



Ignited by the Qur'an: Paludan's Attempt to Produce Global Injustice Symbols at the Freedom of Expression/Blasphemy Nexus

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Abstract

The Danish lawyer and politician Rasmus Paludan has gained notoriety for filming and uploading footage of demonstrations and burning copies of the Qur'an, first in 2019 in Denmark and later in Sweden. Based on videos and material from social and conventional media, this article investigates the background and political and legal opportunity structures of Paludan's activism. It argues that Paludan's actions are situated in reference to broader debates on freedom of expression in general and understanding of blasphemy in particular. Paludan's treatment of the Qur'an resembles a global injustice symbol (Olesen 2015; 2016). The symbol becomes global in nature when it resonates cross-nationally and cross-culturally. In 2023, as the symbol spread to the global public sphere, the Danish government decided to introduce a blasphemy clause that had been repealed five years previously. This underlines Sherwood's argument that blasphemy has made a paradoxical return as a contested global category in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: *Qur'an burning, blasphemy, anti-Muslim politics, freedom of speech*

In February 2017 the career of lawyer and anti-immigration activist Rasmus Paludan took a turn. In January of that year, he had launched the digital media site *Frihedens Stemme* (Voice of Freedom), and in February he used his identity as a journalist to attend a meeting of the left-wing organization Antifa (*Antifascistisk Aktion*). He was wearing a kippa and brought with him not only a camera operator but also a bodyguard. His presence led to unrest, prompting Paludan to call the police for protection, a pattern that would be repeated frequently in the years to come (Barfoed 2017). At that point there was no way he – or anyone else – could have known that this

was the first step on a journey that would lead to his name being discussed at the highest levels of international politics.

In July 2017 Paludan established the *Stram Kurs* (Hard Line) party. The party's philosophical base is ethno-nationalistic utilitarianism, 'as much happiness as possible for as many ethnic Danes as possible' (Stram Kurs Esbjerg 2019), and a major objective is to cleanse the country of non-ethnic Danes, particularly Muslims. The next two years were spent collecting the signatures needed to stand for election. Meeting this target in May 2019 critically depended on the success of the videos he posted on social media (Bischoff 2020).

In the 2019 parliamentary election Stram Kurs's 63,000 votes fell short of the threshold for parliamentary party representation (two per cent) by a small margin. After claiming Paludan had been involved in sex chats with underage boys on a Discord social platform and covering the splintering of the party into at least four different parties, the tabloid paper *Ekstrabladet* concluded that Paludan might 'find it difficult to assert himself politically in this country again' (Andersen and Kopping 2021). Paludan, who has dual Danish and Swedish citizenship, then moved his campaign to Sweden. In Sweden he unsuccessfully ran for parliament in 2022 (156 votes). Campaigning from the difficult position of an unaffiliated candidate, his result in the Danish parliamentary election the same year (379 votes) also indicated that Paludan could be past his political prime (Gerion 2022). It was therefore surprising that in 2023 Paludan's burnings of copies of the Qur'an outside embassies in Denmark and Sweden made international headlines and was considered seriously to affect Sweden's acceptance into NATO (Çıbık 2023, 1343). Later that year the Danish parliament adopted a law which Paludan proudly named *Lex Paludan*. This law entailed the reintroduction of a blasphemy clause that had been abolished in 2017, and although the wording and its position in the penal law had changed, Paludan appears to have been central to a 'surprising return of blasphemy when we might have expected blasphemy to become extinct' (Sherwood 2021, 102). Paludan's rise to global fame (or notoriety) and Denmark's reintroduction of a ban on blasphemy makes Paludan and Denmark's history of blasphemy the ideal case for exploring the question: is blasphemy returning, and if so, why?

Aim and research question

Paludan and Stram Kurs have been studied as a party within 'the Danish far-right ecosystem' as an expression of embodied nativism: a nationalist

platform where 'racialized threats against the ethnically defined nation-state can be performed and communicated through violence against individual bodies' (Switzer and Beauduin 2023, 1337). Others have pointed to how Paludan 'justified his actions by equating hate speech with free speech' as an expression of a 'troubling drift to the right in Danish politics [coming] full circle in that mainstream parties who dabble in far-right politics are robbed of authority to criticize and take action against those extremist ideas and practices that seemingly "go too far"' (Emejulu and Bassel 2023, 66). Yet others have pointed to Paludan as an exponent of 'nationalist, xenophobic, and right-wing ideologies and practices of mis-interpellation and dehumanization' (Khawaja et al. 2023, 250). In addition, with the Norwegian Stop the Islamisation of Norway (SIAN), Paludan has made Qur'an burnings 'a widely used political strategy among far-right and anti-Muslim activists in Scandinavia', thereby contributing to an emergent 'transnational Islamophobic genre among anti-Islamic activists...' (Bangstad and Linge 2023, 941–942). For Bangstad and Linge Qur'an desecration should not be understood through the lens of blasphemy because Muslims 'are not offended by anti-Islamic activism for theological reasons but rather because of a shared understanding between the desecrators and their targets of which acts communicate hate and contempt for Muslims as a group' (ibid.). For Yvonne Sherwood, author of *Blasphemy: A Very Short Introduction*, blasphemy is rarely only a question of theology. Indeed, an attempt to identify why people are offended 'is likely to get us guessing about experiences and feelings of other people...' (2021, 3), and this is 'a tricky business...' (2021, 11). Instead, Sherwood suggests blasphemy is an analytical lens and marker of the limits of what can be thought and said, a 'litmus test of changing values' (2021, 7). Based on this approach, this article asks why Paludan, in a world of abounding nationalist, xenophobic, and right-wing ideologies, violent videos, and the equation of hate speech with freedom of speech, manages to attract global attention. My claim is that this is connected with the underpinning of his antimigration viewpoint with what the Danish sociologist Thomas Olesen terms 'global injustice symbols': 'events, situations and individuals infused with collective injustice meanings in a global public sphere' (Olesen 2016, 326). I do not claim that what Paludan reacts to is in any way an objective injustice, but simply that this may be how he wants it to be perceived.

