

## The limits of 'freedom': why Koran-burning is unbiblical

*Social Issues briefing #086, 10/09/2010.*

We are not convinced that backing down is the right thing ... Islam is of the Devil.

- Pastor Terry Jones  
as at Sept. 8<sup>th</sup>; quoted by Reuters

For although I am free from all people, I have made myself a slave to all, in order to win more people. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win Jews ... To the weak I became weak, in order to win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I may by all means save some.

- The apostle Paul  
1 Cor. 9:19–22, HCSB

We have agreed to cancel our event on Saturday. Americans don't want the mosque there and of course Muslims don't want us to burn Korans.

- Pastor Terry Jones  
as at Sept. 10<sup>th</sup>; quoted by SMH

*This briefing began life as a statement against Pastor Terry Jones planned September 11 Koran-burning. He has now decided not to go ahead. Some elements of his reasoning are questionable, but his public re-evaluation deserves commendation. Despite Jones' change of mind, the episode remains an interesting test-case in the 'freedom' of free speech, and in how Christians believe freedom should be used.*

It would be hard to find anyone more convinced about Christianity than the apostle Paul. It would also be hard to find anyone more trenchant about the origins of other religious practices. For Paul, one ancient religious practice – the offering of food to an idol – is not quaintly misled. While denying that these idols have any real power, he insists that there is more going on than meets the eye: 'what they sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God' (1 Cor. 10:20, HCSB).

Indeed Paul is probably the source of Pastor Terry Jones' view that 'Islam is of the Devil'. For Paul, the best thing that has happened to the planet is the appearance of Jesus Christ. The permissions people give each other to ignore Jesus are frankly inexplicable. It must be, reasons Paul, that 'the god of this age' (the devil) 'has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God' (2 Cor. 4:4, NIV). Here Paul simply extends Jesus' own teaching that a 'father of lies' is at work (John 8:44).

President Obama, Ban Ki-moon, General David Petraeus, Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, Indonesian Preseident Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and thousands of others have come down on this little Gainesville church. It is a group of people who disagree with the presuppositions of the arguments against them; who believe that Islam is mistaken and wrong; and who sought to protest Abdul Rauf's proposed 'Ground Zero' mosque. The burning was to proceed as a constitutionally protected act of 'free speech'.

Would Paul have attended? Once he would have. He was willing to become the impromptu cloak-room for the mob who stoned Stephen (Acts 7:58). At that time in his life, Paul thought Stephen every bit as wrong as Pastor Jones now finds Mohammed. And as we have seen, even after Paul was found by Jesus, he remained convinced that there is truth, there are lies, and that religions are not benign expressions of cultural diversity.

So: had Pastor Jones gone ahead, would Paul have attended? Without a shadow of doubt – **no**. If he may have done before meeting Jesus, he radically changes afterwards. The planned book-burning emerged from a miasma of angry revenge around the World Trade

Centre attacks, and from the recent proposal to build a mosque nearby. It is hard not to be reminded of Paul's post-Jesus kind of response. It is strikingly different:

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay, says the Lord.' On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

– Rom. 12:18–21, NIV;

quoting Deut. 32:35 and Prov. 25:21–22.

In a long and nuanced argument about the food and the idols (1 Cor. 8–10), Paul never affirms the idols nor the food practices surrounding them. Yet his conclusion is clear. 'Give no offense to the Jews or the Greeks or the church of God, just as I also try to please all people in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved' (1 Cor. 10:32–33, HCSB).

In these and related arguments (e.g. Gal. 5, Rom. 14), Paul was the most extraordinary exponent of freedom. The U.S. First Amendment guaranteeing freedom of speech can indirectly be traced back to these very arguments. Those who think Islam is wrong have the freedom to say so, and should not resile from saying so. It is problematic that a degree of fear now prevents people from saying so. The liberal establishment that espouses liberality should not stifle careful dispute about religion, for the society that disputes carefully and well will be more tolerant than the one that does not.

But it does *not* follow that Christians should press free speech to its limit. 'Muslims believe the Koran is the divine word of God, in letter and meaning,' says Abdel-Moeti Bayoumi, a scholar at Al-Azhar University, Cairo. 'If a human burns the revealed word of God, this would be considered the gravest crime for all Muslims.' Journalist Mike Bernos reports that even Danish cartoonist Kurt Westergaard, who sparked Muslim outrage in 2006 with a drawing of the Prophet Mohammed, thought plans to burn the Koran went too far.

Paul would have argued intensely against the Muslim view of the word of God. Yet we have very good reason to think he would have opposed this act. Does Koran-burning help 'win' Muslims to Christ? No. Does it create a 'stumbling block' for them? Yes. Is it profoundly unhelpful to the kind of person that Paul repeatedly calls 'the weak'? Absolutely. Paul's approach to those who have not yet been found by Jesus has given the Christian church, at its best, habits and patterns of action and feeling called 'gentleness' and 'love'. Paul demolishes *arguments* that oppose Christ (2 Cor. 10:5), but always seeks to 'build up' *people*. Christians and their pastors may, on occasion, have good reason to resist even a President. But we have no warrant to resist the clear teaching and practice of our Apostle.

The imam who is behind the planned Muslim centre at 'Ground Zero', Mr Abdul Rauf, now regrets proposing the plan. Yet he believes he cannot withdraw it, because of 'headlines in the Muslim world ... that Islam is under attack. And I'm less concerned about the radicals in America than I am about the radicals in the Muslim world.' It seems, then, that many Muslims will not back down from giving offence, yet cannot take offence. Perhaps that is precisely because they have not heard and learnt of Jesus' way. Even so, it does not follow that Christians respond in kind: like Jesus, we are not shaped and formed by the ways of those who oppose us.

- **Andrew Cameron**  
(for the Social Issues Executive,  
Anglican Diocese of Sydney)

### **Sources/Further Reading**

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Online: <http://tinyurl.com/mann001>.

See also [www.sie.org.au](http://www.sie.org.au); browse by topic 'free speech'.

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