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Islam and Muslims in the Swedish Media and  
Academic Research: With a Bibliography of  
English and French Literature on  
Islam and Muslims in Sweden

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## **Abstract**

Although broadcasting and print media have played an important role in the construction of the public image of the different, dangerous and fanatical Muslim, it is clear that academic studies are also responsible for the ways in which Islam and Muslims are portrayed. By comparing how Islam and Muslims have been presented in public debates and the Swedish media with their treatment in academic studies in this area, it becomes possible to identify both similarities and differences. While public debates and the media have both been preoccupied with exceptional cases of violence, the academic study of Islam and Muslims in Sweden has mainly focused on questions such as organisational structures, historical aspects and freedom of worship. However, both journalists and academics have neglected the fact that secularism is also present among immigrants with Muslim cultural backgrounds and that 'Muslims' also take part in ordinary activities that are not related to religion alone. A critical discussion of how public images of minorities are constructed must evaluate both the impact and content of the media and the academic study of minorities. In this article, I suggest that a self-critical and reflexive analysis of the academic study of Islam and Muslims in Sweden is badly needed.

## **Keywords**

Muslims, Islam, Sweden, Media, Academic research



## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The media, in particular the press, radio and television, but also the Internet and popular culture, such as films and magazines, are often held responsible for presenting, spreading and constructing negative and stereotypical discourses of Islam and Muslims in Europe and the United States (Allievi, 1997; Allievi, 2003; Hvitfelt, 1991; Hvitfelt, 1998; Said, 1981; Shadid and van Koningsveld, 2002; Shaheen, 2001).<sup>2</sup> According to their critics, the media not only establish a difference between Us and Them, they are also responsible for keeping the collective imaginary active and for presenting Islam and Muslims as something totally different from and incompatible with the Western world. In most media reporting, Muslims are presented as believers, not as individuals with different cultures, ethnicities or linguistic backgrounds. Muslims and Islam are also mainly debated, described and reflected on in terms of exceptional cases, for example the Rushdie affair, *jihad*, terrorism, honour crimes, etc. (cf. Allievi, 2003: 292–3; Alwall, 1998: 187–90). According to Kai Hafiz, who has studied 14,000 German news reports on the Middle East from the 1950s up until the 1990s, ‘Islam is the single most negatively contextualized topic in Middle East reporting’ (Hafez, 2005: 8). Because of this bias, journalists seldom acknowledge the fact that a large proportion of Europe’s Muslim population live ‘normal lives’, that many Muslims are secularised and Westernized, and that there is no consensus among Muslims concerning how Islam should be practised and interpreted.<sup>3</sup> To Hafez the real problem is ‘not so much what journalists and the public think of the Middle East, but what they think about’ when they read or listen to news that involves Islam and Muslims. He continues by saying: ‘Large parts of the Middle Eastern and Muslim realities are just not in the Western medias. News gets rejected before it is even given a chance to be stereotyped’ (Hafez, 2005: 6). Key questions therefore are, by what criteria is news selected, and to what extent is news repeated and rehashed by global media companies?

Although a large number of studies have shown that Islam and Muslims are often presented in accordance with preconceived and stereotypical images—Muslims are, for example, pictured as a grey mass slavishly following the harsh laws of Islam, as violent and oppressive, and as leaning towards terrorism—it is also essential to analyse in what respects the academic study of Islam has contributed to the public debate about Islam and Muslims. What implications do academic categories such as Islam and Muslims have for our understanding of who is a Muslim? Are we academics contributing to the view of Muslims as primarily a religious category when we focus on the presence of religious Muslims in Europe? Furthermore, is there a correspondence between the content of the media and the academic study of Islam and Muslims? On the basis of data concerning Islam and Muslims in Sweden, this essay focuses on two different issues. First, how are Islam and Muslims perceived and presented

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1 A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the Seventh Mediterranean Social and Political Meeting, Florence and Montecatini Terme, 22–26 March 2006, organized by the Mediterranean Program of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute, together with the ISIM (the Netherlands). I would like to express my gratitude to the organizers of Workshop 10, Professor Martin van Bruinessen and Professor Stefano Allievi, and all the participants for a stimulating discussion and suggestions on how to improve my paper (especially Maurizio Albahari, the discussant for my paper). I would also like to express my gratitude to LearnIT and the Knowledge Foundation, who are supporting my research.

2 It is essential to stress that it is not the media, i.e. the technological innovations, in themselves that make things happen but of course those who use them and interact with them (for example, broadcasting or print media) that it is significant to study.

3 By discussing secularization and secularism, I am not trying to demonstrate or argue that an atheistic or secular world view is better, more correct or ‘normal’ than a so-called religious world view. A useful discussion of the secular and of secularism is found in Asad 2003. Furthermore, I am not trying to determine the degree of secularization among Muslims in Sweden. By using this concept, I am mainly saying that many individuals with a Muslim cultural background do not attend mosques or perform the obligatory Islamic rituals prescribed by Islamic theology. However, it is essential to stress that the concept of secularization is heavily debated and that it could be used in many different ways.



