

Burbank Leader

In Theory: Protesting without flames

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A pastor whose plan to hold a Koran burning at his church Saturday has drawn the ire of Muslims and non-Muslims around the world. Up until he decided to cancel the event late last week, the Rev. Terry Jones had rejected the pleas of military officials and even the president himself who said the event would "serve as a major recruiting tool for Al Qaeda." If Jones has such a dislike of the Islamic faith, what alternatives could he have considered to get his message across that don't involve burning/desecrating a holy book?

Answer:

A cab driver in New York City was stabbed for being Muslim.

A Mosque in Tennessee was vandalized and burned.

On Sept. 11, an anti-Islam rally was held at Ground Zero.

And the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kan., announced that it planned to burn Korans if the Rev. Terry Jones and his church in Florida canceled its plans to do so.

Can this really be the "land of the free and the home of the brave," where religious freedom for all people is guaranteed?

Sixteenth-century Unitarian theologian Francis David shared these prophetic words: "We need not think alike to love alike." And looking at the situation in our country today around the issue of religious intolerance, particularly of Muslims, I believe the words of David, if put into practice, could do a great deal to heal the wounds that are so much with us now, and to reduce the violence that wracks our country and our world.

What would happen if we really believed that we don't have to think alike to love alike? Perhaps we could get to know more about each other instead of assuming that we know without investigation. We would not always agree, but we might discover that we have a great deal more in common than we realize, and understand that hateful words and actions are not meaningful solutions to our disagreements.

My experience in interfaith dialogue has shown me that the central values of most religious traditions include the idea of love for others. Because that is true, I believe people of faith should practice compassion in their interactions with all others, whatever their religious beliefs may be. With that in mind, I would challenge all people, including the Rev. Terry Jones, to find ways to love those with whom they may disagree. I am convinced, along with David, that "we need not think alike to love alike." It is my hope and prayer that we will find ways to do just that, so that we can reclaim a country of freedom and justice for all.

The Rev. Betty Stapleford

Unitarian Universalist Church of the Verdugo Hills,
La Crescenta

The Rev. Terry Jones has gotten a lot of media attention this week about his threat to burn the Koran on Sept. 11. In the end, he backed off and didn't do it. In several other cases, Korans were burned or had pages torn out.

What is the message in all of this? Was Jones a publicity seeker, or did he really have an important message? If the latter, was his method of conveying that message appropriate?

Unfortunately, Christianity has its own groups of extremists. Generally, they don't blow up things, but they do attack others in the name of God. These attacks include attacks on Christian groups or individuals who do not believe the same as they do.

One of the articles of faith of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints states: "We claim the privilege of worshiping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience, and allow all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where, or what they may." This is not to say that the message of Christ should not be proclaimed. Rather, it means that respect should be given to others as that message is proclaimed.

In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus instructed his disciples, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen."

At the same time, he taught his disciples to be tolerant and to forgive others. In Matthew 18:21-22 he taught Peter as follows: "Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, until seven times: but, until 70 times seven."

Yes, Christ's message should be taken to all, but in doing so, there is an obligation to do it in a manner in accordance with his teachings. Sometimes, Christians forget that in their zeal to proclaim.

Rick Callister

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

La Cañada II Ward,

La Crescenta Stake

How gratifying it is that the planned burning of the Koran did not take place. To do so would have been grossly counterproductive.

It would also be counter to the eminent guidance in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. For example, "Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also," and "Love your enemies ... pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your father which is in heaven." (Matthew 5)

The temptation to react humanly is understandable, but does not reflect the higher viewpoint of our individual and collective spiritual relationship with God, in which we are one harmonious family, regardless of religion, nationality, social status, etc. When we understand that God governs our lives, we can expect to be guided into the most appropriate paths of action. Prayer based on realizing that God is in control is always the most effective treatment for mistreatment.

By no means does this mean we excuse the actions of those who have committed grievous crimes. However, even the perpetrators of such acts have a higher nature, and we help protect ourselves and our nation when we see that evil is not the higher nature of anyone.

Mary Baker Eddy's book, "Miscellaneous Writings 1883-1896," has an introductory piece titled, "Love Your Enemies," which counsels: "Hate no one; for hatred is a plague-spot that spreads its virus and kills at last. If indulged, it masters us.... If you have been badly wronged, forgive and forget: God will recompense this wrong.... We should measure our love for God by our love for man.... The present is ours; the future, big with events."

This approach goes far beyond mere positive thinking and taps the spiritual source of good that Christ Jesus revealed as fundamental to the highest human experience. This removes the fear and vulnerability that otherwise make themselves felt, and frees both us and our so-called enemies to become increasingly aware of our God-given peace, and of what we each should do to rectify world issues.

