

## **The Burning Qur'an and the Benign Bible: Representation of Scripture(s) in the Swedish Media Debate on the Qur'an Burnings**

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In this article, we examine the way the (Christian) Bible and the Qur'an are represented in Swedish press in the wake of the Qur'an burnings that took place in Sweden 2020–23. Through critical discourse analysis we investigate debate articles and identify prominent discourses that stress the Bible as benign and the Qur'an as malign for Swedish society. The Bible is framed as harmonizing with Swedish values, including freedom of speech, while the Qur'an is framed as non-compatible with a modern, secular society. The result is then related to biblical reception studies on various notions of Bibles in the public sphere and the theory of the politicization of religion as applied in sociology of religion. Ultimately, we argue that an increasing politicization of the Bible risks reinforcing problematic notions of the religious Other, through framing sacred scriptures as contrasting symbols for groups of people, even in the world's most secularized country.

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## Introduction

Between 2020 and 2023, a heated debate raged in Sweden because of several cases of Qur'an burnings in numerous Swedish cities. The debate centred around the supposed conflict between the two fundamental laws on freedom of religion and freedom of speech. Since Sweden does not have any law on blasphemy, the discussion revolved around the importance of securing the fundamental laws as well as religious minorities' right to not be subjected to discrimination. While the Muslim scripture, and, as some argued, freedom of religion, was literally lit up in the public square of Sweden, the Christian scripture played a much cooler role in the debate. In this article, we aim to examine this role; how was the (Christian) Bible used and framed in the Qur'an burning debate and why was it drawn into the debate in the first place?

The biblical scholarly interest in the way the Bible is invoked, represented, and interpreted in the public debate has increased in recent decades.<sup>1</sup> Studies within sociology of religion are increasingly focusing on the new visibility of and controversies regarding religion in the Nordic public sphere (cf. Furseth 2018; Lundby 2018). From both fields, scholars have discerned how a constructed binary between the Bible and the Qur'an is expressed in Western debates on topics such as immigration, religion, and secularism, where the former is seen as embodying a specific, and positive, heritage and culture, while the latter is seen as something foreign, even threatening (Jensdotter 2021; Liljefors 2022; Strømme 2017, cf. 2022; 2023; 2024). As a sociologist of religion and a biblical scholar, we unite in an interdisciplinary approach which we believe will strengthen both fields further. This article aims to examine how and why the Bible comes to the fore in the media debates following the Qur'an burnings in Sweden between 2020 and 2023. By examining both religious and secular press, we seek to investigate discourses on scriptures in a context often referred to as the most secularized country in the world, as well as how constructions of scripture influence notions of secularity. Through an interdisciplinary theoretical approach, we hope to contribute to a greater understanding of the role ascribed to the Bible in the construction and maintenance of a secularized society's notions of religion, as well as the function the Bible may have in contemporary political and public debate.

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1. Influential studies include Sherwood 2006; Berlinerblau 2008; Crossley 2016. In the Nordic context, a novelty study is the anthology *The Nordic Bible* (Bjelland Kartzow et al. 2023), which gathers scholars from different disciplines addressing Bible-use in various parts of the Nordic public sphere.

We will begin by giving a background to the Qur'an burning events that took place in Sweden at the beginning of the 2020s. We then move on to set out the selected method and material, after which we present the study's results. Lastly, we discuss the implications of the results through a theoretical frame.

### The Qur'an Burnings in Sweden between 2020 and 2023

Desecrations of religious scriptures appear regularly and worldwide in news reports about religious and political conflicts.<sup>2</sup> There are numerous examples of the explosive social power of desecrating scriptures and how these can draw intense media coverage, prompting religious and political outrage (Watts 2019, 83). For instance, Florida pastor Terry Jones gained world media attention in 2010 when he threatened to burn a Qur'an on the ninth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, causing widespread protests in Muslim countries. Despite appeals to cancel the event by several American officials, including President Barack Obama, Jones burned a Qur'an the following year, which provoked protests and attacks on UN aid workers and US soldiers in Afghanistan, costing the lives of 24 people. Scriptures, as biblical scholar James Watts argues, have emerged as potent objects of contestation. However, most of these controversies do not revolve around interpretation of the meaning of scriptures, but rather on the physical display and manipulation of them, and their function as physical symbols of religion, cultures, and ideas (Watts 2019, 7).

In the last several years, there has been an outbreak of Qur'an burnings in several Nordic countries as a method of criticizing Islam and defending freedom of speech. The Danish-Swedish lawyer Rasmus Paludan (b. 1982) is the most well-known contemporary Nordic provocateur who uses the burning of the Qur'an as a political manifestation in Denmark and Sweden (Larsson et al. 2024, 8).<sup>3</sup> Since 2017 and the launch of his political party Hard Line (*Stram Kurs*), Paludan has voiced heavy criticism of Islam, Muslims, and multiculturalism and since the end of 2020, Paludan has

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2. As Watts demonstrates, a religious scripture combines two qualities otherwise rarely found together: it is an available material object, and it offers incomparable access to divinity (Watts 2019, 95). Destroying scriptures stirs deep antipathies stoked by memories of political and religious suppression by book burnings, both in antiquity and in modern political history (Watts 2019, 174).
  3. *Temenos* 60(1) from 2024 is a themed issue on burnings of the Qur'an which discusses the contemporary practice of public rituals where a physical copy of the Qur'an is burnt. See also Lövheim 2024 for an analysis of the Qur'an burnings as a mediatized conflict.

