

Expressing Religiosity in a Secular Society: the Relativisation of Faith in Muslim Communities in Sweden

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This article discusses religion in public space and the case study is Muslim minorities in Sweden. The discussion deals with secularisation trends within Muslim communities in Swedish society in view of the notion of counter-secularisation as a fixed and unchanged form of religious expressions in contemporary public life. What happens in Muslim communities as Muslims of various cultural backgrounds and religious orientations meet and interact in a new secular context? The article argues that, similar to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Christian reform movements opened up for a relativisation of faith and thus to a certain extent initiated a secularisation process, a relativisation of faith is at present an ongoing process in Muslim communities in Sweden. Of the three definitions on secularisation, promoted by Jose Casanova, secularisation as ‘differentiation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms’, ‘marginalisation of religion to a privatised sphere’, and ‘the decline of religious belief and practices’, Muslim practices in Sweden indicate an adherence to these two first notions of the relation between ‘church and state’. As for the last definition of secularisation; ‘the decline of religious belief and practices’, which has to do with private religious practices, many Muslims would regard themselves as religious without claiming a public role for religion, similar to many Christians in Sweden. Furthermore, many of the traits considered to be ‘religious’, might well be attempts to protect a particular cultural context rather than being signs on increased religion as such.

Introduction

Religious manifestations in the public space have, the last few decades, been on increase in western society. On the surface, it seems that ‘religion’ is in the process of regaining its former magnitude. Such a supposition is in contrast to social theories from the nineteenth century onwards. The early social scientists, such as Emilè Durkheim and Max Weber, predicted a decrease of religious influences in the modernisation process of society, and in the 1950s and 1960s secularisation theories, building on this prediction, claimed not only a decreased role of religion in modern society, but some scholars even went as far as

promoting the view of an eventual death of religion.¹ On the other hand other researchers at the time, such as David Martin disagreed with the general secularisation paradigm, claiming that despite the differentiation of society, religious values have been institutionalised and religion was and still is thus relevant in modern society.² It is undeniable that religious values, particularly Christian values, as noted by Martin, saturate modern society. The calendar with its red-letter-days and festivals is one example of how religion influences modern life. The festivals, such as Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost are played out in the public space with particular Christian (as well as some non-Christian) traditions, thus activating the collective memory of each society into a more or less religious modus. Other examples include the flag, which in many western societies contains a cross, and many countries' national anthems with their stress on the interlink between God and the Nation. Even the religious education curriculum in many Western countries tends to emphasise Christianity rather than religion in general, thus reinforcing Christian values in new-generation citizens. However, it is important to note that, in parallel to this institutionalisation of Christian values, Enlightenment humanism has also forced its way into Western societies. An increased number of people celebrate the Christian festivals, referring to them as family gatherings rather than as religious events. Easter is for many a holiday for sport and leisure rather than a remembrance of the death and resurrection of Jesus. In Sweden, the Monday after the Pentecost evening, which traditionally was a public holiday, has been abolished and this will probably lead to an eradicating of this holiday from collective memory. Thus, Martin's argument that institutionalised Christian values make Western countries more aware of religion or religious values might be modified; these values might have impeded the secularisation process but whether they are agents in maintaining a strong manifestation of religion in modern society remains to be seen.

In the 1980s, the secularisation theories were challenged by academics in the field. It was, in particular, sociologist José Casanova, who questioned the generally accepted idea of increased secularisation.³ His definition of secularisation as (1) 'differentiation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms'; (2) 'marginalization of religion to a privatized sphere'; and (3) 'the decline of religious belief and practices'⁴ has contributed to a further distinction between the various dimensions of secularisation in academic discourses. Casanova's first two dimensions of secularisation seem to pertain to secularism, i.e. the ideology of the state as separated from religion, whereas the last dimension seems to pertain to people's secularisation, i.e. the decline of people's religiosity.

Casanova claimed a 'de-privatisation of religion'; i.e. that religions have (re)entered the public sphere and thereby increasingly gained publicity, thus refusing 'to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularisation had reserved for them'.⁵ Except for the phenomenon of an increased public re-emergence of Protestant fundamentalism in the US, Casanova's evidences of 'de-privatisation of religion' were collected from non-western societies, among them the Iranian revolution.⁶ It is of importance that even Peter Berger's retreat (1999) from his former secularisation theory (1950s and 1960s) to a high degree is linked to development in non-European societies as well as to the new religious awareness in immigrant communities in western countries.⁷

The notion of religion having gained an increased role lately is to a great extent built on how religious movements around the world have managed to bring religion into public life as well as into politics. The growing influence of, for instance, the Protestant Fundamentalism in the USA, of Catholicism in Latin America, and of Islamic political parties in countries with Muslim majority populations has made the impression of a strong contemporary public manifestation of religion. Berger acknowledges that, in particular, in Western Europe, with its increased modernisation processes, key indicators of secularisation have intensified. He even shows how these secularisation indicators, such as low church-attendance, a lack of adherence to ‘church-dictated codes of personal behavior’, recruitment to clergy, etc – formerly common mostly in the northern countries of Europe – have rapidly saturated southern European countries, such as Spain, Italy, and Portugal as modernisation processes have accelerated in these societies.⁸ However, despite his reference to the link between modernisation and secularisation in western European society, he considers what he calls ‘the Islamic movement’ – both in countries where Muslims are in the majority and among Muslim immigrants in Europe – to be part of the counter-secularisation movement.⁸ Although not explicitly stated by Berger, it seems that he promotes a view of new religious expressions in Western society as fixed and static rather than in a flux of change. In contrast to such an understanding of the new religious presence in the public sphere, I have argued elsewhere that Islamist movements’ political participation in countries with Muslim majorities is a secularising force.⁹ In the present study, I will discuss secularisation trends within Muslim communities in Swedish society in view of the notion of counter-secularisation as a fixed and unchanged form of religious expressions in contemporary public life.

