



From Blasphemy to Sacrilege: Searching for Religion in Controversies about Islam

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Abstract

Qur'an burnings have come to constitute a subculture in Scandinavia. Why have they focused on sacrilege against Islam's scripture, while blasphemy against its prophet still dominates polemics in other parts of Europe? This essay traces the emergence of blasphemy as the principal form in which such polemics occur to colonial India. It shows how critics there tried to attribute Muslim protests against insults to Muhammad with a religious language they seemed to be missing. With its globalization after the Cold War, this debate about blasphemy was taken up in Europe. But in the Nordic countries it has been replaced with sacrilege as a way of rehearsing the religious element that remains absent from Muslim demonstrations of offence against alleged insults to Islam.

Keywords: *Islam, Muhammad, Qur'an, blasphemy, sacrilege, religion, insult, injury*

The Scandinavian subculture of protests against Islam or Muslim immigration is distinctive in one respect. It has turned from debates about depicting or describing Muhammad to a focus on desecrating the Qur'an. This is despite the fact that one of the most widespread and damaging controversies over alleged insults to the Prophet started in Denmark in 2005, when *Jyllands-Posten* published cartoons of Muhammad that gave rise to sometimes violent protests in many parts of the world, alongside a boycott of Danish products. Of course, desecrations of the Qur'an are by no means unique to the Nordic countries, with perhaps their most famous example being from the United States, where a pastor named Terry Jones burned copies of the scripture in 2012 and livestreamed the performance on social media. But Qur'an burnings remain rare in the US, as apparently do insulting depictions of the Prophet in Scandinavia. Why might this be the case, and how can we understand it?

The essays on Qur'an burning collected here describe their emergence as a Scandinavian subculture linked to but ultimately separate from similar criticisms of Islam and Muslims elsewhere in Europe. What brings these forms of criticism together is their self-attribution as tests of Muslim tolerance or secularism, which are meant to demonstrate their ability to live as good citizens in European democracies. By protesting against such criticisms, in other words, and thus proving their unwillingness to abide by laws protecting free speech in particular, Muslims automatically disqualify themselves from citizenship. In this way such tests operate very much like the kinds of citizenship tests that states require of immigrants, though of course in much cruder ways. And, indeed, the latter tests are sometimes put in place to take concerns raised by the former into account. Interestingly absent from this debate, however, is any consideration of protest as itself a democratic value.

Anti-Islam protests, after all, are sometimes as offensive to public opinion as Muslim ones defending Muhammad or the Qur'an, both occasionally breaking the law in the cause of some higher ideal. And these ideals cannot easily be differentiated between secular and religious ones since the invocations of free speech on the one side are reflected by claims about freedom of conscience on the other. The right to criticize defended by one party is counterposed with the right to live free from insult by another. The problem with this debate is that the religion meant to be at its centre is nowhere to be found. While they may be devout, after all, Muslims protesting against insults to Muhammad or desecrations of the Qur'an tend not to make theological arguments when doing so. And this often leads to their opponents having to argue that Muslims are dissimulating their true intentions. But then the latter also accuse their critics of being disingenuous in their defence of free speech.

As some of the essays here point out, Qur'an burnings inherit the free speech vocabulary that had characterized controversies over depictions of the Prophet, even though they make little sense where acts of desecration are concerned. Indeed, burning books has historically been understood as an example of censorship and thus an attack on free speech. And the incoherence of extending this argument from depictions of Muhammad to desecrations of the Qur'an suggests that the shift from one form of criticism to the other is more substantial than superficial. Now, the fact that Qur'an burnings must take their language from insulting depictions of the Prophet only recognizes the latter's priority. And this genre of criticism and controversy first emerged in colonial India during the middle of the nineteenth

century (Tareen 2020). Its first incidents of violence were the Muslim-Parsi riots of 1851 and 1874 in Bombay, both of which dealt with the publication of unflattering accounts of Muhammad in Parsi-owned newspapers (Parsee 1856; Times of India 1874).

This beginning is crucial because it shapes all subsequent controversies about insulting the Prophet. The first important thing to note about these riots is that they occurred not in some traditional site of Muslim culture but in a modern city. The depictions in question, moreover, appeared in equally modern newspapers carrying instructive and entertaining stories for a lay audience. They were not found in theological texts or even polemics meant to convert Muslims to some other faith. Both religion and tradition, therefore, were notable by their absence in such depictions of the Prophet. This does not, of course, mean that they were not insulting or even meant to offend, as there was a subterranean history of conflict between Parsi capitalists and Muslim labourers in Bombay. The Muslims protesting against what they saw as insults, for their part, did not invoke any theological principle of punishment for blasphemy but rather colonial ideas about libel and defamation (Scott 2023).

