Books Do Furnish A Mind, Part I

by Ibn Warraq (March 2015)

> "…some covet to have libraries in their houses, as ladies desire to have cupboards of plate in their chambers, only for show; as if they were only to furnish their rooms, and not their minds".
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> –Sir William Waller,[1] Meditation V in *Divine Meditations upon Several Occasions: with a Daily Directory,* 1680.

Anyone entering my smallish but not tiny apartment in New York is immediately struck by the sight of seventeen overflowing Ikea Billy bookcases of approximately 3450 books.[2] All those in happy possession of a private well-stocked library must have encountered the same inevitable question, "Have you read them all?" Occasionally, when the mood takes me, I reply, "Imagine you have a wine cellar. Now what would be the point of having a well-stocked wine cellar where all the bottles are empty?"

Umberto Eco, professor of Semiotics and author of *The Name of the Rose*, possessor of two large private libraries, one in his Milan apartment which houses 30,000 volumes, and one in his holiday home in Urbino, which is home to 20,000 volumes, when asked that question ["Have you read them all?"], had a slightly different reaction and reply, "At first I thought that the question characterized only people who had scant familiarity with books, people accustomed to seeing a couple of shelves with five paperback mysteries and a children's encyclopedia bought in installments. But experience has taught me that the same words can be uttered also by people above suspicion. It could be said that they are still people who consider a bookshelf as a mere storage place for already read books and do not think of the library as a working tool. But there is more to it than that. I believe that, confronted by a vast array of books, anyone will be seized with the anguish of learning and will inevitably lapse into asking the question that expresses his torment and his remorse….[But the question has to be answered.]In the past I adopted a tone of contemptuous sarcasm. 'I haven't read any of them; otherwise, why would I keep them here?' But this is a dangerous answer because it invites the obvious follow-up: 'And where do you put them after you've read them?' The best answer is the one always used by Roberto Leydi[3]: 'And more, dear sir, many more,' which freezes the adversary and plunges

him into a state of awed admiration. But I find it merciless and angst-generating. Now I have fallen back on the riposte:'No, these are the ones I have to read by the end of the month. I keep the others in my office', a reply that on the one hand suggests a sublime ergonomic strategy and on the other leads the visitor to hasten the moment of his departure."[4]

To the same question, French novelist, poet, and Nobel Prize winner in 1921, Anatole France [died 1924] always replied "Not one-tenth of them. I don't suppose you use your Sèvres china every day?"[5]

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> "On all sides are we not driven to the conclusion that of all things which men can do or make here below, by far the most momentous, wonderful, and worthy are the things we call book? For, indeed, is it not verily the highest act of man's faculty that produces a book? It is the thought of man. The true thaumaturgic virtue by which man marks all things whatever. All that he does and brings to pass is the vesture of a book"
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> — T. Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-worship and the Heroic in History,* The Hero as Man of Letters, 1840.

About three thousand four hundred books (including the ones in my bedroom), and another two thousand in a farm house in France, do not amount to a serious library, alas. Professor Richard A. Macksey of Johns Hopkins University, and co-founder of the university's Humanities Center, is the owner of a library of over 70,000 tomes.[6] Christian Galantaris in his *Manuel de Bibliophile* recounts the tale of Sir Richard Heber [1774-1833] who owned 300,000 books spread over five different houses in England, and some on the continent. Jacques Bonnet gives the example of Antoine-Marie-Henri Bouland [1754-1825], a former mayor of a Paris arrondissement who had to acquire nine buildings to house his 600,000 volumes. Bonnet, a French publisher, author, translator, and art historian, is himself possessed by bibliomania, of which he gives a witty and erudite account in his *Des Bibliothèques Pleines de Fantômes,* a work in which most bibliophiles will recognize their own experiences. Bonnet's personal library of some 40,000 books puts mine to shame.

But does size matter? Some celebrated men of letters had modest libraries, but others boasted substantial ones. Michel de Montaigne [1533-1592], writer of one of the most influential collections, in Western literature, of essays which were first published in 1580 as "*Essais*" and to which we owe this sense of "essay," had but 1000 volumes. Robert Burton [1577-1640] was the author of an extraordinarily learned work in three volumes, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, published in 1621, and was Samuel Johnson's favorite book, "the only book that ever took him

out of bed two hours sooner than he wished to rise."[7] And yet, Burton seems to have derived his scholarly compendium from just 1700 tomes.