To study how burning Qur'ans became integral to the attempt to produce symbols of global injustice, the article proceeds as follows. First, the available material is introduced; I then discuss Paludan's Qur'an burning project,

emphasizing how his various professional identities allow him to connect with a Danish tradition of freedom of expression and of blasphemy. This sets the values and the binary structure of the injustice symbols he produces. Finally, the article ends with an analysis of how the Danish case of Qur'an burnings contributes to overall discussions of the role of blasphemy in the twenty-first century.

Material

The volume of publicly available material on Paludan is overwhelming. He currently runs at least five Facebook sites, two YouTube channels, a blog, and an autobiographical podcast (Table 1). The article also draws on media interviews with Paludan, as well as the description of demonstrations and Qur'an burning in the Danish media. The coverage is extensive. In February 2024 more than 4,000 articles about Paludan are indexed in the Danish newspaper database Infomedia, and more than 3.7 million in the Danish web archive. Yet due to social media takedowns, journalists' inconsistent attention, and Paludan's initial reluctance to announce his own active involvement in the burnings (Frøkjær 2019), the material is also uneven. Facebook closed Paludan's profile temporarily in 2019, but YouTube's decision to close Paludan's political and journalistic channels in 2018 and 2020 (Nørgaard 2020) means the material on this platform has been removed, and although Paludan covers his own events in his podcast and blog, there are some gaps in the material around the time of the first Qur'an burnings. Paludan's main outlets are currently in Danish, though there are also several videos in Swedish, and he sometimes shifts to English in his videos. This article builds on Paludan's output in Danish. When I quote from videos or written material in Danish, the translation is mine. The range of his various outlets shows how Paludan's activities span different types of media, as well as different societal areas: he is a politician (parliamentary candidate, Stram Kurs party leader), journalist (Voice of Freedom), bishop (the Church of Saint James the Moor-Slayer), and sportsman (Soldiers of the Danes). In his podcast he is a public intellectual, a Nietzschean *Übermensch*. The various types of material are therefore connected with different professional identities, allowing Paludan the lawyer to navigate the Danish legal landscape of rights.

Table 1. Selection of Danish social media profiles (12 February 2024)

Media	Name	Established	# entries	#subscribers
Podcast	Übermensch (Overmenneske)	12.04.2023	18	
YouTube	Parliamentary candidate Rasmus Paludan (Folketingskandidat Rasmus Paludan)	29.09.2022	66	161
	Church of Saint James the Moor- Slayer (Sankt Jakob Maurerdræberens Kirke)	25.10.2020	16	157
Facebook	Sankt Jakob Maurerdræberens Kirke	25.10.2020	15	555
	Hard Line (Stram Kurs)	30.07.2018	633	44,000
	Rasmus Paludan	30.07.2018	291	17,000
	Voice of Freedom (Frihedens Stemme)	24.01.2017	57	6,100
	Soldiers of the Danes (Danernes Soldater IF)	26.12.2018	45	1,300
Instagram	Lawlordofdenmark	2015	578	12,000
Blog	Tv.frihedensstemme.dk	23.01.2017	App 300	

Paludan the lawyer

Paludan is a lawyer with a degree in law from the University of Copenhagen (2008). When he was a student, he suffered a head injury in a traffic accident that left him with a 25 per cent reduction in his working capacity. This delayed his studies and allegedly changed his personality, leading to 'difficulty dealing with conflict' and intolerance for others' mistakes (Nørgaard 2019). Despite this, Paludan has practised as a lawyer with his own company since 2014. In 2017 Paludan was the defence lawyer for John Salvesen, who was charged with blasphemy after burning a copy of the Qur'an in his garden during the Christmas of 2015 and uploading a video onto the 'Freedom Yes, Islam No' Facebook page. Salvesen explained his act as an expression of dislike: 'I did it because I've read it. It's only because it's a manual of hatred. I can't see anything wrong with burning one's own property if one feels like it' (Nielsen 2017b). Salvesen expressed his sense of victimhood: 'We're proud to be a country which has freedom of expression.

But I'm the victim of its suppression or [people who argue that] it should be suppressed' (Nielsen 2017b). In 2017 the public prosecutor in Viborg decided to prosecute Salvesen under Article 140 of the penal code, the blasphemy clause (Kahn 2018, 121). The prosecutor explained that 'the burning of holy books such as the Bible and the Qur'an may in certain cases be a violation of the blasphemy clause, which deals with public mockery or mockery in relation to a religion' (Jensen 2017). As will be discussed later, the case never made it to court because the blasphemy clause was repealed in June 2017.

The threat from Muslim migration

Among Paludan's other clients was Uwe Max Jensen, a controversial performance artist and right-wing activist who later became a parliamentary candidate for Stram Kurs (Mayerhöffer 2021). Other clients from the anti-Islam milieu included two persons who in 2018 faced prosecution for the disturbance of public order after interrupting a service in Roskilde cathedral by playing a recording of the *adhan*, the Muslim call to prayer, an action intended to provoke criticism of the bishop's allegedly 'pro-Islamic' approach (Kühle et al. 2018). As a lawyer for three of the four men who dispensed 'asylum sprays' on the streets in 2018, Paludan's defence was that this was 'a necessary political event based on the lack of action by the police to protect Danes against the crimes of asylum seekers' (Paulsen 2018). In the spring of 2018 Paludan also represented a young man accused of making death threats against Muslim students at a high school. Paludan's defence strategy stated that the alleged threats were no more than frustration at the school's submission to 'Muslim students' terrorization of the school and teaching' (Ritzau 2018). To summarize, through Paludan's work as a public defence attorney he identified a 'grievance community' (Olesen 2015) that shared a sense of threat from Muslim immigration. Paludan had identified an injustice that over time allowed him to produce global injustice symbols.

