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A Burning Affair: Introducing a Special Issue on the Burning of the Qur'an

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Abstract

In this special issue of *Temenos* we wish to draw attention to and provide a contextualization and analysis of the burnings of the Qur'an that have taken and continue to take place in the Nordic context in recent years. Although many countries still have blasphemy laws or laws against religious hatred that protect 'religion' (however defined) or religious sensibilities from being desecrated or mocked, most Western countries, including Sweden and Norway, have removed blasphemy laws and made it possible to offer a critique of religion, including the right to criticize religious texts. While several articles in this special issue discuss the contemporary practice of public rituals where a physical copy of the Qur'an is burnt, we argue that understanding why this practice has become so widespread in the Nordic region requires a historical awareness of how both blasphemy and the freedoms of religion and expression have been understood and practised in this very specific cultural and political environment in the far corners of Europe.

Keywords: Qur'an burning, Rasmus Paludan, blasphemy, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland

In this special issue of *Temenos* we wish to draw attention to and provide a contextualization and analysis of the burnings of the Qur'an that have taken and continue to take place in the Nordic context in recent years. Although

many countries still have blasphemy laws or laws against religious hatred that protect ‘religion’ (however defined) or religious sensibilities from being desecrated or mocked, most Western countries, including Sweden and Norway, have removed blasphemy laws and made it possible to offer a critique of religion, including the right to criticize religious texts. It is therefore possible and permissible in Sweden and Norway to voice heavy criticism of religions and even desecrate or ridicule texts that are viewed as holy by their followers. For example, the blasphemy law (*trotsfrid*) was abandoned in 1970 in Sweden, in 2015 in Norway, and in 2017 in Denmark. In December 2023, however, the law was reinstated in Denmark (Christensen 2023). In Finland the legislation has differed from the other Nordic countries, and it is forbidden to burn or desecrate religious texts in Finland (Äystö 2017; Sandén 2023). According to section 10 of chapter 17 of the Finnish criminal code, a person who ‘breach[es] [...] the sanctity of religion’ can face imprisonment or a fine. The section criminalizes anyone who:

1. publicly blasphemes against God or, for the purpose of offending, publicly defames or desecrates what is otherwise held to be sacred by a church or religious community, as referred to in the Act on the Freedom of Religion (267/1922) (quoted from Äystö 2017, 317).
2. by making noise, acting threateningly or otherwise, disturb worship, ecclesiastical proceedings, other similar religious proceedings, or a funeral, shall be sentenced for a breach of sanctity of religion to a fine or to imprisonment for at most six months (quoted from Äystö 2017, 317).

While several articles in this special issue discuss the contemporary practice of public rituals where a physical copy of the Qur’an is burnt, we argue that understanding why this practice has become so widespread in the Nordic region requires a historical awareness of how both blasphemy and the freedoms of religion and expression have been understood and practised in this very specific cultural and political environment in the far corners of Europe.

The Nordic contexts

Over the *longue durée* it is fair to say that in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway there have been relatively few blasphemy cases, both in the past and in the present (Årsheim 2017; Äystö 2017; Sandén 2023). For our purpose here it is important to note that the concept – as well as legal regulation – of blasphemy has changed dramatically.

In the Middle Ages blasphemy was generally seen as either a sin against God or as heresy or witchcraft, and was dealt with in canon law. Later, during Protestant absolutist rule, blasphemy accusations were dealt with by civil courts, and blasphemy cases in this period mostly concerned the preservation of state authority (Årsheim 2017). For example, in Norway's 1814 liberal constitution a blasphemy legislation was much milder than the absolute monarchy's draconian laws. In the following century the legislation was watered down, and in 1902 the wording in Norway was changed from "the denigration of the 'holy word of God or Sacraments', with a particular protection for the official religion, to the 'declaration of faith' of any 'recognized' religion" (Årsheim 2017, 557).

