

THE DEPICTION OF ISLAM IN SWEDEN: AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

By Jonas Otterbeck

In this article I will try to present and critically review the phenomenon of Islamophobia in Sweden. By showing how the discourses on Islam can be seen as reflections of changes (social, religious, economic, political, etc) in society, I would like to break down the undifferentiated picture often given when the representation of Islam or Islamophobia is discussed. To achieve this I will highlight some different formative periods in Swedish history and show how Islam has been used and presented by various powers. The discourses on Islam are, as every discourse, upheld and developed through practices. Thus they are also changing over time. By drawing attention to the genealogy of these discourses, a pattern of limits and conditions of the specific discourses emerge. Since genealogical arguments tend to be lengthy, I will have to concentrate my presentation and, rather than covering each and every period and develop on them with a huge amount of evidence, try to make my point clear through some examples. Looking back at history, what is particularly interesting is to see which discourses that still have some relevance. I will return to this below. The article will end with some critical remarks on the research on the representation of Islam and Islamophobia.

This article is not based on my own research, though I am well acquainted with the empirical material. It rather draws together research that is related to the phenomenon of Islamophobia in Sweden. My role here is to summarize and at the end critically review the research done.

The ontological discourse of the church

The first period that I will mention is when Sweden is slowly established as a leading military power in Northern Europe (mid 16th until mid 18th century). One of the most important, early manifestation of the growing power of the Swedish crown was a change of religion. In the first half of the 16th century, Sweden was formally turned into a Lutheran, Protestant country from being a Catholic one. Within the Latin Christian world there existed a strongly negative, popular ontological discourse on Islam portraying the religion as fatalistic, fanatic, violent, cruel and aggressive and Muhammad as a second rate charlatan and lecherous womaniser.¹ However there co-existed, as shown by Maxime Rodinson, parallel discourses carrying other images of Islam, Muslims and Muhammad for example among certain theologians and some individuals the political elite in the different Middle age kingdoms in Europe.²

Already within these early impressions about Islam, its adherents and its prophet, we find the existence of parallel discourses. One was an ontological discourse on the difference and inferiority of the other. This and the two following are mentioned by Said in *Orientalism* (1978/1979:2f): An academic and a political discourse. Admittedly, the academic discourse was not of the same sort as the one that was to follow as a result of the Enlightenment. But still its practitioners claimed that they through carefully scrutinized

¹ See Berg 1998:27; Buaben 1996: Chapter 1; Daniel 1962; Rodinson 1987.

² Rodinson 1987:7ff.

evidence could establish a relevant and trustworthy image of what they were studying. Thus, it was separate from both the political pragmatism and the ontological claims of the other discourses.

The popular ontological discourse of the Church spread to Sweden. An early example of how Muhammad was used in the early reformation comes from a wall painting in the Gothem church on Gotland (an island situated on the East coast of Sweden) from the middle of the 16th century. The painting depicts St Christopher, Jesus as a child, the Pope and Mohammad. St Christopher carries the child on his shoulder, saving it from the water in which the Pope and Muhammad perish. How do we understand this painting? The propaganda is directed towards Catholicism. The drowning, nameless pope is humiliated by being associated with Muhammad and Islam; the false prophets perish together.³ The ontological discourse on Islam and Muhammad could be mobilised to say something about Catholicism. This connection between the Pope and Islam (often represented by the Turk) can also be found in for example prayer books and was a fairly common formula when the threats against the Church or Christianity were listed. In the prayer book of Caspar Melissander from 1609 is a prayer meant to be read by children. It reads: "Sweet Lord Jesus Christ, keep us from the Turk, the Tattar, the Pope and all sects".⁴ This function of the discourse on Islam – that of representing a demonised other – is still in use in for example the religious propaganda of some of the Free Churches of Sweden.⁵

Another example of how the Turks and their religion were seen as the symbolic other of Christianity is how the siege of Vienna was closely followed by the Swedish elite. Even though there was not a military threat against Sweden from the Turks, when the Ottoman forces withdraw, a letter was sent out in October 1683 to be read in all parishes as a thanksgiving to God. The so-called victory was presented as a victory for Christianity against the hereditary foe.⁶