toured Sweden and burnt several copies of the Qur'an, with both peaceful counterdemonstrations and violent riots as consequences. During the summer of 2023, a new Qur'an burner entered the Swedish stage, namely Iraqi asylum-seeker Salwan Momika. By August 2023, there was a massive international demand for a ban on Qur'an burnings in Sweden and Denmark, and the two countries received heavy negative press on social media. Established news media like Al-Jazeera also circulated biased and even incorrect information about the burnings and Sweden's legal system. The burnings of the Qur'an have often developed into media events that have taken on a life of their own (Larsson et al. 2024, 10).<sup>4</sup> In the wake of the burnings in 2023, the Swedish Embassy in Baghdad and the Swedish consulate in Beirut were both attacked. Besides their global impact, the Qur'an burnings developed into an internal political affair when Sweden raised its threat level on a five-grade scale to four, indicating it was highly likely Sweden would become a target of terrorism. The Qur'an burnings also had major consequences on Sweden's foreign politics by affecting the sensitive process of Sweden applying for membership of NATO.

In the legal aftermath of the Qur'an burnings, Paludan was sentenced on 5 November 2024, by Malmö District Court to four months in prison for incitement, a sentence that has been appealed. Momika, together with co-actor Salwan Najem, was also charged with incitement. The verdict was supposed to be announced on 30 January 2025, but was postponed as Momika was murdered less than 24 hours earlier. The murder caused a public reaction, including heated discussions in the media and on social media platforms. Najem was sentenced to a suspended sentence and a daily fine for incitement on 3 February. He is also expected to appeal the verdict at the time of writing (February 2025).

## Material and Methods

The material used for this study consists of opinion pieces (editorials, debate articles, and columns) from Swedish newspapers. The selected newspapers can be divided into two categories: secular and religious. A total of 25 articles were collected from the secular press, taken from *Aftonbladet*, *Dagens Nyheter*, *Expressen*, and *Svenska Dagbladet*. The material from the religious press comprises 23 articles from *Dagen*, *Kyrkans Tidning*, *Sändaren*, and *Världen idag*. All articles were published between January 2020 and July 2024. The articles were collected via the media archive

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4. As a mediatized conflict, the Qur'an burnings in Sweden were amplified, framed, and co-structured by the media (Lövheim 2024).

Retriever and the newspapers' websites. The selection criterion was an explicit mentioning of the Bible.

The analysed material represents only a small fraction of the broader debate surrounding the Qur'an burnings in Sweden, precluding broad generalizations based on the result. However, opinion pieces from Swedish media serve as valuable indicators of legitimized positions that continue to influence mainstream discourse on specific issues (cf. Lövheim 2024, 232–233). Furthermore, this particular material illuminates aspects of the debate not evident in studies examining overall media coverage, while revealing the ongoing politicization of religion across various domains of Swedish public life.

The material was analysed through critical discourse analysis (CDA). The approach stems from a notion of the world as contingent, arguing that representations and practices that exist in the social world are created through social processes (Hjelm 2014, 16). Through discourse, a particular form of knowledge is established as true and “taken for granted”, setting the framework for what can be said – when, how, and to whom – but also regarding what is considered “common sense” (Fairclough 2015, 107). The model for CDA analysis employed in this study includes three dimensions of discourse. Discourse as text encompasses the linguistic characteristics of the text; discursive practices concern how discourses are produced, distributed, and consumed; discourse as social practices concerns the discourse's interaction with the society that constitutes its context (Fairclough 1992, 71–73).

The result of the CDA will be presented as follows. First we will present the main discourses identified in the material. Thereafter follow examples from the three dimensions of discourse, using analytical tools from the CDA toolbox. In the last dimension of CDA, we will discuss our results with theories from biblical reception studies and sociology of religion, namely different uses and notions of the Bible, such as the *cultural Bible* (Sheehan 2005), the *liberal Bible* (Sherwood 2006), the *far-right Bible*, and the *civilizational Bible* (Strømme 2017, 2024), together with the politicisation of religion (Ivanescu 2010). This theoretical framework will be presented more in detail below.

### **Discourses on Scriptures and Secularism**

In the source material, five discourses are identified as particularly prominent. This does not mean that no other discourses are to be found, or that these five are expressed uniformly in all texts where they occur. However,

it can be argued that the debate is primarily organized around these five discourses.

We have labelled the dominating discourse in the material as the *Freedom of Speech Discourse*. In all texts explored here, there are statements either confirming or contradicting the underlying assumptions of this discourse (cf. Larsson and Mattsson 2024; Lövheim 2024; Nissen and Lundstedt 2024). In this discourse, freedom of speech is presented as an absolute and non-negotiable right in Sweden. Moreover, it is emphasized that freedom of speech can never be restricted by religious feelings or demands: “But in a free society, religious feelings cannot constitute the limit for freedom of speech” (Rudenstrand 2022). This discourse distinguishes between legislation and morals. Even though the Qur’an burnings are unanimously criticized in the analysed texts, the Freedom of Speech Discourse emphasizes that legislation must extend beyond what is considered morally acceptable. Erik Helmersson, editorial writer at *Dagens Nyheter*, formulates this assumption as follows:

“It is wrong to burn the Qur’an” then becomes a perfectly reasonable moral stance. As a basis for legislation, however, it is meagre. Laws cannot rely solely on emotions, that is far too shaky foundation. They require clear principles. A better one is that blasphemy against religious scriptures must be included in freedom of speech, even if it provokes us. (Helmersson 2023)

The Freedom of Speech Discourse is often paired with a discourse we call the *Angry Muslims Discourse*. In this discourse, Muslims are portrayed as angry and easily offended, with a low threshold for acting on these emotions. The underlying assumption in this discourse is that religious groups react and act in different ways, with Muslims as a negative model.