Graham Bothwell

First Church of Christ, Scientist,

La Cañada

Some of the alternatives available for the Rev. Terry Jones, or for anyone who is so vehemently opposed to the religious beliefs of another culture, would be:

1. Engage in open dialogue. In open dialogue, the premise would be a willingness to hear another person's point of view; to listen with an open mind and heart, without judgment.
2. Look for the point of agreement. In every conflict or difference of opinion, there is always common ground. There is at least one point that all parties can agree upon. In the case of the Rev. Jones, perhaps one point of agreement would be that all human beings have the right to worship God, their creator, in whatever way they choose.
3. Focus on peace. Attitudes that contribute to the peaceful resolution of conflict would include mutual respect and a desire to work together in true cooperation for the highest good of all concerned.

Are we willing to let go of our individual, ego-driven opinions and prejudices in order to create a new relationship of maturity and compromise, bringing about a lasting, peaceful resolution?

In the words of the Unity Peace Song: "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me."

Jeri Linn

Unity Church of the Valley,

Montrose

Simply put, I would call on the Rev. Terry Jones to put his own faith into practice in order to get answers to his questions about Islam, the Koran and Muslims. I will defer to my fellow Christian Americans to counsel him accordingly. The common ethical teachings of "love thy neighbor" embodied in all major religions can provide numerous ways to more constructively address his concerns about the Islamic faith.

The pastor should be advised that the message of the Koran has been imprinted in the hearts and minds of over a billion faithful Muslims worldwide who follow it as guidance to bettering themselves as human beings and to positively contribute to the society around them. Burning the physical book does nothing to lessen its impact amongst its adherents. Besides, burning a book — which by his own admission, the pastor hasn't even read — is just silly.

Every year since that tragic day in our history, faith groups remember 9/11 by bringing out the best of what makes them American in the context of their religions. In Islam, as with other faiths, Muslims are encouraged to repel evil and injustice with love and peace. Across the country this year, a countless number of interfaith events brought our great nation together to remember the innocent victims of 9/11 through a beautiful blend of religious and American civic values.

In Los Angeles, the Islamic Center of Southern California, University Muslim Medical Association Clinic, Saddleback Church and interfaith groups, held a "Day of Healing" on Sept. 11 during which free medical services were provided to the community at large. Locally, Crescenta Valley United Methodist Church held a 9/11 event called "A Time of Healing and Understanding" during which members of the church and the Islamic Congregation of La Cañada Flintridge read passages of the Bible and Koran relating to peace.

"We heard about the church in Florida promoting 'Burn the Koran' Day on Sept. 11, and decided that we wanted to create an event that advocates bridge-building over bridge-burning," said Crescenta Valley United Methodist Church Rev. Pastor Paige Eaves.

For the record, the violent protests against the Koran burning in Afghanistan and other parts of the Muslim world are repugnant displays of anti-Islamic behavior. In Islam, injustice is not an answer for injustice. Muslims are instructed to walk away from ignorance with a greeting of peace.

There are divided opinions near Ground Zero over the building of an Islamic Center. This one issue is dwarfed by the multitude of religious and American values that bring us together as Americans and serve as a role model for pluralism worldwide.

Levent Akbarut

Islamic Congregation of La Cañada Flintridge

La Cañada

There are many ways to voice a difference of opinion without being offensive, hateful or insulting. The most apparent, non-provocative way of conveying a message of disagreement is to use respectful words that express a well-reasoned argument. Obviously, the Rev. Terry Jones does not intend to live peacefully with his Muslim neighbors or to listen to their views. This bigoted man has only one thing in mind: sensationalism. And thanks to the media, which seems to always gravitate toward the most outlandish and shocking stories, news of this stunt shot straight to the top of all the news bulletins. How sad.

Burning the Koran is simply wrong! I can't imagine that there are religious teachings that encourage the desecration of another religion's sacred texts. That a member of the clergy would even contemplate such an action is reprehensible. Frankly, any act of book-burning is very troubling — but to attempt to burn the holy book of a major religion is simply beyond the pale.

America is a country that protects and cherishes the rights of the individual to free speech. At the same time, however, our society must be very forthright with what is acceptable, and what is not, in the realm of free

expression. Those who violate society's norms — although they may be protected by the Constitution — should be marginalized, especially if it is a leader who claims to represent spirituality.

In 1821, the German Jewish writer Heinrich Heine wrote about the burning of the Koran during the Spanish Inquisition, and said: "Where they burn books, so too will they in the end burn human beings." Heine's prediction tragically came true one century later when his books were among the thousands of volumes torched by the Nazis in Berlin's Opernplatz. That event was part of the prelude to the Holocaust and the incineration of millions of Jews across Europe.

Rabbi Simcha Backman

Chabad Jewish Center,

Glendale

Well, let's see. There's graffiti-writing, stone-throwing, headscarf-removing, mosque-picketing and cartoon lampooning of the prophet Mohammed. People have already come up with so many creative ways to show prejudice, ignorance and fear. Pastor Terry Jones could simply search Google for good ideas.

Surely the real question is not one that inspires my sarcasm, but one that challenges me to deep reflection as a leader of people who follow Jesus. For example, if the anguish of 9/11 leads congregation members to experience their darkest feelings, what could a pastor do to turn a congregation toward peace, healing and a restored right relationship with the creator?