Both these examples have to be put in the context of the Swedish ambition to create an empire in which the church and the "true faith" were central aspects. Unity in religion was proclaimed in the constitution of 1634 to be a corner stone and necessity for Sweden's prosperity.⁷ This was followed by other decrees during the 17th century, for example one in 1665 outlawing the practice of any other religion than the Swedish form of Evangelical Lutheranism.⁸ In 1734 it was established in law that the severest punishment for apostasy was banishment. An apostate could no longer be considered to be a Swede and had to leave the country in accordance with a law from 1686 that in practice equated membership in the righteous Church as a precondition for citizenship.⁹

³ L. Karlsson 1985:85ff.

⁴ Berg 1998:51. One must not forget the existence of a strongly negative discourse on Catholicism in Sweden as late as in the mid-20th century. Today, there are Catholic intellectuals who claim that the very same prejudices that once were against Catholics are now directed towards Muslims.

⁵ See for example Morey 1994 or Sjöberg 1992. Sweden has had a Protestant, Lutheran state Church until the year 2000 when there was a separation between Church and state. Other Protestant Christian traditions have been called the free churches.

⁶ Å. Karlsson 1998:77f.

⁷ Sander 1988:33.

⁸ Sander 1988:33f.

⁹ Sander 1988:34.

The fascination with the Ottoman Empire

During the second half of 17th century and the early 18th century the leading nobles and the crown adopted another agenda when it came to politics. Sweden's most powerful competitor when it came to political power was Russia, and the only power useful to side with in a war against Russia was the great Ottoman Empire. Already in 1657 King Karl X Gustav sent an ambassador to Istanbul to gain the support of the Ottoman rulers against Russia.¹⁰ The sought after political pact between Sweden and Ottomans became a reality during the 18th century when the King Karl XII ended up in Bender in the Ottoman Empire after a devastating military setback against the Russian armies at Poltava 1709. The King spent five years under Ottoman protection before returning to Sweden. During the 18th century there were continuous contacts between Sweden and the Ottomans.¹¹ Among the elite there were those who admired Ottoman civilisation, and Turkish studies (and also Persian studies) were encouraged by the State.¹² A Swedish embassy was established in Istanbul, which, by the way, is still there next to the Mevlevihanesi (the meeting place of the Mevlevi dervishes) in Istaklâl Caddesi 497.¹³ This led to a different discourse in regards to Islam that in some ways opposed the traditional Christian discourse. Instead of the discourse on the demonised other, we find one developing on the customs and manners of the Turks; that included an interest in the issues of religious rituals and theology. In the early 18th century, the power relations were obvious, Sweden was the part who needed the support of the Ottoman state – not the other way around. Pretty soon Sweden was heavily in debt to the Ottomans and the financial affairs kept the Ottomans interested in Sweden. Interestingly enough, this led King Karl XII to create through an edict an exception to the above mentioned rules. The Muslims and Jews who came to Sweden from the Ottoman Empire were in 1718 guaranteed the right to perform their religions when in Sweden.¹⁴ This reflected the treatment that the King received during his stay in the Ottoman Empire when he and his following were guaranteed similar rights. Incidentally, these exceptions were the start of a series of exceptions regarding religious minorities, all granted for economic reasons.¹⁵

In this period, the foundations for Swedish scholarly interests in the Ottoman Empire and Islam were laid. Thus the start of the Orientalist tradition in Sweden was not connected to colonialism but with an inferior state's interest in a superior one. During the 18th century a change took place. According to the historian Åsa Karlsson, who cites among others Peter Burke, the upper classes of an emerging (Western) Europe came to distance themselves more and more from both the other classes of their own societies and from other cultures. At the same time there was an urge for knowledge about the others that they had distanced themselves from.¹⁶ This change of attitude towards other ethnic groups, classes, and religions has also been discussed by other Swedish scholars.¹⁷ The writings of the European travellers become more arrogant and patronising. In the beginning of the century authors were curious, maybe puzzled but mainly trying to observe. The observations were not necessarily flawless but there was an epistemological difference in the attitude. Later there seems to be a demand of mastery and knowledge

¹⁰ Kahle 1993:iii

¹¹ Hjärpe 1998:7; Å Karlsson 1998.

