

THE QURAN CONTROVERSY

Teaching the Quran?

Why UNC's Stance on the Quran Assignment Matters

When going to battle, "know yourself and know your enemy," advises the Chinese "Art of War."

Some say that UNC had the legal right to assign my book on the early passages of the Quran but erred by making such a controversial choice.

The controversy, however, has touched a nerve and revealed that this society is in dangerous disagreement about who our enemy really is. Others deride television personality Bill O'Reilly for calling the assignment "tripe" and comparing it to assigning Hitler's "Mein Kampf" in World War II. I say: "Don't shoot the messenger." O'Reilly articulates the views of millions. I disagree with O'Reilly's analogy, but not for the reasons many think.

Contrary to what many have said, my book does not claim that Islam or any other religion is "a religion of peace." We need to get beyond such vacuous arguments. Religions are as peaceful or violent depending on who is interpreting them and how they act.

Violent adherents to Islam attacked the United States and set up the oppressive Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Violent adherents to Christianity massacred thousands of unarmed Muslim civilians in Bosnia and planted triumph crosses over the looted and dynamited remains of their mosques and communities. Violent adherents to Hinduism tortured, raped and burned alive thousands of defenseless Muslim civilians last spring in the Gujarat province of India.

To paraphrase the Bible: Each religion sees the mote in the eye of the other while failing to see the plank in its own eye. After the Cold War, religious fundamentalism has replaced the United States-Soviet rivalry as channels for violent conflict. We cannot afford a world of religious leaders attacking other traditions to advance their claims to religious superiority.

Imagine that a U.S. university had assigned "Approaching Japanese Buddhism" in 1941. It would have been denounced for presenting the

"religion of the enemy," a religion that was being used to indoctrinate young men in militant fanaticism. The subsequent controversy would have generated a public debate about which Japanese were in fact the enemy.

But the issue was swept under the rug, and Japanese-Americans were placed in internment camps without serious debate. Lack of consensus about the enemy now could lead to even more disastrous results, here and abroad.

The spectacle of opinion-makers such as columnist Bill Buckley and Wall Street Journal Editorial Board Chairman William Bentley misrepresenting a book they haven't read teaches us something about our own society.

Egyptian students and politicians attacked universities over books they also had not even read. Many say Western civilization is superior because it encourages debate. Yet opinion-makers in the United States pontificate on a book they know nothing about, and N.C. legislators

threaten budgetary revenge against one of the finest educational institutions in the nation.

Societies that make their universities slaves to the whims of religious zealots or demagogic politicians lose their intellectual vitality and damage their ability to act effectively in the world.

I won't review here the disagreements with the Family Policy Network that I expressed in an op-ed article I published in an Aug. 8 Washington Post op-ed column. Beyond that: Yes, UNC could have avoided controversy and assigned a book on terrorism or Islamic militants, such as Ahmad Rashid's superb, prophetic study of the Taliban published in 2000. I hope another college assigned it, and all Americans should read it.

But to limit all discussions of Islam to discussions of terrorism is to impose the very same monolithic association that bin Laden and the attackers wanted to provoke.

My book chooses passages with the same criteria that Biblical passages have been chosen for readings in required readings in courses on

humanities – not to make judgments about the Bible being peaceful or not peaceful but to introduce theological ideas and stories that are key to both the religion and the civilization of those who read them.

It also explains how the Quran functions as a sacred text in Islamic society. Such knowledge won't hurt anybody and implies no generalized judgments about Islam.

By inadvertently sparking an urgently needed public discussion and refusing to back down, UNC fulfilled one of the most essential roles of a great university. I respect all the positions in that discussion, except the Time Magazine dismissal of all parties in the debate with contempt and treatment of the issues as trivial (Aug. 13 edition). That is a complacency we cannot afford.

Michael Sells is a comparative religions professor at Haverford College and author of the book "Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations."

Calling Book 'Required' Crosses Line

In 1992 the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in *Lee vs. Weisman* that publicly funded universities are not permitted to force students into studying a particular religion.

Offering such a course as an elective is entirely permissible; however, in my opinion, requiring students to read "Approaching the Qur'an" is not. I use the term "require" because that is what the Summer Reading Program Web site has deemed this assignment.

Interestingly, administrators have said both to the public and to the court that the assignment is not truly required since the students are not penalized for refusing to participate; yet

according to the SRP Web site, students who chose not to read it were required to write a paper explaining their reasons for refusing.

So if a student felt reading the book infringed upon his religious beliefs, he was forced to put his spiritual convictions on display.

This should not happen in a public university. It doesn't matter that the word "required" will induce more freshmen to read the book and attend the discussion sessions.

Choosing to deem this assignment "required" in some environments and "not required" in others, such as court, is extremely misleading.

