



Ritual Dynamics of Qur'an Burning

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Abstract

In this article I approach Qur'an burning from the perspective of ritual studies. By conducting a discourse analysis of a YouTube video of a Qur'an burning, I argue that it can be perceived as a ritualized performance that communicates a variety of meanings to a variety of audiences. On one hand, the burning demarcates between 'us' and a Muslim 'them', thus serving to construct an ingroup identity. On the other, Muslims are constructed as a barbaric threat against which a civilized man is justified to use violence. To consolidate intergroup boundaries most effectively, Qur'an burning must be conducted within a community or preferably broadcast to a wide audience. Even when broadcast online, however, the act needs to involve a physical book. Consequently, both online and offline aspects are important for the ritualization of Qur'an burning.

Keywords: discourse analysis, social media, ritual, violence

Some time ago I was walking in a forest and listening to an audiobook of Andre Swanström's (2018) study of Finnish SS volunteers and their participation in war crimes during the Second World War.¹ Something the narrator said made me freeze in my tracks. The narrator was describing a scene from Kai Struve's book (2015, 622–23), where members of the SS Westland regiment are carrying out a pogrom in the Polish town of Skalat. The Jewish residents of Skalat are being pursued and shot, and their faces are being mutilated and pierced with bayonets. Meanwhile, some SS soldiers are occupied with dragging the Torah scrolls out of the local synagogue and burning them in the street.

The scene struck but also perplexed me. I cannot even begin to fathom the pain and horror felt by the massacre's Jewish victims, but at least my

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social-psychologically trained mind can grasp some of the motivations driving the SS men to kill. After all, many of the most influential theories in contemporary social psychology are born of the need to account for the horrors of the Holocaust (see Milgram 1975 on obedience to authority and Tajfel 1981 on ingroup/outgroup bias). I had fewer intellectual tools to comprehend the SS soldiers' need to destroy the Torah scrolls. What was the purpose of burning the scrolls? It cannot have been to upset or hurt the Jews, at least not primarily. The Jews were being killed or were already dead. I doubt the destruction of books added much to their suffering. I therefore tend to think the soldiers' motivations were more complex (see Shahab and Isakhan 2018, 214). In my current understanding the best way to describe the act of Torah burning is to characterize it as a performance of ideology. In my view burning scriptures is less instrumental than symbolic, or even ritual, behaviour.

Since that walk in the woods I have been increasingly interested in understanding the phenomenon of book burning. What are the factors and dynamics that drive people to set fire to writings others consider sacred? What does book burning mean for those who engage in it, and what is its significance in society more generally?

Despite the fall of the Third Reich, copies of the Torah are still being burned around the world (see, for example, Terry 1988). In the contemporary Western mediascape, however, the most visible manifestations of book burning are the various incidents of Qur'an burning, some of which have made international headlines (see, for example, Freytas-Tamura 2017; Cassidy et al. 2022). Probably the most famous are the several cases associated with the Florida pastor Terry Jones, who gained great public attention after declaring his plans on social media to burn copies of the Qur'an on the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks (Goldman 2010; Peralta 2013).

Jonas Svensson (2017) has authored the pioneering publication on the psychology of Qur'an desecration. He argues that those burning or otherwise damaging the Qur'an empathize with the sense of sacredness experienced by Muslims in relation to the Qur'an. This sacredness is in turn rooted in the cognitive blending of the Qur'an with the concept of a person. The Qur'an is implicitly endowed with certain characteristics more commonly associated with human beings, and it thus becomes conceivable to 'hurt' it in the same way human beings can be hurt.

Svensson's (2017) argument helps make sense of the general phenomenon of Qur'an burning. Individual cases of Qur'an burning, however, can often be explained without the complex dynamics of conceptual blending and sacralization. It is unlikely that every single person burning a Qur'an

empathizes with the veneration Muslims feel for the book and uses this empathetic understanding to devise ways to hurt it as if it were a human being. It is more likely that they are simply modelling the behaviour they have witnessed from like-minded people. They have seen news of the Qur'an being burned and Muslims being angered by it, and this is enough reason for them to buy the book and a box of matches.

This is essentially what makes Qur'an burning a ritual. Like other rituals, it is carried out within a community of like-minded individuals. Rituals are assumed to have effects, but as a rule, the causal link between the ritual action and its stated effects is obscure. Despite – and perhaps because of – their causal opacity, rituals have an important function in a community. Although they are not technically the most efficient way to attain a tangible goal, rituals serve as signals of commitment to communal norms (Whitehouse 2021, 26–27).