Secularisation processes in Swedish society

To contextualise secularisation trends in Muslim communities in Sweden it is necessary to look into the Swedish historical secularisation processes that have mainly been linked to social changes in the nineteenth century. Urbanisation, as peasants moved into the urban areas to work in factories, brought changes in the relations between the church and socio-political institutions as well as between the church and the people. The church and religious life played an important part in everyday life in the traditional peasant society. However, in the urban space, collectivistic life patterns with extended families as the main foundation of social life was exchanged with core families and a more individualistic lifestyle. Even the religious reform movements in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries were agents of changes of the religious landscape.¹⁰ The movements initiated a relativisation of faith. Through breaking away from the main State Church, the movements explicitly questioned the Christian orthodoxy. By indicating a variety both of the ways to the sacred and to the way of being religious, the reform movements loosened up the concept of the ‘one truth’. As religious devotion to a great extent has to do with exclusivity; the claim for *the* certainty, a lack of such an exclusive ‘one truth’ might for many make it more difficult to believe or to adhere to a religious system. Steve Bruce illustrates this when he states that ‘[w]hen the oracle speaks with a single clear voice, it is

easy to believe it is the voice of God. When it speaks with twenty different voices, it is tempting to look behind the screen'.¹⁰

The increased alphabetisation process together with education endorsed by liberal priests within the church to encourage common people to study the catechism, were further incentives towards a relativisation of faith.¹¹ Religious knowledge became available for everybody, creating a possibility for 'pick and choose' instead of depending on the totality of a particular religious scholar's interpretations of the Holy text. The initial increased religiosity spurred by both reform movements and educational processes soon developed into a process of individualisation, and a subsequent secularisation of Scandinavian society following all three of Casanova's understandings of secularisation.⁴ As for the third dimension in Casanova's definition, i.e. peoples' decreased religiosity, it is important to state that what can be observed in Scandinavian society is mainly a decrease in adherence to religious systems' rules and regulation, whereas peoples' relation to God in various forms might be more difficult to measure. Even though the two phenomena, individualisation and secularisation, are different, they might both, according to the Swedish scholar Per-Johan Ödman, be traced back to the period of the Renaissance when individualistic currents were linked to a questioning of the hegemonic role of the state church at that time.¹⁰

Ödman believes that the new form of belief, created by this ideal of liberal education and the enlightenment of common people in general, caused a feeling of relativisation; individuals could choose their belief, either they could follow the public cult or they could *choose* an alternative cult. This relativisation of belief made the faith interchangeable, leading eventually to a weakening of religious authorities and the following secularisation of society.¹⁰ The development in the early twentieth century, with the Church gradually losing ground in Swedish society, proves Ödman's argument. However, it was in the 1950s that the Swedish Church suffered its fatal loss when it comes to popularity and influence.¹⁵ The event leading up to the crisis has by many been traced back to the book *Belief and Knowledge (Tro och Vetande)* published in 1949 by the Swedish philosopher Ingemar Hedenius, in which there is an extensive criticism of Christianity.¹⁶ Today, there is a common agreement of Sweden as a secular society, particularly in the sense that the public language is fully secular and the Church has no official authority. Sweden is thus secular in Casanova's definition of secularisation as 'marginalisation of religion to a privatised sphere'.¹² With the separation between the State Church of Sweden and the state in 2000, Sweden is even a secular society in terms of Casanova's definition of secularisation as 'differentiation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms'. When it comes to Casanova's definition of secularisation as 'the decline of religious belief and practices', i.e. a decline in people's religiosity, this might, as mentioned above, be harder to prove. Church attendance has indeed been declining, but religious activities in Free Churches, in the management of various New Age directions, and in non-Christian religious communities are flourishing. It is interesting to note the claim of the Swedish theologian Ola Sigurdson's view of what he names the 'post-secular' society. In his view, religion has not disappeared it has only changed. And it is particularly the relation between religion and politics that, to a great extent, has been transformed in modern Swedish society.¹⁷

Is 'Islam' changeable?

Roel Meijer points at how there is a common 'unfruitful debate' on 'the issue of whether Islam is compatible with Enlightenment (and Europe and modernity)', due mainly to the notion that Islam does not recognise any separation between 'state and "church"'.¹⁸ It is mainly Islamism, or what is commonly known as 'political Islam', that has been associated with this notion, as Islam in this particular understanding is regarded as 'a comprehensive social and political system' and as 'a way of life'. It is important to draw attention to the fact that as Islamists tend to be the main actors in the discussion of what 'Islam' is and the main designers of public Islamic discourses, Islamism tended to be regarded as 'the Islam'.¹⁹

Meijer opposes the view of Islam being incompatible with Enlightenment ideals by referring to, among others, the German scholar on Islamism, Gudrun Krämer, who already in 1997 wrote about Islamism and democracy.²⁰ In Meijer's writings he even draws attention to a development of theological dogmas as well as of political ideas within both moderate Islamism, such as the Muslim Brotherhood as well as in the more strict formalist movement, the salafis.¹⁸ The words of the Political scientist, William Safran might illustrate how even Christianity in pre-modern times had theological doctrines that are incompatible with contemporary currents of thought and ideologies, such as, for instance, democracy, indicating how religious assumptions change in time and space. He compares the pre-modern Catholic idea of life as a 'vale of tears' with the fatalistic notion of 'God's will (*insh'allah*)' in Islam, saying:

In short some religions are the harbingers of democracy and progress whereas others are not. It may be argued that in a number of countries neither capitalism nor democracy could develop because the beliefs associated with the religions that dominated there were incompatible with an autonomous and progressive civil society. For example, premodern Catholicism was marked by features that were not conducive to what is now called 'democratization': these included hierarchical institutions that regulated nonparticipating and highly inegalitarian societies and perpetuated the belief that this life was a vale of tears. Such a situation is widely believed to prevail in Muslim societies, owing to the fatalism – the belief that everything is God's will (*insh'allah*) – that is considered an important element of Islamic culture.²¹

Indeed Safran does essentialise religions by claiming that 'some religions are the harbingers of democracy and progress whereas others are not'. However, by referring to pre-modern Catholicism and comparing it with Islam in contemporary societies, he actually promotes the idea that it is Muslim societies' pre-modern status rather than 'Islam' as a religion that creates the barren environment for democratic ideas to flourish in these societies. A similar notion is apparent in the philosopher, Charles Taylor's huge work on 'secularity', when he states that in 'Christian (or post-Christian) society' belief is an option, whereas this is not the case in Muslim society, adding in brackets 'or not yet'.²²

In contrast to the common belief that 'Islam' is unchangeable and that 'Islam' has saturated Muslim society, also promoted by Safran, researchers, such as for instance Jocelyne Cesari, have observed how Muslims in Europe and in the United States tend to be secularised and individualised in relation to Islam. Cesari notes that the 'secularisation of Islam is seen in the transformation of individual religious observance, as well as the

acceptance – by the vast silent majority – of the separation between public and private space'.²³ There is, however, also an ongoing secularisation process in countries with Muslim majority population, but it is important to point out that the notion that secularisation is regarded as a precondition for democracy is contradicted in the actual political practice in many of these countries. Secularisation in the Middle East, Olivier Roy argues, is closely linked to dictatorship.²⁴ He states:

The contradiction of secularists in many Muslim countries is that they favour state control of religion or even suppress traditional and popular expression of it (for instance, Kemal Atatürk banned Sufi brotherhoods, while establishing the *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, or Directorate for Religious Affairs); such a policy maintains a link between state and religion. More generally, in most Muslim countries secularisation has run counter to democratisation, the best example being the cancellation of the Algerian parliamentary elections of 1992 under the pretence that they would have been won by the Islamists.²⁴

Roy further sees religion in Muslim countries as instrumentalised. 'State secularism', Roy claims, 'promotes not a critical and reformist religion, but a conservative and subservient one.'²⁵ Thus, as the state promotes one understanding of Islam and Islamists, a different understanding with an emphasis on politics and Islam as a 'comprehensive social and political system', 'Islam' becomes relativised, as Christianity became in Sweden in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Roy describes this phenomenon by claiming that religion thus turns into a 'multifaceted practice'.²⁶

Thus, 'Islam' and 'Muslim society' are both in a state of flux. Similarly, as in Christianity, various Muslim actors compete in defining what 'Islam' is and, similarly, as in previous Christian society, this competition for definition has led to a relativisation of religion, or what Bruce describes as the oracle's many voices.

Islamic developments

The Muslim expansion in the early formative period of Islam extended the borders of territories ruled by Muslims from China in the East to the Iberian Peninsula in the West. Due to a lack of a stable political and legal system at the time, Islamic legislation, politics, administration, social structures, architecture, etc, tended to incorporate local cultural trends into the growing body of what has today become 'Islam', thus reflecting the wide geographical and cultural spectre of Muslim leadership. Islamic legislation is a prominent example of this. The Muslim expansion started before the establishment of sharia as a religious code of law. In various regions of the growing empire, legislation suitable for time and place developed. The many Islamic law-schools, of which only a few have survived until today, had different approaches to the Islamic sources as well as having different legal devices for the construction of religious laws and regulations. Even the contemporary approach to the Islamic sources, 'the return to the Koran and Sunna' is a result of social changes. The decline and fall of Muslim regions the last 500 years have forced Muslim intellectuals to rethink Islamic thinking. The challenge of Western Colonialism created new ways of looking at Islam and Muslims. The first reactions came in the Indian Subcontinent, one of the first regions to be colonised, with a slight opening up for a rapprochement between modern ideas and Islamic thought by the

intellectual Shah Waliullah (1703–1762). Simultaneously, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792) wanted to purify ‘Islam’ in the Arab Peninsula, and in the late nineteenth century intellectuals mainly based in Egypt belonging to the Salafiyya movement (it is important to distinguish this intellectual movement from the rigid and formalistic contemporary salafi movement) followed up these thinkers’ ideas, putting them into a modern framework. This development of ideas indicates possibilities for Islamic ideas to develop even further as Muslims move into new cultural contexts. A similar historical-critical process with criticism of Holy texts, which has taken place in Christianity and Judaism, can be anticipated among some Muslims, but mainly within certain marginalised groups. Some attempts to such textual criticism by for instance Muslim and Islamic feminists have to a great extent been overlooked by the more mainstream trend dominated by male scholars. The Moroccan sociologist and feminist Fatima Mernissi has indeed been criticised, particularly by Moroccan Islamists, but her ideas have not been publicly repudiated. In contrast, the Bangladeshi Feminist Taslima Nasreen was persecuted particularly for her novel *Shame*, in which she describes Muslim persecution of the Hindu minority in Bangladesh,²⁷ and as she was understood to have called for a revision of the Koran,²⁸ and for ‘ridiculing Islam’.²⁹ The difference between the two feminists’ approaches is that Mernissi does not explicitly criticise the Koran, rather she discusses the Hadith literature within the frame of an Islamic scholarly discourse. Nasrin’s approach has been more confrontational; she has not been involved in textual criticism, rather she issues political statements in a politicised conflict between secularists and Islamists.

