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CONTENTS

SPECIAL ISSUE: BURNING OF THE QUR'AN

ARTICLES

BOOK REVIEWS

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 (*trosfrid*) 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

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1 Most cases were related to the protection of the majority religion, the most famous and ridiculed example being the Norwegian ban on Monthy 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 (Åkesson 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-Mus'haf 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 Qur'an 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 Qur'an 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 Qur'an 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 Qur'an burnings in Denmark and Sweden have received considerably more attention and provoked more anger than the Qur'an 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

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2 Quotation from *Resolution on the Repeated Crimes of Desecration and Burning of Copies of al-Mus'haf 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.

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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 feal 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

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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 *ṭahara*) 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'ānun karīm fī kitābin maknūn lā yamassuhu illā l-muṭahharūn*) (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:

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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 ʾUthmān at the time when the people of Shām and the people of ʿIrāq were waging war to conquer Armīniya and Adharbījān. Ḥudhaifa was afraid of their (the people of Shām and ʿIrāq) differences in the recitation of the Qurʾān, so he said to ʾUthmān, 'O chief of the Believers! Save this nation before they differ about the Book (the Qurʾān) as Jews and the Christians did before them.' So ʾUthmān sent a message to Ḥafṣa saying, 'Send us the manuscript of the Qurʾān so that we may compile the Qurʾānic materials in perfect copies and return the manuscripts to you.' Ḥafṣa sent it to ʾUthmān. ʾUthmān then ordered Zaid bin Thabīt, ʿAbdullāh bin Az-Zubair, Saʿīd bin Al-ʿĀṣ and ʿAbdur-Raḥmān bin Ḥārith bin Hishām to copy the (original) manuscripts perfectly. ʾUthmān said to the three Quraishī men, 'In case you disagree with Zaid bin Thabīt on any point in the Qurʾān, then write it in the dialect of Quraish as the Qurʾān was revealed in their tongue.' They did so, and when they had written many copies, ʾUthmān returned the original manuscripts to Ḥafṣa. ʾUthmān sent to every Muslim province one copy of what they had copied, and ordered that all the other Qurʾānic 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 Qurʾanic inscriptions, not least between scholars from the Hijaz who approved of burning as a method and Iraqi 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 Qurʾan could even 'merit eternal damnation' (El Sahmsy 2022, 105–106).

As always, when assessing different practices of handling the Qurʾan 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

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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 Qurʾan. 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.

unanimous 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, Rich-

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

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Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

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

Aim and research question

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

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

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

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

Material

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

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

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

Paludan the lawyer

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

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

The threat from Muslim migration

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

Creating the public figure of Rasmus Paludan

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

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

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

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

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

The attraction potential of symbols

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

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

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

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

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

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

Giving the audience what they want?

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

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

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

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

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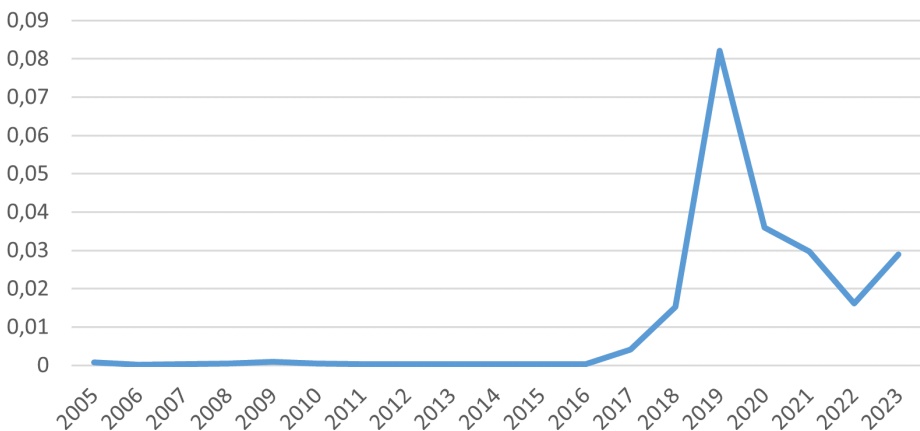
Figure 1. Web mentions of Rasmus Paludan (Source: The Danish Net Archive).

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

Qur'an desecrations: Paludan's signature approach

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

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

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

Qur'an burnings as (g)local events

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

Repealing the blasphemy clause

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Paludan as a blasphemer 'in the Danish tradition'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Paludan as a producer of global injustice symbols

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

Ritual Dynamics of Qur'an Burning

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Abstract

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

Keywords: *discourse analysis, social media, ritual, violence*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Qur'an burning in Finland

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

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

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

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

Qur'an burning as a media ritual

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Figure 1. Screenshot of the video.

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

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

Table 1. Main events of the video.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ambivalent agendas

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Burning books makes you manly

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Islam vs … what?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Concluding thoughts

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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The Qur'an Burnings of SIAN:
Far-Right Fringe Actors and the Staging of Conflictual Media Events in Norway

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Abstract

Denmark, Sweden, and Norway have in recent years seen a wave of Qur'an burnings, a subset of Qur'an desecration, involving largely non-religious fringe actors. Desecrations of the Qur'an are nothing new, but their mode of articulation in the present requires attention to both context and the actors involved. In this article we examine the Qur'an-burning events of the Norwegian organization Stop the Islamisation of Norway (SIAN). The article draws on media events theory, paying attention to how the symbolic and ritual dimensions of such spectacular mediated events generate both cohesion and conflict among globalized audiences. Informed by both on- and offline ethnographic fieldwork, we explore the mediated ritualization of smaller-scale urban events involving staged Qur'an burnings by this far-right fringe group in Norway in recent years. We demonstrate how a relatively small and marginal far-right political actor succeeds in being foregrounded by the media, creating polarization, capturing free speech, and racializing Muslims by desecrating the Qur'an.

Keywords: *Qur'an burning, media event, ritual, Islamophobia, free speech, secularism*

Introduction: Qur'an burning and conflicted media events

The Norwegian organization Stop the Islamisation of Norway (SIAN) first burned the Qur'an in the Southern Norwegian city of Kristiansand in 2019. SIAN has since staged several Qur'an-burning events, notably outside

mosques in suburbs of Oslo densely populated by people with a Muslim background. These events, which are designed to both provoke Muslims and draw media attention, have generated large counter-demonstrations as far away as Pakistan and necessitated extensive police security measures across cities and towns in Norway.

In our recent research (Bangstad and Linge 2023) we argue that while most Norwegians surveyed oppose SIAN's Qur'an burnings (NRK 2023a), the organization has partly succeeded in presenting its Qur'an burnings as legitimate criticism of Islam and a matter of free speech in public debate. The aim of this article is to explore how SIAN uses traditional and social media to ritualize their Qur'an-burning events, and how this ritualization enables such a small and far-right fringe organization to incite polarization among large audiences, align its hatred of Islam with more mainstream Islam-critical meta-narratives, and thus succeed in 'free speech capture' (Titley 2020). To answer these questions, we have structured the article along four main parts.

In the methodological part we describe our case, which is SIAN's Qur'an burnings in Norway. Our main sources of empirical data are videos and text material produced by SIAN and published on the organization's homepage, sian.no. We situate the Qur'an burnings in a transnational Islam critical context but make clear that our research on Qur'an burnings represents a localized case study in a Scandinavian country. This 'glocal' (Robertson 1995) approach sets the structure for the article. In the second, contextual, part, 'The emergence of the anti-Islamic movement in Europe', we show how SIAN emerged within a post-9/11 Islam-critical context and profited from a transnational media-savvy network to establish itself in Norway.

In the third part, 'Theorizing Qur'an burnings', we show how both *media event* theory and more recent critical studies of these perspectives can assist in unpacking a series of divisive media events involving Islam, secularism, and free speech since the spectacular 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001. This part draws attention to the symbolic and ritual dimension of such events, showing how a new genre of mediated Qur'an desecrations is ritualized to generate media attention and drive global audiences. In this part we also argue that the proliferation of assaults on Islamic symbols in the West can be understood as a form of secularist iconoclasm – or a way to cleanse secular society of Islam – and not merely as acts of free speech.

In the fourth and analytical part, 'The staging of conflicted Qur'an-burning events', we use this theoretical insight to analyse how SIAN exploits media attention to ritualize its Qur'an-burning events and to a large extent succeeds

vis-à-vis liberal audiences in the media by presenting its hatred of Islam and Muslims as a 'critique of religion' and a matter pertaining to free speech.

To grasp the polarizing effects of the Qur'an-burning events, we draw on theoretical insights into media events. These traditionally focused on how the ritualization of spectacular televised events had strong cohesive effects on their audiences (Dayan and Katz 1994). In today's more globalized, fragmented, and polarized media reality, media event theory expands the spectrum of media events and explores how the symbolic and ritual dimensions of events such as the Muhammed cartoon controversy (hereafter the cartoon controversy) and SIAN's Qur'an burnings, have both cohesive and divisive effects on local and global audiences (Kunelius and Nossek 2008; Klausen 2009; Sumiala et al. 2018).

To understand the social and political imaginaries involved and the public perception of these events, they should be framed within the wider post-9/11 debate about Islam, secularism, and free speech in Europe. For example, in her analysis of the cartoon controversy Brown et al. (2013) argue that secularism and free speech are saturated with power and subjectivity. Likewise Asad (2013) claims that the 'destruction of signs' such as the mocking of the Prophet Muhammad is invested with secular power. Along similar lines Noyes (2016) describes such practices as a form of iconoclasm, a word that originates in *iconoclast*, which means 'destroyer of images'. We argue that the burning of the Qur'an may thus be understood as a politics of iconoclasm, or as part of an ostensibly 'civilizing' secularist project.

While SIAN is a small far-right fringe organization with a limited number of active supporters, its Qur'an burnings have attracted wider sympathy from self-declared liberal supporters of free speech in Norway (Tranøy 2020), who have deemed Qur'an burnings a form of 'religious critique' (Stavrum 2023) and an exercise in 'free speech' (Kierulf 2023). Inspired by the perspectives of new media event theory (Hepp and Couldry 2009), we argue that SIAN uses mediated and ritualized public Qur'an burning as a powerful channel for generating both provocation and polarization through staging itself as a defender of free speech.

Methodology: a case study of Qur'an burnings in Norway

This article pays particular attention to the emergence of the Stop Islamisation network in Europe and its manifestation in Norway. With the other contributions to this special issue the article seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of public Qur'an burnings and Qur'an desecrations in Scan-

dinavia. While cognizant of the conflicts and debates around public Qur'an burnings in Denmark and Sweden in the same period, we do not explicitly address these cases in our article. We contend that even if there is a clear transnational context to SIAN's public Qur'an burnings in Norway, the form which public Qur'an burnings have taken there must be understood through reference to the localized contexts in which they occur.

Our empirical data originates on SIAN's homepage, sian.no. SIAN has filmed and broadcast Qur'an burning and Qur'an desecration events from different places in Norway on its homepage. Six of these videos represent our primary data source. The organization's recording of and commentary on the Kristiansand event in 2019 represent the main case of analysis (SIAN 2019a; 2019b; 2019c).[1] SIAN's recordings of other forms of Qur'an desecration such as burnings of the Qur'an outside mosques (SIAN 2022; 2023b) and dog walking the Qur'an – a peculiar form of desecration that consists of dragging the Qur'an around with a dog leash – outside mosques (SIAN and local Magistrate's Courts (SIAN 2021) provided extra contextual data applicable to this particular case.

SIAN's homepage also contains information about SIAN's organizational structure and articles written by activists in the organization. Texts addressing SIAN's Qur'an burnings and free speech provided a second data source. This material included SIAN's statutes (SIAN 2023a) and four articles penned by one of SIAN's founders, the former leader Arne Tumyr (2011; 2020), and the organization's current leader, Lars Thorsen (2016; 2020). The homepage also contains an archive of brochures that SIAN distributes during its street rallies. This material, which includes three caricatures (SIAN caricatures 1, 2, & 3) of Muslims, is our third data source.

The emergence of the transnational Stop the Islamisation network

Propelled by al-Qaida's terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, the first wave of what Berntzen has described as an 'anti-Islamic turn' (Berntzen 2020, 2) took shape with the establishment of anti-Islamic organizations, websites, and political parties and the emergence of several high-profile anti-Islamic personalities. Norwegian far-right groups and activists were pioneers of this wave. In the early 2000s Arne Tumyr (1933–2023), a former social democratic newspaper editor turned far-right activist (Bangstad 2016), established the

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1 The data analysed in this article are publicly available. However, we do not want to support the analysed material or its producers by giving them increased visibility. We have therefore chosen not to include links to their material in the references.

Norwegian Forum against Islamisation (FOMI), the predecessor of SIAN and one of the first European organizations with an explicitly anti-Islamic orientation (Berntzen 2020, 4)

The anti-Islamic 'counter-jihadist network', which regarded jihad as the core ideology of Islam, united along a set of anti-Islamic narratives and tropes, notably the 'contra-jihadist' Eurabia thesis of Gisèle Littman, who is known by the pen name Bat Ye'or (Bangstad 2013). The idea of a plot orchestrated by European and Arab elites was embraced by Norwegian anti-Islamic activists like Hege Storhaug and the far-right blogger Peder Nøstvold Jensen (alias Fjordman). Fjordman, who inspired the 2011 terrorist attack on Government Headquarters in Oslo and Utøya, the island where the Labour Party's youth branch AUF's annual summer camp took place (Bangstad 2014; Seierstad 2016), was probably the 'counter-jihadist' *Gates of Vienna*'s most influential contributor.

The second wave of what Berntzen refers to as the 'anti-Islamic turn' was propelled by the cartoon crisis of 2005–2006 and consisted of the expansion of organized anti-Islamic mobilization under the banner of free speech. The European Stop Islamisation network emerged in this context with the establishment of Stop the Islamisation of Denmark (SIAD) in 2005, Stop the Islamisation of Europe (SIOE) in 2007, and Stop the Islamisation of Norway (SIAN) in 2008 (Berntzen 2020, 69–71). The second wave also included an anti-Islamic reorientation of pre-existing think tanks, NGOs, and conservative alternative news outlets. This was also the case in Norway, where organizations such as Human Rights Service (HRS) started to focus almost exclusively on Islam after the cartoon crisis (Berntzen 2020, 70).

An essential dimension of the anti-Islamic turn in the post-9/11 era in many countries in the Western hemisphere was that the increasingly fragmented, polarized, and globalized media reality began to provide new platforms to far-right and often fringe Islamophobic groups and individuals, and the opportunity to mediate their ideology to large audiences and create polarization. While most of these actors remained relatively small in terms of popular support, they succeeded in influencing public discourse by setting the agenda for the debate about Islam, secularism, and free speech (Bail 2012; 2015).

Stop the Islamisation of Norway (SIAN)

SIAN emerged in the context of an increasingly hostile public discourse about Islam in Europe and Norway during the 2000s (Døving and Kraft 2013). The organization has its roots in the Action Committee against Calls

for Prayer, which was established in 2000 in reaction to a municipal decision in the Norwegian capital of Oslo to permit mosques in central Oslo to issue the call for prayer – the *adhan* – from their loudspeakers. The same year, the committee took the name Forum against Islamisation (FOMI). In 2008 FOMI changed its name to SIAN, aligning the organization with the European Stop Islamisation networks (Tranøy 2020, 12).

SIAN's essentialization of Islam and Muslims as inherently violent, with rape as a threat to non-Muslim women, represents a central dimension of Islamophobia, which is essentially a 'form of prejudice' (Bangstad 2016). The speech made by SIAN's Lars Thorsen immediately before the Qur'an burning in Kristiansand on 16 November 2019 is characteristic: he referred to Muslims as 'sexual predators' and 'murderous zombies'; declared that Islam was a 'machine for genocide'; and alleged that rape and the murder of children were acts 'sanctioned by the Qur'an'. Thorsen also called for unspecified 'measures to be taken' against the 'destructive elements' that he claimed Muslims in Norway represented (SIAN 2019b). In her speech SIAN's then vice chair and Thorsen's domestic partner Anna Bråten described the prophet Muhammed as a 'macabre paedophile murder machine and warlord' and demanded of 'all Muslim men' in Norway that they 'set their women free' or face being 'expelled' (SIAN 2019a).

In line with this dehumanizing language in their propaganda material, SIAN generally portrays Muslims as never changing, inherently threatening, and unassimilable, a description that is a form of racialization drawing on traditional biological racism. SIAN brochures also contain graphic illustrations such as cartoons portraying beheadings and cartoons wherein the prophet Muhammed is portrayed in animal-like ways (SIAN caricatures 1, 2, & 3). In its public statements SIAN situates itself ideologically in a long line of racist actors and organizations spanning from the late Arne Myrdal, the founder of the Popular Movement against Immigration, to Anders Behring Breivik, the perpetrator of the 2011 terrorist attacks in Norway (Bangstad 2014).

SIAN is estimated to have about a thousand paid-up members (Tranøy 2020, 20) in a country of 5.3 million inhabitants. While this number makes SIAN one of the largest anti-Islamic far-right groups in Norway, it remains a small far-right fringe organization. Rather, it is SIAN's ability to use traditional and social media as a means of staging its Qur'an-burning events that enables the organization to get its message across. The available studies of SIAN's membership base indicate that SIAN's followers are mostly middle-aged to elderly white men with a middle-class background who vote for populist and far-right political parties with an Islam- and immigration-

critical agenda (Tranøy 2020). These findings indicate that SIAN is not merely a subcultural movement consisting of marginalized young men but a well-established organization which also appeals to more mainstream audiences.

SIAN's active members have a more specific profile. The organization consists of a core of activists and a larger group of passive sympathizers. The activists usually have a more explicitly racist profile and sometimes even a criminal background. Lars Thorsen, SIAN's current leader, was sentenced to a three-year prison term for fraud in 2013 and received a 30-day criminal sentence of conditional imprisonment and a fine of NOK 30,000 for anti-Muslim hate speech that Oslo's Magistrate's Court deemed to be in violation of Norwegian General Penal Code §185 in November 2019. In October 2022 Thorsen was also sentenced to imprisonment for assaulting three men with pepper spray when they tried to prevent him burning the Qur'an outside two mosques in Oslo (Velle 2022). SIAN has evolved in a more explicitly racist and extremist direction in recent years. Interestingly, SIAN's current vice chair, Ellen Due Brynjulfsen, has herself refrained from actively participating in the organization's public Qur'an burnings, suggesting that the leadership of SIAN may be internally divided on the issue (Nrk.no 2023b).

SIAN disseminates its ideology and mobilizes supporters on social media and during street demonstrations. This online mobilization corresponds to earlier research highlighting the proliferation of anti-Islamic organizations on social media (Haanshuus and Jupskås 2017, 146). SIAN also makes use of more mainstream media. Two days ahead of the first Qur'an burning in Norway in Kristiansand on 16 November 2019, SIAN placed a small ad in the regional paper *Fædrelandsvennen* with the title 'Come and hear why we burn the Qur'an!' ['kom og hør hvorfor vi brenner Koranen!']. SIAN's homepage contains self-produced articles about Islam, highly derogatory caricatures of Muslims, and videos from SIAN's own highly mediatized street rallies. The rallies correspond to a shift of the anti-Islamic movement in Europe from web- to street-based forms of activism. SIAN's mediatized Qur'an-burning events are an essential aspect of this propaganda.

Theorizing Qur'an burnings

Conflictual media events in an age of digitalization and polarization

Research has shown that the focus of public and academic debate about minorities in the West has shifted from race to culture and religion, and more specifically, to Islam (Bangstad 2016). In countries in the Western hemisphere

(Morey and Yaqin 2011) – including Norway – both traditional and new media have focused disproportionally on Islam and covered Muslims in a predominantly negative way (Døving and Kraft 2013).

The shift of focus from race to culture and religion has been strengthened by a set of transnational and highly mediated critical events involving Islam and Muslims, such as the Danish cartoon crisis of 2005–2006 (Klausen 2009). Andersson et al. (2012, 13) describe such events as 'critical' in terms of their potential to generate new references, perceptions, identifications, and boundaries so that there is a marked difference before and after the event.

The role of the media is essential to the critical events' impact on their audiences. In the historical context of national broadcasting on television Dayan and Katz (1994) highlight spectacular occasions – 'high holidays of mass communication' – like the Olympic Games, which they describe as *media events.* Such events, which are pre-planned and broadcast live, 'monopolized media communication' in the age of national TV. Media events interrupted the daily routines of large audiences in a festive style; they were staged as historic, and they communicated a message of reconciliation through a set of ceremonial and ritual means. The success of these ritualized media events depended on their cohesive effects (Hepp and Couldry 2009).

Several scholars have contested the neo-Durkheimian perspective on rituals and media events as successful in terms of their cohesive force (Bell 1998; Rappaport 1999). In a more fluid, complex, and globalized world mediatized events are articulations of competing cultural discourses and therefore generate both social cohesion and conflict (Hepp and Couldry 2009, 7). Mass-mediated arrangements such as the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar fit classical definitions of media events but show the extent to which mediatized rituals during 'high holidays of mass communication' (Dayan and Katz 1994) in the age of digitalization and culture wars have both cohesive and polarizing effects among different groups of spectators.

Becker (1995) draws attention to the media's contribution to the ritualization of small-scale events in contemporary urban settings. She argues that the media plays a decisive role in constituting public events as rituals by setting them apart from mundane activities and contributing to their structure (ibid., 629). The media belongs to, reinforces, and authenticates an event's significance. It structures a ritual by focusing on an event's different aspects such as specific spatial settings, a particular kind of atmosphere, typical participants, audiences, and peak moments. The coverage attracts attention and frames a set of behaviours. Participants respond by acting in a non-routine way that is appropriate for the ritualized media event. This

response may express itself through a certain clothing style, a particular type of speech, and the use of specific symbols (ibid., 637–340).

