

## INFORMATION PAPER

SUBJECT: Handling and Disposal of Sacred Texts, Spiritual Writings and Religious Items

1. Sacred writings that have become unusable because of age, torn or defaced in some fashion, degraded by water, insects, dirt or mold and mildew are generally in view in this memorandum. Scriptures that have misprints, improper sequencing of folios, or binding errors should be handled in the same fashion .

2. In all cases, scriptures, sacred writings and religious items should be handled and approached with respect, courtesy and humility:

- a. They should not be used in inappropriate ways, i.e. door stops, insect swatters, furniture levelers, etc.
- b. The most common means of disposal is burning or burying or burning and then burying. The exceptions are Hindu texts as well as the Quran.
- c. If replaced but still useable, they may be donated to another worshipping community or person. This would be the preferred method with new, foreign language, peculiar sizes of scriptures, etc.
- d. Consecrated items used in worship that are being removed but have other uses (tables, chairs, candle sticks, etc.) should have a Letter of De-consecration if it applies.
- e. Any literature that contains the name of God should be treated with respect. Although traditions vary, some traditions and/or personally held convictions require that this material be burned or treated as sacred.

3. Guidelines by Religion or Denomination:

a. Roman Catholic.

Sacred Scriptures are handled with dignity. When it comes to a point where it is damaged beyond use, i.e. torn pages, pages missing, etc., it, being blessed, is to be disposed of with dignity. It should be burned and then the ashes buried.  
Rev. Msgr. Frank A. Pugliese, Vicar General, Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA PO Box 4469 Washington, DC 20017-0469 (202)719-3630

<http://www.milarch.org/>

b. Protestant.

Protestant theology does not place sacredness in the page and ink of texts, therefore, there is no doctrine or guideline across denominations. Most denominations have not even considered the question. However, the value of certain Bibles comes from their owner (a historically significant figure or revered family member) or because of genealogical records that they contain. The following is representative but not exhaustive:

(1) American Baptist Churches: no guidance.  
<http://www.abhsarchives.org/>

(2) Methodist.

The United Methodist Book of Worship which contains official rituals and liturgy, includes consecrations for new buildings, the pulpit, baptismal font and Lord's table. However, there isn't a service for disposal of these types of items should they be replaced. The General Board of Discipleship offers a "Service for Disposal of Old Bibles or Devotional Books"-- it is a service and not a policy or doctrine. Rev. Taylor Burton-Edwards, Director, Center for Worship Resourcing

<http://www.gbod.org/worship/default.asp?act=reader&item id=1774>.

(3) Latter Day Saints (LOS).

A search through many years of the Church Handbook of Instructions (these are books with guidelines for local leaders) and no directive in the disposal of religious texts and/or artifacts was found.

<http://www.lds.org/churchhistory/archives>

(4) Presbyterian.

There is no doctrine or guideline other than treating the book with respect because of what it contains.

<http://www.history.pcusa.org/national/>

(5) Reformed Church in America.

There are no requirements in the RCA relating to the discard of sacred items. Over the years several questions have been raised about the discard of Bibles, but no answer was provided with a theological rationale. The sacred is not located in things or places. No individual congregations having policies about proper disposal of Bibles or of other sacred objects.

Russell L. Gasero, Archivist, Reformed Church in America

<http://www.rca.oralPage.aspx?pid=230>

(6) Southern Baptist Convention.

There are no policies, procedures or guidance for the disposal of Bibles. Although old and usable bibles can be passed on to other people, there are no special procedures for discarding them.

Southern Baptist Library and Achieves. The Southern Baptist Convention Building, 901 Commerce St., #400, Nashville, TN 37203-3630 Phone: 1-615-244-0344

<http://www.sbc.net/redirect.asp?url=http://IWNW.sbhla.org>

(7) Assembly of God.

There is no official Assembly of God policy on this. Glenn Gohr, the Assemblies of God Director of Archives

[www.iFPHC.org](http://www.iFPHC.org)

c. Orthodox.

Old religious books, Bibles, icons, vestments, etc. that are no longer serviceable are generally burned or buried in Orthodox Christian custom. Orthodox clergy are aware of how to dispose of such items properly. Only an Orthodox priest should dispose of unserviceable Communion items -- chalices, antimensia, spoon, etc. There are really no written guidelines in this regard -- it's just what's done.

<http://www.oca.org/>

Documents and Publications/Official Documents/Statutes of the Orthodox Church in America, Article 10, Section 9.b

d. Jewish.

All three traditions agree that sacred books and religious items (prayer shawls, torah scrolls, etc) are buried if they cannot be repaired and are completely unserviceable. This is done normally once a year in a plot opened for such a purpose at a local Jewish Cemetery. In locations that are not near any Jewish community, items should be sent to a local Jewish community or one of the endorsing agents for disposal.

In a combat situation, if they couldn't be shipped somewhere, then they should be buried where they are.

<http://www.jcca.orgflwb/>

e. Hindu.

Deities and other sacred items such as *sastras* (scriptures) are considered as non-different from the Lord. Old remnants are technically called *nirma/yam* or *nirma/ya prasadam* (mercy). They are disposed of in reverential ways usually by immersion in clean water (river, lake, sea), burial (in a clean place) or burning. Note that items that are still usable need not be destroyed or discarded. They can be sent to the next of kin in the case of belonging to a deceased Vaisnava/Hindu or cremated with them. They can be given to other Vaisnavas/Hindus if the next of kin does not want them. Sacred books or pictures that are damaged or destroyed in some way, rosaries (*japa-ma/a*) that are broken and cannot be re-strung, old, worn or broken sacred threads, sacred flowers or foodstuffs that are stale or old (unless the flowers are specifically dried and can be preserved) should be disposed of in the above ways.