When it comes to modern ‘secular’ criticism of the Holy text by contemporary male intellectuals, such as the Egyptian Nasr Abu Zayd (d. 2010) and the Syrian engineer Muhammad Sharur, these have, similar to Nasreen’s statements, caused disturbances in Muslim society. Sharur’s book has been banned by religious authorities,³⁰ and Abu Zayd was forcedly divorced from his wife by the Egyptian court in 1995, based on a decree that he was an apostate.³¹ It was Abu Zayd’s view on the Koranic text as mainly a literary work that caused Islamists in Egypt to react. In a Foucaultian sense, it might be that these initiating endeavours came before the time was ripe for such thought, whereas it might be supposed that in future years critical analysis of the Koran will become part of the mainstream Islamic discourse. One example of how Islamic discourses are in constant flux of change is how the ideas of Muslim Feminists in the 1980s and 1990s,³² that Islamic legislation is a result of male interpretation, has entered mainstream Islamic discourses. In 1999, the famous TV-skaykh Ahmad al-Kubaysi, who is one of the main actors in the contemporary Islamic debate, expressed a similar thought on a Dubai satellite TV-station. He stated:

Women have abstained from the interpretation [of the Islamic sources] and they have left the matter to men. Men have, however, often given rules for family matters and matters of men and women in a manly way and for men’s own benefit. This they have done however, in the best of intentions (*ahsan al-niyya*) and not deliberately (*muta’ammid*).³³

Although male Islamic scholars might have expressed similar thoughts before al-Kubaysi, it was the first time I heard such a critical view of previous Islamic scholarship.

The cautious way he expressed this thought of male dominance in interpretation of the Islamic sources further indicates the sensitivity of introducing such new stances in the debate. The Tunisian-born Rashid Ghannoushi, who for a long time has been living in the UK is another Muslim scholar who also has introduced gender-equal interpretations of the Islamic sources in the debate. Even the famous Islamist Yusuf al-Qaradawi is by many regarded as an Islamic reformer, particularly due to his leadership of the organisation European Council for Fatwa and Research. One important initiative of this council was to accept that women who convert to Islam might remain with their non-Muslim husbands. I have also observed how Al-Qaradawi's statement that it is a duty for Muslims in the West to be engaged politically had an impact in some Muslim communities in Sweden.³⁴ It remains, however, to be seen how far the new development towards interpreting Islamic sources within a modern and secularised framework in Islamic thought goes. The present growth of conservative and extreme positions, such as the salafī trend, indicates indeed a reaction to the global political situation of Muslim feelings of powerlessness, but it also has to be regarded within a framework of conservative reactions to modern ideas entering the Islamic stage.

This Islamic development on the level of ideas is reflected in Islamic public expressions. Muslim clothing varies in different regions; the long female black coats (*abaya*) and long male light-coloured (mostly white) shirt-like garments (*thawb*) in the Arab peninsula are examples of local clothing, whereas the male and female tunics and wide pants (*shalwar* and *qamis*) in South Asian countries is another example. In addition, local architectural styles in the various regions influenced the expression of Islamic buildings. Muslims have had a tendency to incorporate local traits into an Islamic framework, particularly in the initial period of Islamic history, and the variation of Islamic buildings all over the world is a prominent example of how, in history, local culture penetrated Islamic public expression in the fast-growing religion. The Great Mosque of Xi'an in China from the seventh century, for instance, has a Chinese architectural style with focus on symmetry and balance (Figure 1). In North Africa and in the Iberian Peninsula, a particular architectural style, which has come to be denoted Moorish and thus 'Islamic', is pervasive. The Mezquita of Cordoba is an example of this with influences from Berber, Greco-Roman and Visigoth architecture; semicircular arches and geometric decoration being the most prominent features in this structural design (Figure 2). Ottoman architecture from the fifteenth century onwards is also influenced by various styles; the Seljuk style; simple and harmonious monumental buildings of stone, and the Byzantine style; the vast square room with a huge circular dome. An example of an Ottoman mosque with this architectural mixture between Seljuk and Byzantine styles is the Sultan Ahmad mosque in Istanbul (Figure 3).

'Islamic' architectural features became institutionalised in the various regions of the Muslim empire, and as mosques have been raised in western countries these features have been transferred into these new social contexts. The Central Mosque in London (as well as most mosques in Germany and France) has 'Islamic' traits with arches and domes (Figure 4). However, in most cases, even local architectural features manifest themselves in the Islamic sacred buildings.³⁵ In Sweden, there are at the moment eight main mosques. Some of them are purpose-built mosques, whereas others are buildings rebuilt as mosques. For instance, the main mosque in Stockholm is a rebuilt power station

designed at the turn of the twentieth century by the Swedish architect Ferdinand Boberg. Boberg was a proponent for the architectural style of gentle forms and open inner spaces and it was therefore 'easy' to transform this building into a mosque.³⁶ Moreover, he had travelled extensively in the orient and his interest in oriental architectural traits is obvious in this building, making it most suitable for a mosque building.³⁷ The Swedish Muslim Representatives who evaluated the building for the possibility of using it as a mosque, regarded its ornaments and its interior glazed mosaic tiles as expressing 'Islamic Architecture' in the style of Andalucia and Morocco (Figure 5).³⁸