Samuel Pepys began buying books (and prints and maps) in 1660s at about the time he began writing his diary. He wrote on January 10th 1668, "The truth is I have bought a great many books lately, to a great value; but I think to [buy] no more till Christmas next, and these that I have will so fill my two presses [i.e. book shelves], that I must be forced to give away some to make room for them, it being my design to have no more at any time for my proper Library then to fill them."[8]

Nonetheless, by the end of his life, Pepys's collection amounted to 3000 volumes.

He wished to distinguish his library from the more "Extensive, Pompous, and Stationary Libraries of Princes, Universities, Colleges and other Publick-Societies" and equally from the "Voluminous Collections…of Professors of Particular Faculties: as being calculated for the Self-Entertainment onely of a solitary, unconfined Enquirer into Books." His design was to comprise "in fewest Books and least Room the greatest diversity of Subjects, Stiles, and Languages its Owner's Reading [would] bear." Nor did Pepys exaggerate his bibliopegic requests, since he aimed at "Decency and Uniformity" in their binding; and in the catalogue at "Clearness, Comprehensivenesse, and Order."[9]

Thomas de Quincey [1785-1859] in his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*: *Being an Extract from the Life of a Scholar*, which first appeared in two parts in the *London Magazine*, September and October, 1821, wrote,[10]

> Paint me, then, a room seventeen feet by twelve, and not more than seven and a half feet high. This, reader, is somewhat ambitiously styled in my family the drawing-room; but being contrived "a double debt to pay," it is also, and more justly, termed the library, for it happens that books are the only article of property in which I am richer than my neighbours. Of these I have about five thousand, collected gradually since my eighteenth year. Therefore, painter, put as many as you can into this room. Make it populous with books, and, furthermore, paint me a good fire, and furniture plain and modest, befitting the unpretending cottage of a scholar.

Edward Gibbon [1737-1794], in his *Memoirs*, talks of his library in Lausanne,

> My habitation was embellished in my absence, and the last division of books, which followed my steps, increased my chosen library to the number of between six and seven

> thousand volumes. My seraglio was ample, my choice was free, my appetite was keen. After a full repast on Homer and Aristophanes, I involved myself in the philosophic maze of the writings of Plato, of which the dramatic is, perhaps, more interesting than the argumentative part: but I stepped aside into every path of inquiry which reading or reflection accidentally opened.[11]

Robert Southey[12] [1774-1843], Poet Laureate for thirty years, Romantic poet and friend of Coleridge and Wordsworth, is said to have lived for books, and his library. Critic William Wallace wrote, “Southey is the stock example—though not necessarily the model—of a man of letters. He lived by and for literature. Coleridge styled Southey’s library his wife, and no spouse could desire greater tenderness or more steadfast devotion than he bestowed upon the books which covered the walls of almost every room in Greta Hall. He was a bibliophile in the widest sense of the word. Books that were worthy of fine binding he clothed handsomely; others were sometimes decently and sometimes gaily covered by his women folks, and made of one room a “Cottonian library.” But he was never so much of a lover of tall folios as Lamb, though, in his decadence, Wordsworth found him fondly handling the volumes he could no longer read. Books were in truth to Southey the raw material in which he exercised what can only be termed his book-making faculties. He bought as many as he could pay for, and as fast. Some were chosen to feed his intellect and please his palate; but most were destined to be delved into as rapidly as possible and forced to give up their treasures of information, which were classified, indexed, and shaped for use in the production of history, biography, or Quarterly article.”[13] His library contained fourteen thousand books, 3861 of which were auctioned after his death by Sotheby’s in 1844.

