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EUROPE

Danish Man Who Burned Quran Is Prosecuted for Blasphemy

By KIMIKO de FREYTAS-TAMURA FEB. 23, 2017

A 42-year-old man who burned a Quran and posted a video of it on Facebook has been charged with blasphemy in Denmark, a striking decision by prosecutors in a country that is largely secular but has grappled with the role of Islam in public life.

The decision stunned many Danes: No one has been convicted of blasphemy in Denmark since 1946, and the country has a long tradition of free speech; burning the flag is not a punishable crime.

Simmering tensions between religious sensitivities and free speech have been a theme in Denmark since 2005, when the newspaper Jyllands-Posten published 12 cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. The depictions outraged many Muslims, who consider such representations to be blasphemous.

The controversy led to deadly riots, attacks on Danish embassies in the Middle East and a trade boycott against Denmark. But Danish prosecutors at the time refused to charge the newspaper's editors with blasphemy.

The decision to charge the Quran burner was made by a regional prosecutor in Viborg, on the Jutland peninsula, and had to be approved by the country's attorney general.

The blasphemy law has been invoked only a handful of times since its creation in 1866, most recently in 1971, when two people broadcast a song mocking Christianity and stirred a debate over female sexuality. They were acquitted.

No one has been convicted of the crime since 1946, when a man dressed himself up as a priest and mock-baptized a doll at a masquerade ball.

In the current case, the suspect, who was not identified by the authorities but called himself John Salvesen on Facebook, uploaded video footage of a Quran being burned in his backyard. In the 4-minute, 15-second clip, the clicking sounds of a lighter are heard before flames engulf the large leather-bound book.

The video was posted on Dec. 27, 2015, to a Facebook group called “Yes to Freedom — No to Islam.” Above the video, shared 415 times, were the words: “Consider your neighbor, it stinks when it burns.” One commenter wrote: “If I had the Quran I’d also burn it, that’s the only thing it’s good for. Gives a bit of heat.”

The man’s Facebook page was full of messages critical of Islam, refugees and women. In one post, he even wrote, “I hate children.”

The video did not get widespread attention at the time. The defendant — his true name is still not clear and under Danish law cannot be released unless he is convicted — was charged last year with hate speech, but the indictment was later changed to blasphemy, a decision prosecutors announced on Wednesday. A trial has been scheduled for June. If convicted, the defendant faces up to four months in prison or a fine.

His lawyer, Rasmus Paludan, argued that his client had burned the Quran in “self-defense.”

“The Quran contains passages on how Mohammed’s followers must kill the infidel, i.e. the Danes,” he said. “Therefore, it’s an act of self-defense to burn a book that in such a way incites war and violence.”

Mr. Paludan also noted that in 1997, a Danish artist burned a copy of the Bible on a news show by a state broadcaster but was not charged. “Considering that it is legal to burn a Bible in Denmark, I’m surprised then that it would be guilty to burn the Quran,” he said in a phone interview.

Mr. Paludan said his client “loves freedom of expression and loves Denmark.” Speculating on the decision to bring charges, he said, “The fear of Islam and Muslims may be far greater now, and the prosecution service may be a lot more apprehensive of

Islam and its followers."

Jan Reckendorff, the regional prosecutor who brought the charge against Mr. Salvesen, said in a statement: "It is the prosecution's view that circumstances involving the burning of holy books such as the Bible and the Quran can in certain cases be a violation of the blasphemy clause, which covers public scorn or mockery of religion."

Jacob Mchangama, director of Justitia, a Danish civil liberties group, called the decision to file charges the latest sign of a declining respect for free speech in Europe. "It's a sad development but one that mirrors developments elsewhere," he said.

Mr. Mchangama said he thought the prosecutor was motivated by a desire to fend off the threat of terrorist attacks. "Danish authorities are afraid that the Quran burning could spark a new crisis, and if they say that they've actually charged this person, this is a way to appease or at least avoid such a crisis," he said.

Blasphemy laws protect religious dogma from ridicule, and therefore the feelings of believers, Mr. Mchangama argues, while hate speech laws protect religious groups from degrading expressions.

Denmark is one of only five countries in the European Union that has a blasphemy law on the books. Some say the case could lead to a rallying cry to abandon such laws once and for all.

"One might speculate that this is one more straw on the back of the camel, so that more politicians will be in the favor of abolishing the law," said Per Mouritsen, a professor of political science at Aarhus University. Danes, he said, generally believe that "Muslims should be able to stand up to ridicule as much as Christians would routinely put up with, and that everyone should take a joke."

Mr. Mouritsen, noting the 1997 decision not to prosecute, asked, "Why should this all of a sudden be an issue, when everybody agrees that the blasphemy law is a thing of the past?"

The decision to press charges was condemned by the right-wing, anti-immigration Danish People's Party, which said it would push to rescind the blasphemy law.

“I’m not going to recommend people burn either Qurans or Bibles, but it’s a waste of public resources to spend time on such things,” Peter Kofod Poulsen, the party’s spokesman for legal affairs, told Ritzau, a Danish news agency. “We have more important things to busy ourselves with in 2017 than to take people to task over burning books.”

But Trine Bramsen, a member of Parliament and a spokeswoman of the Social Democrats, an opposition party, defended the blasphemy law. “I struggle to see how that we’ll achieve a stronger society, or how we’ll enrich the public debate, if the burning of holy books was permitted,” she told Ritzau.

The 2005 cartoon controversy was followed by deadly attacks that have left Western Europe deeply shaken.

In 2010, Kurt Westergaard, who had drawn a cartoon for Jyllands-Posten that showed Muhammad with a bomb in a black turban, narrowly escaped an assassination attempt, fleeing into a safe room at his home in the port city of Aarhus to escape a young Somali armed with an ax and a knife. In 2013, Lars Hedegaard, an outspoken critic of Islam and a defender of Lars Vilks, a Swedish cartoonist who had lampooned Muhammad, was shot at outside his Copenhagen home by a gunman disguised as a postal worker.

In January 2015, 12 people died an assault on the French satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo, which had lampooned Islam. The next month, the police in Copenhagen shot and killed a man after he killed someone outside a synagogue and sprayed bullets into a cafe where Mr. Vilks, the Swedish cartoonist, was speaking.

In Denmark, “the very idea that religion is taken seriously is the antithesis of being a good citizen,” said Mr. Mouritsen, the political scientist. “This is very important.”

Martin Selsoe Sorensen contributed reporting.

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