In a way, it was a shame that the man who recently planned to burn the Bible and the Jewish holy scripture, the Torah, in Stockholm changed his mind. He had his permit, it was just a matter of getting started. But no: he backed down, and thus an opportunity was lost to show the Muslim world that Swedish law does not discriminate against Islam, as long as you own it yourself, anyone can burn any scripture they want. But the sad truth is that it probably wouldn’t have made any difference. Fanatics are not characterized by logic and benignity. They act on emotions: I am offended, I must take revenge. If you accommodate them in one area, they immediately find others where they can advance their positions. (*Dagens Nyheter* 2023)

As in this quote, the discourse repeatedly refers to a Muslim capacity for violence, ready to be used against the free society to adapt it to Islam.

These two discourses are often countered by another pair, which include the *Different Freedoms and Rights Discourse* and a discourse that claims that Sweden has a poor understanding of sanctity, which we call the *Sanctity Discourse*. The first of these is a direct counter-discourse to the dominant Freedom of Speech Discourse by emphasizing that freedom of speech is one of several freedoms and rights in Sweden, and that freedom of speech always needs to be balanced against, for example, freedom of religion. Ann Heberlein, opinion-maker, formulates the essence of this discourse as follows: “Freedom of expression is not, and has never been, unlimited. The boundary of freedom of expression has, I argue, been crossed with the burning of holy books outside holy buildings” (Heberlein 2023). As in this citation, the discourse emphasizes the limits of freedom of speech, often through references to legislation and Qur'an burnings as a potential crime in the form of hate speech.

In the second discourse, arguments are gathered that highlight the low level of understanding of sanctity in Sweden. Jonas Gardell, a well-known author and artist, writes that:

And it's like we just can't understand the strong reactions in other countries. We are somehow mute, astonished, and impervious to the strong religiosity of the outside world. ... It won't help no matter how many times we try to explain that in Sweden we don't believe in God as much as we do in Freedom of Speech. In secular Sweden, we have come to terms with the “fairy tales” and “superstition” that religion is said to be and believe that our secular thinking is both objective and rational. (Gardell 2023)

In the Sanctity Discourse, Sweden is described as a secular country where various forms of religious practices and feelings have limited space and are not accorded value or met with understanding when expressed in the public sphere. The underlying assumption is that these conditions make it difficult for secular Swedes to relate to and manage the reactions that the Qur'an burnings have generated, both in Sweden and globally.

Finally, we have identified a *Benign Bible Discourse*, where the underlying assumption is that the Bible is assumed to harmonize with Swedish values.<sup>5</sup> In this discourse, the Bible emphasizes love over violence and is regarded as compatible with modern society. Christians are described as

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5. When applying the term “Benign Bible” we draw on previous works by Strømme, cf. 2022.

capable of critical thinking and of valuing the freedoms and rights of a democratic society higher than religious beliefs, practices, or symbols:

Burning Christians do not burn Qur’ans but share the good news from the Bible. Fanatics must be opposed but cannot be eradicated. In democratic societies, dissenters are not killed, they are debated with. We will never be able to have an open and generous society if disagreements are not made visible, allowed, but also problematized. (Alm 2020)

### The Discourses’ Textual Level

Having identified the prominent discourses in the material, we will now illustrate how these discourses are constructed through linguistic and discursive elements. *Transitivity* concerns ascribed agency – in other words: who is described as a subject with the capacity to act independently and who is described as an object (Fairclough 1992, 178)? In the material, there is an overarching tendency to describe religious individuals in collective terms from a secular position, where the group’s actions are evaluated as either positive or negative. Here, the reactions to the Qur’an burnings by the group of Muslims are highlighted as problematic, especially in relation to “Swedish freedom of speech”. In contrast, the group of Christians (and to some extent Jews) is portrayed as tolerant and adapted to Swedish society – in accordance with both the Freedom of Speech Discourse, the Angry Muslims Discourse, and the Benign Bible Discourse. The following quote, which concerns Rami Hussein, secretary general of the party Nyans,<sup>6</sup> comes from a column by journalist Fredrik Strage, published in *Dagens Nyheter*:

To increase his voter base, Rami Hussein calls on Christians and Jews to become as easily offended as Muslims: “To accept this now because you yourself are not affected means that you should sit quietly and accept that the Bible, the Torah, or any other holy scripture is burned.” Most Christians and Jews accept precisely that. Not because they like it, but because they know that democracy is better than theocracy. (Strage 2022)

Strage’s text is a good example of the clear assumption of the role of a “secular self” from which he can read and objectively assess religious scriptures, often in a mocking tone when he refers to “God appearing

6. The party was founded in 2019 and primarily targets minority groups with foreign backgrounds, including the growing group of Swedish Muslims. They received support from 0.5 per cent of voters in the 2022 parliamentary election.



as an irresponsible diva” or as being “as validation-seeking as a TikTok influencer”.

The absence of Muslim voices from the debate reinforces the image of a Muslim collective as an objective “them”. It is, for example, “Sweden’s Muslims [who] need to adapt to Swedish society’s secular laws and norms” (Pettersson 2023). Conversely, the presence of Christian authors among the actors means that the Christian collective is broken down into subjective individuals. Either the actors themselves appear as representatives able to problematize their holy text in relation to societal norms, or it is expressed in the text that “I” can choose how to act when someone insults my faith: “Because at the same time that I, as a Christian, can be upset by recurring criticism, mockery, and derogatory comments about Jesus and the Bible, I still don’t want to live in a society where criticism of religion would be forbidden” (Rudenstrand 2022).