Although blasphemy legislation had rarely been used in the Nordic context during most of the twentieth century (Årsheim 2017; Binderup and Lassen 2017),¹ strong voices had certainly long worked for its abolition. Mirroring the population's demographic composition, the earlier history of blasphemy laws in the Nordic contexts was associated with public discussions of Christianity. Today the focus is mainly on debates about Islam and Muslims. Furthermore, the more recent context of increased Muslim agency in Europe – for example, as shown in relation to the Rushdie affair and above all in the attacks on the office of Charlie Hebdo in 2015 – has led to new calls for the abolition of blasphemy legislation. Although the terrorist attacks against Charlie Hebdo propelled the legal development in Norway, however, it also delayed the abandonment of the blasphemy law in Denmark. With the rise of Islamic violence and the memory of the Muhammad cartoon crisis still fresh (Klausen 2009), Denmark feared that a change to the law could provoke 'particular religions' and be misinterpreted, and an abandonment could even be 'deliberately distorted' outside Denmark (Binderup and Lassen 2017, 444–445). The Social Democrats, who at the time led the government coalition, explained their reluctance to make any legal changes when Prime Minister (then Minister of Justice) Mette Frederiksen announced the government's decision to retain the blasphemy law. She said:

The Criminal Law Council's review shows that the article on blasphemy is not a hindrance to criticism of religion... At the same time, the Council points out that if the article is abolished there could occur public burnings of holy books like the Bible or the Koran that the authorities could not act against. I find it difficult to see how we achieve a stronger society, or how

¹ Most cases were related to the protection of the majority religion, the most famous and ridiculed example being the Norwegian ban on Monty Python's film *Life of Brian* in the early 1980s.

it could enrich the public debate, if it was made legal to burn holy books (Binderup and Lassen 2017, 446).

This way of putting the argument ‘was largely based on the fear of violent reactions to religious insult, including terrorism’, and the ‘limitation of freedom of expression was based on concerns for public order and safety’, argues Eva Maria Lassen (2020, 145). In February 2017, however, a man who had posted a burning of the Qur’an on his Facebook page was prosecuted. In response to this charge, the Red–Green Alliance drafted a bill on the abolition of the blasphemy law, and in June 2017 the Danish Parliament rescinded the blasphemy ban (Lassen 2020, 146). This was not the last word on blasphemy laws in Denmark, however. A new draft bill reintroducing blasphemy legislation was proposed in 2023. In this new version the state prohibits Qur’an burnings, explicitly referring to threats made by actors in the Middle East following the large number of burnings that have been conducted in both Denmark and Sweden since 2017 (TV2 News 2023). In December 2023 a new ban on the burning of the Qur’an was therefore enacted in Denmark (Christensen 2023).

As we are finalizing this special issue, the debate in Denmark is echoed in an ongoing heated discussion in Sweden of whether the law should be changed to protect believers from being hurt, while other voices argue that this is the wrong path. Those who hold the latter opinion argue that freedom of expression is a fundamental aspect of liberal democratic political culture in Scandinavian countries, and that these principles must be protected, even when the cost is high. A change to the law would be to submit to pressure from foreign regimes or violent threats. Without taking sides in these complex matters, the articles included in this special issue can hopefully shed light on these debates and provide insights for how the burning of the Qur’an can be related to the study of religions as well as to other academic disciplines (i.e., media studies, law, etc.). In other words, we do not claim to have the right answers to the dilemmas faced by the politicians, government authorities, activists, or commentators who engage with the issue of Qur’an burning, but we hope we can offer some insights that may help in future debates and deliberations.

The present context

The most well-known contemporary Nordic provocateur using Qur’an burning as a political manifestation is the Danish-Swedish lawyer and politician, Rasmus Paludan (b. 1982). Yet it should be stressed that Paludan is far from

being alone in using the burning of the Qur'an as a method for criticizing Islam and defending freedom of speech. For example, the Florida pastor Terry Jones and his attempt to establish an 'International Burn a Koran Day' in response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks is an earlier example that also earned international notoriety and criticism. Following his burning of the Qur'an in 2011 more than twenty people were attacked and killed in Afghanistan (Svensson 2017, 243; Olson 2021).