Jean-Baptiste Colbert [1619-1683], French statesman, Minister of Finance for Louis XIV, gathered an impressive number of books (23,000) and manuscripts (5212) during his life. Pierre LeGallois in his treatise on European libraries, wrote in 1680, “The library of Monsieur Colbert contains a large number of rare books and manuscripts. Here one sees all the manuscripts concerning France, among them the negotiations for the treaty of Munster, the twenty eight conferences ofthe Pyrenees, and copies of all the charters of the kingdom.”[14] His library passed to his son, the Marquis de Seignelay, then in 1732 the Colbert family sold the library to Louis XV for 300,000 pounds.[15]

George III [1738-1820] began to form his collection by purchasing in 1765, in its entirety, the Library of Joseph Smith (the British Consul in Venice), consisting of 6000 volumes, including 260 incunabula, and many early Venetian and north Italian works with fine

illumination and bindings, for £10,000. They now form that part of the British Library known as the "King's Library." From 1766 onwards, George III, began to build on the Smith Collection, spending on an average £1,500 per year on books until the last years of his reign, when mental illness led to trustees looking after his affairs. But upto then members of his library staff travelled all over Europe looking for suitable items to buy. His agents were able to buy up complete libraries as they came on the market of such antiquaries, book collectors and scholars as James West (President of the Royal Society), Anthony Askew (a classical scholar, bibliophile who had assembled a large, chiefly classical, library, the Bibliotheca Askeviana, and who was responsible for creating a taste for curious manuscripts, scarce editions, and fine copies), Richard Farmer (Shakespearean scholar) and Grimur Jonsson Thorkelin (Icelandic-Danish scholar). Samuel Johnson is said to have counselled the Librarian on the Library's collection policy, as Boswell tells us, "[Dr.Johnson] had frequently visited those splendid rooms and noble collection of books, which he used to say was more numerous and curious than he supposed any person could have made in the time which the King had employed." Then Boswell adds in footnote, "Dr. Johnson had the honour of contributing his assistance towards the formation of this library; for I have read a long letter from him to Mr [Frederick Augusta] Barnard [Chief Librarian], giving the most masterly instructions on the subject."[16] George III was large-hearted man having opended the Library to anyone with scholarly intentions, even to the extent of allowing its use to Joseph Priestley, Dissenter, Scientist and Unitarian, with whose views the King strongly disagreed. John Adams was another visitor. In 1823, George IV offered the Library, approximately 65,000 items, to the nation. The British Library explains the present state of the collection:

> The collection's home is the six-storey King's Library Tower, designed specifically for the purpose by the building's architect Sir Colin St John Wilson (1922-2007). Many of the books are on view to visitors behind UV-filter glass which, together with the environmental control system, helps maintain appropriate light, temperature and humidity levels. Behind the moveable bookcases containing George III's books, there is in fact another row of shelves containing a similar collection formed by Thomas Grenville (1755-1846) … The King's Library remains a working library, and throughout the day volumes are retrieved for readers working in the Rare Books and Music Reading Room."[17]

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"I cannot live without books." Thomas Jefferson, *Letter to John Adams*, 1815.

"I will bury myself in my books and the devil may pipe to his own." Tennyson, *Maud*, Ist Edn.

1855.

“People say that life is the thing, but I prefer reading.” Logan Pearsall Smith, *Afterthoughts* (1931) ‘Myself’

One must pay homage to Antonio Magliabecchi [1633-1714], the master librarian of seventeenth century Florence, who spent his life in single-minded pursuit of books, reading, and learning. According to one account, Antonio started on his journey as an assistant in a bookshop, where his knowledge of the names and contents of books, helped by his prodigious memory, spread among book-loving Florentines. He came to the attention of Ermini, the librarian to the Cardinal de Medicis, who was duly impressed with Antonio’s knowledge particularly of rare books, and spoke of him to other learned men. Ermini is said to have taught Greek, Latin, and Hebrew to Antonio. Finally the Grand Duke himself, Cosmo III, in 1673, put Antonio in charge of his library that had been established in his palace. Magliabecchi lived frugally, in high-minded self-denial of creature comforts, in that library for the remainder of his life (he lived to the age of 81), cut off from the rest of the world. Theodore Koch in an article in the *North American Review* of 1914 wrote, “While his official position as librarian to Cosmo III, Grand Duke of Tuscany, gave him considerable prominence, he is remembered more especially for his personal characteristics and his vast store of self-acquired learning. He has been described as a literary glutton, and the most rational of bibliomaniacs, *inasmuch as he read everything he bought*. His own library consisted of 40,000 books and 10,000 MSS. His house literally overflowed with books; the stairways were lined with them, and they even filled the front porch.”[18] [Emphasis added]. As the Catholic Encyclopedia tells us, “He left his books (30,000 volumes [sic]) to the Grand Duke to be used as a [free] public library; his fortune went to the poor. The *Magliabechiana* was combined with the grand-ducal private library (Palatina) by King Victor Emmanuel in 1861, the two forming the *Biblioteca Nazionale.*”

