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## **Desecrating the Koran**

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CHICAGO - When I was an undergraduate at Southern Illinois University, a couple of born-again Christians passed out pocket-sized Bibles near the entrance of the student center. I took one, and so did a friend of mine, a Christian who apparently had some unresolved issues. He walked over to a nearby garbage can and spiked the Bible into the bin. I didn't like what he did. So I reached into the trash, took out the Bible, cleaned it off, and decided to keep it in my care.

It was the first Bible I ever had. To this day, more than 25 years later, I've kept a Bible on my bookshelf.

It is both logical and natural for the desecration of scripture to rouse strong reactions, whether it involves the Bible or the Koran, the scripture of my own faith. Perhaps this is because humankind is inherently sensitive to metaphor and symbolism, and that desecration is easily interpreted as an affront to the larger meaning of what is defiled. Contempt shown to the Koran, for example, may be viewed as an insult to Islam and Muslims worldwide.

But the recent deadly anti-US riots triggered in Afghanistan by a Newsweek report, later retracted but generally corroborated by Red Cross sources, that the Koran had been defiled by US interrogators at Guantánamo Bay is not the kind of reaction I'm talking about. The controversy is unfortunately more complicated than a simple act of desecration because it involves a convergence of many symbols created by the emotions and decisions of the post-9/11 era.

The desecration reportedly occurred in a camp that has become the symbol of American abuse against Muslim inmates, held without charge and without external protections.

An American soldier, representing more than the sum of body and uniform, is symbolic of the nation that issues his or her rank. He or she is not only American, but a powerful nation accused of manhandling the most powerless souls. This powerful symbol is then said to have trashed another potent symbol - the Koran, which in itself has dual symbolic meaning to Muslims.

It is the scripture Muslims turn to for guidance, calm, and perspective. But it is also considered by them to be the last divinely revealed missive sent to earth, completing the spiritual arc of revelation given to Messengers starting with Adam, passing through Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and concluding with Muhammad. Muslims view the book as much greater than the sum of ink on paper. It is the musical score of Muslim spirituality, a book whose mere recitation is considered an act of worship. A small portion of the Koran pertains to sacred law. The rest speaks of God, humanity's origin, purpose, and ultimate return to God himself.

Symbols and their desecration take on inflated meaning in a context like Guantánamo, which is already perceived globally as a hub of injustice. It is but one of many post-9/11 controversies that have mushroomed into symbolism.

In the Abu Ghraib setting, people saw a confirmation of the linkages between power and corruption embodied in the torture and molestation of scores of weak, incarcerated Iraqis at the hands of a few but powerful military personnel.

But in a similar vein, it behooves us to remember the symbol created by those Muslim men, standing masked like bandits and waxing proud with self-righteousness behind Nick Berg, a

young man from suburban America, whom they'd bound hand and foot and forced to read off the names of his family. As they beheaded Mr. Berg on video meant for distribution, they blasphemed, profaned, and abused the name of God, creating - in a blink - a connection between their religion and the desecration of life. The same may be said about the murder of journalist Daniel Pearl in Pakistan and, obviously, the events of 9/11.

Those who doubt the staying power of symbols and religion may want to reconsider their stand.

It is a striking reality that human sensitivity to symbols has survived, despite the postmodern flattening of the world and its aggression against belief in the unseen. But while humans have God-given emotional accouterments naturally sensitive to such things as desecration, we also have been given the intellect that keeps that sensitivity in check and within the realm of moderation.

Just as we know that this episode of the desecration of the Koran is not reflective of the ethos of religious tolerance among Americans, we must also learn never to attach to Islam - either the religion or the civilization - the acts of vigilante Muslims who unwittingly desecrate the name of Islam and, perhaps, inspire others to desecrate their book.

• *Ibrahim N. Abusharif is editor-in-chief of Starlatch Press, a Muslim publishing house. He is completing a comprehensive index to the Koran.*