That's not the only aspect of the Summer Reading Program that is misleading, however.

Chancellor James Moeser, according to Fox News, has commented, "A fifth of the world's population subscribes to the Islamic religion, and yet it's not a well-understood religion."

That said, one would conclude that the reason this book was chosen was to help students better understand the Muslim faith.

Unfortunately, "Approaching the Qur'an" does not accomplish that goal. The selected suras deal mainly with topics such as fertility and the beauty of nature, leading one to conclude that the Muslim faith is one of peace.

Not included in the book are suras four, five and nine, which contain language that urges Mohammad's followers to "find (the idolaters) and take them captive and beaueager them and lie in wait for them in every place of ambush."

Now, I am not arguing that Michael Sells is at fault for not including those suras. After all, the book was intended to point out key theological concepts that, according to Sells, are "most easily accessible in the first few suras."

I am, however, arguing that the University is at fault for requiring incoming freshmen to read a book based upon a religious text that illustrates only the positive aspects of the Muslim faith and pretending this will lead students to a better understanding of Islam as a whole.

The choice of this particular book was an orchestrated effort to coerce students into seeing only one side of the Muslim faith.

The kinds of questions that ran through most American's minds on Sept. 11 were questions such as, "How could someone use religion to justify killing over 3,000 Americans?"

Requiring this summer assignment was an attempt to respond by saying, "See! This is a religion of peace. Let's look first to ourselves and try to understand what we did to deserve this." This is an infantile sentiment that was also reflected by the faculty-led teach-ins days after the attacks.

If the goal for the Summer Reading Program was to place "Operation Tolerance" where a classic novel or even (gasp) a book that reflects the philosophical and intellectual heritage of America might have been, then it succeeded brilliantly.

But if the goal, as the administration has said, was to promote a basic understanding of the Muslim faith, then I believe we can all safely say that it failed monumentally.

Allie Perry, Student Congress representative for District 14, voted against a measure supporting academic freedom regarding the summer reading. Reach her at aperry@email.unc.edu.



Summer Reading Outcry Shows Importance of Social Tolerance

Dating back centuries, religion has been the most divisive issue between human beings. Muslim, Christian, Jew, Buddhist, Zoroaster, Taoist or atheist. These identities have become almost symbols for different lifestyles, cultures and beliefs but with one common, universally found trait: arrogant assurance of the validity and supremacy of their respective religion versus others.

We teach and endorse tolerance toward all that is different in almost every facet or division of society, and we pride ourselves on having a society that is most respectful of differences and least racist of any to ever make its mark on the scrolls of history.

However, do compassion and understanding become muddled in the face of revenge or retaliation?

Can bigotry be defended? Well, millions of Americans and critics are trying to stilt cultural understanding and pigeon-hole an entire race of people because of one group of self-empowered terrorists.

Sept. 11 was a day that shocked the entire world; how could people justify these horrors?

Afghanistan, Muslims, Arabs: All of these groups became responsible for this heinous crime as we Americans committed another one: the error of overextension.

A turban became a suspicious article; Islam became a cult religion, which endorsed the mass-murder of innocent people for Allah.

Misunderstanding and lack of cultural knowledge fueled this wave of racism (or some Americans called it patriotism) and is even prevalent now as UNC has come under intense scrutiny for assigning a summer reading program of "Approaching The Qur'an" by Michael Sells.

I used to think that learning was the acquisition of formerly unknown material to understanding of the material. How can learning about something new be bad?

The mobs of angry parents and groups who protested its reading by the incoming students called it an endorsement of a certain religion over another, and in a time so cold to the Islamic religion, it was not acceptable.

I was one of the fortunate, yes fortunate, members of that body who read and enjoyed the book.

I admit to being a less-than-pious Christian who has never read the Bible, save a few excerpts, and reading about a new religion, culture and lifestyle was an eye-opening and satisfying experience that bred knowledge.

I wasn't mortified that I was reading a book that represented the religion of a few fanatics who strayed from the Quran's message.

If we represented a race by a few, then I'm sure the early Christians, Catholics and Jews could face some heat for their prior injustices.

The funny and ironic thing is that the Quran was quite similar to another book you might have heard of and I'm sure would have no problem allowing your college-bound child to read. It teaches the acceptance and tolerance of others. It teaches awareness and humility toward your creator. It teaches peace and nonviolence. It warns of greed and capriciousness. It warns of cruelty and negligence, and it prescribes the essential

elements of love, compassion, understanding, altruism, consciousness and forgiveness.

Now I don't believe these are bad things to be having our children read and absorb.

If we were to read, as I did last year, "The Autobiography of Malcolm X," are we saying that black Muslims are the most justified civil rights group and that "white people are the devil?"

