

Hurting the Qur'an – Suggestions Concerning the Psychological Infrastructure of Desecration

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Abstract

Recent years have witnessed several examples of desecrations of copies of the Qur'an as a display of non-Muslim hostility against Muslims. The present article attempts to answer a fundamental question relating to this phenomenon: how do desecrators know what acts directed at the Qur'an are likely to offend Muslims? The suggestion put forward is that desecration is an act that can be understood across cultural and religious boundaries because it is based on shared, intuitive knowledge of what the sacredness of an object entails. This knowledge, in turn, rests upon certain mental operations involved in the process of sacralisation: i.e. when things are 'set apart and forbidden'. When the mental processes of psychological essentialism and conceptual blending are combined, it results in a partial personification of the sacred object, providing inferences concerning which acts count as desecrations, i.e. acts that, had they been directed at a person, would cause harm, whether physical or psychological.

Keywords: Desecration, Qur'an, sacralisation, psychological essentialism, conceptual blending

In July 2010 Terry Jones, a pastor in the *Dove World Outreach Center* church in Gainesville, Florida announced a 'Burn the Qur'an day' as an event to commemorate the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York on 11th September 2001. The actual burning, however, did not take place until March 2011. In an event at which the book was 'put on trial' with a prosecutor, a defence lawyer, and Jones himself as the judge, the Qur'an was sentenced to death and burned. The execution method was, according to Jones, decided by a poll on his Facebook page in which the options were burning, shredding, drowning, or death by firing squad (Banks 2011). As a direct response to the event, riots erupted in Afghanistan, resulting in the deaths of more than twenty people, among them seven UN personnel in the city of Mazar-i-Sharif (The Guardian 2011).

This incident is but one example among many in recent years of Qur'an desecrations performed by individuals or groups antagonistic towards Islam or Muslims. In this article I will present more. The purpose, however, is not to provide a descriptive inventory of contemporary Qur'an desecrations. The examples, which are limited, have largely been gathered from news reports and online sources. The collection process has not been systematic, because it is not the actual, individual instances of desecration that interest me, but the principles that govern them, i.e. what the common denominator is. The problem to be solved is one that, in all its simplicity, constitutes a genuine puzzle: how did Jones, and others like him whose aim it is to desecrate, know what to do? Desecrators can anticipate that Muslims who view a copy of the Qur'an, a *mushaf*, as a sacred object will be offended, sad, or angry in response to the varied actions taken. Acts of desecration constitute successful communication across cultural and religious boundaries that rests upon a pan-human capacity for 'cognitive empathy', i.e. the ability to simulate the mind of 'the other', at times on the basis of limited information, and the possibility to do this without necessarily simulating the emotions of that 'other' (i.e. affective, or emotional, empathy) (see e.g. Bloom 2014; Shamay-Tsoory, et al. 2009). It is precisely this capacity for emotionally detached empathy that makes lying and deception possible, as part of a 'Machiavellian intelligence' (de Waal & Morris 1982).

In what follows I argue that the cognitive empathy underlying Qur'an desecration rests on a shared understanding of the sender (the desecrator) and the (perceived or real) receiver (the person experiencing the desecration as a desecration). This understanding can transcend cultural boundaries because it is built on a set of intuitive or implicit beliefs that are if not universal, then at least cross-culturally widespread, and probably unique, to humans as a species. These beliefs concern sacred objects defined broadly as objects that are, in the words of sociologist Emile Durkheim, 'set apart and forbidden' (Durkheim 1965 [1915], 62). In focusing on unconscious, implicit, and intuitive processes, this article contributes to a broader academic discussion concerning the development of theories for understanding and explaining sacralisation processes and their consequences for beliefs and behaviour within the framework of the cognitive science of religion (Anttonen 2000).

As I describe different forms of Qur'an desecration below, most readers will have no problem in understanding *that* these acts will be offensive to anyone who holds the Qur'an to be sacred. Hence, it may be argued that there is really no need for further explanation. The question 'how do desecrators know what to do?' can be answered merely by stating the seemingly

obvious: it is self-evident to them – it is ‘just common sense’. This answer, however, points directly to the problem: why does this, or anything, appear self-evident or the object of common sense? As linguist George Lakoff writes:

Whenever a cognitive scientist hears the words ‘It’s just common sense,’ his [sic!] ears perk up and he knows there’s something to be studied in detail and depth – something that needs to be understood. Nothing is ‘just’ common sense. Common sense has a conceptual structure that is usually unconscious. That is what makes it ‘common sense’ (Lakoff 2002, 4).