in the mass media in Sweden (in particular, Swedish newspapers, tabloids and television)? Has the public debate contributed to the so-called Islamicization of Muslims in Sweden? (By Islamicization I am mostly referring to the notion that Muslims are perceived as ‘fanatics’ or even potential terrorists, not an empirical observation that Muslims actually are ‘fundamentalists’). Secondly, what kinds of questions and issues have academics been concerned with in studying Islam and Muslims in Sweden?<sup>4</sup> 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 believe it is essential to be self-critical and ask whether academic studies may not actually be enhancing, even creating, stereotypes.<sup>5</sup> For example, 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 secularised. How does this selectivity affect Muslim self-perceptions, and how does this way of depicting the Muslim community influence how non-Muslims understand the Islamic presence in Sweden? In other words, are academic studies also contributing to the fact that the public understanding of Islam and Muslims has been framed by a religious belonging? Although this is an important question that needs to be considered in every academic discipline, academics writing on Islam and Muslims in Europe have seldom, to my knowledge, been engaged in self-critical or reflexive discussions of their own contributions or representations of Muslims in Europe, and Sweden is no exception to this.<sup>6</sup>

Although this article focuses on Sweden and the Swedish academic study of Islam and Muslims, it is clear that the discussion and the relationship between the media and the academic study is neither typical of nor unique to Sweden. The problem, and the call for a more self-critical approach to the presentation of Islam and Muslims in Europe, is an issue of great relevance for all academics who are trying to understand how Islam and Muslims are presented and understood in contemporary Europe. In order to develop the academic study of Islam and Muslims, it is therefore essential to highlight the relationship between such study and the media. To the best of my knowledge, we are still lacking critical studies that try to outline and reflect upon the possible relationship between the two. Instead of blaming all problems on the media, this article calls for a more self-critical approach to the study of Islam and Muslims in Europe.

The paper is organized into three sections. The first part focuses on the Swedish media and their presentation of Islam and Muslims. The second outlines the content of academic study and debate in Sweden. Parts one and two are thereafter compared and discussed in the final section. The aim of the comparison is to identify similarities and important differences and to find out if there are any connections and influences between Parts one and two. This section of the paper also contains suggestions for future research projects that could be studied in order to develop the academic study of Islam and Muslims both in Sweden, and in Europe in general. The final section argues that Sweden is

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4 Since the history of Islam and Muslims in Sweden might be unknown to most English readers outside the Scandinavian countries, I have included a lengthy bibliography of English and French literature on these topics. Although the list contains several titles, most articles, books and reports on the subject are written in Swedish. See Larsson 2004 for a full and detailed bibliography.

5 Since the publication of Edward Said’s influential, but also heavily criticised book, *Orientalism*, in 1978, it has become obligatory for all academics who are doing research on the Muslim world or on Islam to engage in a process of self-criticism. The call for a self-critical evaluation is also made by a large number of so-called post-colonial and feminist scholars. Following the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on New York and Washington, there has also been critical discussion of the usefulness of the academic study of the Middle East in the United States. Although Martin Kramer’s book, *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America*, has been condemned for having a political agenda, it also addresses the question of how academic study contributes to an understanding or a lack of understanding of a particular phenomenon. Kramer and Said might therefore be reconciled because they are addressing the same problem, namely how to study an area, region, culture, language or religion. However, no other similarities are detectable between the two authors.

6 An important exception is Arkoun (1997: 41), who provides a critical evaluation of teaching about Islam in France.

not an exceptional or unique case. The images of both Islam and Muslims produced by the media and the academic study of Islam and Muslims are no different in Sweden than in the rest of Europe.

### **The Swedish media and the image of Islam and Muslims**

Before I develop the discussion and bring in some examples from the media and the public debate, I should stress that the study of the impact of the media contains a large number of practical and methodological problems. First of all, are the media (i.e. journalists and reports) responsible for driving the discussion in a particular direction, or does media content merely mirror the values and interests of the audience? For example, do negative images of Muslims and Islam presented in the media correspond to the beliefs and values of the journalists, or do they simply mirror negative opinions that are predominant in the society? Secondly, how the audience interprets the messages that are broadcast or printed always depends on both its own presuppositions and the social context. For example, two different audiences who read an article in a daily paper—let us say, about the conflict in Israel and Palestine—may easily understand or interpret the message in the text differently. ‘Normal’ reporting on Islam and Muslims is most likely to be understood differently by a Muslim and a non-Muslim reader because they have different experiences and knowledge of Islam and Muslim cultures. The intricate relationship between text, language, representation and ‘meaning’ is a basic discussion in all media and communication research, and the problems addressed above are in no way typical of the discussion of Islam and Muslims.<sup>7</sup> Thirdly, it is necessary to be cautious when comparing different sorts of media. It is difficult to compare an article written for the cultural section of a newspaper with an article in a debate or an open letter sent to a daily newspaper. Moreover, it is also evident, at least according to Kai Hafez, that reporting on the Middle East has not just been stereotypical and negative. His research on German news reports on the Middle East indicates that there are differences over time, between different countries and issues, and between different sorts of media, especially between newspapers that are driven by different political agendas (Hafez, 2005).

In analysing the impact of the media, it must also be borne in mind that both official and public debates on Islam and Muslims are often closely related to both national history and global events and developments. For example, public debate and perceptions of Islam and Muslims in Europe have been coloured especially by global events such as the terror attacks in New York and Washington on 9/11/2001, the murder of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh in November 2004, and the bombings on the London transport system in July 2005 (EUMC, 2005; Larsson, 2005b; Allen and Nielsen, 2002). There are several indications that these global events have had a negative impact on the local context, in other words, on Muslims living in other parts of the Middle East, Europe or the United States. For example, in many cases Muslims living in Sweden have been held responsible for the terror attacks and have become guilty by association. No matter whether they practise Islam or not, Muslims have often suffered from intolerance, discrimination, xenophobia and Islamophobia since these global events.<sup>8</sup> For example, a survey distributed among approximately 400 practising Muslims in Sweden

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7 This observation is not unique to the debate about Islam and Muslims but is general for all forms of communication. The intricate relationship between text, language, representation and ‘meaning’ is discussed in Hall 1997.