Here, the number of Christian actors is a result in itself: approximately 70 per cent of the texts in question are written by individuals who have publicly defined themselves as Christian. In most of these texts, the author’s Christian position is not a topic or starting point for argumentation, even though religious arguments are present in some texts (which we will return to later). However, based on the reasoning above, this ratio may play a role in the representation of the group of Muslims versus the group of Christians in the analysed debate.

When it comes to *modality* – the degree of assertion with something said, and its framing as an objective truth or subjective opinion (Fairclough 1992, 159) – style and genre are crucial to the character of the material: opinion pieces are, by default, argumentative to persuade. Nevertheless, modality is a valuable tool because it shows how statements with strong objective modality actively contribute to establishing what is perceived as “taken for granted” and “common sense”. To connect to the analysis of transitivity above, statements that in various ways generalize about Muslims and Christians as groups often do so with a strong and objective modality. To use a quote from the Christian Democratic party leader Ebba Busch: “Our continent’s Christians and Jews have had to learn to live with satire and criticism. Many Christians themselves laugh at Monty Python’s ‘Life of Brian.’ Those who want to live here must realize that this is how it is and will remain” (Busch 2020). The quote contains several linguistic elements of interest for an analysis of modality. The introductory word “our” marks a clear distance between the “Christians and Jews” who live on “our continent” and “those who want to live here”, referring to Muslim migrants. The expression “this is how it is and will remain” conveys an

implied meaning – that Christians and Jews have managed to internalize European values in a way that Muslims need to follow – that is presented as a truth. This assumed truth reinforces both the identified Benign Bible Discourse and the notion of the violent Muslim central to the Angry Muslims Discourse.

The analysis of modality reveals how arguments in line with the dominant discourse – the Freedom of Speech Discourse – are expressed with strong modality. This is partly done by incorporating words reinforcing the seemingly self-evident starting points of the discourse, such as “of course”, “naturally”, or “indeed”. Similarly, those who argue from a challenging discourse need to relate their argumentation to the assumptions of the dominant discourse. This becomes particularly evident among those who believe that freedom of speech needs to be weighed against other freedoms and rights, and that Qur’an burnings should be able to be classified as hate speech. Here, we instead find linguistic practices that demonstrate a lower degree of modality in the form of disclaimers or expressions such as “even so”.

Focusing on how linguistic practices contribute to shape and reinforce discourses illustrates the idea behind the analytical concept of *word meaning*, that words always have a meaning-making potential and that the words we use are a result of a choice (Fairclough 1992, 185). It is no coincidence that Ebba Busch uses the pronoun “our” when she speaks of Europe in the quotation above. Similarly, opinion-maker Alice Teodorescu Måwe, is aware of the linguistic effect of describing the Qur’an burnings as “‘offensive’ treatment” (Teodorescu Måwe 2023). Both through the chosen words and how they are presented (in Teodorescu Måwe’s case, in quotation marks), the reaction to the Qur’an burnings is portrayed as exaggerated and the act of burning scriptures must be accommodated within the framework of freedom of speech.

### **Discursive Practice**

The next dimension of discourse – discursive practices – derives from the assumption that all texts build on each other in more or less conscious ways (Fairclough 1992, 101). Thus, the arguments put forward and how they are formulated often draw upon or refer to other discourses, which, using CDA-inspired vocabulary, can be termed *interdiscursivity* (Fairclough 1992, 118). As noted in the presentation of the identified discourses, they often come in pairs, where the Freedom of Speech Discourse frequently appears alongside the Angry Muslims Discourse. In texts that express this pair, interdiscursive references are often made to an underlying debate

on migration and an Anti-Muslim Discourse where Islam is presented as a problematic religion for Swedish society and its assumed core values. Two explicit expressions of this form of interdiscursivity are found in the articles by Christian Democratic party leader Ebba Busch and Per Ewert, editorial writer for the newspaper *Världen idag*. The latter asserts that Islam is “an honour culture” and that “an open society [can] never accommodate such a culture to the extent that it becomes satisfied” (Ewert 2023). In the same vein, Ebba Busch states in her debate article:

Integration cannot work if those who have chosen to seek a future here do not accept what made that future possible. There are many different ideological orientations within Islam, but according to most, the dominant view is that women’s role should not be the one we take for granted in Sweden. (Busch 2020)

These statements are consistent with how both actors repeatedly express themselves regarding migration and the integration of Muslim migrants.<sup>7</sup> In this capacity, they provide good examples of how events like the Qur'an burnings are framed in a way that incorporate them into the larger order of discourse in which the respective actors find themselves.

Given the overarching research question of this article – how the Bible is used in debates about the Qur'an burnings – it is time to address this question by looking at the presence of *manifest intertextuality*. In the toolbox of CDA, manifest intertextuality directs the attention to other texts that are drawn upon (Fairclough 1992, 104). In this article we particularly examine references to the Bible. In line with the selection criteria for data collection, all articles refer to the Bible in one way or another. Nine articles include specific biblical quotations.<sup>8</sup> The most referenced verse is Matt 7:12, which is cited in three articles. There are also nine articles containing religious arguments, by which we include references to biblical verses or Christian practices as a basis for calls to action. Somewhat surprisingly, only three of these texts come from the religious press, while the remaining six articles are published in secular newspapers. All but one