Hence, although it is easy enough to understand that certain actions directed at a copy of the Qur’an constitute desecrations while others do not, it may be less obvious why this is so easy to understand. The understanding is itself a consequence of unconscious mental processes, probably unique to humans compared with other animals, that can be further explored and outlined. It is to these processes I now turn.

Sacredness and sacralisation

In the context of the academic study of religions ‘the sacred’, as a general concept, has often been posited in a way that is both elusive and vague, at times as a synonym for ‘religion’, at times as a transcendental force with a causal effect on diverse beliefs and practices (as consequences of experiences of ‘the sacred’, whatever that could possibly be). I will not venture into this field,¹ but limit myself to ‘sacred’ as an adjective (rather than a noun with an unclear referent) (Dawes 2016, 6; Righetti 2014). Here, I side with sociologist Matthew Evans in focusing on the ‘set-apart sacred’ (Evans 2003). This is in line with the sociologically oriented tradition, associated with Durkheim (Paden 1991), in which sacralisation of objects, places, persons, and even ideas is a commonplace phenomenon in human culture, often analysed under the umbrella concept of religion, but in no way restricted to that context.² Evans:

1 For different aspects of traditional references to ‘the sacred’ in the study of religion among scholars such as Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade see contribution to the volume *The Sacred and its Scholars* (Idinopulos and Yonan 1996). For short overviews see also Evans 2003, 36–38 and Dawes 2016, 4–5.

2 Dawes (2016) proposes that the ‘attitude of regarding certain objects, beliefs, practices, institutions, places, or persons as sacred’ constitutes a feature that appears to be shared by all religions (although not unique to them) (Dawes 2016, 3). I make no such claims to universality here, but find Dawes’s suggestion indicates a worthwhile topic to pursue.

think[s] the feature common to the set-apart sacred is its valuation beyond utility, and that this mental setting-apart of certain things, sometimes accompanied by a literal setting apart, is largely based on non-rational (which is not necessarily to say *irrational*) features, like their emotional value (Evans 2003, 39).

Several important aspects are highlighted in this quotation. The act of 'setting apart' is mental, i.e. the result of a process taking place in the minds of human beings. Sacredness is not an inherent quality of the object, it is ascribed (Dawes 2016, 6). There are no sacred objects without human beings considering objects to be sacred. The setting-apart process, however, is not in itself a sufficient condition for an object to be conceived of as sacred, even if it is a necessary condition. The object set apart must also be an object of 'valuation', i.e. must be invested with a value that separates it from other objects, particularly objects that are conceived of as belonging to the same class. The setting-apart aspect is hence relational. A sacred stone is sacred in relation to non-sacred stones. A sacred book (whether 'book' here denotes an individual copy or, as in the case of the Qur'an, a particular sub-class of books) is sacred in relation to non-sacred books. In line with this reasoning religious studies scholar Ann Taves has suggested a dual process involved in sacralisation with two components: (1) singularisation; and (2) valuation (Taves 2013, 143f., 152–4). A set of behavioural patterns follows with the latter process.

Both Evans and Taves regard sacralisation processes as recurring and general features of human culture, observable around the world and throughout history. Occasionally, whatever becomes sacralised is connected to beliefs in superhuman agents (e.g. gods, spirits, ancestors), but such a connection is by no means necessary.

As stated above, it is the general, cross-cultural occurrence of sacralisation processes that constitutes the basis for the argument in this article. Both Qur'an desecrators and their potentially offended audience implicitly know what sacralisation entails and demands as a consequence of singularisation and valuation. However, as a further elaboration on these two aspects of sacralisation, I want to suggest that they not only occur alongside one another but that they are interconnected, and furthermore, that the nature of this interconnection can explain intuitive conclusions on which acts towards a sacred object are appropriate (prescribed) or inappropriate (forbidden). To substantiate this, I turn to two areas of research on the human mind and how it works: the theories of psychological essentialism and of conceptual blending.

Same, same but different: singularisation on the basis of invisible 'innards'

The process of setting apart, or singularisation, becomes most conspicuous when a sacred object is perceptually indistinguishable from non-sacred objects. An example from the religious domain might be the holy water used in the Catholic mass and ordinary tap water. A chemical analysis would show that there is, indeed, no discernible difference between the two. Still, believing Catholics will insist that there is. Another example is that while Elvis Presley's dirty underpants might be sold at auction for £5,000, I would probably have to pay someone to accept mine. A third example is the curious fact that while an original piece of art may be worth a fortune, a perceptually identical copy (or forgery) is almost worthless. In all cases the valuation of the 'special' object rests purely on the human imagination that there is an invisible and undetectable 'something' residing in it that makes it special and different. The three examples given illustrate three commonplace ways in which this something can be perceived as entering into the object: through ritual performance, physical contact (contagion), and origin.