Furthermore, Becker (1995, 640) highlights that the media's most critical role in ritual participation is its shift of an event's focus to reflexivity, turning the performance into a 'meta-narrative'. With the media's presence ritual participants and audiences become conscious of the construction of meta-narratives, and that the event carries symbolic significance beyond the bounded sphere in which it is unfolding (ibid., 629). This dislocation – the transformation of a performance that is central to symbolization and ritualization (ibid., 630) – is a creative process that is constituted by both established symbols and agentic power. The media's role in such ritualization is central to processes of mediatization and attracts attention to how modern media shapes and transforms social practices (Hjarvard 2013), including ritual performances such as Qur'an burnings.

The ritual dimension of mediated Qur'an desecration

The epistemological lineage of public Qur'an burnings in Europe must be situated as an extension of the global cartoon crisis, which started when the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published twelve cartoon caricatures of the prophet Muhammad in 2005 (Klausen 2009). Inspired by new media event theory, Kunelius and Nossek (2008) argue that the controversy was intended as a conflictual event designed to be covered by the media. The publication of the caricatures was a highly spectacular and symbolic 'political ritual' that 'defined parties and made distinctions' between 'us' and 'them'. Drawing on Western master narratives of free expression, it was designed as a 'test for self-censorship', rallying people in favour of or against the cartoons, thus creating both cohesion and division among transnational audiences (ibid., 258–259).

This type of conflicted media event opens avenues for understanding the importance of 'free speech' as a political discourse and cultural imaginary in many contemporary societies (Titley 2020, 3). It also shows how events are constructed by attracting media attention to cultural tropes, images, and ritual performances. The cartoon controversy was followed by a series of highly symbolic Islam-critical media productions with the proclaimed aim of defending free speech by offending Muslims. Some, including the anti-Islamic short films *Submission* and *Fitna* (Larsson 2014), broadcast highly symbolic icons like the Twin Towers, the *niqab*, and the Qur'an in a pejorative way as a means of ritualized provocation to this end.

Various forms of Qur'an desecration such as Qur'an burning have become a particular genre in provocative, ritualized, and mediatized anti-Islamic performances (Svensson 2017, 253). Qur'an desecration is a recent phenomenon that appeared alongside the emergence of new social media. The first truly globalized Qur'an desecration occurred at the Guantanamo prison camp in 2005, when American interrogators allegedly flushed the Qur'an down a toilet in front of detainees with a Muslim background who had been captured during the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) as a means of psychological torture, provoking international media attention, as well as riots and violence in various predominantly Muslim countries (Svensson 2017). The context of these pioneering acts of Qur'an desecration reveals much about the context of their later uses among far-right and anti-Islamic activists in the Western world. As expressive acts, Qur'an desecrations are intended to be a form of ritualized humiliation that targets Muslims, constituted as religiously motivated in the name of a secularist antagonism or indifference to religious symbols.

The burning of Islamic symbols such as the Qur'an is not an entirely new phenomenon in Norway. The first known Qur'an burning on Norwegian soil occurred when a secular-oriented Kurdish-Norwegian nationalist from Iraq set pages of the Qur'an on fire and disseminated a video of the burning on YouTube in 2010. The incident resulted in a *fatwa*, a non-binding legal edict – in this case a death sentence against the activist – pronounced by the Norwegian-Kurdish-Iraqi Islamist Mullah Krekar (Eriksen and Wernersen 2012). Before the *fatwa* was pronounced the incident received scarcely any media attention. This indicates that the desecration of religious symbols and the ritualization of such incidents depend on media interest and traction to transcend their erstwhile communities of interpretation.

The first mediatized and globalized act of Qur'an burning occurred when Terry Jones, an evangelical pastor from Florida, announced that he planned to burn the Qur'an on Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook in 2010. In 2011 Pastor Jones 'put the Qur'an on trial', 'found it guilty', and let his 'assistant pastor' burn the book on an altar. The burning, which was designed as a ritual to be covered, drew global media attention and triggered riots in Afghanistan in which more than twenty people were killed (Svensson 2017, 243). Inspired by global media attention and polarization, Qur'an burning was adopted and redesigned by various anti-Islamic activists.

In 2019 the Danish far-right politician and lawyer Rasmus Paludan introduced Qur'an burning to his parliamentary electoral campaign as a political strategy in the name of free speech (Switzer and Beauduin 2023). Norwe-

gian SIAN leaders were in close contact with Paludan and were probably inspired by his campaign in Denmark to adopt public Qur'an burnings as a political strategy in Norway. In this special issue Toft (2024) draws attention to two different Qur'an burnings events carried out by Paludan and SIAN in 2022. Both triggered violent riots and were 'heavily mediated'. Toft (in this issue) argues that media attention contributed to the magnitude of the events, showing how SIAN's Qur'an burnings in Norway resulted in several heated public debates about immigration, freedom of speech, hate crime, and the role of Islam regarding these issues (Toft 2024).

Qur'an burning as a secularist politics of iconoclasm

Contemporary Qur'an burnings align themselves with a long history of ritualized book burnings in which scriptures considered to have sacred properties by adherents of minority faiths have been the favourite targets of extreme and far-right movements. In Nazi Germany the burning of sacred Jewish religious texts such as Torah scrolls was framed with symbols such as the swastika, musical performances, and political speeches. These incidents show the symbolic significance of burning books and the potential political power of ritualizing such acts. Book burnings thus bear important similarities to the politics of iconoclasm (Noyes 2016). The analogy between Nazi German book burnings and contemporary far-right Qur'an burnings (Jensen 2023) is therefore entirely apt, in that their intended targets then and now were and are racialized minorities and sacred texts made symbolically to 'stand in for' these minorities.

The destruction of religious images involves a profound history of intolerant violence and has notably appeared in revolutionary French secularism. For example, Noyes (2016) shows that iconoclasm constitutes not only a means of religious purification but also a form of power politics conducted under the guise of 'unity', 'rationality', and 'progress'. Wars over symbols – 'iconoclashes' – from the Taliban's destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan to the caricaturing of the Prophet Muhammad – currently represent what Mouffe (2020) describes as antagonistic political projects.

Regarding the cartoon controversy, Asad (2013, 27) argues that the wilful destruction of signs is 'invested with the power to determine what counts as truth'. Similar to iconoclasm, he claims the secular critique seeks to create spaces for new truths by destroying spaces occupied by other signs. The making of blasphemous images such as caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad are thus not merely acts of free speech but actions subject to specific

power relations and political agendas. Corresponding to Noyes' (2016) understanding of iconoclasm as a civilizing project, Asad understands the 'obsessive need to repeat again and again blasphemous words and symbols' as something of a 'litmus test' of Muslims' worthiness as 'fully integrated' secular subjects (Asad 2013, 50).

SIAN's staging of conflicted Qur'an-burning events

SIAN's Qur'an burnings are inspired by earlier Qur'an desecrations, notably Terry Jones's Qur'an-burning event (Tumyr 2011), which SIAN compared to *Jyllands-Posten*'s publication of the Muhammad caricature, describing both events as fundamental matters of free speech. For example, in 2016, when the German authorities seized a large number of Qur'ans distributed by Salafi preachers in Germany, SIAN posted a picture of the Qur'an adjacent to Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and, with a nod to the texts of British World War II posters ('Keep calm and carry on'), urged their readership to 'keep calm and burn the Qur'an' (Thorsen 2016). SIAN's references to related events in other countries highlight the transnational dimension of Qur'an burning and anti-Islamic movement's framing of hatred of Islam as a matter of free speech.

SIAN presents itself as a single-issue organization focusing on the alleged existential threat Muslims pose to Norwegian and Western society. The organization describes Islam as a 'violent totalitarian ideology comparable to Nazism' (Haanshuus and Jupskås 2017, 159). Like other European anti-Islamic organizations (Berntzen 2020), SIAN portrays itself as a non-racist and non-violent organization that opposes Islam in the name of 'democracy', the 'UN declaration of human rights', and free speech (SIAN 2023a). SIAN thus presents its activism and Qur'an burnings as a necessary critique of religion and Islam.

SIAN's ideology and iconography about Islam and Muslims, however, is both racist and Islamophobic. Before their public street rallies SIAN distributes printed material in the form of standardized brochures about the 'evils of Islam', replete with derogatory cartoons. In the cartoons Muslim men are portrayed as blood-curdling terrorists decapitating non-Muslims (SIAN caricature 1) and as evil-looking predatory rapists (SIAN caricature 2), while the prophet of Islam is portrayed as a wolflike male (SIAN caricature 3). SIAN brochures also regularly reproduce Danish cartoonist Kurt Westergaard's derogatory cartoon of the prophet of Islam with a bomb in his turban. Although SIAN brochures are clearly inspired and often make intertextual reference to some of the more derogatory cartoons from the

Muhammad caricature series *Jyllands-Posten* commissioned in 2005, they form part of a visual genre that is significantly cruder and more amateurish in its expression. By referencing the cartoon controversy (Klausen 2009) and similar critical events with global repercussions in their propaganda material, SIAN aims to present their Qur'an burnings as necessary in the ongoing battle over free speech (Thorsen 2020). Titley (2020) refers to this far-right strategy as one through which 'free speech capture' is achieved.

Since 2019, when SIAN burned the Qur'an for the first time in Kristiansand, the organization has staged dozens of Qur'an-burning events in various Norwegian cities. Regarding their symbolic value, SIAN has described the Qur'an burnings as a 'symbolic emergency call' and the 'lighting up [of] a cairn' – a warning to humankind about the purported 'dangers of Islam' (Tumyr 2020). SIAN activists usually soak the Qur'an in fuel and burn it on the street. On 18 December 2022, however, SIAN introduced a new ritual twist to its event: 'the Advent Qur'an candling'. With a clear reference to the Christian advent ritual of lighting four candles before Christmas, SIAN ignited four Qur'ans in front of Oslo's City Hall [*Rådhuset*] (SIAN 2022). Like the caricaturing of the Prophet Muhammad, which Kunelius and Nossek (2008) describe as a 'political ritual' and a 'visual media event', SIAN's Qur'an burnings, which differ in their ritualization, are generally highly symbolic performances designed to arouse negative emotions such as anger.

In light of Becker's (1995) ideas about ritual media events, it is primarily the repeated spectacle – underpinned by counter-demonstrations, strict security measures, and media attention – that turn Qur'an burnings into powerful anti-Islamic rituals. SIAN activists are very conscious of this media dynamic. They stage the Qur'an burnings carefully, making them a spectacle and thus contributing to the ritualization of the events. SIAN records all its events and publishes short film productions on the organization's streaming channel on Rumble. As SIAN is a relatively small organization with a thousand members, a few thousand passive followers, and only a small cadre of street activists, it is likely that these recordings are watched mostly by SIAN supporters, not by mainstream society viewers (Haanshuus and Jupskås 2017). Although these short films probably serve as a means of strengthening internal cohesion and popularity, they also structure the events with larger mainstream media broadcasters.

SIAN stages Qur'an burnings in a media-savvy manner. Corresponding to Becker's (1995) ideas about the media's role in the construction of rituals in urban settings, SIAN draws attention to specific aesthetics, particular spatial settings, a certain type of atmosphere, and typical participants and

audiences. While preparing for the events, SIAN activists film themselves driving through neighbourhoods they label as 'Islamized ghettos' in a decommissioned and militarily camouflaged Mercedes Geländerwagen. When making appeals on the street, Lars Thorsen, SIAN's leader, appears in a beige military-like outfit with an army cap and military boots (SIAN 2019b; 2022; 2023b). The military style of the SIAN crew underpins the organization's militant profile, its social diagnosis of an 'existential war' between Islam and the West (Berntzen 2020, 90), and its willingness to take action to 'prevent' the 'Islamisation of Norway'.

Regarding SIAN's selection of locations for Qur'an desecrations such as burning or 'dog-walking' the Qur'an, SIAN has a strong preference for symbolically laden sites like police stations (SIAN 2022), local magistrate's courtrooms (SIAN 2021), or the square facing the Norwegian parliament [Eidsvolds Plass]. Norwegian municipal bylaws generally permit municipalities to restrict SIAN's demonstrations to less public spaces in towns and cities, but these have generally not been used. SIAN's first Qur'an burning took place near the imposing Kristiansand Cathedral. The location's selection is also a means of reinforcing SIAN's somewhat paradoxical claim to represent the rule of law and free speech vis-à-vis Muslims in Norway. Moreover, SIAN regularly burns the Qur'an in front of mosques (SIAN 2023b). By choosing locations close to where many Muslims practise Islam, SIAN deliberately creates a hostile atmosphere, directly seeking to provoke anger and violent reactions from Muslims. Muslim public reactions, which often result in police intervention and attract media attention, serve as 'proof' of Islam's and Muslims' allegedly 'violent' character and are actively used in SIAN's propaganda in the aftermath to promote its anti-Islamic message (SIAN 2019c).

SIAN's Qur'an burnings are more explicitly ritualized when a set of circumstances allows a performance to become a conflicted media event. On several occasions SIAN has organized Qur'an burnings in the squares of small Norwegian cities or in densely populated immigrant neighbourhoods. Some events have attracted violent counterdemonstrations, strict security measures, and substantial mainstream media coverage. The Norwegian mainstream media regularly contributes to the ritualization of the Qur'an burnings by drawing attention to the events' slogans, specific actors, setting, and peak moments.

SIAN's first Qur'an burning in Kristiansand in 2019 was one such ritualized media event. Several Norwegian mainstream media actors covered it, including NRK, the state-owned Norwegian broadcaster, which published a timeline on its homepage outlining the incident's various dimensions. NRK focused on the 'many counterdemonstrators' present, the 'heavy

police presence', and the violence that broke out when the police pinned a refugee with a Muslim background to the ground when he attempted to assault Lars Thorsen as he set light to the Qur'an. NRK also drew attention to mediated global protests against the Qur'an burning on social media platforms like Twitter and the burning of the Norwegian flag by Muslim protesters in places like Karachi in Pakistan (Krüger et al. 2019).

SIAN activists, who record all their events and broadcast them on their homepage via the streaming channel Rumble, also focused on security measures but with a different framing. In SIAN's videos police security measures implemented in the context of SIAN's public demonstrations are framed as 'evidence' of Islam's allegedly 'violent' nature. In speeches during SIAN's public demonstrations Lars Thorsen routinely alleges that such measures are necessary against the threat posed by the figure of the 'violent Muslim' (SIAN 2021b). The notion of the 'violent Muslim' is a standard trope in SIAN's online propaganda. SIAN seeks to strengthen this claim by recording and focusing on violent protests and particular types of protesters.

During SIAN demonstrations Qur'an burning is staged as the ritual's 'peak moment'. The burning of a book most Muslims consider sacred is intended to shock, provoke, and attract as much attention as possible, locally and globally. In this respect SIAN has had notable successes – above all in Kristiansand in 2019 when three young Muslims with a refugee background attempted to assault Lars Thorsen. One of the three, a Muslim male in his twenties, was not known to be among the more religious in the local mosque's congregation but felt deeply insulted by SIAN's actions (Omar 2019). Several of the organization's video clips from Kristiansand, including a clip entitled 'Qur'an burning in slow motion' (SIAN 2019c), are devoted entirely to the violent incident. Such attacks strongly reinforce the character of Qur'an burnings as media events. In Kristiansand in 2019 and throughout Norway in 2020 and 2021, SIAN's Qur'an burnings attracted massive national and international media attention, reinforcing SIAN's message about Islam's alleged 'violent nature'. Unlike Dayan and Katz's (1994) idea of unifying media events that generate social cohesion, SIAN's Qur'an-burning rituals are successful when they trigger anger and create social conflict.

Conclusion: Qur'an burnings and the capture of free speech

Becker argues that the media's most critical role in ritual participation is its shift of the focus of an event to reflexivity, turning the performance into a 'meta-narrative' (Becker 1995, 640). The transformation of a mediated per-

formance, which is constructed on pre-existing symbols and discourses, is central to an event's symbolization and ritualization. In the contemporary globalized world mediatization is central to such processes (Hjarvard 2013). The media transforms events, globalizes them, fills them with additional content, and shapes unifying or conflicting social practices.

Toft (2024, this issue) nuances the ability of SIAN to attract media attention but highlights the group's persisting potential to influence public discourse about Islam and Muslims. By systematically exploring the media coverage of Paludan's and SIAN's Qur'an burnings, he argues that the news value of Qur'an burnings has decreased, that the symbolic power of Qur'an desecrations is spent, and that media outlets are mostly critical of SIAN's narrative about Islam and Muslims.

As our recent research has highlighted (Bangstad and Linge 2023), however, Toft (2024, this issue) also affirms that media coverage of Qur'an burnings must be analysed in relation to the media's negative focus on Islam over time. He specifies that the media coverage is 'multi-layered', and that the coverage at the 'opinion layer' makes the Qur'an burnings a matter of free speech and the violent Muslim reactions that seek to delimit it. We expand on these findings. SIAN's Qur'an burnings are not isolated incidents but a mediatized and globalized form of Qur'an desecration that first emerged in the Guantanamo prison camp in 2005. The ability of these events to divide audiences show their persisting symbolic power – depending on how they resonate with shifting socio-political circumstances.

Theoretical insights into how media events work in a more globalized, fragmented, and polarized media reality (Kunelius and Nossek 2008; Hepp and Couldry 2009; Titley 2020) shed light on the impact of small-scale, urban, conflicting events such as SIAN's Qur'an burnings. Their symbolic and ritual dimensions draw on pre-existing anti-Islamic tropes and events which the mediation of the Qur'an burning repeats and strengthens, thereby situating Qur'an burnings in the ongoing 'meta-narrative' of secularism and free speech in Europe and Norway. This mediated ritualization makes SIAN's Qur'an burnings a powerful means of representing itself as a defender of free speech and of creating polarization. That leading SIAN figures are aware of the potential of appealing to wider liberal audiences by invoking the trope of free speech is underlined by SIAN activists' regular public appearances in recent years wearing yellow T-shirts with the slogan 'Defend freedom of speech' ['Forsvar ytringsfriheten'].

By situating themselves in a liberal tradition, an important strategy of racist and anti-Islamic actors such as SIAN is to 'capture free speech' (Titley

2020) via a set of highly ritualized and performative forms of public provocation against Islam and Muslims. Although a 2023 opinion poll indicates that 45 per cent of the population would like to see Qur'an-burning events banned (Nrk.no 2023a), SIAN still succeeds in making Qur'an burning a straightforward question of freedom of expression and the right to 'offend' Muslims in a supposedly neutral secular space. The Norwegian public discourse about SIAN's Qur'an burnings reflects SIAN's success in capturing free speech (Bangstad and Linge 2023). In this debate mainstream liberal commentators (Kierulf 2023; Stavrum 2023) often end up positioning SIAN's Qur'an burnings as distasteful but protected and necessary offences to protect free speech against Islam and Muslims.

Scholars such as Noyes (2016), Asad (2013), and Brown et al. (2013) situate the defamation of Islamic symbols in a tradition of iconoclasm. SIAN's Qur'an burnings may thus be interpreted as a politics of iconoclasm in the name of secularism. Secularism, Brown et al. (2013) show, is not merely a principle of state religious neutrality. Like free speech, it is contextually embedded and reflective of 'different structures of power and subjectivity'. The authors highlight that secularism is central to the idea of the liberal West, juxtaposed against the imagined and racialized 'other', which in recent years has increasingly become Islam and Muslims (ibid., viii). Thus, a widespread discourse in Western European countries such as Norway is that secularists are entitled – or more precisely, morally obliged – to defy Islamic symbols as part of a civilizing mission (ibid., xii).

Asad (2013, 27) argues that the wilful destruction of signs is 'invested with the power to determine what counts as truth'. Like iconoclasm, secular critics seek to create spaces for new truths by destroying spaces occupied by other signs. Arguably, the removal of Islamic symbols such as the veil or the minaret from European public spheres represents the secularist politics of iconoclasm. Rather than representing a neutral stance towards religion, such practices ignore the fact that secularism has its own history of power and hegemony, and that Islam, as the 'other', is particularly targeted by 'civilizing' secularist projects.

Anti-Islamic organizations such as SIAN make claims to such a mission in the name of secularism. Similar to other iconoclastic movements (Noyes 2016), SIAN does this by mediating the burning of Islam's holiest object, the Qur'an. SIAN presents the performance as a necessary means to purify Norway of the purported Islamic menace symbolized by the Qur'an, which in the organization's view is comparable with Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. The media, which draws attention to the security measures and violence surrounding

the events, plays an instrumental role in the ritualization, mediatization, and dissemination of the spectacle. Through this process SIAN, a Norwegian far-right fringe organization, partly succeeds in staging itself as a defender of free speech and secularism.

In as much as SIAN has voiced support for proscribing the Qur'an and called for Muslims to be deported from Norway, they can hardly be seen as principled defenders of universalist conceptions of free speech. Moreover, by means of translating Qur'an burnings as a matter pertaining only to free speech, both SIAN and liberal defenders of Qur'an burnings in Norway (Kierulf 2023; Stavrum 2023) distract from the fact that Qur'an burnings constitute acts rather than merely speech. 'Under what conditions does freedom of speech become freedom to hate?', asked Judith Butler in a 2013 essay (Butler 2013, 127). It is the central contention in this article that Qur'an burnings and other forms of Qur'an desecration turn 'freedom of speech' into precisely a 'freedom to hate'.