¹² See for example Kahle 1993:iiif; Hjärpe 1998:8f; Å. Karlsson 1998.

¹³ Hjärpe 1998:7.

¹⁴ P. Karlsson & Svanberg 1997:10.

¹⁵ P. Karlsson & Svanberg 1997:10.

¹⁶ Å. Karlsson 1998:84ff.

¹⁷ Larsson cited in Å Karlsson 1998:84; Ambjörnsson 1994:33ff.

that make the travellers write in a distancing and disparaging manner. We are here witnessing the first traces of what was to become the discourse on racism and Germanic supremacy.

Orientalism in its prime and the foundation of modern Sweden

The next period of interest is the first half of the 20:th century when the foundation for modern Sweden was laid. Sweden was transformed from a poor cousin up north to a leading economic power in Europe. During the same period the Social Democratic Party gained power step by step. Instead of acknowledging domestic diversity (in regards to language, ethnicity, sexuality and even religion) a nationalistic discourse on the unity of Sweden and its people was put forth and gained hegemony. It is not before the second half of the 20th century that freedom of religion was granted to the citizens (and then mostly to comply to the demand of freedom from religion). Having been a poor country, Sweden had until the Second World War had an emigration that widely overshadowed the immigration. Things changed after the war.

During the first half of the 20th century, Islam was associated with the Orient and the Orient was primary something exotic, Biblical, pre-modern and sometime erotic; at least in popular culture and consciousness. One of the central figures in the development of an academic understanding of religion in Sweden was the historian of Religions and Arch Bishop Nathan Söderblom (who was the teacher and mentor of several of the leading Swedish Orientalist scholars). He had a disparaging view of Islam that showed for example in his textbooks in history of Religions.¹⁸ The influences of Söderblom's texts have been crucial for the discourses on several different religions in the public school of Sweden. The historian of Religions, Christer Hedin, has summed up the overarching view of Söderblom in his writings on Islam. Söderblom holds the opinion that: Muhammad was a second rate prophet who could not keep up his call when he gained worldly power; Islam is a conservative religion which stifles progress and which is in need of a strict legalism to cover up fundamental obscurities in the theology; Furthermore it is an intrinsic quality of Islam to be expansive and greedy for power. This was of course not a private discourse of Söderblom, instead it was connected to a common Western European discourse on Islam among historians of religions. Islam was seen almost as a dead religion, just as Arabic was studied in Sweden at the time as a dead language.¹⁹ Not many of the Swedish scholars at the time had contacts with Muslim believers. The written word *was* the religion and the older the texts were the more authentic.

Still, several of the Orientalists at the time performed some truly scholarly work, for example Tor Andræ and K. V. Zetterstéen. Islam was their primary field of study and for example Andræ's production on Muhammad are still cited (as good scholarship) by both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. There is no doubt that these scholars had a deep respect for Islam and a great knowledge of the theology of the religion. Rather it was the epistemological attitude to Islam that can be understood with a Saidian conceptual framework.

The textbooks

¹⁸ Hedin 1997.

¹⁹ Kahle 1993.