The human ability, or rather proclivity, to categorise objects with reference to invisible inner properties has been well researched since the 1980s, and dubbed 'psychological essentialism' (Medin & Ortony 1989). Today, the evidence is quite robust that the ability/proclivity is widespread, if not universal, and emerges early in children's development (see e.g. Gelman 2003; Haslam, et al. 2013; Meyer, et al. 2013; Sousa, et al. 2002). It is important to stress that essentialism here is treated as a *psychological* phenomenon – as a way of thinking to be analysed as such. Whether there are such things as essences does not enter the analysis (Gelman 2003, 8–11).³

In the biological domain humans use essentialist reasoning in categorising plants and animals, and in the social domain it is used to categorise human beings into groups of individuals sharing 'something'. Such perceptually diverse specimens of the category 'dog' as the Great Dane and the Chihuahua both belong to the same category, because they are conceived of as sharing 'dog-ness'. Furthermore, a Great Dane that having undergone extensive plastic surgery perceptually resembles a small horse is still conceived of as a dog, because its inner 'dog-ness' is untouched by the outer transformation. The shared 'something', the essence, need not be

3 This is important to stress since essentialist thinking and charges against persons for being 'essentialists' (which is in itself, curiously enough, an ascription of essence) are used today in academia with defamatory motives. Theories on psychological essentialism do not consider whether this way of thinking is preferable, but merely note that it is commonplace, perhaps inevitable, and comes naturally to humans.

specified. Its function is to serve as a placeholder in a chain of reasoning, a basis for inferences concerning individual examples viewed as belonging to a particular category. In these two cases of essentialism from the biological and social domains the notion of an invisible essence serves to 'explain' perceived commonalities within a category, and differences between categories. Hence, a person's actions may be 'explained' by the fact that she belongs to a particular social category – woman, white, middle-class, heterosexual, Swedish, etc. – and shares the 'essence' all members of that category share, but which is itself not further specified.

However, there is experimental evidence for another form of essentialist thinking that is more relevant for the issue at hand. It is a form of essentialism that is used not in categorisation, but to separate individual exemplars *within* a category, i.e. to ascribe uniqueness or, to use Taves's terminology, for 'singularisation'. Psychologist Paul Bloom (2010) has noted that this is most marked in separating individual humans from one another within the social domain. The capacity to separate individuals from one another, and imagine that they remain the same over time and despite changes in appearance, is central to our advanced social cognition and according to many scholars is one of the major reasons behind the species' evolutionary success (see e.g. Dunbar, et al. 2007, 110–27).⁴ We construe individuals as unique and stable over time, because they are perceived as carrying 'within' them what Bloom terms a unique 'life force essence' (Bloom 2010, 20). Hence, Anna may appear and behave quite differently when she is three months old, thirty years old, or a hundred and three. The cells in her body have been replaced many times over. However, we conceive of her as being the same person throughout her life. At the same time, she is different from and unique in relation to other persons, even to her identical twin, Malin, with whom she shares her genes. The stable and unique, but invisible, essence may, on the level of reflective thought, be described differently in different cultural settings (Roazzi, et al. 2013). A few examples taken from English are the words 'soul', 'identity', and 'character'.⁵ I want to suggest a possible connection between how humans conceptualise other humans as unique individuals and how we conceptualise

4 For a recent suggestion on the evolutionary origins of psychological essentialism as connected to the ability to mentally separate individual exemplars see Rakoczy and Cacchione 2014.

5 This everyday dualism in human thought is so 'self-evident' that humans seldom reflect on its nature as a construction of the mind (see e.g. Bloom 2004, 189–208; Bloom 2007; Fiala, et al. 2011). Certain psychological conditions caused by damage to particular areas of the brain, however, make this evident. One example is the Capgras delusion, where those affected are under the delusion that 'significant others have been replaced by impostors, robots or aliens', remaining perceptually the same, but different on the 'inside' (Ellis & Lewis 2001, 149).

sacred objects. I am not alone in this. Psychologist Susan Gelman, who is one of the most well-known researchers in the field of psychological essentialism, has suggested that the form of essentialism sometimes applied to artefacts (original paintings, celebrity memorabilia, relics, etc.) 'may reflect the important task of tracking individuals through time and space' (Gelman 2013, 450). How then is the connection to be understood?

