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Editorial Note

On 16 May this year experts in the study of religion gathered in Helsinki to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the Finnish Society for the Study of Religion (SUS), the publisher of Temenos. The anniversary was an opportunity to look back and to look forward. A lot has happened in sixty years, and the debates have varied, but the participants were clearly hopeful about the future. The study of religion today is an essential field with much to offer anyone who wishes to understand contemporary societies and changes. SUS also performs an important task in bringing scholars together and keeping conversations open and current.

However, 2024 is not just a special year for the SUS; it is also a special year for Temenos. This year we publish the journal's sixtieth number. It would be impossible to attempt to summarize 60 years and 120 or so issues in a short editorial note. All we can say is that the journal has always been and continues to be characterized by variety and a fearlessness in taking on challenging topics. This year's first issue, a special issue published in June on the burning of the Qur'an, exemplifies this. The interest in the issue has been noticeable. At the conference of the European Association for the Study of Religion (EASR) in August this year the guest editors Göran Larsson, Iselin Frydenlund, and Torkel Brekke organized a well-attended panel discussion about the issue. We are very happy to be able to publish the comments provided during the panel discussion by Professor Verena Meyer and Professor Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, and the response from Iselin Frydenlund and Göran Larsson. Their reflections on the special issue start this anniversary issue.

The first peer-reviewed article also brings us back to the topic of Qur'an burnings, which continued after the period analysed in the special issue. Mia Lövheim, in conversation with the contributions to the special issue, examines the period between 1 April and 1 October 2023 more closely and explores and discusses the representations of the event as a 'crisis' in the Swedish daily press. With a quantitative approach to the main topics in a selection of daily newspapers and with the aid of theories of mediatized conflicts, Lövheim analyses how the events were debated and constructed, highlighting both similarities with earlier research and new perspectives.

The analysis underscores how the 'Qur'an crisis' is co-structured by multi-faceted social, political, and religious changes. There is a risk of polarization here – but also the possibility for deliberation and negotiation and a greater understanding of the questions at hand.

The second article continues with the focus on Sweden and examines conspiracy mentality in Sweden more closely through a survey of paranormal beliefs, practices, and experiences. Cristoffer Tidelius uses the idea of a shared sociocultural milieu of alternative views and practices of knowledge as a point of departure. Continuing with a detailed presentation of the research field, Tidelius explores the relationship between conspiracy mentality and paranormalism. The study shows that the variables that contribute significantly to predicting conspiracy mentality are gender (being male), higher levels of paranormalism, lower income, conservatism as opposed to openness to values of change, and self-transcendence as opposed to values of self-enhancement. The study also points to higher levels of conspiracy mentality among sympathizers with the right-wing populist party in Sweden.

Our third peer-reviewed article focuses on Sápmi. Helge Årsheim examines the identification and protection of the sacred natural sites (SNS) of Indigenous peoples, focusing on cases where the SNS of the Sámi people have come under pressure. The article starts by unpacking the origins and impact of the concept of SNS, moving from the international level to domestic decision making. Årsheim is particularly interested in how discourses on SNS have come to interact with and influence other issues of global governance such as environmental and biological diversity concerns, cultural heritage activism, and the protection of the human rights of Indigenous peoples. The second part of the article discusses the extent to which the Norwegian authorities, commercial actors, and civil society activists have drawn on the international discourse on SNS to formulate their claims.

As usual, the issue concludes with book reviews of the field's current literature. We hope you will enjoy this anniversary issue. Do follow us on social media for suggestions about noteworthy earlier research published in Temenos over the last 60 years.

Sofia Sjö and Minna Opas

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

Abstract

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

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

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

VERENA MEYER

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JAKOB SKOVGAARD-PETERSEN

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

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

The context of the Middle East

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Perspectives

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ISELIN FRYDENLUND
GÖRAN LARSSON

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3 The first legal draft mentioned 'sacred objects'.

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

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The 'Qur'an Crisis' in the Swedish Press: Negotiating Freedom of Speech in a Mediatized and Religiously Diverse Society

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Abstract

During the summer of 2023 news and debates about public burnings of the Qur'an dominated the Swedish and international media. In the aftermath of the flames and the debate this article aims to present and discuss the representation of the event as a 'crisis' in the Swedish daily press between 1 April and 1 October 2023. The article uses a quantitative analysis of the main topics in a selection of Swedish and Nordic daily newspapers, and a combination of co-occurrence and qualitative frame analysis of how the event came to be debated in a sample of Swedish opinion articles. Theories of mediatized conflicts as dynamic and complex processes revealing the state of democracy in a society are used to analyse the findings. The results are discussed in light of previous research on Qur'an burnings in Sweden and on debates about previous events involving clashes between freedom of speech and freedom of religion in the Nordic countries. The article concludes by arguing that the 'Qur'an crisis' as a mediatized conflict co-structures an ongoing negotiation between different positions on the most fundamental values of democracy, which has become increasingly contentious in Swedish public and political debate.

Keywords*: Qur'an burnings, Sweden, mediatization, daily press, freedom of speech, religious diversity*

On 4 April 2023 the Swedish Administrative court ruled against a former decision by the police to deny a permit for a public demonstration. A Qur'an was to be burnt as part of the demonstration, and the police had denied permission on the grounds of increased threats of riots and terror attacks following a series of similar demonstrations in 2022. The court ruling sparked a spate of public burnings of the Qur'an in June and July,

followed by diplomatic protests and violent demonstrations, especially in Muslim-majority countries, and debates in the Swedish parliament. With escalating reactions the 'Qur'an crisis' came to dominate both the Swedish and international media during the spring and summer of 2023. The Swedish prime minister called the event 'the most serious security situation since the Second World War' (Edwards 2023), and the Swedish Institute reported on its repercussions for Sweden's image abroad. In an interview about the situation Simon Anholt, the founder of the Nation Brands Index (NBI), stated that the 'Qur'an crisis' caused nearly as much opprobrium for Sweden as for Denmark after the publication of the Muhammad cartoons in 2006 by the newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* (Swedish Institute 2023).

In the aftermath of the flames and debates it is time for a reflection on the Qur'an burnings as a 'crisis' in the context of the social, political, and religious changes that have occurred in Swedish society in recent decades, as well as how they are related to broader debates on religion and freedom of speech. The aim of this article is, first, to present the main topics in Swedish and Nordic daily press coverage of the Qur'an burnings between 1 April and 1 October 2023, and second, to analyse the main frames used to interpret the meaning of the event in Swedish opinion pieces, using quantitative co-occurrence analysis and qualitative frame analysis. The findings will be discussed regarding how the 2023 coverage compares to research on earlier burnings in the Nordic countries (Larsson et al. 2024), as well as daily press coverage of *Jyllands-Posten*'s publication of the Muhammad cartoons in 2005 (Kunelius et al. 2007). In conclusion, the framing of the Qur'an burnings as a crisis for Swedish society will be discussed in the context of ongoing debates in Sweden regarding how to practise the democratic values of freedom of speech amidst the increased diversity and contestation of religion in the public sphere (Furseth 2018; Lundby 2018).

Background: Qur'an burnings in Sweden 2023

The right to freedom of speech is granted in the Swedish constitution by the Law on Freedom of Expression (Sveriges Riksdag 1991). The exercise of freedom of speech at public meetings is regulated by the Public Order Act, and decisions on permission are delegated to the local police, based on the possibility of upholding public security and order (Sveriges Riksdag 1993). Freedom of religion is also a constitutional right in Sweden (Sveriges Riksdag 1951). However, Sweden has not had a specific law against defamation of religion since 1970. A new law on agitation against an ethnic or national

group was instituted in 1948, which criminalized utterances involving hatred or disregard of a group based on ethnicity. Later revisions extended the law to religious beliefs, as well as race, sexual orientation, and sexual identity (Sveriges Riksdag 1949).[1] The Swedish situation resembles that in Norway but differs from that in Finland, where the violation of the sanctity of religion is a criminal act. In Denmark a law criminalizing the inappropriate treatment of writings with significant importance for a recognized religious community was reinstated in 2023 (see Larsson et al. 2024).

The police decision to deny a permit for public demonstrations involving burnings of the Qur'an followed riots after burnings performed by the Danish politician Rasmus Paludan in several Swedish cities during 2022 (for more see Kühle 2024). The most violent event took place at Easter 2022, coinciding with Sweden's application to join NATO in May 2022 (see Larsson and Mattsson 2024). A burning outside the Turkish embassy on 21 January 2023 resulted in strong international protests and threatened to obstruct Sweden's NATO application. The decision by the Administrative Court on 4 April was made on the grounds that the right to freedom of speech could not be compromised by expectations of riots or terror attacks in Sweden. Legal grounds for restricting public demonstrations need to directly follow from or concern the act's immediate environment (Kammarrätten 2023).

One of those applying for permission to burn a Qur'an was Salwan Momika, a 37-year-old Christian refugee from Iraq. On 28 June he burned a Qur'an outside one of the largest mosques in central Stockholm, while playing the Swedish national anthem and waving the Swedish flag. The burning was staged during the celebration of the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha. In an interview (Hedbom 2023) Momika stated that the act was motivated by a critique of the Qur'an, which should be forbidden both in Sweden and throughout the world, and that Swedish people needed to wake up to the danger Islam posed to democracy. On 20 July Momika attempted another burning outside the embassy of Iraq in Stockholm, but when this failed, he instead violated the Qur'an by kicking and stamping on it. These burnings were followed by several others during July, August, and September, and the events were also filmed and disseminated on the TikTok digital platform.

Momika's public desecrations of the Qur'an caused demonstrations with burnings of Swedish flags in several Muslim countries, and the Swedish embassy in Iraq was attacked on 29 June and set ablaze on 20 July. Several

1 The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) includes crimes committed out of hostility or hatred towards Islam and Muslims, those who are or are perceived to be Muslims, or representatives of Muslims or Islam in their statistics for such crimes (Brå 2019).

countries suspended diplomatic relations with Sweden, including Turkey, Pakistan, Morocco, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Yemen. On 12 July the United Nations Human Rights Council issued a disputed resolution urging member countries to 'address, prevent and prosecute acts and advocacy of religious hatred' (Henley 2023). On 31 July the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) adopted a resolution against repeated crimes of desecrations and burnings of the Qur'an in Sweden and Denmark. The Swedish prime minister and foreign minister answered the international criticism by repeatedly disassociating themselves from the burnings, stating that such acts were 'legal but inappropriate' in Sweden (Björkman 2023). In August threats of terror attacks from radical Islamist movements such as Al Qaida and Hezbollah escalated. As a consequence the Swedish security police raised the risk level of terror attacks to four out of five on the international scale.

There were public demonstrations and debates in Sweden, the largest taking place in Stockholm on 30 June and 9 July. The situation also created tension in parliament and in the right-wing government coalition,[2] in power since September 2022. These escalated when a member of the nationalist populist Sweden Democrats, which cooperates with but is not formally part of the government, tweeted derogatory statements about Islam, leading to a vote of confidence on 17 August. On 18 August the Swedish government initiated a revision of the Public Order Act to investigate the possibility of prohibiting burnings of the Qur'an due to security risks (Regeringskansliet 2023). A survey conducted in August 2023 showed that while most of the population strongly supported freedom of speech, 53 per cent supported a ban of the burning of religious scriptures in public (Rosén 2023a). On 30 August the Social Democrats, the leading opposition party, called for an investigation of whether burnings of the Qur'an fell under the law of agitation against ethnic and national groups (Socialdemokraterna 2023).

Public controversies on religion as media events: Previous research

The Qur'an burnings in Sweden followed a series of similar events in Europe evolving from tensions between freedom of speech and the defamation of religious beliefs and symbols, including the publication of the British-Indian writer Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* in 1988, *Jyllands-Posten*'s

2 The Conservatives (Moderaterna), Christian Democrats (Kristdemokraterna), Centre Party, and Liberal Party (Liberalerna). The Tidö Agreement is the basis for cooperation with the Sweden Democrats (Government Offices of Sweden 2022).

publication of the Muhammad cartoons in 2005 and the subsequent debate in 2006, and the attacks against the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris in 2015. All these events have been extensively covered and debated in conventional news media and increasingly on various digital media platforms. The media coverage has often displayed a polarization between fundamentalist, most prominently Islamic, religious groups and Western democracy as characterized by freedom of speech, individual liberty, and equal treatment under laws based on the principle of a neutral secular state. The media's performative role in orchestrating polarization between religious and secular values has previously been analysed through theories of media events (e.g. Eide et al. 2008; Couldry et al. 2010), hybrid media rituals (Valaskivi and Sumiala 2023; Pauha 2024), or mediatization (Cottle 2006; Lundby et al. 2018).

The burnings of the Qur'an in the Nordic countries are a topic of growing scholarly interest. A recent special issue of *Temenos*, edited by Larsson, Frydenlund, and Brekke (2024), illustrates the complexity of Qur'an burnings regarding contemporary legal and political factors at local and global levels, as well as historical and theological aspects. The articles in the special issue focus on burnings of the Qur'an in the Nordic countries before or during 2022. These studies' findings provide an important point of comparison for the analysis presented in the present article. This especially concerns Larsson's and Mattsson's (2024) analysis of 60 opinion pieces from a broad range of Swedish newspapers commenting on the Easter riots in 2022. Their findings and conclusions regarding how the burning of the Qur'an ignited different positions and attitudes towards freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and openness to cultural and religious diversity in Swedish society will be further presented and discussed in the analysis of the more recent material from 2023 this article analyses.

Linge and Bangstad (2024) argue that Qur'an burnings by the far-right fringe organization SIAN in Norway represent 'conflict-generating media events' in which symbolic and ritual dimensions are amplified to attract publicity and generate polarization, and free speech as a fundamental democratic right is 'captured' to promote Islamophobia and polarization in society. In such events actors such as SIAN and the media work in conjunction to situate local Qur'an burnings within a larger 'metanarrative' of secularism and free speech in European society. However, the outcome of this process risks turning acts depicted as 'freedom of speech' into a legitimation of 'freedom to hate' – in this case Muslims. This argument is connected with Svensson's (2017) point that the explosive character of Qur'an burn-

ings relies on a shared intuitive understanding between the performers and protesters of an object's sacredness, and how it can be desecrated in ways that communicate contempt and hatred for a particular religious group.

Toft's (2024) analysis of the Norwegian media coverage of Qur'an burnings in Sweden and Norway during Easter 2022 takes a somewhat different approach to 'media events'. Like Linge and Bangstad, Toft starts with an approach that sees media events as disruptive (Valaskivi and Sumiala 2023, 1335). However, the outcome of such events can have different outcomes, depending on how it resonates with shifting sociopolitical circumstances (Cottle 2006). Based on an analysis of interviews with journalists and articles in Norwegian newspapers, Toft argues that the meaning of events such as Qur'an burnings needs to be analysed regarding different layers of coverage such as news, commentary, and opinion journalism. A core finding of the study is that news journalists reflect critically on how they cover and frame such an event. Highlighting this variation in media coverage contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex ways in which media representations are connected with various actors and established discourses in a particular society.

In addition to recent work on the media coverage of Qur'an burnings in Nordic societies, previous research on media debates about the 2006 Muhammad cartoons event constitutes a relevant point of reference for the present study. This event has been described as a 'defining moment' that '…left an enduring residue in the form of a repertoire of images and assumptions' (Eide et al. 2008, 11) and has been analysed in numerous publications (see e.g. Klausen 2009; Christoffersen 2016). Two reports from an international comparative project on the media coverage of and debates about the Muhammad cartoons are particularly relevant (Kunelius et al. 2007; Eide et al. 2008). A core theme in this project concerned the dynamic between freedom of speech as a universal value and the possibility of communication across particular contexts (Kunelius and Eide 2007, 11–12). This dynamic can result in tension or clashes, but it also has potential for deliberation and dialogue. In line with Toft's findings this study showed that although news coverage more often seemed to reproduce a clash of values between the 'Western' and 'Muslim' worlds by favouring violent demonstrations and extremist positions, opinion pages reflected a broader spectrum of positions that defended, criticized, or rejected this understanding (Kunelius and Eide 2007, 19–20). The project's Swedish case studies focused on the development of frames (Strömbäck et al. 2008) or discourses (Wallentin and Ekecrantz 2007) in articles in daily newspapers during 2006. The results of these studies will be further presented in the discussion of the findings from 2023.

Mediatized conflicts: Dynamics and complexity

This article's analysis departs from theories on mediatization, religion, and conflict. As a concept, mediatization captures interrelated processes between media change and social and cultural change that develop at an institutional level, as well as in daily social interaction (Hjarvard and Lundby 2018). Mediatization also focuses on the media's active role in social and cultural conflicts. In terms of religion the media provides a horizon of orientation, as well as tools for various social actors to engage in such conflicts. Nordic researchers have developed research on the mediatization of religion over the last two decades in a series of publications (see e.g. Hjarvard and Lövheim 2012; Lövheim and Hjarvard 2019). This research reveals a growing contestation of Islam especially in the public sphere, as secular journalism increasingly presents religion according to news value and topical political debates (Lundby et al. 2018; Lövheim et al. 2018a; Taira 2019). This contestation occurs against the background of the increasing ethnic and religious diversity since the 1990s. Religion in Nordic societies today is characterized by a complex interplay between continuing secularization in terms of adherence to organized religion and the increasing visibility and contestation of religion in the media and in political debate (Furseth 2018). Here tension and conflict between secularity, culturalized Christianity, and Islam have become more pronounced in discussions of the various challenges of secular democracies (Lövheim et al. 2018b; Taira 2019, 187).