The mosque in Malmoe, built in 1983 mainly by petrol dollars from Saudi Arabia, also has 'Islamic' architectural features; the dome with two traditional minarets, an inner open space and arches. It might be possible to associate the interior of this mosque building to the Wahhabi ideology with its pietistic style with a lack of ornaments except in the *mahrab*, the niche in the *qibla* (prayer direction) wall where the imam stays during prayers. However, according to Birgitta Knutsson, it is the financial situation that has restricted the interior decoration in this mosque (Figure 6). Knutsson regards that the mosques in Sweden have strong 'Islamic' architectural features, but these have been mixed with Swedish traits. She believes the Swedish traits to be a result of, first, Muslims' wish to adapt to the Swedish context, and secondly to the Swedish authorities' claim to adherence to local standards.³⁹

Islam in Sweden went through great changes during these years with the notion of 'returning to the homeland' being gradually replaced by a wish to settle in the new country. A male convert in the early 1990s reacted to the trend that most mosques in Sweden tended to have 'Islamic' structural designs rather than 'Swedish' designs. He expressed that his dream for Muslims in Sweden was to have red-coloured mosques with white corners, a Swedish architectural design (Figure 7). However, as most mosques are raised by money funded in other parts of the world, the funders tend to have certain preferences, such as the style in the Malmoe mosque indicates. Moreover, as long as Islam is regarded by Muslims as well as by non-Muslims as a non-Swedish religion, the tendency for Muslims, particularly first-generation Muslim immigrants, is to orientate themselves towards their home-countries, even when it comes to religious buildings.

Islamic developments in Muslim communities in Sweden⁴⁰

To speak about 'Muslims' in the Swedish context is not an easy task. In Sweden, Muslim communities consist of persons from various cultural backgrounds, of various religious directions and of various degrees of religiosity. Similarly, as most countries with Muslim majority populations have a more or less secularised orientation in law and the political system, many Muslims are secularised in the sense of two of Casanova's definitions of secularisation; 'differentiation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms' and 'marginalisation of religion to a privatised sphere'. However, many of these Muslims would have a more or less religious orientation and would therefore not be secularised in the sense of Casanova's third definition of secularisation; 'the decline of religious belief and practices'.⁴ Thus, they have a private religiosity, in terms of having a personal relation with God without necessarily accepting the totality of the religious system of organised religion, in a similar fashion many Christians are religious in

Sweden. Many Muslims would even be secularised in terms of all three of Casanova's definitions of secularisation. However, whereas many of them might be agnostics, atheists and some even refute the belonging to Muslim communities, many would still claim a strong Muslim identity. Islam in this sense has become the glue for the social structure within Muslim communities.

Islamists, on the other hand, are those who regard Islam as a comprehensive system covering all aspects of human life, including politics, economics and social structures. They would claim that Islam should play a part in official life. From the 1990s onwards I have interviewed Muslim leaders in Sweden and have observed that many of them are Islamists. Moreover, I have also observed that even many practicing Muslims who attend the mosque regularly might be regarded as being part of the Islamist group, although not all would consciously regard themselves as being Islamists. This is mainly due to the spread and availability of Islamist literature from the 1970s onwards, where the Islamist understanding of Islam was presented as 'the truth'. The distribution of translation of books by famous Islamists such as Sayyid Qutb, Hasan al-Banna, Abu al-Ala al-Mawdudi reached its height in the 1990s, but from then on the available Islamic literature has been more multifaceted with sufi literature as well as feminist literature starting to reach a broader Muslim public.⁴¹

In order to look into secularisation trends in Muslim communities in Sweden, I will discuss two interrelated issues. First, is the recent flourishing of Islamic public images in Sweden, an indication of an increased religiosity related to Casanova's third sense of secularisation, i.e. secularisation as 'the decline [or in this case increase] of religious belief and practices'? And second, are these public Islamic images fixed and unchangeable or are they in a flux of change in a continuous interaction with surrounding society? Muslim public expressions, mosques, Muslim politicians, and the Muslim female headscarf, will be discussed and related to the two above-stated research questions.

As a start, it is important to see the intensification of Islamic public images in Sweden as first and foremost a result of the growth of Muslim refugees from countries with Muslim majority populations, an effect of the violent conflicts mainly in the Balkans, in Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and so on. However, as the Swedish researcher, Eva Hamberg observed in the 1990s, some of the refugees coming to Sweden become more religious than they were before they emigrated, whereas others become less religious.⁴² There is thus a diversity in Muslim communities that should be kept in mind in the following discussion.

Religious buildings

Mosque buildings are, apart from the Muslim female headscarf, the most visible Islamic public expression, and the development of the construction of mosques might indicate how Muslims either wish to separate themselves from or draw near to Swedish cultural traits. As discussed above, the mosques in Sweden are a mixture of 'Islamic' and Swedish architectural styles. Knutsson discusses, for instance, the mosque in Malmö in terms of being 'Islamic' in its architectural style, but at the same time, she says, the exterior resembles the farm houses in Scania, the region where Malmö is situated, with its white-scrubbed walls and its low modest height.⁴³ Knutsson regards mosques in Sweden in terms of the Swedish expression '*lagom*'⁴⁴ (enough, adequate), which implies

the meaning of not being too little and not too much. She claims that the mosques are all ‘lagom’ big and ‘lagom’ conspicuous. She states:

The Muslims architectural iconography is *lagom* in their expressions in order not to provoke. The orientalist traits are *lagom* exotic in order not to disturb their surroundings.⁴⁴

Knutsson’s introduction of the concept ‘lagom’ is interesting in that this common Swedish expression might be associated with the Koranic expression of ‘wasat’ (in the middle); i.e. the Islamic religion is the middle way (*din al-wasat*), the Muslims are the people in the middle (*umma al-wasat*). Islamic theologians explain this to be the religion that is not extreme and the Muslims who are not extreme one or the other way.

Thus, mosques in Sweden seem to have integrated the ‘Islamic’ and the ‘Swedish’, both as an expressed wish from the Muslims but also as a result of Swedish formal regulations.