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7. Tomas Poletti Lundström (2023) argues that *Världen idag*'s editorial board combines radical nationalism with a Christian revivalist position, while party representatives from the Christian Democrats repeatedly point to aspects of Islam as problematic within the Swedish context (cf. Lövheim and Jensdotter 2024).
  8. The explicitly cited biblical verses are: Gen 17:18, James 2:18 and 2:20, John 1:1 and 1:14, Lev 19:18, Luke 9:50, Matt 5:39 and 7:12 (in three articles), Rom 12:19 and 13:4. Also, there are several references to biblical values such as the dual commandment, the golden rule, or care for the stranger, and biblical stories such as Jesus cleansing the temple.

of these articles are authored by actors who, either by title, within the text, or from previous publications, are self-identified Christians. However, biblical quotations can be found in more articles where they are used as illustrations for an argument for the benignity of the Bible rather than as calls to action. One article contains biblical quotes that could be interpreted as more explicitly referring to violence: Rom 12:19 and 13:4. These texts are however used to illustrate the importance of humans not seeking revenge (as Muslims in the Qur'an burnings counter-demonstrations) but leave the vengeance to the Lord (Alm 2020). In most cases, the Bible is mentioned more generally and in passing, such as: "Should it be forbidden to burn the Qur'an? No, that is highly doubtful. You should have the right to do that, just as much as you have the right to burn the Bible or the Swedish flag" (Josefsson 2020).

One of those to use religious arguments in a hortatory manner is the Archbishop of the Church of Sweden, Martin Modéus, who, in a debate article in *Dagens Nyheter* expresses his "deepest sympathy for Muslims and others who have what they hold sacred desecrated. I pray, hope, and work for this to come to an end" (Modéus 2023). By referring to "the words of Jesus" in the Gospel of Matthew, the Archbishop calls for self-reflection on the hatred that he believes can be accommodated within the framework of freedom of speech but which he believes should never be expressed:

Based on Jesus's words: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12), I want, from my Christian tradition, to affirm people of different faiths. This is how good neighbours live. We greet each other and help each other. If something is difficult to understand, we ask. Kindly. (Modéus 2023)

The Archbishop also addresses the secular reader by referring to the fact that: "We all have things we hold sacred, in some sense", and that: "In a good society, freedom of speech is united with respect and space for the sacred" – whether the sacred is of a religious or secular nature.

Church leaders Åke Bonnier and Sofia Camnerin do not cite any biblical text but refer to "the dual commandment of love" as guiding:<sup>9</sup> "Instead, we should all consider our responsibility to work for salvation, freedom, mutual respect, and peace – between people, between countries, with the creation, and with God. The dual commandment of love needs to be our guide" (Bonnier and Camnerin 2023). In addition to calling for good manners and reduced hatred towards Muslims, Bonnier and Camnerin take

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9. Matt 22:37, NRSV: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."

on the task of explaining why the Qur'an burnings can be perceived as so provocative for Muslims. In line with the Sanctity Discourse, where secular Sweden is described as lacking in its understanding of the sacred, they offer the following explanation in their debate article (where they respond to criticism directed at their earlier statements on the matter):

The question was instead answered in the context of what position the Bible holds in Christian tradition compared to the Qur'an in Muslim tradition. They have different roles. For Christians, the gospel, the good news, Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word, is central. Thus, it wasn't about whether it would be more "right" to burn a Bible than a Qur'an. It is obviously wrong to desecrate the Bible and Christian faith. (Bonnier and Camnerin 2023)

Frida Park, editorial writer for the Christian newspaper *Dagen*, offers a similar explanation. Like Bonnier and Camnerin, Park emphasizes that the desecration of a Bible is just as wrong as the desecration of a Qur'an, but that the reactions to the two acts may differ depending on the status ascribed to the object in the respective religious tradition.

But why do many Muslims react so strongly to a religious [sic] being set on fire? In Islam, the very book that contains the Qur'an is holy. Those who desecrate the Qur'an offend their most sacred and, figuratively speaking, stick a knife in their religious heart. Here, the view differs between Islam and Christianity, where the Bible is seen by many as the living word of God, but where the physical book does not have holy status in itself, which would have become very apparent if the man who intended to burn the Bible on Sergel's Square had carried out his plan. (Park 2023)

Returning to the dual commandment of love, Bishop Emeritus Bengt Wadensjö and Imam Awad Olwan, in a debate article in *Svenska Dagbladet*, call for a change in the law whereby the founding documents of religious communities are protected. The purpose of such a law is to "protect religion's role in society", and they argue that: "It is simple to formulate this new interpretation. Jesus said that in everything do to others as you would have them do for you. This is an important principle that should be written 10,000 times by Rasmus Paludan and his like-minded" (Wadensjö and Olwan 2023).

However, using the words of Jesus to question the law of freedom of speech is an interpretation that is challenged in the debate, including by a minister of the Church of Sweden, Jonas Gräslund, who, in direct response to Wadensjö and Olwan, writes:

We should welcome blasphemy, criticism of religion, and provocations. They give us a chance to practise tolerance, broad-mindedness, and restraint. All things that we within religion strive for. We can do this because we believe that God's word dwells in our hearts and because we as Christians and Muslims have a common confession: "God is greater!" God is greater than our religious feelings, opinions, and provocations. If God is greater, then we too should be greater. There you have a way of living according to the commandment "In everything do to others as you would have them do for you". (Gräslund 2023)

A similar view is expressed by opinion-maker Susanna Birgersson, who, in an editorial in *Expressen*, writes the following:

As a Christian, one might initially be a little heartened by the thought, but after just a brief reflection, one must still decline the consideration. Thanks, but no thanks! "In the beginning was the Word ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us", writes the evangelist John about the incarnation, that is, about God becoming human through Jesus. The Bible is inseparable from Jesus himself. I try to memorize as much as I can to have the words within me when I face life. The Bible isn't just a "holy scripture", a symbol that I kiss and revere and look at in processions. It is the food I eat. Still, I don't want politicians to ban people from burning it. Nor do I want it to become punishable to submerge crucifixes in urine, or anything else that for me expresses mockery of the God I believe in. "My kingdom is not from this world", Jesus said – and disappointed many. He allowed himself to be arrested, insulted, mocked, reviled, spat upon – literally – and nailed to a cross. (Birgersson 2023)

The quotes from Gräslund and Birgersson are interesting from different perspectives. Birgersson asserts a self-defined Christian identity and argues from that position – on a secular editorial page – as to why the desecration of holy texts should be permitted. Unlike Bonnier and Camnerin or Park in the quotes above, Birgersson does not attempt to compare the status of the Bible within the Christian tradition with that of the Qur'an within Islam. Here, different religious expressions are equated and should be able to withstand mockery and scorn. Based on her approach to the Bible, a contrast is drawn with how Muslims have reacted to the Qur'an burnings in a way that do not meet the ideals of Western democracy. A similar approach can be found in Gräslund's text, through references to Muslims such as "my friend Imam Hassan", who "with a gentle smile" stated that "The Qur'an lives in my heart. No one can reach it there!" (Gräslund 2023). Like Birgersson, Gräslund incorporates the provocative into the history and tradition of Christianity.

Just think of all the religious emotions/feelings that Jesus challenges! Like when he heals on the Sabbath, cleanses the Temple, or speaks of himself as the Son of God. The high priests want to sentence him to death for blasphemy. Not unlike the ayatollahs' fatwas or other contemporary calls for blasphemy laws. (Gräslund 2023)

If we look at the comparisons made between the Bible and the Qur'an in the analysed material as a whole, it can be interpreted as a confirmation of the Sanctity Discourse assumption, including a low level of knowledge and understanding of sacred aspects within different religions, such as the different roles of various scriptures as mediators of religious messages. The Freedom of Speech Discourse that dominates the material includes a secular starting point that does not offer any possibility for such distinctions. In the debate, freedom of speech is seen as trumping religious aspects – whatever they may be. The conspicuous absence of Muslim voices – except Imam Awan Olwan (who, interestingly, cites the Bible and not the Qur'an), quoted above – also means that Muslim actors neither confirmed nor challenged this approach. Instead, it is Christian actors who, using the Bible, express their views on behalf of all religious individuals. There is a risk that such contributions, although formulated with a call for reflection and reconciliation, are interpreted in the light of an Angry Muslims Discourse and reinforce the image of Christianity as a reformed and modern religion willing to accommodate societal norms while Islam and Muslims stubbornly cling to their fanatical stance.

In the next section, our analysis has reached the level of social practices, where we bring in theories from outside the CDA, to discuss the potential political and ideological effects of the result (Fairclough 1992, 238). The selected theories draw on previous research on notions and constructions on the Bible in Western culture and how religion has become an increasingly politicized issue in contemporary political discourse.

### **The Benign Bible and the Malignant Qur'an: Scriptures Essentializing Cultures and People**

At an art exhibition in Glasgow 2009, visitors were asked to deface the (Christian) Bible. The event caused public outrage, leading to Pope Benedict XVI himself commenting on the issue in the *Daily Mail* under the heading "It would not happen to the Koran."<sup>10</sup> In her analysis of the event, biblical scholar Yvonne Sherwood argues that the implication that defac-

10. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1202632/Pope-attacks-art-vandalising-Bible.html>

ing the Qur'an would lead to fatwas and massive public fury served as a smokescreen for the fact that an aggressive and spectacular performance of outrage was being unleashed on behalf of the Bible (Sherwood 2012). In these comparisons with the Qur'an, Islam was invoked negatively as the intolerant Other. The notion that one can do things with the Bible that one can't do with the Qur'an functions symbolically like the contrast between the emancipated women of the West and the women in non-democratic Muslim regimes still bound by traditional religion and "forced" to wear the burqa or the veil (Sherwood 2012, 91; cf. Mahmood 2005). In modern blasphemy debates, Sherwood argues, Islam serves as an important function as a euphemism for a more illiberal Christian/biblical past that enables the forgetting of that past (Sherwood 2012, 45). "It is a truth if not universally, then widely, acknowledged – and crucial to the self-identity of Europe and North America – that the Christian bible is far more tolerant and liberal than some other scriptures we could mention" (Sherwood 2012, 6). The material analysed in this study reveals a similar discrepancy in the perceived resilience of sacred texts to criticism: while the Bible is presumed capable of withstanding mockery and profanation, the Qur'an is characterized as demanding retribution for such acts. Sherwood's example thus demonstrates the necessity of incorporating a theoretical framework that elaborates on this differential treatment of scriptures within contemporary discourse.