In history class we learn and read about such figures as Huey Louis, Adolf Hitler, Jim Jones, Benito Mussolini and Bloody Mary. Are we consequently endorsing to our youth anarchy, Nazism, mass suicide, fascism and religious intolerance to the point of murdering those of opposing religions?

Reading of these recent protests and nationwide surprise at the distinguished University's assignment at "such an inappropriate time" has taken me aback because of the hypocrisy. A bumper sticker I was always fond of read "Keep the Books, Burn the Censor," and that saying seems appropriate here.

People are protesting the learning of a culture that few Americans understand or have learned of.

Little did most Americans know but the Middle East and the Islamic culture has faced years of injustices, war and turmoil over their

religion which endorses universal concepts.

People are protesting with intolerance a book that teaches the opposite.

To prevent further travesty wouldn't it be appropriate to learn about that which we don't understand and embrace difference rather than shun and ostracize?

Killing in the name of God always seemed like the most backwardly, idiotic concept to me – murdering (a capital sin) in the name of the deity that shuns the action. Literally, bigotry and racism is not murder, but as far as every religion's respective deity is concerned, they are but one sin.

Religion has caused many wars, and still causes wars; but outside religion, mere cultural misunderstanding and intolerance has caused every war, disagreement and scuffle from World War II to a high school fight.

If we as a nation can be shocked at a University's diplomatic attempt to spread knowledge in a highly appropriate time (as anti-Muslim, anti-Arab feelings seem to be flowing through our country), then we are protesting knowledge, truth and compassion and endorsing hate, ostracism and hostile relations.

I was made a more well-rounded person for reading the book. I am not going to change my name and become a Muslim. I am not going to join the al-Qaida terrorists in a plot on the free world. I am going to infect my knowledge of this previously foreign religion and culture. I am going to spread the Islamic, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Zoroaster and atheistic teaching of tolerance and compassion toward strangers.

I will not shun alien cultures. I will not hold a group accountable for a few. I will not protest the teaching of tolerance and understanding toward that which we don't understand. I think it appropriate to end with an aphorism that summarizes what we as a people should do and what I have done through the wonderful opportunity I had to read the Quran: "Once another language is mastered it is no longer foreign; once another culture is understood it is no longer alien."

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Heart of Education Rests Upon Free Choice

I don't think the debate about UNC's assigning a book about the Quran to incoming freshmen will produce much except repeated grandstanding on both sides, unless we can admit that each side in this issue has a leg to stand on.

Of course the University should be able to assign a book for its students to read, even a bad or dangerous one. UNC-system President Molly Broad is right in saying that any attempt by the legislature to control assignments at the University strikes directly at the foundation of its academic freedom.

But we need also to think about why a person might try to do just that. The members of the state House who voted for Rep. Larry Justus' amendment are likely not embittered reactionaries, eager to limit

either academic freedom or our First Amendment rights.

I'm guessing they are motivated by an assumption that what a student reads affects what that student thinks in the sense that one is molded by one's environment and often inclined to imitate behaviors one is exposed to. And of course there is truth in that assumption. Parents know very well that their children are influenced by the company they keep, the television they watch and the books they read.

But a problem arises if we think that education as a whole works that way – that learning is simply a matter of accepting and then imitating the ideas and ways of behaving that we are exposed to. The assumption that learning is essentially imitating is not stupid, and it has a long history.

The Greek philosopher Plato was an early advocate. The problem with this assumption is that it leads very quickly, if one is serious and consistent, to the conclusion that we need to limit and control everything our children are exposed to – searching out good books, music, ideas and political beliefs for them and censoring bad ones. This can be an idealistic approach, but it leads to mind control and dictatorship. A good example of both lies close to hand in Fidel Castro's Cuba.

Another radically different assumption about learning is that it includes the learner's reasoning about what she or he is exposed to, that the learner observes the consequences of things and puts two and two together so that he or she ends by agreeing with some things and disagreeing with others. This view of learning recognizes that students think and make judgements and do not simply imitate. It, too, goes back to the Greeks, most importantly to Aristotle, but its most powerful expression in English is the essay called "Areopagitica" advocating the freedom of the press and written by John Milton in 1644.

Both these ways of seeing the process of learning can be urged with passion by persons who are genuinely concerned with the morality of students and with the future of society. People who want to control students' reading are not always motivated by loathing for freedom, and people who support the University's assignment of reading about the Quran are not trying to subvert students' present religious beliefs.

Personally I prefer the second view, and I feel more comfortable siding with Aristotle and Milton than I would with Plato and Castro. But whichever side you're on, I hope you'll agree that we will all benefit if we try hard not to oversimplify the position of those we disagree with. You don't have to look far these days to see what happens when either side in a deeply-felt ethical conflict demonizes the other: It makes progress impossible by hardening both sides in oversimplified positions.

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