8 Although it is very difficult to analyse the relationship between the media and public opinion, it is evident from a large number of surveys of Europe generally (Allievi, 2003: 322–5), as of Sweden in particular, that many Europeans (Swedes included) have preconceived, negative images of Islam and Muslims. For example, the report *Islamic Extremism: Common Concern for Muslim and Western Publics: Support for Terror Wanes Among Muslim Public*, published by the Pew Research Centre in July 2005, indicates that many non-Muslims do not trust Muslims. The report states: ‘Public attitudes toward Muslims and concerns over Islamic extremism are remarkably consistent in Western Europe, the U.S., and other countries with sizeable Muslim minorities. Majorities in all Western European countries as well as Canada, India and Russia agree that Muslims coming to their countries want to be distinct from the larger country instead of adopting its customs and way of life (p. 17).’ Similar results are also reported for Sweden. According to the 2004 report by the Swedish Integration Board (a survey based on a questionnaire sent to 4000 people randomly selected from among the population aged 16–78; 2577 answers were returned. *Integrationsbarometer*, 2005: 17–18), two-thirds of the people

(particularly in Göteborg on the west coast) a couple of days after the tragic events in the United States in 2001 indicates that Muslims had become the victims of verbal abuse, harassment and even physical violence after the 9/11 attacks. Several mosques and prayer halls received threats, and quite a number were vandalised or desecrated. From the 176 answers returned, more than 90 percent said that they had suffered from discrimination and xenophobia because of the 9/11 attacks (cf. Larsson, 2005b).

**Table 1: If you have personally been the target of discrimination or threats since 9/11, in what way or ways have you been targeted?**

	Number	Percentage
<i>People have voiced negative opinions about Islam and Muslims</i>	80	44
<i>People have shouted 'terrorist', 'bin Laden', 'go home'</i>	80	45
<i>I have been threatened with violence because I have been identified as a Muslim</i>	13	7
<i>I have been the victim of physical violence</i>	7	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>182*</b>	<b>100</b>

*Note:* \*The total number of responses is more than 176 because some of the informants ticked more than one box. Source: Larsson, 2005b: 32

The extent to which the results of the survey could be related to media coverage of the terrorist attacks in the United States is, of course, difficult to demonstrate or substantiate.<sup>9</sup> However, it is evident that many Muslims in Sweden believe they are represented negatively and stereotypically by the Swedish media (cf. Larsson, 2005b; Otterbeck, 2000: 168–73). For example, the focus on exceptional and 'negative' incidents is also problematic because there is a gap between the living conditions of Muslims and non-Muslims in Sweden. As in many parts of Europe, in practice individuals with Muslim cultural backgrounds are confined to certain living areas, schools and businesses, if, that is, they have access to the job market at all. However, Muslims in Sweden rarely live in ghettos in the inner cities (as in many other European cities or in the United States) but in the suburbs of the largest cities (Stockholm, Göteborg and Malmö). At present there is a clear split between the expensive housing areas in the city centres or the better suburbs and the suburbs that are mainly inhabited by immigrants. According to Islamologist Anne Sofie Roald:

(Contd.) \_\_\_\_\_

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. Approximately 54 percent responded negatively to the statement that 'Swedish Muslims are like Swedes generally', while 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 regarding women wearing veils on ID cards; 66 percent were against this and only 10 percent in favour (*Integrationsbarometer*, 2005: 12). In the 2005 report by the Board of Integration, 36 percent were wholly or partly opposed to the building of mosques in Sweden (*Integrationsbarometer*, 2006: 36) and 'almost 7 out of 10 consider their knowledge [about Islam and Muslims] to be very poor or quite poor' (*Integrationsbarometer*, 2006: 37). These results are not exceptional or unique: similar results are also indicated in earlier surveys and polls. In sum, Islam and Muslims are seen by many Swedes as different, problematic, even dangerous to Swedish society (cf. Alwall, 1998: 187–90; Hvitfelt, 1991). Against this background, Muslims have become the immigrant par excellence in the official debate over immigrants in Sweden (Roald, 2002: 103).

<sup>9</sup> To investigate this issue, it would be necessary to conduct in-depth interviews with both victims and offenders. This is not feasible in Sweden, where there are no official data or statistics that might provide information on Islamophobic incidents that could be related to the 9/11 attacks.