In this article I provide a case analysis of a YouTube video that shows a Qur'an being burned. I argue that while the conceptual blending proposed by Svensson (2017) may account for Qur'an burning as a general phenomenon, individual incidents are better explained by group dynamics. By engaging in the shared activity of Qur'an desecration, the desecrators may signal their opposition to Islam and therefore also signal a shared value system among themselves. Qur'an burning thus serves as an act of ritual boundary work that consolidates the contours of the ingroup (on boundary work see Gieryn 1983; Pauha 2023).

Qur'an burning in Finland

In recent decades there have been some Finnish cases in which the Qur'an was publicly burned. The most recent was an incident in 2020, when the blogger Anter Yaşa published a video on TikTok of himself burning the Qur'an. According to Yaşa (2022) Prosecutor General Raija Toiviainen investigated the incident but decided not to prosecute him. According to this decision, which Yaşa (2022) shared in his blog, Toiviainen did not think it was in the public or private interest to prosecute the case because the videos in which Yaşa burned a copy of the Qur'an were no longer publicly available. If this decision is authentic, it is noteworthy that the Prosecutor General did not consider the Qur'an burning in itself as punishable but only its public broadcasting.

In addition to the Anter Yaşa case, the Finnish authorities have investigated the case of a man accused of burning the Qur'an in the vicinity of a reception centre in the Pohjanmaa region of Western Finland in 2015. The District Court of Etelä-Pohjanmaa dropped the charges because there was no evidence of the man having lit the fire he was filming (STT 2016).

These two cases were discussed on social media, and the latter was covered by local newspapers. In general, however, the public reaction to the incidents was mild. Indeed, the only public demonstrations organized in Finland to protest against incidents of Qur'an burning have concerned incidents in other countries, especially Norway (Turun Sanomat 2012).

Other known cases of Qur'an burning in Finland are even less high-profile than the two discussed above. In this article I analyse such an incident, whose public visibility was limited to one YouTube video with approximately 22,000 views. Despite having little public impact, the video is of marked scholarly interest because it provides an interesting example of the ritualized dynamics of Qur'an burning.

Qur'an burning as a media ritual

The variety of definitions religion scholars have proposed for ritual is too large to be summarized in a single article (for an extensive overview of definitions see Grimes 2013). What many if not most definitions have in common is a view of ritual as a form of symbolic communication. For example, according to Stanley J. Tambiah (1981, 119) '[r]itual is a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication' that is 'constituted of patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts, often expressed in multiple media'. Raymond Firth (1967, x) has in turn defined ritual as 'a formal set of procedures of a symbolic kind, involving a code for social communication and believed to possess a special efficacy in affecting technical and social conditions of the performers and other participants'. Lauri Honko (1979, 373) follows suit with his definition of ritual as 'traditional, prescribed communication with the sacred'. More recently, Harvey Whitehouse (2021, 26–27) has distinguished between ritual and instrumental stances towards human action. While the latter is characterized by an attempt to identify the causal links that connect the action to its desired outcomes, the former is causally opaque. There is no obvious link between ritual action and its stated effects, but this is precisely what makes ritual an effective tool of community formation. By performing actions that serve no obvious instrumental purpose, people can signal their adherence and commitment to community norms.

As is common with regard to the terminology of religious studies, it has proved exceedingly difficult to demarcate ritual as a distinct class of human activity. Instead of trying to distinguish between ritual and non-ritual, scholars increasingly focus on ritualization – that is, on practices that are used to lend ritual-like qualities to activities (see Bell 2009a, 138; 2009b, 90;

Grimes 2013). Ronald L. Grimes (2011, 21) has even gone so far as to argue that '[n]o action is a ritual, but any action can be ritualized'.

As I noted in my earlier comment on the burning of the Torah scrolls by the SS Westland regiment, I see the burning of scriptures as a pronouncedly ritualized activity. Of the various characteristics of ritual-like activities (Bell 2009a, 138–69), symbolism and performativity are central to Qur'an burning. When a person sets light to a copy of the Qur'an, they are not burning a mere book but a symbol that embodies the values of an entire community (see Bell 2009a, 156). Moreover, the symbolic message is expressed in a highly dramatic manner that sets it apart from the routine actions of everyday life (Bell 2009a, 160).

A special category of rituals and a focus of increasing scholarly interest are 'media rituals' (see, for example, Couldry 2002; Sumiala 2013). In this line of research 'ritual' is typically defined rather loosely, including phenomena such as sports predictions, unboxing videos, or celebrity deaths (see Sumiala 2013; Trillò et al. 2022). Simon Cottle (2006, 415) defines mediatized rituals as 'exceptional and performative media phenomena that serve to sustain and/or mobilize collective sentiments and solidarities on the basis of symbolization and a subjunctive orientation to what should or ought to be'. Cottle (2006) distinguishes between five types of mediatized rituals, including moral panic and media scandals. Focusing on social media, Trillò, Hallinan, and Shifman (2022) have suggested an even more elaborate typology that includes sixteen different categories of social media rituals.