Eric Cochrane in his history of Florence wrote that “an indispensable condition of all scholarly activity [during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was] submission to that incarnate encyclopedia of scholarship [Antonio Magliabecchi who] did not have to give proof of his learning by writing books: the scores of authors who applied to him for information kept his name prominently displayed in the dedications and acknowledgements of half the books published in his lifetime.”[19]

He had acquired a personal library of 30,000 (or perhaps 40,000) books and 10,000 manuscripts, *and* he read everything he bought. That is true dedication to learning since to read 30 000 books in a lifetime would mean reading almost two books a day for sixty years. Even if the

story has been embellished slightly, the point is that Antonio was interested in the contents of the books he sought and bought, unlike many of the modern book collectors described in Nicholas Basbanes' entertaining account of bibliophiles and bibliomaniacs, *A Gentle Madness*. One possible exception, described by Basbanes, was Hubert Howe Bancroft [1832-1918] who wrote a delightful memoir called *Literary Industries*. Bancroft started a publishing business in 1856 in San Francisco, which flourished and expanded. By 1870, he began collecting Western Americana with a passion, "Bibliomaniac I was not. Duplicates, fine bindings, and rare editions seemed to me of less importance than the subject matter of the work. To collect books in an objectless, desultory manner is not profitable to either mind or purse. Book collecting without a purpose may be to some a fascinating pastime, but give it an object and you endow it with dignity. Not half the books printed are ever read; not half the books sold are bought to be read. Least of all in the rabid bibliomaniac need we look for the well-read man."[20]

And yet, Bancroft himself was to become obesessed, deciding that if he was going "to gather all the material requisite for a complete narrative of events bearing on California, it would be necessary to include a large part of the early history of Mexico, since the two were so blended as to make it impossible to separate them." His collection of a thousand volumes was clearly not enough, and so he embarked on a journey, or career, of a typical bibliomane. He spent days and months poring over booksellers' catalogues in London, pouncing on any items related to the Pacific coast, finally employing an assistant to prepare a bibliography. "From London I went to Paris," wrote Bancroft, "and searched the stalls, antiquarian warehouses, and catalogues, in the same careful manner." He continued to Madrid, and from there "To Saragossa, Barcelona, Marseilles, Nice, Genoa, Bologna, Florence, and Rome; then to Naples, back to Venice, and through Switzerland to Paris. After resting a while I went to Holland, then up the Rhine and through Germany to Vienna; then through Germany and Switzerland again, Paris and London, and finally back to New York and Buffalo. Everywhere I found something, and seized upon it, however insignificant, for I had long since ceased to resist the malady."[21]

By now he had acquired ten thousand volumes, and just as he was thinking his quest was over, Bancroft realised that he had neglected Mexico itself for a possible source for further books on his subject. Thousands more books, newspapers, pamphlets, manuscripts relating to Jesuit missions in Texas, California, and South America, works in Indian languages and dialects, and so on were acquired through agents and dealers. By 1890, Bancroft was in possession of a library of sixty five thousand volumes, a library that luckily survived the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, and was bought by the University of California at Berkeley, where the books are now housed in the university's Bancroft Library. Thus while it is highly unlikely that Bancroft had read the sixty five thousand volumes let alone the 100,000 manuscripts, his

bibliomania had resulted in the creation of an invaluable tool for scientists, a research library on the subject of California, and the Pacific West, unequaled in the United States, perhaps, the world.