Since 2017 and the launch of his political party, *Stram Kurs*, Paludan has voiced heavy criticism of Islam, Muslims, and multiculturalism, and in his campaigns he has used the burning and desecration of the Qur'an as a tool to express his political opinions in Denmark. Without going into detail (for more see Lene Kühle's article in this issue) the burning of the Qur'an was first legal and possible after the change to the Danish law and the abandonment of the blasphemy law in 2017 (Binderup and Lassen 2017). Paludan's campaigns and burnings of the Qur'an nevertheless created several protests and conflicts in Denmark, but with time his manifestations received less public attention. In 2020 Paludan decided it was time for similar public demonstrations in Sweden. In the summer of 2020 he attempted to burn the Qur'an in Malmö with the Swedish artist, Dan Parks (b. 1968). Both Paludan and Parks have previously been convicted of hate speech and incitement against ethnic groups, and Paludan was therefore forbidden to enter Sweden in 2020 (Expo 2020). In October 2020, however, his application to become a Swedish citizen – his parents were Swedish and Danish, making him eligible for Swedish citizenship – was approved, and there was no legal way to prevent him entering Sweden (Åkeson and Nordblad 2020). Since the end of 2020 Paludan has toured Sweden and burnt several copies of the Qur'an, and peaceful counterdemonstrations and violent riots have followed in the wake of these events. During the Easter of 2022, which coincided with Ramadan, demonstrations in Stockholm, Malmö, Landskrona, Linköping, Norrköping, and Örebro led to protests and violent clashes between the police and demonstrators (Larsson 2022). Approximately three hundred Swedish police were injured in this riots, the cost of which was estimated to be 43 million Swedish kronor (around 3.8 million euros) by the Swedish Police Union (von Sydow and Danielsson 2022).

Timing, transnational connections, and international ramifications

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 fundamentally changed the security situation in the Nordic region, and both Finland and Sweden decided to abandon their policy of neutrality and apply for NATO

membership. In this sensitive period – all NATO member states must approve new members – the burning of the Qur'an became a delicate political issue in Sweden. For example, in late January 2023 Paludan burned a Qur'an outside the Turkish Embassy in Stockholm, and he received many death threats from all over the world for this and earlier actions (Erlandsson 2023). The 2023 burning provoked the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who stated that he would not approve Swedish NATO membership if Sweden continued to accept the burning and desecration of the Qur'an. It was not only Paludan, however, who applied at this time for permits to organize demonstrations at which the Qur'an would be burnt. Several other actors now started to apply for permits to burn copies of religious texts – not only the Qur'an but also copies of the Torah and other religious texts (Erlandsson and Alnahhal 2023; Sandén 2023).

Moreover, during the summer of 2023 the Qur'an burnings in Sweden achieved new international prominence, as the most active 'Qur'an burner' in public was now Salwan Momika, an asylum seeker in Sweden, with a background from Northern Iraq. Momika, who had previously participated in a Christian militia group in Iraq, succeeded in provoking actors in the region like Hizbollah and the Iranian leadership. By August 2023 there was massive international demand for a ban on Qur'an burnings in Sweden and Denmark, and the two Nordic countries received massive negative press on social media. Established news agencies like Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, and Orient News also circulated biased and even incorrect information about the legal system and why the burning of the Qur'an could take place in Sweden (Alnahhal 2023). Similarly, fake messages were sent to many prominent Muslim actors in Norway, falsely calling for Muslim action against the blasphemers on behalf of Hizbollah. However, the Norwegian Intelligence Service quickly went public with this information (Sfrintzeris 2023), which may have contributed to the calming of the situation. Exactly who wanted to capitalize on the Qur'an crisis is unknown, though foreign agencies were believed to have played a role in this and similar misinformation campaigns (Sfrintzeris 2023; Lindström 2023 for Sweden).

As several of the articles in this special issue point out, the burning of the Qur'an has often developed into media events that have taken on a life of their own. For example, the global attention the burnings of the Qur'an in Sweden and Denmark received in traditional broadcasts and print media, as well as on various social media around the world, led to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) deciding it was time to issue a statement against Sweden and Denmark. The statement said:

[The OIC] Condemns the repeated crimes of desecration of copies of al-Musʿhaf ash-Sharif, which aroused the wrath of about two billion Muslims all over the world, which represents a dangerous embodiment of the culture of hatred and racism, and a manifestation of Islamophobia, and demands the immediate cessation, and criminalization of such extremist provocative acts, and to underline the need to respect religious texts and symbols and promoting a culture of peace and acceptance of the other (Resolution 2023, paragraph 7).²

The OIC therefore argued that Sweden and Denmark should change the law or face consequences. The Swedish embassy in Baghdad was attacked and stormed by an angry mob on the night of 19 and 20 July 2023 (SVT 20.7.2023). The Swedish consulate in Beirut was attacked on the night of 9 and 10 August 2023 (SR 20.8.2023), and in early August a Turkish woman working for the Swedish consulate in Izmir was fatally wounded by a shooter (Olsson 2023). Whether the last incident was related to the burning of the Qurʿan in Sweden, however, is unclear. Yet Sweden and Denmark had now become the target of fierce criticism, and anger was voiced by the larger Muslim world. Militant organizations like Hizbollah and al-Qaeda stated that the two Nordic countries were legitimate targets for terrorist attacks (PST: Nasjonal trusselvurdering 2024).