Although it is clear that the segregation of living (or the ‘enclavisation’ of society) is not a conscious policy of the Swedish authorities, it is still a policy, in so far as nothing is done to stop it. The consequence of this policy is that in some suburban schools few pupils have a proper knowledge of the Swedish language. In some classes, there may be one or two pupils from ‘Swedish’ families, while in others there are often none at all. There is massive unemployment among the population of these immigrant suburbs, and few immigrants have primary or even secondary contacts with ethnic ‘Swedes.’ (Roald, 2002: 109)

The physical, material and ‘mental’ separation indicated in this quotation is, of course, a serious problem that is causing growing tensions and divisions within Swedish society. This perception among many immigrants, and not only among persons with a Muslim cultural background, creates a feeling that society is divided between Us and Them, which could easily lead to the development of a negative identity and a feeling of not belonging to Swedish society. Today ‘Swedes’ and immigrants have limited contact with one another, and for many adults (especially those who do not attend a public school, college or university), the media is the only information channel about the Other. Under these conditions, there is a problem in the fact that many Muslims, rightly or wrongly, believe that most of the Swedish media promote preconceived, stereotypical, negative and even inaccurate images of Islam and Muslims. Another problem is that Muslims may easily acquire a stereotypical view of non-Muslims and feel that they are not part of Swedish society.<sup>10</sup> If this is indeed the case—as many Muslims believe according to my own experience of several years of fieldwork among Muslims in Sweden—we are witnessing a destructive division between ‘Us and Them’ that holds out the prospect of nothing other than confrontation and separation. The growing gap between Muslims and non-Muslims can also be illustrated by the fact that many Muslims who are suffering from growing intolerance and living under the threat of verbal abuse or even physical violence are reluctant to report incidents of Islamophobia to the police (Ericson, 2005; Larsson, 2005b). Whether the reasons for this unwillingness lie in a lack of information, language problems or a general distrust of the police is difficult to answer. This question needs further investigation and more research before we can arrive at firm conclusions.

Nevertheless, without forcing the argument too much, the negative attitudes found in the survey discussed above and in several reports by the Swedish Integration Board (*Integrationsbarometer*, 2005) more or less correspond to how Swedish television news covered Islam and Muslims in the 1990s. Media studies conducted by Håkan Hvitfelt clearly demonstrate that Islam and Muslims were mainly associated with violence and war in the television news.

When journalists report on Islam and Muslim affairs, therefore, it is violence, war and conflict that are their focus. Although it is not necessarily the journalists’ intentions, the indirect message to the audience is that Islam is a violent religion and that Muslims are more prone to violence than other believers (cf. PEW, 2005: 12). The Muslim identity or belonging 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 television news content and the attitudes of Swedes towards Islam and Muslims (cf. Hafez, 2005: 7). 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. But growing competition, less time to do research and smaller budgets have also changed and are challenging the conditions under which news is produced and reporting conducted (Hafez, 2005: 12; Hvitfelt, 2002). It is also clear that news is often selected,

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10 According to Kai Hafez, stereotypical reporting is not typical of the western or Islamic media. He says: ‘Some communication scholars argue that in the eyes of many consumers and journalists the main function of the news media is to act as a warning system for dangers or potential dangers that develop in the outside world. Comparative research in various media systems of the world has shown that such news standards are a universal feature. Asian media tend to report about the West in pretty much the same way as Western media do about the East. Political violence in Ireland, Spain or Islamist terrorism make for preferred news’ (Hafez, 2005: 7).

repeated and reused on a global scale because control over the news and the media has become more concentrated in the hands of a small number of global news agencies.<sup>11</sup> Thus it has become more difficult to present a news reportage that questions or challenges the prevailing order and the agenda of the dominant news agencies. As already mentioned above, to what extent are media producers willing to support articles and reports that are in conflict with the opinions of the readership, news agency owners and advertisers, and that require more research? This is an open question that needs further debate and more research before it can be answered satisfactorily.

**Table 2. Islam in television news 1991–1995 (*Aktuellt*, TV 1; *Rapport*, TV 2; *Nyhterna*, TV 4)**

Type of item	Percentage of coverage on Islam/Muslims
Violent context	44.7
Direct violence	27
Bodily punishment/death threats	6.5
Peace process during/after war	4.5
Victims of war	2.7
Violent rituals	0.3
Not connected with violence	14.3
<b>Total number of news reports</b>	<b>627</b>

Source: Hvitfelt, 1998: 80

However, if the great majority of consumers in Sweden see Muslims primarily as religious, the media will accordingly 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 hybridization, especially among young Muslims who on the one hand may have been born and raised in Sweden but on the other are also accustomed to Muslim traditions. However, might not the development described above also have a negative effect on academic research on and the study of Islam and Muslims in Sweden? All in all, it is very easy to blame the media for this imbalance, but to what extent are we, that is, academics and scholars of Islam and Muslims in Sweden, responsible for this focus? A first step in answering this question is to provide an overall picture of what kinds of articles, books and reports scholars working in this area have produced.

### **The academic study of Islam and Muslims in Sweden**

Although few Swedish scholars who have studied the history of Islam and Muslims in their country have been engaged in critical self-reflection, the study of these topics and its connection with public debates is the focus of the social anthropologist Aje Carlbom's doctoral thesis, *The Imagined versus the Real Other: Multiculturalism and the Representation of Muslims in Sweden* (2003). The main argument of the book, which is based on his thesis, is that the academic study of Islam and Muslims in

<sup>11</sup> The importance of the structure of media globalization, especially the impact of transnational television, is discussed in Chalaby 2005.