Other book collectors whose passions, bibliomania, and eccentricities have led to the establishment of important private research institutes in the United States include Henry E. Huntington [died 1927], Henry and Emily Folger [died 1930 and 1936 respectively], and John Pierpont Morgan [died 1913].

Book collector, Fred J. Board of Connecticut confessed to Basbanes without embarrassment "I don't buy books to read. I don't read any of them, really, it's the chase I enjoy, the challenge. That's what I was doing in business, I was chasing these companies. Then I got interested in a private press in Portland, Maine, Mosher Press. They did about five hundred books, and I have all but three or four. And then I kind of got interested in epitaph books."[22]

Carter Burden, who is said to have spent somewhere between ten and twenty million dollars on first editions of American authors, started collecting toy soldiers and baseball cards at the age of six. He is an obessive collector rather than someone with serious scholarly concerns. For example, Burden once paid $19,250 for a copy of the book *Hike and the Aeroplane*, Sinclair Lewis's first book, written under the pseudonym Tom Graham. Nicholas Basbanes remarked to Burden, "With everything you've got, I would have figured you to have Sinclair Lewis pretty much covered." Burden replied, "I already had a copy of the book. It was the dust jacket I needed."[23]

There is a short but charming essay by E. M. Forster on how his own library was constituted over the years, beginning with what he inherited from his grandfather, a country clergyman, a rather severe and dogmatic character who wrote works such as *One Primeval Language*, *The Apocalypse its own Interpreter* and *Mohammedanism Unveiled.*[24] Asks Forster, "Have you read my grandfather's works? No? Have I read them? No."[25] The next influence he notes is that of his aunt, a great reader of good prose, "Trollope, Jane Austen, Charlotte Yonge, Malory, sound biographies of sound Victorians – these have come down from her. Books on birds also – Bewick and Morris….She was interested in crafts – she started classes for leather-work in the village, She herself was a designer and worker, she designed and executed bookcovers which were made up at the binder's, and my shelves are (to which we now return) are enriched by several examples of her skill. Here are the Letters of Charles Darwin (whom she had known), and Ruskin's *Praeterita*, and Ruskin's *Giotto* – a fine example in pigskin, introducing the legendary O of Giotto and her own initials. The most ambitious of all her bindings – the

Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam – I gave away after her death to an Oriental friend. I still miss that lovely book and wish I possessed it. I still see the charming design with which she decorated its cover- polo players adapted from an ancient Persian miniature – a design for which the contemporary dust jacketis a poor substitute."[26]

"However", continues Forster, and brings us to the point of this excursus, "I am contemporary myself and I must get on to myself and not linger amongst ancestral influences any longer. What did I bring to my library? Not much deliberately. I have never been a collector, and as for the first edition craze, I place it next door to stamp collecting- I can say no less. It is non-adult and exposes the book-lover to all sorts of nonsense at the hands of the book-dealer. One should never tempt book-dealers. I am myself a lover of the interiors of books, of the words in them – an uncut book is about as inspiriting as a corked up bottle of wine-and much as I enjoy good print and good binding and old volumes they remain subsidiary to the words: words, the wine of life."[27]

Forster finds a kind of comfort in being surrounded by his books, "It is very pleasant to sit with them in the firelight for a couple of minutes, not reading, not even thinking, but aware that they, with their accumulated wisdom and charm, are waiting to be used, and that my library, in its tiny imperfect way, is a successor to the great private libraries of the past."

As for lending books, yes he does lend them, "and they are not returned, and still I lend books. Do I ever borrow books? I do, and I can see some of them unreturned around me. I favour reciprocal dishonesty."

As he grows older, Forster confesses guiltily that the ownership of his books gives him increasing pleasure, but of a "peculiar" kind. And then returns to the theme of the real value of books, "And, like all possessiveness, it does not go down to the roots of our humanity. These roots are spiritual. The deepest desire in us is the desire to understand, and that is what I meant just now when I said that the really important thing in books is the words in them – words, the wine of life – not their binding or their print, not their edition value or their bibliomaniac value, or their uncuttability."[28]

To be continued.