Besides its global impact, the burning of the Qurʿan developed into an internal political affair in both Denmark and Sweden. On 17 August 2023 Sweden raised the threat level on its five-grade scale to four, indicating it was highly likely Sweden would be a target of terrorism (SÄPO 2023). Similar developments have not followed in Norway or Finland, though copies of the Qurʿan have also been burnt or desecrated in these countries (see Pauha, and Linge and Bangstad in this issue, as well as Äystö 2017). We therefore observe that Qurʿan burnings in Denmark and Sweden have received considerably more attention and provoked more anger than the Qurʿan burnings that have been conducted in Norway. The causes of the different reactions to the Nordic countries are complex. It is likely, however, that Denmark was perceived to have a track record of insulting Islam with the publication of the Muhammad cartoons in *Jyllands-Posten*, while Sweden's defence of

² Quotation from *Resolution on the Repeated Crimes of Desecration and Burning of Copies of al-Musʿhaf ash-Sharif in the Kingdom of Sweden and the Kingdom of Denmark Approved by the 18th Extraordinary Session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation*, paragraph 7.

the Swedish artist Lars Vilks and his drawings of Muhammad had already provoked certain segments in the wider Muslim world (for these crises see Klausen 2009; Larsson and Lindekilde 2009). It is, however, too early to draw this conclusion, and more research is therefore needed.

Context and analytical frames

As the different articles in this special issue of *Temenos* show, the burning of the Qur'an is neither a new phenomenon nor something unique to Norway, Denmark, and Sweden (see, for example, Svensson 2017; Olson 2021; or Äystö 2017 for an overview of earlier desecrations of the Qur'an). Burning the Qur'an in Western contexts often entails criticism of Islam, Muslims, and multicultural policies, but it is also a stress test for the open democratic society and the fundamental right to be provocative in the name of freedom of expression. Some would argue that freedom of speech is used today as a smokescreen for articulating anti-Muslim attitudes and even derogatory statements against migrants in general and the multicultural society in particular (e.g. Kabir 2014). Some commentators see the responses to the burning of the Qur'an from politicians and the authorities as demonstrating that it is difficult for democratic societies to find a balance between freedom of expression and freedom of religion (Blue Holmes 2012; see also Larsson and Mattsson in this issue). However, this interpretation implies that we think of freedom of religion as including a right not to be offended, which is a problematic position to take, at least from a classical liberal perspective. A dilemma for politicians and authorities, however, is the difficulties in allowing Qur'an burning and protecting provocateurs' freedom of expression while maintaining law and order on the streets and good relations with the Islamic world globally. The Nordic states have traditionally been stable and very capable of dealing with law and order issues, but the Qur'an burnings have made them appear confused and paralysed, both from the perspective of their own publics and that of other countries. This situation poses several interesting questions, from the nitty-gritty of police tactics to the legal and philosophical issues concerning the governance of religion.

To offer an analysis and enhance our understanding of the case studies and examples included in this special issue, it is necessary to consider both internal and global affairs in the respective Nordic countries. In its complexity the burning of the Qur'an and its repercussions around the world illustrate that we live in a globalized world (Olson 2021). The local is distinctively connected with the global, and what happens at a global level

will have an impact on local contexts. As Roland Robertson (1938–2022) and others point out, this is not unique for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but the strength of the global has increased with the development of mass communication and migration processes, including new transnational bonds between ‘migrants’ and their respective ‘home countries’ that have become more direct and perhaps also stronger. We believe the burning of the Qur’an and its many repercussions around the world may be analysed as an illustration of the link between the global and the local that produces the kind of glocality which Robertson discusses (Robertson 1995). Media reportage, news, videos, and images on social media spread around the world in seconds today, and the local setting is given new interpretations and meanings. What is legal or socially acceptable in one context is not necessarily legal or accepted in another, and this provokes reactions and responses (Blue Holmes 2012). As Robertson argues, it is only when global questions enter the local context that they become meaningful as something distinct, different, or unique (Robertson 1995). Qur’an burnings in a faraway place can therefore enter a completely new context and be used in their new local setting to construct a narrative that serves the local purposes of individuals, social movements, political parties, or even governments. Finally, it can be argued that Qur’an burnings belong to a subset of Islamophobia, which in itself is a global and globalizing phenomenon (Ganesh et al. 2023).

