

In 2023, after far-right activists in Denmark burned copies of the Quran, sparking international protests and diplomatic backlash, the Danish government proposed a law to criminalize such acts. Framed as a step toward protecting Muslim communities, the proposal reignited an old tension: can liberal democracies uphold both freedom of expression and religious dignity without contradiction? Though framed as protection, the law's reveals something deeper: Denmark's unwillingness to confront the systemic Islamophobia that fuels these provocations in the first place.

**In this essay, I will argue that Denmark's Quran-burning law is a symbolic, politically motivated gesture that avoids addressing structural discrimination, undermines democratic consistency, and ultimately reinforces the very divisions it claims to resolve.**

To support this claim, I draw on Amer's analysis of how European governments often regulate Muslim practices—such as veiling—during election cycles to signal a hardline stance on immigration (Amer, p. 13). As she argues, these actions are politically motivated rather than grounded in a sincere commitment to minority rights. Similarly, I engage critically with Hansen's strong defense of free expression, particularly in his discussion of the Danish cartoon controversy (Hansen, p. 13). While Hansen maintains that freedom of expression must remain absolute—even when it offends religious groups—this framing presents a dangerously limited binary: that democracies must choose between liberty or dignity. It not only produces inconsistent policy across a globalized world but also legitimizes the normalization of hate under the guise of liberal principles. Instead of treating freedom of expression and religious sensitivity as mutually exclusive, both should be upheld within a balanced and principled democratic framework. Laws like Denmark's, when enacted without that balance, risk weakening the very values they claim to defend. Both Amer's and Hansen's perspectives reveal that symbolic legal gestures often fail to address the deeper structures of exclusion and institutionalized discrimination.

Amer and Hansen highlight contradictions in European democracies, and Denmark's law shows how those contradictions manifest—where political convenience overrides any genuine commitment to reform. Rather than asking why these Quran burnings happened in the first place, the government has chosen to silence the act without addressing the conditions that fueled it. Posed as a genuine effort to confront anti-Muslim discrimination, it is in fact a reactive political maneuver designed to preserve the country's international reputation and defuse diplomatic tensions. Justice Minister Peter Hummelgaard described it as a “targeted intervention,” admitting that the desecrations had “put Denmark in a difficult foreign-policy situation.” This framing reveals the law's true purpose: not to combat Islamophobia, but to perform damage control.

Even if laws like these offer symbolic recognition, they cannot substitute for systemic change. As Carens argues, “legal rights for Muslims are necessary but not sufficient” to address the deep and persistent hostility that Muslims face across Europe (Steiner, 2023, p. 164). Carens' insight reminds us that democratic inclusion is not achieved through legal gestures alone—it requires challenging the structures that create exclusion in the first place. The proposed law does nothing to address the root causes of marginalization in Danish society. Instead, it serves as a short-term fix aimed at calming international backlash and mitigating security concerns. Even Danish policy analyst Jacob Kaarsbo admitted that the bill is more about “reaching out to the Muslim mainstream” than achieving justice. By emphasizing that satire and criticism of religion would remain protected, the Danish government signaled that its aim was diplomatic optics—not confronting domestic Islamophobia. Rather than protecting Muslim communities from harm, the law operates as a diplomatic gesture—a reaction to foreign outrage rather than a commitment to domestic reform. Denmark is not asking why this hate occurs; it is merely legislating its visibility.

This inconsistency becomes even more apparent when we examine Denmark's history of defending Islamophobic provocation under the banner of satire. On one hand, depictions of the Prophet Muhammad as a terrorist—such as those published during the Danish cartoon

controversy—are defended as satire under the principle of free expression. On the other hand, burning the Quran, an act rooted in the very same hateful ideology those cartoons normalize, is suddenly deemed unacceptable. But what is the real difference between portraying Islam as violent and destroying the book that Muslims worship? Both acts reflect and feed into the same public fear: the belief that Muslims are dangerous or threatening. Hansen argues that cartoons are protected expressions, even if they offend, because in liberal democracies “religion is... a fair target for criticism, satire and... mockery and ridicule” (Hansen, p. 13). Yet he overlooks how these representations shape public attitudes and fuel discrimination. It’s like saying it’s fine to mock someone to their face every day, but then acting shocked when someone else takes it too far and throws their belongings in the trash. You can’t encourage a narrative and then punish its consequences. While Hansen’s defense of free speech is philosophically consistent, it underestimates how abstract principles can enable real-world harm when applied without regard for context. Even if the cartoonists’ intent was not to incite hatred, the cultural message received—and acted upon—was that Muslims are to be feared. When the Danish state protects one kind of provocation while condemning another, it sends a confusing message: Islamophobia is permissible as long as it’s veiled in satire. This contradiction doesn’t defend liberal values; it corrodes them.

