

Axis of Fundamentalism: Gainesville to Mazar-i-Sharif

Friday 8 April 2011, by [WILLIAMS Patricia J.](#) (Date first published: 7 April 2011).

I was in Nottingham, England, when evangelical minister Terry Jones and the Dove World Outreach Center of Gainesville, Florida, seized control of the global media stage by soaking a Koran in kerosene and setting it aflame. This occurred after a so-called “trial” of Islam for being “of the Devil.” The Koran was “found guilty and a copy was burned.” With hubristic conflation of his church and our state—as well as of magic and legality—Jones proclaimed, “The court system of America does not allow convicted criminals to go free. And that is why we feel obligated to do this.”

Pastor Jones also felt obligated to broadcast the incineration online. As his deeds flashed around the globe, they were mirrored in fundamentalist kind, particularly in Afghanistan, where the population was simmering from another American drone killing another group of children and, in particular, the pending trials of twelve American soldiers for the “sport” killing of random civilians—behavior that included mutilation, dismemberment and the retention of body parts as souvenirs. Riots broke out, and in the city of Mazar-i-Sharif, the local UN compound became the object of outrage. Twelve staff were killed.

At more or less the same time Pastor Jones was engaging in his mischief in Florida, I was on the edge of Sherwood Forest, wandering about the oldest pub in Britain, Ye Olde Trip to Jerusalem. It purportedly dates to 1189, the year Richard the Lionheart was crowned and promptly joined the Third Crusade. The pub was supposedly a hangout for soldiers who gathered before their quest to retake the Holy Land from Muslim “infidels.” The Third Crusade, like those before and after, resulted in a bloodbath. The siege of the city of Acre alone led to the slaughter of nearly 3,000 Muslim captives, many of whom were said to have been disemboweled in search of swallowed gemstones. This was also the period during which the Hashshashin—from which the word “assassin” is derived—refined the arts of sabotage, infiltration and murder for hire. The Hashshashin, a small, secretive cult of Persian warriors, conducted their own brand of unconventional, self-interested warfare against ruling Muslim caliphates as well as invading crusaders. Much like Al Qaeda today, they played both sides against the middle, often murdering for hire.

So there I stood on a sandstone cliff of England’s fair Midlands, my feet planted in the Middle Ages, my iBrain iPadded with tweets about the latest “only in America” goings-on.

As it turned out, Pastor Jones (perhaps not coincidentally a high school classmate of Rush Limbaugh) had been personally and publicly begged not to pursue what he dubbed “International Burn a Koran Day” by no lesser luminaries than General Petraeus, Secretary of State Clinton, Secretary of Defense Gates, President Obama and even Sarah Palin. To no avail; Jones—like the Westboro Baptist Church, with which the Dove Center sometimes joins league—presses on unhindered either by compassion or the courts. Such are the complexities of free speech in a socially networked world.

When the Dove World Outreach Center put its burning of the Koran online, it tapped into the unprecedented technological ability to link radically narrow worldviews in a fashion so sudden, so powerful and so complete that it’s almost like atoms smashing. Further complicating the issue, both Jones and the angry mullahs in Mazar-i-Sharif deploy language in an unyieldingly fundamentalist

way: as though words are incarnate, as though utterance is embodied, the word alive. Whether the book at hand is deemed supremely holy or supremely blasphemous, it is Good or Evil. The whole mess has been a perfect collision of preformationist religiosity and legal logic. The resulting blow to international public order was neither moral nor legal, but it did have subversive legalistic import.

Jones issued a statement expressing his sorrow at the deaths in Mazar-i-Sharif, while denying any responsibility and calling for retribution. But his remorse—such as it was—was reminiscent of the three American evangelicals, including the president of Abiding Truth Ministries, whose recent mission to Uganda rallied that country into such a homophobic frenzy that a law was proposed to execute gay people. When gay rights activist David Kato was subsequently bludgeoned to death near Kampala, the editor of one local newspaper issued this denunciation: “We want the government to hang people who promote homosexuality, not for the public to attack them.”

The legalities of the First Amendment aside, we should nevertheless pay attention to the dark metaphorical spirits unsettled by incendiary public incantations like Jones’s. Conceptual artist Sol LeWitt had a notion that “the idea becomes a machine that makes the art.” For all our rationalist inclinations, thoughts really do perform sometimes as... animations, for lack of a better term. As a headline in the *Christian Science Monitor* put it: “If Terry Jones burns the Koran, he’ll also set fire to America’s identity.” Similarly, Jones repeatedly describes the Koran as though it is a golem, a real defendant embodying all of Islam. And Afghan mullahs and their inspired mobs see Jones as the reified homunculus of institutional American force. Indeed, both he and President Obama were burned in effigy.

The heated familiarity of old battle cries given new ubiquity by technology has created a feedback loop connecting mass media and social media, social media and structures of power, frustrating and upending—for better or worse—the authority of armies, courts and diplomats. And so it is that as citizens in the Middle East use Twitter and Facebook to democratize theocracies, religious extremists in the United States and South Asia use precisely the same devices to instantiate 900-year-old hatreds and reimpose a premodern order.

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P.S.

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