Sacredness – valuation through the blending of object and person

The theory of conceptual blending was introduced by cognitive linguists Mark Turner and Gilles Fauconnier in their book *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (Fauconnier & Turner 2002). Recently, Turner has also presented the theory in the book *The Origin of Ideas: Blending, Creativity, and the Human Spark* (2014). While the details of the theory are highly complex, the basic idea is straightforward. When humans construct, or grasp, new concepts, we blend concepts already established in our minds. The blending process, which is usually unconscious, involves a selective transfer of properties from what could be termed two 'parent' concepts (technical term: 'input spaces') into the new concept: the blend. An example would be the mythological concept of a centaur, which is a blend of a human being, or rather a person, and a horse. The blend (the centaur) acquires some of its properties from the person concept, and some from the horse concept. It is, however, something altogether new: a 'horse-person'. However, the latter part of this concept is itself a blend, perhaps less obviously so. Turner suggests that the concept of a person is a blend of the perception of the bodily form of another human being and the concept of 'I' as an entity with unique beliefs, thoughts, feelings, values, aspirations, etc. The blend is a concept of another person with a mind, similar but never identical to my own (Turner 2014, 31–56).

A key assumption in blending theory is that the transfer of properties from source concepts to the blend is selective. What is transferred from the parent concept of 'I' into the blend of 'a person' is the phenomenological experience of having an 'inner world' (Gärdenfors 2004, 238). This inner world of another person is itself invisible: it cannot be perceived, only imagined. Yet it is the imagination of an inner world that in my understanding makes that person unique as an individual, and the inner world, at least in part, corresponds with Bloom's 'life force essence'.

What I wish to hypothesise here is that when we set objects apart as unique in the process of sacralisation, we blend. The parent concepts in the

blending process are (1) the object, and (2) the concept of a person. The blend receives its outer appearance from the former and the notion of individual uniqueness (separateness), due to an invisible essence, from the latter. Sacralisation is thus, in a sense, a personification that imbues the object with a unique identity, setting it apart from other objects, just as an individual human being is set apart from other human beings. To be able to separate objects from one another, we implicitly 'borrow' the notion of a unique, but invisible, essence from the concept of a person. However, something else is borrowed in the transfer process, perhaps as a by-product, which may account for the second aspect in Durkheim's definition of sacred things, i.e. that they are 'forbidden'.

The 'forbidden' aspect of the sacred object relates to notions of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour directed at those objects. Based on the reasoning above, a hypothetical suggestion is that what comes to be seen as appropriate and inappropriate behaviour towards the sacred object is a direct result of the blending process. It is a matter of what is considered appropriate or inappropriate behaviour towards a person.

Answering the question

Here, then, we have a possible answer to the central question of this article. Desecrators know what to do to a *mushaf* because, in understanding that Muslims consider the Qur'an to be sacred, they also intuitively know that Muslims view, also intuitively, the Qur'an to be, in a sense, a (valued) person. Consequently, believing Muslims will construe any act that is *harmful* to a person as inappropriate, or rather forbidden, if directed at a copy of the Qur'an as a sacred object.

However, there are some problems with this suggestion, and this prompts a small theoretical modification. Strictly speaking there is no unique Qur'an considered sacred. Copies of the Qur'an, *mushafs*, are not objects set apart because of their individual uniqueness. Rather, they are special because they belong to a *particular category* of books. Hence, if there is a conceptual blend underlying the sacredness of the Qur'an, that blend cannot be that of an *individual* person and an *individual* book. It must be that of an *individual person belonging to a particular group*, and an *individual book belonging to a particular category of books*. This suggests turning to psychological essentialism in the social domain: groups and group belonging. While members of a social group are not identical, the intuitive bias is that they all partake in something 'shared', albeit to different degrees. This shared 'stuff' unites

them in a group and at the same time forms part of their individual essences, influencing but not totally substituting them (Gelman & Hirschfeld, 1999, 409). A secular counterpart here would be the national flag as sacred object (i.e. the idea that it should be treated in a certain manner). Every flag is a unique object, but it shares a 'national-flag-ness', different from other national flags, and from other pieces of cloth, which unites them and makes them what they are, i.e. sacred objects.⁶

Before presenting examples to substantiate the claim that Qur'an desecrators know what to do because of an implicit and intuitive appreciation of what sacralisation entails, an alternative explanation will be suggested, and discarded.

It might be that would-be Qur'an desecrators have gathered a vast knowledge of how the proper and improper handling of *masahif* (plural of *mushaf*) have been discussed throughout Islamic history, and use that knowledge to come up with appropriate forms of desecration. This would be an alternative answer to the question of how desecrators know what to do. For several reasons, however, I deem this alternative unlikely.