As a ritual, Qur'an burning is mediatized in the extreme: those engaging in it are often seeking public attention for their action, and the media is often eager to comply. In a typical case of Qur'an burning the publicity may arguably even be the primary motivating factor. For example, in the recent Finnish case mentioned above the blogger Anter Yaşa burned both the Qur'an and the Bible on the social media platform TikTok with the apparent goal of demonstrating that the two books – and Islam and Christianity – are treated with different standards (Yaşa 2022).

The specific case I am analysing here is also mediatized in the sense that it is filmed and broadcast on social media to a (potentially) global audience. Theoretically at least, any internet user can participate in the ritual event by (dis)liking or commenting on it. The ritual's meaning is thus not only communicated to the audience by the performer but is constructed in the interaction between them, as well as among the audience members.

I am unaware of previous research that has approached Qur'an burning from a ritual studies perspective. Some preliminary insights, however, can

be gleaned from studies that have investigated the ritual aspects of cultural heritage destruction (e.g. Shahab and Isakhan 2018). In particular, according to Sofya Shahab and Benjamin Isakhan (2018), the terrorist organization ISIS uses the destruction of pre-Islamic heritage sites as an initiation ritual that provides its recruits with a shared identity and moral context. Like Qur'an burning, instances of heritage destruction perpetrated by ISIS have been extensively broadcast on social media.

As with cultural heritage, the Qur'an can be perceived as an embodiment of communal values, and the burning of the Qur'an therefore aims for the destruction not only of a book but its symbolic value to the Muslim community (see Shahab and Isakhan 2018, 217). In the following pages I argue that in addition to this explicit message of pure negation, Qur'an burning has a more constructive purpose; like the forms of heritage destruction Shahab and Isakhan (2018) discuss, it serves as a kind of initiation that provides its participants with a sense of identity and purpose.

Unlike the ancient artefacts that ISIS destroyed in the Mosul Museum, however, a copy of the Qur'an is not unique. Qur'an burning therefore does not need to be a one-time spectacle; it can become a recurring performance. The aforementioned Florida pastor Terry Jones even turned Qur'an burning into a kind of calendrical ritual by suggesting that the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks be celebrated as 'International Burn a Koran Day' (Goldman 2010).

As a recurring event, Qur'an burning feeds on transnational media coverage. The impulse to burn the Qur'an is unlikely to arise on its own: it is more likely to arise from external sources. Transnational influences are also very clear in the case analysed in this article, as the people burning the Qur'an explicitly contrast their act with the terrorist attacks on 9/11.

Three-and-a-half minutes of book burning on YouTube

In this article I investigate Qur'an burning as a ritual – that is, a performative activity in which meanings are constructed and communicated to a variety of audiences. I analyse a video in which two or more Finnish-speaking people burn a copy of the Qur'an. A private user uploaded the video on YouTube in May 2015, and by August 2023 it had been viewed approximately 22,000 times and liked 500 times.² The video is accompanied by a caption that suggests the user who uploaded the video is also the person responsible

² The data analysed in this article is publicly available on YouTube. However, I do not want to support the analysed video or its producers by giving them increased visibility. I have therefore chosen not to include their names or a direct link to the video.

for burning the book: 'I ordered a Qur'an so I could burn it. Fuck Islam and jihadists.'³

In 2015 an exceptional number of people applied for asylum in Finland. The asylum seekers were mainly from Muslim-majority countries, and hate crimes against Muslims increased significantly compared with previous years (Tihveräinen 2016). However, the publication of the video preceded these events, and asylum seekers are mentioned neither in the video nor in the comments. Indeed, the Qur'an burning in the video is explicitly linked to only one historical event: the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

I analyse the meaning making that occurs in the ritual burning of the Qur'an by applying a rhetorically oriented form of discourse analysis originally designed by Sakki and Pettersson (2016) and employed in the study of online rituals by Pauha (2017). The analysis proceeds in three stages, the foci of which are the content, form, and function. The three stages roughly correspond to three questions: what? how? and why? Although the three stages may be separated in principle, they are inevitably somewhat intertwined in analytical practice.

In the case of the video that I analyse here the content is easy to outline. The video shows very little of the surroundings in which the burning takes place. Throughout the video's three minutes and 31 seconds, the camera is aimed at the ground. The focus is an English translation of the Qur'an, placed on top of the ashes of what seems to be an old campfire (see Figure 1). Only a male voice is heard talking in the video, but his comments suggest that others are present. Towards the end of the video someone is heard coughing in the background.