When analysing the burning of the Qur’an and its repercussions in local settings around the world, it is evident that it can serve very different purposes. On social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter), for example, we see that Salwan Moumika is connected with other ‘Qur’an burners’ like Yezidis in Iraq, who suffered unspeakable violence at the hands of the Islamic States. Their postings of images of a burning Qur’an on social media can be read as survivor agency; the Nordic context is completely different. Although many details remain unknown, it is likely that some of the confrontations in Sweden and Denmark should be understood in the context of international security policy. For example, there are good reasons to argue that Russia explicitly wants to obstruct or delay Sweden’s NATO membership (e.g. Lindström 2023). Yet we do not know enough about the extent to which hostile state actors have manipulated and facilitated the dissemination of news about Qur’an burnings.³ However, we believe the timing is crucial if we want to understand the debate and controversy about the burning of the Qur’an.

³ How Sweden’s negative portrayal on social media concerning Swedish-Muslims relations with Swedish Social Services and foreign powers has influenced Sweden’s relations with the larger Muslim world is discussed in Ranstorp and Ahlerup 2023 and Lindström 2023.

It is also likely that criticism against Nordic countries can be used by local politicians and actors in the larger Muslim world to divert attention from internal and local problems. Pointing fingers at an external scapegoat and directing local frustration at a distant enemy is therefore an efficient strategy that can be used to create local cohesion and downplay local shortcomings and failures. For example, many OIC member states which complained that Sweden and Denmark neither protected nor respected religious minorities were among a group of states with the most discrimination against religious minorities in the world (Fox and Topor 2021). A case in point is Pakistan, which does not respect its Ahmadiyya Muslim, Shia Muslim, or Christian minorities, who are often victims of harassment and even open violence. (Concerning the harassment of Ahmadiyya Muslims in Pakistan, see Larsson 2018a; concerning violence against Shia Muslims in Pakistan, see Ahmed 2011).

The disposal of ‘dead books’ and the ethics of intention

As scholars in the study of religions, it is also necessary to place the burning of the Qur’an (or other religious texts) in a larger historical and theological context. For both Muslims and non-Muslims alike it is commonly known that the Qur’an is regarded as a sacred or ‘special book’. It thus differs from other books and should therefore be treated differently. For example, one should be ritually pure when one touches the Qur’an, and the Qur’an should be set apart from other books – for example, by placing it on the highest shelf in a room (Svensson 2010, 37). It is this difference and set-apartness that makes the Qur’an a holy or sacred object. (Concerning the concept of the holy and sacred in religious studies, see Durkheim 2001 and Alles 2017).

For example, there are many rules for how Muslims should handle the Qur’an, and these rules and regulations are often viewed as *adab al-Qur’an* (i.e. the ethics of the Qur’an). As Jonas Svensson points out, both Muslims and non-Muslims, especially those who want to mock, anger, or upset Muslims, have a cognitive or psychological intuition about what might be the ‘proper’ or ‘improper’ way to handle the Qur’an, or any other sacred text or object for that matter. Without going into the psychological or cognitive assumptions that supports this proposal (Svensson 2017), it is possible to distinguish between three different categories for how to understand and analyse various forms of desecrating a sacred text, according to Svensson.

1. Acts that would ‘cause pain, physical injury, or death’ as if the text was a physical individual who was able to feel pain and ultimately to die. These acts involve burning, stabbing, kicking, and so on.

2. Acts intended to 'cause distress and psychological pain' like 'urinating, defecating and spitting'. These acts involve contact between something that is held sacred (i.e. the Qur'an) and something that is viewed as disgusting or defiling (i.e. by wrapping it in bacon, immersing it in urine, and so on).
3. Acts that are more metaphorical in nature and that aim to give rise to 'contempt, ridicule, verbal abuse, humiliation, or attacks on her character'. This category involves verbal abuses or bashing that often attacks the sacred object with negative or provocative wordings, like 'fuck XX' with the attempt to express 'hostility or contempt' (Svensson 2017, 254–255).

