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Blogging the News With Robert Mackey

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Florida Pastor Says Koran Burning Still On

By ROBERT MACKEY AND DAMIEN CAVE

Updated | 6:31 p.m. Terry Jones, the pastor of a tiny Florida church that has garnered worldwide attention for its plan to burn more than 200 copies of the Koran, told reporters on Wednesday that, “as of this time, we have no intention of canceling.” He added, “we are not convinced that backing down is the right thing, so on Sept. 11 we will continue with our planned event.”

As The Lede [explained earlier today](#), there has been widespread opposition to the church’s plans from American officials, including the American commander in Afghanistan, Gen. David Petraeus, who [warned](#), “It could endanger troops and it could endanger the overall effort in Afghanistan. ... It is precisely the kind of action the Taliban uses and could cause significant problems. Not just here, but everywhere in the world we are engaged with the Islamic community.”

Speaking to television crews assembled on the church’s lawn in Gainesville, Fla., Mr. Jones said, “we understand the general’s concerns and we are still considering” what he said. The pastor, who has been highly successful at [using the media to spread his message](#), then attacked the news media for what he said was a failure to accurately report what he called “quite a bit of support” for the book-burning event, even within the American military.

By way of example, Mr. Jones cited a phone call he said he had received on Tuesday from a former American soldier who claimed that “the people that are on the field, the Special Forces ... are 100 percent behind us.”

While he was speaking to supporters, Mr. Jones refused to take calls or return messages from one of evangelical Christianity’s most revered figures: Franklin Graham.

Mr. Graham — the son of evangelist Billy Graham — called Mr. Jones twice on Wednesday in an effort to stop the Koran bonfire from happening, said a spokesperson for Graham’s ministry, but in both cases, he only reached a secretary who said Mr. Jones was not available.

“It’s never right to deface or destroy sacred texts or writings of other religions even if you don’t agree with them,” Mr. Graham said in a statement. “And while as an American Mr. Jones has the freedom and right to do it, it doesn’t make it right.”

Mr. Graham’s behind-the-scenes effort was seen by some Christians who oppose Mr. Jones as the last, best hope of getting him to give up his bonfire idea because Mr. Graham is well-known for his own strong criticism of Islam. He came under fire in 2002 for [saying that the Koran “teaches violence,”](#) and more recently, he [has argued](#) that President Obama’s “problem is that he was born a Muslim; his father was a Muslim; the seed of Islam is passed through the father. ” (The president’s paternal grandfather [converted to Islam](#) in Kenya decades before Mr. Obama’s birth in Hawaii to non-observant parents.)

At least two other prominent commentators with a record of denouncing Islam or the Koran — [Pamela Geller](#) and [Robert Spencer](#) — have also called for Mr. Jones to call off his “International Burn a Koran Day” demonstration.

In his televised statement on Wednesday, Mr. Jones argued that the book burning was justified by a never-before reported atrocity an unnamed former soldier claimed to have witnessed during the war in Bosnia, in which “radical Muslims” had massacred Christians in a burning hospital in front of American troops, who were not allowed to intervene.

Mr. Jones spoke of the event as if it were well known, but it is not, and may not have occurred. While there were massacres carried out by Serb, Croat and Muslim forces in Bosnia’s war, a search of [the Bosnian War Crimes Atlas](#) compiled by the Research and Documentation Center in Sarajevo turns up no record of any atrocity like the one he says the soldier described to him.

To a reporter who worked in Bosnia during that war, the story Mr. Jones told on Wednesday sounds very like the kind of fictional tales of wartime atrocities against Christians that were cited by Bosnian Serbs and Croats at the time to justify the well-documented massacres of Muslims that did take place — like the murder of thousands of Muslim men and boys buried in mass graves around Srebrenica in 1995.

Postwar research [concluded](#) that about 65 percent of the documented victims of the war were Bosnian Muslims, many of whom were from secular families that often included Serb or Croat members.

It should also be noted that American soldiers arrived in Bosnia as peacekeepers only after the end of the conflict there.

On Wednesday, the German magazine [Der Spiegel](#) published allegations against Mr. Jones from former congregants at the church in Cologne, Germany, he led until 2008. Spiegel reported:

A “climate of fear and control” had previously prevailed in the congregation, says one former member of the church who does not want to be named. Instead of free expression, “blind obedience” was demanded, he says.

Various witnesses gave Spiegel Online consistent accounts of the Jones’ behavior. The pastor and his wife apparently regarded themselves as having been appointed by God, meaning opposition was a crime against the Lord. Terry and Sylvia Jones allegedly used these methods to ask for money in an increasingly insistent manner, as well as making members of the congregation carry out work.

Andrew Schäfer, a Protestant Church official responsible for monitoring sects in the region where Cologne is located, confirmed the accounts. “Terry Jones is a fundamentalist,” he told Spiegel Online.

Both major churches in Germany have “sect commissioners” who monitor the activities of religious groups, sects and cults. Although they are obviously not totally impartial, the officials’ findings are usually considered to be trustworthy.

Former church members are still undergoing therapy as a result of “spiritual abuse,” Schäfer said. According to Schäfer, Jones urged church members to beat their children with a rod and also taught “a distinctive demonology” and conducted brainwashing.

“Terry Jones appears to have a delusional personality,” speculates Schäfer. When he came to Germany in the 1980s, Jones apparently considered Cologne “a city of Hell that was founded by Nero’s mother.”