Figure 1. Screenshot of the video.

3 All excerpts from the data were translated from Finnish by the author.

The main events of the video are outlined in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Main events of the video.

| | |
|-------------|--|
| 00:02–00:13 | A male voice speaks: ‘Well, well, here we have the holy book of the jihad-ists, the Qur’an. It has been ordered just for this occasion. So, here’s some lighter fluid.’ |
| 00:13–00:21 | A hand holding a bottle appears and pours liquid on the book. |
| 00:20–00:24 | The hand leaves the view and reappears holding a lighter. The voice says: ‘Fire.’ The lighter is ignited. |
| 00:24–00:36 | The person holding the lighter makes repeated attempts to ignite the Qur’an. |
| 00:37–00:41 | The voice says: ‘Doesn’t ignite exactly like the WTC towers, but we’ll get there.’ |
| 00:42–00:45 | A small flame appears on the cover. The hand retreats and the voice says: ‘That’s more like it.’ |
| 00:46–00:51 | The flame goes out. The hand reappears and tries to reignite it. The voice says: ‘It went out.’ |
| 00:52–00:58 | The voice says: ‘Bring me the petrol can over there.’ The hand leaves the view. The voice continues: ‘There’s just a drop in the green can.’ |
| 00:59–01:04 | The hand reappears holding a bottle and pours more liquid on the book. |
| 01:05–01:08 | The hand leaves the view and reappears holding a lighter. A few attempts are made to ignite the book. |
| 01:09–01:14 | The hand leaves the view. The voice says: ‘Pour whatever is in there on it.’ After a short pause, the voice continues: ‘There’s nothing in there.’ |
| 01:15–01:30 | The hand with the lighter reappears and tries to ignite the book. When a flame appears, the hand retreats, then reappears with a bottle and pours liquid onto the flame. |
| 01:31–01:45 | The hand leaves the view. The voice says: ‘That should do the trick.’ After a short pause, the voice continues: ‘How do you like this, Mussulmans?’ This is followed by a longer pause.. |
| 01:46–01:53 | The voice says: ‘Doesn’t it look nice!’ This is followed by a pause. |
| 01:54–03:03 | The voice says: ‘That’s right.’ This is followed by a long pause. |
| 03:04–03:25 | More liquid is poured on the burning book. The voice says: ‘A little fuel for the fire.’ This is followed by a pause. |
| 03:26–03:30 | The voice says: ‘Guys, go get some sausage – we’ll soon have coal for grilling.’ |

The video’s general atmosphere contrasts starkly with the aggressive act it portrays: it is shot in bright sunshine, and one can hear the recurring chirping of birds in the background. The voice in the video is speaking in a low,

slow, and somewhat monotonous tone that carries no strong emotion. The scene's emotional intensity is very mild compared with Andre Swanström's (2018) description of the destruction of the Torah scrolls during the pogrom in Skalat.

The video's execution is very unsophisticated and even crude compared with the work of a prototypical social media influencer. The hand-held camera shakes noticeably. The people in the video are so poorly prepared that their petrol can is empty, and their words and actions give a strong impression of the action being improvised on the spot. Indeed, most of the video shows them failing to get the book to ignite. Despite this, they have decided not to cut out the parts in which they struggle to keep the flame alight. This general haphazardness may lend the video an aura of authenticity and thus even work in its favour.

In addition to the video I have included the comments on it in my analysis. In August 2023 there were 410 comments. With the exception of two English comments and two responses to them the comments are in Finnish. Their length varies from a single word of encouragement ('Beautiful!' or 'Respect!') or condemnation ('Stupid!') to a few sentences.

Like the heritage destruction Shahab and Isakhan (2018, 214) investigate, Qur'an burning is a performance aimed at several different audiences at once. The video analysed here succeeds in this, as is evidenced by the messages posted in the comment section. Several commenters applaud the action and call for others to follow suit: 'More activity like this is needed.' One even declares that they have ordered a copy of the Qur'an, apparently not for the first time: 'I placed an order. I don't know why I went for a year without ordering one.'

