TEMENOS
Nordic Journal for the Study of Religion
Temenos Vol. 60 No. 2 (2024), 203–23
DOI: 10.33356/temenos.148361

Reflections on the Special Issue: Burning of the Qur'an

Abstract

The following three short texts are the outcome of a roundtable discussion at the European Association for the Study of Religion (EASR) conference held on 19 August 2024 in Gothenburg. The focus of the roundtable was the special issue, Burning of the Qur'an, which was edited by Göran Larsson, Iselin Frydenlund, and Torkel Brekke and published in *Temenos*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (2024). The special issue contained articles on the development in Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland and a meta reflection on the burning of the Qur'an from a British and South Asian perspective. At the EASR conference the editors invited Assistant Professor Verena Meyer from Leiden University and Professor Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen from the University of Copenhagen to comment on and discuss the special issue. This section of Temenos publishes Meyer's and Skovgaard-Petersen's responses, with a short reply from Iselin Frydenlund and Göran Larsson. The discussion focuses on research ethics ('why study a controversial topic'), legal frameworks, and the lack of 'Muslim voices' in the study of controversial topics.

Keywords: *Qur'an burnings, Sweden, Rasmus Paludan, Denmark, Middle East, research ethics, law, blasphemy, sacrilege*

Discussing Göran Larsson's, Iselin Frydenlund's, and Torkel Brekke's Special Issue on the Burning of the Qur'an

VERENA MEYER

I would like to start by stating the obvious, which is that the topic we are discussing is very provocative. I say obvious because the very point of burning a Qur'an is provocation. Such provocation did not leave me unaffected either. As I read the articles, especially the details about the lengths to which groups have gone to perform their disdain for the Qur'an, I noticed how angry I was getting at the sheer spitefulness of these actions. If I had ever fashioned myself as an objective academic or impartial observer, these articles led me no longer to entertain any such illusions. A few pages in I found myself nauseated by anger, repugnance, and contempt for the perpetrators of Qur'an burnings. When I thought about my spectacular failure to be neutral, I began to wonder about the ethics of studying people whose beliefs and practices may be at fundamental odds with our own values and the values of the communities with whom we associate and identify. What does it mean to do research on those who seek to hurt people we care about and to eliminate the principles we hold dear by engaging in active and hurtful acts of Islamophobia?

What makes this even more complicated is that the group we are discussing – people from the Nordic countries burning the Qur'an – may be understood to be making a claim on behalf of an imagined 'us' as opposed to an imagined 'other'. After all, in the construction of insiders and outsiders that we see in Qur'an burnings, we – which is to say those of us contributing to this special issue and commenting on it now – are in many ways on the inside. We are white, non-Muslim (or at least presenting as such), culturally or historically Nordic or at least European, male in some cases, and so on. We are therefore navigating complicated power dynamics as we are making sense of Qur'an burnings. These power dynamics operate not only at the level of what is happening on the ground but crucially also in the debates we are having about it now – our claim to be providing an explanation of what it all means. Our interpretations are not neutral – not only because our reactions and situations will inevitably colour our findings but also because our scholarship of Qur'an burnings may well influence future on-the-ground developments.

As scholars we are, in other words, implicated in these events in multiple ways. This, I think, makes it important for us to reflect on our own positionality in relation to the events of which we are making sense. How

do our views and reactions, our identities and privilege, affect the body of knowledge we are producing about Qur'an burnings? What are our dead angles and biases? And, perhaps going a step further, to whom or to what is our scholarship accountable?

My second comment moves from the ethical to a more conceptual question about what is actually happening when a Qur'an is burnt. It is well known that according to mainstream Muslim understandings the Qur'an is not just a book. As the literal word of God, a physical copy of the Qur'an has a sacred status in its own right and must be shown reverence by observing rules of ritual purity and respect (A. *adab al-Qur'ān*). This understanding of the irreducible power of a physical object itself clashes with familiar modern Western understandings of a book and the religious truths it may mediate. The physical copy, rather than a sign or symbol that is linked to an immaterial sacred as an abstraction, is inseparable from this sacred essence itself. In an article addressing the 2005 cartoon crisis in Denmark Saba Mahmood observed that many self-declared liberals and progressives felt a great deal of 'bafflement … at the scope and depth of Muslim reactions' to the cartoons at the time (Mahmood 2013, 67). These secular liberals conceded that the cartoons were somewhat Islamophobic and certainly in bad taste, but no more than that. Many of these well-meaning liberals even urged Muslims to stop taking the cartoons quite so seriously. After all, no real injury had been done. The important thing in a religion was belief, and belief was an interior matter and thus unassailable. By universalizing their own semiotic ideologies, they of course completely missed the point.