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'But it's really about …':
Norwegian Media Coverage of the Qur'an Burnings in Sweden and Norway in April 2022

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Abstract

This article examines the Norwegian media coverage of and public debate about a series of anti-Muslim demonstrations in which Qur'ans were burned in Sweden and Norway over the Easter of 2022. Conceptualizing Qur'an burnings and the ensuing riots in Sweden and Norway as a *media event*, the article explores how different actors manage, negotiate, and use the mediated attention constituting such an event. The empirical material consists of all articles published by ten selected Norwegian newspapers between 14 and 30 April 2022, as well as interviews with seven journalists from these newspapers. A key point the article makes is that news journalists are mindful of how they cover and frame such an event. They take steps to ensure that their coverage accords with professional journalistic standards. The analysis shows, however, that the media coverage is complex and multi-layered, and that news journalists' managing strategies only influence a small part of the total coverage and debate. A media event is by its nature discursive, and the article discusses how the event's 'real meaning' is contested as various actors within and outside the media reframe it to fit already established discourses.

Keywords: *Qur'an burning, media and religion, media events, media conflicts*

Over the Easter of 2022 Rasmus Paludan, the leader of the Danish right-wing party Stram Kurs ['Hard Line'], held a series of anti-Muslim demonstrations in Sweden, during which one of his acts was to burn copies of the Qur'an (Larsson 2022). In the wake of Paludan's demonstrations, several riots erupted in several Swedish cities in which protestors and police clashed violently. These events were heavily mediated, and both the news coverage and the dissemination of video footage through social media seem to have

contributed to the magnitude of the riots and to the fact that there were also riots in places where Paludan had not held his demonstrations (Larsson 2022, 27). The following week the Norwegian anti-Islamic organization SIAN [an acronym for 'Stop the Islamization of Norway'] announced that they would burn a Qur'an in front of the mosque (and police station) in Stovner, an area of Oslo with a large immigrant population (Einarsdóttir and Mikalsen 2022). The Norwegian police prohibited this demonstration, and SIAN was barred from going there. However, the next day they burned a Qur'an in the small town of Sandefjord, resulting in minor riots (Tjoflot et al. 2022). These events received heavy coverage in the Norwegian news media, resulting in several heated public debates about immigration, freedom of speech, hate crime, and the role of Islam.

In this article I will analyse and discuss the media coverage of these events in ten major Norwegian newspapers between 14 and 30 April 2022. Informed by the theory of *hybrid media events* and *mediatized conflicts*, this article sees the media coverage as part of the event itself, arguing that the news media influences the event by amplifying and directing mediated attention and facilitating a space in which a range of actors can use this attention according to their own agenda as the event's meaning is negotiated. To demonstrate this, the article analyses 294 articles published by selected newspapers and discusses the coverage in light of interviews with journalists in seven of them. A key point of the article is that news journalists take tangible measures to direct and frame the mediated attention according to professional journalistic standards. However, I will argue that these measures only have a limited impact on the totality of media coverage. The article contributes to research on transnational media events by providing a case of how mediated attention travels across borders and plays out within a particular national context.

Media events

The Qur'an burnings can be conceptualized as a *media event*.[1] Originally coined by Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz (1992) to describe televised festive and socially cohesive occasions, the term has developed to include a wide range of phenomena in which mediation and media coverage form part of the events themselves (Hepp and Couldry 2010; Frandsen et al. 2022).

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1 Hereafter I will treat the wide range of different happenings across two countries and over time as a single media event. This is in accordance with both established theory (see below, cf. Hepp and Couldry 2010) and the empirical material.

Rather than focusing on the term's cohesive (Dayan and Katz 1992) or ritual aspects (cf. Couldry 2003; Cottle 2006a; Hepp and Couldry 2010), this article is informed by work on disruptive and conflictual media events, following what Valaskivi and Sumiala call a 'critical turn' in media event research (2023, 1335). Responding to criticism of the original focus on ceremonial and integrative events, Katz and Liebes (2007) propose the inclusion of *disruptive* events as an important type of media event, perhaps even as a type that has come to upstage integrative and ceremonial media events (p. 159). Sumiala et al. (2018) also focus on conflictual events, calling for media event theory to take the recent changes in the media environment into consideration, introducing what they call *disruptive hybrid media events* (cf. Chadwick 2013).

Several perspectives from research on (disruptive) media events are of interest when analysing and discussing the Qur'an burnings in Sweden and Norway. First, following Uusitalo and Valaskivi, I work from the premise that a (hybrid) media event is constituted by mediated attention and various meaning-making processes (2020, 1347). Although unmediated occurrences happen all the time, it is through mediated attention that they become events that have an impact beyond their immediate context. Mediated attention also confers a sense of importance and centrality on the event due to what Hepp and Couldry call the myth of the mediated centre (2010; see Couldry 2003). By being in the media, the event is commonly perceived to be of special importance and high on the public agenda (cf. McCombs and Shaw 1972). This also means that attention is a sought-after commodity for actors seeking to convey a message to a larger public (Koopmans 2004). Valaskivi and Sumiala (2023) argue that disruptive hybrid media events should be seen in the light of theories of the *attention economy* (cf. Simon 1971; Franck 1999), in which managing attention becomes a key factor of the event. Focusing on the role of news institutions in media events, Uusitalo and Valaskivi (2020) argue that journalistic practices aimed at scaling the attention of the audience can be conceptualized as an *attention apparatus*, and as part of this they define three 'conditions of attention management' (p. 1345): *perceived audience expectations*; *professional conditions of journalism*; and the *societal responsibility of journalism*.

Second, the mediated nature of these events means that their 'meaning' is not fixed but open for interpretation and negotiation. As Fiske recognized as early as 1994, it is difficult to distinguish between 'a "real" event and its mediated representation' (p. 2). He argues that we must always see media events as *discursive* events, in which the discourse is an integrated part of the event. Discourse produces 'the instrumental sense of the real that a society

or social formation uses in its daily life' (p. 4). As reality is only accessible through discourse, a media event is no 'mere representation of what happened' (p. 2), nor is it 'a discourse *about* an event' (p. 2); it is, however, a *media event* where the two merge. A media event is thus also often a site where different discourses in a society come to the surface – what Fiske calls points of 'maximum discursive visibility' – that may prompt discursive struggles which continue past the occurrences themselves (p. 8). This article treats the Qur'an burnings as one such discursive media event.

Third, it is important to recognize that media are never merely neutral transmitters of information. They also influence it at various levels. In his work on what he calls *mediatized conflict* Simon Cottle points out that the media 'are actively "doing something" over and above disseminating ideas, images and information' (2006b, 9). They are best seen as having an active performative and constitutive role within conflicts. For example, Cottle shows how much institutional factors within the news media affect how conflicts are framed, both in the news and in societal debates about it (2006b, 186–87). Hjarvard, Mortensen, and Eskjær argue that media have 'become integral to the social processes through which conflicts are defined, recognized and in some cases resolved by social actors and that media are utilized for particular interests during conflicts', and that media 'have a profound impact on conflicts themselves' (2015, 3). They propose a model in which media influence conflicts by inserting three 'dynamics' that may play an important role in the evolution of conflicts themselves – namely, *amplification*, *framing and performative agency*, and *co-structuring* (pp. 9–10).

Seeing the Qur'an burnings as a media event in which attention, discourse, and media dynamics are important, the article will examine the traditional news media's role in the event.

The Qur'an burnings as a media event

> Paludan wants to incite riots. He wants to seek out Muslim neighbourhoods, as close as possible. He wants young people to 'go bananas' and he wants to attract attention around it. I'll avoid labelling, but in a way Thorsen is a 'poor man's' Paludan. The group he travels with is tiny. There are three or four of them. So that begs the obvious question: this is a strange phenomenon – does it deserve any attention at all? (interview *Klassekampen*).

If we follow Hepp and Couldry in defining media events as 'certain situated, thickened, centering performances of mediated communication that are fo-

cused on a specific thematic core, cross different media products, and reach a wide and diverse multiplicity of audiences and participants' (2010, 12), The Qur'an burnings qualify as such. The *thematic core* is the burning of the Qur'an, though, as will be discussed later, the media coverage, discourses, and debates are not restricted to the actual act(s) of burning. Both Paludan and SIAN have burned Qur'ans many times over several years (Haugland 2022; Linge and Bangstad 2024; Switzer and Beauduin 2023). Most of these burnings have passed unnoticed. It is when these events receive mediated attention that they assume the characteristics of important events that touch on topics central to wider society (cf. Couldry 2003). As a media event, it is 'co-produced' by the media and the actors involved 'on the ground' (see Katz and Liebes 2007). Receiving mediated attention is paramount for Paludan and SIAN to get their political message about the dangers of Islam and Muslims across to more people than the few attending their demonstrations, and provoking reactions from Muslims in the audience is key to this (Switzer and Beauduin 2023). SIAN writes on its website that it is an oversimplification to say that its members burn the Qur'an merely to provoke. However, 'to burn a book – or show caricatures –to visualize the extreme penchant for violence in certain groups, can be a virtue', and by challenging Muslims in this way 'the Muslim lies fall, the un-integratable shows his Islamic face. He performs the most **basic Islamic act**, he commits Muslim violence, he tries to kill the infidels for Allah's sake' (Thorsen 2020, my emphasis and translation). Burning the Qur'an to expose Muslims' violent nature is thus part of SIAN's intended message. Although Paludan does not go this far in the interviews in my material, he frequently points to the violent nature of Islam and Muslims when he talks about why he burns the Qur'an. The timing and location of the burnings also indicate that the provocation of Muslims is intended, as Paludan's planned burnings were scheduled during Ramadan in suburbs with a large Muslim population. In this context the Qur'an burnings are part of these actors' deliberate attempt to spread their message by gaining media attention. The following quotation from SIAN's leader is illustrative:

> But at the end of the day in our world all PR is good PR. No matter how much demonizing, denigration, filth, and shit is dug up and flung out […], it will in some way have a positive effect because it contributes to placing the focus on the Islamic problem that we are here to solve (Lars Thorsen, quoted in Haugland 2022, 78).

Ideally, provoking violent reactions from Muslims therefore has the dual purpose of gaining mediated attention for their message about the dangers of Islam and simultaneously confirming that message. Once mediated attention is gained and the Qur'an burnings become a media event, however, the meaning of the burnings becomes a matter of contestation.

The empirical material

The article analyses all articles published about the event, both online and in print, from ten national newspapers in Norway between 14 and 30 April 2022. The main criterion was to have a varied sample of newspapers with a national audience. The sample includes the websites of the public service broadcasters NRK and TV2, the Christian newspapers *Vårt Land* and *Dagen*, the left-leaning newspaper *Klassekampen*, the tabloids *Verdens Gang* (*VG*) and *Dagbladet*, the newspapers *Aftenposten* and *Dagsavisen* and the purely web-based *Nettavisen*. The sample consists of 294 articles, of which 77 were published in print, and 217 online. Most of the paper-based articles are also found in web format. To map the material, I initially employed the Norwegian media search service Atekst, using the search words 'Paludan', 'SIAN', 'Qur'an' [*Koran*], and 'Qur'an burning(s)' [*Koranbrenning(er)*] within the selected period. As this service mainly covers print-based publications, I used the same search words on the newspapers' websites, as well as cross-referencing all hyperlinking between articles.

In addition to the published material, I interviewed journalists from seven of the news outlets.[2] The aim was to conduct interviews at the 'news chief' [*nyhetssjef*] level. This means journalists responsible for publishing work but with no formal editorial responsibility. Five interviews were at that level (*Dagbladet*, *Klassekampen*, *Nettavisen*, *VG*, and *Vårt Land*). My *Aftenposten* and NRK informants were editors. All interviews were conducted in January and February 2023. The interviews were semi-structured and included both general questions and questions based on a preliminary analysis of that newspaper's articles about the Qur'an burnings and riots. Data gathering and analysis were therefore a dynamic process in which the interviews were informed by an analysis of the articles, which in turn formed the basis for new rounds of coding and analysis.

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2 I failed to get interviews with the last three. I could not establish contact with anyone at the right level in two outlets, while the news chief in the third did not wish to be interviewed, as they did not think they had any particular coverage of these events.

The journalistic view of Qur'an burnings

> Of course, there's a criterion that must be present for us to cover something. There's the old 'dog bites man, man bites dog'. […] Qur'an burnings, if we go far back in time, it was really controversial, […] but as these burnings happen so often, the news value falls immediately. […] It's no longer news that SIAN is burning a Qur'an – they've seen to that themselves, […] and we haven't got the resources to go out to some road bridge where an extremist is burning a Qur'an (interview, *Vårt Land*).

The journalists interviewed about the Qur'an burnings generally agreed on a central point. Although Qur'an burnings have generated much media attention over the years, it is not the burning itself that is newsworthy. Indeed, the frequency of burnings reduces the news value. Although their emphasis and examples vary, all the informants tell of similar evaluations concerning whether Qur'an burnings warrant news coverage. *Klassekampen* reports they are well aware that media coverage is an explicit goal of both Paludan and SIAN. However, neither the act itself nor their message about Islam is reason enough for them actually to cover it. 'Why is he burning the Qur'an?', he asks. 'I don't find that very interesting, really […]. We already know why.' Likewise, *Vårt Land* says that 'the symbolic power' of SIAN burning a Qur'an is largely spent, and that it is hardly a 'news event' at all. To actually cover this, the journalists need more. In Sweden it is the riots that are really of interest for newspapers. *VG* confirms this: 'It's the reactions and the aftermath that are the actual story.' So, when *VG* sent reporters it was to 'really understand what was going on there'. Several of the other editors emphasized similar points. For a Qur'an burning to be newsworthy, it needs to represent a larger societal issue:

> The deciding factor for us is that it represents something more. I mean, is it just a single occurrence there and then, or is the event an expression of a larger conflict? Or larger tensions or societal changes, or something else? Trends is perhaps the wrong word, but tendencies. That's something we care about! (interview, *Aftenposten*).

The cause of the riots and the role of Islam

> It was important for us not to link Islam and the demonstrators. It's not like 'now the Muslims exact revenge'. That's really not what this is about (interview, *Nettavisen*).

As mentioned, both SIAN and Paludan target Islam and Muslims when they burn the Qur'an, and the idea that violent reactions expose Islam's violent nature is part of this. In this narrative the rioters are Muslims, and the riots' cause is Islam. However, this is not necessarily a narrative shared by journalists. Part of this is to be found in a general fear of jumping to conclusions. NRK stresses this throughout the interview, saying: 'You should be careful not to assign blame or motives before you have all the facts.' Similarly, *Aftenposten* expresses concern about being stuck in a single and simple explanation of complex events. 'Religion, in this case, would only be one of several causes, and its possible influence would then need to be discussed further.' There also seems to be a shared view among my material's informants that it would be far too simplistic to present Islam or Muslims as the cause of the riots. 'This thing where you see a religion as one comprehensive thing and judge from that – that's too simplistic for our readers,' *Vårt Land* elaborates. This is also tied to the ideal of practising 'truthful journalism', as *VG* puts it. Echoing several others, *VG* emphasizes that journalists know much more about Islam and Muslims now than before. For example, they know that there are extremists within Islam, as in other creeds or ideologies, but he adds: 'However, Islam as a religion, I can't say that is the problem in these issues.' Although the informants differ in their focus on and explanation of the events in Sweden and Norway, they agree that even though Islam can be seen as part of what happened, framing the religion as the riots' primary cause is simply not credible and would be bad journalism.

Different layers of journalism

Interviewer: Does Dagbladet have any particular profile when it comes to these things [Qur'an burnings]?

Journalist: No, but at the editorial and commentary level we're very conscious of our history, and that we should fight fiercely for the right to express yourself.

Interviewer: Does that affect you? Is there a connection between that and what you do?

Journalist: No, not really.

Although the newspapers in my material differ in size, focus, and organizational structure, a common theme in the interviews is that there is a professional division of labour within the news organizations.

> **Editor**: At Aftenposten we distinguish strongly between opinion journalism and commentary journalism and news journalism.
> **Interviewer**: Are there closed walls between them?
> **Editor**: Yes, and that's how it should be. That doesn't mean we can't talk to each other, but we do want news journalism and commentary journalism to operate freely, and we should be able to operate independently of each other. We even have examples where commentary journalism criticizes the news journalism published in Aftenposten, because we should allow room for a very wide range of opinions.

Most of the informants talk about clear boundaries between news journalism and the journalistic work of commentators and editors. The boundaries are even clearer when it comes to opinion-based articles by non-journalists. Newspapers usually have their own divisions, with their own journalists and editors for the debate pages.

As will be discussed further below, distinguishing between different layers of news coverage based on the distinction between news, commentary, and opinion journalism is meaningful. I will also argue that it is useful to make another distinction within the layer of news journalism, and the interviews confirm this. On a regular day many of the published news articles only contain content picked from other news outlets and news agencies such as the Norwegian News Agency (NTB). Although they are compiled by journalists, these articles mainly follow the perspectives and framings of others. This is perhaps less a result of the journalists' professional standards and more of resources and the push to publish quickly (cf. Uusitalo and Valaskivi 2020). *Vårt Land* speaks of 'the digital economy', where no newspaper can 'give blanket coverage to everything'. A lack of journalists forces newspapers to depend on news agencies. They therefore often start out by using NTB, and assign the story to a journalist only if the situation demands it. Several of the informants told me that as the burnings started at Easter, few journalists were on hand, and NTB was a natural choice. *Aftenposten* also says they often use NTB, while their own journalists investigate the story, allowing continuous publication while journalists prepare more thorough articles.

Professional news journalism standards

The journalists seem to have a shared set of journalistic standards and understandings of 'proper' news reporting (e.g. Schultz 2007). They generally

agree about how to assess the Qur'an burnings' lack of news value and the dangers of using what they see as problematic simplifications when exploring the riots' possible causes. Professional standards also include factors unique to their particular newspaper, such as the editorial profile, available resources, and their target audience's interests, something which all informants emphasize strongly (cf. Harcup and O'Neill 2017, 1482). In addition, all interviews thematize the societal responsibility of news journalism (see Uusitalo and Valaskivi 2020, 4). The informants emphasize that they take special care not to just relay Paludan's and SIAN's message but to present a balance of different opinions and to reveal underlying issues. They are aware that they provide the actors the attention they seek, and they therefore take steps to manage and direct this attention according to their own news journalism principles. This also means that the interpretations and framings of what the Qur'an burnings and riots are 'really about' are not set and vary both between reporters and between newspapers.

The coverage

The Qur'an burnings were covered extensively in the Norwegian news media. In the ten newspapers examined here 225 unique articles were published over 17 days (see Table 1).[3]

Table 1. Total number of articles in the period 14–30 April 2022.

News outlet	Online	Print	Unique
Aftenposten	21	22	25
Dagbladet	23	4	23
Dagen	17	6	18
Dagsavisen	24	7	25
Nettavisen	45	-	45
NRK	6	-	6
Klassekampen	17	17	17
TV2	22	-	22
VG	18	11	19
Vårt Land	24	10	25
Total	217	77	225

3 Seven of the news outlets published both online and in print. The majority of the articles in the print versions were already published online and are excluded from the analysis to avoid counting them twice.

The majority of these articles were published between 14 and 23 April, when the actual burnings and riots took place. The coverage continued after this, and most of the newspapers kept publishing about them throughout the period. The event thus had a high degree of visibility.

Multi-layered coverage

Based on the analysis of the material, I distinguish between four interconnected *layers of coverage* which are structured differently in how they approach and frame the event. These layers are a) *the event layer*, descriptive articles relying on news agencies and other news outlets, b) *the journalistic layer*, news articles and features in which the journalists frame the matter based on their own material and sources, c) *the editorial layer*, 'journalistic' opinion articles such as editorials and commentary, and d) *the opinion layer*, opinion-based pieces such as columns, op-eds and debate pieces. The following figure shows how the articles were published, sorted by layer.
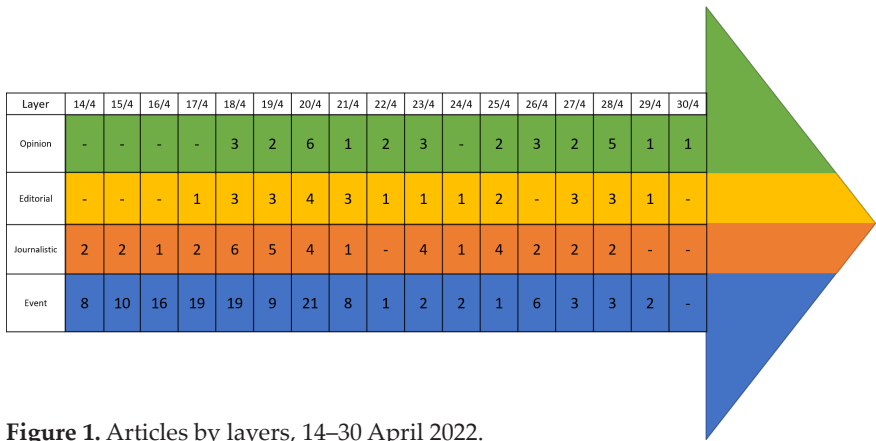
Layer	14/4	15/4	16/4	17/4	18/4	19/4	20/4	21/4	22/4	23/4	24/4	25/4	26/4	27/4	28/4	29/4	30/4
Opinion	-	-	-	-	3	2	6	1	2	3	-	2	3	2	5	1	1
Editorial	-	-	-	1	3	3	4	3	1	1	1	2	-	3	3	1	-
Journalistic	2	2	1	2	6	5	4	1	-	4	1	4	2	2	2	-	-
Event	8	10	16	19	19	9	21	8	1	2	2	1	6	3	3	2	-

Figure 1. Articles by layers, 14–30 April 2022.

The event layer

Danish right-wing extremist creates chaos in Swedish cities (Kagge 2022).

The event layer comprises most of the articles about the Qur'an burnings. With 130 articles, the event layer contains more than half the total number of articles. The articles in the event layer tend to be descriptive and stay close to what happened, siting several different sources. Based on the analysis of this layer, two findings stand out in the material.