[1] Sir William Waller , Meditation V in *Divine Meditations upon Several Occasions: with a Daily Directory,* London: Benjamin Alsop, 1680, p. 29. Sir William Waller (1597 –1668) was an English Parliamentary general during the English Civil War. I discovered this quote after I had already thought of the title of the essay, which was an ironical allusion to Anthony Powell's novel *Books Do Furnish a Room*, tenth volume in the twelve volume series, ambitiously and pretentiously titled, *A Dance to the Music of Time.*

[2] I counted them, in February 2015, bookshelf by bookshelf by drawing a grid of rectangles representing each bookshelf.

[3] Italian Ethnomusicologist, Roberto Leydi [died 2003] had a private library containing 10,000 volumes (plus thousands of records, tapes and instruments) which he donated, just before his death, to Center for Dialectology and Ethnography in Bellinzona, Switzerland.

[4] Umberto Eco, "How to Justify a Private Library", in edd. Harold Rabinowitz & Rob Kaplan, *A Passion for Books*, New York: Times Books (Random House) 1999, pp.35-36. Originally in Umberto Eco, *How to Travel with a Salmon & Other Essays*, New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1994.

[5] Quoted by Walter Benjamin, 'Unpacking My Library', in edd. Harold Rabinowitz & Rob Kaplan, *A Passion for Books*, New York: Times Books (Random House) 1999, p.7.

[6] http://bookriot.com/2013/09/30/libraries-rich-famous/

[7] James Boswell. *Life of Johnson*, Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2008, p..438.

[8] *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, edd. Robert Latham & William Matthews, London : G.Bell and Sons, 1976, volume IX, p.18.

[9] *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, Vol. X, p.34. Pepys's spelling and punctuation have been retained.

[10] The London Magazine, “Confessions of an English Opium-Eater: Pains of Opium” No.XXII, October, 1821, Volume IV, [July-December,1821], p.368.

[11] Edward Gibbon, *The Life and Letters of Edward Gibbon with his History of the Crusades*. London and New York: Frederick Warne and Co., 1889, p.108

[12] Pronounced “Sow” (as in fully grown female pig); and “thee”

[13] Craik, Henry, ed. *English Prose*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916, Vol.V, sv “Southey, R.”

[14] Pierre LeGallois,*Traite historique des Plus belles bibliotheques de l’Europe*, Paris: E.Michallet, 1680, , pp. 125-126.

[15] E,Stewart Saunders. *Public Administration and the Library of Jean-Baptiste Colbert*. Purdue University: e-Pubs, found at http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1018&context=lib_research

[16] James Boswell. *Life of Johnson*, Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 2008, p.379.

[17] The British Library: Help for Researchers,. George III Collection: the King’s Library. Available on line at: http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelprestype/prbooks/georgeiiicoll/george3kingslibrary.html

[18] Theodore W. Koch, *The North American Review* (1821-1940) Boston: Aug 1914. Vol. CC., Iss. NO. 705, p. 244.

[19] Eric Cochrane. *Florence in the Forgotten Centuries 1527-1800: A History of Florence and the Florentines in the Age of the Grand Dukes*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1973, quoted in Nicholas A. Basbanes, *A Gentle Madness, Bibliophiles, Bibliomanes, and the Eternal Passion for Books.* New York: An Owl Book, Henry Holt and Company, 1999, p.38.

[20] Quoted in Nicholas A. Basbanes. *A Gentle Madness, Bibliophiles, Bibliomanes, and the*

Eternal Passion for Books. New York: An Owl Book, Henry Holt and Company, 1999, pp.169-170.

[21] N.Basbanes, *op.cit*., p171.

[22] N.Basbanes, op.cit.,p.407.

[23] N.Basbanes, p.285.

[24] More correctly, Charles Forster, *Mahometanism unveiled: An inquiry, in which that arch-heresy, its diffusion and continuance, are examined on a new principle, tending to confirm the evidences, and aid the propagation, of the Christian faith.* London: J. Duncan and J. Cochran, 1829.

[25] E.M.Forster, “In My Library”, in *Two Cheers for Democracy*, London, 1951, p.301

[26] Ibid.,p 302.

[27] Ibid.,pp.302-303.

[28] Ibid.,p.304.

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Ibn Warraq’s latest book is