Even though there exists an Islamic language of blasphemy, in other words, it was not brought up in either of these riots. The argument was already fixed as occurring between partisans of free speech on the one hand and freedom of conscience on the other. By 1874, however, Muslims also started invoking the Indian Penal Code which had come into operation in 1860 (Lewis 1870). A document influenced by Jeremy Bentham's philosophy of Utilitarianism, the code replaced blasphemy, which was still part of British law, with the proscription of offences that might hurt the religious sentiments of Indians belonging to all religions (Ahmed 2009). Since it concerned itself not with any religious truth but only the true or false feelings of many kinds of believers, this proscription was a secular one that differed little from defamation. And Muslims, like members of other religious groups, fixed on it when making their case against what in many parts of Europe would still be called blasphemy.

While the term blasphemy continued to be used to describe the offence Muslims took to disparaging descriptions of Muhammad, therefore, in fact they had dispensed with theological categories and forms of reasoning from the late nineteenth century to rely on efforts to proscribe 'hurt sentiments' without distinguishing between one religion and another. Hurt sentiments have indeed been universalized and are now put forward even in places where the Indian Penal Code has never held sway. This is the language that

defined the first Western protests against alleged insults to Muhammad, which emerged in Britain following the publication of Salman Rushdie's novel, *The Satanic Verses*, in 1989. Not accidentally, these first protests were by Muslims of Indian descent, but they soon spread with their reasoning to other parts of the world. The only theological element of the controversy was in Rushdie's own reference, in the title of his novel, to an incident of satanic interpolation in the Qur'an, though it received no attention from his Muslim critics (Akhtar 1989).

British Muslims instead sought to have their hurt sentiments protected by that country's blasphemy law, which in good theological fashion was meant to protect only the sanctities of the Church of England. The only way in which Muslims could access a theological argument, in other words, was through Christianity, though they did not succeed in doing so. If anything, Muslim claims to be covered by Christian ideas of blasphemy led to the law's abolition, which ironically meant that Muslims had come to serve as agents of secularization in the United Kingdom. If I have dwelt so extensively on the history of controversies over insults to the Prophet, it is to show that it emerged in colonial India as a modern form which had little if anything to do with theology or tradition. If anything, such controversies were secular or rather products of secularism, the problem they posed being that religion had become invisible within them and could only be manifested in the hurt, rage, and violence of believers who had no other language in which to express themselves theologically.

From its beginnings, then, the form that controversies over insults to Muhammad took had to do with arguments about free speech. That is to say it was about the permissibility of representation, whether pictorial or in writing, given the hurt or injury it caused. And while desecrations of mosques or temples by Hindus and Muslims were also important causes of conflict in colonial India, these were more easily dealt with as illegal encroachments, possession, or destruction of private property and did not give rise to any argument over principle. But it is precisely this latter form rather than insults to the Prophet that seems to define Qur'an burnings in Scandinavia, despite the awkward transition made from one to the other. For such desecrations also appropriate and destroy some physical object, and in doing so give rise to a different kind of argument about ownership. Does the text 'belong' to Muslims in some generic fashion, even if particular copies of it do not?

In some ways, of course, disputes over the Prophet are also about ownership, with Muslims claiming he belongs to them in the sense that insulting

Muhammad hurts their sentiments. But like the desecration of religious sites, burning Qur'ans accomplishes much more than having non-Muslim claim possession over them. As a number of the essays here point out, the act of desecration is the mirror image of a ritual of consecration. Burning the Qur'an, after all, can also be an acceptable way of disposing of it in the most appropriate way since fire is a well-known agent of purity as much as destruction. But more than this, I would argue that in ritually setting the Qur'an alight, its critics are in fact introducing a truly religious and even theological practice to a controversy that lacks both. Given the secular language of Muslim protest, which as we have seen gives rise to much suspicion about its real intentions, there is a need to make religion visible in the debate.

If Muslims will not or cannot deploy a religious vocabulary, their opponents will have to do so, albeit in acts of negative theology that acknowledge the Qur'an's sacred status in the very effort to extinguish it. Here, then, is the ritual element missing from Muslim arguments and protests, where it is only manifested in emotion and occasionally violence. The act of iconoclasm, we know, repeats and reverses rituals of worship. And the burnings of stave churches as part of the black metal music subculture of the 1990s are the precedent for these acts in countries like Norway. Both cases involve a criticism of religion, though church burnings did not serve as a test of Christian tolerance and were not linked to immigration. Yet they did seek to avenge a pre-Christian culture, just as anti-Islam activists want to protect a Christian one. While I am not positing any direct connection between these phenomena, what is interesting about them is the focus on ritual and religion, which in both cases can only be retrieved from an opponent in an act of negative identification.

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