Critics might argue that the Quran-burning law is not symbolic or politically motivated, but a necessary step to maintain public order and protect national security. Quran desecrations, they point out, have triggered violent protests abroad, endangered diplomatic missions, and heightened the risk of terrorism. From this perspective, the law appears pragmatic—not an attempt to scapegoat Muslims or silence dissent, but a preventive measure aimed at avoiding escalation and safeguarding both Danish citizens and international partners. However, this argument overlooks the broader context. If Muslim communities had not already been consistently marginalized, misrepresented, and politicized by both media and the state, Quran burnings would not carry such potent symbolic weight. These are not isolated provocations—they are the culmination of years of cultural messaging that frames Islam as incompatible with Western values. As Amer observes, these debates often

resurface around election cycles and are strategically used to “reassure a nervous majority,” rather than to promote genuine integration (Amer, p. 13). When governments finally intervene—not to challenge the underlying prejudice but only its most extreme expressions—they are not solving the problem; they are managing public perception. Rather than framing Muslims solely as targets of protection or provocation, democratic societies must also amplify Muslim voices in shaping the civic and legal responses to such challenges. And while security concerns are real, a democracy must not allow fear to dictate selective or inconsistent policymaking. It is not principled governance to defend free speech when it mocks Muslims and abandon it when it causes diplomatic fallout.

Denmark’s Quran-burning law risks reinforcing the harmful “clash of civilizations” narrative by implying that Islam is inherently at odds with Western democratic values. As Amer argues, European states often “perpetuate the much cherished myth of a ‘clash of civilizations,’” drawing a stark divide between a rational, secular Europe and a violent, irrational Islam (Amer, p. 9). By targeting Quran desecration while continuing to tolerate Islamophobic satire, the law portrays Muslims as uniquely volatile—deepening the perception of incompatibility with liberal norms. Instead of addressing Quran burnings as calculated provocations rooted in a broader culture of Islamophobia, the law casts Muslims as a group requiring special legal protection. This framing reinforces the stereotype that Muslims are hypersensitive or incompatible with liberal norms. Hansen insists that religious groups must accept freedom of expression as part of life in a liberal constitutional state, warning against what he terms “Muslim exceptionalism” (Hansen, p.8). While Hansen warns of “Muslim exceptionalism,” he fails to see that the true exception lies in how consistently Muslim practices are singled out for public scrutiny and legal contradiction.

When the state steps in to protect Muslims in ways it wouldn’t for other groups, it risks stoking public resentment and confirming the very perception of difference it seeks to reject. The textbook notes that anti-immigration sentiment in Europe stems from fears of “national identity” and “public safety,” which far-right parties exploit to oppose integration (Steiner, 2023, p.

167). Though framed as protective, laws like Denmark's may instead legitimize these fears, reinforce the idea that Muslims are fundamentally "other," and exacerbate the cultural divisions they claim to mend.

Some may argue that laws like Denmark's are necessary compromises in a volatile world, but this framing obscures a dangerous reality: symbolic protections that avoid confronting structural Islamophobia do not resolve tension—they prolong it. Democracies cannot selectively defend liberal values when it is politically convenient and abandon them when those same values demand uncomfortable introspection. A refusal to address the root causes of anti-Muslim hostility does not contain the crisis—it deepens public division, legitimizes exclusion, and corrodes democratic credibility.

Protecting free expression and religious dignity is not a contradiction—it is a democratic obligation. Without structural reform, meaningful civic inclusion, and a commitment to consistency, laws like Denmark's will remain tools of political expediency rather than genuine protections. A principled democracy does not react to provocation with performance—it responds with accountability, equity, and the courage to confront its own contradictions.

## Sources

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