

Of Conversions, Qur'an Burnings, and the NYPD

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A few days ago I was interviewed on radio station KBRT about the conversion to Islam of Sean Stone, son of legendary filmmaker Oliver Stone. At a press conference last week in Iran the younger Stone publicly announced his conversion, but added he does not understand himself to be abandoning the Christianity or Judaism of his roots. He says, "I consider myself a Jewish Christian Muslim." KBRT wanted to know whether such a thing is possible, and whether the younger generation are blurring religious boundaries once thought to be clear.

Many former certainties about boundaries among Muslims, Christians and Jews have indeed been challenged in recent years. An obvious example is the Messianic Jewish movement – initially received with skepticism by both the Jewish and Christian communities – which challenges assumptions about how we understand religious identity, community and belonging. Another example are the growing number of so-called "Muslim followers of Jesus," about whom I have published an [article](#) exploring the complex theological issues this movement raises. Sean Stone's profession of faith raises a different set of complex questions.

Historically most Muslims have not seen Islam as repudiating Christianity or Judaism. Most Muslims see Islam as affirming the Judaism taught by Moses, and the Christianity taught by Jesus, while correcting errors that have crept into these faiths during the centuries since. From an Islamic standpoint Stone's statements can be seen as nothing new.

From a Christian standpoint perhaps the most important question these statements raise is the one Jesus himself asked: "Who do people say I am? ...And who do you say I am?" (Mark 8:27ff.) For most Christians, to be a "Christian" is to see Jesus not only as the one who shows the way, but also as the one who *is* the Way to God. Not only the one who teaches us how to know God, but also the One in whom God has revealed God's very self to humanity. Not only the one who demonstrates how to forgive, but also the One whose self-giving on the cross makes possible our forgiveness. For most Muslims, to be a "Muslim" is to see these beliefs about Jesus as deeply problematic at best.

While noting these things about "most Christians" and "most Muslims," we must remember the stunning diversity of the worldwide Muslim and Christian communities today. To be a "Muslim" means different things to different Muslims, just as to be a "Christian" means different things to different Christians. Jesus himself was always much more concerned with the attitudes of our hearts than with the external religious labels we wear with pride.

Regardless of what Sean Stone means by "Jewish Christian Muslim," and regardless of how he would answer Jesus' question, we must uphold his human right to decide those things according to his own free, uncoerced conscience. As the Holy Qur'an says "There is no compulsion in religion." A few days after Stone announced his conversion to Islam in Iran, the Iranian judiciary announced it would execute Pastor Youcef Nardakhani for converting to Christianity. This is a good time for people of good will of all faiths to pray and work for a world where no one is coerced into violating their religious conscience.

Speaking of the Holy Qur'an, some readers may wonder why demonstrators in Afghanistan are so angry about the burning of the Qur'an by ISAF personnel. When a Muslim burns a Bible, Christians and Jews are offended, but they are not *this* angry. Why is this so offensive to Muslims?

An important doctrine of Sunni Islam is not only that the Qur'an is the Word of God, but that as such it is an uncreated quality eternally subsisting in God's Essence. Indeed an early Islamic tradition reports that "Everything between the two covers" is uncreated. Thus not only the ideas recorded in the Qur'an but the book itself is a holy manifestation of the divine.

A parallel which may help Christian readers understand Muslims' feelings is to consider Eucharistic devotion in High-Church Christian traditions. If one imagines how American Christians would feel if a foreign Muslim army in the U.S. – however friendly their intentions – entered a Catholic church and confiscated the consecrated Eucharist, and then desecrated it, one may sense why the Afghan people feel violated at this time.

Nonetheless most Muslims agree that this anger does not justify killing. The Islamic, Christian and Jewish traditions all agree that human beings are created in God's image, so killing a human being is an attack against God (Genesis 9:6). In his Friday sermon – before most of the recent violence took place – the President of the Islamic Society of North America said: "The people of Afghanistan have the right to be offended over the burning of the Quran. However, in the face of this challenge, the sanctity of human life must be respected above all else...not having people lose their life and having violent reaction to this...Don't respond to something done wrong by wrong. Two mistakes do not make a right." In a televised address Sunday, Afghan President Karzai expressed sorrow for recent killings, saying: "Our people's emotion in this regard is legitimate and respectable, but while we share their sorrow, we should all try to keep calm...Now that we have shown our feelings it is time to be calm and peaceful."

Meanwhile, my very dear friends in the Muslim community at Yale are also feeling violated after news emerged this week that the New York Police Department has been spying on the Muslim Students Association at Yale, despite the absence of any evidence of Yale Muslim students' involvement in terrorism or other criminal activity. President Levin has issued a [statement](#) robustly defending the civil liberties of Yale's Muslim community.

During my fifteen years living in an Islamic Republic in North Africa, I frequently experienced police surveillance of me because of my Christian faith, and I was frequently interrogated by the police about my faith. I was deeply grateful when my Muslim neighbors spoke up in my defense. Jesus says we must do unto others as we would have them do unto us (Luke 6:31). If Christians want Muslims to speak up in defense of the human rights of Pastor Youcef Nardakhani, then we must speak up when the civil rights of American Muslims are violated.

Many of my Muslim friends are offering to save the NYPD some trouble by posting on Twitter their daily activities which any possible police surveillance might uncover. You can read their often-hilarious reports under the hashtag [#myNYPDfile](#).