The complexity of religion's public role in contemporary Nordic societies calls for an approach to mediatization that accounts for dynamics and varieties in how the media conditions interaction between actors in a particular event. Media forms and representations can reproduce and reinforce tensions between various interests and actors in society but can also nuance them by displaying alternative perspectives or forms for public deliberation (Cottle 2006). Hjarvard and Lundby (2018, 55, cf. Hjarvard et al. 2015) approach the media's role in contestations of religion through the intertwined dynamics of amplification, framing, and performative agency and co-structuring. Using *Charlie Hebdo* 2015 as an example, they argue that the news and social media's global dissemination of the attack amplified the controversy in the mobilization of worldwide protests against terrorism and support for the magazine, for example. In terms of framing, the incident's dominant representation as a terrorist act against freedom of expression in the Western news media enhanced a particular interpretation of the event's causes and implications. The media can also frame an event by providing platforms for different voices that affect various actors' performative

agency. The dynamic of co-structuring addresses the media's role in public deliberation by giving a voice to different actors in news reporting or opinion pieces, and how access to the media intersects with power dynamics in society. The variety of available media genres and forms, as well as the degree of competition between them, plays an important role in whether the media aligns with or challenges such power structures. The degree of disunity within politics or civil society also creates opportunities for the media to engage in commentary and criticism from a variety of perspectives (Cottle 2006, 20). Media conflicts should therefore be conceived of as dynamic and complex rather than constant or linear. Mediatized conflicts open public spaces where diverging views and voices define and defend their claims and aims. In this process '…the state of democracy in today's societies becomes revealed and, in important respects, constituted and open to evaluation' (Cottle 2006, 5).

Data and methods

The analysis of media coverage of and debate about the Qur'an burnings starts with articles published in a selection of Nordic daily newspapers between 1 April and 1 October 2023. This material cannot be seen as representative of public opinion, as debates about the burnings of the Qur'an in Sweden also took place on digital media platforms such as TikTok and X, and on both national public and global satellite television. Analysing the Qur'an burnings as a hybrid media event permits a more comprehensive analysis of the interplay between different forms of media and actors (see Valaskivi and Sumiala 2023; Linge and Bangstad 2024). Nevertheless, focusing on the daily press can be motivated, first, by the aim of contextualizing media coverage of and debate about a topical event within social and political changes in Sweden regarding religious diversity. Despite the increasing use of digital and hybrid media since 2006, national newspapers can still be considered relevant as public spaces where negotiations of the visibility and legitimacy of religion between political and civil society actors take place (Langer and Gruber 2021). Opinion material from the daily press is therefore valid for mapping different standpoints of 'legitimate public controversy on a given issue' (Kunelius and Eide 2007, 11–12). Second, daily press material enables comparisons with previous research on the 2022 Qur'an burnings, the Muhammad cartoons, and longitudinal studies in the Nordic countries of the mediatization of religion, especially Islam, and political debate (Taira 2019, 182). In the Nordic countries the daily press maintains a significant position

in setting the political discussion agenda, enjoying a high level of public attention and trust by international standards (Mediebarometern 2023).

This first quantitative part of the analysis is based on 1,306 articles from 14 Nordic newspapers, representing the largest newspapers with different political profiles, as well as the main religious (Christian) newspaper in each country: in Sweden *Dagens Nyheter* (independent), *Aftonbladet* (independent social democratic), *SydSvenskan* (independent liberal), and *Dagen* (Christian); in Denmark *Politiken* (social-liberal), *Jyllands-Posten* (liberal-conservative), and *Kristeligt Dagblad* (Christian); in Finland *Helsingin Sanomat* (liberal), *Ilta-Sanomat* (independent), *Huvudstadsbladet* (Swedish, independent-liberal), and *Kotimaa* (Christian); in Norway *Aftenposten* (independent conservative), *Dagsavisen* (social democratic), and *Vårt Land* (Christian). Articles were collected manually from the newspapers' websites between 1 April and 1 October 2023 using the search words '*koranbränning*', with equivalent terms in Danish (*koranafbraending*), Finnish (*koraanin poltto*), and Norwegian (*koranbrenning*).[3] Fifty-seven per cent of the articles were from Swedish newspapers, warranting a focus on Swedish newspapers in the following analysis. The Nordic newspapers will be used for comparison in the analysis of the main topics. Two people inductively coded the total sample of articles in the SPSS software program by date, newspaper, genre, topic, and actor. Descriptive statistics (frequency and cross tabulation) were used to identify dominant patterns in how the articles represented the event and to compare patterns between newspapers and genres, as well as changes over the period. These results are presented in Table 1 below. Articles from the Swedish newspapers were then analysed through an inductive frame analysis using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. The results of this analysis are presented in Figure 1 and Table 2 below.

Framing concerns the process of selecting certain aspects of an event and making them more salient to '…promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation' (Entman 1993, 52). Miller and Riechert (2001) describe frames as ideological interpretative mechanisms used for claiming meaning in contentious issues, shaped in dynamic interaction between the news media and various stakeholders representing opposing interests and values. This approach emphasizes the interplay between significant changes in the political debate and news media representations, which connects well with the dynamic of co-structuring in mediatization theory described above (Strömbäck et al.

3 For Nordic newspapers the search was filtered to include only Qur'an burnings in Sweden.

2008, 121). Frames are manifested in 'the choice and range of terms or words that provide the context in which issues are interpreted and discussed' (Miller and Riechert 2001, 105). Frames can thus be identified by analysing the frequency with which words occur and co-occur in texts.

For the Swedish newspaper articles a quantitative latent semantic analysis of the most frequently co-occurring words in news articles and opinion articles respectively was made using the Leximancer program, a software package offered by Leximancer Pty Ltd.[4] The program performs an analysis of concepts, defined as words that occur together with a certain frequency in sentences of selected texts compared with other sentences. A concept map (see Figure 1 below) visualizes the relations between concepts in a sample of texts, based on the probability of these words' co-occurrence (Lundgren and Jensdotter 2022).[5] This analysis can be seen as a form of unsupervised machine learning approach (Boumans and Trilling 2016, 14) in that it builds a thesaurus of co-occurring words from the texts, not from predetermined categories. It is therefore suitable for performing an inductive frame analysis.

The quantitative semantic analysis of the Swedish opinion articles was followed by a qualitative analysis of a sample of articles in which the co-occurring concepts identified in the map were most frequent. These articles were subject to a close reading of framing in the sense of the interpretation of the event's meaning, problem definition, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation.

Coverage of the Qur'an burnings in the Nordic daily press

A quantitative analysis of the total sample from the Nordic daily press shows that most articles were published in July (522) and August (440), followed by September (148) and June (111). In October 2023 very few articles appeared, which follows a common pattern of the news or issue cycle of similar events (Miller and Riechert 2001; Strömbäck et al. 2008). The majority of articles (110) were published on 20 and 21 July, the dates of a Qur'an burning outside the Iraqi embassy in Stockholm and the attack on the Swedish embassy in Iraq.

The analysis of the articles' topics generated 12 categories (see Table 1), of which *international reactions*, *news events*, *security*, *law*, and *freedom of speech* were most frequently represented. An analysis by genre shows significant

4 Version 5, Leximancer User Guide released Dec 2021.

5 Leximancer applies Bayesian statistics to measure the prominence of co-occurring words, which is a form of conditional probability measurement.

differences between news and opinion articles. The topics *event* (news reports), *international reactions*, *person* (which includes burners of the Qur'an, most frequently Momika), *security*, and *Nordic politics* dominated the news articles, while the opinion articles almost exclusively focused on *freedom of speech*, *religion*, and *Swedish politics*.

Table 1. Topics in Nordic newspaper articles, percentage (rounded), N=1,306.

Topics	Total percentage	News articles	Opinion articles
International reactions	24	93	6
Event	16	97	2
Security	13	91	9
Law	13	77	23
Freedom of Speech	8	27	73
Swedish politics	6	64	32
Swedish protests	6	84	16
NATO	3	77	23
Religion (including Islam)	3	57	42
Person (burners)	3	94	6
Nordic politics	2	90	10
Disinformation	2	86	14

An analysis of topic changes over time shows that the coverage shifts from *international reactions*, which is most frequent in July, to *security, freedom of speech*, and *Swedish politics* in August. In September the topics of *Swedish protests* and *person* are most frequent. Differences between newspapers show that *Aftonbladet* stands out as focusing mostly on *Swedish politics*, while *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*, based in Southern Sweden and Malmö, where several protests against burnings took place, mostly covers *Swedish protests*, *NATO*, *law*, and *disinformation*. Among the Nordic papers *Jyllandsposten*, *Politiken*, and *Huvudstadsbladet* most frequently report on the significance of the events for Nordic (domestic) politics. *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Ilta-Sanomat* focus more on *NATO*, which can be explained by Finland's and Sweden's parallel membership application processes. *Aftenposten* and *Dagsavisen* focus more on *freedom of speech*. Finally, among the Christian papers *Dagen* and *Vårt Land* focus mostly on the topic of *religion*, while *Kristeligt Dagblad* predominantly covers *Nordic (domestic) politics*.

To summarize: the findings from the quantitative analysis of the Nordic newspapers show several similarities with previous research – for example, of the Muhammad cartoons in the Swedish and Nordic press, which use similar material and methods. The coverage in news articles focus on international reactions, violent demonstrations, and security threats where Muslims also dominate as actors, which resembles the dominant frame of conflicting values between the 'Western' and 'Muslim' worlds found in previous studies (Kunelius et al. 2007). Changes in topics over the period, from Qur'an burnings and international reactions to the implications for Swedish society, including security, freedom of speech, and domestic political debates, also follow the patterns these studies report (Strömbäck et al. 2008, 131; Wallentin and Ekecrantz 2007), as well as the dominance of freedom of speech within opinion articles. The prominence of the topics of *law* and *person* in the coverage of the Qur'an burnings in 2023 is noteworthy. This pattern is also displayed among the most frequently co-occurring words in news articles, which were (in translation): *Swedish*, *Qur'an burnings*, *Qur'an*, *Momika*, *police*, and *agitation*.[6]

Frame analysis of opinion articles in Swedish opinion articles

For a deeper analysis of how the Qur'an burnings were interpreted in the Swedish press this last part of the analysis focuses on framing in opinion articles – including editorials, opinion pieces (op-eds), cultural debate, and columns – in the four Swedish newspapers *Aftonbladet, Dagens Nyheter, Dagen*, and *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* (n=87). Figure 1 below shows the most frequently co-occurring words resulting from the analysis using the Leximancer software program: *Swedish* (Svenska); *Muslims* (muslimer); *Qur'an burnings* (koranbränningar); *hate crime* (hatbrott); *freedom of speech* (yttrandefriheten); and *sacred* (heliga).

A closer analysis of the co-occurrences shows that *Swedish* is most frequently connected with the words *Muslims* and religion, *hate crime* with *Qur'an burnings*, hate, the law, and ethnic group, while *freedom of speech* is connected with protect and government, and *sacred* with the Qur'an and the modal verb should ('borde'). These co-occurrences indicate that the opinion articles' framing of the event focuses on the implications of the Qur'an burnings for Swedish society in general, Muslims living in Sweden, and the protection of both freedom of speech and minority ethnic groups against hate crimes. The final aspect also includes the question of the sacredness of religious scriptures.

6 In Swedish *Svenska, koranbränningar, Koranen, Momika, polisen, hets.*

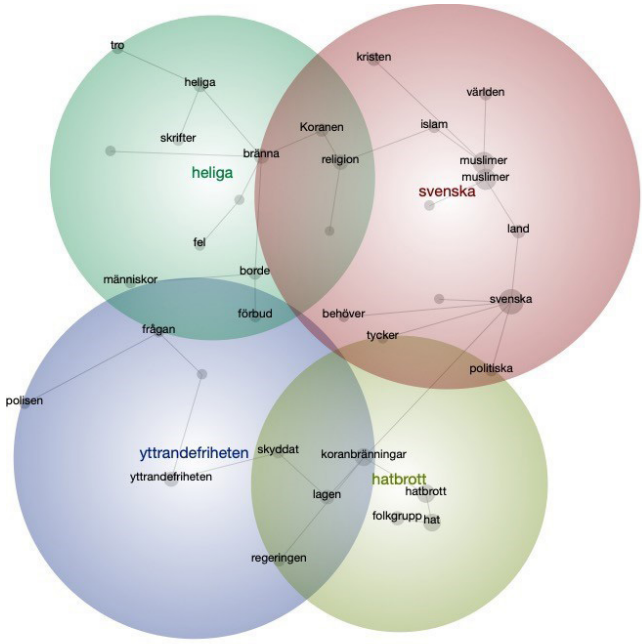

Figure 1. Concept map of most frequently occurring words in Swedish opinion articles.

A qualitative analysis of 30 articles in which the co-occurring concepts identified in the map are most frequent generates three main frames regarding the implications of the Qur'an burnings. The first is characterized by an emphasis on *freedom of speech as an absolute and universal value*, and *a core feature of Sweden as a democratic society*. *Dagens Nyheter* (2023) states that the right to freedom of speech also protects the rights of minorities to practise their religion: 'In free Sweden burning the Qur'an is allowed – and celebrating Eid.'[7] Burnings and defamations of the Qur'an are considered provocative and disrespectful, but the right to harm religion is a necessary element of freedom of speech. Violent reactions and threats from Muslim groups and international actors, often described as 'fundamentalists', 'fanatics', or 'extremists', can never be a reason to restrict freedom of speech. *Dagen* (Crosson 2023) states: 'If freedom of speech is restricted, the henchmen of violence will continue to demand concessions and attack the values and ideals that build our democracy until nothing remains of freedom and pluralism.'

7 All quotations from Swedish newspaper articles have been translated by the author.

The second frame argues that *freedom of speech needs to be discussed and negotiated against the value of pluralism in the public debate*. Pluralism and dialogue on equal terms are crucial for democracy in a religiously and culturally diverse society. Qur'an burnings can be criticized on the grounds that they damage the possibility of a rational, responsible, and respectful dialogue between secular and religious citizens, but they cannot be prohibited by a blasphemy law, for example. Any revisions of the laws on freedom of speech should be based on the equal treatment of all religions. An opinion piece by several Swedish authors in *Dagens Nyheter* (Goldman et al. 2023) argues that 'Swedish Muslims have a right to be supported against mockery and offence', but the freedoms of religion and speech are universal values that cannot be limited to certain groups.

The third frame argues that *freedom of speech can be restricted due to the risk of increased hate and violence against minority groups*. Protecting the rights of minorities to participate in public debate and exercise their rights is the most important value for a functioning democracy. Burning the Qur'an is not an act of freedom of speech but of violence directed at Muslims, who have increasingly been exposed to hate and discrimination in Sweden. Advocates of this frame argue that 'Qur'an burnings are agitation against an ethnic group' (Abbas 2023) and call for a revision of the law in certain cases. The rights of minority groups to exercise their democratic rights by safely participating in public debate is emphasized more frequently than arguments based on the rights of religious groups or Muslims per se.

The three frames were used to code the total of 87 opinion articles in the Swedish newspapers. Table 2 presents the result of this analysis:

Table 2. Frames in opinion articles in Swedish newspapers, absolute numbers (n=87).

Newspaper	**Opinion articles**	**FoS absolute, universal value**	**FoS needs to enable pluralism**	**FoS restricted by minority rights**
Dagens Nyheter	32	19	9	4
Sydsvenska Dagbladet	17	8	6	3
Aftonbladet	21	6	5	10
Dagen	17	9	5	3
Total	*87*	*42*	*25*	*20*

As the table shows, the first frame emphasizing freedom of speech as an absolute value is generally most frequent in opinion articles. Most editorial articles, 14 out of 18, take this position. This is particularly salient in the independent *Dagens Nyheter*, where all editorials take this position, as well as the independent liberal *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*, and the Christian *Dagen*. However, most editorials in the independent social democratic *Aftonbladet* represent the third frame on restricting freedom of speech to protect minority groups. Other opinion piece forms (columns, op-eds, and cultural debate) represent more variety, as the three frames are generally almost equally represented among the articles. Here the most salient differences between newspapers are that few articles represent the third position in *Dagens Nyheter*, but they represent a majority in *Aftonbladet.* The analysis further reveals that the second frame, emphasizing the value of pluralism and dialogue, is most common in all newspapers in articles authored by researchers, authors, and spokespersons of religious denominations and interfaith organizations. Spokespersons of Christian denominations are most frequently represented in this frame, arguing for the rights of all religions to be treated with respect in a secular society. Some Muslim leaders also argue for respect and dialogue between secular and religious groups in general, as expressed in this article signed by the chairperson of Swedish Shia denominations: 'As Swedes and Muslims, we invite dialogue on how the law on freedom of speech can be protected while avoiding its utilization for agitation against ethnic groups and to increase hate in society' (Ibrahim 2023). Advocates of the third frame often argue that Qur'an burnings represent 'normalized islamophobia' in Sweden (Kukka-Salam and Eneroth 2023) or support the political agenda of right-wing extremist groups and populist parties, as in this editorial in *Aftonbladet*: 'Burning the Qur'an should be seen as a hate crime. Don't permit the extreme right to define freedom of speech' (Lindberg 2023). This category also includes Muslim claims for recognition in Swedish society: 'We Muslims are part of Swedish society. Those who burn the Qur'an harm our right to peacefully practise our religion' (Miaji 2023).