The next phase of interest is when Sweden is turned into a multicultural society through immigration. Multiculturalism was actually adopted as an official policy by the Swedish government in mid 1970's. The political left was very strong in Sweden and since mid 1960's there was also an alliance between the intellectuals and the government. International solidarity, feminism, equality, class struggle etc. were words that were flagged by the political elite. Among other things this led to rather radical changes in the curriculum of the public schools. For example, in the 1960's a decision was taken to stop the professing of Christianity in school and instead do Comparative religion that was to be a critical study, not a normative study, of the religions of the world. This decision was codified in the curriculum called "Lgr-69". One important critical aspect that should enter into the descriptions of the world religions was that of gender roles. The religion that became the symbol of inequality between the sexes was Islam. Conservative branches of Christianity also came under severe criticism, but not in the same non-reflective way as Islam did. There were many reasons for this: Firstly, the discourse developed by Swedish travellers to Muslim countries had female suppression and female otherness as important elements. Secondly, there was a change in the curriculum towards the religions as they were lived, away from the textual based knowledge about religion. The traditional clothing of Muslim women became a vivid way to represent the differences between the sexes within a religion. As a parenthesis one might add that it was during the 1920's and 1930's that modern women in Sweden managed to change the custom of wearing a headscarf when leaving home. This was part of urbanization and modernization in Sweden and that period was still in vivid memory at the time. Thirdly, Muslims, the Arabs and Islam became associated with the Saudi Arabian Islamic interpretation. 1970's saw the emergence of the immense riches through oil and of course the immense Wahhabite production of da'wa-material.

Kjell Härenstam, a scholar of comparative religion, studied Swedish textbooks on religion.²⁰ From his research it is possible to claim that the texts on Islam generally speaking have a biased selection of "facts", i.e. that "facts" might not be very controversial in themselves but the selection of "facts" paints a negative picture of Islam. Typically, a textbook would write about Allah as a stern and demanding god and about the Christian god as a kind and loving god. Of course this is a true statement, but presented the other way around the statement would still be true.

Violence and Islam

In the 1980's the presence of Islam became visible in the Swedish society for the first time ever, even though there had been Muslims living in Sweden since the 1940's. Suddenly veiled women were part of the townscapes, Muslim children started to enter public school in greater number than before, etc. Most Swedish non-Muslims at the time saw the veil as a clear example of female discrimination and the already strong discourse on Islam as a religion of female oppression was further enforced. This must be understood in the light of the discussion among the political left and the intellectuals about female repression through clothing and stereotyped gender roles. Once again, traditional clothing was an easy target. During this period the Muslim became the symbolic other in the Swedish discourse on immigrants and assimilation and integration, used by both their critics and the xenophobic groups and their defenders, the proponents of multiculturalism and the xenophilic groups. At the end of the 1980's Sweden saw the emergence of some violent xenophobic groups and some conservative Christian sects

²⁰ Härenstam 1993.

that targeted the Muslims as a severe societal problem causing the recession in Sweden's economy. The 1980's (and late 1970's) also saw the emergence in the Swedish media of a lot of reports about Islamic opposition groups worlds wide. Violent or not, justifiable or not, the mere amount of the groups gave life to a strong discourse on Islam and violence that was conflated with earlier discourses on aggressive mission, holy wars, primitivism, etc.

Håkan Hvitfelt, professor in Journalism, participated in making a major survey on attitudes among Swedes in 1990. He put in a couple of questions on Islam that he later reviewed in an article.²¹ For example, the survey showed that approximately two percent had answered that they had a "Very or rather positive attitude to Islam". Almost 65 percent had "a rather or very negative attitude to Islam". The rest were neutral. The majority considered Islam to be incompatible with democracy, oppressive against women, and expansive. Persons with a low education were more negative than the ones with a higher education. Men were more negative than women, those from minor societies more negative than those from urban centres. Furthermore, young persons were more negative than others.

Hvitfelt claimed in the first study that media was largely responsible for the negative attitudes; he develops on this in a later study of the News in media.²² According to Hvitfelt it is typical of Swedish news media to make connections between Islam and different forms of violence. Islam is conflated with war, terrorism, persecution of non-Muslims, and death or other severe penalties. While 25 percent of the news normally will be related to violence as much as 85 percent of the ones related to Islam deal with violence. To some extent this is explainable with the fact that news from "the Third World" is more centred round violence and catastrophes. Also, the time period of the study was one of political unrest and violent protests in the Muslim world. Still, the discourse on Islam and Muslims in the news was one conflated with violence.