Particularly relevant for our analysis are the groundbreaking works of historian Jonathan Sheehan and his description of a *cultural Bible*, that is, the understanding of the Bible as part of the cultural heritage of the West (Sheehan 2005)<sup>11</sup> and Sherwood's description of a *liberal Bible*, that is, the understanding of the Bible as compatible with, or even the foundation of, perceived Western values, such as democracy, freedom of speech, and equality (Sherwood 2006). Building on Sheehan and Sherwood, biblical scholar Hannah M. Strømme has analysed how the Bible is used within European far-right movements. Strømme argues that the idea of the Bible as an expression of a particular cultural heritage (*the cultural Bible*) and that that heritage is a liberal-democratic society (*the liberal Bible*) has contributed to the production of *the far-right-Bible* understood by right-wing extremists to represent Western culture as opposed to the Qur'an

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11. The analysis of debates on Nordic Bible translations by Bjelland Kartzow and Neutel can be mentioned here: They argue for a process of a heritagization of the Bible in the Nordic countries, through the framing of the Bible as a text with national significance. They argue that the Bible is transformed from a specifically religious object to a more broadly majoritarian symbol (2023).



and Islam (Strømme 2017). In her most recent book, Strømme expands her analysis and frames what she calls the *civilization Bible*. She states that the celebration of Western civilization, as founded on so-called biblical values and in opposition to Islam, is a version of the *cultural Bible*, but that while the latter stresses the Bible's influence on cultural fields such as pedagogy, philology, poetry, and history, the *civilizational Bible* emphasizes civilizational unity (Strømme 2024). In this binary construction of the Bible and the Qur'an, the object "the Bible" becomes a symbol that forms the basis of the European culture whose existence is considered to be threatened by a so-called Islamification.

Strømme argues that scriptures play an important function in populist right-wing and far-right-wing movements to reinforce a world view of "us" and "them". She shows how such politicians emphasize the Bible as a theological-cultural common-ground for the West, signifying a superior civilization, while the Qur'an is demonized as anti-Western, anti-modern, and violent (Strømme 2022). The Bible is mobilized as the exclusive possession of an exclusive people, signifying that Islam, with its own sacred scripture, is the "Other" who should remain outside of the Western world. The populist exaltation of the people and the identification of an enemy is done with the help of the Bible. She states that the burning of the Qur'an is a violent way of identifying the enemy as Muslims, without doing violence to Muslims (cf. Svensson 2017, and ways of hurting the Qur'an in similar ways to hurting a human being). Scriptures are thus part of the essentialization of the "Other" that underpins Islamophobia, foundational objects that endow cultures with an essence. The constructed binary between "a benign Bible and a barbaric Qur'an ... help feed and foster far-right groups and rhetoric" (Strømme 2022, 100).

Parts of this notion can also be found in Swedish mainstream media where debates on scripture running through the 1980s and up until the first decade of the millennium centred around the Bible as problematic, due to its interpreted misogynist, homophobic, and violent content. After 9/11, however, a shift occurred, and notions of the Qur'an's misogynist, homophobic, and violent content came to the fore in media discourse of scripture. There has thus been an increasing tendency in Swedish public debates to contrast the (good) Bible and the (bad) Qur'an (Liljefors 2022, 2025).<sup>12</sup> We argue that this tendency is detectable in the debates following the Qur'an burnings in Sweden at the beginning of the 2020s.

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12. Several biblical scholars have examined the supposed binary construction between

The analytical approaches of biblical scholars complement sociological perspectives on the Bible's function in Western secular democracies' political discourse, including Sweden. As Strømme notes, the rise of populist movements has reintroduced religion into political debate, with Islam portrayed as a civilizational threat, establishing a division between a secular/Christian "we" and Muslim "others" (Brubaker 2017; Nilsson DeHanas and Shterin 2018; Sumiala et al. 2023). This context makes Beckford's conceptualization of religion in contemporary Western societies particularly relevant. He argues that religion, while "adrift from its former points of anchorage", retains its power as "a potent cultural resource" capable of driving "change, challenge, or conservation" (Beckford 1989, 170). Analysing religion's role in political discourse reveals how meanings attributed to religious elements – ideas, practices, traditions, and scriptures – undergo continuous negotiation. Beckford describes this as a dynamic process where religion's meaning is "intuited, asserted, doubted, challenged, rejected, substituted" across various contexts (Beckford 2003, 3).

Central to our analysis is the concept of politicization of religion, as defined by sociologist Carolina Ivanescu (2010). Ivanescu conceptualizes the politicization of religion as a process wherein religion and religious actors become both objects and subjects in debates over politicized issues (Ivanescu 2010, 312). The first dimension positions religion as something spoken *about* within debates over politicized issues. In contemporary Swedish political discourse, this manifests most prominently in discussions linking religion to migration, integration, and security concerns (Lindberg 2020; Jensdotter 2025). This pattern is evident in our material, reinforcing the construction of Islam and Muslims as religious "others" who not only differ from "us" but represent a problematic presence in "our" society. The second dimension of politicization of religion involves religious actors and arguments as entities to speak *with*, incorporating them as integral components of political debate. Several articles in the material we have investigated employ religious arguments and biblical citations within their reasoning, aligning with this form of religious politicization. While one could argue that the Bible primarily functions as an object to demonstrate contrasts with the Qur'an, we contend that the framing of the Bible in the Qur'an burning debate may not only intensify this second process of politicization of religion but lead to a politicization

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the Bible and the Qur'an in Europe, cf. Sherwood 2006; Crossley 2018. For a similar tendency in other Scandinavian countries, see Løland 2023 and Larsen 2023.

of the Bible itself. Although one can claim that the Bible has always, at least to a certain degree, been politicized, we argue that the role the Bible plays in our material can be understood in the light of the politicization of religion. The Bible is here framed as an object (spoken about within debates over politicized issues) rather than a text with a specific content, and as a symbol for policies, rights, and a particular society rather than a scripture relating to religious contexts, groups, and call for action.<sup>13</sup> By adopting and adapting the Bible for this purpose, the Bible further becomes a subject that is incorporated in the political debate.