Aware of this background, I approached the articles with the expectation that this more recent round of mediated Islamophobia in Europe would likewise point to such clashing ontologies and associated semiotic ideologies. Yet instead of merely invoking this familiar binary, the contributors have invited a rethinking of these existing moulds. For one thing, as Göran Larsson, Iselin Frydenlund, and Torkel Brekke (2024) mention in their Introduction, these rules pertain primarily to the Qur'an in Arabic because a Qur'an is only a Qur'an in the full sense if it is in Arabic. But the burnings mostly – or perhaps even exclusively – happened with English copies, perhaps to achieve a greater media effect in an environment where few people read Arabic, as Teemu Pauha (2024) explains in his contribution. Burning an English translation of the Qur'an may still be hurtful and culturally or politically problematic, but from a theological and ontological standpoint it is not – or at least not to the same degree.

Another point that challenges the notion of a straightforward clash between different semiotic ideologies is that Muslims, especially in the age of mass print, have had to come up with ways to dispose of copies of the Qur'an that are old and worn. When a Qur'an is no longer usable, you would not want to just throw it in the bin. And crucially, one accepted method of respectfully disposing of an old copy is to burn it. This suggests that there is nothing inherently problematic about burning the Qur'an. Instead, what matters is the attitude that accompanies the act of burning, the intention (A. *niyya*), a key term in Islamic theology. But intention, we might think, is not material. So is this really about clashing semiotic ideologies?

Of course, this question is ultimately misleading, as nothing is inherently material. The materiality of the Qur'an to be burnt is contingent rather than given. What is clear, however, is that these contingencies around the materiality of the Qur'an have changed since the 2005 cartoon crisis and the misunderstandings Saba Mahmood described. Lene Kühle (2024) and Teemu Pauha (2024) have both described the lengths to which people burning the Qur'an have gone to demonstrate a maximum of disrespect – spitting on it, wrapping it in bacon, or urinating on it. It may be that these Qur'an burners' intention itself is not material. Through their intention, however, they seem to make some kinds of Qur'an burnings 'more material' than others, to echo Rowlands's (2005, 80) words, as they become mechanisms for what Kühle has called a de-sacralization of the Qur'an. But this de-sacralization is not based on any inherent Muslim sentiments. After all, as Pauha pointed out, it is the Qur'an burners themselves for whom a physical copy is indispensable in their Islamophobic act. They must even spend money on a Qur'an if they are to burn it in the first place. In other words, for these Qur'an burnings to be effective, the perpetrators actually need first to produce the Muslim standpoint on materiality. This suggests some fundamental shifts since the cartoon crisis. Today, associating Muslims with a particular semiotic ideology appears to have become an intrinsic part of Islamophobia itself.[1]

A third point that emerged across the different articles is the significance of mediation in Qur'an burnings. This is not only about burning a Qur'an. It is about being seen burning a Qur'an. And like other provocative images, the mediation of Qur'an burnings summons opposing publics.[2] In his article,

1 On this point I am indebted to Karen Strassler, who recently made a similar argument about Muslims' 'too literal' interpretation of images, concluding that 'Islamophobia is, to a significant degree, a visual ideology' (Strassler 2023, 223).