Creating the public figure of Rasmus Paludan

In Paludan's roles as a social media persona and politician, he acted on this perceived threat by integrating his identity as a journalist with political campaigning. Paludan always brings a camera to his events to produce videos that he then posts on Facebook and YouTube. As a reporter for Voice of Freedom, he stepped directly into the conflict between left-wing groups such as Antifa and right-wing organizations such as For Freedom

(*For Frihed*), the Danish branch of Pegida (the German anti-Islam, far-right political movement). Paludan had already participated in For Freedom's demonstrations 'for freedom of expression and against the sneaky Islamization of Denmark and the West' (For Frihed 2017). It was in this broader context of radical anti-immigration activism, at a demonstration in July 2017 arranged by SIDA (Stop Islamiseringen af Danmark) outside a mosque in Roskilde, that he announced the birth of Stram Kurs. In front of seventy participants, Paludan, 'a concerned citizen and lawyer' (Danmark Rundt 2017), stated that Islam did not belong in Denmark.

While campaigning for his new party in the autumn of 2017, Paludan realized that confrontations made good material for his videos, and that as a campaigning politician he would receive police protection if he felt threatened (York 2017). In the forthcoming municipal elections of November 2017, however, he was not taken seriously as a candidate:

On his website he calls himself the Soldier of Freedom, the Protector of the Weak, the Guardian of Society, and the Light of the Danes. Lawyer and social debater Rasmus Paludan has spoken for freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and against Islamization. He has founded his own party, Hard Line, which is standing for the municipal elections, and which believes that Denmark must expel many Muslims from the country every year. He was formerly a member of *New Right* (Ny Borgerlige) but does not think that their immigration policy is strict enough. That is why he formed Hard Line (Kamp 2017).

In the municipal elections of 2017 the party received only a thousand votes.

The attraction potential of symbols

During the summer of 2018 Paludan continued his political campaigning with meetings and demonstrations across Denmark. His nationalistic speeches with direct insults against Islam and Muslims sparked particularly strong reactions in ethnically diverse neighbourhoods, and in the first half of 2018 the police were present at 45 Stram Kurs demonstrations (Christensen 2019). In the autumn of 2018 Paludan announced that his demonstrations the following spring would include a Muhammad drawing event, as well as demonstrations 'with the theme of burning the Qur'an' and the pouring of urine, bacon, and pig's blood on it (Sjöberg 2018). And the spring of 2019 was indeed to be eventful for Paludan and Stram Kurs (see Appendix 1 for

examples of events¹). On 9 February Paludan posted a video with the title ‘Dane burns the Qur’an’ on Facebook. The video featured right-wing activist Lars Theilade, for a time a leading force in Stram Kurs (Jensen 2022) and in charge of the first Qur’an burning at a Stram Kurs demonstration. This took place on 2 March in Hjørring. The Qur’an was wrapped in bacon (Appendix 1) but not doused with urine, as this became ‘too sticky to handle’ (Radio 24Syv 2019). In a short speech before the event Theilade described ‘Project Muslim migrations’ as a violent means of bringing the freedom of expression that was under pressure because of ‘pseudo-academic and under-gifted’ politicians (Appendix 1). On 3 March 2019 a demonstration was announced ‘showing the Prophet Muhammad engaged in sex with an animal and to burn the Qur’an’ in the city of Frederikshavn. According to the programme ‘Before we burn the Qur’an we will distribute 500 copies of a drawing of the Prophet Muhammad being anally penetrated by a dog while performing anal sex on a boar’. Footage from the event shows Paludan distributing drawings, but no Qur’an burning (Appendix 1). An event in the nightlife district of Aalborg on 16 March was described as follows: ‘Before we burn the Qur’an, we will put pieces of raw bacon between its pages’ (Appendix 1). The events were also announced in an interview in a local newspaper that stressed that the Qur’an would be wrapped in bacon and doused with urine (Sønderup 2019). It is unknown why this event was cancelled.

On 22 March 2019 Stram Kurs arranged an event involving a reading from *The Satanic Verses*, the burning a Qur’an wrapped in bacon, and the throwing of a Qur’an. The event took place near Christiansborg, the Danish parliament. The police were prepared for trouble: more than twenty police officers supervised (or protected?) the small number of people who attended the event. Nearby, in front of parliament, the controversial Islamist organization Hizb ut-Tahrir held a Friday prayer to commemorate the victims of the Christchurch shootings the previous week (see Sinclair 2008). The situation developed dramatically when one participant jumped into the canal in an attempt to steal the Qur’an from Paludan during the Qur’an throwing event (Friberg 2019). Eggs were also thrown at Paludan.

A couple of weeks later, on 14 April 2019, a Stram Kurs demonstration at Blågård’s Plads in Copenhagen was interrupted after only a few minutes, during which the Qur’an had been thrown around. The event led to major street riots. The police arrested 23 people, more than seventy related fires were reported, and the police received around a thousand emergency

1 This article does not contain links to the videos, but Appendix 1 contains their titles. This allows anyone who is interested in finding them to do so, but it limits their dissemination.

calls (Stougaard 2019). This event marked a major transition for Paludan's campaign, leading to significant coverage from the mainstream media (Kosiara-Pedersen 2020, 1013).

Giving the audience what they want?

Stram Kurs was banned from demonstrating in the Copenhagen area for a period after the unrest and therefore had to temporarily relocate the campaign. Soon, however, Stram Kurs was able to continue their tours across Denmark, but with ongoing tension with the police, who did their best to ensure that demonstrations took place in an orderly manner. Paludan's relationship with the police was therefore complicated. They offered him protection, but as they also regulated his right to demonstrate, he found that they were limiting his freedom of expression. He often also complained about their inability to protect him. Meanwhile, for Paludan and Stram Kurs it was clear that the larger audience he had newly gained depended on interesting videos being available online. Of the 661 videos uploaded to the Stram Kurs Facebook site between 2 August 2018 and 1 October 2022, 63 received more than 100,000 views; and videos and livestreams made up 44 per cent of the page's interactions with Facebook users (Switzer and Beauduin 2023, 1341). Paludan's first videos had focused on confrontations with left-wing activists, but he had learned in 2018 that presenting his political programme in ethnic minority neighbourhoods and making offensive remarks provoked a reaction. A journalist reporting on Stram Kurs's first Qur'an burning analysed it as follows:

Paludan, who is strongly critical of Islam, typically tries to provoke reactions which necessitate the intervention of the police, who are always present at the demonstrations. He always makes sure he videotapes his performances so that he can later use the videos to 'document' for the public how uncivilized and barbaric Muslim immigrants really are. The demonstrations are always held in areas where many people of ethnic origins other than Danish live (Sisseck 2019).