Dynamics of mediatized conflicts: Framing, co-construction and deliberation

The approach to mediatized conflicts applied in this article starts from a dynamic perspective, in which the media amplifies, frames, and co-structures events such as the 2023 Qur'an burnings in Sweden (Hjarvard and Lundby 2018). This implies that mediatization can reproduce and reinforce tensions

between various interests and actors in society but also open public spaces for different views and voices that reveal, re-evaluate, and reconstitute the state of democracy in a society (Cottle 2006, 5).

The focus on newspapers in the Nordic countries rather than television or social media limits an analysis of amplification. The dominance of the topic of *international reactions*, however, shows that Nordic newspapers' reports contribute to an amplification of the event as a 'crisis' between Sweden and Muslim-majority countries in particular. In terms of framing, the quantitative analysis shows that news articles primarily focus on reactions in the form of critiques, protests, and threats of violence from Muslim countries and organizations, following the dominant frame of conflicting values between the 'Western' and 'Muslim' worlds in previous studies of the Muhammad Cartoons and Qur'an burnings (Wallentin and Ekecrantz 2007; Strömbäck et al. 2008; Linge and Bangstad 2024).

The analysis of framing in the Qur'an burnings in Sweden 2023 shows continuity and change compared to the findings of previous research. The first frame identified in opinion articles, arguing for the absolute value of freedom of speech, represents similar arguments to those dominating the coverage of the Muhammad cartoons in 2006. In their analysis of opinion articles in the Swedish daily press in 2006, Wallentin and Ekekrantz (2007, 193) found two main discourses on the cartoon controversy. The 'ultraliberal discourse', claiming freedom of speech as a universal and unconditional right, was most common, particularly in editorials. The 'moderately pragmatic discourse', claiming freedom of speech as a universal right but with some conditions and responsibilities, was slightly more common in other opinion articles. Articles defending liberal freedom of speech were also dominant in Larsson's and Mattsson's (2024, 150) analysis of 60 opinion pieces about the 2022 Easter riots in Swedish newspapers. Two less frequent discourses identified in this study were debates about Sweden as a multicultural society and the cultural differences between 'Muslims' and Swedish society. These discourses are connected with Strömbäck et al.'s (2008, 126, 135) analysis comparing coverage of the Muhammad cartoons in the *New York Times* and *Dagens Nyheter*. They found a frame of intolerance in *Dagens Nyheter*, highlighting that the insult Muslims felt because of the publications was more frequent than framings of the publication as an act of freedom of speech, which was more frequent in the *New York Times*.

In line with these findings in previous research on similar events, the analysis of coverage of the Qur'an burnings 2023 shows that several interpretations of the event are present in the daily press: a strong defence of

freedom of speech as a universal value but also arguments that freedom of speech needs to be exercised with conditions and responsibilities, including reflections on how society should respond to experiences of discrimination and hostility among Muslims living as a minority group in Western societies. This variation in the media coverage corresponds to and strengthens Toft's (2024) argument about the importance of analysing the complexity of media events and distinguishing between how such events are framed in different layers of the coverage such as news, commentary, and opinion journalism.

In the Swedish opinion articles from 2023 arguments represented by the second and third frame, which in different ways call for a renegotiation of the absolute value of freedom of speech, seem more prominent than in other studies. Together, these articles are as frequent as articles defending the primacy of freedom of speech as a fundamental democratic value. While arguments about the importance of exercising freedom of speech responsibly and rationally represent a continuity of arguments from the 'moderately pragmatic discourse' on the Muhammad cartoons, the third frame, arguing for the possibility to restrict freedom of speech to protect Muslims as a minority group in Swedish society, was barely visible in the study of how the press framed the Muhammad cartoons in 2006 (Wallentin and Ekecrantz 2007, 194). Although a direct comparison between these two studies' findings is impossible due to differences in methods and so on, this difference between the framings of similar issues in the Swedish daily press calls for further analysis.

The dynamic of co-structuring emphasizes that media debates are not detached from but embedded within the transformations and contestations of values and social relations in society. How the media gives voice to different actors and perspectives intersects with contestations between different groups in society (Cottle 2006, 20). Both variety and competition between media actors and the degree of disunity within politics or civil society play an important role in how the media positions itself regarding competing power interests.

Taira argues that 'there is a need to consider how religion-related media discourses and portrayals … are entangled with social changes in their capacity to direct and reflect the public presence and boundaries of the groups and practices conventionally named religion' (2019, 175). Nordic longitudinal comparative projects have shown that between 1988 and 2008 critique and debate about Islam were less frequent in media and parliamentary debates in Sweden than in the other Nordic countries (Lövheim et al. 2018a; Lundby et al. 2018). The Swedish population's tendency for relative

tolerance of religious diversity compared with other Nordic countries was also confirmed in a survey of opinions about Islam as a threat to national identity (Lövheim et al. 2018b). A study of the coverage of religion in Swedish newspapers between 2008 and 2018 (Lövheim 2019) showed that religious diversity rather than absolute secularity remained the starting point for media representations of tensions between religious practice and values considered crucial for Swedish democracy, such as gender equality and individual freedom. However, diverging opinions regarding the challenges of a high tolerance of religious diversity in Sweden had increasingly become a burning issue in the daily press (Lövheim 2019, 288).

In the 17 years since the publication of the Muhammad cartoons Sweden has become more ethnically and religiously diverse. Inhabitants born outside Sweden have almost doubled, comprising 20 per cent of a population of 10.5 million in 2023 (SCB 2023). Immigrants from Africa and Asia, where there are many Muslim-majority countries, comprise around 1.1 million people. In political debates issues related to Islam but also to religion as part of human rights have increased since populist right Sweden Democrats' arrival in parliament in 2010 (Lindberg 2020). The politicization of religion is also affected by the change from a 'disengage strategy' towards the Sweden Democrats, which in contrast with the situation in other Nordic countries was practised by other political parties and the news media from 2010 (Lindberg 2020, 97). Since the cooperation agreement between the Sweden Democrats and the current government coalition was signed in November 2022, the party has become increasingly vocal in its criticism of Islam and has proposed restrictions for mosques and other public displays of Islam, despite the risk of infringements to the right of freedom of religion (Rosén 2023b). These demographic and political changes are also reflected in the public's attitudes towards freedom of religion. Demker (2023, 119) shows that concern about freedom of religion as a threat to the population is strongest among those sceptical of immigrants' freedom to practise their religion. This, she argues, shows that support for public expression of religion is conditioned by the majority population's understanding of how this freedom is practised.

Larsson and Mattsson (2024) also find that press coverage of the riots following the burning of the Qur'an in Sweden in 2022 ignited several different positions and attitudes towards freedom of speech and religion in Swedish society. However, they conclude that the riots were mainly seen as a result of a failed multicultural policy in Sweden and a perception of Islam as an obstacle to liberal democracy and thus to freedom of speech (2024,

151). Linge and Bangstad (2024, 96) argue that Qur'an burnings performed by far-right groups in Norway capitalize on the endorsement of the critique of Islam as a reprehensible but nevertheless necessary part of free speech by the mainstream media and political actors. The analysis of Swedish opinion articles discussed in this article presents a more complex connection between the daily press and the current political debate. The three identified frames display both variety and competition between the four newspapers in the study and within them through differences between editorials and other forms of opinion pieces. The almost reverse pattern in frames in *Dagens Nyheter* and *Aftonbladet* editorials highlights how framing in newspapers is co-structured by the degree of disunity or struggle within current Swedish politics (Strömbäck et al. 2008, 136). *Dagens Nyheter's* framing follows the position taken by the right-wing coalition government, while *Aftonbladet* criticizes the government for supporting the right-wing populist agenda and supports the Social Democratic opposition's attempts to revise the law on agitation against ethnic groups. The findings of the study presented in this article are therefore aligned with Toft's conclusion concerning how the meaning of a media event such as Qur'an burnings is contested as various actors inside and outside the media reframe it to fit dominant patterns and alternative framings with established discourses (2024, 122). The second and third frames' strong presence, which disputes the absolute value of freedom of speech and argues for dialogue with and protection of Muslims in Sweden, can be interpreted as a sign of how the media becomes an arena for acknowledging minority groups' experiences and claims in a situation of increasing contestation of tolerance (Cottle 2006, 168). These frames can be seen as representing continuing support for diversity in the practice of freedom of religion in the daily press. Arguments about protecting the rights of Muslims in Sweden, however, are primarily related to their situation as an exposed minority, not to their religious beliefs. Arguments concerning respect for religious beliefs and values are primarily voiced by spokespersons for Swedish Muslims or Christian and Jewish groups. Further studies are therefore needed to assess whether support for Swedish Muslims in opinion pieces is conditioned by ideals of religious minority citizens supporting the majority's conception of democratic values (Abdel Fadil and Liebmann 2018, 287).

In conclusion, the Qur'an burnings were represented in the Swedish and international press as a 'crisis' for Swedish society. This study's findings have shown that although topics of international reactions, violent protests, and security dominated the first months of the news coverage, the 'crisis' came

to concern the status of freedom of speech as a foundation of democracy versus a public debate representing the population's increased diversity and the rights of ethnic and religious minorities threatened by the increased politicization of Islam. The analysis thus highlights how the 'Qur'an crisis' as a mediatized conflict is co-structured by ongoing and complex social, political, and religious changes, and that this complexity can enhance polarization but also deliberation and negotiation between different democratic rights and values in contemporary Sweden.

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Paranormalism, Voting Intention, and Other Conspiracy Mentality Predictors in Sweden

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Abstract

This article explores conspiracy mentality occurrence in Sweden as part of a 2020 survey of paranormal beliefs, practices, and experiences. Using the idea of a shared sociocultural milieu of alternative views and practices of knowledge as a departure point, the relationship between conspiracy mentality and paranormalism, viewed as instances of cultic, rejected, and stigmatized knowledge, is tested through multivariate regression. As part of the regression model, the effects of other social predictors (e.g. gender, income, and cultural values) are also assessed. A nonparametric analysis further explores the relationship between conspiracy mentality and voting intention. The results of multivariate regression show that the dependent variables only predict conspiracy mentality to a limited extent. Predictors that significantly contribute to predicting conspiracy mentality are gender (being male), higher levels of paranormalism, lower income, conservation as opposed to openness-to-change values, and self-transcendence as opposed to self-enhancement values. Meanwhile, the nonparametric test pointed to distinctly higher conspiracy mentality levels among sympathizers with the right-wing populist party the Sweden Democrats and those who favoured political parties not represented in parliament.

Keywords*: conspiracy theories, conspiracy mentality, the paranormal*

It is difficult to overstate the growing awareness, popular and academic, of conspiracy theories and their dissemination in the contemporary West, not least in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g. Butter and Knight 2023) and the January 6 Capitol insurrection (e.g. Thompson 2023; Thomas et al. 2024; cf. Imhoff et al. 2024). Much attention has also been devoted to the detrimental social consequences of conspiracy theories. These effects include the impediment of political engagement (Jolley and Douglas 2014a; Imhoff

et al. 2021), the promotion of non-normative and impermissible political actions (Imhoff et al. 2021), including (radical) violent extremism (Rousis et al. 2022; Rottweiler and Gill 2022), less willingness to reduce personal carbon footprints (Jolley and Douglas 2014a), and vaccine hesitancy (e.g. Jolley and Douglas 2014b; cf. Uscinski and Parent 2014). More broadly, some contemporary analyses state that the contemporary world is marked by a post-truth status (e.g. McIntyre 2018) and epistemic instability (Harambam 2020; cf. Valaskivi and Robertson 2022), characterized by the erosion of trust in epistemic institutions.

Although we can infer that new information and media technologies enable the faster transmission and visibility of conspiracy theories, it is less clear if their scope and number of believers have increased (e.g. Uscinski et al. 2018). Indeed, conspiracy theories seem to have been a permanent and integral feature of the modern West's cultural landscape, not least in the US (Olmsted 2018), while Joseph E. Uscinski and Joseph M. Parent (2014, 157) have found evidence that conspiracy beliefs have decreased since the 1960s. Regardless of growth and decline, recent studies point to majorities in the US and in European countries believing in at least one conspiracy theory (e.g. Uscinski and Parent 2014, 36; Drochon 2018; Enders and Smallpage 2018). For example, the once-fringe online phenomenon QAnon now has vocal sympathizers among lawmakers in the US (e.g. Beauchamp 2022), and the image of the self-appointed QAnon shaman as part of the mob storming the US Congress (Thompson 2023) is arguably etched in the minds of many commentators. Indeed, then-future President Donald Trump positioned himself early as a presidential candidate endorsing conspiracy theories such as the birther controversy surrounding President Barack Obama (e.g. Marietta and Barker 2018; Uscinski 2018). Whether or not we agree with David G. Robertson's, Egil Asprem's, and Asbjørn Dyrendal's (2018, 1) assessment of conspiracy theories as 'one of the defining issues of our age', this state of affairs nevertheless serves as a background against which the current article should be read.

As part of a national randomized survey in 2020 of paranormal beliefs, practices, and experiences in contemporary Sweden, I wanted to estimate the extent of conspiracy mentality tendencies in the Swedish adult population and assess its relationships with paranormal involvement. In other words, the article is devoted to conspiracy mentality occurrence, as well as its relationship with another form of contested knowledge claims, namely paranormalism. As part of this analysis, however, it will also be possible to determine the influence of other social predictor variables of conspiracy mentality.

Previous research on conspiracy theory beliefs and conspiracy mentality

The study of conspiracy theories is a burgeoning and rapidly expanding field, involving various social scientific disciplines (e.g. Douglas et al. 2017; Hornsey et al. 2022, 80). Instead of attempting an exhaustive overview of the state of the art, I will briefly recapitulate some findings pertaining first to the psychological and second to the demographic characteristics of conspiracy believers. Third, I will present a snapshot of specifically Swedish research on conspiracy theories, as Sweden is the present study's national context. These three sections are all important for providing a context for the present study, though it will engage mainly with a fourth trajectory of research – namely, the concomitance of conspiracy beliefs and other contested knowledge claims such as beliefs, practices, and experiences related to paranormal phenomena. This fourth section also serves as a bridge to the theoretical part of this article.

Much research has sought to explain tendencies to hold conspiracy beliefs with reference to individual differences and situational factors. One such trajectory in previous research is the relationship between conspiracy belief and the 'Big Five' model of personality traits, the results of which have been modest and ambiguous, however (e.g. Swami et al. 2010, 759; Swami and Furnham 2012, 253; Imhoff and Bruder 2014; Goreis and Voracek 2019). Others have noted that conspiracy believers are more prone to engaging with intuitive rather than analytical modes of thinking (Swami et al. 2014, 574), preferring anthropomorphic (Imhoff and Bruder 2014, 35) and teleological interpretations (Wagner-Egger et al. 2018) of events, and seeking meaningful patterns and intentions behind seemingly random occurrences (Douglas et al. 2016, 65, 69; van Prooijen et al. 2017, 332). Furthermore, a growing number of studies has tested the relationships between conspiracy beliefs and various pathological states of mind such as personality disorders, albeit mostly within the general sub-clinical population (e.g. Darwin et al. 2011; Barron et al. 2014; Brotherton and Eser 2015; Cichoka et al. 2016; Imhoff and Lamberty 2018; Wood and Douglas 2018; Furnham and Grover 2021). Conspiracy believers have recurrently been shown to exhibit lower levels of interpersonal trust, as well as trust in institutions (e.g. Goertzel 1994; Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999; Barkun 2016, 115; Lantian et al. 2016; Wood and Douglas 2018), and they are more prone to experiences of powerlessness and anomie (e.g. Abalakina-Paap et al. 1999; Leman and Cinnirella 2013, 4; Imhoff and Bruder 2014, 35). A key finding concerning the characteristics of conspiracy believers, however, is that belief in one conspiracy theory often entails acceptance of others (e.g. Goertzel 1994; Uscinski et al. 2018; Imhoff

et al. 2024), including even contradictory (Wood et al. 2012) and fictional conspiracy theories (Swami et al. 2011). This inclination to accept conspiracy theories in general has been conceptualized differently as conspiracy mentality (e.g. Bruder et al. 2013; Imhoff and Bruder 2014), a conspiratorial mindset (Dagnall et al. 2015), conspiracist ideation (Brotherton et al. 2013), and conspiratorial thought (Uscinski and Parent 2014, 35), for example. How conspiracy mentality, which I will henceforth use as shorthand for a predisposition to belief in conspiracy theories, ought best be understood, and what factors precede it, remains subject to debate (e.g. Nera 2024, 47; Trella et al. 2024; Strömbäck et al. 2024).