There are also, however, commenters who criticize the burning of the Qur'an. Some have trouble in seeing the point of the act: 'I don't know if there's any sense in this[.]' Others characterize the people in the video as pathetic losers who try to be cool but cannot even get a book to burn properly: 'One thing that [name] won't become is a pyromaniac... that was such a pathetic performance...' A few commenters express deep veneration for the Qur'an and/or confidence that the people in the video will pay for their transgression: 'You will experience something really bad in May. P.S. Do you have a problem, as you're burning the most important book in the world 😊😊😊😊😊?' Interestingly, a few commenters also perceive the events in the video as evidence that the Qur'an is indeed special, and even sacred. Specifically, the problems the people in the video have in starting the fire are used as proof that they are involving themselves in things they do not

understand: 'It doesn't ignite well. You don't know the power of the great book.' 'It seems the Neo-Nazi didn't know that the Holy Book never burns.'

It is noteworthy that the person who uploaded the video does not respond to the comments posted about it. The only exception is when he reacts with a heart emoji to one comment: 'Judging by the ground around the Qur'an, that's not the first book to be burning there...' This could be interpreted as an indirect acknowledgement of the ritual's recurrence.

Ambivalent agendas

Having examined the video's content, the analysis proceeds to an investigation of form. This involves an analysis of rhetorical and stylistic devices such as humour and metaphor (Sakki and Pettersson 2016, 160). I discuss this stage's findings with those of the third analytical stage, the focus of which is function. In the latter stage the content of the data and the forms in which they are expressed are analysed in a broader context. In this case the context is the exchange that takes place between the people in the video and the viewers, as well as among the viewers. To understand this immediate interactional context, however, it is also necessary to account for the general sociohistorical context of contemporary Finland and Islam's place in it.

At this stage the analysis also becomes somewhat provisional and even speculative. The reason is not a flaw in the method but the nature of ritual as a form of human activity. In his paper on media, ritual, and conflict Grimes (2011, 18–19) considers ritual to be medium in its own right because, like other media, it is a 'means of communication that, metaphorically speaking, sits in a middle position, thereby linking two parties'. As a medium, ritual is typically multimodal, including visual, auditory, and bodily aspects (Grimes 2011, 19). Furthermore, compared with media such as news reports and radio programmes, ritual is often extraordinarily multisemiotic, conveying a variety of meanings to a variety of audiences. The meaning of a ritual can seldom be translated to simple declarative sentences, as it remains ambiguous and open to interpretation.

The video analysed here is no exception, providing semiotic resources for the construction of multiple and even competing meanings. For example, even the seriousness of its anti-Muslim stance is somewhat unclear, as the provocative, brash, and somewhat cheeky remarks of the person in the video could be interpreted as trolling (i.e. provoking others for entertainment by expressing opinions in which one does not believe; see McCosker 2014; Dynel 2016). This is also how some of the commenters construct his

actions. For example, several comments express either an explicit or implicit delight in Muslims being angered: 'Way to go, [name], quite a few Muslims have come here to dislike.'

Furthermore, as Table 1 shows, the Qur'an does not burn well in the video. It is almost at its midpoint before the book actually ignites, and even by the end the damage is limited to an edge of its cover. Throughout the video it is possible to read the title on the cover and recognize the book as the Qur'an. The resulting impression is that the main point of the video may be less the book's destruction than showing that the book being destroyed is the Qur'an. If it is of primary importance that the book is recognized as the Qur'an, it makes sense that the struggles with igniting it are not edited out, and the video ends before the cover gets too damaged. Similarly, it makes sense to burn an English translation, the title of which is written in large letters on the cover (see Figure 1), instead of an Arabic original, whose title the average Finnish viewer would be unable to read. All this suggests the video's main purpose is to shock and provoke.

For a troll, however, the person in the video is personally quite invested in his anti-Muslim stance – so much so that he has spent his time and money ordering a copy of the Qur'an to burn. This already distinguishes him from a prototypical internet troll, who issues provocative statements without believing them himself. One of the commenters observes: 'You still wasted your money on it lol🤔🤔🤔.'

Furthermore, despite adopting a style of expression typical of an internet troll, the people in the video cannot be too ambiguous concerning their intentions. Many scholars of Islam consider burning to be a legitimate way to dispose of a worn-out copy of the Qur'an (Svensson 2010, 42–43), and Qur'an burning may therefore be motivated by completely contradictory goals. Accordingly, the people in the video need to ensure that their act is interpreted as being done out of spite, not respect.

Importantly, some of the efficiency of rituals in community building may rely on their ambiguity (Gillin 2023). As Kertzer (1988, 11) has noted, people may participate in a ritual without necessarily attributing the same meaning to it. Rituals may therefore unite people behind a common cause despite disagreements in views and ideology. In Joel Gillin's (2023) words, rituals can foster 'cohesion without agreement'. In particular, burning the Qur'an can unite a diverse group of people who harbour animosity towards Islam but are divided on all other fronts. This may be especially important for groups like the Finnish extreme right, who are notoriously prone to clashing over differences of opinion.