Sweden is highly politicised and driven by a political agenda that rests on a so-called multicultural ideology (Carlbom, 2003: 14–15). While previous scholars have mainly reproduced a ‘false’ image of the Other, Carlbom seems to argue, with little or no self-criticism, that his research presents the ‘real’ Muslims in Sweden. Furthermore, scholars working on Islam in Sweden have neglected to study important and sensitive issues, such as Islamism and Islamic missionary works (that is, *da’wa*). According to Carlbom, this is because most scholars have been eager to present a supposedly positive image of Islam and Muslims that could be contrasted with their negative image in the media. Carlbom’s work raises important questions that are closely related to the academic study of Islam and Muslims in Sweden and the construction of minorities, but it has been criticised by, for example, David Westerlund for being superficial and selective in its presentation (Westerlund, 2004: 172–6). According to Westerlund, the ideas Carlbom presents are rarely substantiated with hard evidence, and Carlbom’s results are based on a biased selection of data. It is also evident that he has missed important works, such as those dealing with Islamic missionary activities in Europe (cf. Janson, 2003), as well as media studies that could be related to Islam and Muslims in Sweden (especially Hvitfelt 1991; 1998). Contrary to his own statement in the introduction to his thesis, he is by no means the first social anthropologist to have dealt with Muslims in Sweden (cf. Carlblom, 2003: 18; Westerlund, 2004: 174). Nonetheless, since his is one of the first studies to have been devoted to analysing the complex relationship between academic studies, political ideology and public debate, his thesis is of importance to the theme of this article.

Although the number of studies devoted to the history of Islam and Muslims in Sweden has increased during the last ten years, it should be stressed that our knowledge of these topics is still very limited.<sup>12</sup> For example, since Swedish law prohibits official records from containing information about religious affiliations, we do not even know the exact number of Muslims who are living in Sweden.<sup>13</sup> The figures given in the media, or for that matter in academic articles and books, depend on how we define ‘Muslim’. For example, are we only talking about so-called religious Muslims, or does our definition also include people with cultural backgrounds in the Muslim world? Keeping these problems in mind, the figures given for Muslims living in Sweden range from 250,000 to 300,000, depending on which sources are being used.

The problem discussed above also becomes relevant in trying to determine how many articles, books and reviews have been written that focus on Islam and Muslims in Sweden. Should we only count publications that focus on religion, or should we also include ones that look at Muslims from a cultural, ethnic or linguistic perspective? Without making any claim to completeness, my annotated bibliography on this subject, published in 2004, includes 430 articles, books and reports, and approximately fifty homepages (Larsson, 2004). In collecting this material, I included only publications that deal directly with Islam and Muslims as a religious phenomenon. However, since it was difficult to make a sharp distinction between, for example, religion and culture, the bibliography also contains a general reading list of publications that deal with Islam and Muslim affairs from the cultural, ethnic or linguistic points of view. Before presenting this material, I should stress that it is not my aim to be critical of any particular scholar: my interest lies only in the overall picture. For

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12 My discussion is primarily based on religious studies of Islam and Muslims in Sweden, but it should be kept in mind that scholars in sociology, social anthropology, political science and immigration research have also been occupied with studies that could be of great relevance for our understanding of Islam and Muslims in Sweden. Although a number of departments and institutions in Sweden (for example, Malmö University College and Ceifo at Stockholm University) have focused on migration and immigration, there is a gap between religious studies and immigration studies. Although I believe that this division is still present in academic study, there are signs of a change, and more scholars of religion have recently been engaged on immigration studies and projects. My understanding of this division could, of course, be a result of my own bias and preoccupation with religious studies, but it is necessary to examine how the academic world is dividing up the field into compartments for practical administrative or economic reasons, not to mention struggles for power and influence within the academic world itself.

13 This problem is not, of course, unique to Sweden: similar problems in quantifying Muslim populations are reported from most countries in Europe. See Brown, 2000.

example, is it possible to find a correspondence between the interests of the media (as described by Håkan Hvitfelt in Table 1) and publications on Islam and Muslims in Sweden? If we treat the published material as a unified entity, is it possible to discern any topics that have received special attention from scholars and researchers? Although it is very difficult to maintain firm boundaries between these topics—most publications on Islam and Muslims in Sweden deal with several different topics at the same time—it is possible to distinguish a number of subjects that have been studied, namely conversion (especially female converts), ethnicity (ethnic groups), education, freedom of religion, general publications on Islam and Muslims in Sweden (i.e. introductory publications, or handbooks on Islam that also include information about Islam and Muslims in Sweden), *halal* slaughter, health (including burial/death), ‘Muslim publications’ (this category includes publications written by Muslims that are not academic in kind), the media, Muslim organisations (including mosques, etc.), religious interactions and interfaith and dialogue aspects, secularism, ‘Swedish Islam’, *sufism* or ‘popular religion’, and youth and children. From this sample, it is clear that most publications have been of a general or introductory character and that few studies have focused on such topics as theological debates and the transmission of Islamic knowledge in Sweden.

**Table 3. Publications on Islam and Muslims in Sweden published between 1984 and 2004**

	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	Total
<b>C</b>				1	1									2		1			1	1	2	9
<b>E</b>	2	2	1	1		12	2				2	1	1	1	3		1	1	3			33
<b>Ed</b>		2			2			1	1		1		2	2	2	4	5			1	1	24
<b>Fr</b>											1	1	1	1	1	1						6
<b>G</b>	1	1		3	4	6	8		3	8	6	6	1	4	3	9	1	5	10	6	3	88
<b>Ha</b>										1				1		1		1				4
<b>He</b>		1				1	2	1					1		1	2	2	2	2			15
<b>M</b>			6	5	4	9	7	18	3	6	5	4	4	4	5	2	1	4	3	4	1	95
<b>Me</b>								1				1			1	1		2	2	3	1	12
<b>Mo</b>	1	1			1	1	2	3		3		2	2	2	3	4	3	2	1			31
<b>Ri</b>			1			3		2						1	2	3	1	3	6	1	3	26
<b>S</b>				1									1			1			1			4
<b>SI</b>		1						1	1	1		1	1	2	2	2	1	4	5	2		24
<b>S/P</b>											1			2		2		3	3			11
<b>Y/C</b>								1			1	1	1				1	1	1	1	1	9
<b>T</b>	4	8	8	11	12	32	21	28	8	19	17	17	15	22	23	33	16	28	38	19	12	391

**KEY**

C= Conversion

E = Ethnicity (Ethnic groups)

Ed = Education

Fr = Freedom of Religion

G = General publications on Islam and Muslims in Sweden

Ha = *Halal* slaughter

He = Health (including burial/death)

M = Muslim author

Me = Media

Mo = Muslim organisations (mosques, etc.)