The first is that the coverage is strikingly uniform across all ten news-papers. There is very little variety in how the event is described or even explained. Although various newspapers published some unique content in the event layer, the overall impression is that of a common narrative, with a uniform progression. Most of the newspapers composed their event-layer articles drawing on the same sources and even using identical formulations. The perhaps most striking example of this can be found in how Rasmus Paludan was described to contextualize what happened in Sweden. NTB published the following text on Thursday 14 April:

> Paludan's party 'Hard Line' was created in 2017 and aims to forbid Islam and deport all Muslims. In 2020, Paludan was sentenced to three months in jail for defamation and racist remarks towards Muslims during a dem-onstration in Denmark. The same year, he was denied entry to Sweden for two years. This happened after violent riots in Malmö related to an event where he was due to burn a Qur'an wrapped in bacon, as he has done several times in Denmark.

This text[4] appeared in 17 of the 22 articles published on Thursday and Fri-day. All the newspapers except one used it at least once during the first four days. Many other such texts appeared across the newspapers throughout the period. The primary source of common formulations was NTB. Several other sources, however, were also picked up and used uniformly. Perhaps even more striking is how entire identical articles by NTB are published directly. For example, on Monday 18 April five of the ten newspapers published exactly the same article from NTB about the riots in Rosengård, where a school had been set on fire.

The second finding is that although Paludan and SIAN are given a lot of media attention, there is very little resonance concerning their message that Islam is dangerous, and that the rioters are Muslims. There is next to no focus on the rioters. They are mainly described as 'demonstrators', 'counter-demonstrators', and 'rioters', and on Monday 18 April, after the Swedish police said that they belonged to criminal gangs targeting the police, most of the newspapers picked this up. Also regarding Sandefjord, there was little focus on those mainly described as 'counter-demonstrators'. Only in a single article are the Swedish rioters described as 'Muslims and so-called anti-racists' (Kagge 2022), while a few articles indicate indirectly that they

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4 Some articles only used part of the text, but the whole text was published in most cases.

are Muslims (e.g. Lied 2022). The articles in the event layer generally identify Paludan as the cause of the riots, and he is described as a right-wing extremist with an anti-Islamic agenda. Likewise, in Norway SIAN is identified as anti-Muslim provocateurs causing minor riots. There are next to no pictures of Paludan actually burning the Qur'an in Sweden or of SIAN burning the Qur'an in Sandefjord, and there are no quotations from what was said at these demonstrations. Paludan and SIAN are only quoted in a few articles, and then mainly about whether they are allowed to burn the Qur'an. The aftermath of the Qur'an burnings is given considerable media attention in the event layer. The uniform narrative across the newspapers is one that does not resonate with Paludan's or SIAN's message about violent Muslims.

The journalistic layer

> It is psychological violence. What happens with the identity of the children and their trust in Norwegian society when books are burned outside their houses of God, and they are surrounded by constant hostility? (Brandvold 2022).

Compared with the event layer, the journalistic layer consists of only 38 articles. The journalistic layer is far more varied than the event layer. The articles in this layer are written by journalists who in different ways have gathered unique material from their own sources, and the articles vary in both the journalists' interests and the particular newspapers' focus. The most obvious distinction is between the newspapers that sent journalists to Sweden and those who did not. The three newspapers with reporters on location were also the newspapers that published the most articles in this layer. Eleven articles, by *Nettavisen* (3), TV2 (4), and *VG* (4), were written by journalists on site in Sweden. Only one (Sandnes, Jåma, and Sfrintzeris 2022) actually reported live from a Qur'an burning. The rest were mainly built around interviews with people in Swedish suburbs (e.g. Sandnes and Jåma 2022), Paludan (e.g. Tønnessen and Braaten 2022), or the local authorities in Sweden (e.g. Ogre and Braaten 2022). The remaining articles in this layer vary in focus and framing. Some focus on SIAN's planned burnings in Stovner and the minor riots in Sandefjord (e.g. Danielsen 2022). Some focus on how Muslims in Norway are afraid because of the Qur'an burnings (e.g. Brandvold 2022). Several articles address questions of freedom of expression and the possibility to limit it when expressions become hateful. And

there are also several articles about social and economic factors in Norway and Sweden, which according to some may account for the Swedish riots.

Although there is little resonance with Paludan's and SIAN's message about Islam and Muslims in the journalistic layer, their message is reported and picked up in several articles. *VG*, *Nettavisen*, and TV2 interviewed Paludan, and the interviews were given space in five articles. The leader of SIAN, Lars Thorsen, is also quoted in a few articles. The rioters, both in Sweden and Norway, are in some cases at least indirectly identified as Muslims. Three articles report how rioters shouted 'Allahu Akbar', both in Malmö and in Sandefjord, and politicians from the Norwegian right-wing Progress party identify the rioters as Muslims in several articles (e.g. Lepperød 2022a). In most of the journalistic articles, however, these views are balanced by opposing views, and other explanations are generally given for the riots than the rioters' religious convictions. The media event's discursive nature is clearly evidenced by the majority of articles in this layer framing the Qur'an burnings and riots as part of issues of direct relevance to Norway, even when reporting on events in Sweden. Such audience-orientation is well established in research on news journalism (Schulz 2007), and in three of my interviews the informants say their audiences' interests strongly influence what they report.

The editorial layer

The point is that provocations provoke (Stavrum 2022).

Twenty-six articles are categorized as belonging to the editorial layer. Of these, ten are editorials, and 16 are commentary articles. Most articles in the editorial layer revolve around one of two already well-established discourses: a) the Qur'an burnings are really about underlying socioeconomic differences (3 editorials / 7 commentaries); or b) they are really about the conditions for freedom of expression in Norway (7 editorials / 5 commentaries). The discursive nature of the Qur'an burning media event and the audience-orientation of the news media are thus even more explicit in this layer, while the range of different perspectives and voices is significantly narrower. This can of course be seen as part of the genre, as both commentaries and editorials are supposed to reflect the authors' and newspapers' opinions on more overarching questions.

In many cases the reframing of what the event is really about is quite explicit. For example, in *Vårt Land*, where a commentator writes under

the headline 'It is not about religion' that 'if you instead choose to focus on Muslims' views on the Qur'an or an academic debate about freedom of expression, you risk missing the core of the problem' (Erstad 2022). Similarly, in *Dagsavisen*, where the Qur'an burning is downplayed, and it is said that 'there is no getting around the fact that the core of what's going on is immigration to Sweden' (Bredeveien 2022). All the articles agree that Paludan's and SIAN's actions are deplorable, and that violent responses to them are unacceptable. The real differences in opinion concern who and what are to blame for the riots, and whether freedom of expression should be absolute or limited for reasons of safety, or because the expressions fall under different definitions of hate speech. Paludan's and SIAN's message about the violent nature of Muslims generally finds little resonance in the editorial layer. Islam as the possible cause of the riots, however, is the subject of slightly more debate in this layer, with some commentators and editors giving Islam and Muslim a role in causing the riots (Selbekk 2022a; 2022b; Stephansen 2022), and others denying or downplaying it (Erstad 2022; Bredeveien 2022).

Opinion layer

> The **real problem** is that Muslims accept no criticism of their religion and will react violently to all such 'provocations and hate utterances' (Froyn 2022, my emphasis).

Thirty-one articles have been categorized as belonging to the opinion layer in the form of op-eds (19) and columns (12). These represent the authors' opinion, and several are written in response to other articles. Perhaps even more than in the previous layer the Qur'an burnings and riots are used as examples of larger societal trends, reframed into already existing discourses, and the actual occurrences in Sweden and Norway play very little role in most articles. In different ways almost all the opinion-based articles thematize the question about the limits of the right to freedom of expression (28 articles). They can be divided into a) those that advocate against limiting freedom of expression (14), b) those that see Qur'an burnings as legal expressions that should be ignored or fought through other expressions (8), and c) those that define Qur'an burnings as hate speech and/or disturbances of social order which can be limited by law (6).

The most striking difference compared to the other layers is the number of articles that discuss the role of Islam and Muslims regarding the burn-

ings and riots. Fourteen articles blame Islam and Muslims in different ways for the riots; 11 argue that Paludan's and SIAN's actions are expressions of Islamophobia and racism. While no one actually supports Paludan or SIAN, their message about the violent nature of Islam and Muslims is at the heart of the debate in the opinion layer. Several articles (7) state that aspects related to Islam make Muslims prone to violence,[5] and examples of Islamist violence like the attacks on Salman Rushdie, Charlie Hebdo, and Samuel Paty are cited in support of this view (e.g. Holstad 2022; Fahramand 2022a). Several of these articles see the riots as examples of a coordinated attack on democracy and liberal Western values, orchestrated by extremist, religious, and totalitarian forces (Bandehy 2022; Bai 2022a; Zakaria 2022).

Although these articles represent the authors' opinions, the analysis shows that the debate centred on criticism of Islam was to a very large degree facilitated by the newspapers themselves. Op-eds are often published for their controversy value (Bangstad 2013), and the topic of Islam and violence is highly contested in Norway (Lundby 2018). Debates about Islam have long been part of public debate. In this case, however, the hand of the newspapers is even more visible, as most of the explicit criticism of Islam comes from regular columnists. Nine out of 14 articles that criticize Islam in different ways are written by regular columnists. *Nettavisen* stands out as the newspaper that published most of these articles. Although we did not discuss this explicitly in the interview, the *Nettavisen* respondent told me that having *secular Muslims* as regular columnists was part of a conscious editorial choice, and three of them are quite visible in the material (Bandehy 2022; Fahramand 2022a; 2022b; Bai 2022a; 2022b). Many of the critical voices in this layer are therefore hired by the newspapers for their opinions.

Attention management

Mediated attention is a scarce and coveted resource for actors trying to disseminate messages to a broad audience (Citton 2017; Koopmans 2004). Paludan was clearly successful in gaining the attention of the news media. When such attention is gained, however, it also becomes an 'exploitable' resource for other actors. SIAN's demonstration in Sandefjord is a good example of how existing attention can be used and at the same time contribute to sustaining it, and generate more attention. Most of SIAN's demonstrations gain little attention from the news media. With the heavy mediated attention

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5 Most of these articles do not generalize this to all Muslims but point to the problematic aspects that may be at play.

on the riots in Sweden, however, their planned burning in Stovner on Friday 22 April and their demonstration in Sandefjord were covered extensively. It is likely that this attention also contributed to the greater number of counter demonstrators in Sandefjord than at most of SIAN's demonstrations. In the aftermath SIAN also took centre stage in the subsequent media debate about freedom of expression in Norway (cf. Linge and Bangstad 2024).

Uusitalo and Valaskivi (2020) point to the central role that established journalistic media organizations play in such an attention economy. Although these media can also be said to use the attention to compete for audiences, they enjoy a privileged role in managing and directing it. The interviews show that, much as in Uusitalo's and Valaskivi's (2020) study, journalists are conscious of their societal responsibility in generating and directing attention, and they take steps to manage that attention. They justify coverage of Qur'an burnings through their mandate to cover issues of societal importance, they take care not to uncritically relay the messages of Paludan and SIAN, and they are conscious of the need to 'scale the event' responsibly, as *Aftenposten* puts it. This is reflected in the articles analysed in the journalistic layer, where the Qur'an burnings and riots are generally framed as representing a range of larger issues and formatted according to professional journalistic standards of balanced coverage.

Analysed as a whole, however, the journalistic layer is just a small part of the total coverage, and the other layers are structured according to different standards. The massive mediated attention is mainly generated and maintained at the event layer, at least from the beginning. The majority of articles can be categorized as belonging to this layer, and the high visibility and perceived importance of the event thus primarily result from articles originating outside the particular newspapers. Although these all draw on sources the newspapers trust, the articles are compiled quickly and with little or no particular framing from the newspapers in question, and they also seem to bypass the attention management mechanisms that regulate the scale of the coverage. The journalistic attention management strategies pertaining to amplitude and framing are thus mainly relevant for a small share of the total coverage, even when only considering the news articles. When including the editorial and event layers, this impression is even stronger.

The fact that news journalists' management strategies only account for a small part of the overall coverage once mediated attention is established does not mean that the news media has no structuring influence on the media event. Rather, it means that such an influence should not be reduced to considering a single set of professional standards but rather be seen as

complex and multi-layered. The newspapers not only amplify and direct attention; they also facilitate the space where this attention can be used by different actors. Conceptualizing attention as a usable resource, or commodity (Citton 2017, 5–8), helps account for the highly discursive nature of the media event. The massive, mediated attention paid to the Qur'an burnings gave ample space for several actors using the attention generated to further their views within already established discourses of which they were part. To do this, the event needed to be reframed to align with the actors' agenda. The media event thus represents a *discursive opportunity* (see Koopmans 2004) for those in a position to take part in the negotiation of what this *is really about*. And this meaning may be quite different from the actions and intentions of those involved in the actual occurrences 'on the ground'.

For the Norwegian audience the Qur'an burnings and riots in Sweden and Norway were a media event, primarily constituted by the mediated attention and the various meaning-making processes involved. It should thus also be seen as a mediatized conflict. The three media dynamics proposed by Hjarvard, Mortensen and Eskjær (2013) are clearly relevant in the examined case. The news media strongly influence the conflict by amplification, framing and performative agency, and co-structuring the power relations involved. However, the analysis and discussion show that these dynamics should be seen as complex and multi-layered, with several aspects lying outside the conscious attention management of the journalists involved.

Conclusion

Qur'an burnings have received considerable media attention in Scandinavia recently. As a means of gaining public visibility for actors critical of aspects of Islam, it must be said to be highly effective. It is not the burning of the Qur'an in itself but the reactions to it that attract the media's attention, though. Achieving public visibility does not mean the media picks up and disseminates the actors' messages uncritically. As we have seen, newspapers are conscious of their role in reporting the events. Although Paludan's and SIAN's messages cannot be seen to gain legitimacy in the analysed material, they did succeed in placing it on the public agenda, creating discursive opportunities for themselves and other actors able to use the attention in various ways. Furthermore, their message resonated in several articles in the editorial and opinion layers, partly facilitated by the newspapers themselves through the selection of op-eds and perhaps more importantly in this particular case through regular columnists.

Conceptualizing conflicts surrounding the Qur'an burnings as media events does not imply that they are less 'real'. Indeed, the fact that they are played out in local, national, and international media amplifies the conflicts, giving them larger audiences and potentially resulting in a wide range of consequences such as changes to law and policy, heated public debates, or new instances of violence. As media events, however, the meaning of what is happening is constantly negotiated, and different actors can use the mediated attention in several ways. When this article was written in 2023, the Scandinavian Qur'an burnings had taken a new turn. Several countries with majority Muslim populations have condemned Sweden for allowing Qur'an burnings, resulting in changed diplomatic relations, debates about the legality of the burnings, and even threats of terrorist attacks (Strand 2023). New actors thus emerge, and the meaning of Qur'an burnings is constantly contended.

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Rasmus Paludan, Burning of the Qur'an and Swedish Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

This article scrutinizes the public debate in Sweden that followed the heated riots that took place when Rasmus Paludan burned the Qur'an in the spring of 2022. The Easter holiday in 2022, which coincided with Ramadan, served as the backdrop for the Danish-Swedish provocateur Rasmus Paludan. Our study is based on a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of 60 public opinion pieces published between 24 and 30 April 2022, one week after the so-called Easter riots. The Swedish media at this time featured many different responses to the burning of the Qur'an, as well as strong public opinions about how the riots were dealt with, and why the riots erupted in the first place. We argue that the discussion that followed Paludan's public rallies in Sweden unfolds a dilemma between freedom of speech on the one hand and freedom of religion on the other. By deploying critical discourse analysis, this study helps us observe the discursive orders that regulated the debate and identify recurring topics and tropes in public media. The overall results indicate that the riots are mainly viewed as the result of a failed multicultural policy in which Islam is discussed as an obstacle to liberal democracy and thus freedom of speech. Material reasons – poverty, unemployment, and racism – are largely omitted from the debate.

Keywords*: Rasmus Paludan, Qur'an burning, Sweden, freedom of speech, Islamophobia, critical discourse analysis*

The Swedish-Danish provocateur and politician Rasmus Paludan (b. 1982) has been able to expose a weakness in the Swedish democratic system, or rather how this system can be perceived and discussed in public media de-

bates. Since 2020 Paludan has held many public meetings in Sweden at which he has protested against Islam and burned the Qur'an. On most occasions he has been able to hold his meetings without any or very little confrontation or violence, but between 14 and 17 April 2022 his demonstrations – and even the announcement that the Qur'an would be burned – led to riots in the cities and towns of Jönköping, Linköping, Norrköping, Rinkeby, Örebro, Landskrona, Malmö, Skäggetorp, and Navestad. The riots saw uncontrolled outbreaks of violence, leaving approximately three hundred police officers injured, and many counter-protesters were arrested. The violent riots in 2022 that coincided with the month of Ramadan became known as the Easter Riots, as they occurred during the Easter holidays (Larsson 2022; Sandén 2023).

In 2023 other actors were inspired by Paludan, and more burnings of the Qur'an were arranged, but in this article we focus only on how the burning of the Qur'an by Rasmus Paludan was debated and addressed in public opinion pieces published in Swedish newspapers after the Easter riots. Our study is based on a critical discourse analysis of 60 public opinion pieces published between 24 and 30 April 2022, one week after the riots. We chose this week because Swedish media at this point featured many different responses to the burning of the Qur'an and strong public opinions about how society, especially the Swedish police, had dealt with social unrest, and why the riots had erupted in the first place. We argue that the discussion that followed Paludan's public rallies in Sweden unfolds a dilemma between freedom of speech on the one hand and freedom of religion on the other. Our research questions are:

1. What themes and topics recurred in Swedish opinion media concerning the burning of the Qur'an at the time of the Easter riots?
2. How can the clash between freedom of speech and Paludan's criticism of Islam be discursively understood and interpreted?

Our focus is primarily on the debate about Paludan, freedom of speech, and the burning of the Qur'an, but we will also make some comparisons with Mattsson's (2020) earlier study of how a large neo-Nazi rally in Sweden was addressed in public opinion pieces (Mattsson 2020). This comparison has the potential to shed light on freedom of speech at a more general level. The comparison is also justified by the fact that as early as June 1996 Sweden's Supreme Court had found a teenager guilty of breaking the law by displaying Nazi symbols in public, making the Hitler salute, and expressing both clearly antisemitic ideas and extreme racism (Government Bill 2001/02:59, 2001). This verdict has since served as a precedent for situations associated with white supremacy milieus. Paludan's activities are

not therefore in themselves new to Swedish society or the public debate on freedom of speech. The form is new, however, and the multitude of riots that followed Paludan's rallies are thus far unique. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, another dimension comes into play, namely religious freedom and the right to criticize religion especially. So the intersection Paludan has created has three intellectual dimensions: freedom of speech; religious freedom; and hate speech.

Mapping the field

The dilemma between freedom of speech and the limitation of hate speech that is this article's focus is not a new phenomenon in Sweden (cf. Mattsson 2020). For example, in the interwar period and during the Second World War it was frequently debated whether hate speech should be banned in Sweden. The matter was investigated and debated on several occasions, all with the same conclusion: freedom of speech should not be restricted (Sandén 2020). After the war, however, Sweden developed into an international hub for the distribution of propaganda denying the Holocaust and for antisemitic opinions (Lööw 2004). This prompted another round of public debate and investigation, and in 1948 a new law was passed, the penal code on 'agitation against an ethnic or national group'. This law constitutes a limitation on freedom of speech and has been revised several times since 1948 in step with the development of racist practices in contemporary Swedish society. Yet 'the law does not prohibit racist organizations, only expressions of racism, such as hate speech' (Mattsson 2020, 94), and new arenas have developed for expressing racist opinions and practices, not least with the development of social media. 'Old' communication strategies like posters, stickers, flyers, clothing, salutes, and speeches at rallies continue to be used, however.

Like the debate about racism – that is, what should be counted as racism, and whose perspective should be the starting point – the definition of Islamophobia has also been heavily debated (Larsson and Sander 2015). Nonetheless, Islamophobia is included today as one of the hate crime categories in Swedish law and is defined according to the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (BRÅ) as:

> Crimes committed out of fear of, hostility, or hatred towards Islam and Muslims, which activate a reaction against Islam, Muslim property, its institutions, or those who are or are perceived to be Muslims or representatives of Muslims or Islam (Forselius & Westerberg 2019, 63. Our translation).

Although Sweden has had an intense discussion since the 1990s concerning how to interpret the law on agitation against an ethnic or national group expressing racist or neo-Nazi opinions, there has been much less discussion about anti-Muslim or Islamophobic expressions, even though such opinions are also prevalent in Sweden (Otterbeck and Bevelander 2006; Larsson and Stjernholm 2016; Weibull 2019; Olseryd et al. 2021). Important exceptions are the debates that followed the publication of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* in 1988, the publication of the so-called Muhammad Cartoons in Jyllands-Posten in 2005 (later republished in several Swedish newspapers; see Larsson and Lindekilde 2009, for example), and the drawing of the so-called roundabout dog by the artist Lars Vilks in 2007 (Högfeldt et al. 2008).

