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"Muslims" in Swedish Media and Academia

GÖRAN LARSSON

A large number of surveys and polls from various parts of Europe clearly demonstrate that Islam and Muslims are often perceived negatively and as a problem in Western societies. This is a strong indication of a division between "Us" and "Them," i.e. between non-Muslims and Muslims. This gap is often explained by global events, such as the terror attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001, the murder of Dutch film-maker Theo van Gogh in November 2004, the London bombings in summer 2005, and the publication of and responses to the Muhammad cartoons in *Jyllands-Posten*, as well as the negative and biased media coverage of Islam and Muslims in general. Although a large number of independent academic studies and interviews with Muslims demonstrate that the media often use negative and stereotypical images in depicting Islam and Muslims, it is essential to analyse whether, and if so how, academic studies are also contributing to the image of Islam and Muslims in Europe. In this article, therefore, I focus on similarities between media and academics portrayals of Islam and Muslims living in Sweden. From a more general point of view, however, my text should be read as a call for a more self-critical discussion of how and whether academics are also contributing to the portrayal of Muslims in accordance with religious categories.

Even though academic studies often function as a vital counter-weight to media portrayals of immigration, religious communities, Islam, and Muslims, the author stresses the importance of being self-critical and of asking whether academic studies may not actually be enhancing, even creating, similar stereotypical depictions. This article traces the similarities between media and academics portrayals of Islam and Muslims living in Sweden and argues that academics should be wary of too easily adopting religious labels when the topics under discussion have little to do with religion or faith.¹

by hard facts. However, by comparing the discursive techniques by which the Swedish media and the academic community have depicted Islam and Muslims, it becomes possible to identify both similarities and differences.

Swedish perceptions of Islam and Muslims

Both media studies and a large number of surveys have demonstrated that in public debates Islam and Muslims are often perceived as different and non-Swedish. According to the latest report of the Swedish Integration

Board (2004/2005), two-thirds of those surveyed felt that Islamic values are not compatible with the fundamental values of Swedish society; 30 percent were categorically negative, and others answered that such values are "to a great extent" not compatible.² Approximately 54 percent responded negatively to the statement that "Swedish Muslims are like Swedes generally," and 37 percent were opposed to mosques being built in Sweden. Regarding the veil, 35 percent were against Muslim women wearing veils on the street, and only 24 percent approved. The most negative attitude was reported towards women wearing veils on ID cards; 66 percent were against this and only 10 percent in favour. These results are not exceptional or unique: similar results are also indicated in earlier surveys and polls. Against this background, Muslims have become the immigrant par excellence in the official debate over immigrants in Sweden.

When journalists report on Islam and Muslim affairs, it is often violence, war, and conflicts that are their main focus.³ Although this is not necessarily the journalists' intention, the indirect message to the audience is that Islam is a violent religion and that Muslims are more prone to violence than believers of other religions. The Muslim identity or affiliation becomes stigmatized by the overwhelmingly negative media coverage of Islam and Muslims. Although it is difficult to establish a clear link between the output of the media and public opinion, there is a striking correspondence between, for example, television news content and the attitudes of Swedes towards Islam and Muslims. To what extent it is possible for a journalist who wants to keep his or her job to challenge existing stereotypes is an open question. Whatever the answer, it is obviously easier and safer for a journalist to adjust to the prevailing norms. Growing competition, less time to do research, and shrinking budgets have also changed the conditions in which news and reporting are produced. It is also clear that the news is often selected, repeated, and reused on a global scale because control over the media has become more concentrated in the hands of a small number of global news agencies. Thus it has become more difficult to present news reporting that questions or challenges the prevailing order and the agenda of the dominant news agencies. As already mentioned above, the extent to which media producers are willing to support articles and reports that are in conflict with the opinions of the readership, news agency owners and advertisers, requires more research before it can be answered satisfactorily. However, if the great majority of consumers in Sweden see Muslims primarily as religious, the media will consequently present reports that more or less correspond to this image. There is little or no room to present a more complex and heterogeneous picture, which, for example, might show that the Muslim community is divided along a large number of political, ethnic, religious, and secular lines. Muslim identity is also a flexible category that often includes several identities or hybridizations (especially among young Muslims who are on the one hand born and raised in Sweden but on the other are also accustomed to Muslim traditions). From this point of view many young

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Even though academic studies often function as a vital counter-weight and an important resource for journalists who are writing about immigration, religious communities, Islam and Muslims, I argue that it is essential to be self-critical and ask whether academic studies may not actually be enhancing, even creating, stereotypes of them. When journalists call on experts in the universities, they are mainly asking for statistical figures and numbers or for quotations that could be used to support the claims made by the journalists: the latter seldom ask for more complex or conflicting examples or illustrations. As a result, the Muslim community (the term is used here as a collective label for a large number of different communities) is generally described in both public and academic debates as a *religious* community, even though most Muslims living in Sweden are secularized.

According to the most widely circulated figures, the number of individuals with a Muslim cultural background in the country is estimated to be approximately 250,000 or 300,000. These figures are only rough approximations, since it is forbidden to include religious affiliations in official statistics in Sweden. Regardless of the problem of calculating how many people have a Muslim cultural background, academic studies and information provided by Muslim organizations indicate that the great majority of Muslims are secularized. Nonetheless Muslims are presented and discussed in religious categories when they are debated in the public discourse. How does this selectivity affect Muslims' self-perceptions, and how does this way of depicting the Muslim community influence how non-Muslims understand the Islamic presence in Sweden? Although this is a relevant question that needs to be raised, it is very difficult to find a clear answer supported

Muslims have hybrid identities, including Muslim and "Swedish" components as well as religious and secular outlooks. This complexity is seldom analysed, discussed, or presented by the media.