A multitude of demographic patterns has been noted among conspiracy believers. Analyses of characteristics such as race and ethnicity point to ambiguous results, though Uscinski and Parent (2014, 84) argue that small minority groups (e.g. Native Americans and Americans of Middle Eastern heritage) may be especially susceptible to conspiracy beliefs. Evidence further suggests lower socioeconomic strata as more prone to conspiracy beliefs (Uscinski and Parent 2014, 157), while education remains one of the main negative predictors of conspiracy mentality (e.g. Douglas et al. 2016; van Prooijen 2016). Despite the popular tropes of conspiracy believers as angry middle-aged men, conspiracy beliefs seem nearly equally common among men and women (e.g. Uscinski and Parent 2014, 83). The results are ambiguous concerning religion (e.g. Jasinskaja-Lahti and Jetten 2019, 940), though there is evidence of a positive relationship between religiosity and conspiracy belief and mentality respectively, which Marius Frenken et al. (2023, 144, 150–152) have argued may be moderated by political orientation (e.g. Frenken et al. 2023, 144). Hugo Drochon (2018, 344) has argued that religiosity covaries positively or negatively with conspiracy beliefs, depending on whether religion is a distinct part of the cultural mainstream in the respective national contexts: if you belong to a religious minority, the odds increase that you will also have a proclivity for conspiracy theories. Scholars have further scrutinized political affiliation and sympathy as predictors of particular conspiracy ideas. Roland Imhoff et al. (2022, 392–393) have argued that the relationship between conspiracy mentality and politics is curvilinear, insofar as both extreme ends of the political spectrum are more prone to conspiracy theory ideation. Nevertheless, based on data from 26 countries, conspiracy mentality was especially prominent among sympathizers with 'traditional, nationalistic and authoritarian parties' (Imhoff et al. 2022, 400; cf. Frenken et al. 2023, 141). Some (e.g. Atkinson and DeWitt 2018; Drochon 2018) have observed that sympathizers with political parties currently not

in power are more prone to conspiracy beliefs in the US and Europe. In this sense, the statement that 'conspiracy theories are for losers' (Uscinski and Parent 2014, 131; cf. Atkinson and DeWitt 2018) seems warranted.

Data from Sweden, generally known for its high degree of interpersonal trust and trust in public institutions and the authorities (e.g. Ortiz-Ospina and Roser 2016; Astapova et al. 2021, 6–7, 30), are scarcer. By comparing samples from six European countries, Hugo Drochon (2018, 343) found that Swedes were the national population least prone to affirm belief in conspiracy theories (cf. Smallpage et al. 2020). In the Swedish context Andre Krouwel et al. (2017) have demonstrated that conspiracy beliefs attract constituents from both extremes of the political spectrum, while Mattias Ekman (2022, 1130) has argued that the great replacement conspiracy theory (i.e. 'white Europeans are […] being replaced by immigrants from non-European countries through the actions of politicians and power elites') are moving from the right-wing margins into the Swedish political mainstream. Following the Covid-19 pandemic the SOM Institute[1] conducted a survey explicitly targeting Covid-related conspiracies, namely that the virus was manufactured as a biological weapon, with which 13 per cent of Swedes agreed (Ekengren Oscarsson and Strömbäck 2020, 3). Using Swedish and British samples, Julia Aspernäs, Arvid Erlandsson, and Arthur Nilsson (2023) have demonstrated that respondents with subjectivist tendencies vis-à-vis knowledge making exhibit higher conspiracy belief levels. Jesper Strömbäck et al. (2023) have tested whether social media and political alternative media use predicts higher conspiratorial predisposition levels. People on the radical political right, especially when consuming political alternative media, were found to be more prone to conspiracy theory thinking (Strömbäck et al. 2023, 266). A 2021 survey shed some light on the popularity of specific conspiracy theories in Sweden. More than one in four survey respondents agreed with the statement that the real cause of the sinking of the MS Estonia (Wikipedia, n.d.) was the subject of a government cover-up, while roughly one in five agreed that the Covid-19 virus was created in a laboratory. Several other conspiracy theories (e.g. research results are unreliable because commercial interests govern them, Covid-19 was deliberately spread, and the world is governed by a small and secret group) garnered the support of at most one in ten Swedes. For example, belief in chemtrails, that 9/11 was an inside job, that the 1969 moon landing was faked, and a set of antisemitic conspiracies only gathered support from a few per cent (Vetenskap och folkbildning 2021, 50). Except for chemtrails,

1 Acronym for Society, Opinion, and Media (University of Gothenburg, n.d.).

men were more prone to affirm belief in all conspiracy statements (ibid., 52), as were sympathizers with the populist Sweden Democrats (ibid., 56).

Several studies have noted an affinity between correlations of conspiracy theory beliefs and other contested knowledge claims such as belief in paranormal phenomena (e.g. Darwin et al. 2011; Swami et al. 2011; Lobato et al. 2014; Oliver and Wood 2014). A suggested explanation of this positive relationship is that knowledge claims of conspiracies and paranormal and supernatural phenomena are effectively unfalsifiable (e.g. Goode 2000). Others suggest that the kinship between conspiracy and paranormal and supernaturalist beliefs is united not only by substantive content but by their psychological and social functions (e.g. Wood and Douglas 2018; Frenken et al. 2023, 140). For example, David G. Robertson and Asbjørn Dyrendal (2018, 416) have argued that conspiracy theories, much like religious myths, fulfil the role of theodicies, as they help explain 'why bad things happen to good people' by referring to conspiring agents with sinister agendas. Other explanations, to which I will return in the next section, turn not to substantive or functional aspects but to the social status of conspiracy and paranormal claims in society at large. As conspiracy and paranormal beliefs are equally rejected by epistemic authorities and institutions, they come to inhabit a shared social space through which they are both disseminated. This suggestion is directly explored throughout this article.

As stated then, the study of conspiracy theories and conspiracy mentality is a growing field of research involving a range of social scientific disciplines. However, within the purview of this article studies and theorizations pointing to an affinity between various forms of alternative and contested knowledge claims are the most central, the subject to which I next turn.

Theorizing alternative forms of knowledge and developing hypotheses

Before introducing theorizations of a social affinity between paranormalism, conspiracy theories, and conspiracy mentality respectively, these concepts warrant brief comment and clarification. The paranormal may be defined as purported phenomena that 'fall outside of the boundaries of current scientific explanation' (Tidelius 2024, 42). These phenomena are frequently dismissed by established religious institutions, resulting in paranormal involvement as largely 'dually rejected' (Bader et al. 2011, 24) by both religion and science as epistemic institutions. David G. Robertson (2014, 60) argues that common referents include phenomena such as 'telepathy and clairvoyance, and alleged anomalous physical phenomena such as ghosts, crop circles, UFOs,

and reincarnation'. Renowned and legendary creatures such as Big Foot and the Loch Ness Monster – so-called cryptids – may be added to the list, and sometimes various alternative and complementary forms of medicine (ibid.). For the sake of brevity beliefs, practices, and experiences related to paranormal phenomena will henceforth be denoted as paranormalism. Admittedly, this understanding of paranormal phenomena and the term 'paranormal' itself is derived from a distinctly Western setting. Conspiracy theories may in turn tentatively be defined 'as attempts to explain the ultimate causes of events as secret plots by powerful forces rather than as overt activities or accidents' (Jolley and Douglas 2014a), while conspiracy mentality denotes 'the general tendency to adopt such beliefs' (Bruder et al. 2013, 2).

Although not paranormal per se (though some *may* be), conspiracy theories have been identified as positively associated with alternative spiritual and paranormal ideas and practices (Swami et al. 2011; Lobato et al. 2014; Lantian et al. 2016; Wood and Douglas 2018). This confluence of alternative spirituality and conspiracy theories has recently been approached by the term conspirituality (Ward and Voas 2011). There are good reasons, however, to question the novelty of this underlying relationship, as conspiracy theories are interlinked with the history of Western esotericism (Asprem and Dyrendal 2015). Regardless, the affinity between alternative spirituality, paranormal beliefs, and practices on the one hand and conspiracy theories on the other was the central presupposition behind the inclusion of an item measuring conspiracy mentality in the *Paranormal Sweden* survey, constructed by the author. Although the kinship between these phenomena has been differently theorized, I will restrict this exploration to theorization revolving around the suggestion that alternative spirituality, the paranormal, and conspiracy theories exhibit an affinity, as they at least partly share a social and cultural space through which they converge and cross-pollinate.

Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal (2015) have argued that alternative religion (e.g. New Age spirituality) and conspiracy theories are both encompassed by the notion of the cultic milieu. Initially coined by Colin Campbell (1972, 122), the cultic milieu denotes a social and cultural space encompassing 'heterodox or deviant items in relation to the dominant cultural orthodoxies' such as phenomena associated with alternative religion and spirituality, occultism, the paranormal, and pseudo-science. A parallel classification suggested around the same time was historian James Webb's (1974) rejected knowledge, referring to those social phenomena that stand in opposition to the rationality and secularity associated with the Enlightenment and Modernity, together creating a cultural underground (though they

may at times be in vogue) of largely rejected, discarded, and countercultural ideas and practices. Almost 30 years later, Michael Barkun (2013, 28) argued that the cultic milieu and rejected knowledge might be encompassed by a new category – namely, stigmatized knowledge claims, or 'claims that have not been validated by mainstream institutions', which together form a 'cultural dumping ground of the heretical, the scandalous, the unfashionable, and the dangerous' (Barkun 2013, 39). Although extended to the paranormal and the occult, Barkun had contemporary conspiracy theories especially in mind. A more recent and broader categorization of a sociocultural space of alternative religious and paranormal ideas and practices is Christopher Partridge's (2004, 187) occulture, more generally denoting an 'environment/reservoir/library of beliefs, ideas, meanings and values'. While Campbell (1972, 122) envisioned the cultic milieu as a 'single entity' or a distinct social environment, occulture, by contrast, is more nebulous and less marked by tension with societal institutions. Indeed, *popular* occulture captures the dissemination of occultural ideas and practices in the media and popular culture, implying an increased acceptance or mainstreaming of their content (Partridge 2014).

However, the relationship between the above concepts (and their empirical referents) is unclear. Asprem and Dyrendal (2015) have argued for an 'interplay between the cultic milieu and popular culture […] leading to the ordinariness of occulture'. An alternative interpretation is that the cultic milieu comprises a smaller unit of practitioners encompassed within the broader category of occulture. However, another question is whether the cultic milieu understood as a single social entity is perhaps obsolete and replaced by a wider occulture. Regardless of how these issues are settled, the two concepts refer to a general culture consisting of alternative views and practices of knowledge, largely rejected by the main epistemic institutions. This general culture and its referent's status as epistemically rejected therefore explain how paranormalism, conspiracy theories, and conspiracy mentality are interrelated, as they in part share a social and cultural space and means of dissemination. I believe that occulture comes with fewer strings attached in terms of expected social cohesion than the cultic milieu and rejected and stigmatized knowledge, so I will settle for its use.

In the *Paranormal Sweden* survey I suggest two operationalizations of occulture. First, occulture is indicated by paranormalism or an affinity with paranormal beliefs, practices, and experiences. Second, occulture is indicated by recent social contact points with representations of paranormal and unexplained phenomena, a variable to which I will henceforth refer as

occultural contact points. These operationalizations will be introduced more fully in the survey in the next section.

A deductive approach to the assumed positive relationship between conspiracy theory mentality and occulture can be distilled into the following two hypotheses on occulture, which will be tested in the analysis that follows.

H1. Occulture, indicated by paranormalism, positively predicts conspiracy mentality.

H2. Occulture, also indicated by occultural contact points, positively predicts conspiracy mentality.

Moreover, following the preceding section on previous research, another pair of hypotheses may be formulated:

H3. Voting intention for political parties currently not in power positively predicts conspiracy mentality.

H4. Belonging to lower income and educational groups positively predicts conspiracy mentality.

The survey itself requires an introduction before these hypotheses are tested.

Data and method

The *Paranormal Sweden* survey was distributed in 2020 to respondents collected by *The Swedish Citizen Panel* at the University of Gothenburg (GU, n.d). The sample consisted exclusively of randomly recruited respondents. The response rate was 59 per cent. The results were weighted according to gender, age, and education. The weighted dataset included 1,101 respondents. Despite randomization and weighting, the sample deviates from the general population in some respects, most notably in terms of foreign-born participants.[2] In this section I account for the predictor variables included in the survey. First, however, the dependent variable of conspiracy mentality is introduced, as it is the article's focus.

As cost efficacy was of critical concern, I opted to use an item measuring tendencies to conspiracy mentality rather than discrete conspiracy theories and beliefs. Anthony Lantian, Dominique Muller, Cécile Nurra, and Karen M. Douglas (2016) have developed a single-item measurement of conspiracy mentality, correlated with lengthier scales of conspiracy belief and producing good validity and reliability, which I intended to adopt. As input from a pilot study and the research team at *The Swedish Citizen Panel* indicated

2 Six per cent were foreign-born in *Paranormal Sweden* compared to 19.6 per cent in the Swedish population at the time of distribution (SCB, 2020).

the original item was tricky to interpret, revisions were made, however. Accordingly, I do not claim to reuse Lantian et al.'s (2016) instrument but instead introduce one of my own, albeit heavily influenced by the former. The following vignette preceded the question: 'Some political and social events are debated (e.g. the 9/11 terror attacks in 2001, the death of Princess Diana, and the murders of John F. Kennedy or Olof Palme). Some have suggested that official accounts of these events may be an attempt to conceal the truth from the public. This official version, they suggest, would mask the fact that these events are planned in secret by hidden and powerful individuals and groups.' The question that followed was: 'How true or false an image of reality do you yourself think that official accounts most often give?'[3] The scale ranged from 1, a completely false picture, to 9, an entirely true picture. Lower values, or distrust regarding official versions of contested events, are assumed to indicate a tendency to a conspiracy mentality, while higher values, or trust, are counter-indicative of this. This stems from the oft-observed and robust relationship between distrust and conspiracy mentality (e.g. Astapova et al. 2021, 101; Imhoff et al. 2021). Although the item does not explicitly use the term conspiracy theory, it can nevertheless be argued that at least some respondents, aware that conspiracy beliefs are often viewed pejoratively as false and possibly harmful (e.g. Dentith 2018), may underreport their degree of distrust because it lacks social desirability.

The survey's main focus was the 22 items measuring paranormal beliefs[4] (e.g. belief statements pertaining to ancient lost civilizations like Atlantis, supernatural predictions, hauntings, and UFOs), corresponding practices, and experiences (e.g. felt the presence of some form of spirit, witnessed UFO phenomena, visited or lived in a place that was haunted),[5] as well as active searches for information regarding paranormal topics[6] (e.g. mediums, fortune tellers, and seers; parapsychology). Rather than using these items as separate independent variables, I used them in aggregated form. Individual items were ordered into new constructs following principal component

3 Lantian et al.'s (2016) original phrasing was 'I think that the official version of the events given by the authorities very often hides the truth'.

4 These were ten items encompassed by the overarching survey question 'How likely do you find the following statements?', answerable with a 5-grade ordinal scale.

5 These were twelve items encompassed by the overarching survey question 'Have you ever done or experienced any of the following?', answerable with a 4-point ordinal scale.

6 These were seven items encompassed by the overarching survey question 'Have you ever actively searched for information about any of the following topics?', followed by the statement 'For example, by reading a book or visiting a website', answerable with a 4-point ordinal scale.

analysis (e.g. Pallant 2011, 181–201) and included in an additional index. Each affirmed item increased the respondent values in the new measurement by one. This new index, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82, is henceforth called paranormalism.

Alongside paranormalism, *Paranormal Sweden* included measures of recent social contact points with representations of paranormal phenomena in conversations among peers or as depicted in media and popular culture, for example. I have argued elsewhere (Tidelius 2024, 101) that these social contact points may be viewed as indicators of occulture. An additive index, henceforth referred to as occultural contact points, was created based on a survey question that asked respondents how often they had encountered representations of the paranormal or the unexplained in a range of social settings (e.g. in the family, on TV, in the internet) in the last six months. Each item was answerable with a five-point scale, from *not at all* to *every day*. The responses for each item were recoded as binary, and each affirmative response increased the score in the index by one.

As part of the regression model, I wanted to evaluate the contribution and effects of other predictor variables. *The Swedish Citizen Panel* included various background variables suitable for the task, such as gender, education, and age. A variable measuring religion was added to the survey. Respondents were asked whether they belonged to any church or congregation, namely the Church of Sweden (i.e. the former state church), another Christian church/congregation, a Muslim congregation/association, or a religious congregation/association that was neither Christian nor Muslim, followed by a free text amendment. The response alternatives were *Yes, and I have attended services/meetings in the last 12 months*, *Yes, but I have not attended services/meetings in the last 12 months*, and *No*. In the analysis that follows religion was recorded as a binary variable that distinguished between those who belonged to a religious community and those who did not.

As studies point to a shift in the cultural values of Western populations (e.g. Inglehart 1977; 1990) as conducive to the rise of alternative religion and spirituality (e.g. Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Lassander 2014), I wanted to include items indicative of such values. I opted for Marjaana Lindeman's and Markku Verksalao's (2005) Short Schwartz Value Survey, an instrument inspired by Shalom Schwartz's theory (e.g. 2006) of cultural values. Through the combination of ten cultural values (power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformism, and security), two opposed higher-order value dimensions –namely, conservation versus openness to change and self-transcendence versus self-

enhancement – were calculated according to Lindeman's and Verkasalo's (2005, 173) instructions. High values in the conservation vs openness-to-change variable imply that respondents lean towards conservation-type values, favouring the status quo; low values denote openness to social change in various forms. High values in self-transcendence vs self-enhancement imply the favouring of cultural values related to self-sacrifice and submission; low values measure self-enhancement values such as hedonism and stimulation.