2 See Westmoreland et al. (2023) for examples. On the summoning of publics see especially Strassler's epilogue.

borrowing the conceptual language of Hepp and Couldry, Audun Toft (2024) called Qur'an burnings *media events*, understood as mediated communications that focus on a thematic core and that cross boundaries of product and genre and their associated publics. While it is visibility that is sought, this visibility is also ambivalent, for once a story is out, its authors are no longer in control of the narrative generated around it. Toft's article shows that the meaning of an event is not fixed, and that different voices have their own agendas, as they suggest that Qur'an burnings are 'really about' this or that. A similar dynamic becomes apparent in Pauha's discussion of the comments on a YouTube video of a Qur'an burning. While he shows that the video activates symbolic resources associated with a masculine, militant, muscular Finnish identity, some of the comments the video's viewers post show that not everyone is convinced. Indeed, some appear to see them as quite the opposite, which is to say comically incompetent, pathetically trying and failing to set light to a Qur'an. I am reminded of what Patricia Spyer and Mary Steedly (2013, 30) have called instances of 'wrong address', where media events crossing boundaries form unanticipated publics as they encounter audiences who were perhaps never supposed to be addressed in the first place. Sometimes the consequences can be unexpected, as was the case when reports of the Qur'an burnings in Turkey seriously called into question whether Sweden could join NATO. Far from producing some sort of agonistic encounter between insiders and outsiders, the effects of these media events generate a complex landscape of positionalities that evade the control of the discourse's instigators, and that are unstable or constantly shifting.

I would also like to raise some questions about individual articles. In Pauha's piece I was fascinated by the discussion of gender and the observation that Qur'an burnings are not only a male affair when it comes to the demographics of the perpetrators but also in the symbolic resources that are mobilized in the burnings' performances. Gender also plays a role in other kinds of Islamophobic discourse, most prominently in the one on Love Jihad (Frydenlund and Leidig 2022). Is there also an implied woman in these gendered productions of a Finnish identity? Could it be the Finnish nation that needs to be protected by its 'boys'? Or is Islam feminized here as something to be subordinated and emasculated?

Kühle's article discusses the strange return of blasphemy laws in contemporary Danish legislation. Although it is clear that blasphemy is, as she aptly calls it, a 'floating signifier', it is also oddly specific in the sense that unlike comparable categories like 'hate speech', 'blasphemy' has a clear

religious dimension. But what is at stake in the first place in making this about religion? I wonder whether calling Qur'an burnings 'blasphemy' and taking legal action against them in these terms may be part of the problem because it reinscribes the idea that Muslims are all extremely religious and extremely sensitive about their religion. And this is precisely what the Qur'an burners are themselves asserting.

Toft's article touches on a similar issue. Although many Norwegian journalists writing about Qur'an burnings appear to criticize the perpetrators as violent and xenophobic, some simultaneously assume that, as one of them is quoted as saying, 'Muslims accept no criticism of their religion and will react violently to all provocations'. While this is of course nonsense and an Islamophobic statement in its own right, it made me wonder to what extent this media attention remains an outsider discourse, a journalistic conversation by non-Muslims for non-Muslims. But there are plenty of Norwegian Muslims too. Are they part of this broader national debate? Is there any room for Norwegian Muslims to assume a role not as outsiders to be talked about but as insiders who get to speak on behalf of a Norwegian public? Or are things already set up to preclude this? If so, perhaps this is the real problem – not some hooligans trying and failing to set light to books.

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More Context and Perspectives on the Nordic Qur'an Burnings: TEMENOS ROUNDTABLE ON QUR'AN BURNINGS at the EASR, 2024

JAKOB SKOVGAARD-PETERSEN

First, let me congratulate you on this thematic issue on Qur'an burnings in the Nordic countries. I learned a lot, even about my own country, Denmark, and about the main instigator of these Qur'an burnings, Rasmus Paludan. It might also have been interesting if the editors had discussed the reasons these burnings happen overwhelmingly in the Nordic countries. I do not have an answer to that question. Instead, to add to the discussion, I will address the issues of contextualization and add some further perspectives.