Although the findings above are pessimistic, it should be stressed that it is very difficult to demonstrate a clear relationship between what the media publish about Islam and Muslims and the opinions of the public. For example, do the media have a driving effect on the opinions of their readership, or do they merely reflect and repeat public opinion? From this point of view, media and communication studies often indulge in a debate about the so-called "chicken and egg" problem, i.e. what is the driving force of the debate? It is also obvious that different audiences interpret the message in different ways, depending on their knowledge and personal experiences of Muslims. Still the media play an important role in the formation of the society, especially when the latter becomes more ethnically and religiously segregated and the distance between people of Muslim cultural backgrounds and ethnic Swedes is increasing. From this point of view, the media are of great relevance for how both non-Muslims and Muslims understand Islam, Muslim identities and Western society. It should not be forgotten that Muslims are also affected by, for example, the portrayal of the West by Arabic, Turkish, and Persian satellite channels.

What about academic studies of Islam and Muslims?

If the media have focused on the negative cases (Islamic fundamentalism, terrorism, violence, patriarchal structures, *jihad*, etc.), most studies of Islam and Muslims in Sweden have focused on organizational structures, conversion, freedom of religion, etc. As my annotated bibliography on literature on Islam and Muslims in Sweden—*Islam och Muslimer i Sverige: En kommenterad bibliografi*—amply illustrates, most academics have not studied the negative cases.⁴ Although this is an important observation that shows an essential difference between media coverage and academic studies, most researchers on Islam and Mus-

lims in Sweden have also neglected to focus on processes of secularization, internal variations within the Muslim community, generational differences, hybrid identities, etc. From a critical point of view, most studies have been based on earlier and well-known facts and figures: until now, innovative research has mainly been carried out by doctoral candidates. The lack of empirical research could partly be explained by the economic situation in the Swedish academic milieu (today it is extremely difficult to obtain funding for empirical research, a problem that is not, of course, unique to researchers on Islam and Muslims). But it also seems that many researchers have been reluctant to leave their safe university environments and go out into the field to collect new empirical data. To evaluate and interpret the debate over Islam, it is also essential to collaborate with other researchers who are engaged in the study of Islam and Muslims in Europe, as well as to take part in research carried out by academics in, for example, media and communication studies (especially if we want to analyse the impact of new information and communication technologies such as the Internet, satellite television and the lesser medias, such as cassettes and pamphlets).

Because of the situation described above, I argue that we have a fairly low knowledge of what is actually going on inside the Muslim communities in Sweden. For example, we lack studies of Islamic sermons, the reception of *fatwas*, the impact of international theologians on the Swedish Muslim context, or generational and gender differences. There are, of course, important exceptions to my negative presentation and conclusion, such as Jonas Otterbeck's study of the Swedish Muslim journal *Salaam*, Anne Sofie Roald's studies of Muslim women, and David Westerlund's studies of sufism. My critique should therefore not be read as a criticism of my hard-working colleagues in Sweden—on the contrary, they have laid the foundations for the study of Islam and Muslims in the country—or as an excuse for my own shortcomings in this area (I am very much a part of the academic tradition described above). Rather, this article is a call for more thorough empirical research on Islam and Muslims in Sweden and for greater collaboration between Swedish and international researchers.

From a general point of view, I argue that it is both necessary and important for academics who are engaged in research on Islam and Muslims in Europe to adopt a more self-critical approach and ask if and in what ways we are contributing to the portrayal of Islam and Muslims. For example, by neglecting processes of secularization, or internal variations within and between the generations, we are running the risk of becoming either defenders of Islamic traditions and interpretations, or single-minded researchers on Islam and Muslim cultures who simply repeat the prevailing views of the public debate. Thus, instead of single-handedly blaming the media for all the problems, it is essential to evaluate how and whether the academic study of Islam and Muslims is also contributing to their stereotypical portrayal in Sweden.

Woman at a demonstration in Stockholm with a placard, saying "To Wear a Scarf Is Your Own Choice," 17 January 2004



PHOTO BY BERTIL ERICSON / © AFP PHOTO, 2004

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Notes

1. This article is based on a paper presented at the workshop "Public Debates about Islam in Europe." See page 56 for further details.
2. This survey is based on a questionnaire sent to 4000 people randomly selected from among the population (aged 16–78); 2577 answers were returned. See *Integrationsbarometer 2004 En rapport om allmänhetens inställning till integration, mångfald och diskriminering 2003 och 2004* (Norrköping: Integrationsverket, 2005).
3. Cf. Håkan Hvitfelt, "Den muslimska faran: Om mediebilderna av islam," in *Mörk magi i vita medier: Svensk nyhetsjournalistik om invandrare, flyktingar och rasism*, ed. Brune Ylva (Stockholm: Carlssons, 1998), 72–84.
4. Göran Larsson, *Islam och Muslimer i Sverige: En kommenterad bibliografi* (Göteborg and Stockholm: Makadam Förlag, 2004).