In an interview with the newspaper *Politiken* in November 2018 Paludan himself acknowledged that his media strategies were formed by his audience: 'The livestream doesn't get very many viewers. ... People want to see what is characterized by the action. So, of course, we do what people want' (Sjöberg 2018). Tellingly, it was in this interview that he announced that he

would begin burning Qur’ans. The Qur’an burnings seemed to give Paludan exactly the attention he was seeking.

The attention was not enough, however, for Stram Kurs to be successful in the 2019 parliamentary election. After this the Danish public lost interest in Paludan (Figure 1).² The overall attention, as indicated by mentions of his name on the Danish-language internet, is never excessive, being at no time more than 0.1 per cent of traffic on Danish websites, but the attention peaked in 2019 when Paludan began burning Qur’ans and dropped dramatically in 2020. This was also the year that he established the Church of Saint James the Moor-Slayer (*Sankt Jakob Maurerdræberens Kirke*) and relocated his campaign to Sweden. While the latter was the move that gained Paludan world attention, the former is an interesting addition to Denmark’s religious landscape: according to Paludan the church is ‘a Christian church, but we are not so focused on turning the other cheek. We are inspired by Saint James, who drew the sword when necessary. So it’s a little crusade-like’ (Christoffersen 2020). The aim of the church is to give Danes something to fight for and not just something to fight against, and its holy symbol is revealing about Paludan’s overall project: to challenge what is considered sacred, and what is considered profane.

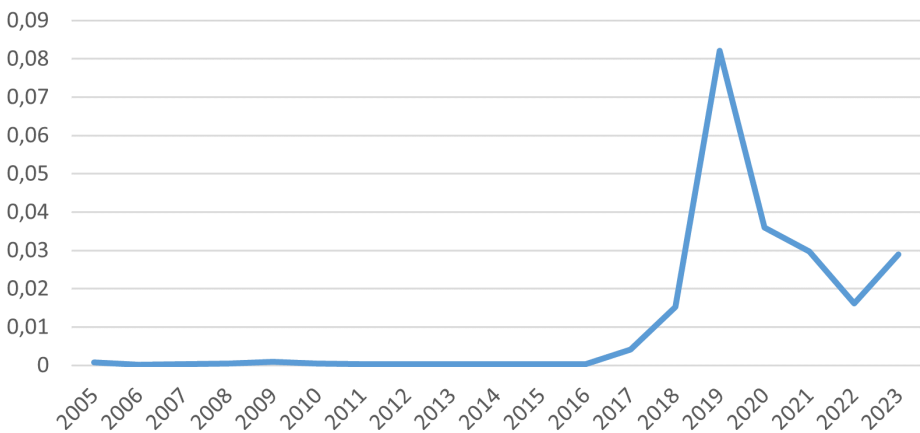


Figure 1. Web mentions of Rasmus Paludan (Source: The Danish Net Archive).

² The decline in mentions of Paludan’s name after the 2019 election (Fig. 1) is probably partly due to a genuine loss of interest, but it is likely that it is also connected with a change in YouTube’s algorithms (Kulager 2019).

Qur'an desecrations: Paludan's signature approach

The Qur'an is both holy scripture and a holy object in its own right (Christiansen and Boserup Jensen 2020, 112). Its position as a holy object means that rules have traditionally governed the handling of copies of the Qur'an to protect its holiness. These include prohibiting using a Qur'an as a pillow, allowing infidels to touch it, licking one's fingers while reading it, touching it while in a state of ritual impurity, and placing it beneath other books on a bookshelf (Svensson 2017). When Paludan handles a copy of the Qur'an, it is clearly with the intention of desecration and inflicting harm through (1) physical violence (tearing, burning), (2) defilement (individuals urinating, defecating, or spitting on the Qur'an, or covering it with slices of bacon), and (3) verbal 'Qur'an bashing' (shouting 'Fuck the Qur'an') (Svensson 2017). So Paludan's Qur'an burnings are part of a larger project of desecrating the Qur'an as a means of criticism. By doing this, Paludan inscribes himself into a sequence of globally mediatized Qur'an burnings – most famously, that of the evangelical Pastor Terry Jones, who announced a 'Burn the Qur'an Day' in 2010 to commemorate the 9/11 attacks. Because of the uproar his plans caused and a request by President Obama not to go through with the event, Jones postponed it (Olson 2021, 8). At the actual burning in March 2011 Jones performed as mock judge, who announced the Qur'an was 'guilty of crimes against humanity' and sentenced it to death (Bail 2014) by burning, a method which, according to Jones, had been decided by a Facebook poll (Svensson 2017). The other options were shredding, drowning, or death by firing squad, but audiences may have perceived burning as 'particularly dramatic, symbolic, and offensive acts for Muslims' (Bangstad and Linge 2023, 947). Overall, Paludan and Jones have similar anti-Islamic positions, but their symbolic actions differ: Jones identifies the Qur'an with a person who has committed hideous crimes: the Qur'an burning is perceived as a punishment. For Paludan the Qur'an burnings are only one part of his repertoire, which includes the badmouthing of Islam by playing with, stepping on and throwing a copy of the Qur'an to the ground, tearing out pages, or distributing or producing offensive drawings of the Prophet. Indeed, not all Paludan's numerous demonstrations³ feature a Qur'an burning, though it must be added that in some cases this is because the burning is prevented. The repertoire of actions all enact Paludan's two credos: first, 'The best thing would be for Muslims to be far away from Denmark. The second

³ The total number is unknown; but in 2018 it there were 53, and by April 2019 at least 19 (Christensen 2019).

best would be that there were no Muslims on this Earth' (Andersen 2019); and second, that freedom of expression is the most important distinction between civilization and Islam. Burning the Qur'an sends the message that (the symbols of) Islam and Muslims should not be present in Denmark, and in Paludan's opinion the protests against this send the message that Muslims are uncivilized, disrespecting of freedom of expression, and potentially violent.