Muslim politicians

Another issue worth discussing, when it comes to Muslim public expressions, is Muslim politicians’ approach to Swedish mainstream politics of individual rights, i.e. the human rights approach to equality at all levels in legislation in contrast to the collective right paradigm promoted by the Islamic law-schools. In the late 1990s, Muslims started to participate in the Swedish political field, and in the twentieth century many Muslims have become members of political parties, representing these parties in political local and national bodies.⁴⁵ In discussions with 12 Muslim politicians, all immigrants (i.e. of the first generation Muslim immigrants) of various ethnic and national backgrounds, of various religious practices (ten of them were practising Muslims), and with various political orientation (belonging to six political parties from left to right), I discovered that all of them, with one (partly) exception, claimed that they promoted individual rights rather than collective rights, the latter a prominent feature in Islamism and in the traditional Islamic message, which builds on the Islamic law-school literature. The example discussed with the politicians was mainly their stand towards marriage and divorce legislation in Sweden versus the Personal Status legislation in countries with Muslim majority populations. Whereas 11 of the Muslim politicians claimed that Muslims should adhere to the Swedish legal system even in family law, one of them, who came to Sweden as a toddler and was thus raised in Sweden, claimed that Muslims should have the right to follow a sharia family legislation system if both spouses agreed. It is interesting that this latter person was one of the few who explicitly claimed an ethnic identity in addition to the Islamic identity.

The Muslim politicians were all devoted to their party programmes, and one, a practising Muslim, was even active in claiming homosexuals’ equal rights in all fields in Swedish society. This, he exclaimed, was a result of him being engaged in a political party who flagged for homosexuals’ rights. He believed that by devoting himself to a political party he had to take the consequence of this, as voters would vote according to the political programme. Muslims’ heterogenic approach to various political issues and their claim for individual rights rather than collective rights indicates a turn towards secularism in terms of Casanova’s definition of secularisation as ‘differentiation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms’ and as a ‘marginalisation of

religion to a privatised sphere'. However, Casanova's third definition of secularisation, as 'the decline of religious belief and practices' on a personal level, does not apply to this group of Muslims, as ten of them had an expressed Islamic identity and were practising Muslims, and four of the five women in the investigation wore headscarves. It seems, thus, that the Muslims in the investigation have adapted to a private religious stand similar to many Swedish Christians, despite the women's visible religious symbols.

The Muslim female covering

The phenomenon of female covering, the headscarf (*hijab*, *khimar*) and the face-veil (*niqab*, *burqa* [the particular Afghan covering with a long loose-fitting coat with a head-cover and face-veil with grid in front of the eyes, all in one piece]), might serve as another suitable illustration for the debate on whether Islamic developments in the Swedish context goes towards secularisation or an intensification of religion in public life. Islamic covering has become the most significant marker of Muslim public presence all over the world, starting mainly with the images from the Iranian revolution in 1979 with women with black *chadors* in the streets demonstrating against the modernising and repressive rule of the Shah. Gradually, the Islamic female covering has come to take a prominent place in academic literature on Islamic politics.

Few other phenomena have stirred such emotions and created such heated discussions as the Muslim female headscarf and face-veil. The literature on 'veiling' is huge.⁴⁶ In contrast to the more recent notion that Islamic female covering signifies 'religiosity',⁴⁷ many researchers from the 1990s regarded this phenomenon more in political and social perspectives.⁴⁸ In the present study, the focus will mainly be on how the form of 'veiling' has changed in the Swedish context and how this change in form might indicate a rapprochement towards a Swedish cultural approach to religion.

In Sweden, the Islamic headscarf was a rare phenomenon up to the mid-1980s.⁴⁹ In the 1970s and early 1980s, some immigrant women from Turkey, Kurdistan or North Africa would wear small traditional scarves tied under the chin. The use of a different type of dressing among Muslims – long coats, some would even wear a *jilbab* (a loose-fitting ankle-length coat covering the whole body bought mainly in Arab countries), with big shawls tied under the chin with safety pins hanging down over the bosom – intensified in the 1980s as Muslim refugees from Arab countries, mainly from Lebanon, many of them Palestinians, and from Iraq, entered Sweden. This headscarf style was part of a trend that started in the mid twentieth century in the Egyptian Islamist organisation The Muslim brotherhood.⁵⁰ This organisation's political message of social equality and justice in Islam was reflected in women, whether rich or poor, dressing equally in loose-fitting coats and headscarves. This particular style of Islamic female covering eventually came commonly to be called *hijab*, despite the fact that the Koranic term *hijab* means a curtain or a screen, which in the Koranic sense divides the male from the female sphere. Thus, this particular way of dressing was an Islamist invention, based on the lofty ideal of social justice.

In the 1980s, many ethnic female Swedes started to convert to Islam, as they married Muslim immigrants, and many of these started to wear the *hijab*-style of covering. For many converts, to cover Islamically was a result of a personal wish of becoming more

‘royal than the king’; as the Islamic understanding that most converts adapted was so different from the Swedish value tradition, the conversion process brought with it a need to repudiate their former culture, a well-known phenomenon even in conversion to other religions. However, it was also a result of the converts’ husbands’ pressure on their Swedish wives to prove their disassociation of their former lifestyles.⁴¹

The refugees from Southeast Asia, particularly from Afghanistan, rarely used this *hijab*-style of female covering. In Malmö, with a big group of Afghan refugees, who started to arrive in Sweden in the 1980s, few women covered their hair. The young Afghan women who wore a scarf used a long narrow see-through scarf, covering only parts of the hair and usually matching in colour the Afghan clothing of wide trousers and a long tunic. The old women used a big shawl covering the heads and the bosom. Both of these head-covers are called *chadar* (Dari) or *pora-nej* (Pashtu). At the end of the 1980s, one of the young Afghan girls was inspired by the converts and started to wear a *hijab*-style head-scarf. She tells of how she was heavily criticised by the other Afghans who claimed that she had adapted the ‘Arabic head-cover’. This example indicates that the Afghan ‘culture’ was more important than the religious aspect, probably as a result of the migration to a new cultural context. Thus, by becoming a minority, the importance to stick to cultural practice came to be prominent in many Muslim immigrant groups.