The need for contextualization is much stressed in the issue, and it is clearly important. One could say, however, that what is intended is only the Nordic context. And even here, there is a lack of Muslim perspectives on the burnings throughout the issue. The focus is on the ritual, the men who performed the burnings, and the public deliberations and dilemmas, not on the intra-Muslim discussions in their wake. This may be because few Nordic Muslims felt inclined to participate in the public debate about these incidents. But if this was so, it is surely a point to be noted and discussed. And specifically Muslim fora should be investigated – they are citizens as much as anyone else. To take an example, in the Arab media a couple of Muslim non-violent responses received great attention and were circulated: a video of an Iraqi woman, Quds al-Samarani, who manages to grab the copy of the Qur'an from the arsonist in front of the Iraqi embassy in Copenhagen, but who is instantly thrown to the ground. The police then return the copy to its owner, who burns it (Sky News Samarani 2023). Or the Syrian refugee Ahmad Alloush, who announced that he would burn the Torah and Bible in front of the Israeli embassy in Stockholm but on the day declared in front of the press that he would never burn someone else's holy book (Aljazeera Alloush 2023). These short YouTube videos were circulated widely in Arabic, Turkish, and English in Nordic Muslim circles, and they tell another story of non-violent reactions than those highlighted in the Nordic non-Muslim media. Naturally, Muslims in the Nordic countries differ on most things – and certainly about the interpretation of their religion. But those to whom I spoke seemed united in a sense that this was the 'next level' of threats to their life in Denmark; after all, the burnings were accompanied by banners calling for the deportation of 'Islam', and politicians and the media seemed more interested in free speech.

The context of the Middle East

This points to a contextualization that could also have been pursued, namely that of Middle Eastern responses. The introduction refers to debates in Denmark and Sweden that pitted the freedom of expression against pressure from Middle Eastern regimes or terrorism (Larsson et al. 2024, 8). This is not to deny that these threats are real. On 16 October 2023 some Swedish football fans were killed in Brussels by a Tunisian in response to the Qur'an burnings, and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan evoked the burnings of the Qur'an in his exploitation of Sweden's bid for NATO membership and to pursue Kurdish activists in the country (Aljazeera Erdogan 2023).

Yet we should be careful to avoid simply reiterating the story of the pressure from 'Middle Eastern dictators' or 'autocrats'. Not that these countries are not ruled by autocrats – they are – but because this framing works to give Middle Eastern people – Muslim or otherwise – even less of a voice on an issue about which they feel strongly. Precisely because these incidents have a character that could mobilize broad strata of their populations, Middle Eastern autocrats had good reason to play them down instead of playing them up.

The cartoon crisis of 2005–06 is habitually evoked when discussing the Qur'an burning crisis – and it is an important precedent. In some ways, however, it is also a contrast. At the time I was the director of the Danish–Egyptian Dialogue Institute in Cairo, an initiative funded by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and I had to debate the issue of the Muhammad cartoons with some very incensed audiences in Egypt and Palestine and on Arab TV stations. By contrast, when I visited North Africa, Egypt, and the Gulf during the Qur'an burning months of 2023, there was much less public anger. There was little public agitation and no boycott of Swedish or Danish products, and while the local media did not ignore the subject, they mainly discussed other matters.

Why have the Qur'an burnings elicited so much less public agitation? The typical answer I get from people is that they are exhausted: hit by inflation, covid, and the financial crisis, they have turned away from political issues and are concentrating on making ends meet. There is much truth in this observation. Another, more cynical, observation is that most Arab states are much more authoritarian today and will not tolerate demonstrations or other manifestations of a public political will. This is also evident in the media, which is generally under much tighter political control than was the case before the 2011 Arab uprisings.

In a country like Egypt most of the media is now under army or government control. This is bad for democracy, liberal life, and probably economic development. But for local intellectuals – and the foreign scholar – it at least offers an opportunity to gauge the thinking in circles of power. Although during the early months of the cartoon crisis the Egyptian government media took a great interest in Jyllands-Posten's 'demeaning pictures' and 'insults', this time they have covered it much less, and much less emotionally. This makes sense: the Egyptian regime also learned lessons from the cartoon crisis – namely, that it ultimately played into the hands of the Islamist opposition, who in January 2006 called for a boycott and reaped the benefit. This time the government media covered the Qur'an burnings in a much less agitated way, stressing Egypt's protest and role in solving the issue. They were, in short, covering their backs rather than stoking the fire. Religion can have tremendous mobilizing power, but it is also difficult to control. For obvious reasons authoritarian states prefer an atomized, passive population. This does not mean that they are indifferent to public sentiment – indeed, they try to monitor it and direct it if possible. It is no coincidence that the Arab state which did witness violence as a reaction to the Qur'an burnings was Iraq, where there is no single authoritarian ruler but a competition between (unruly) factions; it was the supporters of the leader of such a faction, Muqtada al-Sadr, who attacked the Swedish embassy in Baghdad and later a Danish office in Basra. These attacks should be seen as a move to embarrass the (pro-Iranian) government rather than to put pressure on the Nordic countries (Amwaj 2023). The previous year the same group had stormed the Iraqi parliament with the same intention.