Ri = Religious interactions/cultural encounters/dialogue

S = Secularism

SI = ‘Swedish Islam’

S/P = *Sufism*/‘Popular religion’

Y/C = Youth/children

T=Total per year and category

Source: Larsson, 2005a

From Table 3 above, for example, it is clear that few articles, books or reports have focused on radicalism, terrorism or violence, that is, on the exceptional cases that have received so much media attention (cf. Allievi, 2003). Although these subjects may be included in a number of publications, I suggest that this indicates an important difference between the academic study of Islam and Muslims in Sweden and journalistic interest in them.

Table 3 illustrates also that the number of publications on Islam and Muslims varied between 1984 till 2004. For example, it is clear that so-called Muslim publications, that is, publications produced by Muslims in Islam in Sweden, are the most frequent category in the table. 'Muslim publications' outnumber every other category by 95 publications compared to 88 publications on general themes, 33 on ethnicity and 31 on Muslim organizations. Although it is very difficult, if not impossible, to show a correspondence between the number of publications and global events, it is clear that the periods 1989-1991 and 2001-2002 both produced a large number of publications on Islam and Muslims. The first period (1989-1991) corresponds to the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, a period that also gave rise to the debate about the so-called Clash of Civilizations theory, while the second period (2002-2001) might be related to the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. However, while for the first period Muslims participate actively in the debate over Islam and Muslims (at least if we consider the number of publications for this period), for the second period this is not the case. One explanation for this change could be related to the fact that the influential and important Swedish Muslim journal *Salaam* was not active at the time of the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks.<sup>14</sup> A second explanation could also be related to the fact that many Muslims seems to have abandoned the print media in favour of cheaper and more accessible forms of publication, especially on the Internet (for example, the online forum SfCM and a number of other homepages).<sup>15</sup> From the figures given in Table 3, it is also clear that the number of publications on Islam and Muslims has decreased from the beginning of 2003. However, it is hard to tell whether this is a new trend, or just a temporary decline. Furthermore, it is important to determine how many of these were produced between 1984 and 2004 that focused on Islam and Muslims in Sweden. According to my estimates, there were just six (Alwall 1998; Carlbom 2003; Gustafsson 2004; Johnsdotter 2002; Månsson 2002 and Otterbeck 2000). We should also listen to Kjell Härenstam, who defended his thesis on Islam in Swedish schoolbooks in 1983, as well as Madeleine Sultán Sjöqvist, who defended her thesis on Muslim converts in 2006 (they are not included in my statistics for this paper since they defended their theses before 1994 and after 2004 respectively). All in all the statistical data given in Table 3 gives an illustration and overview of the publication of printed articles and books on Islam and Muslims in Sweden. The table gives also an impression of both the strengths and weaknesses in the Swedish academic study of Islam and Muslims in Sweden.

### **The construction of a minority: the role of the media and of academic study<sup>16</sup>**

On the basis of the information gathered in my annotated bibliography (Larsson, 2004), it is clear that few academic publications correspond to the findings reported by, for example, Håkan Hvitfelt on Swedish media (Hvitfelt, 1991; 1998), and in general academics have been less concerned with so-called exceptional cases (cf. Allievi, 2003).<sup>17</sup>

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14 This journal has been analyzed by Jonas Otterbeck (2000).

15 The activities of this forum are analyzed in Larsson 2005d.

16 It is important to remember that the concept of a minority does not refer only to numbers and statistics, i.e. it is not only the number of individuals that counts when we want to distinguish a minority group. As, for example, Talal Asad has shown, the definition of a minority is also closely related to questions of power and representation. To belong to a minority is also often a sign that you have little or no power or influence in the society. Asad writes: 'minorities are defined as minorities only in hierarchical structures of power' (2003: 175).

17 This finding should not automatically be seen as an indication that Carlbom (2003) is right in his critique of the studies of Islam and Muslims that have been conducted in Sweden. In his review of Carlbom's thesis, Westerlund (2004)



