

Threat to burn Quran should be call to educate

BY ISMAT SARAH MANGLA

In August 1983, Muslim extremists set fire to an Ahmadiyya Muslim Community mosque in Detroit, out of hatred for our beliefs. While the building was destroyed, 2,000 copies of the Holy Quran miraculously survived the blaze.

Once again, the Muslim holy book could be threatened with fire. Pastor Terry Jones of the Dove World Outreach Center in Florida planned to burn copies of the Quran this Saturday, in a horribly misguided remembrance of the victims of Sept. 11, 2001. Reason seemed to prevail on Thursday, when he called the burning off — until he declared later that it had only been “suspended.”

Either way, the temerity of Jones' message is shocking to me, both as a Muslim and as an American. As a Muslim, because I can't fathom the desecration of my revered holy book. As an American, because I don't understand how one can so boldly abuse our country's values of freedom of speech and religion.

But Jones' willful ignorance of the sacred text of 1.5 billion Muslims around the world is especially troubling. When asked about his knowledge of the Quran, Jones said, "I have no experience with it whatsoever."

His remarks underscore a larger problem: Americans' apathy and lack of information on the true teachings of Islam — and the willingness to form negative opinions despite both. While it's true that most Americans are uninformed about religions other than their own, in this case, such ignorance has consequences.

The continued perception that Islam is a violent or unjust religion only leads to division and discord — and fuels the extremists who exploit Islam to justify terrorism.

But both Jones and Muslim extremists are wrong about the “violent” teachings of Islam. It's important that Americans understand Islam does not condone violence or the imposition of religious beliefs. In fact, a cursory examination of the Quran reveals that this holy book actually supports the fundamental values all Americans cherish: integrity, justice, tolerance, charity and freedom of religion.

With so many Americans scared or confused about our religion, it is up to us, American Muslims, to educate our fellow citizens — with respect and with patience.

We owe it to our faith, and we owe it to our country.

This Saturday, at our newest mosque in Rochester Hills, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community of metro Detroit will convene with other faith groups to relate and reflect. In doing so, we hope to bring people together to discuss the real teachings of the Quran and other sacred texts, the ones that enjoin justice and mercy upon us. Because that's the only way we can really foster understanding - through intellectual dialogue, not book burning and blind hate.

From the holy book

The Quran — and in turn Islam — emphasizes truthfulness, as demonstrated by the passage, “Shun all words of untruth.”

It instructs us to care for the less fortunate: “And they feed, for love of Him, the poor, the orphan and the prisoner.”

It holds freedom of worship sacrosanct: “There shall be no compulsion in religion.”

And it values justice above all else: “O ye who believe, be steadfast in the cause of Allah, bearing witness in equity; and let not a people's enmity incite you to act otherwise than with justice. Be always just, that is nearer to righteousness.”

In other words, Muslims are guided to be truthful, charitable and to side only with what is right — even if doing so goes against one's self-interest. Aren't these the same ideals inculcated in us as Americans, values that we strive to uphold in our society and in our courts?

The Quran is filled with such verses calling on Muslims to practice every kind of goodness. Yet most Americans know little or nothing about them. An August Pew Research poll concluded that 35% of Americans believe Islam is more likely to encourage violence than other religions, while 24% weren't sure.

Of course, it's not difficult to understand why. Approaching the ninth anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, we can't forget the violence of that day. The really ugly truth: The 9/11 attackers, the Taliban and al-Qaeda are all doing far more harm to the Quran than Jones is by burning it. By distorting the verses of the Quran to justify their violent agenda, these terrorists and their sympathizers continue to breed hostility toward Islam and Muslims. Instead of spreading the Quran's message of peace, they are spreading their own message of hatred — just as Jones has twisted the Bible's teachings of peace into a message of hatred.

But extremists have always distorted the words of holy books, and most religions have had periods where extremists gained prominence. Yet few consider the Spanish Inquisition a highlight or representative of the true spirit of Christianity.

'Unsensational lives'

As American Muslims, it is our responsibility, then, to expose this sham, especially when Islam is so prominently featured in our national conversation.

We need more dialogue, more reading of the Quran, both inside the Muslim community and out. After all, more than a billion Muslims in the world and 2.5 million in the United States are living quietly unsensational lives. These stories - of the silent majority of peaceful Muslims — are not headline-worthy. But they are nonetheless real.

That's why the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community — the oldest Muslim organization in the United States — is escalating its 121-year tradition of sponsoring interfaith symposia around the country, in response to Jones' misguided event. And we have a long history of doing that here in Detroit. Our first missionary, Dr. Mufti Muhammad Sadiq, regularly met with members of all faith groups when he came to Highland Park in the early 1920s. Some things haven't changed.

I hope Jones' suspension of the burning is a permanent one. But if it's not, I'm comforted with the memory of that other time, in Detroit, when copies of our holy book withstood the flames of hatred. I believe that the teachings of the Holy Quran are strong enough, merciful enough, just enough to withstand the flames of scrutiny as well.

Ismat Sarah Mangla, 31, grew up in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and studied and worked in Ann Arbor for eight years. She is a graduate of the University of Michigan and Columbia University, and still considers the Detroit branch of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community her home. Today, Ismat works as a journalist in New York City.

RELATED INFORMATION

A Day of Remembrance and Respect for All

Tomorrow, faith leaders from around the community will meet to remember the victims of 9/11 and promote the need to create peace and respect among all faiths. The event is free and open to the public. Refreshments will be served.

When: 2:30-4 p.m., Saturday

Where: Masjid Mahmood Ahmadiyya Muslim Community Center, 1730 W. Auburn Road, Rochester Hills

<http://www.freep.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20100910/OPINION05/100910064/1322/Threat-to-burn-Quran-should-be-a-call-to-educate&template=fullarticle>