

Table of Contents

- ***[Following Quran burnings, will Sweden stumble into anti-blasphemy laws?](#)***

Following Quran burnings, will Sweden stumble into anti-blasphemy laws?

By [Paul Marshall and Jacob Rudenstrand](#)

[Religion Unplugged](#) (19.02.2025) - On Jan. 29, Salwan Momika was shot to death in the city of Södertälje, Sweden. He had been [investigated](#) by Swedish authorities and targeted by Islamist extremists since he publicly burned Qurans in 2023, acts that caused domestic and international outrage. Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson [said](#) a “foreign power” may have been involved in the shooting.

The incident was even brought up last week by Vice President J.D. Vance during a trip to Munich. The audience at the Munich Security Conference was expecting to hear about the Trump administration’s [plans to end the war in Ukraine](#). Instead, they were treated to a rejection of progressive orthodoxies that have prevailed in Western Europe since World War II.

Momika's killing took place shortly before he was due to be sentenced for the [Quran burnings](#), even though his demonstrations had been granted police permits and his applications for those permits clearly stated he intended to burn a Quran. On Feb. 3, the Stockholm District Court fined and gave a conditional sentence to his fellow campaigner Salwan Najem for "agitation against an ethnic or national group."

The murder was celebrated by a significant portion of the population. When Swedish Public Radio [reported](#) on his death, a majority of the posted comments were positive: “Serves him right,” “Rest in Hell.” “Good news in the morning” and “Now I hope everyone realizes that you don't burn a Quran.”

According to journalist Sofie Löwenmark, who investigates Islamism in Sweden, the number of such comments numbered in the tens of thousands.

Even one of few Muslim leaders [commenting](#) on Momika’s killing, imam Salahuddin Barakat, the recipient of a human rights award and who is known for his work in interreligious dialogue, expressed mixed feelings: “When an evil person dies, we can feel both joy and sorrow — joy that some of the evil is gone, but also sorrow that we failed to save a soul from Hell [...] At the same time, we must be aware of how this joy is expressed and how it can be perceived or deliberately misinterpreted by those who seek to harm Muslims.”

A convert from Islam, Omar Makram, who had fled Egypt’s blasphemy laws and burned a Quran himself as a way to seek asylum in Sweden, [lamented](#): “read the comments on social media and news sites. The few condemnations that exist are drowned in a sea of

cheers and celebrations. One gets the feeling that this is not Sweden, but a Middle Eastern country. But then it hits me — this is Sweden."

Sweden's blasphemy statute, one that specifically targeted insults to religion, was abolished in 1970. But, concerned about Muslim alienation and potential violence in the face of acts such as Quran burnings, it is bending existing laws concerning hate speech into quasi-blasphemy laws.

The court had previously convicted Momika and Najem of "agitation against an ethnic or national group." But such a law, while it has problems of its own, is targeted against racism, not religion. But Islam is not an ethnic or national group. Its nearly two billion adherents span hundreds of ethnicities and almost every nation in the world.

Criticism of Islam is often reduced to anti-Arab animus, but Arabs make up less than 15% of Muslims. And Momika and Najem are not some white nationalists but immigrants from Iraq. They are Assyrian in background, but the former announced himself as an atheist and apostate from Christianity. He said that his acts were to try to prevent in Sweden what was happening in his home country.

Furthermore, the court stated that the Quran-burning demonstrations "were so far from a factual and valid criticism of religion that, by a clear margin, they also showed contempt for the Muslim community because of the group's beliefs." But while Quran burnings are clearly a far cry from serious expressions of religious debate, how can a court decide what is a "factual and valid criticism of religion."

The court [also held](#) that "expressing one's opinion about religion does not give one a free pass to do or say anything and everything without risking offending the group that holds that belief." But this means that perceived offense may decide whether an expression is criminal or not.

Much of Sweden's elite opinion supports such restrictions. The country has long had a state church and this has shaped an ethos of still wanting the state to support a particular view of religion — it is just that the view of religion has changed. As Åke Bonnier, former bishop in the Church of Sweden, said in an [interview](#): "[Freedom of religion] is not about trampling on people's inner sense of sacredness."

But freedom of religion means that religious beliefs, or irreligious ones, can be criticized, even mocked, as happens frequently in Sweden to, for example, Christian sentiments.

In an open society, people of different faiths — Christians, Muslims, Jews, agnostics and secular humanists — must be able to live side by side in freedom and security. But they may be critically scrutinized, even ridiculed.