Muslim traditions concerning how *masahif* should be handled – sometimes referred to as *adab al-Qur'an* or 'etiquette with the Qur'an' (al-Nawawi 2003) – contain discussions, for example, of whether copies of the Qur'an should be bought and sold, the correct ways to show respect for the book (e.g. kissing it, placing it on top of other books, embellishing it, and protecting it), and how to handle a copy no longer fit for use, i.e. to respectfully bury it (see e.g. Motzki 2001; Suit 2013; Svensson 2010). Most of these instructions are in line with the suggestion of sacralisation as personification: copies of the book should be respected, venerated, and protected, often in manners analogous to how (valued) human beings are to be respected, venerated, and protected.⁷

There are (perhaps obviously) no direct instructions in this tradition of 'etiquette with the Qur'an' on how to perform desecration. Desecrators might, however, draw useful conclusions from cautionary instructions on *how not to handle masahif*. These include using a copy of the Qur'an as

6 I have dealt with this issue at length in a forthcoming article on Muslim beliefs and practices relating to the Qur'an as a sacred object: see Svensson, forthcoming.

7 This is not a feature unique to Islamic tradition. There are similar normative demands on how sacred texts should be handled, as well as folk practices, within other religious traditions. For two collections of articles on the topic see Myrvold 2010; Watts 2013a. In the introductory chapter to the former, the Study of Religions scholar James Watts also clearly identifies as a recurring feature that sacred texts appear to be imbued with 'personas more like people than like books' (Watts 2013b, 25).

a pillow, letting infidels touch it, licking one's fingers while reading it to facilitate the turning of pages, touching it while in a state of ritual impurity, and placing it under other books in a bookshelf. In the examples I have gathered (to be discussed below) there is little evidence that such information has been used. There are, for example, no images of desecrators resting their heads on copies of the Qur'an. Nor are there any videos on YouTube in which people sift through the pages of a *mushaf* while licking their fingers. Put differently: *adab al-Qur'an* as a tradition is of little use in predicting the forms of desecration that occur. The question, then, is if my suggestion above fares any better. I believe it does.

In the following I will introduce a basic distinction between two categories of Qur'an desecration, based on the theoretical outline above. My claim is that these two categories cover most if not all cases of desecration that are easily identified as such. I will also suggest a third category of actions 'harmful' to the *mushaf* which are perhaps seldom viewed as desecrations, but nevertheless fit within the general framework.

Harm through physical violence

In a video published on YouTube on 16th September 2015, entitled 'Christians ripping up Koran at university', a man stands before a crowd, allegedly at an American university campus. He gives a speech on Muhammad, Islam, and the Qur'an. The crowd challenges him, and as the debate gets increasingly heated, the speaker gets increasingly agitated. Eventually, he starts tearing pages out of the copy of the Qur'an that he is carrying, provoking a violent reaction among the crowd and forcing police officers present to intervene.⁸ Another YouTube video, featured on *The Deen Show*, an American Muslim web-based talk show, shows a man, also on a campus, ripping pages from a copy of the Qur'an, putting them in his mouth, and chewing them.⁹ The footage becomes the starting point for the show's topic of the day: 'How do we respond when someone tries to provoke us?' In another video a man, whose face is not shown, films himself performing a series of acts directed at a *mushaf*, including throwing stones at it, stabbing it with a knife, kicking it, stepping on it, throwing it to the floor, and tossing it into a lake.¹⁰

All the examples (tearing apart, biting, stabbing, throwing to the floor, etc.) are acts that would cause pain, physical injury, or perhaps even death

8 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bgkBLitaVpM>>, accessed December 10, 2017.

9 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjwSDYPEnw>>, accessed December 10, 2017.

10 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RjobVoYeghM>>, accessed December 10, 2017.

to a human being. So would all the execution methods that Terry Jones let his audience vote for on Facebook. One might add here incidents reported from prison camps run by the US military in Guantanamo Bay and Iraq, where prison guards have allegedly used copies of the Qur'an for target practice.¹¹ Whether these incidents have actually occurred is of little consequence for the argument. Reports still construe the incidents, real or not, as desecrations.

The favoured desecration method within this category appears to be burning. Qur'an burning, or accusations of Qur'an burning, has been a feature of communal violence in India (DH News Service, 2016). On YouTube there are several homemade movies featuring the burning of pages from or whole copies of the Qur'an, as well as images of half-burned *masahif*.

Interestingly, the burning, drowning, and shredding which feature in Jones's list above would not necessarily occur if desecrators were inspired by Muslim religious discourses on how to treat (or not) a *mushaf*. All actually appear in discussions on how to respectfully dispose of copies of the text, or excerpts therefrom, no longer fit for use. Immersing the Qur'an in water, preferably running water, and thereby erasing its text is considered a respectful alternative to burying it (or just storing it in a safe place). Burning is more controversial. Those who accept it cite the example of the third caliph 'Uthman, who, according to legend, collected what became the authoritative version of the text and burned all other versions. Those opposing burning as a method (or reserving it as a 'last resort') see burning as an inherently hostile act or associate fire with hell and the devil (Iblis). Similar reservations are expressed against using a paper shredder to dispose of the text, a practice nevertheless acceptable to some (Svensson 2010).

