

Religion Today
May 22-28, 2005
Protesting for the Holy Quran
Paul V.M. Flesher

The last two weeks have seen a series of demonstrations in the Islamic world opposing the reported desecration of the Muslim holy book, the Quran (Koran), by American interrogators at Guantanamo Bay.

The protests began in Afghanistan, after a member of Parliament held a press conference denouncing the sacrilege, and within a few days spread across the Muslim world. The protests in some areas were violent and targeted western relief organizations as representatives of the "American infidels." Newsweek, which launched the accusations by claiming that interrogators flushed a Quran down a toilet, has since retracted its reporting. But the myriad of reports of other American mistreatments of the Quran will not let this story die down in the Muslim world for a long time.

Why are Muslims reacting to these reports with such large-scale protests? Several commentators have pointed out that the Quran serves as a political rallying point, a way to focus anti-western and anti-American feeling in the Islamic world. That is certainly true, but why can it form such a powerful focus? What is it about the Quran that causes Islamic believers to get so upset at its desecration? The answer lies in the nature of the Quran itself, as understood within Islam.

From the earliest years of Islam, the Quran was more than just a book, it was literally given by God ("Allah" in Arabic). When Islam's prophet Muhammad sought God during his mountain retreats, God sent his angel Gabriel ("Jibril" in Arabic) to give Muhammad his messages. These messages from the beginning are believed to have been formulated by God, taught by Gabriel, and memorized by Muhammad. Thus the Quran literally contains God's message, given without alteration. This has been Muslim belief from the beginning.

Because of the Quran's divine character, Muslims also believe it cannot be translated. Or more precisely, that any translation of the Quran does not and cannot carry the same meaning as the original. In order to study the true meaning of the Quran, Muslims traditionally have taught their children the ancient form of Arabic in which the Quran is written.

To return to the desecration of prisoners' copies of the Quran, the Muslim prisoners had copies of the Quran in the original Arabic. Since they believe God inspired the Quran's very words and sentences, each copy of the Quran

contains God's exact words. Unlike the Bible used by most American Christians, it is not a translation or a version or paraphrase; it is God's actual words. So it is not surprising that large numbers of Muslims were upset when a Quran was flushed down a toilet.

It is this character of the Quran as a sacred object that puzzles westerners, even Christians. While most Christians view the Bible as holy and certainly treat it with respect, the holiness comes primarily from its words and their meaning. When preachers say, "The Bible says," or "The Bible teaches us," or even, "Jesus tells us," they are pointing to the words and statements found in the biblical text. The Bible's words are a source of meditation, study, edification, and education. Indeed, many denominations make a religious virtue of individuals' knowledge of the Bible. Even Tom Sawyer, that Mark Twain hero, portrayed himself as knowing the words of Scripture.

Christianity's focus on the sacred words, especially among Protestants, does not extend to the Bible as an object. Protestants recognize that copies of the Bible are many and multiple, and do not have the sanctity that some ideal original copy would. They differ little from copies of the Declaration of Independence or the United States Constitution. The original may require respect and careful treatment, but the copies do not.

Consider, for example, the scene in the 2004 film "National Treasure," where the "true" Declaration of Independence is briefly hidden among the printed copies in a gift shop. The scene's comedy comes from the audience's knowledge that the true Declaration should be kept behind special glass in a vault-like display case. The copies do not carry the original's value.

In the end, then, the protests concerning the Quran derive in part from Muslim belief that the Quran contains the literal words of God. God's holy character gives the Quran its character as a holy object. This might be likened to the holiness that ancient and medieval Christianity attributed to saints' relics. In modern western Christianity, however, the notion of the Bible as a kind of similar holy object is now foreign