All in all, I am inclined to perceive the words spoken in the video as more than mere provocation for provocation's sake. For example, besides trolling or dark humour, the final comment in the video, 'Guys, go get some sausage, we'll soon have coal for grilling', can be interpreted as signifying the symbolic dominance of the Finnish national majority over Islam. As Jyrki Pöysä (2001) argues, sausage has established itself as a symbol of Finnish masculinity. Being traditionally made from pork, it is also contrary to the Islamic diet. The ritual destruction of the Qur'an thus provides a starting point for another ritual, that of 'flagging' the Finnish national identity by grilling sausages (see Billig 1995; Pauha 2017, 72). Of course, other interpretations are possible. Perhaps the mere association between fire and barbecue is sufficiently strong to inspire the comment. Ambiguity rules here as well.

The word 'guys' in the above excerpt is also noteworthy. In the original Finnish the word is 'pojat', the literal translation of which is 'boys'. The word thus brings the gender of the ritual participants to the fore. Furthermore, by its informality and colloquialism, the word signifies and strengthens the camaraderie among the ritual participants and abolishes hierarchies between them. Instead of carrying a nihilistic message of destruction for destruction's sake, the burning of a Qur'an expresses a more constructive aim of assembling men in the name of Finnish national values.

Burning books makes you manly

What the Finnish word 'pojat' makes clear is that all the ritual participants are male. This is typical of Qur'an burning more generally. The desecration of the Qur'an has been a largely male affair, with few high-profile cases involving women (but see Carter 2010; MEMO 2023). The gendered dynamics of Qur'an burning therefore deserve closer attention. Tentative explanations can be suggested based on male rituals studied by anthropologists in various pre-industrial societies (e.g. Hage 1981; Lattas 1989; Bonnemère 2014), as well as in post-industrial Western contexts such as sport (Anderson et al. 2012; Clayton 2013) and group psychotherapy (MacNab 1990).

Mikkelsen and Søgaaard's (2015) analysis of the rituals of the Philippines' Bugkalot people can shed important light on Qur'an burning as a masculine ritual of transgression. According to Mikkelsen and Søgaaard (2015) both the now-extinct headhunting rituals of the Bugkalot and the dramatic dances that have replaced them allow their male participants to express their violent potential within clear bounds. The participants can thus claim a status that is superior to the mundane anonymity characteristic of female existence,

without challenging the egalitarianism that characterizes the relationships among men. It is therefore through ritual that Bugkalot men can construct a masculine identity that combines the contradictory ideals of egalitarianism and dominance.

Mikkelsen and Søgaaard (2015) hypothesize that similar dynamics apply to the rituals of the industrialized West. Men in contemporary Europe are increasingly caught in a double bind in which they are expected both to display violent behaviour (or be feminized) and reject it (or be socially shunned). To meet these conflicting expectations, men engage in practices that stay within the bounds of 'civilized norms' but at the same time demonstrate a potential for violence.

Similarly, the men in the video occupy a middle position between conformity and transgression. The action is definitely violent in nature, yet it is framed as violence that is necessary for maintaining the boundary between civilization and barbarism. Both in the opening remarks of the video and in the caption accompanying it 'jihadists' are named as the group against which the burning of the Qur'an is aimed. However, the precise wording suggests that the term 'jihadists' is used in reference to Muslims in general: the Qur'an is referred to as 'the holy book of the jihadists', and the caption declares hostility to 'Islam and jihadists'.

Similarly, Islam is constructed throughout the comment stream as a violent and barbaric faith that has no place in a civilized society. For example, one commenter states: 'Islam [is a] barbaric religion that intruders to the country advertise as the religion of peace.' The opposition between Islam and civilization is even more explicit in the following comment, which refers to Muslims as animals: 'Monkeys do not belong in a civilized society.'

In this respect the very first sentences spoken in the video are worth noting: 'Well, well, here we have the holy book of the jihadists, the Qur'an. It has been ordered just for this occasion.' By emphasizing that he has ordered the book, the person in the video distances himself from those like the soldiers of the SS Westland regiment. Unlike thugs who forcefully snatch scripture from a shrine, the person in the video has obtained the Qur'an perfectly legally. Indeed, and as evidenced by the two more high-profile cases of Qur'an burning in Finland, it is not at all clear whether even the burning itself constitutes a criminal offence under Finnish law. Despite approaching the limits of legally sanctioned behaviour, the people in the video never explicitly trespass them.