In the 1990s, a wave of Muslim refugees came to Sweden, mainly from Iraq, the Balkans, and from Somalia, and in first decade of the twenty-first century even more refugees from Afghanistan, Somalia and Iraq arrived. I observed during my research on Muslims in Sweden how many of the Bosnian refugees adapted easily to a typical Swedish religious trait of being religious privately; thus, few of the Bosnian women dressed in a headscarf in the public space, although they would attend the mosque regularly and pray and fast in their private domain. However, a few, particularly those who came to Sweden as small children and early adolescence, started to be more visibly religious than their parents by wearing the particular *hijab*-style covering in public. Many of these young women told how they were reproached by their mothers and older women who saw this visibility of religion as unnecessary. This is most probably due to their cultural background; in Bosnia under Tito there had been a distinct separation between religion and the state.⁵¹

Many Somali women have a special type of dress. Before the Civil War which started in 1991 in Somalia, women usually wore traditional dresses and light colourful scarves, often tied behind the neck.⁵² In the aftermath of the violent conflict, many Somali men went to Saudi Arabia on generous scholarships to attend religious schools and study Islamic legislation (*sharia*).⁵³ Some of them returned to Somalia, and the current Islamisation process in Somalia is a result of this. Some even went to western countries, becoming Islamic leaders for the Somali minority communities. Thus, the loose-fitting coats and big shawls in black, grey and brown, which many Somali women wear today in many parts of the world, is a result of the Somali Islamic leadership being influenced by the Saudi wahhabi and the more global salafi understanding of Islam. It is also symptomatic that many of those who wear the face-veil in Swedish society are Somali women,⁵⁴ due to many Somali leaders’ strict understanding of Islam.

In the 1980s’ *hijab*-style of covering, there was an implicit prohibition of make-up and of exposing the features of women’s bodies. It was prominent in the equality ideal that rich and

poor, ugly and beautiful should be regarded on a similar footing. Moreover, in the internal discourse of Islamic covering, a prominent idea was that a woman's beauty should be exposed only to her husband. Another important idea was that God values the beauty of the heart more than the beauty of the face. Some first-generation immigrant Muslim women living in the immigrant-dense suburbs, where many Muslims live, tend to wear the same loose-fitting garments and long scarves with no make-up in the twenty-first century as was common in the 1980s and 1990s. At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the headscarf style in Sweden has, however, to a great extent changed. This change is most visible in the new generation of descendants of immigrants; many young girls born and bred in Sweden have adapted a new style of Islamic covering; trousers and tops (often tight) with a headscarf pinned up with needles (not covering the bosom), and many would also use make-up. Moreover, the arguments for covering have changed from accentuating the beauty of the heart and seeing covering as a way to protect the family, and so on, to emphasising covering as part of a Muslim identity.⁵⁵

The spheres of Islamic legislation, theology, and political thought have traditionally been and still are today dominated by men. As men select and define what is 'Islamic' in time and space, those women who want to attend to the will of God would follow these definitions, believing them to be divine decrees rather than human beings' interpretations of divine sources. Another reason for women to wear headscarves, particularly in the generation of descendants of Muslim immigrants, might be to be able to move freely within the majority society, as parents often – in a stereotyping we-and-them fashion – regard the scarf to be a protection towards Swedish majority society's 'low sexual morals'. Regardless of why women choose to wear headscarves in various forms, it is interesting that women are the ones to accept standing out as different from the majority society. Most Muslim men, except for those within the extreme salafi trend, wear similar clothes to men in the Swedish majority society. In 1992, a female convert wrote an article in an Islamic journal in Sweden criticising Muslim men for wearing 'ordinary' clothes. Muslim men would answer her that 'is it not enough that we are black-skulls (*svartskallar*) – should we look like desert sheikhs too?'.⁵⁶ Her answer to this was that because she is a woman she is 'forced' to look different and she is 'forced' to be proud of her religion and her dress, whereas men have no such obligations.⁵⁶

The main question is whether the increased use of Islamic covering in Sweden at the collective level of Muslim communities is an expression of a stronger 'religious' presence in the public sphere or whether this phenomenon signifies a feeling of powerlessness within the minority group, where this obvious visibility of religion is merely an attempt to empower a stigmatised minority by making them more visible in the public sphere?

In Sweden, there has been and, to a certain extent, still is an understanding of the country as a multicultural society.⁵⁷ The strong emphasis on collective rights inherent in the ideal of multiculturalism has, however, been toned down, particularly in view of the attention lately on the powerlessness of minorities within minorities, i.e. women's and children's subdued situation within minority communities. Multicultural aspects within the society have therefore started to be expressed in terms of diversity in the labour market rather than in diversity of social structures within minority communities. But similar to the term integration, diversity is understood differently by minority community leaders and majority authorities.⁴⁵ In contrast to the authorities' emphasis on the labour

market, community leaders stress group rights.⁴⁵ I have argued elsewhere that multi-cultural politics with an emphasis on group rights tends to create ‘minority thinking’ with victimisation as the main ingredient.⁴⁵ In such a minority thinking there seems to be a need for stigmatised minorities to be visible in the public sphere. Garbi Schmidt discusses how the practice of Islam makes Muslims visible and thereby Muslim practices become a public affair.⁵⁸ But whereas Schmidt emphasises the individual aspect of visibility, it is important to point at how Islamic female covering, to a great extent, has an aspect of collective visibility, where women are the carrier of tradition.