There are several earlier studies on the intersection between freedom of speech, anti-Muslim sentiments, and the secular. Talal Asad stresses that the debate that followed the Muhammad cartoons in 2005 was 'discussed largely in the context of the problem of integrating Muslim immigrants into European society and how it related to the "global menace" of Islamists' (Asad 2009, 20). This analysis and conclusion are not unique to Asad. Curtis F.J. Doebbler makes a similar argument, stressing that the *Jylland-Posten* cartoons and similar controversies are often discussed and framed as a conflict between Western and Islamic values (for the Jylland-Posten controversy see Klausen 2009 and Lindekilde 2008). Within public debates following controversies, freedom of religion is often depicted as conflicting with freedom of expression (Doebbler 2009) or inherent secular values that are closely associated with the West (i.e. Asad 2009). While it is difficult to find a neutral position (Bangstad 2014) – you are either for or against freedom of expression – critics see publications like the Muhammad cartoons as another assault by the western press on Muslims (Doebbler 2009). According to this logic the Rushdie affair, the Muhammad cartoons, Vilk's roundabout dogs, and Paludan's actions and opinions cannot be seen as isolated cases but as part of a larger critique of Islam and Muslims on the one hand and of multicultural society and Islamophobia on the other. A negative attitude towards Islam and Muslims is also mirrored in media reporting on Islam and Muslims (Said 1981; Knott et al. 2013; and Axner 2015 for Sweden), coverage in movies and in popular culture (Shaheen 2003; and Berg 1998 for Sweden), and in several survey studies that demonstrate that Islam and Muslims are often associated with negative attitudes (see Weibull 2019 for Sweden).

Method and methodology

In this study we use critical discourse analysis (CDA), both as the theoretical premise and as the methodological engine. Contrary to linguistic discourse analysis, which pays attention to grammar and syntax, our focus is on the 'level of meaning in text and talk' (Hjelm 2014b, 143). Although we are inspired by Fairclough (1992; 2010) and Fairclough and Fairclough (2012), it is also important to stress that a CDA approach has also been applied by scholars of religion like Titus Hjelm (2014a; 2014b) and von Stockrad (2003). Whatever the disciplinary background, it is commonly understood that CDA is rooted in critical realism, which views reality at three different levels. The first is the textual level, which includes all forms of semiotic expressions, both verbal and nonverbal. The second is discursive practice, which relates to how texts are structured by influential ideologies, or discursive orders (Fairclough 2010). Finally, CDA points to social practice, which is the third level, representing the routine of the everyday exchange of linguistic expressions constituted by discursive practice.

According to scholars who apply a CDA approach matters are expressed meaningfully in relation to a particular discursive practice that is regulated by a discursive order. Conducting a CDA study is therefore to 'pay attention to the argumentative and persuasive aspects of the text', how 'a story unfolds', and how truth claims are constructed (Hjelm 2014a, 863). Yet the discursive practice is also constituted by a larger social practice, changes within semiotic practices, that may alter the discursive practice. Within CDA this is called either interdiscursivity or recontextualization and refers to how different discursive orders may alter how we discuss and label phenomena within social practices leading to changes within discursive practice. The recontextualization alters the preconditions for the discursive order and thus also constitutes a new premise for social practice and creates new hegemonic orders (Fairclough 1992; 2010; Fairclough and Fairclough 2012).

The article's empirical material was generated by typing they keyword 'Rasmus Paludan' into the Swedish 'Retriever' media database, searching for articles published between April and May 2022, and finally focusing on the period between 24 and 30 April, as this was the period when the articles of interest to this study were most evident. The 60 articles that we chose for our analysis were editorials and op-eds published in the culture section or public opinion pieces (i.e. texts that had been submitted by the public for publication in a newspaper; in Swedish *fria ord*), and all were published during the week following the Easter riots. It can be argued that there is a difference between articles written by professional editors and

public opinion pieces. As all the texts are generated from printed and edited newspapers, however, we argue that they represent the public debate as it played out in the edited media included in the Swedish 'Retriever' database.

When making references or providing quotations from the texts included in our dataset (N=60), we have chosen not to give any information about the authors, the political opinion of the newspapers, or in which newspaper sections the text was published (i.e. in the political or cultural section, etc.) because we are mainly interested in the argumentation and wordings chosen in the articles, not the author or the newspaper that published the text. We therefore only provide information about the newspaper and the date of the text's publication. These references are not therefore included in the list of references. We have translated all the newspaper quotations from Swedish to English.

Before we proceed with presenting our findings it is necessary to make some clarifications. First, we must emphasize that this is not a study of legal procedures or legal frames, but a critical discourse analysis of public debates as they unfold in the Swedish media. To place our study in its national context, it is important to stress that freedom of expression and freedom of religion have been part of the constitutional law (in Swedish *Grundlagen*; see Enkvist 2013; Åström and Eklund Wimelius 2020) since 1951. The Swedish legal system does not contain an explicit definition of religion, but several legal paragraphs and specific laws state that individuals or groups are protected in expressing their religious beliefs and gathering for religious services. It is also forbidden to discriminate against a person or group based on religion or religious belonging. Equally, the Swedish state recognizes that individuals or groups can suffer from hate crimes if they express a religious belief or are associated with a specific religious tradition (Forselius & Westerberg 2019). Sweden has had no law against blasphemy that prevents any explicit criticism of religions since 1970 (Sandén 2023).

Like the rest of Western Europe, Sweden has had a heated discussion about how to define Islamophobia and how to draw the line between negative attitudes towards religions and illegal hate speech. Although the number of hate crimes reported as 'Islamophobic' has been stable since the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brottsförebyggande rådet, BRÅ) started reporting these statistics, many have argued that the number of anti-Muslim or even Islamophobic hate crimes is much higher than the official statistics suggest (Larsson and Stjernholm 2016). This is probably true, but the definition of Islamophobia also affects how common anti-Muslim attitudes are in Sweden. We know from other statistical surveys

that Islam is the least appreciated religion by Swedes (Weibull 2019), and Muslims are often portrayed in a negative light (Otterbeck 2005; Axner 2015). Without developing the critical discussion that is associated with how to define and measure Islamophobia (for a discussion see Larsson and Sander 2015), Islamophobia is associated in this article with two aspects: essentialist understandings of Islam and Muslims as something different from 'us', the non-Muslims (i.e. the majority Swedes); and as something threatening (i.e. the enemy, something that should be combated and ejected from the country). Our operationalization of Islamophobia is thus wider than the definition used by the BRÅ. It should be noted that we are not attempting to test whether or argue that some of the published texts should be labelled hate crimes. Our analytical use of Islamophobia is closer to how Islamophobia is defined and operationalized in the influential Runnymede Trust report, *Islamophobia: A Challenge for us all*, which was published in 1997. It should also be stressed that it is not automatically a hate crime to hold stereotypical or essentialist understandings of a religion, but it is still a stereotypical and simplistic understanding of a religious tradition and its followers.

Presenting the results

In accordance with CDA we commence by investigating the manifest textuality in the 60 articles that we selected for our analysis. We follow this with an analysis of the discursive practices.

Manifest textuality

In the first step of the analysis, we scrutinized the articles to learn about the manifest textual content. We both read all the articles separately, seeking recurring themes, patterns, and arguments. Between 24 and 30 April 2022 we found 71 texts that matched the keyword 'Rasmus Paludan' in the Swedish 'Retriever' media database. Of the 71 texts, seven were excluded because they mainly discussed various claimed police shortcomings, and four because they consisted of factual errors concerning time and place. Sixty texts were included in our analysis.

After our separate reading we compared our respective outcomes and were able to organize the articles in our dataset in three different main themes:
  a) General reflections on freedom of speech (37 articles);
  b) Concerns related to the Swedish multicultural society (15 articles);
  c) Islamophobic reflections (8 articles).

Having established the main themes, we jointly read the articles again to distinguish the manifest textual content in each theme: what the standpoint in each article was; and how this constituted the subcategories in each. Theme a) unfolded in three different subcategories. The first, 'Defence of the principle of freedom of speech', included 28 articles. Within this category the articles addressed Paludan's burning of the Qur'an as an undesirable event, but as insignificant in relation to the importance of the freedom of speech: the high police costs could not be an argument for limiting the freedom of speech. The second subcategory, 'Practical limitations for freedom of speech', included eight articles that recognized that there must be a reasonable limitation to how much public spending was acceptable for the upholding of the freedom of speech. There were therefore arguments for what, when, and how agitation against Islam (and other underlying matters that might cause riots) could be performed. The theme's last subcategory, 'Racism', included four articles that actively refrained from addressing Paludan's burning of the Qur'an as an issue of freedom of speech. Instead, the event was understood and discussed in relation to racist structures in society in general and Islamophobia in particular.

The second main theme b) unfolded in two subcategories. One was critical of the multicultural society, seeing the lack of integration as the principal explanation for the riots that followed Paludan's burning of the Qur'an – in total seven articles. The other subcategory included five articles that argued for coexistence and cohesion in a multicultural society.

Finally, the third main theme, Islamophobia, also unfolded in two subcategories. The first, four articles, portrayed Islam and Muslims as more or less homogenic categories that distinguished themselves from other religions and cultures in relation to freedom of speech. The second subcategory portrayed Islam and Muslims as less capable of fitting into a Western democratic society – in total four articles.

Discursive practices

Having established the manifest textual content, we started to analyse the articles to scrutinize the discursive practice, the second level in CDA, and the discursive orders that shaped the language and logics within each theme and subcategory.

Defence of the principle of freedom of speech

The public debate about Rasmus Paludan's demonstrations and the burning of the Qur'an was clearly framed in relation to the question of freedom of speech and this legal domain's relationship with questions like freedom of religion and multiculturalism. The 28 articles included in the 'Defence of the principle of freedom of speech' subcategory often argued that Paludan's actions were offensive and provocative, but he was entitled to his opinions, and it must be allowed to burn any book in an open democratic society. For example, one Expressen article (28/4) argued that although we might disagree with Paludan, his right to burn the Qur'an must be defended, as this was a matter of principle.

> If we start to adapt and limit free speech or other expressions depending on how racists, Nazis, Taliban or Maoists react, democracy and openness will soon be over (Expressen 28/4).

Several articles expressed the opinion that violence should never be a successful tool in a democratic society (i.e. Kristianstadsbladet, Norra Skåne 26/4; Enköpings-Posten 27/4). It is thus argued that it is a dangerous road for a society and especially the police to accept violence as a way of hindering unpleasant, controversial, or provocative demonstrations, and that it is important to support Paludan in his right to burn the Qur'an, even if we disagree with his opinions and actions. This thought is expressed in Bohusläningen, for example.

> Don't get me wrong, I think Paludan, and his actions are downright stupid to be honest, but as far as I know it's not illegal to be stupid. And as much as I dislike his actions, it is allowed to hold a public meeting and express one's opinions in Sweden (Bohusläningen 28/4).

Several articles also express the opinion that the defence of the freedom of expression is tied to the notion of being a citizen in Sweden. For example, in Bohusläningen (28/4) and Expressen (28/4) we find voices arguing that Sweden is a secular state, and everyone who lives in Sweden must therefore accept the rule of law, and that there is no room for parallel legal systems. Consequently, Ystads Allehanda (30/4) argues that it is not a viable solution to prohibit Paludan's demonstrations in specific immigrant-dense suburbs, a suggestion made by some politicians, as well as public spokespersons. To go down that road would only be to support a kind of no-go-zone argu-

ment and to give in to voices arguing that some groups in society should be treated differently (Ystads Allehanda 30/4). Bohusläningen (28/4) contains an article that argues that the conflicts that erupted following the burning of the Qur'an had very little to do with the freedom of expression or religion, it is rather a 'contempt for Swedish legislation' or even 'Swedish values'.

> What we have witnessed in recent weeks in the form of riots and attacks on police and blue light personnel is anything but an expression of freedom of expression and freedom of religion. It is an expression of contempt for Swedish society. A contempt for Swedish legislation. A contempt for Swedish values. And I can never tolerate that. We will not tolerate it! (Bohusläningen 28/4).

In our sample it is regularly brought up that all citizens who live in Sweden must accept the secular state and embrace a broad understanding of freedom of expression. If they do not, it is even argued that 'they' should consider moving to another country (Borås Tidning 26/4). For example, Borås Tidning (26/4) contains an article that argues that if we prohibit Paludan from burning the Qur'an, there is a risk that Sweden will no longer be the Sweden that we have come to know. It is therefore not the time to reintroduce blasphemy laws protecting religious sentiments, even when some individuals are hurt or offended (Borås Tidning 26/4). These ways of expressing the argument illustrate the tension between freedom of speech and freedom of religion.

Practical limitations of freedom of speech

Concerning the political turbulence and enormous costs and risks that followed the publication of the Muhammad cartoons (Klausen 2009), it was brought up in our sample that there might be good reasons to prohibit Paludan from burning the Qur'an. Magazin 24 (29/4) argues that it would be to 'tempt fate' to give him this opportunity to desecrate the Qur'an. If this demonstration of contempt for the Qur'an is allowed, there is a risk that it will be costly for society and broader Swedish interests. Yet another line of reasoning is found in an article in Norra Skåne (29/4), which stresses that the actions conducted by Paludan should be associated with freedom of belief (*trosfrihet* in Swedish).

> Freedom to speak, write, and form works of art about everything is self-evident in Western democracy. But is freedom of speech also freedom in the eyes of everyone to burn or destroy things that religious practitioners hold sacred? (Norra Skåne 29/4).

It is also argued that the 2022 riots were too costly for society at large and for the individual police officers who had to defend freedom of speech (Norra Skåne 29/4). According to an article in Vestmanlands Läns Tidning (27/4) it should be remembered that Paludan's aim is to create 'chaos', not to express his political views. It is thus argued that it might be justified to prevent Paludan burning the Qur'an.

The risk that Paludan will only humiliate the already downtrodden parts of society – migrants struggling to become part of Sweden – is also expressed. As humiliation is a driver of political extremism and even violence, the demonstrations should have been prevented, argues a writer in Dala-Demokraten (30/4).

> As citizens we should offer much stronger resistance when mockery and hatred fill our public places. I understand the Swedish Muslims who are fighting for their place in society and who feel both hurt and vulnerable in Sweden today – above all, when they are met in the debate by a loud idea that violation of religion and sacred values is a matter of course to chew on (Dala-Demokraten 30/4).

Yet the same writer in Dala-Demokraten (30/4) also stresses that even though it is easy to understand the feeling of being hurt, this does not defend the use of violence.

It is also argued that a sharp distinction between theoretical principles and practical or 'real' outcomes must be drawn. This opinion is voiced in Östgöta Correnspondenten (30/4).

> Paludan is not Voltaire. His political act is based on a mad hatred of Muslims. Of course, a good liberal can consider that they have the right to express their opinion, purely in principle. But the good liberal must also realize that reality is not a political science seminar. Actions have consequences (Östgöta Correnspondenten, 30/4).

According to an article in Östgöta Correspondenten (30/4) the debate is not neutral, and freedom of expression is always situated in a political context. In an open and democratic society it is therefore important to understand that 'not all opinions are desirable', and it is naive to think that a Nazi and a rabbi will meet each other with a respectful tone and listen to the best arguments (Östgöta Correnspondenten, 30/4). An opinion voiced in Östagöta Correspondenten (30/4) is that the best way to respond to Paludan is therefore not

a prohibition but to shame Paludan's negative and stereotypical opinions socially. An article in Norra Skåne (29/4) takes a stand against opinions, attitudes, and behaviour that are socially unacceptable by the majority, and in this text the readers are reminded that the persecution and annihilation of Jews during the Second World War began with the burning of books in Nazi Germany (i.e. Confino 2012).

Racism

It is very unlikely that most of those who participated in the riots and attacked the police were practising Muslims, at least according to opinions expressed in Göteborgs-Posten (25/4) (cf. Larsson 2022). It is argued that the discussion that unfolded after the Easter riots is steeped in racism and prejudice against Islam, Muslims, and migrants in general (Göteborgs-Posten, 25/4). Because of negative attitudes, suspicion, and a social distancing from Muslim organizations and Muslim civil society since the terror attacks in 2001 (i.e. Mythen et al. 2009), it is easy to understand why Paludan's actions are provocative for many migrants and Muslims in particular. According to opinions expressed in Göteborgs-Posten (25/4) the majority society's defence of his right to burn the Qur'an is therefore yet another example of racism and anti-Muslim attitudes. Göteborgs-Posten (25/4) argues that the best way to protect the large number of individuals with a Muslim cultural background living in Sweden would be to make the burning of the Qur'an a hate crime. This way of putting the argument illustrates that the debate about the burning of the Qur'an that followed the Easter riots was also related to public discussions about Islamophobia.

This is expressed even more explicitly in Blekinge Läns Tidning:

> This dangerous prank show, cynically hiding behind democracy to damage it, should not have taken place at all (Blekinge Läns Tidning, 25/4).

In both Blekinge Läns Tidning (25/4) and Göteborgs-Posten (25/4) we find voices arguing Paluden only exploits freedom of expression, and he has no aim other than to scorn, harass, and anger Muslims in Sweden.

> In fact, there is plenty of support in our laws to prevent such evil pariah-provocateurs like Paludan, a rightist and sociopath who advocates ethnic cleansing, who is banned elsewhere in Europe, and who is frowned upon

by the Danes themselves. Both the Public Order Act and the Criminal Code offer legal (democratically decided) obstacles. But Sweden receives and protects the attack with a literal interpretation of the constitution, and with that the police become representatives of evil (Blekinge Läns Tidning, 25/4).

Tidningen Syre (25/4) also contains an article that highlights the importance of anti-Muslim hatred in Swedish society. The political discussion has become increasingly saturated with bluntly racist opinion, and Muslims are one of the favourite target groups. Tidningen Syre (25/4) cynically states that:

> I had to take a closer look into what incitement against an ethnic group really means. I guess that it is no longer incitement if it is against Muslims. It is ok to hate Muslims these days. If you [incite people] you are not a racist any longer, you're just expressing criticism, this is how the racist of today reasons (Tidningen Syre, 25/4).

Following this line of reasoning, Tidningen Syre (25/4) argues that anti-Muslim opinions are part and parcel of the new racism. It is therefore argued that it is now high time to analyse our legal system and ensure that the laws are not violated or misused (Tidningen Syre, 25/4):

> I'm afraid that to protect democracy, freedom of speech, and other rights, we are also paving the way for their total abolition (Tidningen Syre, 25/4).

In line with this reasoning, it is argued in Aftonbladet (25/4) that even though it can be difficult to make a sharp distinction between freedom of expression and hate speech, it is the context and the intention that matters. Burning a book should be allowed, but if the person doing the burning repeatedly argues that Muslims are the 'real' problem, and that 'non-Western persons' should leave the Western world, we have a problem that is not related to the freedom of speech but to hate and prejudice. Tidningen Syre (30/4) argues similarly, stating both Paludan and those who defend his right to burn the Qur'an in the name of freedom of speech are only using the debate and the chaos that followed the riots for their own political goals. This section illustrates that the debate about the burning of the Qur'an is not only related to freedom of speech but also to freedom of religion and the defence against hate, prejudices, and defamation.

Concerns related to Sweden as a multicultural society

When analysing the content of the articles included in our sample, it is clear that the multicultural society is talked about as the riots' context, and that this context is sometimes more important to debate than freedom of speech itself. For example, an article in Kungälvsposten (26/4) claims:

> Thirty years of naive integration politics has allowed new arrivals to settle where they please. And where do you think that a new arrival, without a penny in the pocket, would like to live? With their countrymen in downtown concrete boxes. … This segregation has paved the way for organized crime to soak up the most marginalized youngsters. Anyone who has opened a door into a sociology class will understand the correlation – except those who are blinded by their ideology (Kungälvsposten 26/4).

Several articles in our sample repeat that Sweden has been naive, but it is never clarified what this naivete entails. In the criticism of a multicultural society that has gone wrong a distinction is made between politicians and people in general. For example, in Dagens Nyheter (28/4) we read:

> Were those who warned about the multicultural society right? I would really like to say: definitely not. … We who are defending multiculturalism must ask ourselves how we have gone from being a model to becoming a warning. And what is the way forward for a country which, when we were asked to open our hearts and did so, were only rewarded with deadly gun violence and riots? … The responsible [politicians] who have denied and closed their eyes to a development have torn the country apart – that is the worst of it all (Dagens-Nyheter 28/4).

This text implies there is a democratic gap between what should be understood as the ordinary people who have defended the multicultural society in good faith and the elite. The phrase 'open our hearts' in the quotation above is a reference to a well-known speech given by the former prime minister Fredrik Reinfeldt (2006–2014) that called for solidarity with asylum seekers and refugees following the troubles in the Middle East after 2014. Contrary to Reinfeldt's hope, it is argued that the multicultural society is primarily identified as an elite project that has been imposed on citizens, and the Easter riots are evidence that multiculturalism does not work (Dagens-Nyheter, 28/4). Multiculturalism is also understood as the opposite of secularism, and religion in general and Islam in particular are thus held accountable for the riots. In an article in TTELA (30/4) we read:

> The people who are prepared to choose the Qur'an over their country, that is, above our laws and the society we have created, those people will never accept the freedom of speech and religious freedom we have in Sweden. And this is what Paludan wants to demonstrate with his demonstrations. Exactly this!

In the above quotation the conflict is portrayed as a conflict between religious people and a claimed secular norm of Swedish society. This way of putting the argument can be interpreted as saying that religious people will never be able to fully accept freedom of speech, and that Paludan wanted to prove this.

In defence of multiculturalism

In our sample there are also voices that defend the multicultural society and strive to cast a critical gaze at the debate itself rather than at the riots. Tidningen Syre (26/4) argues that Muslims should not be understood as a group that bears collective responsibility for the riots:

> I could write something here about all the Muslims who in different ways tried to stop the violence, clean up afterwards, and in different ways do good. But I don't want to. Not that I don't want people in general to get a different picture of Muslims than the one the Qur'an burner Paludan wants you to see. But because it is also to perpetuate the image of Muslims as more violent than others, and therefore as those who need to prove their innocence far more than ordinary Swedes do (Tidningen Syre 26/4).