The dynamics outlined above become especially clear when the justification for the burning of the Qur'an is challenged. One commenter strongly

condemns the act: 'What's wrong with you? The Qur'an is a sacred book for a certain religion [...] We have this one and only globe, and we must get along with whatever means necessary[.]' However, the commenter is rebuked in equally strong terms: 'The only ones who don't get along here are representatives of a certain religion.'

The responses argue that Muslims do not need to be tolerated because they are themselves intolerant of others. Indeed, Qur'an burning and even more extreme violence against Muslims are justified: 'Child rapists should be burned along with that book.'

Islam vs ... what?

It is noteworthy that while the people in the video are *against* 'Islam and jihadists', they are not *for* anything, at least not explicitly. They justify their action in terms of pure opposition and do not claim to act on behalf of any distinct group or cause. Despite this, many of the commenters condemning the burning of a Qur'an seem to construct it as a Christian attack on Islam. This is typical especially of the commenters whose usernames and arguments suggest that they are of a Muslim background.

The assumption that Qur'an burning is motivated by Christianity is clearly present in the many comments that call for the burning of the Bible in retaliation. For example, one commenter states bluntly: 'Hi, I just had an idea to burn a Bible 😊.' Another commenter is more conciliatory: 'Why are you doing this? The Islamic faith has a lot of similarities to Christianity. How would you feel if someone burnt the Bible?' A third commenter even straightforwardly assumes that the Bible is a special book for the people in the video: 'What planet are you on? Would you like it if I did the same thing to your Bible[?]'

Considering how often the burning of the Qur'an is constructed as a Christian act by those condemning it, it is noteworthy that only one commenter claims a Christian identity and opposes Islam on biblical grounds. In contrast several commenters state that they are atheists or nonreligious and have no reservations about burning a sacred book of any kind. This is unsurprising, given what is known about the predictors of anti-Muslim racism in the Finnish context. According to Pauha and Ketola's (2015) analysis of nationally representative survey data, hostility to Christianity and national pride are the two variables that best predict negative attitudes to Muslims in Finland. In another report Ketola (2016) has concluded that the primary factor motivating anti-Muslim racism in Finland is a perception of Islam as a

threat to the secular Finnish way of life. Religiously motivated Islamophobia exists in some exceptionally conservative Christian groups, but the general picture is that the people who are against Islam and Muslims tend also to perceive other religions negatively.

There is thus a clear mismatch in how the motives for the burning of the Qur'an are constructed by those who approve of the act and by some of those who condemn it. The proponents of the burning, however, also draw on the Islam–Christianity opposition when justifying the act: according to the commenters, the Qur'an and other Islamic traditions call for the oppression and even killing of Christians, and it is therefore necessary to prevent the rise of Islam by all means necessary. For example, one commenter argues:

The purpose of Islam is to lie to the infidels so that [the Muslims] can convert them. [...] At first, they lie and are really friendly with everyone. But later they beg for more rights and invite imams to Finland when the number of Muslims increases. The aim of the imams is to guide the Muslims who are on the wrong path (who don't follow the Qur'an like they should!) to the right path. When they have enough rights, they start spreading [Islam], so they kill many unbelievers if they won't convert. Christians need to pay taxes to be allowed to stay. But that's not all. A Muslim is not punished for killing a Christian, so they kill anyway whenever they feel bored...

The underlying assumption seems to be that from the Muslim perspective all non-Muslim Finns are Christian. They therefore deserve the harsh treatment that Islam allegedly reserves for the 'infidels'. The only ways in which non-Muslim Finns can try to avoid this fate are by converting to Islam or by minimizing the Muslim presence in Finland.

Concluding thoughts

Jonas Svensson's (2017) article, 'Hurting the Qur'an', has thus far been the most significant scholarly work on the psychology of Qur'an desecration. According to Svensson desecrators can empathize with the cognitive sacralization of the Qur'an, which in turn relies on the blending of the book with the concept of a person. Because the Qur'an is conceptualized in some ways as similar to a human being, it can be hurt in a similar manner.

Despite its merits, Svensson's (2017) account leaves one fundamental question unaddressed: why do people engage in Qur'an desecration? This is also acknowledged by Svensson (2017, 260) himself when he writes that

his theory 'has no direct impact on theories of the social or political roles of sacralisation or desecration, e.g. as a social glue, as a means for ordering the world, or as an expression for, and part of, social conflict'.

In this article my aim is to supplement Svensson's (2017) work by focusing on the 'social roles of desecration'. More specifically, I argue that Qur'an burning can be understood as ritualized boundary work that aims to consolidate the demarcation between the ingroup and the outgroup. The social aspects of Qur'an burning are particularly pronounced in incidents that are broadcast on social media, similar to the incident investigated here.