Qur'an burnings as (g)local events

During the 2005–2006 Danish cartoons controversy, calls for burning the Qur'an circulated in Danish anti-Islamic milieus, but the response was clear then: it was illegal (due to the blasphemy clause) (DR.dk 2006). In contrast, Qur'an burning is legal in the United States, and book-burning events occasionally take place. In the 2000s, for example, several churches burned J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter books (Olson 2021, 9; Larsson 2019). Unlike the law, however, social media blurs the distinctions between different national contexts, and following Jones' action several home movies from around the world circulated on YouTube, featuring the burning of pages from or whole copies of the Qur'an, as well as images of half-burned copies (Svensson 2017, 253). In this category we also find Salvesen's 2015 Qur'an burning and the 2019 video 'Dane burning the Quran', which appears to have been an inspiration for Paludan and Stram Kurs. But Paludan's method of using footage of public Qur'an desecrations as a way to disseminate criticism of Islam completely transformed the genre by placing the emphasis on the audience and their reactions rather than on the burning Qur'an itself.

Repealing the blasphemy clause

The abolition of the Danish blasphemy clause was therefore a precondition for Paludan's actions. Abolition had been underway for a while as part of a European (and broader Western) movement to repeal blasphemy clauses. Indeed, the recent repeal of blasphemy laws in countries such as Norway, the Netherlands, and Iceland with 'no threats, physical manifestations, or security or foreign policy consequences' (Retsudvalget 2017) was part of the bill's justification. This reassurance was needed, as a 2014 report by the Criminal Code Council had stressed that a repeal would mean that 'the authorities will not be able to intervene against public burnings of e.g. the Bible or the Qur'an' (Straffelovrådet 2014).

The council pointed to the balancing of 'considerations of freedom of expression, protection against the violation of feelings, the possibility of maintaining social peace, and the state's relationship with foreign powers' (Straffelovrådet 2014), but in line with the general reluctance of the Danish judiciary to engage politically, the council did not present a recommendation.

Considered a vestige from a world in which an absolutist king could promise to keep the country free from 'all slanderers, swearers, and blasphemers of God' (*Lex regia* 1665), the blasphemy clause was in the eyes of many an embarrassment to a modern secular society. As a 'floating signifier' blasphemy could be 'appropriated at different times to fit different political goals and societal identity constructions...' (Larsen 2014). The clause had a potential for actualization, as happened during the cartoon controversy (concerning this controversy, see Klausen 2009), and with the 2017 charges against Salvesen the mobilization of the clause for political purposes seemed likely.

These arguments were central to the broad coalition of politicians – with the Social Democrats the only exception – which repealed the blasphemy clause. This had been proposed by the left-wing Red–Green Alliance (*Enhedslisten*), but recommendations by the European Council and the UN and experiences in Norway and the Netherlands convinced the Conservative Minister of Justice to support the bill as

Freedom of expression is a core value. Freedom of expression is also a fundamental prerequisite for a well-functioning democracy and for the development of society and the individual. Freedom of expression is fundamental to a democratic form of government, where voters can make their choice based on a free political debate, where ideas and positions can be put forward and countered (Minister of Justice Søren Pape Poulsen, L170).

Brushing aside potential questions of national security, the Danish Social Liberal Party spokesperson found it unacceptable to 'deposit our decisions and agency in the hands of extremists who constantly feel offended' (L170).

When Paludan refers to freedom of expression as a crucial feature of his Qur'an burning, he thus resonates with mainstream Danish politics. Furthermore, he places himself within the Danish debates as a blasphemer.

Paludan as a blasphemer 'in the Danish tradition'

During the parliamentary discussion of the repeal of the blasphemy clause the spokesperson for the Red–Green Alliance, Bruno Jerup, focused his comment on how the clause was *de facto* inefficient:

So the Penal Code says burning holy scriptures should lead to a punishment under the blasphemy clause. But that is not actually what happened. How does the minister relate to that? (L170.)

Jerup's point was that since the revised penal code of 1930 only four cases had been tried for blasphemy (including Salvesen). Only two had led to convictions, and the last, the mock baptism of a doll in 1946, was punished only with a small fine. In nine additional cases the public prosecutor had considered prosecution but had decided against it. A closer examination of these cases elucidates the specific Danish tradition of governance of speech (cf. Maussen and Grillo 2014). A significant event was the 1938 conviction of five Danish Nazis. They were sentenced relatively severely to 20–80 days imprisonment for circulating leaflets which charged that the Torah constituted an incitement to rape (Larsen 2014). Following their conviction parliament decided to strengthen minority protection by introducing Section 266b, 'the racism clause', which was inserted into the criminal code by Act No. 87 of 15 March 1939. This clause was later reworded to correspond with international obligations (Christoffersen 2013, 50). Its current wording punishes anyone who, publicly or with the intention of publicizing widely, makes a statement or other message in which a group of persons is threatened, mocked or degraded because of their race, skin colour, national or ethnic origin, belief, or sexual orientation.⁴ The penalty is a fine or imprisonment for up to two years. Paludan has been convicted under this clause twice, in 2019 and 2020 (Ritzau 2020). From this perspective racism legislation has rendered the blasphemy clause redundant.