In the case of a Deity (sacred icon) that is physically damaged - with the exception of sacred *sila* (stones) - one first of all does the ritual of *visarjanam* or praying to the Lord to leave the Deity. There does not seem to be any specific procedure for immersing, burning or burying items except for Deities (icons): "If one has to immerse a Deity then he should first take off all cloth and ornaments and immerse the Deity within one's heart, after displaying the *visarjani mudra* (hand gesture). O my Lord, I have worshiped You and Goddess Laksmi (the Lord's divine consort) with devotion. O husband of Kamala (the Lord's divine consort), please enter my heart and rest there.

"After praying in this way, one should offer (ornamental ritualistic) shoes to the Lord and then immerse Him (in water), along with His associates (this refers to other attendant Deities), after performing the appropriate *pranayama* (preliminary breath control) and *sadanga nyasa* (preliminary ritualistic purificatory hand gestures) and displaying the *visarjani mudra* (hand gesture)."

- *Hari Bhakti Vilasa 8.498-500* Svavasa Dasa, Bhaktivedanta Book Trust,

<http://www.bbt.infol>

f. Buddhist.

There is no set or official way of how to dispose of sacred Buddhist materials. think each tradition or culture has their prescribed ways of how to dispose of such sacred material. If a Buddhist priest or Buddhist lay person is available, they can recite a Buddhist scripture (sutra) in front of the items to be disposed of (as an expression of gratitude) and then dispose of them. In many instances, the material is usually burned and then the ashes are placed in the ground. However, if it is not possible to burn the material, you can place the items in a bag (so that they will not be seen by others) and then place it in the dumpster for recycling if

recyclable OR place in the dumpster for throwing away.

Everyone realizes the sacredness of the texts and teachings BUT sometimes we must deal with these items in a practical manner, especially when it comes to disposing of old and unusable items.

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<http://www.numatacenter.com/>

g. Muslim.

With regards to getting rid of unwanted religious and Islamic literature, the great classical Hanafi jurist (faqih), Imam al-Haskafi (Allah have mercy on him) states: "Books that are no longer benefited from, one should wipe away the names of Allah, His Angels, and His Messengers, and burn the rest. There is also nothing wrong with casting them into a flowing river as they are (i.e. without wiping away those names) or burying them, and this (burying them) is better." (Radd al-Muhtar ala al-Durr al-Mukhtar, 5/271)

Thus, if one decides to dispose of religious literature, the best thing would be to bury it by wrapping it in something pure first, in a place where people would not normally walk. It would also be permitted to tie the books and papers with something heavy and cast them into a flowing river. Alternatively, the literature may be burnt, but in this case, only after erasing the names of Allah, His Angels and His Messengers.

Disposing of Unusable Copies of the Qur'an

As far as old and unusable copies of the Qur'an are concerned, it is not permitted to burn them unless there is no other way to dispose of them. The great Hanafi Imam, Imam Ibn Abidin (may Allah have mercy on him) states:

"If a copy of the Mushaf (qur'an) becomes old and it is difficult to read from it, it should not be burnt in fire. This is what Imam Muhammad (m: student of Imam Abu Hanifa) pointed out and this is what we take. It will not be disliked to bury it. It should be wrapped in a pure cloth, and a Lahd grave (m: grave that has a incision in the side wall, customary in hot climate countries where the earth is solid) should be dug, because if a Shiq grave (m: grave with a straight opening, common in cold climate countries due to the earth being soft) is dug and the copy of the Qur'an is buried, it will entail the soil falling on top of the Qur'an which is a form of disrespect, unless a slab is placed as a roof. .. " (Radd al-Muhtar, 5/271)

In light of the above, there are two methods of disposing of an unusable copy of the Qur'an:

(1) Wrapping it in a pure piece of cloth and burying it respectfully in a place where people (normally) do not walk about In cold climate countries (such as the

UK), one may dig a Shiq grave, but a slab should be placed first and over it the soil.

(2) Fastening the Qur'an with a heavy object like a stone and then placing it respectfully in flowing water.

If one is able to implement the above two methods, it would not be permitted to burn the copy of the Qur'an. However, if the above two methods are difficult to carry out, then one may burn the Qur'an and bury or drown the resulting ash. If the pages of the Mushaf have become old and worn out and thus torn due to reciting/reading them much, for example, or it becomes non-conducive to benefit from (that particular copy), or if there are found therein mistakes due to negligence when writing it, or printing and/or publishing errors, all of which cannot be corrected; then it is permitted to bury it without burning it. It is also permitted to burn and then bury it in a place that is far removed from rubbish, trash, paths and walkways. (Doing this) will safeguard it from any type of degradation and debasement, as well as a protection for the Qur'an so that there does not occur any confusion, distortion or dispute due to the spreading and circulation of copies of the Qur'an that have printing and/or publishing errors.

<http://www.fatwa-online.com> Fatwa#176, 968, 4660, 8380, 6252, 9850 Source:

The Collection of Islamic Verdicts issued by The Permanent Committee of Research & Islamic Rulings &

<http://www.Sahab.net>

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