The independent variable of political sympathy, measured as voting intention in the next parliamentary election, included all parliamentary parties (i.e. the Left Party, the Social Democratic Party, the Green Party, the Centre Party, the Liberal Party, the Moderate Party, the Christian Democrats, and the Sweden Democrats) with the addition of those opting for another party outside parliament. Although this categorical variable was not included in the regression model, a separate nonparametric analysis was conducted.

A standard multiple regression analysis (e.g. Pallant 2011, 149) was performed on the conspiracy mentality item. The underlying research question for this technique can be posed as follows: how well do the independent variables (IVs) predict the outcome of the scores on conspiracy mentality, and which IVs are the best predictors? Alternatively, which background factors affect the likelihood, positively or negatively, of persons either doubting or trusting official versions of contested events? The multiple regression analysis attempts to assess which predictors affect the dependent variable (DV) through a linear model in which the contribution of each IV becomes clear.

The effect of the predictor of political sympathy was assessed by a chi-square test of independence (e.g. Pallant 2011, 217–221). Due to the small number of cases within specific values of the conspiracy mentality variable, the latter was recorded as a binary value, measuring those who viewed official versions of contested events as mostly false on the one hand, indicating conspiracy mentality, and those viewing them as neither more accurate nor false, and more true than false on the other.

Before presenting the multivariate regression results, I will introduce the distribution of conspiracy mentality in the sample at large.

Results and analyses

The distribution of the conspiracy mentality item was positively skewed towards trust in official versions of contested events and trust in the authorities and institutions. Figure 1 illustrates the general distribution of respondents on conspiracy mentality.

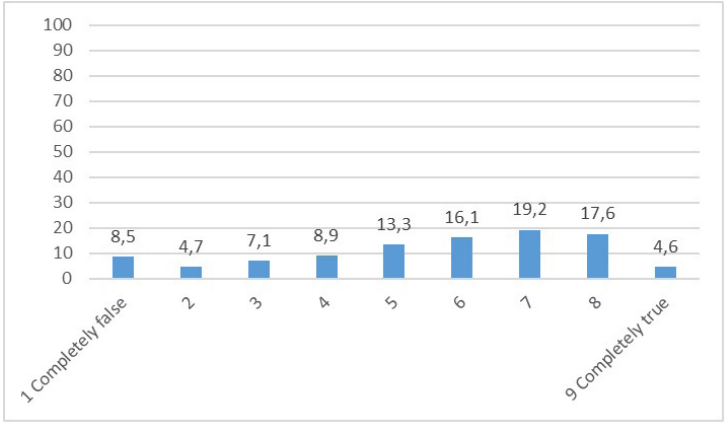

Figure 1. Conspiracy mentality per distrust/trust regarding official versions of contested events in valid percentages (*n* 1,067).

However, if we use five as an intermediate or neutral middle-ground category and add those scoring below it, we reach a proportion of 29.2 respondents. That is, between one in every four and one in every three persons in the adult population view official versions of contested events as more false than true. Figure 2 presents the distribution as recoded in three main groups, the other two being the majority viewing official versions of contested events as more accurate than false, comprising 57.5 per cent, and those who are intermediate, uncertain, or neutral, with 13.3 per cent of respondents.

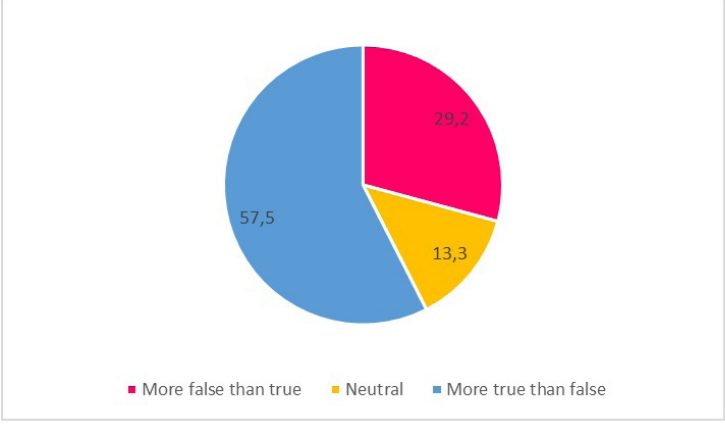

Figure 2. Conspiracy mentality in valid percentages.

The multiple regression model included the binary variables of gender, accommodation type, urban-rural residence, country of origin, and religion, and the continuous variables occultural contact points, conservation vs openness to change, self-transcendence vs self-enhancement, monthly income, age group, education level, and paranormalism. Most dependent variables within *Paranormal Sweden* gravitated towards a non-normal distribution, and conspiracy mentality was no exception. Initial diagnostics showed signs of homoscedasticity towards the opposing end, while assumptions of linearity fared better. However, no signs of multicollinearity or outliers affected the outcome to any greater extent.[7] The regression model was significant ($P<0.05$), albeit only explaining about 7.5 per cent of the variance within the variable conspiracy mentality, indicating that other predictors not included in the model or random variation were at play.

The effect of the predictors gender, conservation vs openness to change, self-transcendence vs self-enhancement, monthly income, and paranormalism was singled out as making a statistically significant contribution to the model. Beta coefficients, which represent the change in the dependent variable per unit increase in the predictor variables, are found in the second column of Table 1 (preceding the error terms, SE B). In contrast, standardized coefficients (β) are included in the fourth column, followed by P-values. Being female as opposed to male slightly increases the general trust in official versions of contested events, with a beta coefficient of 0.34. Gravitating towards conservation as opposed to openness to change decreases the level of trust by a beta coefficient of -0.38. Gravitating towards self-transcendence as opposed to self-enhancement also decreases the level of trust in official versions, with a beta coefficient of -0.21. Monthly income covaries positively with trust in official versions of contested events, with each higher income group increasing the latter by 0.07. Each score for paranormalism decreases trust in official versions of contested events by -0.04. Although the contribution of the predictors was minor, being female, more prone to affirm openness to change and self-enhancement values, and having a higher monthly income increased the likelihood of a person affirming a greater trust in official versions of contested events. Conversely, being male, being more prone to affirm conservation and self-transcendence, and scoring higher on paranormalism decreased the level of trust in official versions of contested events – in other words, a greater conspiracy mentality. As the regression model only accounts for about 7.5 per cent of the variance within conspiracy

7 Other diagnostics included acceptable Cook's distance, Tolerance, and VIF (e.g. Pallant 2011, 148–167).

mentality, we may suspect that other forces are at play. One such predictor may be excluded from the regression model – namely, the nominal and categorical variable of voting intention, to which I turn next.

Table 1. Multiple regression model on conspiracy mentality.

	b	SE B	β	P
Constant	5.671	0.416		
Gender (female)	0.34	0.16	0.08	0.03**
Residence (other)	0.15	0.44	0.01	0.73
Urban-rural (rural)	-0.20	0.15	-0.04	0.20
Country of birth (outside Sweden)	-0.49	0.31	-0.05	0.11
Occultural contact points	-0.06	0.04	-0.05	0.17
Conservation vs openness to change	-0.38	0.08	-0.16	<0.001**
Self-transcendence vs self-enhancement	-0.21	0.20	-0.08	0.03*
Monthly income	0.07	0.02	0.11	0.003**
Age group	-0.08	0.05	-0.06	0.11
Religion	-0.18	0.15	-0.04	0.22
Education	0.02	0.07	0.01	0.72
Paranormalism	-0.04	0.02	-0.09	0.015*

R2 = 0.075
Confidence intervals in parentheses.
* = Significant at the 0.05 level or lower.
** = Significant at the 0.01 level or lower.

Turning to the chi-square test of independence between political sympathy and the binary version of the conspiracy item, the test in itself proved significant: $\chi 2$ (8, n = 766) = 50.48, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's V 0.26. Sympathizers with the Left Party, the Social Democratic Party, the Centre Party, the Liberal Party, the Moderate Party, the Christian Democrats, and the Green Party all exceeded expected cell counts among respondents who were either neutral to or viewed official versions of contested events as more true than false. The Sweden Democrats, a right-wing populist party that entered parliament in 2010 (e.g. Mudde 2007; Ekman 2022) and, to a lesser extent, those opting for a party outside parliament, by contrast, clearly exceeded expected cell counts among those who viewed official versions of contested events as more false than true. In other words, respondents sympathetic to

the Sweden Democrats and parties outside parliament were less trusting of official versions of contested events and therefore showed higher conspiracy mentality levels. Figure 3 illustrates the proportions among sympathizers with the respective parties on the binary conspiracy mentality item. As becomes salient, the proportions of respondents who view the official versions of contested events as more false than true are nearly as large as those who view these versions neutrally or more true than false among sympathizers with the Sweden Democrats, in stark contrast to those favouring other parliamentary parties.

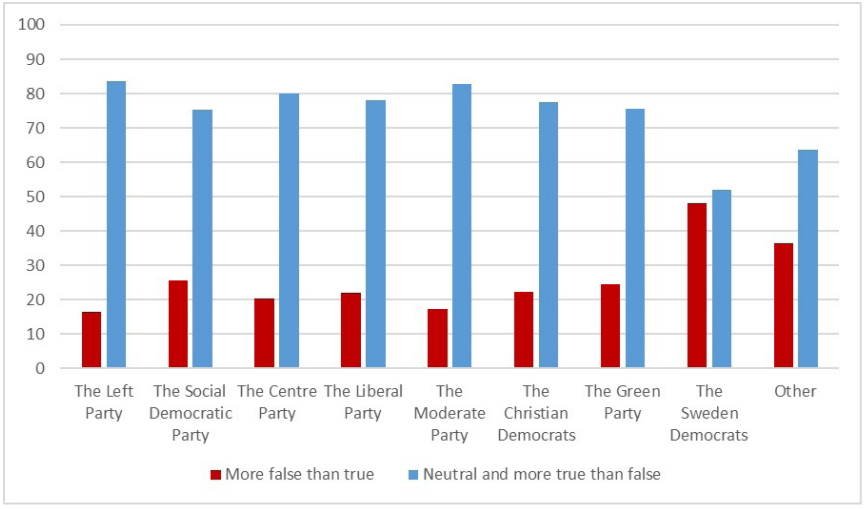

Figure 3. Conspiracy mentality per voting intention in valid percentages.

Discussion and conclusion

Returning to the four hypotheses, only H1 is unambiguously corroborated, as paranormalism was associated with conspiracy mentality, while occultural contact points (H2) were not. The corroboration of H1 indicates that the idea of a sociocultural environment engaging with and reproducing different forms of cultic, rejected, and stigmatized knowledge gains some support. H3, predicting greater conspiracy mentality among sympathizers with political parties currently not in power, was only corroborated for those favouring the Sweden Democrats and parties outside parliament. This aligns with previous findings that place conspiracy mentality to a greater extent within the radical populist right (e.g. Imhoff et al. 2022, 400). As the Sweden

Democrats are now a collaborating party with the government due to the Tidö Agreement (Government Offices of Sweden 2022), a follow-up study is warranted, especially if the party ever participates in government, for previous research (e.g. Atkinson and DeWitt 2018; Drochon 2018) indicates that sympathizers with parties currently not in power are more prone to conspiracy beliefs. H4, pointing to those with lower income and education as more prone to conspiracy mentality, was only partly corroborated due to the positive association between higher income and trust in official versions of contested events. A recurring and strong negative predictor in previous research – namely, education (e.g. van Prooijen 2016) – was therefore found to be nonsignificant in this Swedish 2020 sample. Another pattern presented in the section on previous research – religion – also proved nonsignificant. It cannot be ruled out, however, that a more fine-grained measurement of religiosity would yield significant results. The present measure only roughly captured religious belonging and behaviour, excluding belief. The study further suggests a slight male overrepresentation among respondents prone to conspiracy mentality, in contrast with studies (e.g. Uscinski and Parent 2014) suggesting balanced gender distributions, yet in line with those that point to a male predominance (e.g. Vetenskap och Folkbildning 2021). Follow-up studies are encouraged to ascertain if Swedish men are indeed more prone to distrust and conspiracy mentality, as well as to test if other gendered patterns emerge when measuring discrete conspiracy beliefs as opposed to conspiracy mentality.

Although the sample exclusively consisted of randomly recruited respondents, it nevertheless deviates from the general population in variables such as foreign-born citizens. Follow-up studies carefully designed to cater to foreign-born respondents – for example, through stratification – are warranted, especially to test suggestions that minorities may be especially prone to conspiracy beliefs (e.g. Uscinski and Parent 2014, 84).

Naturally, the measurement of conspiracy mentality can be problematized. One may object to the assumption that distrust in official versions of contested events per se indicates a conspiracy mentality. However, previous research has demonstrated a strong connection between the two as poignant (e.g. Astapova et al. 2021). It cannot be ruled out that at least some respondents will vent their frustration with the authorities through such an instrument while remaining sceptical of conspiracy narratives. We may also suspect that social desirability may mitigate the levels of distrust in official versions of contested events in the dataset. After all, the term conspiracy theory is often used pejoratively (e.g. Dentith 2018), and respondents may

well be aware of this. Furthermore, as *Paranormal Sweden* was distributed in the autumn of 2020, during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, period effects cannot be ruled out, though it is unclear if this suggests heightened or mitigated levels of distrust and conspiracy mentality. This serves as another reason to carefully monitor conspiracy mentality and conspiracy belief levels in general in future studies.

To summarize, the suggestion that conspiracy mentality covaries with paranormalism because both share a social space (e.g. occulture) through which they are disseminated gained some but not unequivocal support. Meanwhile, the relationship between conspiracy mentality and political orientation was only significant among sympathizers with the populist right-wing Sweden Democrats, suggesting significant limitations to the idea that those favouring parties currently not in power were more prone to conspiracy beliefs. The same results, however, strongly suggest an affinity between conspiracy mentality and the far right, as indicated by several previous findings (e.g. Imhoff et al. 2022; Frenken et al. 2023; Strömbäck et al. 2023). Some other recurring predictors of conspiracy mentality, most notably education, failed to manifest any significant effects in *Paranormal Sweden*.

* * *

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Hallowed Grounds: Approaching Sacred Natural Sites in Sápmi

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Abstract

This article examines the identification and protection of the sacred natural sites (SNS) of Indigenous peoples, with a particular emphasis on a selection of cases where the Sámi people's SNS have come under pressure in Sápmi. The article unpacks the origins and impact of the concept of SNS, from the international level to domestic decision making. A key concern of this investigation is how discourses on SNS have come to interact with and influence other issues of global governance, from environmental and biological diversity concerns and activism for cultural heritage to protective measures for the human rights of Indigenous peoples. Following this overview, the article discusses the extent to which the Norwegian authorities, commercial actors, and civil society activists have drawn on the international SNS discourse to formulate their claims in a series of cases concerning energy developments in Sápmi.

Keywords*: sacred natural sites, Indigenous religion, human rights, Sámi*

The issue of self-determination and its violation over centuries of colonial rule has been front and centre from the beginning of the international movement for the recognition of Indigenous people's human rights (Niezen 2003, 119–120; Anaya 2004, 107). The centrality of self-determination and the shared history of colonial subjugation have served to galvanize the push for greater recognition of the human rights of Indigenous peoples and runs throughout the *Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) adopted by the United Nations in 2007, from the preamble to its substantive provisions. The twin influence of the call for self-determination and the need to address the injustices of the colonial past stand out as uniting and consolidating features for Indigenous peoples around the world.

This article sets out to examine one specific dimension of the fight for self-determination as it has played out in acts of resistance against the vestiges of colonial rule: the struggle of Indigenous peoples to gain political and legal recognition of their sacred natural sites. Unlike sites that gain legal protection based on the perceived cultural, social, or religious value of existing or earlier constructions or archaeological traces of prior use, sacred natural sites can primarily be identified through the role they play in the worldviews, stories, and beliefs of Indigenous peoples (Liljeblad and Verschuuren 2019). Sites held to be sacred can be found all over the world, in mountainous areas, on plains, in caves, forests, and groves, on the coast, and along the banks of rivers. Such sites provide a prime location for some of the core aspects of the globalizing discourse of Indigenous religiosity, including harmony with and care for nature, autochthonous claims to place and genealogical connections between the living, ancestors, and the cosmos (Johnson and Kraft 2017, 4).

The interrelationship between nature and the sacred form some of the key interests in the early academic study of religion, from the idea F. Max Müller developed in his *Lectures on the Science of Language* (1861) that mythological ideas are derived from natural phenomena and the centrality of the sacred grove at Nemi to the theory of religion James G. Frazer proposes in *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1890), to Mircea Eliade's claim in *The Sacred and the Profane* (1957) that nature always represents something altogether different – the sacred – that transcends it.