The rationale here is to refrain from any perspective suggesting that Muslims should be held accountable – something the Tidningen Syre writer claims is being done when positive examples are offered (cf. Larsson 2022). Reporting when Muslims clean up after the riots rather than people living in the neighbourhoods of the riots as a positive example underlines a particular Muslim responsibility for the riots as such. An article in Borås Tidning (25/4) argues:

> He [Paludan], like other far-right extremists, wants to provoke immigrants in general and Muslims in particular to fuel social conflict, create social unrest, and thus increase support for authoritarian and racist policies. All the talk about freedom of expression is just a smokescreen. It should be remembered

> that those who now claim that Qur'an burnings are about defending freedom of expression are largely the same forces that otherwise want to ban, for example, Muslim calls to prayer, the pride flag, and flag burning and stop what they call 'challenging contemporary art' (Borås Tidning 25/4).

In the quotation above the multicultural society is not seen as the root cause of the riots, and those who claim it to be so are instead individuals and groups who oppose freedom of speech when it concerns content they find controversial.

Islamophobic reflections

Essentialist descriptions

Several articles in our sample present an explicit or implicit division between the non-Muslim majority society ('us') and the Muslims ('them') as an explanation for different responses to Paludan's demonstrations. In an article in Uppsala Nya Tidning (28/4) we read:

> Our Swedish values have developed in our country over the last 1,000 years – influenced by Christian ethics and Western humanism. We should never give up on democracy and human rights (Uppsala Nya Tidning, 28/4).

In line with the above quotation the majority of Swedes have a Swedish spirit ('*folksjäl*') that is rooted in Christian heritage, but the quotation also seems to imply that all Muslims are different from 'Swedes' if they are either born and raised in undemocratic societies or governed by corrupt leaders or Islamists. Islam is thus portrayed as a religion that is different, or at least treated as different from other religions. An article in Smålandsposten (27/4) even argues that it is impossible to expose Islam or Muslims to criticism.

> Is there not an repressed fear and compliance towards Islam in Sweden, I ask myself (Smålandsposten, 27/4).

This seems to indicate that it is impossible to express any criticism of Islam and Muslims because to do so is politically sensitive. The argument is repeated in an article in Världen idag (29/4) (concerning this newspaper, see Steiner 2010), which argues that Islam has a special position in Sweden, and it is not allowed to criticize or mock Islam and Muslims in the way that is possible for all other religions. It is also questioned if suburbs dominated

by Muslims should be treated differently from other areas in society only because they are governed by 'a mob of Islamic fanatics'. This lenient attitude, it is argued, has already been imposed since the police stopped some of Paludan's demonstrations. Similarly, an article in Ledarsidorna (29/4) argues that Islam and Muslims are seen as a special case that is above the law.

Openly hostile

While there are several different ways of arguing for or against Paludan and his burning of the Qur'an, some articles in our sample show an open hostility towards Islam and Muslims. These texts not only provide essentialist or us-and-them portrayals of Islam and Muslims but can also be interpreted as a manifest and deep fear of or anger against Islam as a religion or Muslims as a religious category. For example, an article in Bulletin (29/4) maintains that the Qur'an is only a book of plagiarism that is based on earlier religious texts.

> If the Prophet Mohammed were alive today, he would have been put in prison for life for *copyright infringement*. The sentence above could land me in jail in many Muslim countries. And according to Islamists and many Muslims, I *should* be thrown in jail for this sentence (Bulletin 29/4, italics in original).

Furthermore, Bulletin (29/4) suggests that the Qur'an is not only a 'badly written book' but also a text that does not move its readers like 'good' books by famous novelists. Bulletin (29/4) states that the Qur'an is filled with 'frightening' content, and preventing protesters from burning the Qur'an is the first step in the acceptance of Sharia law in Sweden. That this is a serious topic to which readers should pay attention is also related to questions of power and hegemony, and in this case the writer in Bulletin attempts to arrive at a conclusion and a 'point when all alternative constructions are suppressed in favor of one dominating view' (Hjelm 2014b, 141)

A similar argument is presented in an article in Göteborgs-Posten (26/4), which says it is time to put a stop to Islamists who want to prevent the right to criticize Islam. The argument is also related to the general discussion about integration and the multicultural society.

> They have come here and enjoy our hospitality, our welfare, and our protection. Why should we, as migration fanatics, try to hide such problems, so that they can continue to bring large numbers of people here who ignore

democracy, who have their own rules, and who react with great violence if their rules are broken in our country (Göteborgs-Posten, 26/4).

The above quotation from Göteborgs-Posten can also be read as a depiction of us and them. The text argues that this is 'our' country and 'they' (i.e. non-Swedes and Muslims) must conform with the majority society. An article in Kristianstadsbladet (25/4) also explicitly expresses this opinion, arguing that those who oppose the burning of the Qur'an should either accept our democracy or leave.

> The completely natural conclusion is that those who cannot adapt to Swedish democracy and freedom of speech must quickly find a new country to live in. Sweden is simply not your country and never will be. Settle in Egypt, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq and other countries where religion (often combined with an ingrained culture of honour) rules life (Kristianstadsbladet, 25/4).

In the quotation a typical 'Muslim country' is a country governed by Islamic law, and the countries listed above should therefore be happy lands for all Islamists who protest against the burning of the Qur'an, or who argue that Sweden and Swedes are Islamophobes – though they are not, according to the opinions expressed in Kristianstadsbladet (25/4). As Hjelm (2014a, 861) points out, 'contrasting word choices' are a powerful tool for creating a division between us and them, and in several articles in our sample there is a dichotomy between 'Swedes' and 'Muslims'.

Both Kristianstadsbladet (25/4) and Svensk Tidskrift (29/4) contain articles that argue that the protests against Paludan should be seen as part of a larger foreign attack on Sweden.

> To understand the riots in connection with Rasmus Paludan's demonstration and promised Qur'an burning, a true picture must be conveyed that it was not angry young men but an extremist campaign with Islamist overtones aimed not only at the police but at Swedish society (Svensk Tidskrift (29/4).

Resembling the criticism that was voiced against the Swedish Social service (Socialtjänsten) on social media in 2021 (see Ranstorp and Ahlerup 2023), it is argued that the attack on Paludan and the police who protected the freedom of speech was probably orchestrated by foreign forces (i.e. Islamists in countries outside Sweden), and that the violence that followed Paludan's

demonstrations should be analysed as part of a larger problem (see the introduction to this special issue).

Interdiscursivity

Based on the analysis above, we can observe at least three different discursive practices with largely different premises. While some opinions focus on limitations of freedom of speech, others focus on the riots' perceived root causes, independently of freedom of speech. Yet others express clear root causes for the riots, seeing them as imbedded in Islam or the multicultural society. In line with how CDA is used as a theory and method within the social sciences, we argue that three different discursive orders are at work in the rationales within the various discursive practices: how the 'problem' is discussed; what positions are taken in the debate; and how systems of knowledge and beliefs are constructed (cf. Hjelm 2014b).

The first discursive order could be labelled *liberal freedom of speech*. Within this it is important to articulate that the material consequences of any sort of exercise of freedom of speech may infringe on any speech. No extremist of any kind should be given grounds for future cancellations of freedom of speech by causing riots today – even if the freedom of speech is exercised by an extremist.

The second discursive order concerns *multiculturalism*. Whether the writers seek the root causes of the riots within the *multicultural society*, or if they defend multiculturism as an idea, they are both fighting over the future roll of multiculturalism. One side propagates assimilation to avoid such situations in the future; the other seeks to find multicultural caution and views to avoid such provocations.

The third discursive order could be labelled *Muslims' cultural shortcomings*. The overarching idea is that trust is built over a very long time, and that it is rooted not only in personal lived experiences but also in a Christian and Western culture. This way of expressing the argument is also built on the notion that there is a gap between 'us' (i.e. Swedes, those who are secular) and 'them' (i.e. non-Swedes, Muslims, those who are religious).

In all three discursive orders material conditions such as poverty, unemployment, and neighbourhood criminality as possible causes of the riots are completely omitted from the analysis. One can therefore argue that what is being debated is a struggle of ideas: ideas guiding the liberal and secular society are seen either as superior ideas to which all must sign up to or as subversive ideas that can be attributed to religious/Muslim ideas.

We argue that this idealistic way of arguing contributes to the emergence of a new, interdiscursively discursive, order. We call this discursive order *Cultivating Muslims*.

All our sample's articles also agree that freedom of speech is a self-evident and overarching goal that must be kept intact. No one attempts to find an angle that this has little to do with freedom of speech, despite the fact that Rasmus Paludan is not known as a freedom of speech advocate in any other area. Surprisingly, freedom of religion is rarely discussed, even when it is said that this norm safeguards secular norms that are the benchmark for freedom of speech and implicitly religious convictions. Religious freedom is thus understood as the fruit of secularism, and Islam and/or the multicultural society is therefore seen as a constant potential threat to freedom of speech.

Furthermore, in our sample a clear distinction is seldom (if ever) made between Islam as a religion and Muslims as individuals with different ways of approaching Islam and cultural norms. This exemplifies how 'the discourse "irons out" the variety of beliefs, practices and ways of thinking in the group' (Hjelm 2014a, 860). Similarly, Muslims are instead portrayed as a function of Islam, and as such they need to be *recultivated* or even controlled to fit into the liberal and secular West (Sunier 2012).

Conclusions

With the aid of a CDA approach we analysed how the public debate that followed the Easter Riots was expressed in 60 public opinion pieces published between 24 and 30 April 2022. The empirical material was generated by typing 'Rasmus Paludan' as a keyword into the Swedish 'Retriever' media database. In line with CDA's use as both a theory and method in the social sciences, we started by identifying the manifest textual level/s that were present in our dataset. This generated three major themes: 'general reflections on freedom of speech' (37 articles); 'concerns related to the Swedish multicultural society' (15 articles); and 'Islamophobic reactions' (8 articles). The three major themes were then divided into further subcategories.

In answering the two research questions we asked at the beginning of the article, we found that the burning of the Qur'an ignited, strengthened, and provided fuel for several different positions and attitudes towards freedom of speech and freedom of religion on the one hand but also attitudes towards the multicultural society and present challenges Swedish society faces on the other. The overall results indicate that the riots are mainly viewed as a result of a failed multicultural policy in which Islam is talked

of as an obstacle to liberal democracy and thus freedom of speech. For example, material reasons, poverty, unemployment, and racism are largely absent from the debate. Yet although several articles stated that freedom of speech was the most important aspect, there were also voices that argued that the conflicts and riots that followed Paludan's demonstrations were an indication of problems in Swedish multicultural society, and that some of these problems were connected with 'Islam'. But there were also other opinions that stated that the burning of the Qur'an should be seen as a hate crime, and that Paludan's actions are illustrations of racism and intolerance towards Islam and Muslims.

According to our findings it is also possible to identify three different discursive orders that play out differently in the articles in our dataset. They are: 'liberal freedom of speech'; 'multiculturalism': and 'Muslim cultural shortcomings'. In line with how we understand and make use of CDA, the discursive order will affect how we discuss, perceive, and act on a problem or question. In CDA research this is labelled as recontextualization or interdiscursivity. To put it differently, the 'discourse is *constitutive* – that is, it constructs social reality and relationship', and the three identified discursive orders are tied to various social practices that will contribute to both 'the reproduction of society and to social change' (Hjelm 2014b, 135). The three discursive orders help us identify 'social positions', how various arguments and speakers relate to each other (social relationships), how systems of knowledge and beliefs are constructed regarding the 'problem', and how it 'should be solved'.

Leaving aside the CDA approach, it is apparent that what happens at a local level will be related to global developments. However, this was not something that was picked up in the news material we analysed for this article. In April 2022 the debate was primarily about Sweden, and how the problem should be handled at a local level, but as indicated in the introduction to the special issue of *Temenos* of which this article is part, the war in Ukraine, Sweden's application to become a NATO member, and the rise of protests from Muslim leaders like Recip Tayyip Erdoğan and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) led to the burning of the Qur'an in Sweden becoming global news and an event with major consequences for the whole of Swedish society.

In future studies it will be important to investigate if, how, when, and why the 'talk about the burning of the Qur'an' had an influence at both a societal level and on how various individuals of a Muslim cultural background understood and responded to the public debate and the responses

from the non-Muslim majority society. Like most CDA studies, however, we have only focused on the textual level, not 'the actual process of production and consumption' of texts (Hjelm 2014a, 865; cf. Hjelm 2014b, 145). This is a limitation, but to study how media coverage and debates are consumed, why various 'readers' understand and position themselves in relation to texts, and how media influences the social reality would require both textual analysis and a mixed method approach built on surveys, ethnography, and interviews. This is beyond the scope of this article.

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New Atheism and the Criticism of Islam: From Transnational Discourses to Local Implementation?

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Abstract

One of the ideas in the debates concerning anti-Islamic activities is that atheists, especially prominent celebrity atheists – commonly known as 'New Atheists' – have provided support and justification for anti-Islamic attitudes and activities. Given that Sam Harris, one of the so-called New Atheists, stated that he started writing his first book, *The End of Faith* (2004), immediately after the 9/11 attacks, criticism of Islam is expected to be prevalent among some atheists. The more interesting questions, however, concern what kind of criticism there is, how to make sense of its reasons and motivations, whether it dominates the New Atheist agenda (as some argue), and whether the criticism has been somehow influential in various localities. In examining New Atheist publications and their possible presence at the local level, particularly in Finland, this article suggests that an exceptionally pronounced anti-Islamic approach applies mainly to Harris rather than to New Atheism as a whole. Instead, several other significant aspects come into play, highlighted by other New Atheists, and this is largely true of local atheist activism too. Thus, while a weak link between New Atheists and anti-Islamic activities can be made because of their promotion of strong criticism of religion, New Atheism is not the key to understanding such activities, at least in the Finnish context.

Keywords*: atheism, criticism, Islam, Islamophobia, New Atheism*

References to freedom of speech are ubiquitous among those who defend various provocative anti-Islamic activities. Similarly, freedom of speech is one of the explicitly advertised key values among high-profile atheists who speak critically of religion. In the twenty-first century New Atheists have been the main representatives of the latter position, and the idea that there is a strong connection between anti-Islamic activities and New Atheists is sometimes made in the media and in scholarship, as evidenced later in this

article. However, this article suggests that although New Atheists are very critical of Islam, the connection between anti-Islamic activities and New Atheism is relatively weak or at least indirect, and even weaker between anti-Islamic activities and local atheist activism.

Given that Sam Harris, one of the New Atheists, stated that he started writing his first book, *The End of Faith* (2004), immediately after the 9/11 attacks, criticism of Islam is expected to be prevalent in what came to be called New Atheism. Rather than asking whether New Atheists criticize Islam, the more relevant questions concern the kind of criticism there is, how to make sense of its reasons and motivations, whether, as some argue (see e.g. Edis 2015; Emilsen 2012; Khalil 2018), it is the royal road to understanding New Atheism, and whether the criticism has influenced local practice.[1] The main question animating the first part of the examination is whether the criticism of Islam is simply an example of the general New Atheist critique (i.e. one among others), or whether it is a special case (i.e. its special target)? The second part of the article takes the reading from transnational New Atheist discourses to local practices, especially in Finland, and asks whether the criticism has been integrated into grassroots atheism. This part evaluates the implementation of New Atheism in Finland to argue that the link between atheist activism and criticism of Islam is weak, despite the fact that an explicit admiration of freedom of speech unites them.

As the term New Atheism is contentious, it should be noted it was coined by the journalist Gary Wolf, who named Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and Daniel Dennett as New Atheists in an interview with the *Wired* magazine in 2006. Christopher Hitchens was later included among atheism's 'four horsemen'. Some scholars have questioned whether there is any coherence in the term 'New Atheism' (e.g. Zenk 2013), and I do not assume that people labelled as such agree on everything and have no major differences. 'New Atheism' is a journalistic term used to group different thinkers, but the discourse on 'New Atheism' has been lively, and there has also been empirically verifiable cooperation between the four key thinkers to whom the term is typically attached. I therefore have no major objection to using the terms 'New Atheism' and 'New Atheists' as a short-cut in discussing the four key authors.

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1 Edis writes that 'the negative perception of Islam among the New Atheists […] goes beyond their distaste for those conservative forms of Christianity that most affect the lives of most English-speaking atheists' (Edis 2015, 176). Khalil is slightly more reserved in suggesting that the 'New Atheist authors […] reserve some of their strongest criticism of religion for Islam in particular' (Khalil 2018, 167). These are not necessarily and obviously wrong claims, but they may give the impression that Islam is a special case for all New Atheists equally, and that the New Atheists devote a lot of time and space to writing about Islam.

Bestsellers and their authors: Islam in New Atheist publications

Of all four New Atheist bestsellers, Sam Harris's *The End of Faith* is by far the most alarmed about the Islamic threat to rational thinking and the 'modern world'. Islam is the main target throughout his first book, and the longest chapter is 'The Problem with Islam' (chapter 4, 45 pages). He describes Islam as violent, suggesting that 'we are at war with Islam' (Harris 2004, 109) and offering selected quotations from the Qur'an to show how Muslims believe and behave. His second book, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (2007, 85), describes Muslims as 'utterly deranged' and claims that the idea of Islam as a peaceful religion hijacked by extremists is a fantasy, suggesting that violent Islam is the real Islam, supported by (his reading of) the Qur'an. Even his third book, *The Moral Landscape* (2010), which focuses on how science might be able to constitute the basis for morality (i.e. that we could get from *is* to *ought*), contains an imaginary scenario about a Muslim suicide bomber (Harris 2010, 63). In his treatment of spirituality, *Waking Up*, Harris argues that Islam supports violence more than other religions (Harris 2014, 20), and that Sufi mystics are not representative of true Islam (Harris 2014, 22). His dialogue with Muslim activist Maajid Nawaz repeats many ideas concerning the 'problem of Islam' already present in his first book (Harris and Nawaz 2015). Harris denies the accusation of Islamophobia by responding that he condemns Islamic doctrines rather than all Muslims, adding that 'bad acts of the *worst* individuals [...] are the best examples of the [Islamic] doctrine in practice' (quoted in Khalil 2018, 103), but Harris also embraces the existence of moderate Islam in the dialogue more than he previously has (see Sheedy 2022, 90–91).

Richard Dawkins, the most famous twenty-first century atheist, has written critically of religion for decades, but *The God Delusion*, published in 2006, was his first full-length book about religion. Its writing was inspired by 9/11, based on his view that the time was now ripe for a more full-blown attack on religion, including Islam. It plays a minor role in the book, however. Regarding religion, Dawkins has always been primarily interested in claims concerning the existence of God, gods, and other supernatural beings, and the 'work' such beings are said to do in the world. The main focus has been on Christianity, perhaps partly related to his own biography – Dawkins was brought up as a Christian, and he went to Christian schools and was confirmed in the Church of England (Dawkins 2019a, 10). In light of previous scholarship on Islam and New Atheism, it may come as a surprise that the most sustained treatment of Islam in *The God Delusion* takes only four pages and deals with Jyllands-Posten and the case of the Muhammad cartoon

crisis (Dawkins 2006, 46–49). The focus has not changed in *Outgrowing God*, published in 2019. It refers to Islam (and Judaism) occasionally, but the major part of the criticism targets Christianity, and the Bible in particular. Islam is not a major exception in Dawkins's main books about religion. Khalil has to dig up Dawkins's 2013 tweets to find statements about Islam being 'the greatest force for evil in the world today' (Khalil 2018, 160).

Yet it is possible to find occasions in Dawkins's books in which Islam emerges as worse than Buddhism, for example. For Dawkins 'Islam is analogous to a carnivorous gene complex, Buddhism to a herbivorous one' (Dawkins 2006, 232–233), hinting that the latter is more tolerant of members of other religions (or people without a religion). Moreover, Dawkins, like Harris, has been accused of Islamophobia. Again, like Harris, he denies this by suggesting on Twitter that he is phobic about FGM, whipping women for being raped, honour killing, and so on, adding that 'Muslims are [the] main victims of the above' (quoted in Lofton 2022, 445).

Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* (2007) is more moderate in tone than other New Atheist bestsellers. The Oxford theologian Alister McGrath even suggests that '*Breaking the Spell* is a well-argued, thoughtful, and interesting work, which shows no signs of the rambling and ranting I fear I find, for example, in Dawkins's *The God Delusion*' (Dennett and McGrath 2008, 28). Although McGrath's view is contestable – after all, Dennett's style is hyperbolic, as I have suggested elsewhere (Taira 2014, 67–71) – Dennett's approach differs somewhat from that of his colleagues. The criticism focuses primarily on Christianity and the alleged protection of religion from natural scientific analysis. Islam is not highlighted, at least not explicitly, but there are some occasions when Islam is at the problematic end of the continuum within religions:

> Sharks and dolphins look very much alike and behave in many similar ways, but they are not the same sort of thing at all. Perhaps, once we understand the whole field better, we will see that Buddhism and Islam, for all their similarities, deserve to be considered two entirely different species of cultural phenomenon (Dennett 2007, 8).

Without even beginning to examine the severe problems in comparing two separate entities such as 'Islam' and 'Buddhism' or to deconstruct the stereotype of Buddhism as peaceful ('dolphin') (Jerryson and Juergensmeyer 2010), it is obvious that these are rhetorical constructions with little scholarly value. They do testify to the negative evaluation of Islam, but this is not the same as making Islam the main target of New Atheist criticism. A

similar judgement holds when Dennett compares Islam with Judaism and Christianity regarding tolerance, as he writes that 'Islam stands alone in its inability to renounce this barbaric doctrine [of regarding apostasy as capital offense] convincingly' (Dennett 2007, 289).