From the 1970s blasphemy was increasingly understood as a legitimate critique of culture and society rather than as a criminal offence. In 1971 and 1976 a song, a film, and a mural were all accused of insulting Christianity, but the Attorney General decided against prosecution. All three cases intersected with sexual liberation. In 1971, a singer, Trille, performed a song on Danish Radio (DR) about how God impregnated Mary through a substitute, but the

⁴ Sexual orientation was added by Act No. 357 of 3 June 1987.

charges were dismissed. In 1976 two cases were discussed, but no charges were pressed for a film with a sex scene between Jesus and Mary Magdalene and a mural of Jesus with an erection. According to Danish sociologist of religion, Signe Engelbreth Larsen, these cases show how blasphemy was aestheticized in a transition from texts to pieces of art, and that it had also become sexualized and mediatized (Larsen 2014). In 1997, when an artist burned the Bible as part of an art project, covered by DR, the Attorney General took no legal action against the artist or the three journalists (Steffensen 2017). Thus, 'Denmark refused to prosecute a TV show that burned a Bible on air' (Kahn 2018, 120). In this context events that may be classified as blasphemous performative art can be used to convey anti-Islamic messages without breaching the racism clause. In 2023, the Social Democrat led government decided to stop Paludan and other anti-Islamic activists burning Qur'ans by reintroducing a clause in the penal code which punished those who disseminated 'publicly or with intent to spread in a wider circle an improper treatment of a scripture that has significant religious significance for a recognized religious community, or an object which appears as such a scripture' (L65).

A law obviously changes the direct consequences of behaviour; but it also has symbolic consequences, changing the perception of the phenomenon it regulates. Legislation typically influences the cost of signalling. An anti-discrimination law, for example, increases the cost of signalling patriotism through discrimination (Posner 1998). The law abolishing blasphemy directly reduces the cost of signalling criticism of Islam by burning a Qur'an but is also likely to change opinions about people who are critical of Islam and who burn the Qur'an. A law may influence efforts by 'norm entrepreneurs' – those interested in changing social norms, to use the American legal scholar Cass Sunstein's term – to construct new signals by providing opportunities to send the signal or by increasing its visibility (Posner 1998). The law abolishing blasphemy therefore not only ensured the legality of Paludan's actions but also encouraged norm entrepreneurs like Paludan by supporting the idea that his actions were basically legitimate as expressions of freedom of speech – even if opinions might differ as to whether they were laudable. It will be interesting to see if the new law can reverse this process. The ban on the improper treatment of scriptures opens a new chapter in the story of Paludan. Will he play the role of martyr, and will this in turn impute new meanings to the symbol? Will he continue to produce controversial actions and symbols?

Paludan as a producer of global injustice symbols

As a politician, journalist, and blasphemer in 'Denmark's culturalized political scene' (Switzer and Beauvain 2023, 1341), Paludan's localized focus on Denmark (and since 2020 also Sweden) makes it easy to categorize him as an agent of 'deglobalization', aiming to protect the nation-state by keeping immigrants out and curtailing international relations (Khawaja et al. 2023). But despite being mostly in Danish, Paludan's filming of quarrels and riots can easily be decoded as see-how-violent-Muslims-are by someone without a knowledge of Danish, and their message, No-to-Muslims-in-the-West, addresses an international audience. From this perspective Paludan's demonstrations are mediatized events which enact struggles in the global public sphere. But do they also represent what cultural sociologist Thomas Olesen has termed global injustice symbols? Global injustice symbols are 'events, situations and individuals infused with collective injustice meanings in a global public sphere' (Olesen 2016, 326). By framing a particular struggle represented by certain political and cultural schemas and binaries as just, they mobilize activists in a battle against a designated system of authority as 'empirical actors, institutions, or value complexes that obstruct, destroy, degrade and pollute cherished values' (Olesen 2016, 327). The cartoon controversy is an example of an event which has become a global injustice symbol arranged around a binary that places respect for religious sentiments in contrast to (alleged) Western disrespect for Islam; the system of authority is *Jyllands-Posten* and by extension discrimination in Danish society in general. As a mirror image of the cartoon controversy, Qur'an burnings draw on a binary of respect for freedom of expression *versus* Muslim disrespect for (peaceful deliberative) democracy. The system of authority is the politicians that have allowed Muslim migration to Denmark. The symbol formation is ultimately a *political* process that involves the capacity to define social realities and objects – that is, to affect how collectives understand and interpret them. Through his frequent references to his police protection Paludan connects with what Olesen calls a violent person event type, an event when (someone framed as) an innocent person has faced violence. Yet a violent person event does not automatically create an injustice symbol. The risk of violence constitutes a 'material basis' (Olesen 2015, 118), but the formation of injustice symbols requires agency – that is, the performance of a role (Olesen 2015, 121). It is therefore possible that – as with any attempt to construct a symbol – these injustice symbols may fail (Keane 2018, 80). Perhaps this happened after the 2019 election when the Danish public lost interest in Paludan. Yet injustice symbols are 'potentially contested and

negotiated' and may be subject to *de-symbolization* (attempts to counter and problematize the meanings imputed to an object) (Olesen 2016, 334). Meanwhile, the relocation of Paludan's campaign to Sweden represents a *re-symbolization* (endowing an object with different meanings). Injustice symbols become global to the extent that resonant schemas and binaries are available both cross-nationally and cross-culturally (329). In directly addressing 'likeminded nationalist patriotic groups around the world' in a video, Paludan is attempting to connect with these resonant schemas and binaries (Switzer and Beauduin 2023, 1343). Paludan's Qur'an burnings have inspired a small number of people in both Denmark and Sweden to use the symbolism for similar or other aims, and Paludan's inspiration of the Norwegian anti-Islamic activists SIAN indicates that the production of injustice symbols has been at least partly successful (Bangstad and Linge 2023). For a broader audience the material basis of Paludan's articulation of the injustice symbol is probably inappropriate:

To become an object in the process of injustice symbolization, the victims of violence must be considered innocent, decent, and thus undeserving of violence (Olesen 2015, 118).

Yet in a mediatized world success should perhaps be counted not in mobilizations of people but in headlines and influences.

New constellations of freedom of speech, blasphemy, and hate speech?

According to some observers caring about the feelings of gods – or of religious people – does not belong in a modern secular world, yet blasphemy has proven a surprisingly persistent phenomenon (Larsen 2014; Sherwood 2021). Based on the repeal and reintroduction of the blasphemy law, Denmark is a good place to begin investigating why this is the case.