Nevertheless, believing Muslims have reacted strongly against the burning and shredding (tearing apart) of *musahif*, and would probably also do so to attempts at 'drowning'. The reason is the one stated above. It is not only the *acts* in themselves that count, but the *perceived intent* of the perpetrators, and this intent is to perform an action that would cause harm (pain, physical injury, or death) if the object in question were a person. It should be noted that when Muslim scholars accept the burning, immersing in water, and shredding of *masahif*, it concerns copies of the Qur'an no longer fit for use, i.e. they are metaphorically 'dead' persons.

11 For examples of desecration of *masahif* as a means of psychological torture see Peppard 2008.

Harm through defilement

The first category of acts, therefore, consists of those that if directed at a person would cause pain, physical injury, or death. The second category covers acts that may be expected to cause distress and psychological pain. They are based on the intuitive understanding of how persons react emotionally and behaviourally to what they identify as potential sources of harmful contagion: with disgust, anxiety, and physical withdrawal.

Some research has been undertaken on the human 'psychology of disgust' concerning what human beings in general find disgusting and the behaviour that the emotion of disgust prompts (for an overview see Kelly 2011). Cross-cultural studies have revealed that although there is a great variety in what human beings around the world (and throughout history) find disgusting, some elicitors appear more widespread than others. Among these are bodily waste products such as urine, faeces, sweat, and sexual fluids. Rotting food and decaying flesh are likewise widely viewed as disgusting. Signs of infection, such as festering wounds, also appear to provoke similar emotions among people around the world (see e.g. Curtis & Biran 2001; Rozin, et al. 2008).

Just as in the case of pain, injury, and death, one may expect that widely shared intuitive notions of what elicits disgust may serve as a basis for desecration. A person who is forced into contact with what she finds disgusting may be assumed to experience psychological distress and anxiety. Consequently, I suggest the bringing of copies of the Qur'an into contact with 'dirt' constitutes the second category of acts of desecration.

There are many examples. They feature individuals urinating, defecating, and spitting on the Qur'an.¹² The debut album of the black metal band *Taghut* (a Qur'anic term denoting idolatry) was called *Ejaculate upon the Holy Qur'an*, and the video footage accompanying the YouTube version of the title track contains explicit graphics representing the act.¹³ Images are posted online showing copies of the Qur'an thrown in a garbage bin, smeared with rotting food, or being flushed down the toilet.¹⁴ These examples all constitute uses of potentially universal disgust elicitors.

There are, however, examples where desecrators appear to make use of some basic information on Muslim culture-specific objects of disgust. In a post on the blog *Pharyngula*, for example, the self-styled PZ Meyers

12 See e.g. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1P1hi2WuZlC>>, accessed 22 December, 2016.

13 See e.g. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q0L2yyHEni0>>, accessed 22 December, 2016.

14 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7W3iTKKAESE>>; <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zr1fTcRAVgw>>, accessed 22 December, 2016.

suggests a form of desecration that consists of making a cover for a copy of the Qur'an, and bookmarks, from slices of bacon.¹⁵ This is probably based on an awareness that Muslims (persons) avoid eating pork and find pork (and pigs) disgusting. Images of this form of desecration are available on the internet, allegedly used in anti-Muslim activism among Buddhist militants in Myanmar.¹⁶ Another example of more culture-specific knowledge being useful for desecration is the allegation that US soldiers in Iraq have made dogs pick up copies of the Qur'an (Peppard 2008), which is based on an awareness that contact with dogs, or rather dogs' saliva, renders a *person* ritually unclean, and is generally avoided.

Harm through verbal abuse and disrespect

The two forms of desecration so far discussed cover most, if not all, cases that may easily be conceived as such both by desecrators and those who are the (secondary) targets of desecration, i.e. those who can be expected to be offended by them. They are conspicuous because they involve direct physical action. If, however, the general explanation given here is correct, then a third category is also conceivable. A person may be harmed by direct violence, causing pain or death, or by being forced into contact with disgusting objects or substances, causing anxiety and distress. But a person may also be, at least metaphorically, 'hurt' by attacks on her self-esteem or social reputation making her the target of contempt, ridicule, verbal abuse, humiliation, or attacks on her character. The act of spitting on the Qur'an may be classified either as an example of a display of contempt or wilful defilement. This leads to the suggestion that the instances of verbal, alongside physical, 'Qur'an bashing' in anti-Muslim activism are structurally analogous to the verbal 'bashing' of persons.