The late Christopher Hitchens (1949–2011) published multiple essays against religion in his lifetime. In one of his essay collections, *Love, Poverty, and War*, he writes about 'fascism with an Islamic face' (Hitchens 2004, 411–420) when reacting to 9/11. His attitude towards Islam does not differ significantly in other publications written in and for a different context, but it is not the case that Islam received special treatment compared with Christianity in his main book about religion, *God Is Not Great* (Hitchens 2007), written quickly after books by Harris, Dawkins, and Dennett started to sell well. It is true, however, that Islam may have been particularly problematic for him, especially because he was a good friend of Salman Rushdie and followed his situation closely after the publication of *The Satanic Verses*. There are only a couple of pages about Rushdie in *God Is Not Great*, but Hitchens dedicated a full chapter to their friendship in his memoirs (Hitchens 2011, 261–280). Such an experience makes the negative judgement of Islam unsurprising (although one can challenge whether the generalization of his animosity from some Muslims to Islam is fair), but there is more to it than this. Commentators have suggested that Hitchens's bigotry against Islam 'arose from the need to supply an analysis for Islamist attacks on the United States that did not include actual US foreign policy as part of the explanation' (Seymour 2012, 69). This insight highlights that Islamophobia as an alternative explanation leaves unexamined the change in Hitchens, who abandoned his earlier socialist conviction and began to support conservative and Republican policies in the United States while moving personally closer to the centre of power (e.g. from being a critic of Desert Storm to a signed-up member of the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq in 2002).

Several other authors have had close relations with the four famous ones, and some have made especially negative comments about Islam. For example, the late Victor J. Stenger (1935–2014), an American particle physicist who wrote extensively about religion, named himself the fifth New Atheist in his 2009 book *The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason*. His comments regarding 9/11 testify to his negative and simplistic attitude towards Islam – he claims that 'Islam flew those planes into those buildings' (Stenger 2009, 241) – but Islam is not singled out as a special case. Other traditions, movements, and belief-systems deemed religious are equally dubious and dangerous in his defence of science.

There are still others such as the British novelist Martin Amis (1949–2023), who socialized with Hitchens, and to whom Hitchens dedicated his essay collection *Love, Poverty, and War*. He wrote soon after 9/11 that 'since it is no longer permissible to disparage any single faith or creed, let us start disparaging all of them' (Amis 2002), thus hinting that criticizing all religions was a smokescreen for lambasting Islam. Ayaan Hirsi Ali (b. 1969), a Somali-born woman, who was known at least in the Netherlands for her political career based on criticism of the Dutch state overlooking the abuse of Muslim women and girls, also became world-famous after writing books critical of Islam – *The Caged Virgin* (2006) in particular – and the script for an anti-Islamic short film, *Submission* (2004), before moving to the United States soon afterwards.[2]

What this brief survey should make clear is that the attitude of New Atheists towards Islam is certainly negative. Yet I suggest that commentators examining this topic tend to ignore the significance of other targets of criticism and overemphasize Harris, who is clearly the most vocal critic of Islam among the four main New Atheists. Khalil (2018), for example, dedicates more than 55 pages to Harris and Ayaan Hirsi Ali and ten pages to Dawkins, Dennett, and Hitchens combined (both Dennett and Hitchens are covered in three pages). To demonstrate how the most famous New Atheists think in real-time conversation about the possible exceptionality of Islam, the example of the Four Horsemen roundtable is useful.

The Four Horsemen roundtable

The Four Horsemen roundtable, consisting of Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens, took place in Washington DC in September 2007 as part of the annual conference of the Atheist Alliance International, and it was the only occasion all four held a face-to-face discussion. There was another less famous roundtable at the Global Atheist Convention in Melbourne in 2012 (Dawkins 2019b, 2), but Hitchens had already died. Ayaan Hirsi Ali participated in it with Dawkins, Dennett, and Harris; she had originally planned to join the original Four Horsemen roundtable but had been unable to do so.

Watching and listening – or reading (Dawkins et al. 2019) – the roundtable discussion provides a great opportunity to see the Horsemen's somewhat

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2 Edis notes that Ayaan Hirsi Ali 'cannot be described as an activist for atheism per se' (Edis 2015, 182). I agree with this view because Hirsi Ali's opinions and personal narrative differ somewhat from those of the 'four horsemen', but network analysis suggest her close relationship with them.

different approaches to Islam. In this discussion it is Harris who emerges as most interested in highlighting Islam as a special case. It is therefore probably unsurprising to read him saying that 'treating Richard, Dan, Christopher and me as a four-headed atheist has always elided significant differences of emphasis and opinion' (Harris 2019, 36). At the original roundtable he confesses to using words like 'spiritual' and 'mystical' to describe extraordinary or self-transcending experiences (Harris, in Dawkins et al. 2019, 48–49) and later specifying Islam's and modernity's incompatibility – he does not say the same about other religions – before the possible exceptionality of Islam is explicitly brought up by him:

> Do you feel there's any burden we have, as critics of religion, to be even-handed in our criticism of religion, or is it fair to notice that there's a spectrum of religious ideas and commitments and Islam is on one end of it and the Amish and the Jains and others are on another end, and there are real differences here that we have to take seriously (Harris, in Dawkins et al. 2019, 120–121).

Dennett misunderstands the point, responding briefly by suggesting that the 'network-balancing trick' is unnecessary because critics focus on the negative aspects. Dawkins clarifies that 'Sam's asking about whether we should be even-handed in criticizing the different religions'. Hitchens states the question is about 'whether all religions are equally bad', to which Dawkins responds, 'Yes, whether Islam is worse than Christianity'. Harris then illustrates how Islam is worse, arguing that the 'mayhem that's going on under the aegis of Islam just cannot be compared to the fact that we have two people a decade who kill abortionists'.

After a polite approving gesture Dawkins begs to differ, or at least he prefers another perspective that does not make Islam exceptional:

> Well, I'm sure that's right. On the other hand, my concern is actually not so much with the evils of religion as with whether it's true. […] And I really care about the bogus belief. And so, although I also care about the evils of religion, I am prepared to be evenhanded, because they all make this claim, it seems to me, equally (Dawkins et al. 2019, 123).

Hitchens joins Dawkins by responding that 'I would never give up the claim that all religions are equally false' (Hitchens, in Dawkins et al. 2019, 123). Based on this conversation, Islam is seen as more dangerous than other

religions in this historical period but equal among others in proposing er-
roneous beliefs about the world.

Soon the conversation focuses on minor disagreements and clarifications
between Harris and Hitchens, and Hitchens suggests that over space and
time, the danger of Islam evens out. He then emphasizes that all religions
are 'equally rotten, false, dishonest, corrupt, humourless and dangerous,
in the last analysis' (Hitchens, in Dawkins et al. 2019, 126).

World politics, human rights, and Islam's perceived problem with women

I have argued so far that New Atheists are not identical in how they relate
to Islam – Harris singles out Islam; others do not, though the obvious his-
torical context of 9/11 matters here. The next step is to identify the main
issues in the criticism of Islam before I argue that the understanding of the
New Atheism agenda is lacking if it is seen as reducible to Islam or even
to religion, though I do not deny that the criticism of Islam is particularly
vitriolic and based on questionable interpretations.

One of the main problems with Islam from the perspective of the New
Atheists is its role, presence, and visibility in world politics. All four are
concerned about this, but Harris is the most discussed among the com-
mentators. Although it is by no means incomprehensible that people have
found some doctrines and practices preached in the name of Islam highly
problematic and even threatening, the main problem, in my view, is that
Harris gets the analysis wrong. Scott Atran (2011), among others, has listed
key issues Harris gets wrong from the scholarly perspective. These include
a lack of data, ignorance of empirical research, imaginary examples, and
idiosyncratic interpretations of certain examples. Harris has been further
criticized for confusing correlation and causation and selecting evidence that
supports his views (rather than evaluating all the available evidence). One
of the points repeated most often is that the reasons for suicide bombings
have rarely been religious, and that, contrary to Harris's assumption, there
is not a long history of suicide bombing in the Sunni tradition. Harris also
tends to think that when we know what the Qur'an says, we know how
(real) Muslims think and behave, thus favouring scriptural literalism in
his approach – a position not supported by scholars of religion, who study
the actual behaviour of religious people (Taira 2014, 48–58; see also Dick-
son 2010). As his views are academically untenable, Harris can therefore
be accused of a tendentious attitude towards Islam that is already present
in the opening pages of his first book, in which he presents an imagined

scenario of a suicide bomber and asks, 'Why is it so easy, then, so trivially easy – you-could-almost-bet-your-life-on-it easy – to guess the young man's religion?' (Harris 2004, 12).

Harris, and Hitchens up to a point, support Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations thesis, turning it into a crude version in which 'Muslims hate the West' (Harris 2004, 31). Instead of attempting to refute this interpretation of the thesis, as others have several times (Dickson 2010; Hedges 2008), it is more relevant to note that it is in line with the general political position-ing of some New Atheists. Both Harris and Hitchens are known for their right-wing neoconservative sympathies with United States foreign policy in the early years of the twenty-first century; Hirsi Ali has been affiliated with the centre-right/conservative policy institute the American Enterprise Institute; and anti-Islamic atheist writer Ibn Warraq briefly belonged to the neoconservative think tank the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (Edis 2015, 186). Dawkins and Dennett have been more reserved in this respect.

A second and related problem concerns human rights and individual liberty, often evident in atheists' perception of Islam's problem with women. This topic is relatively evenly shared among the New Atheists. None has shown much sympathy for the defenders of veils, for example. Muslim women are seen primarily as victims of Islamic patriarchy, whatever indi-vidual Muslim women say themselves. Islam can thus be said to be a specific case for the New Atheists, although criticism is not limited to Islam. As Edis notes, 'To atheists, Islam comes across as a particularly virulent form of monotheist patriarchy' (Edis 2015, 182).

The defence of human rights and individual rights is one thing, but the superficially feminist agenda is another, picked up by some commentators, including myself, in earlier publications. In 2012 I argued that 'the New Athe-ists have been eager to defend (Muslim) women's rights mainly when it has supported their own moral and epistemological superiority', and that 'their rhetorical attempts to save dark-skinned women from their men counts as an example of […] the cultural imperialist exploitation of feminism' (Taira 2012a, 109). In other words, when New Atheists have defended feminism or women's rights, it has gone hand in hand with criticizing Islam; there are very few examples of such defences that are not simultaneously combined with a negative evaluation of Islam (or other religious traditions). More recently, Kathryn Lofton (2022, 443–444) has pointed out that in their de-fence of women's human rights Dawkins and other celebrity atheists have also been a source of transphobic rhetoric and have thus contributed to an anti-trans position in addition to their alleged Islamophobia in the name of

women's human rights. As she notes, '"Women" have long been a subject of moral concern for freethinkers' (Lofton 2022, 444).[3]

In both aspects, world politics and women's rights, Islam has been constructed as the enemy in a way that essentializes Islam. It is common for New Atheists to posit true and authentic Islam, its essence, as somehow separate from our values. The true Islam for them is the violent one, the one that does not support women's rights, and 'moderates' contribute to the situation by asking us to tolerate and respect unfounded (religious) beliefs.[4]

The relevance of the 'third culture'

New Atheism's explicit agenda is the defence of science and morality (whatever they mean) by promoting a society in which scientific and moral progress (whatever they mean) can take place. Although Islam is constructed as one of the enemies in this agenda, and possibly *the* enemy in Harris's thinking, the critique is extended to everything that is seen as promoting the relativity of Truth. Three tweets by Dawkins from one day (22 March 2013) highlight this tendency:

> The question is not 'Does it [religion] give people a sense of belonging?' Nor 'Has it inspired great art and music?' But 'Is it TRUE?'

> The question is not 'Is it [religion] good for the fabric of society?' Nor 'Does it give people a sense of purpose in life?' But 'Is it TRUE?'

> Religious belief: the question is not 'Does it make people good or bad?' Nor 'Does it comfort people or frighten them?' But 'Is it TRUE?'

These tweets underline Dawkins's perspective, previously mentioned in the exploration of the Four Horsemen roundtable. Everything Dawkins considers anti-science and not conforming to the Truth is in his list of enemies. Both he and Dennett represent a new intellectual type and activ-

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3 There are many others who have analysed in detail the difficult relationship between the New Atheists and feminism (Beattie 2007; Brandt 2019; Stinson et al. 2013; Trzebiatowska 2018) and those who analyse more generally the idea that Muslim women need saving by the West (Abu-Lughod 2013).

4 As Aaron Hughes notes, however, essentializing is not far from the commentators who emphasize that 'true Islam' is something other than the distorted militant hijacking of Islam that is practically 'synonymous with feminism, ecology, gender equality, LGBTQ2S rights, and the like' (Hughes 2021, 13).

ity in which scientists – or philosophers speaking on behalf of the natural sciences and Truth – speak directly to the lay public. The development of a new kind of intellectual is known as a suggested solution to the dilemma of 'two cultures'. In the late 1950s British chemist and novelist C. P. Snow (2001) lamented the existence of (and gap between) two academic cultures: the traditional humanist-literary culture and the scientific. Those who were called intellectuals were found in the humanist-literary culture. They spoke directly to the masses, whereas members of the natural sciences communicated to larger audiences through traditional intellectuals. One solution to this dilemma has been the development of a new kind of science intellectual who avoids the middleman and writes for the general public using a popular approach and often discusses social issues (morality, politics, and religion), despite being educated in the natural sciences. Called the third culture (Brockman 1995), this solution to the dilemma of two cultures is accompanied by a criticism of humanist-literary intellectuals for their alleged dismissal of science. Indeed, Brockman's *The Third Culture* (1995) included contributions by Dawkins and Dennett. With his PhD in cognitive neuroscience Harris can be read as part of the same wave of thinking, alongside physicist Victor Stenger, whereas Hitchens places his bets on literature as the way to a new Enlightenment.

Religion (including but not limited to Islam for the public intellectual of the third culture) is just one of the enemies. Another significant enemy is alternative or complementary medicine. The list extends as far as to certain academic positions that are rightly or wrongly named postmodernism, feminism, postcolonialism, poststructuralism, postmarxism, and critical theory (Western Marxism of the Frankfurt school) – often condensed into the meaningless catchphrase 'postmodern relativism'. These represent the contemporary humanist-literary culture for the other side. I have previously detected negative expressions of contemporary humanist-literary culture in the publications of New Atheists (Taira 2016, 292), demonstrating how similar discourses have been influential in local contexts of atheist activism, especially in Finland (Taira 2012b; 2014). The point here is that the New Atheist critique has more targets than Islam, including positions that are (more or less) atheist.

The question of alt-right and social media controversies

Thus far most of what I have covered could have been said of the early phases of New Atheism. In the last ten years or so, however, there have been some

developments that need to be taken into account to evaluate the overall relationship between atheism and criticism of Islam, especially because the possible relationship between atheism and right-wing anti-Islamic thinking has become a prominent topic of discussion.

Accusations of Islamophobia have increased due to the online presence of atheism, including of figures like Harris and Dawkins. Perhaps the main reasons are the rise of the alt-right (and 'alt-lite', the right that is insufficiently extreme for the alt-right) and the fact that they have occasionally been associated with atheism, especially in the United States. This has been an issue atheists themselves have discussed. As the Polite Conversations podcast host says:

> I can't tell you how many people write to me and say that they cringe at the term atheist [...] because of the types of representatives that we have out there that are joining hands with members of the alt-right (quoted in Sheedy 2022, 79).

The alleged turn towards the alt-right or alt-lite has somewhat accentuated the anti-Islamic dimension of online public atheism. The Twitter presence of Harris and Dawkins may have played a role in this development. For example, Dawkins's Islam-critical tweets have been publicly discussed in the mainstream media. They are not the worst examples one can find in the far corners of the internet, but when delivered by such a high-profile celebrity atheist, they may well be inspirational to other activists. Atheists have also contributed somewhat to other issues that divide groups in the contemporary culture wars – trans rights is one of the examples, as Dawkins has been perceived as transphobic by other high-profile atheists (Mehta 2023). Harris left Twitter in 2022 but continues his social media presence on YouTube. Dawkins still uses Twitter (now X) at the time of writing.

Some alt-right or alt-light people are atheists (Nagle 2017, 109–112; Sheedy 2022, 79–99; Stedman 2018) and may even be inspired by more famous atheists, but atheist activists are divided on the issue, as many continue to defend 'multiculturalism' against Islamophobia (Blankholm 2022, 99; Amarasingam and Brewster 2016). Like other nonreligious people, atheists as a whole are relatively liberal and left of centre, even in the United States (Burge 2021). American atheists have a more negative attitude towards Evangelical Christians, Mormons, and even Catholics than Muslims (Pew Research Center 2017). Furthermore, as in other respects, 'online atheism', or the atheism that is most visible online, does not resemble atheism in general

(Gervais 2022). Although the American alt-right is a politically prominent example of an anti-Islamic attitude, atheism plays a moderate role in the alt-right, and alt-right thinking does not represent atheism in general, even if it is true that some atheist activists lean towards the alt-right.

Long-term impact and grassroot effects

About fifteen years after the peak of 'New Atheism' it can be asked whether it has had a long-term impact, and what its grassroot effects are in local contexts. The first question has been dealt with in previous scholarship, and the evaluation may appear somewhat contradictory. Some have suggested that the impact is minimal (Kaufman 2019); others see it as strongly tied to an 'atheist awakening' (Cimino and Smith 2014). The difference can be explained by the fact that the first considers philosophy, and the second considers atheist mobilization in the United States. I have situated myself somewhere in the middle, noting that New Atheism has provided a narrative frame for 'the rise of the nones', played a role in articulating atheism to the natural sciences and evolution (and away from communism, Marxism, existentialism and the like), and made atheism more visible in the public sphere (Taira 2012b; 2016).

Because of the lack of substantial case studies of multiple localities, it is perhaps too early to answer these questions.[5] I can only provide some views concerning Finland. The main New Atheist books were translated to Finnish soon after their publication. Only Hitchens was published by a major publisher (Otava); the three others were published by a small publisher (Terra Cognita) that focuses on popularizing the natural sciences in line with the idea of the 'third culture'. The translations increased atheism's visibility, although New Atheism had been discussed earlier. This situation vitalized the Union of Freethinkers – the most important association representing atheist activism in Finland: with the Humanist Alliance they organized the atheist bus advertisement campaign in 2009 (Taira 2017). This was also when Islam became a slightly more prominent topic among critics of religion, largely in a general manner rather than in a focused local context. Having spoken frequently with Finnish organized atheists in the last ten years (mainly members of the Union of Freethinkers in Finland and

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5 A study of Canadian secular groups based on Google Trends data and surveys suggests that the New Atheists preach to the choir rather than to unchurched believers or nominal affiliates (Dilmaghani 2020), but I am unaware of any substantial Nordic studies on the influence and/or implementation of New Atheism.

the Humanist Alliance), my view is that although the New Atheists have been somewhat inspirational to Finnish atheists (see also Kontala 2016, 108), they have reservations about New Atheist ideas, which, especially those related to Islam, have very little tangible significance for their agenda. Islam is criticized among the activists much more than, say, thirty years ago, but their tangible actions focus strongly on the privileged role of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finnish society. Nevertheless, in the twenty-first century there have also been younger atheist activists whose background is in Muslim-majority countries, but their numbers are small, and their input to the local atheist agenda in Finland has been limited. So far the presence of ex-Muslims in Finnish public has been paltry.

An interesting case clarifying the possible connection between atheism and an anti-Islamic attitude is the statement by the Chief Secretary of the Union of Freethinkers of Finland, Esa Ylikoski. He wrote a lengthy Facebook post commenting on the Qur'an burnings at the end of January 2023, when the public discussion was ongoing.[6] The main part of the post referred to the 2010 campaign of swapping the Bible and other religious publications for pornographic magazines. Ylikoski opposed this campaign even then, but it went ahead under the leadership of Jussi K. Niemelä, whose mission was to implement a New Atheist approach in Finland. Ylikoski had supported the famous bus campaign but disapproved of this more provocative event. Writing thirteen years later, he emphasized that the religious books they received, including the Qur'an, were not burned even then – they were donated to the University of Helsinki – and by implication, that Finnish Freethinkers were not now in favour of burning the Qur'an.

This statement was significant because it calls attention to how the change in leadership may change atheists' strategies. In this case Ylikoski emphasizes the need to avoid provocative and attention-seeking campaigns and to focus on ensuring that the rights of nonreligious people are not violated in society, especially in education (kindergartens and schools) and other public institutions (healthcare, the army, and so on). This is fully in line with

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6 While several other Nordic countries have experienced multiple burnings of the Qur'an in recent years, there are no high-profile publicly discussed local cases in Finland. The Qur'an burnings in other Nordic countries were not major news items until there was a local angle to the issue. Finland submitted its NATO application in 18 May 2022. Turkey's decision to postpone the ratification of the application coincided with Qur'an burnings in Sweden, and it was understood that such activities in Finland might weaken the Turkish government's interest in ratifying the application. According to Yle News, police had information about the plans to burn the Qur'an in demonstrations against joining NATO, but they contacted the organizers and informed them that it was illegal in Finland (Yle News 2023).

the recent preliminary statement by the Nordic humanist organizations opposing the Qur'an burnings and blasphemy laws at the same time.[7] This is also a shift compared with previous strategies under the leadership of Jussi K. Niemelä, not because there is any novelty in the attempt to speak for nonreligious people but because publicity stunts and interest in New Atheism characterized the short period of Niemelä's leadership, which ended in 2011. Although many views are aired on social media, the current situation suggests there is little interest in Qur'an burnings or other provocations among Finnish organized atheists. As it stands, although atheist activists in Finland do not speak highly of Islam, they have more important issues to consider than Qur'an burning. For the same reason there is little visible interest in New Atheism in Finnish Freethinkers' current activities.

Although the most celebrated contemporary atheists are widely recognized, and their presence and visibility gives further confidence to activists in multiple local settings (even enlivening the scene for a moment), their long-term impact is not obvious. This view may apply better to countries such as Finland (and perhaps other Nordic countries), where New Atheism is seen as too 'American' in style and detached from local concerns and issues, but it demonstrates the importance of examining the implementation of widely circulating ideas and discourses in local contexts. It is clear, however, that global discourses travel fast. The views of celebrity atheists are known, and when they contain strong criticism of Islam, they are circulated in multiple localities and can easily be taken up when it suits local actors' motivations and aims. Therefore, although I maintain that in the Finnish context Islam has not become a special case, this does not guarantee that this will be the case in the future.