While the willingness to create grand theories of religion may have diminished, the interest in the relationship between the natural world and religious concepts has not: scholars have shifted their attention to more locally oriented examinations of the sacred and its environment, with a particular emphasis on the social, cultural, and political forces that give rise to the identification and demarcation of certain areas and spaces as sacred. Notable contributions include *Sacred Sites, Sacred Places* (Carmichael et al. 1994), *Religion and Tourism: Crossroads, Destinations, and Encounters* (Stausberg 2011), *The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis* (Knott 2015), *A Sacred Space is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (Smolkin 2018), and *Defend the Sacred: Native American Religious Freedom beyond the First Amendment* (McNally 2020). Across these contributions scholars have examined the sacredness of sites, places, and spaces not as static or stable phenomena but as fluid and ongoing examples of what may be categorized as the 'sacralization' of places and spaces, wherein the locus of sacredness

is not a fixed property but an inherently social process, as Thomas Kirchoff suggests (2023, 3).

Despite considerable interest in the study of Indigenous religion and spirituality (de la Cadena 2015; Tafjord 2016; Johnson and Kraft 2017; Kaikkonen 2020), there has been little work on the rapidly expanding legal and political initiatives to provide protections for the sacred natural sites of Indigenous peoples and the attendant grey and research literature that explores the status, structure, governance, and cultural and social effects of such sites for biological diversity, human rights, climate change, and nature degradation. The research literature on sacred natural sites in these areas of study has been growing steadily since the turn of the millennium, but has yet to pay sustained and systematic attention to its core category: the sacred and the disciplines that dedicate themselves to its study. A recent review of the conservationist and environmentalist SNS literature found that the conceptualization of the sacred in this body of work was 'dichotomous', 'static', and 'oversimplified', thereby engendering 'subtle forms of discrimination' (Tatay and Merino 2023, 11), in no small part due to its lack of interaction with the study of religion.

Scholars of religion have started engaging with processes of 'sacralization' occurring in some of the areas designated as SNS by Indigenous peoples (Heinämäki and Herrmann 2017; McNally 2020; Kraft 2022). However, insufficient attention has been paid to the interconnections and overlaps between actors working to preserve SNS as a means to protect cultural heritage, biodiversity, and human rights at the international level, and the ways in which these processes have travelled to the domestic and local levels. This article therefore relies on two interrelated research questions: first, how and why the concept of SNS emerged at the international level; and second, the role of the international notion of SNS in local conflicts over energy developments in Sápmi.

After a methodological section this article seeks answers to these questions in two steps. First, the article provides an overview of initiatives to protect SNS internationally – mapping relevant actors, events, arenas, and legal instruments involved in the creation of more robust protections for SNS across different domains of governance and different communities of rights activists. Second, the article traces the influence of these initiatives on a selection of examples from Norway, where energy developments have put pressure on the nature and scope of available legal protections for the SNS of the Indigenous Sámi population.

Method and research design

The design of this study, which traces the effects of normative concepts developed at the international level on cases at the domestic level, builds on a long prehistory of international human rights law and policy studies. A significant inspiration is the work of Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink (1998, 893) on what they characterize as the 'strategic social construction' of norms and the influence of what they call 'norm entrepreneurs' on the efficiency and lifecycle of norms. Within this framework norms like the instruments that have been created or adjusted to protect SNS can only develop if there is sufficient momentum around the legitimacy and efficacy of a norm among 'entrepreneurs' – activists and organizations who can help propel the norm from its original inception point to broader communities and fields of action. After reaching a certain point of dissemination, or 'tipping point', beyond its point of origin, successful norms move on to become internalized, indicating broad support and acceptance in wider society, a trajectory through which major norms moved long ago (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 895). An important part of the investigation below is to determine SNS's current stage in the lifecycle of norms.

Similarly, human rights scholar Clifford Bob has highlighted four steps in the processes leading to the emergence of new rights: (1) communities frame grievances as normative claims; (2) communities convince gatekeepers in international NGOs to accept them; (3) states and international bodies implement new rights after pressure from (1) and (2); and (4) national institutions act to implement rights locally (Bob 2009, 4). The movement for the protection of SNS globally currently appears on the verge of moving from step (2) to step (3), as gatekeepers have been successfully convinced of the salience of SNS claims, though states have yet to fully implement mechanisms for their protection – but appear on the verge of doing so.

Whereas Bob, Finnemore, and Sikkink have paid most attention to the creation and dissemination of norms unidirectionally, from the international to the domestic level, and the role of 'gatekeepers' and 'entrepreneurs', social anthropologist Sally Engle Merry has traced the influence of local contextual factors on the legitimacy and efficiency of norms developed at the international and domestic levels to prevent violence against women. Merry has highlighted the importance of local cultural resources in the 'vernacularization' of norms that have been 'transplanted' from the international domain. For such translations to be efficient, they cannot simply be implemented but must draw on specific local cultural narratives (Merry 2006, 136–137). These conditions are particularly important in the case of SNS,

whose transmigration from the international to the domestic and local levels requires considerable awareness of and engagement with local conditions.

Finally, the present study sets out to examine what Kirsten Carpenter and Angela Riley have characterized as the 'jurisgenerative moment' in Indigenous peoples' rights, engendered by the adoption of the UNDRIP in 2007:

> By participating in the human rights movement as *peoples*, indigenous peoples have begun to transcend the state-centric model that often excludes other groups meriting legal and political attention on the world stage. In 'uncovering' their own legal traditions and working to 'decolonize' indigenous experiences, they increasingly expect international human rights law to reflect and advance indigenous norms (Carpenter and Riley 2014, 177–178, emphasis in original).

Through reflexive engagement with the development and implementation of norms, Indigenous peoples have effectively moved beyond the confines of the state-centric system of human rights and have thus significantly expanded their claims to sovereignty and self-determination. The 'lifecycle' of norms thus no longer has 'internalization' as its endpoint; rather, the full recognition of norms in Indigenous rights must be truly transformative, leading to categorical changes in the structure and methods of legal reasoning.

Taken together, the frameworks developed by Finnemore/Sikkink, Bob, Merry, and Carpenter/Riley provide a roadmap for the mapping and tracking of norms, from international and domestic levels of governance to the grounded local level. Within this framework the development of international norms for SNS must be seen as a reflexive process in which the identification of issues of concern successfully transitions to the level of normative commitments before gradually spreading in different networks of authority through the work of intermediaries, who play a pivotal role in the mainstreaming and dissemination of the norm at the local level but also in actively shaping and negotiating the norm to further their own interests and create a better fit with a variety of local conditions. Unlike the copious research output from conservationists on the urgency of providing more robust protections for SNS because of their potential to improve biodiversity (Zannini et al. 2021; Ma et al. 2022; Sullivan et al. 2024), this article seeks to further our understanding of how and why a specific concern with SNS has emerged, and how this concern plays out on the ground.

To follow the roadmap indicated above, the article provides an overview of the normative instruments involved in the protection of SNS, with

a particular emphasis on the centrality of SNS to the Indigenous rights movement, followed by its gradual inclusion in the *World Heritage Convention* (1972) and the *Convention on Biological Diversity* (1992). The uptake of and adjustments to these instruments to accommodate SNS represent the 'tipping point' in the model developed by Finnemore and Sikkink, and the intermediary stage in the model developed by Bob. After this overview the scope of protections presently available for SNS is briefly discussed, before the article moves on to examine how protections for SNS have emerged as a human rights concern in Sápmi. To pay attention to the local cultural conditions that provide the backdrop against which these claims have been developed, the article provides a basic overview of the current state of knowledge about some of the key features of the worldviews and beliefs of the Indigenous Sámi people, with an emphasis on the spiritual significance of nature and natural sites. The article's final section discusses how concerns about SNS have been formulated and deployed in a selection of cases in Norway, examining whether the 'jurisgenerative moment' for Indigenous peoples' rights that Carpenter and Riley highlight has arrived.

Sacralizing nature – naturalizing the sacred

The emergence of the concept of sacred natural sites (SNS) is intertwined with the Indigenous rights movement. Writing in 1982, the United Nations special rapporteur José Martínez Cobo observed in his *Study of the Problem of Discrimination against Indigenous Populations* that '…indigenous peoples all over the world hold certain areas of their ancestral land as holy' (UN 1982, 42).[1] This holiness could have a variety of origins: they could be dwelling places or embodiments of spiritual beings; they could be burial grounds or sites for religious events; they could contain specific natural products or features; or the forefathers could have made arrangements of stones, erected architectural works, placed sculptural works, and left engravings, paintings, rocks, or other natural features of religious significance (United Nations 1982, para. 173). Hence, in Cobo's definition SNS would above all be recognizable because of some kind of human interference, but with the additional opening for 'natural features'.

Although Cobo characterized the existence of such sites as 'a well-established fact', their recognition and preservation at the international

1 While there are subtle differences in the use of the terms 'sacred' and 'holy', the terms are used interchangeably in the discourses on SNS. For an overview see Stausberg 2017.

level took several decades: in 1993 the United Nations Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities submitted a draft declaration on the rights of Indigenous peoples to the Human Rights Commission for further deliberation (United Nations 1994). Drawing on the Cobo study, article 13 of the draft declaration specified that '[s]tates shall take effective measures, in conjunction with the indigenous peoples concerned, to ensure that indigenous sacred places, including burial sites, be preserved, respected and protected'. When the final declaration was adopted by the General Assembly in 2007, however, this protective measure was nowhere to be found, having been replaced by more generally phrased articles. This process, whereby the final international norm departs from its original framing, illustrates the importance of approaching the development of such norms reflexively as a movement back and forth between involved actors, not as a unidirectional, top-down process.

Parallel to discussions on a draft declaration of Indigenous rights, related processes focusing on the need to preserve sites with religious, spiritual, or sacred dimensions had been taking place at other international venues. Since the adoption of the UNESCO *World Heritage Convention* in 1972 the World Heritage Committee (WHC) has gradually expanded the operational guidelines that clarify the scope of the convention, under which the preservation of 'cultural' heritage was originally kept distinct from the protections offered for 'nature': cultural heritage was originally limited to monuments, groups of buildings, and sites, all of which were constructed or artificially developed or altered by 'man'.

Meanwhile, natural heritage was restricted to natural features, geological and physiographical formations, and natural sites, whose 'outstanding universal value' could be ascertained from the perspective of 'science, conservation or natural beauty' (UNESCO 1994, 10). Hence, the text of the convention established a mutually exclusive boundary between culture and nature, in which 'culture' presupposed some kind of imprint from human activities, while 'nature' did not. In the years since the convention was adopted this boundary's stability has gradually eroded, as the guidelines for the inclusion of sites under the convention have evolved. Since 1992 the guidelines have offered protections for 'cultural landscapes', transgressing the original boundary between culture and nature (Verschuuren et al. 2022, 3). This expansion has made possible the recognition of sites whose defining characteristics may not be their scientific importance or natural beauty but their connection with human-made cultural systems, whether tangible or intangible. Such landscapes could be designed and intentionally created by

humans, they could be organically evolved through cultural imperatives, or they could have 'powerful religious, artistic or cultural associations' (UNESCO 1994, para. 39).

Following this expansion the WHC's advisory bodies created several initiatives to promote and facilitate the conservation of religious heritage and sacred sites, providing an important impetus to conservationists and rights activists across the world. Most prominent among them, the IUCN established its own specialist group in 1998 dedicated to the preservation of the cultural and spiritual values of protected areas: the Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas group, or the CSVPA. The CSVPA has issued guidelines for area managers of sacred natural sites and regularly publishes books and reports on the status of sacred natural sites and the role of Indigenous peoples in their conservation (see Verschuuren et al. 2021). The CSVPA has thus become one of the crucial intermediaries in the formulation of SNS, acting as a gatekeeper in the elaboration and consolidation of the norm at the international level.

In a related development the gradual expansion of cultural heritage concerns into the conservation of natural landscapes has led to increasingly shared interests between conservationists and environmentalists. These interests converged at the 1992 United Nations 'Earth Summit' in Rio De Janeiro, during which the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) was adopted, emphasizing the role of Indigenous peoples as custodians of biological diversity in article 8(j). In 2004 the secretariat in charge of following up the convention – the SCBD – published its own guidelines on impact assessments likely to affect sacred sites, better known under its abridged name, the *Akwe:Kón* guidelines (SCBD 2004). Since 2010 the SCBD has been running a joint programme with UNESCO that links biological and cultural heritage efforts in which the preservation of sacred natural sites occupies a prominent position (UNESCO 2010).

This brief list of international efforts to protect religious, sacred, and spiritual sites is not exhaustive, but it indicates the international community's willingness to strengthen the protections of such sites, the variety of reasons for such protections, and the expected outcomes of such efforts: they have been triggered by a diverse intertwined set of crises facing the international community, from the increasing awareness of biological degradation and the escalating climate crisis to the loss of sites and monuments of great cultural or spiritual significance, and to ongoing and systemic human rights violations based on religion, indigeneity, culture, and spirituality. The severity and scope of these interrelated crises have been instrumental

for the continued elevation of sacred and religious sites on the agendas of activists working for the environment, cultural heritage, and human rights protections worldwide.

Crucially, the sites that are gradually becoming visible, recognizable, 'sacralized', and hence eligible for protection under these international processes represent alternatives to the established order and the hierarchy of protective measures for the built environment. These initiatives are indicative of a shared sense that the international community needs to identify new and more sustainable models of governance that take the claims of Indigenous peoples to self-determination and the use of their lands seriously. In these initiatives, however, there is a continued and marked divide between sites that are already recognized as religious and sites whose status is less clearly established in the lexicon of international law. The latter group – cultural landscapes, holy lands, and sacred sites of Indigenous peoples – whose religiosity, sacredness, and set-apart character has been less clearly recognizable under international law, have become prominent due to their entanglements with nature and the environment, which have acted as force multipliers for their protection.

Identifying sacred natural sites

The process under which sacred natural sites have become recognizable and considered worthy of protection has created a need for precise definitions of such sites. In recent decades a large body of research and consultancy literature on different types of sacred natural sites (SNS) and their management has developed (Liljeblad and Verschuuren 2019, 1–3), largely without any input from the study of religion. Guidelines and declarations developed for the management of SNS tend to provide expansive definitions of sites eligible for protection, echoing the open-ended approach UN rapporteur Cobo favoured in 1982. In language that persistently evades the definitional ambiguities of the sacred, a common denominator is the existence of some sort of spiritual 'significance' (SCBD 2004, II6(e)), 'importance', or 'value' (WWF 2005; Delos Initiative 2017). The communities that cultivate these bonds are rarely specified. The identifying features of such sites are also numerous, and one guideline simply observes that '[s]acred natural sites can encompass virtually any land or aquatic habitat' (WWF 2005, 18), while others specify that they can be constituted by 'a site, object, structure, area or natural feature or area' (SCBD 2004, 7). Features eligible for conservation can encompass:

> …attributes of nature that are evident at all levels of ecological organisation, ranging from species of flora and fauna to geological and topographic features to entire landscapes and waterscapes. They can encompass diverse manifestations such as night skies, monumental natural features, intimate local sites, as well as the practices, knowledge, beliefs, (non)human relationships and institutions associated with them (Verschuuren et al. 2021, 3).

The present and prior usage and access to SNS is equally diverse: one summary observes that '…sacred sites have existed in all cultures and all parts of the world. (…) In all cultures, sacred places are seen as crossingover [sic] points, situated between the mundane and the spirit world: entry points into another consciousness' (Gaia Foundation 2007, 7). Sacred sites can provide their communities with resources, but their use and access tend to be controlled to some degree, ranging from completely forbidden areas considered to be the abode of gods or spirits to open access to anyone '…so long as they show respect' (WWF 2005, 18).

Whereas the early international Indigenous rights movement was largely 'secular' in the sense of calling for the international rights regime to restore original notions of ownership and land use, the importance of SNS for such claims has gradually expanded, strengthening such activism's spiritual and sacred component. A similar development, which appears to support and encourage processes of 'sacralization' at the local level, now seems to be occurring among the Indigenous Sámi.

Sacred natural sites in the Nordic countries

Although land rights have been at the heart of the relationship between Sámi communities and the Nordic states since at least the seventeenth century, the spiritual dimensions to the relationship between the Sámi and their lands have thus far been virtually non-existent in their human rights struggle. Landmark events in the development of Sámi rights struggles have focused on language, access to, ownership, and use of land, and reindeer husbandry, with the last acting as the primary form of cultural practice eligible for protections under international human rights law.[2] As a result of the rights struggles of the last 50 years, all the Nordic countries now provide legal opportunities for the assessment and recognition of Sámi land rights based on a variety of legal concepts, like usufruct, immemorial

2 For an overview of the different land rights regimes in each country see Allard and Skogvang 2015.

usage, established privileges, and local customary law (Allard 2011). After many years of neglect Sámi interests now hold an integral and central position in Nordic law, partly through international commitments such as the ILO *Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention* and the UN *Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR), and partly through gradually increased recognition in statutory laws concerning Sámi issues.[3] An example of how the ICCPR has been given direct effect in the preservation of Sámi interests in Norway is the *Fosen* case, in which the Norwegian Supreme Court found licences for wind power development in the Fosen peninsula were invalid because the construction violated Sámi reindeer herders' right to enjoy their own culture through the adverse effects of windmills on reindeer grazing (Supreme Court of Norway 2021).