During the twentieth century understandings of blasphemy shifted to including minority religions alongside the majority religion in the affording of protection. In Denmark the 1939 case of applying the blasphemy clause to protect Danish Jews against Nazi propaganda is indicative of this change. In Denmark and Europe in general, under the influence of international treaties and covenants and Council of Europe and EU documents, the regulation of discriminatory speech (antisemitism, racism, and Islamophobia) developed after the Second World War (Bader 2014, 330). As societies changed, the blasphemy clause appeared increasingly redundant in the light of newer

legislation, but in Denmark, blasphemy continued to be formally criminalized, though its renewed actualization in the cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s seemed to confirm that the legislation was a relic. Meanwhile, the first Muslim communities – consisting of immigrants as well as converts – were establishing themselves in Denmark. In 1963 the vice-president of Islam Denmark, an organization of Danish Ahmadiyya Muslims, asked for charges to be made against a historian, Palle Lauring, who had characterized the Prophet's approach to art as 'rather stupid'. In 1967 the Danish Ahmadiyya leadership accused a newspaper, *Aktuelt*, of blasphemy after its review of Lauring's book on Muhammad. Neither of these actions was of the kind that would normally fall within the vanishing blasphemy clause, and they were therefore rejected (Larsen 2013). Ahmadiyya Muslims have also instigated blasphemy charges in Britain, and their prominent role in this is indeed paradoxical given their own experiences of facing blasphemy accusations in Pakistan (Sherwood 2021, 94). Globalization thus forms the trajectory of the 'floating signifier' of blasphemy. Historically, blasphemy has been more closely connected with Christianity than Islam, but since the 1970s and 1980s opposition to blasphemy has been associated with minorities, and especially with Muslims (Sherwood 2021, 93–94). This is also the case with the accusations levelled against the Danish state broadcaster DR in 2004 and 2006 for showing Theo van Gogh's film *Submission* (concerning this film, see Larsson 2013, for example) and against the newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* for publishing the twelve infamous drawings of the Prophet, which both failed to lead to legal action. Yet it also shows how the existence of a law invites its use. The case of Paludan's Qur'an burnings, however, shows that the repeal of legislation may also invite action. The question of whether to legislate is certainly one of timing.

Under the influence of social media, blasphemy has become a 'form of easily recognizable signs, repeated over and over again: Muhammed cartoons; burned and defaced Qur'ans, gay and trans religious figures; and animals on the cross' (Sherwood 2021, 126). Beneath the surface of global discussions of blasphemy, however, larger controversies lurk. There is a tension between the US jurisdiction, where Qur'an burnings are usually considered to be protected under freedom of speech, and Europe, where book burnings have tended to be regarded as a possible expression of incitement to religious hatred. The perplexity that besets the governance of speech (Maussen and Grillo 2014) is telling in that on 2 May 2017, one month before the abolition of the Danish blasphemy provision, Jones was included in the newly established Danish list of hate preachers (Nielsen 2017a); yet two years

later he was removed again, indicating that 'local' traditions for regulating freedom of expression and the political culture in which they are embedded are not static. The condemnation by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation of Qur'an burnings, stressing that they 'spread hatred and contempt for religions and threaten the global peace, security and harmony' (OIC 2023) shows that religious actors may also change their use of language. In this document the OIC thus uses a language of discriminatory speech rather than blasphemy. But does this mean that the world has heard the last of it?

Conclusion

As an anti-Islamic politician and a social media phenomenon, Paludan is prolific. Drawing on the feelings of injustice expressed by his legal clients, combining the methods of the right-wing activist milieu with those of 'blasphemers' in the art world, and using his extended freedom of expression as a politician and journalist and talent as a social media persona, Paludan has succeeded in both staging Qur'an defamations as part of his anti-Islam demonstrations and in bringing his message to the Danish and the global public. The Salvesen legal case was a watershed, influencing not only Paludan but also sparking Danish discussions of the limits societies set to speech. This mirrors the impact of Jones's Qur'an burnings in 2011, which ignited a conversation about the perceived threat of Islam in the United States (Bail 2014, 128). While Qur'an burnings have previously been attempted for similar purposes (DR.DK 2006), it was the unique combination of references to freedom of speech and blasphemy that made this possible. Paludan's influence in Danish debates waned after his unsuccessful bid for parliamentary representation in 2019. However, his ability to re-symbolize through global attention led the Danish government to reinstate a blasphemy clause in 2023, an acknowledgement of the undeniable power of symbols.

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Appendix 1. Stram Kurs videos (selected) January–April 2019

Date	Place	Event	Title of Video	Views
13 January 2019	Vollsmose (Odense)	A woman approaches Paludan, who holds a copy of the Qur'an while he speaks to camera. She takes it out of his hand, telling him that he is not allowed to hold it and should stay away from it	Muslimsk kriminel røver koran fra Rasmus Paludan (Vollsmose, 13.1.2019)	9,300
2 February 2019	Aaby (Aarhus)	In this very long live video Paludan chats with the audience, which mainly consists of young boys.	Aaby park 2	50,000
3 February 2019	Tilst (Aarhus)	In this short dramatic video Paludan quarrels with the attendants, mainly young boys. Suddenly, fireworks explode, and the demonstration is dissolved.	Paludan angrebet med eksplosivstoffer i Tilst (3.2.2019)	289,000
9 February 2019	Online	Lars Theilade stands next to a road with a Qur'an in his hands. He says that some claim that the Qur'an supports paedophilia and plundering of infidels, and he agrees. He then sets fire to it in a firepit pot and warms his hands over the flames	Dansker brænder koranen!	140,000
2 March 2019	Hjørring	Paludan explains that he values someone burning the Qur'an at the event because this is something Danes have decided should be allowed. After Paludan has been interviewed by the radio channel 24/7 Lars Theilade makes a speech about why the Qur'an must be burned (to reject its message of domination). He then sets fire to a copy of the Qur'an wrapped in bacon: 'Bacon and surahs about killing infidels are a good match'.	Koranaftænding i Hjørring	23,000
3 March 2019	Frederikshavn	In this short video Paludan states that Muhammed is a paedophile. He then distributes a drawing of Muhammed having intercourse with a dog and a pig to the small audience present. The video ends with a recommendation to help Stram Kurs be elected to parliament.	Tegning: Muhammad kneppes analt af en hund, mens han knepper gris (Frederikshavn, 3.3.2019)	66,000
9 March 2019	Randers	Paludan chats with a small group of mainly young people. When one of them throws a lighter at Paludan, he is escorted away by the police.	Voldsmænd anholdt! (Randers, 9.3.2019)	287,400
10 March 2019	Grenå	Paludan explains how to play 5 -Qur'an, a game he has invented, where five people throw a copy of the Qur'an between them. It ends with a quarrel with one passer-by.	Paludan forklarer 5 Koran til vred muslim (Grenå, 10.3.2019)	7,850