However, before we can make a conclusive analysis of these findings, we must also ask whether data taken from studies like Hvitfelt's are comparable with the academic publications listed in my bibliography? A major difference is that the journalistic reports that Hvitfelt lists are not confined to Islam and Muslims in Sweden: indeed, most of the news relates to incidents outside the country. Nonetheless media reporting of Islam and Muslims could still be responsible for how 'Swedes' see them, especially if we recall the gap between 'Swedes' and immigrants (in this case Muslims) discussed by Anne Sofie Roald (2002; cf. above). For many non-Muslim Swedes, it is only via the media that they acquire any information about immigrants, especially Muslims. According to a survey conducted by the Swedish Integration Board, most Swedes have little knowledge about Islam and Muslims, though a large majority hold negative opinions of them.<sup>18</sup> From this point of view, the media have a great responsibility in terms of how they report Islam and Muslim affairs. If it is felt that most of the coverage of Islam and Muslims is negative and biased, then they should logically be blamed for the fact that many 'Swedes' perceive and understand Islam and Muslims stereotypically and negatively. Whether or not we accept this conclusion, Islam and Muslim affairs are generally presented in connection with the themes of violence, conflicts or ways of life that are sharply different from 'Swedish ones'. However, as noted at the beginning of this article, there are several reasons for caution in blaming all the problems on the media. To what extent does the lack of information and research on 'good initiatives' and 'good practices' mirror the research interests of media researchers? Are media researchers also more interested in the exceptional cases than in the ordinary lives of most people with Muslim backgrounds? Furthermore, what kind of information are journalists and reporters looking for when they turn to universities and colleges in Sweden? But it is also important to ask to what extent Swedish academics and scholars of Islam and Muslims are affected and influenced by the media coverage of these topics when they are conducting research and designing research projects? Without any substantial evidence, it is, of course, impossible to answer these questions, but my own experience tells me that journalists are more inclined to ask scholars to comment on issues that correspond to public opinion about Islam and Muslims. Most journalists who contacts academics on issues that are related to these topics are looking for facts and figures (for example, how many Muslims live in Sweden; how many are followers of Islamism, etc.). It is also common for journalists to want 'expert' comments on current events on both the local and global levels). Although most journalists do not have an explicitly negative intention (this, at least, is my experience), they seldom seek a complex or multi-dimensional explanation. To put it bluntly, they want hard facts and quotations to support their articles or reports. They also produce news that fits the requirements of the public discourse. Unfortunately the public debate has mostly been preoccupied with questions that could be related to so-called exceptional cases, that is, radicalisation, honour crimes and fundamentalism.<sup>19</sup> However, researchers and students of religion are also affected and influenced by the focus that the media tend to have when they are covering Islam and Muslims. Although the relationship between the media and academic work is difficult to analyse, it is clear that many students, for example, are clearly influenced by the media when they choose assignments for individual papers and even theses. If this analysis has a bearing on students, we must ask to what degree is this also true for professors and academics?

(Contd.)

demonstrates clearly that major parts of Carlbom's critique are based on misconceptions and that he has missed important works that have a bearing on the study of Islam and Muslims in Sweden.

18 According to the 2005 report of the Swedish Integration Board, 60.3 percent of respondents said that they had low (or bad) knowledge about the Muslim religion (i.e. Islam), 17.1 percent said that they had a really low or bad knowledge, and 43.2 percent said that they had a pretty low or bad knowledge. See *Integrationsbarometer* 2004 (2005), p. 77. In the latest report, 'almost 7 out of 10 consider their knowledge to be very poor or quite poor' (*Integrationsbarometer*, 2006: 37).

19 However, the recent growing interest in Islamophobic tendencies and intolerance against Muslims and Islam in society is a positive example that is also closely related to the public debate about Islamophobia in both Sweden and the European Union. After the terror attacks in New York and Washington, Muslims have also been invited more frequently to take part in public debates about Islam and Muslims affairs (cf. EUMC, 2005). From a pluralist and democratic point of view, this is a positive development that might be seen as indicating that the media debate is slowly improving and that representations of Islam and Muslims in Sweden are becoming more complex and multidimensional (Larsson, 2005b).

Although the media have a great responsibility for how public debates about minorities are shaped, it is evident that both journalists and academics have a joint responsibility for not reporting on, for example, the ‘folk religiosity’, sectarian divisions, secularism, hybrid identities, etc. that also exist among peoples of Muslim background in Sweden. From this point of view, and especially if we return to Table 3 above, academic studies have clearly been sufficiently single-minded for academics too to have contributed to framing Islam and Muslims in terms of religious categories. Few historians or sociologists of religion who have been concerned with Sweden have, to my knowledge, been interested in studying and collecting data on such topics as secularisation processes, generational differences or internal theological differences within the diversity of the Muslim population in Sweden.<sup>20</sup>

These circumstances of academic research should be related to the economic limitations on research in the fields of the humanities and social sciences (it is, for example, very difficult to obtain financial support to conduct new empirical research that is based on fieldwork and interviews because it is costly and time-consuming), as well as practical problems. To be able to collect new empirical data, academics must leave their ‘safe’ university environments to confront practical problems in the field and struggle with new empirical data. Moreover, most empirical research on Islam and Muslims in Sweden is also based on interviews with leaders and key figures in various Muslim communities. This is not automatically a problem, but there is a risk of the same data being repeated and of Islam only being presented from the point of view of the elite, that is, the religious leaders. Due to this bias, ‘ordinary’ Muslims remain unheard and many perspectives (for example, gender perspectives, minorities within the community, children and young people, etc.) are being lost. This problem is partially solved in the academic theses of writers like Anna Månson (2002) and Madeline Sjöqvist Sultán (2006), but the great majority of publications on Islam and Muslims in Sweden, including my own studies, have been based mainly on interviews with religious leaders, not ‘ordinary’ Muslims. From a critical point of view, this is an illustration of the problems that the economic circumstances of academic research in Sweden is generating. The overwhelming majority of new empirical research in these areas is being conducted by doctoral candidates, not scholars. This is not to say that more senior scholars are more suited to this kind of research, but it is an illustration of the fact that it is very difficult to obtain funding for research on Islam and Muslims in Sweden once one has defended one’s thesis.