Conclusion

It is unquestionable that Islam has been heavily criticized by the four New Atheists. No one denies it. However, the New Atheist attack on all religions is not simply 'a cover for criticising not only militant Islam but Islam itself' (Emilsen 2012, 528). Such interpretations limit our understanding of New Atheism, which is why this article has argued that the New Atheists are not

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7 The preliminary statement was drafted by the Danish humanists (Humanistisk Samfund), and it was shared on the Facebook page of the Finnish humanists (Suomen Humanistiliitto) (3 September 2023). The statement called for the abandonment of the Finnish blasphemy law and opposed all plans to implement such a law in Denmark. It also suggested that 'Quran burning is deeply reprehensible'.

identical in directing their criticism towards Islam, and that their overall mission cannot be reduced to what Muslims allegedly think and do. Although New Atheists generally see Islam as the most harmful religion in this historical period, their criticism also pays attention to truth claims and thus does not single out Islam. One of the additional and significant reasons religion (not just Islam) is the enemy of New Atheists concerns how certain public intellectuals and natural scientists construct their defence of science. That construction is based not only on targeting Islam and Christianity (and occasionally religions of lesser significance from the New Atheists' perspective), but it includes alternative/complementary medicine, alternative spiritualities, and even some established academic approaches, as New Atheists regard them as promoting anti-scientific views. The New Atheist agenda is therefore more far-reaching in its intent than an Islam-focused critique – though this does not make it any less problematic.

I have also suggested that the grassroots effect of New Atheist criticism has been moderate, at least when examined from the Finnish perspective. In the long term it is difficult to anticipate the role criticism of Islam will play in atheist activism in different locations, but thus far it has not been directly derived from New Atheism, and even less from Harris's particularly virulent interpretation. As the Finnish example testifies, a change in leadership may alter the strategies and even some aims of local organizations. In the Finnish context this has meant that the more explicit New Atheist phase ended around 2011, and criticism of Islam and other attention-seeking provocations have since been even less significant for atheist organizations. Qur'an-burning spectacles have therefore not taken place, and atheist organizations have opposed them publicly while defending freedom of speech and arguing against blasphemy laws. The fact that the burning of the Qur'an was not considered relevant by the dominant atheist organization demonstrates that criticism of Islam is not a priority in current atheist activism in Finland. But if the change in leadership can alter the strategies so quickly, it is perfectly possible that in these times, when transnational discourses move quickly and can easily be taken up by local activists, the next phase or turn will see an increase in criticism of Islam and Muslims.

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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 copes 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 owner-ship, 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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Book Review

Thijl Sunier: *Making Islam Work: Islamic Authority among Muslims in Western Europe.* Leiden: Brill, 2023, 317 pp.

Thijl Sunier is a Dutch professor emeritus of the Anthropology of Religion who has had a long career in research on Islam and Muslims in Western Europe. *Making Islam Work: Islamic Authority among Muslims in Western Europe* is his latest book, and I read it as a summary of his theoretical and empirical interests in the topic. The book's basic aim is to provide insights into how Islamic authority has been produced among Muslims with migrant backgrounds in Western Europe in the last fifty years. Sunier is less interested in religious professionals than in a wider group of Muslims. Much of the book is based on his own research projects, but he also co-authors parts with his postgraduate students. Most of the examples and cases Sunier uses are from the Netherlands, but I believe that many of his analyses and insights apply more widely as well.

The book's empirical context is Muslim migration and integration in Western Europe since the Second World War. Methodologically, it is clearly anthropological, with an emphasis on ethnographic rootedness; theoretically, it has been significantly influenced by Talal Asad, Michel Foucault, and some postcolonial theorists. The Asadian influence is most evident in Sunier's view of Islam as a discursive tradition, and Foucault's role is central in his analysis of power. Moreover, constant challenges are targeted at academic, public, media, and policy conceptualizations and categorizations of Islam and Muslims that aim to reduce migrant-background Muslims' agency and capacity to change.

The book starts with a theoretical discussion of Islamic authority, followed by six chapters focusing on different topics. Sunier defines religious authority as persuasive power that 'deals with issues of truth, authenticity, legitimacy, trust, ethics, and imagination with references to religious matters' (p. 1), which is commonly associated with religious professionals and elites. However, Sunier's focus is not primarily on religious professionals but on other Muslims who in one way or another contribute to the creation of Islamic authority. The context of change is also important. As Muslim migrants began to arrive in various Western European countries mainly as guest workers, they encountered an Islamic institutional void that was gradually filled with religious entrepreneurs, mosque associations, home country interests, Islamic movements, political responses, and discourses about Islam. The growth of an Islamic infrastructure is 'embedded in broader societal, political, historical, and technological contexts (…) in unprecedented circumstances' (p. 10). This is the messy context of which Sunier aims to make sense.

The first substantive chapter deals with 'religious brokers', who function as mediators between a community and the outside society. According to Sunier such figures emerged all over Europe as figures who aimed to help their countrymen in a new society. They were 'leaders, mediators and representatives, who belonged to the earliest cohort' (p. 44) and played a significant role in the initial establishment of the community and its relationship with local society, usually its bureaucracy. Later such figures became less important, but they were at first central. As Sunier reflects on his own study of the Rotterdam of the mid-1980s: 'these religious brokers introduced me to mosque associations, not realising how crucial their position was. … [T]hey were essential to keep things going and to bring together parties to the table that would otherwise never meet' (p. 62).

Chapter 2 examines Imam training, which has been one of the major topics about Islam in Western Europe. As Muslim migration was initially primarily work-related, matters of cultural reproduction were not central. Yet as communities matured, a need for religious collective practice, education, and religious guidance also emerged. This was partly met by Imams sent from home countries. It soon became clear, however, that many of the Imams who were sent lacked the knowledge and skills needed in the new context. An interest in training Imams in Europe there-

fore arose, as the religious training institutions in sending countries were unable to assist in producing the required skills. Several European states became interested in the issue simultaneously with the increasing problematization and securitization of Islam in the 1990s and 2000s. This led to expectations that in addition to leading religious practice and counselling, Imams should foster integration and work against radicalization (pp. 85–88). A problem with some of the initiated Imam training programmes was that they were insensitive to Muslim communities' actual needs and sensitivities, and the issue therefore remains largely unsolved despite significant government interventions in some countries, including the Netherlands.

The Turkish-origin Gülen (Hizmet) Movement is the focus of Chapter 3. Having presented background information about the movement's history and development, the rest of the chapter examines the *sohbet*, 'religious conversations and settings where Islamic sources are taught and discussed' (p. 118). The *sohbet* is a key element of Hizmet's pedagogics, in which members internalize the movement's teachings, ethics, and bodily expressions, including proper ways of talking and behaving (p. 120). The chapter is based on data gathered by one of Sunier's students and provides a rare glimpse into these emotionally laden weekly meetings and the careful ways by which newcomers are introduced to the movement's

doctrine. These meetings are part of the programme to raise 'a generation of active followers who embody the ideal image of a perfect Muslim, able to engage with Islamic traditions and modernity in a specific way' (pp. 135–136).

Chapter 4 examines 'alternative authorities', by which Sunier wishes to increase awareness of bottom-up developments that are often locally based. He presents cases of Muslim women's leadership and authority, local community-based authority positions, and halal-scapes. By halal-scapes he means often temporal spaces in which participants create their own Islam-friendly environments, or 'Islamic bubbles' (p. 168) in women's sports or recreational get-togethers, for example. A unifying feature for all these alternative spaces is that there are often negotiations between formal Islamic positions and localized creative adaptations, and as such they have the potential for change. The agents of change are not the religious professionals but ordinary believers working out practical and sometimes innovative solutions to everyday ethical dilemmas. Chapter 5 features a similar point of tension between participation in online and offline *majlis* Shia Muslim sermons during the month of Muharram. As communities can simultaneously be nearby and distant, they may challenge existing patterns of localized authority.

The final substantive chapter takes as its case the branding of Islam. For Sunier branding Islam

means 'claims and forms of appropriation with the epithet "Islamic", used by stakeholders, administrative authorities, religious authorities, representatives, and adversaries to make public statements about Islam' (p. 221). The chapter discusses issues ranging from hijabs to the halalification of all kinds of products. Sunier thus aims to incorporate discussions of contemporary marketized Islam into other political processes where making claims about Islam is central, including far-right discourses. He draws a contrast between 'regular processes of authority-making' (p. 254) that are largely invisible to the public eye and branding that is 'publicly visible, audible, sensible' (ibid.). This is an important point because it is one way of showing how much of the contemporary discussion of Islam is externally produced without any Muslim agency, but something to which they need to react.

In the concluding chapter Sunier reflects on his approach to examining religious authority through wide lenses. He acknowledges that established religious professionals and elites have a significant role to play, but the constantly evolving religious considerations of lay Muslims need a response, and they even sometimes change long-established understandings and practices because the religious elite also ultimately needs laypeople's acceptance. He also considers it important to point to those Muslim groups that are seeking religious answers to their considerations, as this is where the

seeds of change are located. Finally, he acknowledges the importance of the national context, which in many ways moulds the opportunity structure for actions and the questions in the first place (pp. 265–269).

Although Sunier is clearly widely read and professional in his own field, it would have been interesting to read his reflections on other research on religion in diaspora dealing with similar issues. Much research has been done on Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu diasporas, settlement processes, and – to a lesser extent – theological adaptations. Comparative reflections on changes and adaptations among other religions would have even served Sunier's interest in de-particularizing Muslim experiences because a focus on Muslims still puts them in the spotlight.

All in all *Making Islam Work: Islamic Authority among Muslims in Western Europe* is an important contribution to the study of migrant-origin Islam and Muslims in Europe. Sunier's knowledge of the field and ability to connect insights from different times and contexts is at a high academic level. Although he is careful in drawing definitive conclusions, he is nevertheless sufficiently outspoken to further our understanding of the multitude of Islamic authorities in the making. *Making Islam Work* is a fine contribution to the topic of contemporary West European Islam, and I am sure it will become a regular reference in discussions of religious authority. The book will be of most interest to people studying migrant-origin Islam, but it should also be of interest to others studying religion in diaspora and changing religious authority in general. As parts of the book are quite dense, requiring previous knowledge of anthropology and Islamic studies, I would not recommend it for undergraduates. The level is more accessible for those in the postgraduate phase and beyond.

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Book Review

Séamas Ó Catháin: *The Festival of Brigit: Celtic Goddess and Holy Woman.* Dublin: Phaeton Publishing, 2023 (2nd edition), 296 pp.

Séamas Ó Catháin's 'Festival of Brigit' from 1995 has been republished, with a new introduction in which he highlights the history of the folklore archives held at the National Folklore Collection at University College Dublin, from which he derives most of his material on Brigit. At the end of this introduction he defines the book's aim as an attempt 'to uncover (in a wider international context) aspects of the motivation of previous generations in sustaining and preserving ancient practices and beliefs, and at least vouch the hope that I may have succeeded in promoting a wider appreciation of the important role of folk culture as an essential component of seeking to gain a deeper understanding of the past' (p. xvii). Further on in the book he completely omits the questions of methodology and the possible survival of ancient beliefs and practices in the folklore collected in the last few centuries. As this question never surfaces in the book, it allows Ó Catháin to adopt a somewhat ahistorical view of the past, in which source materials more than a thousand years apart from each other can be thrown together to illuminate the nature of Brigit and her festivities. In the original introduction he briefly explains his methodology, stating that to understand the deeper meaning of the folkloristic materials, one must adopt a wider comparative view that also includes literary and archaeological sources, as well as etymological analysis, and extend the analysis to non-Celtic materials, including not only Greek and Roman counterparts to Celtic deities but also Scandinavian and Finno-Ugric materials. He does not really further explain his methodology, but when reading the book it is evident that this is exactly what he sets out to do to find a deeper stratum of meaning buried within the folkloristic traditions pertaining to Brigit.

In the first chapter Ó Catháin focuses on the aspect of Brigit's cult that points to her role as a fertility figure. He states that he aims 'to isolate and highlight certain hitherto largely ignored or, at best, badly understood aspects of the cult of Brigit which feature prominently in Irish folklore' (p. 3). He starts with interesting examples of traditions pertaining to Brigit in the folklore collections, but when he ventures into the comparative materials the evidence is less compelling. Many of these comparisons seem quite far-fetched, as in the comparison of a curvilinear decoration above the cross on a stone slab associated with one of Brigit's holy wells, the horned Cernunnos figure, the headgear worn by St Lucia in the Swedish tradition, and the Akkas in the shamanic drums of the Sámi, for example. The aim of this wild

speculation is to reveal the true nature of Brigit and her festival, which seems to hark back to an ancient cult of fertility. Furthermore, when discussing the symbolism of the cross, Ó Catháin completely disregards Christian symbolism, associating it instead with fertility imagery such as the tree of life and *axis mundi*.

The second chapter opens with a lengthy discussion of the etymology of terms referring to bears and bear symbolism in Sámi, Finno-Ugric, and Scandinavian traditions with no apparent connection with the figure of Brigit. Later in the chapter Ó Catháin finds some tenuous links between bears and folklore concerning Brigit's festivities. This connection with bears appears especially to interest him, as he sporadically returns to the topic throughout the book. The connection between the two seems to have something to do with the coming of the spring, as Brigit's feast day is celebrated on 1 February, and the awaking of bears from hibernation can also be seen as marking the beginning of the spring, which in the Nordic countries starts considerably later than the beginning of February.

Chapter 3 continues by throwing various traditions together. It opens with a discussion of fire symbolism but then proceeds to bees and birds such as oystercatchers and cranes and further to shellfish and acorns and stones. In Chapter 4 the discussion focuses on a folktale type concerning a clever girl avoiding an attempted kidnap found in various regions of Northern Europe.

How this folktale and the various materials discussed in the previous chapter are connected with Brigit is a little unclear, but it seems that in Ó Catháin's mind they all help illuminate the ancient associations of Brigit, the goddess, vestiges of which have somehow survived in the Irish folk traditions.

Chapter 5 opens with a discussion of the Irish Saint Colum Cille and his association with various female figures representing wisdom, chastity, and so on. The exploration then widens to Old Norse and Sámi mythology and the veneration of holy wells, ending with Brigit and her cow and customs related to childbirth, with a discussion of hallucinogenic mushrooms thrown in at the end. The book ends very abruptly with Chapter 5, without any conclusions to draw it all together.

As will be clear by now, Ó Catháin's exploration of the feast of Brigit has led him in many surprising directions. His comparative method seems to rely on the assumption that by throwing together various legends and traditions from different places and ages, we can tease out allusions and connections perhaps lost in the Irish material, thus getting closer to the original meaning of Brigit's cult. As the name of the book itself indicates, Ó Catháin is not interested in Brigit the saint but in the Celtic goddess and the holy woman of folklore. He only alludes to the hagiographical sources that relate the Life of Saint Brigit, even though they are our ear-

liest extensive sources pertaining to Brigit. According to Ó Catháin the sexual imagery he sees as central for Brigit's cult reveals its *raison d'être* as the wish to secure fertility for humans and livestock, as well as crops. In his mind this is the true meaning of Brigit, as his comparative method has revealed. Towards the end of the book (on page 210) he briefly ponders the question of possible cultural-historical links – or their lack – between the various traditions from different linguistic and physical environments adverted to in the book. He does not, however, go more deeply into this question, which to me appears central for his methodology. Ó Catháin merely concludes that there is an interesting parallelism between all these traditions, without saying whether he sees them as originating in an ancient mythological stratum shared by all these cultures or in borrowing, or being of independent origin due to the cognitive capacities of humans which result in similar patterns of thinking, regardless of the environment.

This is truly a baffling book by someone who is clearly very well versed in Irish folklore, and who is convinced that we can find vestiges of much more ancient traditions in folklore. It seems that at least some of the chapters have previously been published as articles, which may explain a certain lack of coherence and the book's abrupt ending. It would, however, have been good if Ó Catháin had further illuminated the thinking behind his methodol-

ogy and drawn everything together at the end to give a fuller image of Brigit and her cult over time.

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Book Review

Molly H. Bassett and Natalie Avalos (eds): *Indigenous Religious Traditions in 5 Minutes.* Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2022, 278 pp.

In the academic study of religion disputes about what makes certain practices religious and religions have been prevalent since the emergence of the discipline. Yet few compare to the challenge scholars face when attempting to categorize practices of Indigenous peoples and define Indigenous religions. *Indigenous Religious Traditions in 5 Minutes* is an ambitious initiative to tackle some of the trickiest questions in the field, and it has resulted in an excellent and accessible compilation edited by Molly H. Bassett and Natalie Avalos. Much like other volumes from the *Religion in 5 Minutes* book series by Equinox Publishing, the volume addresses a range of typical and topical questions in the field. Many of the featured questions would stun even the most seasoned scholars. Were all religions at one time 'Indigenous'? Is an academic approach to Indigenous Religions innately colonizing? Do Indigenous peoples have 'gods'? Nevertheless, each question is carefully approached with reflexivity, depth, and complexity, impressively maintaining the clarity required by the five-minute limit.

From the outset Bassett and Avanos recognize the problem of terminology. The preference for using 'Indigenous religious traditions' instead of 'Indigenous Religions' is articulated in the first chapter by Tisa Wenger (pp. 3–5), who argues that 'religion' as a product of specific European histories has never been a comfortable fit for Indigenous practices, and that 'religious traditions' signals this categorical misfit. The complicated coinage of 'Indigenous' and 'religion' is further explored by the authors in the first block of chapters, 'Indigeneity and Religion'. Here readers are introduced to approaches warning of the dangers of using religion in describing Indigenous practices in some contexts, as well as recognizing its usefulness in others. The word 'traditions' does not escape scrutiny either and is similarly approached with caution. My main question about the volume was why 'traditions' was chosen over 'practices'. I find the most compelling argument for this choice in Greg Johnson's (pp. 31–33) chapter and his argument that traditions 'entail continuity' yet are 'dynamic, flexible, and sometimes radically innovative'. The main reason for the delicate nature of such categorizations, as the editors acknowledge, is the racist colonial legacy of academic work *on* Indigenous communities (p. xv), which has only recently changed to work *with* and *by* Indigenous peoples.

Within a few decades Indigenous peoples have gained access to academic institutions not as objects of study to be measured, documented, and tested on, but as students, researchers, and lecturers. Despite

their relatively recent entry into academia and other public institutions, Indigenous peoples have already catalysed a paradigm shift, positioning themselves at the forefront of decolonizing movements with other communities subjected to colonizing missions. The impact of these initiatives is demonstrated by the presence of voices from Native and Indigenous elders and scholars in the book, who point out how eurochristian systems are deeply rooted and universalized in academia (see George 'Tink' E. Tinker, p. 199), an especially important reminder to all scholars of religion.

The format of the book, consisting of 84 chapters, each intended to be read within five minutes, could easily have resulted in a series of generalizations or failed adequately to address the set questions. In nearly all the chapters, however, the authors have managed to answer immediately and without resorting to overt simplifications. For example, Edward Anthony Polanco (p. 101), in responding to 'Do Native peoples have shamans?', begins his chapter with a straightforward 'no', before proceeding to contextualize his response and presenting a variety of terms (e.g. *curandero*, *didanowiski*, *pejuta wicasa*, *tepahtiani*) used by Indigenous communities in the Americas to describe practitioners categorized as shamans by scholars.

In addition to its accessibility and scope of themes the book's strength lies in its richness of conceptual tools rooted in critical theories and methodologies, including but not limited to the critical study of religion, Indigenous methodologies, feminist and Queer studies, the critical study of race, and decolonial methodologies. Re(telling), unlearning, (his)tory, eurochristianity, lifeways, two-spirit, *nagual*, other-than-human, larger-than-human, more-than-human, and many other conceptual tools featured in the book are important interventions in established limiting, though universalized, terminologies in academia. This allows readers to enrich their conceptual vocabularies, as well as to reflect on the limits and locality of standardized eurocentric binaries (e.g. human and nature, religion and secular) and concepts (e.g. religion, animism, gender, disability).

It is important to note that entanglements between Indigenous practices and missionizing religious institutions have been explored in the book with an understanding of colonial histories, while acknowledging that most Indigenous people identify themselves with Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, and other proselytizing religions (see Bjørn Ola Tafjord's chapter on pp. 28–30). While several chapters explore the role of Christian churches in Indigenous contexts and Indigenous Christianities (see pp. 177–178, 196–197, 226–227), there could have been more focus on the relations of Indigenous practices with other religious institutions, particularly beyond the Americas.

This brings us to another limitation of the volume, namely its geographical scope, which pre-

dominantly centres on the Americas. There are only a couple of chapters discussing Indigenous religious traditions on the Asian and African continents. Contributions focusing on Arctic Indigenous practices are entirely missing, as are those from the Māori and Indigenous Australian contexts. The inclusion of perspectives from the Sámi, Kalaaliit, Inupiat, Māori, Indigenous Australian, Sakha, Evenki, Tuvan, Buryat, Ainu, and many other Indigenous peoples worldwide would have further enriched the book. It is understandable, however, that covering such a variety of cases in one volume would scarcely be feasible.

Overall, the book offers a unique and accessible though theoretically grounded and informed overview of Indigenous religious traditions. Above all it is a great resource for students, researchers, and the general public alike, offering an engaging introduction to the field. Navigating the dynamic landscape of Indigenous religious traditions can be challenging even for the most experienced scholars, making this book a helpful guide for understanding an ever-evolving field, especially if one has a spare five minutes here and there.

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