

Who Would Ban the Koran?

On the bottom shelf in my home library sits a small, little-used paperback edition of the Koran. For years it has been nestled between “History of the Christian Church” and the “Book of Mormon,” far from the books I use regularly.

But since Sept. 11 it has been on my bedside table. As I scan the Koran, I see notes and marks I inscribed years ago, during a study of the book. If I lived in another part of the world or in another time my life might be threatened for having this sacred book of Islam.

Some believe the Koran is a dangerous book.

When it was first published in Europe in 1530, Christian authorities ordered it burned. Latin translations were suppressed by the Spanish Inquisition until 1790. These, and other, ecclesiastical efforts by Christians were meant to restrict Muslim life and worship.

Then, and now, the “original” Koran is untouchable, safely and eternally preserved in heaven, or so Muslims believe. The angel Gabriel gave the words of the Koran to the prophet Muhammad between 619-632. Muhammad’s followers memorized the Koran and, after his death, wrote it down. The first Koran was handwritten in 652 and is said to be the first and finest work of classical Arabic prose.

The key words there are “handwritten” and “Arabic.” Many Muslims consider it sacrilegious to reprint or translate the Koran.

Muslim countries did not allow a printed edition until 1833, when Muhammad Ali Pasha published the Koran in Egypt. His print edition still was not distributed until 1854. Most Arabic editions of the Koran are block printed, a process similar to lithography, considered more consistent with the handwritten rule.

In the 20th century, both secular and religious governments suppressed the Koran. In the Soviet Union, the Koran (along with other religious texts, such as the Bible and the Talmud) was accessible only in the libraries of large cities. During the Cultural Revolution in China, the government forbade the study of the Koran. In the 1980s, Muslims were prohibited from praying, mosques were

destroyed and the Koran was banned in Ethiopia under the socialist military government.

As recently as 1995, the government of Malaysia, an Islamic country, banned a Malay translation of the Koran.

The Koran is not the only book I own that is on somebody's list of dangerous books. Somewhere in my library are other books once banned: "Infallible? An Inquiry," by Hans Kung; "Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone," by Immanuel Kant; "On the Origins of Species," by Charles Darwin; "Christianity Restored," by Michael Servetus; "The Bloody Tenent of Persecution," by Roger Williams; and the Bible itself! (The first English edition by William Tyndale led to his death in 1536.)

Religious leaders' efforts to ban books that seemingly threaten their faith constitute a sad and sorry history. It illustrates the evil done when religious fervor is wedded to political power.

Long ago, western culture forced a divorce of these two powers, and churches and states have all flourished. Islam has yet to adopt this division of labor, and so continues to exercise its earthly power in suppressing books that challenge their religion.

Perhaps the safe thing to do is to return my edition of the Koran to its obscure spot in my home library.

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