When discussing and analysing debates about the desecration of holy books, however, the question of intentionality (*niyya* in Arabic, i.e. that a person has the intention to perform an act, Wensinck 1995) is of great importance. For example, whereas it is obvious that Paludan wants to provoke Muslims by desecrating or destroying the Qur'an, Muslims are not unfamiliar with the problem of various forms of improper or 'polluting' practices when it comes to the handling of the Qur'an. (Concerning Islam, ritual purity, and 'pollution', see Katz 2001).⁴

But the major difference between what can be labelled everyday problems (i.e. that someone drops the Qur'an on the floor or touches it without being ritually clean) and the actions conducted by a provocateur like Paludan is the intention. For example, most everyday mistakes are not intentional but unplanned or accidental, but to desecrate the Qur'an intentionally is something different, and it is therefore perceived as something negative and evil. Yet the line between these categories is often vague and open to interpretation, and there are several cases that show that the question of intent can be utilized in politics to brand 'critics' or political/religious opponents as blasphemous apostates (see, for example, Rollier 2019 who provides examples from Pakistan; for similar uses in other countries see Larsson 2018b).

As Svensson (2010; 2017) and others show, Muslim theologians have often addressed the question of everyday problems when they want to

4 Surah 56, verses 77–79 of the Qur'an states that it seems to be a prerequisite to be ritually clean (i.e. that the believer has conducted *wudu*, *ghusl*, or *tayammum* to become ritually pure, i.e. to reach a state of *tahara*) when touching the Qur'an. This passage in the Qur'an reads: '... this is truly a noble Qur'an, in a protected Record that only the purified can touch a book well-guarded, which none shall touch but those who are clear (*innahu la-qur'anun karim fi kitabin maktun la yamassuhu illa l-mutahharun*) (Q 56:77–79). Translation from Abdal Haleem 2005.

provide answers for how to handle copies of the Qur'an that have become incomplete or worn-out by many years of reading and use. On this topic there are several examples of *fatwas* – non-binding legal answers provided by a mufti – but also other texts written by Muslim scholars that recommend that worn-out copies of the Qur'an should be buried wrapped in a piece of cloth, or if possible, the ink should be wiped off the pages (palimpsest), and the blank pages should be destroyed or buried in a 'safe place' or even burned.⁵ However, they can also be immersed in water or shredded, as Sadan (1986) and others (e.g. Cook 2000, 60–61; Svensson 2010; El Shamsy 2022) point out. One rationale for these methods is that 'fire and water belong to God's creation', according to the Hejazi scholar Tawus ibn Kaysan (d. 106/724) (quotation from El Shamsy 2022, 99).

Surprisingly, few (if any) discussions about the contemporary burning of the Qur'an in the Nordic contexts have addressed the fact that most (if not all copies) of the Qur'an that have been burned seem to be translations. It is questionable if most Muslim theologians would place Finnish, Swedish, Norwegian, or Danish translation of the Qur'an on the same footing as a Qur'an in Arabic. It is well known that many Muslim theologians argue that a translation of the Qur'an is not the same as the Qur'an in Arabic. The level of holiness is therefore quite different if we compare a translation with an 'original' Qur'an. However, the extent to which this has had an impact on the contemporary criticism against the burning of the translations of the Qur'an is unclear. Leaving aside this potential question mark, several Muslim theologians have argued that worn-out copies of texts that either contain quotations from the Qur'an or the whole text can be destroyed by fire – that is, they should be burned. An early example of this practice is related to the third Caliph, Uthman ibn Affan, who ordered that 'flawed' or uncanonical copies of the Qur'an should be destroyed by burning to establish an authoritative and canonical version. (Concerning the codification of the Qur'an, see Motzki 2001, for example.) The root used for indicating burning is *ḥ-r-q*, but some Muslim scholars argue that the method that was used was shredding, and the correct root should therefore be *kh-r-q* (which can be read as 'to tear or shred') (El Shamsy 2022, 100; Wehr 1976, p. 170/*ḥ-r-q* and p. 235/*kh-r-q*). Regardless of the discrepancy and debate that is found among Muslim scholars on the method Uthman uses, the episode in question is recorded by al-Bukhari, who writes:

⁵ The practice of 'burying' texts that contain writings in Arabic from the Qur'an also resembles the Jewish way of placing worn-out copies of Jewish texts in genizah repositories, the most famous being the Cairo Geniza (Goitein 1967–1993; Sadan 1986).