Islamists were also fairly subdued in their response. Predictably, the Muslim Brotherhood condemned the Qur'an burnings, calling for Muslims to show their anger (Ikhwan 2023). But it did not pursue the subject after July 2023. Similarly, the International Union of Muslim Scholars, the Islamist-leaning world organization which in 2006 called for the boycott of Danish products and later for a 'day of wrath' on 4 February, when several Danish embassies were attacked, confined itself to two general denunciations in January and July (International Union of Muslim Scholars 2023). In the Arab World the Brotherhood and the Islamists in general are suppressed and scarcely in a position to mobilize, and they may have reckoned that pushing this issue with little public response would expose their weakness.

To these domestic concerns foreign policy can be added. In 2023 almost all Arab states were working to improve their relations with the West (and even Israel) and had little to gain from a fallout over Qur'an burnings in

remote Northern European countries. The fact that several Muslim countries have protested against the burning of the Qur'an, and often of their national flag, in front of their embassies should not be seen as undue pressure but as the exercise of the regular diplomatic code of conduct.

The same could be said of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which held an extraordinary meeting on 31 July 2023 that strongly condemned the burnings of the Qur'an and listed 35 initiatives to respond to them (OIC Resolution 2023). Again, of course, the states had to call for an emergency meeting of the OIC; they had to condemn the burnings in the strongest terms; and they had to devise tangible actions. The OIC was, after all, established after a similar attempt at sacrilege against the Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem in 1969. Yet it took five hours to negotiate the statement, which avoided decisive measures such as boycotts, leaving it to individual member states to take more concrete steps against Sweden or Denmark. According to diplomats close to the process Iran was the country pressing for action; most Arab countries worked against it. At the next meeting in September no new statement or demands were released (OIC September 2023). The July meeting should thus be seen more as an obligatory but uneasy move than as a strong commitment to escalation.

This leaves us with yet another context, that of global politics, which had also changed since the cartoon crisis. By 2023 the United States no longer stood as the uncontested superpower in a unipolar world. Russia, at war in Ukraine, saw the opportunity afforded by the Qur'an burnings; despite his well-known propensity to keep a long distance from others and avoid mingling with ordinary people, President Vladimir Putin flew to Dagestan and embraced the Qur'an in a mosque surrounded by enthusiastic Muslims – a clip that went viral in the Muslim world (Putin 2023). During the Cold War the United States could frame the conflict as one between a bloc of countries which respected religion and family values on the one hand against a bloc of godless Communists on the other. Now the tables have turned, and Putin speaks of Russia's defence of established religion and family values against godless and woke Western LGBT+ culture. In the battle for hearts and minds in the Global South this presents quite a challenge to the Western bloc. Although not really discussed in the Danish and Swedish media, there is little doubt that Washington and Brussels told at least the Danish government in no uncertain terms that these Qur'an burnings one way or another had to stop.

To summarize: for a variety of reasons Middle Eastern states were neither capable nor willing to exert much pressure on Sweden and Denmark (the only countries mentioned in their statements). Regimes had to engage in a balancing act insofar as they would have to appear deeply committed in the

eyes of their subjects while working to downplay the issue in their media. The same seems to hold true for the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamist organizations. There were therefore only a few actors such as Muqtada al-Sadr or the al-Azhar in Egypt who embraced the opportunity. On 7 October 2023 the issue of Qur'an burnings in the Nordic countries was entirely eclipsed by Hamas's massacre of Israeli civilians and the ensuing Israeli bombardments and military invasion of Gaza.

Perspectives

The introduction to this volume states that the law passed in December 2023 was a reinstatement of the law of blasphemy which was abolished in 2017. This is a simplification; the text and the argument are quite different from the old law. Given parliament's recent abolition of that law, legislators worked hard to approach the subject from another angle.