16 March 2019	Aalborg (nightlife district)	A late night (23.00–05.00) event was announced with the title North Jutland Police burn the Qur'an for the third time. It is unclear what the title refers to, but the event did not take place. On Facebook it was described as 'Before we burn the Qur'an, we put raw pieces of bacon between its pages'.		
17 March 2019	Hobro	Paludan makes a speech in an area he calls 'homo valley'. The event ends in a quarrel, when Paludan tells attendants that they are not Danes and should leave.	Muslim går amok! (Hobro, 17.3.2019)	25,000
17 March 2019	Hobro	Paludan quarrels with a person asking him to go back to his 'loser country'. He opens a copy of the Qur'an and spits at it.	Folk ser også ned på dig i Irak, Mahdi! (Hobro, 17.3.2019)	276,000
22 March 2019	Parliament (Christiansborg) Copenhagen	With the Friday call to prayer in the background Paludan reads aloud from <i>The Satanic Verses</i> . He explains that the message of the book is that Muhammed is a false prophet.	Paludan læser op fra De Sataniske Vers (København, 22.3.2019)	6,300
22 March 2019	Parliament (Christiansborg) Copenhagen	Two copies of the Qur'an wrapped in bacon are ignited by a member of Stram Kurs while Paludan watches. In the video's headline the Qur'an is called the big whore book. In the video Paludan refers to it as the Paedophile's Handbook.	2 eksemplarer af Den Store Luderbog brændes foran Christiansborg! (København, 22.3.2019)	13,000
22 March 2019	Parliament (Christiansborg) Copenhagen	A man jumps into the canal when he sees Paludan and others playing 5-Qur'an. He shouts to the police that he will not come up before the police have taken the Qur'an from Paludan.	Wallah, I ska' ta' koranen fra ham! (Christiansborg, 22.3.2019)	431,000
23 March 2019	Nakskov	Paludan has a discussion with a little boy, who cannot understand what Paludan is doing and thinks he should stop. The boy's father eventually escorts him away.	Paludan forklarer demokrati til fremmed dreng (Nakskov, 23.3.2019)	48,000
23 March 2019	Nakskov	Paludan has a discussion with a police officer. He thinks the police are not taking his security seriously and complains that he has been hit by an egg and a bottle	Indsatsleder nødt til at flytte demonstration (Nakskov, 23.3.2019)	30,000
7 April 2019	Skive	Paludan is evacuated due to threatening behaviour. In this video a man yells at a Stram Kurs member, while bystanders try to calm him: 'Don't do what he expects you to.' He scolds the police for not protecting him.	Stram Kurs støtte: Der er noget galt i vores samfund (Skive, 7. april 2019)	135,000

12 April 2019	Skive	Stram Kurs has not uploaded a video from the event, but a video from the local news shows only a few spectators at Paludan's 5-Qur'an game, while many attend an anti-Paludan counter-demonstration in front of the mosque.	https://www.tvmidtvest.dk/skive/ingen-anholdte-eller-sigtede-demonstrationer-forlob-fredeligt	
13 April 2019	Viborg	Paludan has a peaceful Q&A with a group of people. He explains why he thinks it is meaningful to throw the Qur'an: 'Because this has been decided by the Danes', and he highly values freedom of expression.	Ingen i Danmark har turdet at krænke koranen de sidste 10 år (Viborg, 13.april 2019)	44,000
13 April 2019	Viborg	A young man asks Paludan to explain his actions. Paludan says that someone has thrown a stone at him, and wants to show that he will not be deterred by violence. Paludan also expresses criticism of the police's efforts to keep him safe.	Viborgenser vil gerne have at Rasmus Paludan skal dø (Viborg, 13. april 2019)	7,000
13 April 2019	Viborg	With a cameraman circling him, Paludan prepares for what he says is the second Qur'an burning of the day. The Qur'an is visibly torn and has allegedly been used for 5-Qur'an the previous day.	Afbrænding af den anden koran i Viborg (13.april 2019)	8,200
14 April 2019	Blågårds Plads, Copenhagen	Paludan has started throwing the Qur'an when two people runs towards him. The police restrain them while evacuating Paludan.	Paludan angrebet på Blågårds Plads (København, 14.4.2019) (Uredigeret)	290,000
15 April	Not allowed to demonstrate	Paludan explains that after the demonstration at Blågårds Plads was disrupted Stram Kurs wished to continue somewhere, but they were not allowed to demonstrate in the police district of Copenhagen. The ban was extended until after Easter.	Partileder meddeles demonstrationsforbud i Københavns Politikreds (14. april 2019)	249,000
16 April 2019	Lyngby	Paludan explains that the demonstration is taking place in the police district of Nordsjælland because he is banned from demonstrating in the police districts of Copenhagen and Vestegnen.	Afbrænding af koranen i Kongens Lyngby (16. april)	41,000
17 April 2019	Hellerup	Paludan has a discussion with a large group of people in the affluent neighbourhood of Hellerup	Partileder Rasmus Paludan snakker med borgere i Hellerup (17.april 2019)	221,00