Across these regulatory frameworks, which can loosely be characterized as 'Sámi law' (Skogvang 2009), the role of spirituality, religion, and sacrality has until recently been all but non-existent. This omission is notable given the emphasis on the spiritual relationship between Indigenous peoples and their land in the 1982 Cobo report, the ILO *Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention*, 1989 (No. 169), and the UNDRIP (2007), all of which have been influential for the development of Sámi law in all the Nordic countries, though the latter has yet to become binding legal commitments.

During the last decade, however, movements for increased recognition of the human rights of Indigenous peoples in the Nordic countries have begun to articulate claims for increased protections for SNS as a subset of their larger rights struggle, indicating that 'norm entrepreneurs' have started working for the formal recognition of this norm, moving from step 2 to step 3 in the model of rights development developed by Clifford Bob (Bob 2009). A landmark event in this transition was the 2010 meeting in Aanar/Inari in Finland organized by the Delos initiative, a programme developed by the CSVPA, the specialist group for SNS the IUCN created in 1998. This event led to the *Aanar/Inari Statement on the diversity of sacred natural sites in Europe*, highlighting the need to provide more robust protections of SNS in European countries, including but not limited to the SNS of the Sámi. In 2013 a related event was organized by the Sacred Natural Sites Initiative (SNSI), another subsidiary of the CSVPA, in Pyhänturi in Finland. Unlike the statement from Aanar/Inari, the resulting *Pyhätunturi Statement* exclusively emphasized the need for better protection of the SNS of Indigenous peoples, specifically highlighting the need to implement the provisions of

3 Primarily the *Act on the Sámi Parliament and other Sámi Legal Issues* (1987) and the *Reindeer Husbandry Act* (2007).

the UNDRIP (SNSI 2013). Also in 2013 a preparatory conference before the 2014 UN *World Conference on Indigenous Peoples* was organized in Alta in Norway, resulting in an outcome document that urged states to

> …affirm and recognize the right to the protection, preservation and restitution of our sacred places, sites and cultural landscapes and establish mechanisms that can effectively promote the implementation of these rights including through the allocation of sufficient financial resources (United Nations 2013).

Despite these promising developments, none of the Nordic countries has created legal frameworks that provide specific protections for SNS, though the Finnish authority in charge of national parks has adopted the *Akwé:Kon* guidelines in its regulatory framework (Markkula et al. 2019; Onyango and Wiman 2021). Despite this implementation, there is still some distance to travel in Finland, as evinced by the longstanding controversies surrounding a water bottling plant in an SNS in Suttesája in Finnish Sápmi (Kuokkanen and Bulmer 2006), where the Sámi Council has also criticized the lack of recognition of the SNS concerned by the development (Saami Council 2017).

Identifying sacred natural sites in Sápmi

A crucial challenge to the protection of SNS in Sápmi is the long and painful history of the wilful eradication of Sámi worldviews and spirituality. As a result of colonial encroachments in Sápmi, the Sámi's spiritual and religious ideas and practices prior to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are only fragmentarily known. The term 'Sámi religion' can currently be used to describe (at least) three different yet interrelated worldviews, as identified by Konsta Kaikkonen:

> (1) Sámi indigenous religion (SaaN. *eamioskkoldat*); (2) different forms of Sámi Christianity; and (3) Sámi shamanism (which of course does not cover all contemporary forms of Sámi post-secular practices) (Kaikkonen 2020, 12).

The claims developed to gain protections for SNS tend to draw on a combination of (1) and (3). The main sources of such ideas and practices are archaeological and material evidence and accounts written by Christian missionaries (Pollan 2005, 419). From these sources there appears to be a

scholarly consensus on a set of key characteristics.[4] The Sámi pre-Christian worldview encompassed several dimensions of being, of which the present material world was only one. While the number of additional spheres listed in the written record differ, there were conceptions of at least one spiritual world in which beings outside our regular plane of existence dwelt. Particular landscapes and sites appear to have played central roles in the pre-Christian Sámi religious outlook. The significance of *sieidis* – specific places or natural objects where offerings could be made to ensure future hunting or reindeer success – has been clearly established by numerous depictions in the written sources that have come down to us, as well as in the preponderance of archaeological evidence of their widespread and diverse use (Salmi et al. 2011). Because *sieidis* offer tangible clues of ritual activities and can be identified through established archaeological methods and evidence, their status as set apart and eligible for legal protection under paragraph 4 of the *Norwegian Cultural Heritage Act* is clear and relatively undisputed, offering automatic protections for any cultural traces more than 100 years old.

In addition to *sieidis*, however, specific landscapes, areas, and natural features have played key roles in traditional reindeer herding, serving functional, material, symbolic, and lingual dimensions, bearing place names that function as toponyms that can explain the '…history, events, images, tales and folklore attached to the place' (Näkkäläjärvi and Kauppala 2017, 119). Place names deploying Sámi language terms for sacredness, such as *sáivu, bássi, áiles*, and *háldi*, have been used to detect areas that had religious significance in earlier times (Äikäs 2015, 65; Myrvoll 2017, 101). Because these areas tend to have few material indications that set apart their status, they are more difficult to classify, whether by the cultural heritage authorities, reindeer herders, or companies working in the mining and energy sector looking for available areas to exploit.

In addition to placenames the main sources for the sacredness of areas in Sápmi today are missionary accounts from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the pre-Christian Sámi religion was still dominant, combined with whatever traces of the beliefs and myths the missionaries collected that can be gathered among today's Sámi (Myrvoll 2017, 102). Additionally, 'neo-shamans' have recently started identifying sacred mountains in Sápmi, arguing that they represent 'Mother Earth', and thereby nature in general and all of life's relations (Kraft 2022, 34–35). Finally, the recreational aspects of serene mountainous areas have also assisted their status as

4 These characteristics are primarily based on the synthetic account given by Hansen and Olsen 2022.

'almost sacred' among non-Indigenous inhabitants, as evinced in the case of Tromsdalstind in the early 2000s (Kraft 2010).

Because of sacred natural sites' resonance in international heritage discourses, their documented importance to the ritual and spiritual life of pre-Christian Sámi society, and their appeal to both neo-religionists and non-Indigenous people, they have come to play an increasingly important role in recent claims-making among the Norwegian Sámi. Although the question of SNS was peripheral in the 2013 document that spelled out the Sámi parliament's official cultural heritage policy (Sametinget 2013), it occupied a more prominent place in the 2020 policy, which raised the issue of better guidelines and documentation of SNS in Sápmi (Sametinget 2020a). Also in 2020 the Norwegian parliament considered a proposal by Green Party MP Per Espen Stoknes to subject 'selected Sámi sacred mountains' to their own heritage protection initiative (Stortinget 2020). Referring to the conservation of sacred mountains in Sweden and Australia and the brutality of the Norwegianization efforts targeting the Norwegian Sámi in the 1700s, Stoknes highlighted proposed energy developments on the Rástigáisá and Aahkansnjurhtjie mountains, comparing their status among the Sámi to that of culturally significant church buildings among the majority Norwegian population. The proposal failed to gain traction in parliament, with the majority citing the already existing possibility to attain conservation status for sacred mountains in paragraph two of the *Cultural Heritage Act*, which offers protections for constructed or natural sites connected with 'events, beliefs, or traditions'.

Following this attention, the 2021 *Sametingsmelding* (Sámi parliament report) highlighted the importance of SNS for Sámi cultural heritage. Seeking to move the discussion of how to identify candidate areas and mountains forward, the report suggested that naming traditions could be useful for establishing sacredness (Sametinget 2021, 32). According to the report an absolute criterion for the establishment of sacredness would be the existence of 'empirical data', encompassing 'oral traditions, written sources, place names, and archaeological evidence'. Recognizing the limited consensus regarding the proper methodology with which to approach questions of which areas may or may not be sacred and therefore eligible for protection, the Sámi parliament has initiated a strategy to develop guidelines for registration, requirements for documentation, ethical concerns, and registration of Sámi sacred places in cultural heritage databases.

Taken together, the recent political and legal attention to the need for more robust protections of SNS appears to suggest that the lifecycle of this

norm is approaching the point where it is internalized and implemented, thus entering the final stages of the models developed by Finnemore/Sikkink and Bob. The successful implementation of the norm strongly depends, however, on its reception and 'vernacularization' in specific cases, as Sally Engle Merry's work highlights. To gauge whether the 'jurisgenerative moment' in Indigenous rights recognition that Carpenter and Riley identify has arrived, this article's final section examines three instances when the issue of SNS has been part of the discussion about the acceptability of energy developments in Sápmi.

Davvi wind park

In May 2017 the Norwegian Energy Regulatory Authority (NVE) was notified by the energy company Grenselandet AS of its plans to apply for a wind power development with between 100 and 267 turbines in the municipalities of Lebesby and Tana in Finnmark county, an area of approximately 78 square kilometres. The proposed development area was in Sápmi, and would affect four reindeer herding communities in the area.[5] As a preparatory measure for the licensing process, the NVE initiated consultations with the communities, which voiced their concerns about the consequences for reindeer herding and the continuation of Sámi traditions. The Sámi parliament was also consulted, and it expressed concern that the potential ramifications for Sámi beliefs and traditions should be better documented before permits could be approved, referring in particular to Rástigáisá's role as a sacred mountain, a sentiment echoed by the National Trust of Norway, the Norwegian National Sámi Association, and Sirma Gilisearvi,[6] which submitted written complaints to the process. Specifically, the consultation with the Sámi parliament led to the inclusion in the preparatory stages of the licensing process of a survey of 'immaterial cultural heritage, including sacred areas, in the planning area' (NVE 2018a). Sirma Gilisearvi's submission offered the most elaborate depiction of Rástigáisá's sacredness, emphasizing the existence of offering places in the mountain's vicinity combined with the role of 'nature religion' as a vehicle for the Sámi community's cultural resilience (NVE 2018b).

The Sámi parliament suggested that a survey would have to be conducted by someone with a knowledge of Sámi languages, culture, and local Sámi

5 Reindeer herders are organized in collective, representative units called *siida* (Northern Sámi) or *sijte* (Southern Sámi).

6 A *gilisearvi* is a communal unit below the municipal level.

conditions, with the ability both to review historical sources and gather information among the rural communities affected by the development, indicating its interest in collating information from both the historical record and any potential contemporary views of or uses of the concerned area. This request could not be guaranteed by the NVE, as the only requirement under the licensing regime was to use a surveyor with 'relevant and sufficient competence', and whom the company proposing the development project would select (NVE 2018a).

In 2019 Grenselandet AS submitted a review of the consequences of the project conducted by Multiconsult, an independent consultancy. The review provides a detailed assessment of the project's ramifications for the landscape, nature, cultural heritage, hiking, and tourism. There is no indication in the report that historical sources have been reviewed, or that the consultancy had contacted residents or others using the area (Multiconsult 2019). Rástigáisá is mentioned as the 'sacred mountain of the Sámi' several times in the report but without a discussion of source materials, beliefs, or current perceptions of the mountain. Assessing the landscape of the area surrounding the mountain, the consultancy found the qualities to be 'very high', and that the development would have 'strongly negative' effects on these qualities. Similarly, the report found the mountain itself to have 'great value' in terms of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage qualities, and that the proposed development would have 'strongly negative' effects on these qualities.

Supplementing the report by Multiconsult, Grenselandet AS commissioned an additional survey of the ramifications for Sámi nature use, culture, and reindeer herding in 2021. This report was compiled by Sámi ealáhussearvi (the Sámi Business Association). It featured an elaborate description of the historical sources of Rástigáisá's sacredness, supported by reference to Roald Kristensen, a historian of religion at the University of Tromsø, Aage Solbakk, a local historian, and the writings of Jacob Fellman (1795–1875), a Finnish Lutheran priest who had worked in the area. The report recommended that the detrimental influence of the windmills on the area's spiritual aspects could be compensated for by erecting information boards documenting the written sources for the Sámi conceptions of the sacred aspects of the area and the spiritual forces of nature (Sámi Business Association 2021, 55). The final application for Davvi was submitted in June 2022 and remains pending with the NVE. The project has received widespread attention in the Nordic media (NRK 2022; The Barents Observer 2021; Saami Council 2020), with growing interest especially since the decision in the *Fosen* case. The Davvi case illustrates the complexities of developing

a coherent protection regime for SNS, as the legal framework in place for energy development impact assessments currently has no room for the specific recognition of such sites. Adding to this complexity, the disagreement between different Sámi stakeholders about how to preserve the area under development shows the challenges of trying to adapt protective regimes to local cultural conditions that are neither uniform nor predictable. Hence, the 'vernacularization' of the notion of SNS appears incomplete, as local stakeholders disagree about the concept's boundaries.

National plan for land-based wind power

Parallel to the developments in the Davvi case, and following extensive consultations with other regulatory agencies, the NVE launched a proposal in 2019 for a national plan for land-based wind power commissioned by the Ministry of Petroleum and Energy in 2017. The plan assessed the potential for wind power development across the Norwegian mainland, subdividing the country into 43 regional units and recommending large-scale developments in 13 such units, five of which were in Sápmi, and the rest in southern parts of Norway. The plan was met with widespread condemnation, elicited more than 5,000 responses in a public hearing, and was soon scrapped by the government.

Numerous Sámi interest groups participated in the hearing, heavily criticizing the ramifications for reindeer herding were the plan to be adopted. Among them the response from the reindeer herding community Leavvajoga ja Rastigaissa Samesiida (LRS) stands out: unlike the responses from other herding communities, the LRS argued that their area – Leavvajohka and its surroundings – should be protected from wind power development because it constituted 'the most comprehensive Sámi sacred land areas in Norway' (LRS 2019). Attached to the response was a comprehensive document that argued for the sacredness of numerous mountains, lakes, and rivers in the Leavvajohka area, drawing partly on their names' religious connotations and partly on Jakob Fellman's writings about Sámi religion and specific landscape features. Hence, much like the consultancy reports commissioned for Davvi, the emphasis for the LRS in documenting the sacredness of the landscape was very much on historical sources.

Despite massive resistance to a national plan for land-based wind power and its consequences for Sámi reindeer herding, Statistics Norway published a white paper in September 2022 offering its perspectives on which areas of Norway might most efficiently provide land-based wind power. Of the

4 TWh capacity the paper recommended, 2.6 TWh was recommended for development in areas used by Sámi reindeer herding communities, indicating that the tensions between Sámi land rights and energy development were unlikely to subside in the near future.

Aahkansnjurhtjie

Whereas the status of Rástigáisá as an SNS has been undisputed, another energy development initiative further south in Sápmi illustrates the difficulties that can arise when actors disagree about an area's status. In 2013 a proposal to build a hydroelectric dam in Stikkelvika in the Hattfjelldal municipality, further south in Sápmi, was submitted to the Norwegian energy authorities. In the hearing process both the Sámi parliament and local reindeer herders opposed the initiative, not because of the area's sacred properties but because of its potential to harm reindeer. The Ministry of Petroleum and Energy (MPE) dismissed the opposition, and issued a licence to proceed with construction in 2018.

Shortly after the licence's approval the Arctic Shaman Circle (ASC) – a self-styled religious group – was formed and immediately sought to oppose the construction, citing its detrimental effects on an area sacred for the Sámi. The ASC submitted a 30-page report listing several characteristics said to attest to the mountain's sacredness, including its Sámi name – Aahkansnjurhtjie – which can be linked to the term for goddesses (*aahka*); its prominence and visibility from many of the surrounding areas, which also features numerous other sacred mountains; the finding of an offering ground; its central position within the local reindeer herding district; and the particular kinds of respect the mountain invoked, providing power and calm (ASC 2018). Most of the report detailed personal experiences with and feelings for the mountain among locals.

Following the resistance, the Sámi parliament also issued a statement on the development's ramifications in which it reiterated its concerns about the effects on reindeer herders, while questioning the ASC's claim that the area was sacred for the historical and modern Sámi. According to the parliament's statement opinions were divided over whether the term *aahka* always indicated that a mountain had been held in high esteem, or if it might also indicate simply 'female' or 'old woman'. Additionally, the statement stressed that none of the missionary accounts from the area reported any beliefs associated with the area, further weakening its status as sacred (Sametinget 2020b). The MPE approved the construction of the power plant, but construction has yet to commence at the time of writing.

Building on the momentum created by the ASC resistance to the power plant, the South Sámi museum and cultural centre Saemien Sitje started a project to document sacred areas in the southern part of Sápmi in 2019. Combining historical source materials and interpretations of existing place names, the report found more than 50 areas and locations that were or had been held sacred (Nordberg 2021). An important motivation for both the ASC and Saemien Sitje in this work has been to offer a systematic critique of Norwegian cultural heritage legislation and administration, which has until recently been dominated by a preference for tangible material cultural remains. With the processes currently underway to prevent the construction of Davvi and the process surrounding the Hattfjelldal development, this dominance is likely to be increasingly contested in the coming years.

Much in the same way as with the proposed Davvi wind park development, the Aahkansnjurhtjie process demonstrates local stakeholders' ambivalence concerning the identification and protection of SNS and the challenges facing its formal codification in Norwegian law. Far from the open-ended definitions of SNS proposed at the international level, the identification of SNS on the ground in Sápmi shows that Indigenous peoples – like people everywhere – disagree about how to find equitable solutions to the balancing acts between energy development, cultural heritage, and biological diversity involved in the governance of their lands. While international processes that promote the virtue of creating protections for SNS pay little attention to the foundational ambivalence implied in the designation of areas as 'sacred', this ambivalence lies at the very heart of discussions about SNS in Sápmi.