One of the benefits of religious studies is its attention to religious phenomena from a comparative perspective, which has allowed it to develop a nuanced terminology. Qur'an burnings, as Devji (2024) points out in his postscript, are a sacrilege, not a blasphemy. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica sacrilege is any 'injury, violation, or profanation of sacred things' in the sense of things that are consecrated. Blasphemy, meanwhile, is 'irreverence toward a deity or deities' and is derived from the Greek *phaemae* (φήμη), or speech. Blasphemy itself has undergone quite a transformation: until the eighteenth century there was a vivid belief that God would punish any insults uttered against His majesty, but the term has since grown into a wider protection of all faith communities, and no longer against the wrath of God but against hateful attacks by humans. As Kühle (2024) points out in this volume, the Danish blasphemy law was last applied in 1939 to protect Jews against Nazi propaganda – quite contrary to a country like Pakistan, where blasphemy is a standard accusation against religious minorities for having allegedly insulted the state religion of Sunni Islam. We need to make these distinctions clear.

The addition to section 110e of the penal code introduces 'a ban against improper treatment of scriptures with essential significance to a recognized religious community' (Retsinformation 2023).

Inadvertently, the addition thus clearly evokes an idea of sacrilege and deliberately avoids blasphemy; you can say and write what you want about the Qur'an or the Bible, but you must treat the book itself properly. This is not intended as a defence of the law but as a description of its content and intention, which have been widely misconstrued; given the media's attach-

ment to free speech, much of it referred to the law as a new blasphemy law. I think Devji is right that scholars should at least reflect upon and discuss this analytical difference.

The comparative approach of religious studies should also alert us to another difference from the cartoon crisis: while there has also been a tradition of mocking Christianity and Jesus in drawings – a tradition Jyllands-Posten transferred to the prophet Muhammad – there has been no tradition in the Nordic countries of burning Bibles. Bibles were burnt elsewhere in Europe during the wars of religion, and the Torah has been desecrated in anti-Jewish riots from the Black Death to the Kristallnacht. These were frightful events, a way of symbolically annihilating a faith community from the territory where it resided. Sacrilege against a faith community's holy book is just that, and those who burned the Qur'an made their intentions clear. If we count it as an utterance, it is a particularly vicious form of hate speech which openly calls for the deportation or destruction of an entire religious community. In a statement in February 2023 the Nordic Jewish communities condemned the burning of the Qur'an, emphasizing that 'our tragic European history has taught us that book burnings often signal the normalization of hatred against a group in society. Historically against Jews, but currently against Muslims' (Berlingske Tidende 2023).

In the midst of the Qur'an burnings, 20 August 2023 marked the bicentenary of the opening of Heinrich Heine's play 'Almansor'. Heine, a Jew, was reacting to the book burnings at the Wartburgfest in 1817, when nationalist students burned the Napoleonic Code (which until Napoleon's defeat had given German Jews rights as citizens) and books such as Saul Ascher's *Germanomanie*, which warned against fanatical German nationalism. The play lets an Arab aristocrat, Almansor, secretly enter Granada, which had fallen to the Reconquista a couple of years before, in search of his beloved Zuleima. When he meets his old servant Hassan, he is told of all the Muslims' sufferings under their new rulers, including the burning of the Qur'an ordered by the Bishop of Toledo. Hassan comments: 'Wherever books are burned, ultimately humans will burn, too.' This famously prescient statement is often quoted in relation to the Nazi book burnings a hundred years later. But it is not widely known that it is actually about the burning of the Qur'an. Heine's interest in Muslim history, and his choice of discussing Jewish issues through fiction about Muslims was not uncommon for Jewish intellectuals in the nineteenth century (Lewis 1968; Skovgaard-Petersen 2023, 206–16). Should it not also direct us as scholars to examine issues of Qur'an burnings in Europe today with a view to other religions, not just in the present but also in the past?

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Why Must Scholars of Religion Study Sensitive and Controversial Topics? A Reply to Verena Meyer and Jakob Skovgaard-Pedersen

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First, as editors we are extremely happy that Professor Verena Meyer from the University of Leiden and Professor Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen from the University of Copenhagen accepted our invitation to discuss the *Temenos* Special Issue on Qur'an burnings with us at the European Association for the Study of Religion's annual conference in Gothenburg in August 2024. Moreover, we are grateful to them for their willingness to publish their responses in this issue of *Temenos.* We invited them because we were sure that they would bring fresh theoretical perspectives and the Nordic context into a wider conversation about perspectives and experiences from the broader Muslim world. We see this exchange not as the end but as the beginning of future conversations and academic collaborations. Space does not permit us to engage with all the matters our two discussants raise, but we will address three points: the need for more research on Muslim responses; research ethics; and the 2023 Danish law against the improper treatment of sacred scripture.

