

# Thought, Symbolism, Biblioclasm, Related Mob Violence and Subsequent Human Misery

Elizabeth Berry – June 1, 2011

*Biblioclasm is a politically motivated form of propaganda this is designed to incite and provoke violence, murder and mayhem. Ironically, its victims are often people who are totally innocent. Count me among those who consider biblioclasm as a weapon of mass destruction and its use as a crime against humanity—not as an action of “freedom of speech.”*

Human beings tend to have a propensity for destroying not only people, but even representations of ideas and viewpoints that they disagree with.. As a species, many of us seem to have a desire to destroy almost anything that we identify as belonging to “the other”—whether “the other” is identified by the color of their skin, the geographical location of their home, or their religious belief. Along with war, biblioclasm is one of the human actions stemming from this propensity to destroy that which we disagree with. Biblioclasm is defined as book burning or libricide. It is the practice of destroying, often ceremoniously, books or other written material and media. Today, in addition to books, it may include other forms of media such as video tapes, CDs. Along with books, these items have been ceremoniously burned, torched or shredded.

I was thinking this morning about the old common wisdom many of us with active imaginations as children heard from our parents: “Don’t worry, it’s not real. It is just in our mind. More and more I’m thinking that we should start paying much closer attention to what is in our minds as well as how others attempt to manipulate what is in our minds. There is no human action that did not first begin with a thought, however rudimentary the location of its origin in our brain—even the decision to take a step. Because of the book on propaganda that I’m finishing up, “*Backstage with the Hidden Persuaders*”, thought and how it can be manipulated is a topic forefront to my own recent thinking—on the “front burner” as one might say—thus another side trip with this essay on thought.

It is my hope that more people will become aware of propaganda, how to recognize it, and how to resist it by thinking more rationally. It is my hope that people’s consciousness of it will be raised by discussions and writings on the topic by others all over the world as well.

Just last night we had the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of one of the most violent examples of ethnic biblioclasm of the twentieth century—the burning of the Jaffna library public library located in Sri Lanka. Over 97,000 different books and manuscripts were burned by an organized mob that went on a rampage on the nights of May 31 to June 2, 1981.

Beginning in 1933 the library was built in many stages from a modest beginning as a private collection. With the help of primarily local citizens it became a full fledged library. The library also became a repository of archival material written in palm leaf manuscripts, original copies of regionally important historic documents in the contested political history

of Sri Lanka and newspapers that were published hundreds of years ago in the Jaffna peninsula. It thus became a place of historic and symbolic importance to the local minority Sri Lankan Tamil people. On Sunday May 31, 1981, the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), a regionally popular democratic party, held a rally in which three majority Sinhalese policemen were shot and two killed. [The Sinhalese are the majority ethnic group in Sri Lanka.]

That night police and paramilitaries began a pogrom that lasted for three days. The head office of TULF party was destroyed. The office of the *Eelanaadu*, a local newspaper, was also destroyed. Statues of Tamil cultural and religious figures were destroyed or defaced. Four people were pulled from their homes and killed at random. Many business establishments and a local Hindu temple were also deliberately destroyed.

On the night of May 31, according to many eyewitnesses, police and government-sponsored paramilitias set fire to the Jaffna public library and destroyed it completely.

One year later, the community sponsored Jaffna Public Library Week and collected thousands of books. Then another year later, repairs on parts of the building were in progress when the Black July pogrom-induced civil conflict began in 1983. The library building was damaged by bullets and bombs. Then two more years later in 1985, after an attack on a nearby police station by Tamil rebels, soldiers entered the partially restored building and set off bombs that shredded thousands of books yet again. The once-again blackened shell of the library was abandoned until 1998 when the government under President Chandrika Kumaratunga began the process of rebuilding it with contributions from all Sri Lankans as well as foreign governments.

Twelve years later in 2001 the replacement building was complete, but that was not the end to this story. In 2003 reopening of the rebuilt library was opposed by the rebel LTTE leading to all twenty-one members of the Jaffna municipal council led by Mayor Sellan Kandian to tender their resignation as a protest to the pressure exerted on them to postpone the reopening of the library. Eventually the library was opened to the public.

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Down through the ages we have many examples of biblioclasm and the directly related subsequent calamities involving murders of innocents who had nothing to do with the incident. Ironically, many of the victims are people who would have told their murderers that they opposed such acts of wanton disrespect and destruction had they been given the opportunity to communicate.

We had such an event just this year in March of 2011 when Rev. Terry Jones, a Florida preacher burned a Quran in a public ceremony. Muslims around the world protested the incident. Instead of showing that Jones is the extremist and the symbol of intolerance, by

acting rationally, Muslim extremists in Afghanistan kicked up the insanity a couple of notches and played into dreams of anti-Muslims like Jones. They escalated the incident by going on a killing rage in Afghanistan. On April 1 the attack of the Mazar-i-Sharif UN compound in Afghanistan took place. Up to ten people were murdered and two UN workers were beheaded.

A famous ancient example of biblioclasm includes the burning of the library in Alexandria, a vast storehouse of ancient knowledge. Most historians appoint **Theophilus of Alexandria** (died 412) as the instigator of this event. He was the Patriarch of Alexandria, Egypt from 385 to 412 and is regarded as a saint by the Coptic Orthodox Church. Theophilus was a Coptic Pope at a time of conflict between the newly dominant Christians and the pagan establishment in Alexandria, each supported by a segment of the Alexandrian populace. *[This incident may shed some light on the deep disagreements in Egypt that continue today between Muslims and members of the Coptic Orthodox Church. The seeds of hate often have deep roots in ancient history. Sometimes I wonder if it is not genetically coded somehow. As a species, are we wired for hatred for "the other" and can't help it? Sometimes I wonder.]*

In Mexico in 1562, a Spanish friar wanted to "cleanse the natives of devilish thoughts" so he ordered the burning and destruction of thousands of books made from the bark of trees and bearing the wisdom of Mayan culture.

Other examples abound from the 20th century: The Nazi book burnings are well-documented campaigns. The goal of this Nazi campaign was to ceremonially burn all books in Germany that did not agree with the Nazi ideology. A famous example occurred on May 10, 1933, when in most university towns, nationalist students marched in torchlight parades "against the un-German spirit." The scripted rituals called for high Nazi officials, professors, rectors, and student leaders to address the participants and spectators. At the meeting places, students threw the pillaged and unwanted books into the bonfires with great joyous ceremony, band-playing, songs, "fire oaths," and incantations.



photo courtesy WIKI comons

China's Red Guard wiped out artifacts and books in the takeover of Tibet in the 1960s. On August 25, 1992, the Serbs extended "ethnic cleansing" to the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo, resulting in 1.5 million books and manuscripts being incinerated in one night.

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It is time to pay attention to our thoughts and pay attention to the people who try to control and manipulate our thoughts. Learning about propaganda, its methods and advocates is a necessary step to that education.

*This article incorporates text from WIKI as well as from the [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#), and has been released under the [GFDL](#).*

*Definition of Biblioclasm was the [Oxford English Dictionary](#) as well as the related information to the [Alexandria Library](#), the [Mayan book burning](#) and references to incidents in [China](#) and [Bosnia](#).*