This is the question that most of us asked as we saw Sept. 11 approaching, converging as it did so with the end of Ramadan and a nation-wide dispute about the proposed mosque in New York City. And in response to that question, many of us chose to create interfaith events that converged people for prayer, study and service. Progressive Christians Uniting and the interfaith group of Orange County met to read the Koran. My brother's Methodist church in Memphis was all over the news for extending a hand of friendship to its new Muslim neighbors. Members of our church, along with the Montrose Peace Vigil and other neighbors, gathered around our peace pole for healing prayer and a basic introduction to the Koran from friends who are members of the Islamic Community of La Cañada.

These events gave us a way to express pain around the 9/11 tragedy while also living into our shared hopes for a better tomorrow. They also gave us opportunities to learn. It is difficult to "like" or "dislike" something about which one knows little. (The idea of "liking" or "disliking" a holy book is a funny one, isn't it? Holy books by their very nature offer both challenge and comfort. No Christian would describe everything in the Bible as "likeable.")

Jesus taught that the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with everything you've got — and to love your neighbor as yourself.

So there's our starting point.

The Rev. Paige Eaves

Crescenta Valley United Methodist Church,

La Crescenta

I'm not so sure it's a matter of alternatives he could have considered. Rather, it's whether the national media should have considered the time and merit it gave his hate-mongering opinion in the first place.

Like it or not, the Rev. Terry Jones has the right to free speech. Denying him that right would be detrimental to our own individual freedoms. But that doesn't mean a responsible media is compelled to publicize it. Who is doing more damage — the one individual (Jones) who says something mean-spirited, or the larger group (the media) that promotes and spreads it for its own gains? In this case, the gains are ratings. Sadly, I believe it is just that simple.

Let's face the facts. Prior to this firestorm of hate, Jones had a following of about 50 families in Gainesville, Fla. And before that, he was a hotel manager. Jones was a relative unknown until the media caught hold of his rhetoric, which was absurd enough to fill the insatiable need for more and more news content. There's nothing remotely spiritual or holy about a desire to burn something another group holds sacred. This would be especially true of the Koran, which is not an inflammatory manifesto of war and hate, as Jones and others like him would have people believe.

Jones' agenda is one of narcissistic self-promotion and racist intent. With such negative energy fueling his actions, I doubt that any alternatives he may have considered would have resulted in a positive outcome.

Gary Huerta

Non-denominational

First, I'd hope that the Rev. Terry Jones would focus more on the fact that Christ is the right way instead of Islam being the wrong way. Our calling is positive, to preach the Gospel, as Paul put it so clearly in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4: "Christ died for our sins ... He was buried, and ... He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures."

When people believe the Gospel and come to Christ, they'll throw away for themselves — or yes, even burn — the books they find to be in error, even as the believers in Ephesus did when they repented of their occult practices (see Acts 19:19).

The Christian message is that God loved the world and sent his son Jesus Christ to give his life for the complete payment of our sins. Jesus alone is the way to know God, and following him means repenting from the sins that others may cherish. Jesus wants us to communicate this message, to which many others take great offense, yet we're to do so "... speaking the truth in love ..." (Ephesians 4:15). Perhaps we could call it confronting in love rather than being combative in hatred. We should also be sensitive to the amount of spiritual truth that those around us can handle, as Jesus did when he spoke to different audiences.

Finally, I'd recommend the instruction given in Romans 12:20-21: "But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." This never means compromising the truth of the Gospel, an extreme to which some who claim Christianity go, but it does mean being kind and helpful to all others as fellow human beings. That's what God did with us. His kindness and forbearance and patience are the most powerful tools that lead us to repentance.

Pastor Jon Barta

Valley Baptist Church

Burbank

I am taken aback. I fail to see how Koran-burning demonstrates God's love. We are to turn our cheek to our enemies. I think burning their holy word will only ignite a fire of hatred and retaliation.

We have to look at this life on earth as spiritual and human. The Bible is filled with how we are to treat our enemies, including prayer. From a human side, we must use wisdom and take into consideration the extreme sects of this faith. Does good judgment allow for igniting anger and retaliation? Will that help America's issues with extremists? Will it glorify Christianity?

And what of the command to obey our leaders as unto the Lord? Going against the president for an issue like this, to me, seems to demonstrate a bad testimony. Now if the Rev. Terry Jones chooses to go against those protesting for an admirable or holy cause — such as saving a life — I could see the reasoning behind his activity. But hatred, personal agendas and raising ire, I just do not perceive these as Christian or prudent decisions.

I stand with the word of God on how to spiritually treat our enemies. I do believe we need to defend ourselves against real threats; we live in a world where that is often necessary. Being good Christians does not mean lying down and becoming victims. I see it as potentially hazardous to start a potential conflict over something unnecessary — like burning the Koran. It is just plain recklessness, not self control.

As Christians, we need to adhere to the word of God and the wisdom it exudes. And we have to use the good judgment and intellect God gave us to live wisely.

Kimberlie Zakarian

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