First, we agree with Skovgaard-Petersen and Meyer that a weakness in our special issue is that, except for Faisal Devji's (2024) postscript on Muslim responses, Muslim voices play a minor role in most of the articles. This must be seen in light of the fact that research on right-wing extremism and Islamophobia is less concerned with the receiving end than it is with production. Having followed these public spectacles across the Nordic region, however, we certainly want to recognize the multiple Muslim voices in relation to Qur'an burnings. In this regard we would like to emphasize that Muslim responses are emphatically multiple: from anger to indifference; to strategically ignoring; to calls for the legal regulation of the desecration of the Qur'an (as made, for example, by the newly established political party Nyans in Sweden, Nordstrand 2022); to explicit Muslim calls for *not* having legal legislation for the desecration of the Qur'an, as we have seen in Norway. We do not know enough about these multiple Muslim positions, however, and further research is needed to unravel the various Muslim responses (Kozaric 2023). This unpacking of multiple Muslim responses is of course in itself a project of debunking of stereotypical portrayals of Muslims, as the construction of one essentialized category of 'Muslimness' is

what defines Islamophobia. As Meyer rightly points out, for burnings of the Qur'an to be perceived as producing an effect among Muslims, anti-Muslim provocateurs need to construct a specific Muslim semiotic ideology in relation to the Qur'an. Furthermore, this research lacuna concerning Muslim responses speaks to an even wider research gap. In a scoping review just published by one of the editors (Larsson and Willander 2024) the literature review shows that most research on Muslims and digital media has been on hate and individuals who hate Muslims, and fewer studies have engaged with how Muslims use digital and social media to create support or to build counternarratives.

Second, we would like to acknowledge the importance of research ethics as raised by Meyer. Why do we think it is important to address such a provocative topic? There are of course many ways of replying to this question, but one thing we editors have in common is that we think serious scholarship must address critical questions, even if they are upsetting. In line with scholars like Russell T. McCutcheon (2001) and Bruce Lincoln (2005) we think it is important to subject sensitive topics to scientific scrutiny. Following this conviction, in our previous research we have been engaged in topics like apostasy (Larsson 2018), religious offence/blasphemy legislation (Frydenlund 2019), the global flows of Islamophobia (Ganesh et al. 2024), and the religion–violence nexus (Frydenlund 2017). Needless to say, this is indeed entangled with our ethical and political concerns as engaged citizens. Or to put it differently, one does not engage with Islamophobic public ritual such as Qur'an burnings without regarding hatred against Muslims as a societal problem. In unpacking the complex dynamics at stake, however, we aim for the highest academic standards, which requires a nuanced and multi-layered analysis based on open research questions and transparency, which may reveal surprising results. Furthermore, research on Islamophobia or the far right will necessarily include an analysis of potentially violent provocateurs. Inspired by research on right-wing extremism, including the 'anthropology of the far right', we believe that understanding the actors, networks, and their 'world making' will be essential if are we to work for a democratic and culturally inclusive society.

There is of course always a risk that research on violent extremism will be accused of spreading hate and bigotry, a serious matter Teemu Pauha (2024) also raises in the special issue. Moreover, doing such research gives rise to another ethical issue in need of consideration – namely, how one relates to research objects or interlocuters that cause the researcher emotional and/or political revulsion. To what extent it is possible – or even desirable – to

remain methodologically empathetic in such situations is much debated in research on the far right (Vaughan et al. 2024). Researchers who are engaged in these fields are also often targets of controversy and hate, making it potentially dangerous to conduct such academic work. Despite all these ethical challenges, we strongly believe that as scholars of religion we must be more engaged with controversial questions. If not, there is a risk that 'our' topic – namely, religion (whatever we mean by that noun) – will be hijacked by other research fields like political science, sociology, or psychology, and scholars of religion will ultimately run the risk of becoming obsolete or being reduced to curators of curiosities like myths, sagas, and 'folktales'. Finally, we believe that scholars of religion might offer specifically valuable knowledge to the study of far-right extremism or Islamophobia as we analyse meaning-making processes and study the ways in which humans constitute their cosmos.

