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For Muslims, the bonfire that wasn't still carries implications

by Omar Sacirbey by Religion News Service

The crowd-control barriers and TV satellite trucks are gone after a Florida pastor called off a bonfire to burn 200 Qurans, but American Muslims say the political firestorm in Gainesville was more than a momentary flare-up.

The incident laid bare the wildly different perceptions of Islam's sacred text between Americans—or at least some of them—and rank-and-file Muslims, not to mention the differing responses among Muslims at home and abroad.

But perhaps most troubling, Muslim leaders say the sacrilege of burning a holy text is less dangerous than the hatred or misunderstanding that motivated it, even after nine years of concerted outreach following the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Even though Pastor Terry Jones' Dove World Outreach Center in Gainesville, Fla., promised to never set fire to a Quran, members of the fringe Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kan., did, along with an American flag.

Andrew Beacham, a Tea Party activist from Indiana, joined veteran anti-abortion crusader Randal Terry at a small protest outside the White House, where Beacham ripped pages from a Quran. Vandals left copies of burnt Qurans at mosques in East Lansing, Mich., and Knoxville, Tenn.

The threatened bonfire showed the Quran's power to stir passions among Muslims, but the reaction can vary depending on Muslims' differing views of the Quran.

Muslims consider the Quran to be the word of God as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, and to

desecrate it is to desecrate the word of God. Some Muslims hold that because the Quran was revealed in Arabic, translations are not the authentic word of God. Thus, burning a English-language translation of the Quran, to some, would be acceptable, however distasteful.

Others say that Qurans are mere reproductions of God's word, but not God's actual word.

"It's not the Quran that's being burned, it's the paper," said Imam Talal Eid, a Muslim member of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Overseas, violent protests raged in Afghanistan that left at least three people dead. In the past five years, seven alleged incidents of Quran desecration—most notably a Quran that was flushed in a toilet at the Guantanamo Bay detention facility—have led to violence and death, mainly in Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Gaza Strip, and Nigeria.

Muslim leaders tried to clamp down on efforts to burn Bibles in response—an equally sacrilegious act since the two texts share many of the same stories. When a Muslim man in South Africa threatened to burn Bibles in response to Jones, Muslim groups sued to stop him. In Australia, two students were expelled from an Islamic School in Melbourne when they threatened to burn Bibles.

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"Part of it has to do with attitudes toward free speech in the Muslim world and in the West," said Shahed Amanullah, editor of AltMuslim.com, a web magazine. "The Muslim world is still not used to the idea of free speech, whereas here in West, we understand that someone is always going to do something sacrilegious, and we've all developed thicker skins as a result."

In the U.S., many Muslim leaders tried to ignore the threats, not wanting to give Jones additional attention. Others tried to intervene, including Imam Muhammad Musri of the Islamic Society of Central Florida who showed up unannounced at Jones' office to try to broker a cease-fire.

"Instead of protesting the Quran burnings—and playing into the hands of extremist publicity-seekers like Pastor Jones—American Muslims and Muslims around the world should ... reach out to people of other faiths and beliefs to build bridges of respect and understanding," said Nihad Awad, executive director of the Council on American Islamic Relations.

Laleh Bakhtiar, the first American woman to translate the Quran into English, said the episode also highlighted a theological difference—among Muslims and Christians alike—between a vengeful God who demands action, and a loving God who counsels peace.

"If it's fear of God, then you get these extremists. When you teach love of God, then you become a moderate," said Bakhtiar. "The pastor is acting out of fear of God. And the Muslim people that protested this ... they're also acting out of fear."

Eid, meanwhile, sees in Jones a hatred, ignorance of or even ambivalence toward Muslims, and worries that Jones and his 50-member church, however isolated, tapped into the ugly underbelly of post-9/11 America.

"He's trying to hurt every Muslim," said Eid of Jones.

Amanullah, however, finds reason for optimism in the response from Christians and Jews, government

leaders and, especially, Muslims themselves.

"There're some really amazing things that have come out of this," he said. "One is that the world is seeing Muslims reach out in the spirit of friendship, which completely blows away the stereotype. The other thing is seeing every denomination circle the wagons around Muslims, saying we have a respect for scripture, even if it's not ours."

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