Ḥudhaifa bin Al-Yamān came to 'Uthmān at the time when the people of Shām and the people of 'Irāq were waging war to conquer Armīniya and Adharbijān. Ḥudhaifa was afraid of their (the people of Shām and 'Irāq) differences in the recitation of the Qur'ān, so he said to 'Uthmān, 'O chief of the Believers! Save this nation before they differ about the Book (the Qur'ān) as Jews and the Christians did before them.' So 'Uthmān sent a message to Ḥafṣa saying, 'Send us the manuscript of the Qur'ān so that we may compile the Qur'ānic materials in perfect copies and return the manuscripts to you.' Ḥafṣa sent it to 'Uthmān. 'Uthmān then ordered Zaid bin Thabīṭ, 'Abdullāh bin Az-Zubair, Sa'īd bin Al-'Āṣ and 'Abdur-Raḥmān bin Ḥārith bin Hishām to copy the (original) manuscripts perfectly. 'Uthmān said to the three Quraiṣhī men, 'In case you disagree with Zaid bin Thabīṭ on any point in the Qur'ān, then write it in the dialect of Quraiṣh as the Qur'ān was revealed in their tongue.' They did so, and when they had written many copies, 'Uthmān returned the original manuscripts to Ḥafṣa. 'Uthmān sent to every Muslim province one copy of what they had copied, and ordered that all the other Qur'ānic materials, whether written in fragmentary manuscripts or whole copies, be burnt (Bukhari 1997, 425–426).

Although it is beyond the scope of this introduction, it should be noted that the actions Uthman commands have caused internal conflict and divergent opinions on the legality of using fire as a means of destroying texts with Qur'ānic inscriptions, not least between scholars from the Hijaz who approved of burning as a method and Iraqī scholars who rejected this way of handling religious texts. As El Shamsy (2022) points out, the difference in opinions may also be connected with anti-Uthman or anti-Sunni rhetoric propagated by Shia Muslims.⁶ While some Sunni scholars approve of burning as a method for the disposal of religious texts, Shia Muslims strictly forbid this practice, and the act of burning the text of the Qur'ān could even 'merit eternal damnation' (El Sahmsy 2022, 105–106).

As always, when assessing different practices of handling the Qur'ān and not least the disposal of worn-out copies, there are large differences and even conflicts among Muslim scholars, and it is impossible to find a unanimous

⁶ According to Shia Muslims the first three Caliphs are not regarded as authoritative or righteous leaders of the Muslim community, and they maintain it was Ali (the cousin of the prophet Muhammad and the husband of Fatima) who should have been appointed as the first Caliph. This may be an important reason for Shia Muslims' strong stance against the burning of worn-out or damaged copies of the Qur'ān. They do not see the actions taken by Uthman (mentioned above) as a role model – on the contrary. Concerning the tension between Shia and Sunni Muslims in Islamic history, see Abdo 2017 or Louër 2020, for example.

answer to these questions (see Zadeh 2009 or El Sahmsy 2022, for example). There are also differences between ideals and how Muslims go about handling the Qur'an in their daily lives. Needless to say, there are also major differences and many ways of responding to provocative or sacrilegious handlings of the Qur'an. Even though the present burnings of the Qur'an in Sweden have provoked strong responses, most individuals who identify as Muslim have not responded violently or with hatred (see Larsson 2022, for example).

Outline of the special issue

As this short introduction to this special issue has indicated, there are many ways of analysing the burning of holy books, and divergent theoretical and methodological approaches can be applied.

For example, as several of the included articles show, the burning of the Qur'an can be connected with various forms of media logics, ritualization, and symbolic violence. These aspects are present in Lene Kühle's article on Rasmus Paludan's career as a 'Qur'an burner'. Besides providing a thorough outline of Paludan's anti-Muslim activities in Denmark since 2017, Kühle provides an analysis of Danish debates about blasphemy and the concept of global injustice symbols; a theoretical lens that was introduced by the Danish sociologist Thomas Olesen to describe 'events, situations and individuals infused with collective injustice meanings in a global public sphere' (Olesen 2016, 326).