Muslim minorities’ lack of social power in Sweden can even be illustrated by the mosque buildings. These buildings are more often than not placed at the outskirts of the urban sphere; in Malmoe, for instance, the main mosque is situated behind the main immigrant dense area and is built in the middle of a big empty space. In Uppsala, the mosque is also placed in a suburb to the city centre. In Stockholm, however, the mosque is closer to the city centre but the building does not attract immediate attention in the urban landscape, as many churches do. Moreover, the opposition from majority society to building minarets, which culminated in the prohibition in Switzerland in 2009, is interesting. The opposition to minarets seems to be stronger than the opposition to the building of mosques, and minarets might thus have become a symbol of power, a symbol the majority refutes for Muslim minorities. Even Muslims’ emphasis on building the minarets despite the fact that they cannot use them as a means for call for prayer, seems to indicate that the minarets have become a similar symbol of power or visibility for Muslim minorities.

Religion or secularisation?

The new presence of Muslim religiosity in Sweden has created a notion that religion has returned to Swedish society after years of intense secularisation. The few Muslims who came to Sweden before the 1960s tended to be absorbed into the majority society, whereas many immigrant and refugee Muslims coming from the 1970s onwards have tended increasingly to become part of Muslim communities, identifying themselves mainly with these communities instead of with majority society. This gazing inwards might be a result of the increase of Muslims, i.e. Muslims becoming a large minority in Swedish society, but it might just as well be a result of the growing stigmatisation of Muslims in western society, as well as the global political situation that creates a sense of hostility towards the west. As Muslims from various parts of the world, with various Islamic understandings and orientations meet, and as Muslims interact with majority society, the claim for one truth seems to be relativised. Similar to what happened in the Christian Swedish context when new religious movements made faith interchangeable, the variation of Muslim approaches to the Islamic texts relativises the ‘one truth’ claimed by Islamists and traditional Muslims.

The examples I have drawn attention to above, the development in mosque buildings, Muslim politicians, and the Islamic female covering, indicate that many immigrant Muslims tend to stick to certain cultural patterns from their homeland, as in the Afghan community, or within a certain discourse, as for instance in the Somali community. The minority situation with powerlessness seems to create a need for showing-off, i.e. to stress visible traits in the public space. The great emphasis put on the wearing of headscarves by Muslim community

leaders and many common Muslims in general indicates how the female Islamic headscarf is a suitable means of this demonstration of empowerment in public space. The visibility of Islam through headscarves and minarets and other outwardly religio-cultural practices creates a feeling of power in the general condition of powerlessness in a stigmatised minority.

Berger's view of a counter-secularisation trend might be true in the short term, but the general trend of secularisation of public space described by Casanova as 'differentiation of the secular spheres from religious institutions and norms', and 'marginalisation of religion to a privatised sphere', might also apply to Muslims living in a western secularised society. Whether these secularisation trends also bring with them a 'decline of religious belief and practices' among Muslims in general remains to be seen, but with the descendants of the Muslim immigrants interacting with majority society on all levels; education, labour market, political activities, etc, there is an anticipation that this group might walk a similar road to majority society towards less religious practice. However, as Sigurdson has noted, religion has not disappeared in the post-secular society, rather the relation between religion and society has only changed its form.¹⁷ It might therefore be pertinent to discuss Muslim religiosity in the future in similar terms to that of Swedish society in general; Muslims' religiosity might get a new form in the new generations Swedish Muslims that is different from their parents' and grandparents' adherence to the traditional Islamic system. The collectivistic aspects of the traditional Islamic message might disappear, whereas individualistic understandings of Islam, with an emphasis on Human Rights, might become the new prevailing understanding of Islam, an understanding that has already started to manifest itself in Muslim communities in western countries.

Associated Images

Figure 1. The Grand Mosque, Xia'an, was built in 742 and is the oldest mosque in China. Picture available at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/bjvs/373885583/>

Figure 2. The founder of the Umayyad emirate in Cordoba, Abdur Rahman I, started to build this mosque (Mezquita) in Cordoba in 786. In the 13th century, the mosque was turned into a Christian place of worship. It is commonly known as the 'Mezquita-Cathedral'. Picture available at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/72213316@N00/3318182418/>

Figure 3. The Sultan Ahmad Mosque in Istanbul is commonly known as the Blue Mosque. Picture available at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/urban-icon/2432202842/>

Figure 4. Central Mosque London was established in 1977 after having been planned for nearly half a century. It contains a shop, a café and hosts social gatherings as well as art exhibitions. Picture available at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/mister-e/3799506730/sizes/l/in/photostream/>

Figure 5. Stockholm mosque. The mosque hosts various activities including education for children, social events, and a guide service for non-Muslims who want to visit the mosque. Picture available at [http://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fil:Stockholms_mosk%C3%A9_gabbe\).jpg](http://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fil:Stockholms_mosk%C3%A9_gabbe).jpg)

Figure 6. The Malmö mosque was opened in 1984 and was thus the first purpose-built mosque in Scandinavia. It has been attacked many times. Picture available at http://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fil:Mosque_Malm%C3%B6.jpg

Figure 7. Swedish stuga, Godegårds bruk. A ‘typical’ Swedish farm-house or cottage. Picture available at http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Godeg%C3%A5rds_bruk_stuga_vid_landsv%C3%A4gen_2005-07-08.jpg

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