Following Émile Durkheim (1912), media anthropologists have often adopted a functionalist perspective on media rituals, perceiving them as instruments of community building. In this view the purpose of ritual is to bind people together by gathering them around a common symbolic core such as a totem (Sumiala 2010, 47–48). In contrast, Nick Couldry (2002, 45–46; see also Sumiala 2010, 54–57) and other post-Durkheimian theorists of media ritual have seriously questioned whether anything like a unified community can ever be achieved. From a post-Durkheimian perspective no community has a single symbolic core that everyone shares. Despite the absence of a common core, however, media rituals can be used to create and maintain faith in such a core. No community is ever completely unified, but media rituals construct an appearance of such unity, or in Couldry's (2002, 45–46) term, a 'myth of the centre'.

Philip Smith (1991) has also contributed to the further development of Durkheimian thought by arguing that a ritual constructs a boundary, on one side of which are 'our' sacred values, while on the other are 'their' profane values. The ritual event I have analysed in this article can be interpreted as a good example of these dynamics. A central thread of the video, and especially the comments on it, is opposition between the civilized 'us' and barbaric 'them', which bears noteworthy resemblance to the ritual aspects of warfare Smith (1991) discusses. By constructing an image of Muslims as a bunch of bloodthirsty savages, the video and the comments also construct an image of 'us' as their very opposite. It is this mirror image of Islam that serves as 'the myth of the centre' around which fellow YouTube users can congregate.

In a related manner the video and the comments also juxtapose two kinds of violence: the righteous violence perpetrated by 'us' is just retribution for the vile cruelty committed by 'them', and it may even be necessary as a kind of pre-emptive strike against a looming Islamic threat. As I have argued above, a display of violent potential that stays within 'civilized' bounds is

an important component of rituals that aim to sustain hegemonic masculinity in society: by demonstrating such potential, men can express masculine dominance but do so without threatening their homosocial fellowship.

In his classic book on religious extremism Mark Juergensmeyer (2003, 125–26; see also 2013) draws a distinction between 'strategic' and 'symbolic' acts of violence. Whereas 'strategic' violence serves as a means of achieving a tangible goal, 'symbolic' violence is essentially dramatic and performative in nature. Juergensmeyer (2003, 126) explicitly associates 'symbolic' violence such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks with religious ritual by arguing that they are both 'dramas designed to have an impact on the several audiences that they affect'.

It is possible to interpret the video analysed here as a kind of counter-ritual to the symbolic violence perpetrated in the name of Islam (see Haes et al. 2011, 207). Indeed, the person in the video explicitly links the burning Qur'an to the burning WTC towers. The video is thus a grim mirror of the construction of a jihadist identity through heritage destruction (see Shahab and Isakhan 2018).

The role of the media in Qur'an burning is intriguing. On one hand, and as I have tried to argue in this article, the act is intended as a performance of an ideology for several different audiences. The burning of the Qur'an is about sending a message, and it is therefore essential for the people engaging in it to make their voices heard through diverse media platforms. Yet Qur'an burning can never become a pure online ritual that has no physical component. If it is to have its desired effect, the destruction of the Qur'an needs to involve a paper-and-ink book. Deleting a copy of the e-Qur'an from a computer or creating an animation of the Qur'an in flames would simply not be the same.

The ritual efficacy (see Sax et al. 2010) of Qur'an burning therefore depends on it being performed in both physical and media environments. A similar dual nature of being both mediated and bound to a physical setting is characteristic of public executions, heritage destruction, and other ritualized forms of violence against an outgroup (see Binder et al. 2011; Shahab and Isakhan 2018).

Religion scholars tend to perceive ritual as functional behaviour, and specifically behaviour with a communicative function. This has also been my study's premise. Not everyone agrees with this view of ritual, however. Donovan O. Schaefer (2015), who conceives of religion in terms of affect theory, has argued that ritual behaviour does not necessarily serve a functional purpose, as people may engage in ritual because it is a natural

reaction to certain natural environments. In particular, rituals that involve water and fire are prevalent throughout the world because people are naturally moved – both in a physical and in an affective sense – by elements and landscapes that are relevant for their survival (Schaefer 2015, 192–93).

In my view Schaefer's (2015) affective view provides an important supplement to my own analysis. I consider it self-evident that the Qur'an burning incident I have investigated has a communicative function: after all, the person in the video directly addresses his imagined Muslim audience. However, Schaefer's (2015) work may help explain why the person has decided to express his anti-Muslim sentiment by burning the Qur'an on YouTube and not by writing an inflammatory blog post, for example. Setting a holy book alight has an atavistic and transgressive charm, unlike anything typing on a keyboard can offer. In short, fire energizes us.

* * *

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