In his text 'Ritual Dynamics of Qur'an Burning' Teemu Pauha provides a close reading of the burning of a Qur'an in Finland posted on YouTube. The posted content is analysed here as a media ritual that evokes feelings of masculinity, violence, and camaraderie. Pauha argues that the video is both a symbolic form of violence and transgression against Islam, but the incineration can also be analysed as a ritual that includes components of camaraderie and masculinity that stipulate a boundary between Muslims and non-Muslims in Finland. Besides a detailed description of the posted video, Pauha includes an analysis of the commentaries (likes and dislikes) the video has generated. He proposes that the visual effect of setting fire to a text that is venerated by other individuals is a way of sending a strong message that is much more powerful than 'ordinary' net trolling or online hate.

Marius Linge and Sindre Bangstad use media event theories to analyse the burning of the Qur'an conducted by the Norwegian organization, SIAN (Stop the Islamisation of Norway). Besides providing an overview of the anti-Muslim activities that SIAN organizes, they argue that the burning of the Qur'an should not be seen as an innocent manifestation or expression of

freedom of speech. They thus argue that the burnings staged by SIAN are a 'powerful channel for provocation and polarization', and that it is possible to talk about the before and after of Qur'an burnings. To put it differently, the Qur'an burnings that have taken place in Denmark, Norway, Finland, and Sweden – but also in other places – can be understood as critical (media) events, according to Linge and Bangstad. Like the analysis provided by Pauha, Linge and Bangstad view the burnings organized by SIAN as a mediatized ritual. The actors (those who set light to the Qur'an), viewers (both online and offline), and those who applaud or distance themselves from the actions are all part of a social drama (cf. Juergensmeyer 2017).

Audun Toft's, and Göran Larsson's and Christer Mattsson's, two articles offer respective close analyses of Norwegian and Swedish media responses and coverage of the burnings of the Qur'an in 2022. Besides providing an analysis of how the Norwegian media has covered the burnings of the Qur'an, Toft discusses media events and analyses how different sections in the newspapers differ in content, coverage, and rationale in selecting what should be counted as news in the first place. In Toft's words 'the news media influences the event by amplifying and directing media attention'. This indicates that the burning of the Qur'an is a kind of performance that greatly depends on how the action is received, and how it is reported. To hark back to Pauha's analysis, the mediatization of the burning of the Qur'an is a kind of media ritual, and media is one of the actors in a larger performance. A similar line of reasoning is also found in Larsson's and Mattsson's article, but in this case they scrutinize the public debate in Sweden that followed the heated riots that took place with Rasmus Paludan's Qur'an burning in the spring of 2022. By deploying a critical discourse analysis, Larsson and Mattsson help us observe the discursive orders that regulated the debate, and the overall results indicate that the riots are mainly viewed as a result of a failed multicultural policy in which Islam is discussed as an obstacle for liberal democracy and thus freedom of speech.

Although freedom of speech is often used by advocates of the burning of the Qur'an as a justification for attacking and criticizing Islam and Muslims, it is interesting to learn that the nexus between New Atheism and the burning of the Qur'an seems rather weak, according to Teemu Taira's article 'New Atheism and the Criticism of Islam: From Transnational Discourses to Local Implementation?' To support his claim, the article focuses on how prevalent Islam is in the writings of the New Atheists (i.e. Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens) and in conclusion it is religion in general that is the main problem, not Islam specifically. The

major exception is Sam Harris, who portrays Islam and Muslims very negatively and stereotypically. With the rise of the alt-right movement (especially in the US) and right-wing conservative populist movements in Europe and elsewhere (for religion and populism, see Marzouki et al. 2016), however, the general criticism directed against Islam seems to have taken on arguments from thinkers associated with the New Atheists. With this development the nexus between atheism and a critic of Islam has the potential to grow stronger. When Qur'an burning campaigns were used to criticize Islam and Muslims in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, however, similar activities were forbidden in Finland. From this perspective it is interesting to compare Finland with Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, and how different local circumstances play out when it comes to criticism of Islam and Muslims.

The special issue closes with a short meta-analysis by Faisal Devji in which he places the debate about the burning of the Qur'an in a broader context, with a special focus on the Indian subcontinent.

Finally, we wish to add a short note on research ethics. It is important to explore the topics and material dealt with in this special issue. However, such research also risks drawing more attention to the problematic material created by the groups and individuals some of the articles study. The authors have dealt with this in different ways. The material analysed is publicly available, but to avoid providing extra visibility to the material or its producers, links to the material are not provided, and some authors have also chosen not to name videos and other content. We support these decisions and encourage further reflection on how best to research and present such material.

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