The expression 'Fuck the Qur'an/Quran/Koran' received over 115,000 hits in a Google search on 12th December 2016. It is a phrase that also accompanies forms of physical desecration, for example, being scribbled on the front cover of a *mushaf* that is then defiled or burnt. If directed at a person, expressions such as 'Fuck you!', 'Fuck her', etc. are means of expressing hostility and contempt. Apart from such direct expressions of contempt and hostility, there are also examples where the Qur'an is ill-spoken of in a manner analogous to how human beings may be defamed. In the above

15 <<http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2007/07/29/desecration-its-a-fun-hobby/>>, accessed 22 December, 2016.

16 <<https://twitter.com/nslwin/status/330397662635499520>>, accessed 22 December, 2016.

mentioned YouTube video featuring the public tearing of Qur'an pages the desecrator also engages in verbal abuse, screaming, 'The Qur'an is evil [...] I hate the Qur'an'. A Google search on the first phrase produced 133,000 hits on 12th December 2016. The choice of wording is important, since it reflects personification. There are similar statements describing the Qur'an in negative terms akin to how a person might be described, as a coherent whole with a worldview, mind, and attitude. These include describing the Qur'an as confused, violent, or misogynistic. Of course, none of these statements could apply to the Qur'an in a literal sense, since they all imply the existence of a mind. They are metaphorical, but the metaphors we use are, if one follows Lakoff and his fellow linguist Mark Johnson, important indicators of our intuitive thinking (Lakoff & Johnson 2003). I do not claim that any negative statement about the Qur'an proffered in this manner constitutes an intentional desecration. The claim is only that this kind of defamation of the Qur'an *might* be used in attacks on Muslims in a manner similar to the forms of desecration described above, and for the same basic reason.

Finally, another much less conspicuous form of desecration can be conceived of in line with the theoretical model suggested. In an article on (unintentional) blasphemy from 2008 the philosopher Elizabeth Burns Coleman highlights the fact that someone who holds an object sacred may react negatively to others merely 'failing to respond' appropriately to its presence or giving the object its due treatment. To illustrate this, she uses a simile that is highly relevant for the current article's overall argument: 'After a musical performance, it is conventionally accepted that clapping hands is an appropriate form of acknowledgment of the performers' skill. Withholding this gesture, or clapping weakly, is a way of expressing dislike. For the performer, a lack of applause must be devastating' (Burns Coleman 2008, 47).¹⁷ Disrespect, expressed dislike, or merely a lack of recognition hurt a *person*, and consequently, in line with the overall argument, when such acts are directed against a sacred object, they constitute desecration. In the context of Qur'an desecration a conceivable hostile act falling into this category would be presenting or treating the Qur'an as inferior to other sacred texts, as devoid of any sacred value, or merely as a book like any other.

¹⁷ I wish to express my gratitude to the anonymous reviewer who pointed me to Burns's article.

Additional support for the hypothesis and consideration of alternatives¹⁸

The current article's admittedly hypothetical answer to the basic question posed rests heavily on the theory of conceptual blending. More specifically, it rests on the assumption of a person-object blend being active in sacralisation processes and affecting the inferences drawn and related behavioural patterns. The argument would be strengthened if it could be shown that other, more obvious person-object blends have corresponding effects.

In *The Origin of Ideas*, Mark Turner describes 'representation' as a 'familiar pattern of blending [...] used widely in art and in everyday life' (Turner 2014, 147). A photograph and a person are two distinct material objects. However, because of our blending capacity, humans can appreciate the concept of a 'photograph of a person', where the two material objects are blended to form a representation. More relevant, the way the representation is formed (blending) influences how humans intuitively conceptualise and relate to it. Turner writes: 'We can talk "to the picture" [...] People confess, apologize or propose to pictures, upbraid and accuse pictures, insult pictures. They feel ashamed or proud when a "picture" looks at them. They throw darts at pictures' (Turner 2014, 148). We can add other things humans do to pictures (or other forms of representation, such as paintings, dolls, or statues) of others: burning them, stabbing them, tearing them apart, urinating on them. These are all recurring acts in the above examples of desecration.

However, merely searching for support for the suggested explanation is not enough. Alternative explanations must be considered and evaluated. I have already claimed that it is unlikely that desecrators have been directly inspired by the Islamic tradition of *adab al-qur'an*, but there are other 'cultural' explanations to consider. One concerns the specific practice of Qur'an burning. It may be argued that this is a direct consequence of a culturally specific 'Western' tradition of displaying contempt for and political opposition to a particular group or ideology. The prototypical precedent is organised book burning in Nazi Germany. Indeed, this might form part of an explanation if it is shown that burning is particularly commonplace among desecrators in Europe and the United States. However, a culture-specific tradition of book burning fails to explain its occurrence outside the culture for which it is assumed to be specific (e.g. in India), why it is apparently so easily understood outside that context (by Afghan protesters against Jones's Qur'an burning),

18 This section is the result of two anonymous reviewers' critical comments on the original article draft, for which comments I am grateful.

or why some Muslim scholars have historically expressed reservations about burning 'dead' Qur'ans. Most importantly, however, such an explanation does not explain the other forms of desecration outlined above.

