The Fahrenheit 451 Fatwā

*Habent sua fata libelli.*
“Books have their fates.”
—Terentianus Maurus,
Roman Writer, late 2nd century CE.¹

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_Fahrenheit 451_ is science fiction author Ray Bradbury’s vision of a grim future in which the fireman’s task is not to put out fires, but to set them. In this future totalitarian society books are entirely forbidden. Firemen are responsible for finding books and setting them on fire along with the houses in which they are hidden away. The novel takes its name from the temperature at which paper ignites, 451 degrees Fahrenheit.²

The future envisioned by _Fahrenheit 451_ has been prefigured many times in the past, both recent and remote.³ Ten years ago, _The Satanic Verses_ was burned by British Muslims in Bradford and Yorkshire on January 19, 1989, nearly one month prior to the The Valentine’s Day Fatwā of Ayatullah al-Khumayni. The deliberate burning of books along with book banning is, however, attested in the very remote past, at least as early as the end of the Chinese Warring States Period (475–221 B.C.E). Emperor Shi Huang, ruler of China and founder of the Qin Dynasty, wished to etch his place in history by obliterating the past. Indeed, by destroying the written records of the empire

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³ It is indeed surprising that no general history of book burning seems to exist. See our forthcoming work _Igniting Controversy: A Brief History of Book Burning._

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prior to his own dynasty, he wished to render the past as though it never existed and thereby establish his own reign as the temporal axis mundi of Chinese civilisation. Thus, in 213 B.C. E he ordered that all written records of the empire that ante-dated his coming to the throne, including all Confucian books, be publicly burned. His Prime Minister, Li Si, was given the order. Confucianism presented the added obstacle to Emperor Shi Huang’s scheme of establishing intellectual conformity since it espoused the theory of the fundamental goodness of man, and thus ran counter to the legal ideology of the Qin dynasty which held men to be essentially evil and in need of legal control. The Jewish library in Jerusalem suffered deliberate destruction in 168 B.C. E during the Maccabean uprising. Augustus, a first century Roman emperor, banned the works of the poets Cornelius Gallus and Ovid and ordered them to go into exile. Although his edict was not carried out, the emperor Caligula ordered all the works of Homer, Virgil, and Livy to be burned. In 303 C. E Diocletian condemned all Christian works to the flames.

Book burning was also a feature of Medieval Europe where it was invariably linked to blasphemy and heresy. Jewish literature, the Talmud in particular, was regarded as blasphemous. The Talmud and talmudic literature contain statements of great opprobrium in the eyes of Christianity. Pope Gregory IX ordered the Talmud to be burned throughout Christendom for its “blasphemies against Christ and Mary.” In

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6 See Talmud Bavli [Babylonian Talmud] (New York: Pardes, 1954 reprint of the edition printed in Vilna, Lithuania by the Widow and Brothers Romm in 1886), tractates Gittin 57a; Sanhedrin 43a, 90a, 106a.