Popular Orientalism

One of the most interesting studies on Orientalism in Sweden is one on popular culture. Magnus Berg, ethnologist, coins the concept "Popular Orientalism". In his study it is not the literary canon of the Western cultures that is in focus, rather it is the films, books and other mass produced entertainment that are of interest. This cultural production is ruled by an ontology of the other that is recognisable from Saids work. Berg observes how the key words of modernity are tied to The Western man (in singular, definite tense) and even sometimes to the Western woman. He is an individual, takes initiatives, has control, is rational and goal-oriented, while Arabs, Persians, Orientals, etc. are impulsive, lack initiative, are a collective, and are chaotic. Besides that the former is compassionate, offers a firm friendship while the latter are evil minded in a rather primitive way, and besides that they are treacherous. This list can of course be expanded. There are some positive roles: the "Orientals" can at best offer mystic (instead of the disenchantment of the world with its routinized, small scale everyday life), Wisdom with a capital W (instead of Western science), and simplicity (instead of materialism and complex modernity). These are typical traits of the typical ontological Orientalist discourse. What makes Berg's research interesting is

²¹ Hvitfelt 1991

²² Hvitfelt 1998.

that he followed this study with another one looking into the question of reception.²³ In his interviews two different kinds of image of the Orient stand out. One is regarded as a fairy tale world, that is the world that has Arabian nights as an icon. The other image of the Orient is a very negative one. It is regarded as realistic but not exhaustive. Several of the informants complete the negative image with a supposedly positive one to reach some sort of normalization. The argument goes something like this: All these bad things are probably true but there are of course a lot of nice persons there too. What Berg finds is a common sense scepticism that the viewers and readers have. The discourses on the Orient is not internalised at face value, instead they are treated with a healthy scepticism.

The situation as it is now

During the 1990's, changes occurred in several of the mentioned fields. The Saidian criticism finally paid off. New textbooks on religion were less prejudiced than older ones, Muslim children's presence in Swedish schools became taken for granted, positive examples and personal contacts with Muslims had increased for many non-Muslims, some laws were adjusted to the new demographic situation. There has also been a wave of commercial so called "immigrant movies" in Sweden. These movies problematize racism, ethnic relations, religious conservatism, etc. But still according to polls and (at least) my experience the level of prejudice was and is still high. Doing studies on the image of Muslims or Islam in newspapers, films etc. are popular among my students (at International Migration and Ethnic Relations). So I get a constant update on these matters.

A comment on the present relevance of the different discourses

The problems of the Orientalism studies in Sweden

The last part of the paper will develop a critique of the research on Islamophobia, especially the Swedish one, but I think that that has some relevance for international research too. The critique will deal with the problem of a somewhat uncritical adoption and projection of Said's ideas that leads to a lack of independence, the lack of comparative material, the tendentious choice of empirical material and the confusion of a critical approach with an Orientalist discourse. My critic below is general and all comments are not applicable to all the research mentioned above.

It is typical of Swedish researchers who use a Saidian approach to uncritically adopt Said's results from *Orientalism*. That is, instead of using Said as a heuristic tool to gain a critical understanding of their own material they use Said's results as a matrix for their own results. When they reach the same result they are satisfied. I would claim that this moulding hides a more complex understanding of the phenomenon of Orientalism which of course takes on different guises in different historical settings. Said would be the first to agree with that.

A typical consequence of the above is that researchers tend to forget to use comparative material. We gain a lot of answers from the research but answers to what questions? If we find that Islam is related to

²³ Andersson, Berg, Natland 2001.

violence in the News what does this tell us? To what degree are Hinduism, Judaism and Christianity related to violence? To the same degree, or to a lesser degree? And in the later case, how much less? We already know from the beginning that the news tends to be negative so it should not surprise anybody that Islam is associated with negative phenomena in the News. If we look at the travellers' accounts for their visits in the Muslim world, in what ways do they differ from other comparative material? A Swedish traveller, who toured the Ottoman Empire in the early 18th century, met with some Danes in Konstantinopel. In his writing one finds that the general picture of Orientalism is in fact more applicable to the Danes who he really despises than to the Turks who he finds intriguing and interesting. Is it thus possible to study the Swedish depiction of Danes with exactly the same tools as was developed to unfold the Orientalist discourse? And what conclusions must we make if the discourse is similar or even almost identical? One does that tell us about the uniqueness or the commonness of Orientalism?