Conclusion

In recent decades the idea that the protection of the sacred natural sites of Indigenous peoples can assist in their struggle for self-determination and sovereignty while protecting their cultural heritage, conserving biological diversity, and preventing nature degradation has gained considerable international traction. Despite the success of norm entrepreneurs and intermediaries in international NGOs working for protections of SNS internationally, such protections quickly run into difficulties when they are applied on the ground: the recent discussions among Sámi actors about whether areas in Sápmi constitute SNS that should gain protection suggest that the 'vernacularization' of this norm has a long way to go in Sápmi, and that the 'jurisgenerative moment' in Indigenous human rights jurisprudence that Carpenter and Riley identify has yet to arrive in Norway. Because the

local conditions so crucial for the implementation of norms developed at the international level have yet to be acknowledged and formally brought into the decision-making processes of Norwegian government agencies, the formal recognition granted to SNS in the UNDRIP currently appears to be unavailable to Sámi claimants.

Crucially, the promotion of the idea that SNS should merit special protection has occurred largely without concern for the fundamental ambivalence engendered by its deployment in local settings. Protective measures for SNS have been developed without paying due attention to the singularly most definitive characteristic of the sacred, as documented by centuries of research on the religious and spiritual traditions that sustain them: that the nature, meaning, and understanding of the sacred is a topic of running conversation, theological discussion, and sociocultural change, not one of settled definitions. Hence, efforts to create protections of SNS cannot start from the assumption that such protections can be created unilaterally and without becoming entangled in this running conversation, which inevitably leads to the kinds of disagreements documented above.

The requirements for local discursive configurations of sacred areas in Sápmi to become recognizable under Norwegian Sámi law can thus resemble the constrictions of what Laurajane Smith has characterized the 'authoritative heritage discourse', which defines the legitimate spokespersons for the past, charts the authority of expertise, and promotes a specific and narrow conception of what may be good or important about the past (Smith 2006, 29). Hence, although both international and domestic efforts to recognize and preserve SNS seek rehabilitation, justice, and reconciliation for past injustices, the means available for these processes remain limited to terms set by the very past they seek to overcome.

However, these barriers are not permanent but are subject to continuous negotiation and adjudication, both within the Sámi parliament and in the licensing processes overseen by the NVE and MPE, as neither of the energy developments examined above is settled at the time of writing. Following the decision by the Norwegian government in 2023 to electrify oil and gas installations on the Norwegian seabed, which was heavily criticized by the president of the Sámi parliament, the need for energy developments in Sápmi will continue to grow, leading to new land use disputes between developers, government agencies, and civil society, including but not limited to Sámi groups.

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Book Review

Douglas Ezzy, Anna Halafoff, Greg Barton and Rebecca Banham (eds): *Religious Diversity in Australia: Living Well with Difference*. London: Bloomsbury, 2024, 251 pp.

Religious Diversity in Australia: Living Well with Difference is an anthology that examines numerous aspects of contemporary religious diversity, mainly in the Australian states of Victoria and Tasmania. The book is a product of the Religious Diversity in Australia: Strategies to Maintain Social Cohesion Project led by Douglas Ezzy, Anna Halafoff, Greg Barton, and Gary Bouma. Fifteen authors have contributed to the volume, and it is edited by Douglas Ezzy, Anna Halafoff, Greg Barton, and Rebecca Banham. The book is dedicated to the memory of Professor Gary Bouma (1942–2021), who was an internationally renowned scholar of the sociology of religion and a contributor to one article in the book.

The book consists of a brief introduction, nine thematic chapters, and a final evaluative chapter by the Canadian scholar of religion, Professor Lori Beaman from the University of Ottawa. The editors outline their key aims in the introduction. They wish to highlight current religious diversity in a range of Australian social contexts: 'migration, education, policing, legislation, media, countering violent extremism and interfaith practices' (p. 1). Moreover, the focus on 'the diversity of religious diversity' (p. 2), by which they refer to diversity within religious traditions and ethnic communities, is a welcome perspective, as it brings to light the complex realities in which migrant communities live, illuminating their internal divisions and differing religious integration trajectories. Alongside this, the authors take up issues of 'power and privilege, and the challenges and constraints on funding and resources' (p. 2), as well as belonging (p. 3), including its visibility, all of which play a role in the social inclusion that is key for the long-term development of Australian society.

The first substantive chapter examines religious diversity in Melbourne, a city of five million, where more than half the population were born abroad. It applies a super-diversity perspective to the topic, aiming to highlight the complexities of religious belonging and affiliation with various socioeconomic and migration aspects. It also introduces a welcome theoretical development to super-diversity research that they call 're-homogenisation'. Whereas debates on super-diversity usually highlight the diversification of diversity in the context of high immigration levels, re-homogenization looks to social reorganization, that is, 'how emerging combinations of social variables are forming into new group categories with relatively stable boundaries in super-diverse urban contexts' (p. 16). They do so by examining residential mobility,

for example, identifying different types of new groupings, including 'cosmopolitan hipster villages' (p. 22) with a highly religiously diverse 'gentrifying, young professional and university student population' (p. 22), including many nones. The chapter shows a promising avenue for conducting super-diversity research.

The next two chapters focus on attitudes towards religious diversity and media representations of religion. The first is based on a national survey; the latter on selected newspapers in Melbourne in Victoria and Hobart in Tasmania. They discuss the role of Australian nationalism, and how cultural Christianity is integrated into it. Christianity and Islam emerge as the main poles of the newspaper religion debate, while other religions and spiritualities are less recognized. Christian nationalists are the most antagonistic to religious diversity; the rest of the population is indifferent, ambivalent, or takes a more positive view. The authors also note that religious education tends to play a positive role in how people relate to other religions.

Chapter four on migration and religious diversity starts by pointing to the country's earlier migration-based religious diversity, and how the White Australia Policy affected it, starting with the 1901 Migration Restriction Act and lasting until the 1970s. The policy was targeted at non-British migration and was especially harsh for the Chinese and Japanese communities. The authors remind us that 'the prevailing myth (…) of a White Christian Nation that still persists in Australian society does not reflect its historical and multifaith reality' (p. 77). The authors are generally quite critical of both historical and contemporary policy restrictions, evincing sensitivity about the injustices the Australian Indigenous population and immigrants have experienced. The chapter then discusses the varying lives of Chinese, Indian, and Afghan migrants in detail, including how the Codiv-19 pandemic affected their position in society and transnational relations.

The next chapter takes up the role of education, an aspect that features prominently in the book. Despite having a national curriculum since 2008, Australian states differ somewhat in how different religions and worldviews are taught at school. Based on a textual analysis, the chapter compares the differences between the Australian and Victorian curricula. The Victorian curriculum is more sensitive to different worldviews, whereas the Australian one focuses more on the Abrahamic religions. Both curricula still suffer from an old-fashioned world religions perspective that does not sufficiently recognize Aboriginal spiritualities, for example, but the Victorian curriculum is still considered more advanced. The authors conclude, however, that 'a more critical, considered and inclusive approach to learning about diverse worldviews is as yet to be developed and delivered in Australia' (p. 122).

The Multifaith Movement is a significant, yet in public often underestimated, development that fosters local and national interreligious relations and can significantly help overcome various problems arising from increased religious diversity. Chapter six examines 'representational' and 'relational' multifaith bodies (p. 129) in Victoria and Tasmania, focusing on two case studies. The Faith Communities Council of Victoria (FCCV) is a representational umbrella body bringing together various traditional religious organizations. While fostering good local relations, the representatives must balance their official positions with their personal views, also presenting challenges for issues that are tense for one reason or another. Sacred Conversations is a Hobart-based local group, a relational body bringing individuals of different faiths together. It has no representational authority, but attendees can express themselves freely and create stronger individual bonds. The chapters skilfully address the various types of actors involved in multifaith work.

The last three chapters examine legislation, policing, and the prevention of extremism. They all point to the Christian majority's power and privilege, showing how minorities often struggle to be trustworthy in the eyes of the majority. For example, minorities tend to be overrepresented among victims of police violence due to underprivilege and negative stereotypes, including Islamophobia (p. 178). Trust in the police can be a problem for which various strategies can be used, from staff recruitment to community policing (p. 181). Since 9/11, various counterterrorism policies and measures, as well as those aimed at the prevention of violent extremism, have especially targeted Muslim communities. While addressing real threats to public safety, reactions to religion-based ideologies may also have significant countereffects that harm community relations and societal trust. The chapter on prevention and countering policies explores a series of Australian developments where international learning and local experiences have gradually given way to more constructive policies and practices that foster the building of trust (p. 221).

Lori Beaman's international perspective on religious diversity summarizes the book. She notes that the Australian experiences in many ways resemble developments in Western societies. However, context always matters, so Australian Aboriginal history and the various local circumstances should be noted. Beaman also addresses the enduring power of nationalism, and how nations are imagined. The history of the White Australia Policy and the privilege of certain forms of Christianity have gained new momentum in the 2000s. This begs the question of how to include everyone, and what should be done. Although there is no easy way out, legal development is important, as it sets the national limits of the acceptable and the avoidable. As a final note, Beaman states that 'any living prospect

of living well together in super-diverse nations like Australia depends on the recognition by states, civil societies and religious groups of the harm done and commitment to engaging in reconciliation on Indigenous terms' (p. 238). In my understanding this means that only when we have sorted out our past can we deal with the current times in the optimal manner.

While the individual contributions were all informative reading, I felt the book lacked something. As most of the chapters deal with religious diversity in the states of Victoria and Tasmania, I kept wondering how this was related to the wider Australian situation. I think the book would have benefited from an introductory chapter about the history, regional differences, and overall situation of religion in Australia. An international readership would certainly find this helpful, and it is also what I expected of a book titled 'Religious Diversity in Australia'. I also felt that the urban perspective dominated most chapters, and the states' less diverse areas received less focus. An overt focus on urbanism is a common feature of migration research, but we should not forget that migration also occurs on other sites, and that the related debates and policies tend to be national.

That said, *Religious Diversity in Australia* makes a timely and multifaceted contribution in addressing the numerous central issues of contemporary religious diversity. The book is very systematically produced, is well edited, and will provide inspiration for other researchers with similar interests. It also includes a wealth of new data, providing an up-to-date picture of religious diversity down under. Despite not illuminating the entire Australian experience, it nevertheless provides a valuable looking glass into a growing multireligious society. The book is suitable reading for courses on religious diversity and religion in Australia, and will be of interest to scholars of migration-related religious diversity.

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Book Review

Christopher L. Schilling: *The Japanese Talmud: Antisemitism in East Asia.* London: Hurst Publishers, 2023, 144 pp.

Does antisemitism exist in East Asia? Flagrant antisemitism is marginal in the region, yet Jewish prejudice coexists alongside positive perceptions and even high degrees of admiration for Jews. In his latest book Christopher Schilling propounds the term 'bisemitism' – a state of mind in which one harbours both antisemitic and philosemitic attitudes – as a way of characterizing East Asians in their regard of Jews. Schilling contends that what often appears as 'love of the Jew' in East Asia may actually be an insidious form of one of the world's oldest hatreds.

The opening five chapters provide rich primary and secondary source research on antisemitism and philosemitism in South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China, while the concluding three chapters contain Schilling's sociological perspectives on the development of storytelling in East Asian and Western cultures. Schilling argues that while East Asia has 'imported' some of the West's propensity for dichotomies in its storytelling – that is, good versus bad characters – East Asians can also view characters more flexibly, making room for bisemitic attitudes.

In the first chapter Schilling cites the most extensive global antisemitism poll conducted to date, which found 53 per cent of South Koreans surveyed in 2014 held antisemitic attitudes, in contrast with 23 per cent in Japan and 20 per cent in the People's Republic of China. South Korea thus holds the position of being the most antisemitic country among the world's non-Muslim majority nations. Astoundingly, more than 80 per cent of South Koreans are estimated to have read Rabbi Marvin Tokayer's *Talmud*, a translated and abridged version of Rabbinic Judaism's central religious volume (though it is arguably a great departure from the original). Tokayer's *Talmud* is branded in South Korea as a 'universal book of general wisdom', with many subsequent adaptations, accruing a variegated readership among Korean students, businessmen, athletes, and even pregnant mothers who 'believe that reading [prenatal Talmudic publications] will somehow improve their children's IQ'. Similarly, bestsellers by Rabbi Tokayer abound in Japan, including *Five Thousand Years of Jewish Wisdom: Secrets of the Talmud Scriptures* and *There Is No Education in Japan: The Jewish Secret of Educating Geniuses.*

According to Schilling in the second chapter, 'the commercialization of the Talmud and Judaism by Tokayer and authors that followed him has further inflamed myths in Japan of the Jews being different from other people'. Yet, of the more than five thousand Japanese titles

authored about Jews, Schilling also addresses a significant body of work theorizing that the Japanese are actually descendants of one of the ten 'lost' tribes of Israel. Identification with the Jewish people not merely serves as a way for Japan to relate to the West on their terms but also to distance themselves psychologically from their contribution to the Second World War. Schilling claims that Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* is widely read throughout Japan for this reason; her story encapsulates Japan's feelings of fear and isolation during the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Moving further east in the third, fourth, and fifth chapters, Schilling shifts the focus to contemporary Chinese society. Not unlike South Korea and Japan, the fetishization of the Talmud exists in Taiwan, where the 'Talmud Business Hotel' in central Taichung offers occupants copies of the *Talmud Business Success Bible* to 'experience the Talmud way of becoming successful'. Paradoxically, the fetishization of the Holocaust and incidents of Nazi cosplay have also found expression on the island, with links to the transnational flow of Western antisemitic literature into the region. In stark contrast, citizens of Hong Kong seemingly condemned Nazism during the anti-China protests of 2019. However, by equating Nazism with the Chinese Communist Party, Schilling concludes that the misappropriation of Jewish suffering has only led to the trivialization of the Holocaust in Hong Kong society.

In mainland China Schilling turns his attention to Chinese universities with established centres for Jewish Studies, including The Diane and Guilford Guilford Glazer Institute for Jewish and Israel Studies in Nanjing University, Shandong University's Center for Judaic and Inter-Religious Studies, and the Center for Jewish Studies Shanghai. Schilling condemns the production of Jewish studies 'by and for the Chinese' if it presupposes that Jewish academics cannot be objective in the field of Jewish studies. Such a presupposition veils implicit antisemitism, writes Schilling, for it fundamentally assumes that Judaism dominantly influences all Jewish academics, who are 'burdened' by their ethno-religious identity when conducting research.

The Japanese Talmud makes a significant contribution to the international study of antisemitism because, first, it establishes that prejudice against Jews can flourish clandestinely even in countries with few Jews. Second, Schilling may be one of the first authors to make a general distinction between the antisemitism of the West and East Asia. The 'three Ds of antisemitism' (delegitimization, demonization, and double standards) that tend to colour Western society represent a different kind of antisemitism to that in Confucian society, which tends to engender misrepresentation, misappropriation, and mythmaking. Schilling is not proposing that the latter is less antisemitic than the former; nor is he saying that Westerners

only exhibit characterizations of the former and East Asians of the latter. Rather, in his penultimate chapter Schilling emphasizes that people, especially East Asians, are more fluid than rigid in their thinking, allowing them to practise varying forms of antisemitism and philosemitism at the same time. The world may thus be more 'bisemitic' than we realize.

It is important to note that this concept is not entirely new. 'Allosemitism,' a neologism coined in the 1980s, has already been adopted in the literature to describe the attitude of ambivalence that some hold toward Jews and Judaism. Zygmunt Bauman went so far as to suggest that allosemitism regards Jews as a radically distinct Other 'needing separate concepts to describe and comprehend them'. Schilling's operationalisation of the word 'bisemitism' appears similar in scope to 'allosemitism', and moving forward, a clear explanation regarding their difference is needed.

Schilling covers extensive ground on the contemporary issues afflicting modern contemporary East Asian societies, including rapid globalization and how it heightens the mutual allure and suspicion of perceived Jewish success. While some information is missing from Schilling's analysis – for example, a clearer expounding on the production of bisemitic narratives by East Asia's Evangelical Christian Zionists – his argument is framed as a 'generalization' and should be treated as such. The initial five chapters at the start of his book can be dizzying without any guiding premises (it is only when approaching the final three chapters that one grasps the logic to Schilling's inductive reasoning framework), but this monograph remains an excellent starting point for understanding the reconstruction of the Talmud as symbolic of 'exotic Western wisdom' and how Jews have come to be perceived as both intruding 'outsider' and intriguing 'insider'.

East Asia should not remain overlooked in the field of antisemitism studies. Talmudic texts today in this part of the world continue to inspire both the veneration and vilification of Jews in an era of heightened global competition. Should an 'Asian Century' come, as Schilling surmises, views of Jews in East Asia will increasingly permeate and influence the globe.

The cover photo for *The Japanese Talmud* is thus a pertinent one. Featuring a photograph of Jewish refugees in the ghetto of Shanghai living under Japanese occupation, Schilling has indeed shown us a way forward: to overcome age-old anti-Jewish tropes of Jewish power and domination, we must share 'new' untold histories of Jewish vulnerability amid rival imperialisms over the last two millennia.

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