Another 'cultural' explanation might postulate a common understanding of sacred scriptures, and how one should relate to them, among those culturally influenced by the 'religions of the Book', i.e. Judaism (or rather the religion of the Old Testament) and its 'offspring' in the forms of Christianity and Islam. Notwithstanding the problematic empirical fact that desecrations of the Qur'an also occur in Hindu and Buddhist contexts, one may, for the sake of argument, compare this explanation with the one proposed here purely on the grounds of parsimony and scope.

An explanation based on tradition would suggest that desecrators, in the course of their lives, have internalised information on suitable forms of desecration they have received from others (parents, teachers, peers etc) directly or indirectly (through observation or instruction, or through books or other media). From this they have formed mental models – i.e. conceptions or beliefs – that determine their actions when they desecrate. It appears unlikely, not least considering the innovation one finds in desecration practices, that every such practice corresponds to a particular mental model (e.g. one of ejaculating on the Qur'an and another of stabbing it). Rather, one would assume a more limited set of culturally transmitted generalised mental models, or 'schemata', of what constitutes desecration, schemata from which inferences can be drawn in imagining forms of desecration, even innovative ones. These schemata may be imagined to correspond roughly with the categories outlined above: violence, defilement, defamation, and, possibly, disrespect. They would have to be internalised separately, since there is no intrinsic connection between, for example, a violent act against the scripture and its defilement.

The current article, then, suggests that these separate schemata may be substituted for a single one, which, incidentally, also explains non-hostile practices directed at the scripture: the scripture is a (valued) person. Inappropriate and appropriate behaviour are then inferred from general schemata for interpersonal relations, ethics, and etiquette in the social domain that can be independently assessed, and have probably been in place long before even the invention of script itself.

Although there is therefore little need to assume that desecrators have gone through a culturally informed learning process specific to the issue of how to handle, or not handle, sacred scriptures, it is still possible that some have. The explanatory framework suggested here does not rule out

the existence, and possible influence, of long-established cultural schemata of the dos and don'ts related to sacred scriptures. On the contrary, it may explain how such schemata came into being, the forms they have taken, and how they became culturally established in the first place.

Conclusions

This article has attempted to answer one question: how do Qur'an desecrators know what to do? I have argued that the explanatory model proposed for desecration is more parsimonious and has a wider explanatory scope than alternative models. In conclusion I would also claim that it has the additional value of being testable, or at least that it is possible to pinpoint the kind of empirical work that can be done to test it.

A more thorough exploration of historical and contemporary instances of Qur'an desecration than the one presented here is needed to determine whether they fit within the general exploratory framework. Are they all actions that if performed on a person would cause harm, physically or psychologically, including anxiety and distress? If not, this would pose a challenge to the model. It may also be tested because it generates predictions. There will be actions that I have yet to encounter which, given the general framework, may be construed by most onlookers as Qur'an desecrations: for example, running over a copy of the Qur'an with a car (violence), calling the Qur'an sexually perverse (defamation), or using pages from the Qur'an for blowing one's nose (defilement). I stress again: the problem is not to understand *that* desecrators and believing Muslims alike construe such actions as desecrations, but to understand *why* they do it, beyond stating that it is self-evident or 'common sense'. One may also assume that the *degree* of harm that an action performed on a person is perceived to cause correlates with the degree to which the same action directed at the Qur'an is considered a desecration. For example, hitting a copy of the Qur'an with a hammer would probably be construed as a more severe act of desecration than slapping it with an open hand.

This article's focus has been on forms of Qur'an desecration, but the explanatory model is of potentially wider significance, because it rests on assumptions of a conceptualisation process related to sacred objects that is generally human. This suggests that similar, if not identical, patterns identified in Qur'an desecration will be found in relation to the desecration of any object 'set apart and forbidden'. Whether there is empirical support for this is a question for future research.

This article has not covered the question *why* humans tend to sacralise their surroundings (material objects or places), either individually or collectively. The theoretical model suggested has no direct impact on theories of the social or political roles of sacralisation or desecration, e.g. as a social glue, as a means for ordering the world, or as an expression for, and part of, social conflict,¹⁹ although it may provide insight into the psychological underpinnings of such potential roles, and in consequence a firmer theoretical basis for them.

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¹⁹ For an overview of current (2000-2010) theoretical work on the social roles of the sacred see Righetti 2014.

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