When the Bible is referenced in the material, it is mainly texts with positive connotations that come to the fore, such as the golden rule and the dual commandment of love. The selection of biblical references tends to create or help maintain the notion of the *liberal Bible*, that is, the Bible is represented as harmonizing with Swedish values of tolerance, equality, democratic rights, including freedom of speech. Biblical texts that could be, and historically have been, used to argue against such values, are neglected and not problematized. As previously stated, only nine articles (out of 48) include citations from a specific biblical text. That means that in just above 80 per cent of the material, the Bible is only mentioned as an idea, object or book without any particular reference in mind. The book “the Bible” is framed as benign and as connected to “Swedishness” – for instance in Josefsson’s article where the burning of a Bible is described as similar to the burning of the Swedish flag. In a similar way, “the Qur’an” is mentioned as a mere artefact, represented as oppositional to the Bible and malign. No Qur’anic texts are referenced. Instead, it is the two scriptures’ role as fundamental and civilizational texts that comes to the fore, both regarding the desecration of a sacred object and how this is viewed in two seemingly incompatible cultures/religions, making the scriptures also become representatives of two seemingly incompatible groups. Using scriptures as symbols and representatives of theologies, cultures, politics, and groups, instead of using them to discuss their content, could be understood in the light of our argument above as an example of an increasing politicization of religion, while also implying an increasing politicization of the Bible.

Another important trace is the interconnection between the use of the Bible and the understanding of secularity in the analysed texts. Our analysis reveals the secular’s consistent portrayal as a neutral “primary position” from which religious beliefs and practices undergo evaluation

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13. Cf. Watts’s discussion on “iconic uses” of scriptures, for instance in Watts 2019.

and critique, while the “religious other” is characterized as irrational, anachronistic, gender-inequitable, and potentially threatening (Berg et al. 2016). Strage’s (2022) article, cited above, exemplifies this secular primacy most explicitly, adopting a secular vantage point to evaluate religious declarations, texts, and actors. In the material more generally there is also a tendency to position oneself in a primary secular position while describing religious individuals in collective terms. The dominance of secularism in public discourse manifests further in the notable absence of religious argumentation. Despite Christian actors authoring approximately 70 per cent of our analysed articles, these texts conform to secular discourse parameters. This adaptation extends also to publications in religious media. Thus, to gain agency in the debate requires actors to successfully situate their religious positions within secular frameworks (cf. Axner 2013).

Strømme argues that the Qur’an burnings can be interpreted as a supposed exercise in freedom in the name of a Western secular society, held up as incompatible with Islam. Scripture thus becomes a key prop for designating “us” who exercise the freedom to burn “your” sacred text (Strømme 2022). A formulation which has gained wide currency is the claim that Islam is anti-secular, a label used to justify the exclusion of Islamic symbols from public view (Camilleri 2020, 55). This intricate relationship between the Christian and the secular is one explanatory factor behind the legacy of descriptions of the burning of the Qur’an as a form of secularist iconoclasm, a way to cleanse secular society of Islam (Linge and Bangstad 2024, 82). Following a similar line, Brubaker, using the populist movements of Northern Europe as an example, argues for an intertwinement between Christianity and secularism, where secularism becomes worth defending because of its Christian roots. Thus, if “they” are religious because they are Muslims, “we” are secular because we are (post-) Christian (Brubaker 2017, 10). José Casanova also discerns “an implicit, diffused, and submerged Christian cultural identity” which leads him to conclude that for many Europeans the secular and religious elements of their self-understanding “are intertwined in complex and rarely verbalized modes” (Casanova 2006, 66). Liberal secular Europeans often look suspiciously at manifest expressions of racist bigotry and religious intolerance. But, as Casanova argues, when it comes to Islam, secular Europeans tend to reveal the limits and prejudices of modern secular toleration (Casanova 2006, 78). A strong secular self-understanding combined with prejudices towards other religious groups is true also for the case of Sweden, where post-Christians (the majority of Swedes with a Christian

family background) label themselves as non-religious while ascribing to post-Muslims (the minority of Swedes with a Muslim family background) a Muslim identity. However, looking at the numbers, Thurffjell and Willander argue the opposite would be closer to reality: post-Christians in Sweden have a stronger affiliation with their Christian heritage and culture than the corresponding relationship for post-Muslims (Thurffjell and Willander 2021, 325–327).

Ultimately, we suggest that in the Qur'an burning debate, both in secular and religious press, the Bible and the Qur'an tend to be framed as contrasting scriptures, where the first is seen to harmonize with secular "Swedishness" while the latter is seen to collide with the same. Media representations of the (literally) burning Qur'an (and its followers) and the cool (or at least benign) Bible reinforces a "construction of reality" which essentializes scriptures and groups, built into various forms of discursive practices, which in turn runs the risk of reproducing relations of domination (Fairclough 1992, 87).

## Conclusion

In this article, we have shown how the Bible has been invoked as a prop in the Qur'an burning debate to stress the majoritarian Swedish identity as either secular or rational Christian adapted to secular norms (rather than emotional Muslims). Both these identities – secular or a rational Christianity – are assumed to have benign values (based on the Bible, which harmonizes with secular Swedish values), in contrast to the Other (Muslims). These fixed and contrasting identities are framed as, in Fairclough's term, "common sense" in the debate.

We argue that the way scriptures are invoked and essentialized is an important study object for both biblical scholars and sociologists of religion, since such representations run the risk of reproducing relations of domination. As we hope to have illustrated, such studies benefit from interdisciplinary collaborations. While the biblical scholar can detect vague or implicit biblical references that could have gone unnoticed, and can place them in a broader interpretative context, the sociologist of religion can detect societal currents that affect biblical reception. As we have argued, an increasing politicization of religion in Sweden affects in which situations scriptures are used in the public sphere, and how. While the Qur'an is literally lit up in the public square, the Bible risks being used as fuel.

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