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Newsweek and the Quran

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Three-and-a-half years after 9/11, you would think that we Americans would get it: Muslims take their religion very, very seriously. Now 17 people are dead, Afghanistan is on edge and there are protests in Pakistan, our most vulnerable and valuable ally among Muslim states -- in part, it seems, because of six words in a brief item in Newsweek magazine. The offending passage, a small but colorful detail in a story on the investigation of abuses at the U.S. detention center at Guantanamo Bay, reads in full: "Among the previously unreported cases, sources tell Newsweek: interrogators, in an attempt to rattle suspects, flushed a Qur'an down a toilet"

This was not the first time a major news organization had reported allegations that copies of the Quran belonging to detainees had been desecrated in this fashion -- the Washington Post, the BBC and the New York Times all got there first. For this reason, perhaps, my colleagues at Newsweek, where I spent 38 years as Religion Editor, did not foresee how this single example among others mentioned in the story might incite Islam's most rabid anti-Americans. Neither, apparently, did the Pentagon official who read the Newsweek story before it went to press -- a precaution the Newsweek editors took -- and made no objection to the passage.

I am in no position to pass judgment on my Newsweek colleagues, nor would I want to. Among them are highly sensitive editors who frequently caught errors in my own copy. My concern is that all Americans understand how deeply sacrilegious such an act as Newsweek described would be to Muslims, and why it is not like flushing pages from the Bible down the drain -- as Keith Olbermann on MSNBC and other commentators have suggested.

The Quran is not "the Bible" of Muslims. It is infinitely more sacred than that. To use a Jewish analogy, it is more like the oral Torah first revealed on Mount Sinai which was later passed on orally through the prophets and eventually written down on scrolls for all to read. Whereas Christians regard the Bible as written by human beings inspired by God, Muslims regard the Quran -- the word means "The Recitation" -- as the very words of God, revealed aurally to the Prophet Muhammed in Arabic. To hear those words recited is, for Muslims, to hear Allah. If, for Christians, Jesus is the logos or eternal Word of God made flesh, the Quran is the Word of God made book, and every Arabic syllable in it lives as the breath of the divine.

In short, what Christ is for Christians the Quran (in Arabic) is for Muslims: the living Word of God made present in this world. Moreover, to recite the suras or verses of the Quran, as devout Muslims do, is to breathe in the very words of Allah. Thus, recitation of the Quran is for Muslims much like what receiving the Eucharist is for Catholics -- a very intimate ingestion of the divine itself. This, then, according to Newsweek's story -- now retracted and "regretted" by the magazine's editor -- is what some interrogators flushed down a toilet at Guantanamo Bay.

Gen. Richard Meyers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said this week that in the opinion of the senior commander in Afghanistan the recent outbreak of violence there "was not at all tied" to the Newsweek story. Whatever the truth turns out to be, the two are now linked in the minds of militant Muslims.

Ironically, it was Newsweek that, six months after 9/11, published a lengthy cover story comparing and contrasting the Bible and the Quran. It was a gutsy decision on the part of the magazine's editors, given the sensitive feelings of adherents of both scriptures -- and the mood of

the American public in general so soon after the terrorist attack on New York City. To say more would be self-serving since I researched and wrote the story. But several of the points made above about the meaning of the Quran to Muslims were discussed in that issue of Newsweek. I am chagrined by the realization of how little impact that story made in the long run on the education of Americans about Islam and its holy book, how quickly it was all forgotten. For very different reasons, I hope this more recent story in Newsweek finds the same fate.