

R.I. religious leaders reject reasoning behind threat to Koran



01:00 AM EDT on Friday, September 10, 2010

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PROVIDENCE — Here in a state where residents gather each year to read and celebrate George Washington’s 1790 letter to Jews in Newport pledging to give “bigotry no sanction, and persecution no assistance,” some of the state’s Muslim, Jewish and Christian leaders are joining to decry the plan by the pastor of a small church in Gainesville, Fla., to burn copies of the Koran.

The Rev. Donald C. Anderson, executive minister of the Rhode Island State Council of Churches, said that even if the Rev. Terry Jones has cancelled the book burning, apparently on the understanding that proponents of a planned Islamic Center in New York will move the proposed facility farther away from ground zero, Mr. Anderson strongly believes that Rhode Island’s religious leaders should proceed with an anti-bigotry news conference Friday.

“While I would celebrate [the cancellation] news, it does not sound to me that he’s repented. To have even intended to burn the sacred book of another religion is wrong-headed,” Mr. Anderson said.

Imam Farid Ansari, of the Muslim-American Dawah Center, said he believes it is important for the state’s religious community to speak against the burning of any sacred text.

While some may make the argument that the burning of a Koran could be deemed to be a church’s exercise of free speech, “I think the Supreme Court made clear years ago that free speech has its limits,” the iman said. “You can’t cry ‘fire’ in a crowded theater. This [burning of the Koran] is even worse because you’d be endangering many lives.

“As Muslims, we would never dare think of burning the Bible. That would be unconscionable. It would be tantamount to burning Jesus Christ in effigy,” he said, adding that the anti-Christian laws found in such places as Saudi Arabia are a “cultural thing” and have nothing to do with true Islam.

Mr. Anderson said his own opposition to the Koran burning “has nothing to do with the Constitution” but his own view, as a Christian, that the people in Jones’ Dove World Outreach Center are distorting what faith in Jesus Christ is all about.

The Rev. Liliana Da Valle, executive minister of the American Baptist Churches of Rhode Island, said the First Amendment to the Constitution gives everyone the right to express themselves, even those who want to burn a Koran or an American flag.

“But even though people have the right, it doesn’t make it right,” she said. “Some things are legal but unethical. They may burn a Koran but they have no right to do it in the name of the Christian faith.”

Rev. Da Valle said she was proud that the state’s religious leaders — Jewish, Muslim, Protestant and Catholic — make it a point of meeting every other month and, in 2007, entered into a covenant of faith in which they stressed their unity with the understanding that “we would not play down our faith to have a successful threshold of participation.”

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