Third, Skovgaard-Petersen rightly points to the need to disentangle the debate about Qur'an burnings from discussions of blasphemy, pointing out the strong connection in Denmark between die-hard liberalist positions on the freedom of speech and a specific public discourse on blasphemy. This seems especially important in the Danish context, as the debate there was overshadowed by majority concerns over free speech, while few tears were shed concerning the negative effects of the Qur'an burnings on Muslim minority communities. That said, we do not read Faisal Devji's postscript in our special issue as a clarification of concepts such as 'blasphemy' and 'sacrilege'. Rather, he makes the extremely important point that Muslim responses to the defamation of the Prophet or Qur'an burnings in South Asia and the UK are not grounded in Islamic theology but in the *secular* colonial policies of British India. Devji's point therefore concerns secularization and the subsequent marginalization of Islamic theology, which in turn is constructed in the negative by anti-Islamic provocateurs. Furthermore, if we understand Skovgaard-Petersen correctly, he wishes to point to the difference between the abolished section 140 on blasphemy in the Danish Penal Code and the new legislation from 2023. We agree with him that the two texts differ greatly, and that we should have explored this point in more detail. However, the extent to which the difference should be conceptualized in terms of a move from 'blasphemy' to 'sacrilege' is an open question for us that deserves more scrutiny. For one thing the term 'sacrilege' (or '*helligbrøde*' or perhaps '*vanhelligelse*') is not really used in Scandinavian languages any longer, so which term to use instead of 'blasphemy' is less than clear given that 'blasphemy' seems to cover both sacrilege or religious

offence in a broad sense. The 2023 law in Denmark reads 'a ban of the improper treatment of scriptures'. We use the term sacrilege here, aware of its lack of any good equivalent in Danish (and Norwegian and Swedish). We argue that the difference between the old and new law in Denmark is not that of secularization in terms of moving away from theological to secular articulations of offence (as Devji analyses). This was already present in the previous legislation: the notions of blasphemy as irreverence for God (or the King) were long ago discarded. The old law criminalized disrespect for religious teachings or devotional practices ('*gudsdyrkelse*'), with the aim of protecting religious feelings ('*den religiøse følelse*') as a *generic* category, considering public order. This has surprising similarities with the Indian Penal Code of British India, which used neither the concepts of 'blasphemy' nor 'sacrilege' but 'religious offence' as a colonial tool to maintain public order. Furthermore, it was not limited to speech, as it was understood as also including 'institutions, practices, persons, and things' (Straffelovsrådet 2024). Given the heated public debate in Denmark about blasphemy, it is unsurprising that the term was omitted from the 2023 law, which instead has two remarkable features. The first is the process of the *scripturalization* of sacrilege.[3] By this we mean the ways in which this field is now limited to disrespect for sacred scriptures. Notably, 'religious teachings or devotional practices' are omitted. The extent to which this novel focus on scripture proves the afterlife of Protestant religious culture in post-Protestant societies should be the object of further research. The second remarkable thing is the process of the *materialization* of sacrilege. You can say and write whatever you want if you do not destroy sacred texts as *material* objects. This will of course create some tricky new questions for the courts on how to define 'scripture', and the extent to which digital texts, memes, or the digital visual aesthetics of scriptures are to be included.

In our view Denmark had to do something about the Qur'an burnings to protect its Muslim minority communities, or more cynically, to protect its national and financial interests (remembering the threats and losses Denmark experienced during the Muhammad cartoons). Yet how the new law will play out remains to be seen. If there is one thing we know from the study of religion and law, it is that law itself is a religion-making technology: law produces religion, and often, paradoxically, the conflicts that the law was intended to solve in the first place. This calls for further research on how the law will change the public discourse on 'blasphemy' (or sacrilege), how

3 The first legal draft mentioned 'sacred objects'.

the legal system deals with it, how it might change the religious landscape itself, and how right-wing provocateurs might identify other ways to dehumanize Muslim minority communities – and of course, on how Muslim communities themselves – in all their multitudes and complexities – will respond to the changing legal landscapes.

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This work was supported by The Research Council of Norway [grant number 287230] .

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