Another problem is the tendentious choice of empirical material. The researchers look for material that can be expected to uphold an Orientalist discourse. This prevents a development of our knowledge about Orientalism. Instead of making another survey of the News what about looking into what is written in the culture section of major dailies. What kinds of discourses are present there? How can we understand them with the help of discourse theories and which power relations are at hand?

The last problem is a rather sloppy use of Orientalism but can be seen in some research too, the problem of the confusion of a critical approach with an Orientalist discourse. This might not be a problem of the researcher mentioned above but it is surely a problem of other scholars active in Sweden. To their mind every critical analyses of for example Islamic theology made by a non-Muslim are examples of Orientalism. This critical tool is then reduced to a pejorative, which is a great shame.

WORKS CITED

Ambjörnsson, Ronny, 1994, *Öst och väst: tankar om Europa mellan Asien och Amerika*. Stockholm: Natur och kultur.

Andersson, Åsa, Magnus Berg & Sidsel Natland, 2001, *Där hemma här borta – Möten med Orienten I Sverige och Norge*. Stockholm: Carlssons.

Berg, Magnus, 1998, *Hudud: Ett resonemang om populärorientalismens bruksvärde och världsbild*. Stockholm: Carlssons.

Buaben, Jabal, Muhammad, 1996, *Image of the Prophet Muhammad in West: A Study of Muir, Margoliouth and Watt*. Leicester, The Islamic Foundation.

Daniel, Norman, 1960/1962, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Hedin, Christer, 1997, "Nathan Söderbloms uppfattningar om islam" in *TfMS: Tidskrift för mellanösternstudier*, no. 1/97.

Hjärpe, Jan, 1998, "Introduction: Boundaries and Belonging" in R. Larsson (ed.) *Boundaries of Europe?* Stockholm: Swedish Council for Planning and Coordination of Research.

- Hvitfelt, Håkan, 1991, "Svenska attityder till islam" in S. Homberg & L. Weibull (eds.) *Politiska opinioner (SOM-undersökningen 1990)*. Göteborg: Göteborgs universitet.
- Hvitfelt, Håkan, 1998, "Den muslimska faran – Om mediebilderna av islam" in Y. Brune (ed.) *Mörk magi I vita medier – Svensk nyhetsjournalistik om invandrare, flyktingar och rasism*. Stockholm: Carlssons.
- Härenstam, Kjell, 1993, *Skolboks-islam: Analys av bilden av islam i läroböcker i religionskunskap*. Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis.
- Kahle, Sigrid, 1993, "Orientalism i Sverige" in E. Said, *Orientalism*. Stockholm: Ordfront.
- Karlsson, Lennart, 1985, "Islam and Medieval Art in Sweden" in S. Unge & K. Ådahl (eds.) *Islam: Art and Culture*. Stockholm: The Museum of National Antiquities.
- Karlsson, Pia & Ingvar Svanberg (eds.), 1997, *Religionsfrihet i Sverige: Om möjligheten att leva som troende*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Karlsson, Åsa, 1998, "Främling eller vän? Svenskar i Turkiet på 1700-talet" in A. Florén & Å. Karlsson (eds.) *Främlingar: ett historiskt perspektiv*. Uppsala: Opuscula Historica Upsaliensia 19.
- Morey, Robert, 1994, *Islams invasion: Avslöjande om det växande hotet från islam*. Uppsala: Mediagruppen
- Rodinson, Maxime, 1987, *Europe and the Mystique of Islam*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Said, Edward, 1978/1979, *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage books.
- Sander, Åke, 1988, "Några reflektioner kring framställningen av och undervisningen om icke-kristna religioner" i S. Strömquist & G. Strömquist (eds.) *Kulturmöten, kommunikation, skola*. Stockholm: Nordstedts.
- Sjöberg, Stanley, 1992, *Koranen och Bibeln : vad ska man tro på?* Örebro : Marcus.