Irrespective of my criticism above, it is clear that academic knowledge about Islam and Muslims in Sweden has become richer and more multidimensional during the last couple of years, with the production of a growing body of literature. But it is still evident that many publications simply build on earlier research and that ‘old’ information is being repeated with little criticism. Many publications on Islam and Muslims in Sweden simply repeat facts and figures without evaluating the findings, or else they merely collect new empirical data which results in numerous repetitions: in addition, much of the literature on the subject could be considered merely handbooks. This observation is by no means a criticism of those researchers who have laid the foundations for the study of Islam and Muslims in Sweden—on the contrary—but it is now time to develop the research, collect more data, formulate new hypotheses and bring in new comparative materials.

Besides the study of secularism and expressions of folk religiosity, I suggest that it would be fruitful to study, for example, how Muslims in Sweden have become active in global debates over Islam and its formulation in modern times, which is taking place on both the Internet and via satellite television, as well as through lesser media such as brochures and pamphlets. What kinds of questions and answers are Muslims looking for in the global Islamic market? This question could, for example, be studied by looking at how Swedish Muslims discuss, apply or reject fatwas issued by international and global muftis such as Yosuf Al-Qaradawi and popular preachers such as Amr Khaled. To obtain better knowledge of the internal debates that are taking place within Islamic communities, it is also necessary to examine the content and rhetoric of the Friday sermons delivered in Swedish mosques, as

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20 There are, of course, exceptions, such as Schmidt 2002 and 2004, but they are few.

well as the generational and gender differences that are clearly evident in Muslim communities in Sweden. In addition, it is important to examine how Muslim identities are formulated and debated in Sweden. It is especially important to study and analyse discussions about hybrid identities, that is, the fact that many Muslims combine and uses different identities and take part in many social and cultural discourses at the same time. To study if, how, and in what ways Muslims are combining and negotiating between so-called religious, secular, Muslim and Swedish identities is an essential task for the future study of these topics in Sweden.

Since there are indications that Muslims have been more active in public discussions about Islam and Muslim cultures since the terror attacks in Europe and the United States, it is also necessary to collect more data on how Islam and Muslims are covered in the media (including before the media started to focus on Islam and Muslims, that is, way back to before the Iranian revolution in 1979). Although there are many methodological problems in analysing how the media are formulating and driving the debate over minorities, it is important to continue to monitor and analyse their activities, and to do so without reproducing the stereotypes that the media sometimes present of Islam and Muslims. For example, it would be of great interest to study how images and representations of Muslims in Sweden have changed over time. What kind of reporting could be found in the Swedish media prior to the Iranian revolution in 1979 (i.e. before Islam and Muslims generated global debates over, for example, violence and terrorism)? Most media studies so far have concentrated on the negative aspects of this: to the best of my knowledge, no study has focused on the less stereotypical examples of Islam and Muslims that are also present in the media. For example, no study to the best of my knowledge has focused the large number of reports on recipes during Ramadan and Eid, or the economic impact of Ramadan on local trade. Why are these topics omitted from such studies? By addressing the more 'positive' examples, we are not neglecting the fact that there are problems with how the media cover Islam and Muslim affairs—on the contrary.

Although most of the examples in this article are taken from Sweden, it is clear that my discussion of the role of the media and the academic study of Islam and Muslims are also relevant to the rest of Europe. Thus it is essential to develop a more self-critical approach to the study of Islam and Muslims in Europe. Instead of single-handedly blaming the media for creating negative or stereotypical presentations of Islam and Muslims, it is important to undertake analysis and ask whether and in what ways the media may be influencing the academic study of these topics. It is also vital to ask whether academic study is different from the media coverage, and if so, in what ways? From an academic point of view, it is essential to be aware of the fact that academic research and the research material produced by academics are contributing to how the public discourse of Muslims in Europe is being formulated.

## Conclusions

Although the broadcasting and print media have played an important role in constructing the public image of the different, dangerous and fanatical Muslim, it is clear that academic studies also bear some of the responsibility for how Islam and Muslims are portrayed. By comparing how Islam and Muslims have been presented in the public debate and the Swedish media with the treatment of these topics in academic studies, it is possible to identify both similarities and differences. While the public debate and the media have mainly been occupied with exceptional and violent incidents, the academic study of Islam and Muslims in Sweden has mainly focused on such areas as organisational structures, historical aspects and freedom of worship. However, both journalists and academics have been neglecting the fact that secularism is also present within the Muslim community and that Muslims also take part in 'ordinary' activities that are not related to religion alone. Many Muslims, particularly young Muslims born and raised in Sweden, have flexible and hybrid identities and should not be viewed or measured in terms of religious categories alone. From this point of view, the academic study of Islam and Muslims has also contributed to the public debate about Islam and Muslims in Sweden by presenting Muslims according to religious categories. By following this process, we academics are

also neglecting important aspects of how individuals with Muslim backgrounds create, debate and form their own identities. From this point of view, it is essential to consider what implications the academic study of Islam and Muslims might have on public debates over these categories in Sweden. A critical discussion of how public images of minorities are constructed must evaluate not only the impact and content of the media, but also the academic study of minorities. In this article, therefore, I am calling for a self-critical and reflexive analysis of how the academic study of Islam and Muslims in Sweden could contribute to the public debate and general understanding of who is a Muslim.

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