

Simon Sorgenfrei

Temasektion

“Perhaps we see it in negative terms, but, ultimately, it is positive”

The responses of Swedish Salafis to COVID-19

Keywords

Salafism, Covid-19, Islam in Sweden, Islam and social media, Salafism and state relations, Islam and medicine

Abstract This article investigates how prominent preachers within Sweden’s most active puritan Salafi group, Islam.nu, relate to COVID-19. The article analyzes material published online between March 1, 2020, and July 31, 2020, which is herein divided into three categories: rhetorical responses, social responses, and theological responses. Salafism is often presented in academic literature and by the media as a current that is at odds with the majority society. The material analyzed shows that the Salafi group upon which this article focuses can rhetorically criticize certain expressions in the majority culture while simultaneously emphasizing the importance of heeding the recommendations of the Swedish authorities. Islam is presented both as an alternative and as a complement. The material also shows how the strong emphasis on proselytizing that is typical for Islam.nu is also apparent in relation to COVID-19.

The first case of COVID-19 in Sweden was confirmed at the end of January 2020, but it would take until the second week of March before a case of domestic transmission was confirmed (FHS 2020; Blohm & Heyman 2020). The first death occurred on the 11th of March in Stockholm, the same day that the WHO declared the outbreak a pandemic (Pirttisalo Sallinen & Thörnwall 2020). During the month of March, the Swedish government, advised by the Public Health Agency of Sweden (FOHM), introduced a number of restrictions and directives not least concerning social interactions. Gatherings of more than 500 people were forbidden (Pirttisalo Sallinen & Svensson 2020), a lim-

Simon Sorgenfrei is director of the Institute for Studies of Multireligiosity and Secularity (IMS) and associate professor in the study of religions at Södertörn University, Sweden.

it that was then reduced to 50 people on the 20th of March (Krisinformation 2020). These restrictions influenced a number of societal actors, and, amongst others, various congregations, churches, and mosques announced that they would stop holding larger services until further notice (Aftonbladet 2020). Via the Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities (SST), Jewish, Christian, and Muslim congregational leaders sent out general information as well as information about sermons and other gatherings that would not take place.¹ The Muslim national organizations also sent out recommendations and rules of conduct to their member congregations. For instance, Förenade Islamiska Församlingar i Sverige (the Union of Islamic Associations in Sweden), the oldest Muslim organization in the country, posted the following list on its website:

We would like to encourage our member organizations to observe the following:

1. Follow the decisions and recommendations of the government and other public authorities, and stay up-to-date regarding the latest information.
2. Cancel all activities that require physical contact and that fall within the scope of the decisions made by the government, and keep mosques closed until further notice.
3. Continue religious activity in the form of lectures, reminders, and courses via digital platforms instead.
4. Inform members and followers regularly about the recommendations regarding hygiene, travel, and risk groups.
5. Contact your home municipality to find out how you can contribute to the organized emergency preparedness work being carried out in the local community, for instance by helping risk groups with errands.
6. Do a thorough cleaning / disinfection of the mosque, and clean the premises carefully when closed.

We would also like to send advice, recommendations, and appeals to all our members, followers, and visitors:

1. Keep up-to-date and follow the recommendations of the government and the public authorities regarding personal hygiene and measures aiming to limit the

¹ <https://www.myndighetsst.se/om-oss/nyheter/nyhetsarkiv-aktuellt/2020-04-16-trossamfundeni-coronakrisen.html>, accessed August 20, 2020.

spread of the contagion.

2. If you have symptoms such as coughing and sneezing or if you have a fever, stay at home until you are well again.

3. If you are over the age of 60 and/or have a chronic illness such as a disease of the heart or lungs or diabetes, you should stay at home and limit your contact with other people.

4. Donate to your local mosque! Like other institutions in society, mosques will also be impacted by the effects of the coronavirus since a large part of their revenue comes from Friday collections.

5. Support your local mosque in the decisions they make.

6. Return to God in repentance, perform extra prayers, and fast to beseech God to remove this trial and to protect us, our mosques, and our society.

7. Restrict the breaking of your fast *iftar* and *tarawih*-prayer (the extra prayer that is prayed communally at night during Ramadan) to members of your own household. (FIFS)

Although there was widespread national support regarding following the recommendations of the health agency – a consensus not only amongst religious organizations but also one that united the government and the opposition parties – it soon became clear that the outbreak was not evenly distributed throughout the population.

During the spring, suspicions grew that the contagion had been brought to Sweden by returning skiers who themselves had been infected at ski resorts in Austria and Italy (Salzinger 2020). It was later found out that this was only one of several causes for the spreading of the contagion in Sweden and that the virus also spread amongst tourists visiting Swedish ski resorts (Eriksson & Julin 2020). At the same time, it was clear that certain ethnic minorities were overrepresented amongst those who had fallen ill. The Järva area in the northwestern part of Stockholm, and especially suburbs such as Rinkeby and Tensta where many immigrant live, had been particularly hard hit (Gustafsson & Tottmar 2020; Mitti 2020). On the 24th of March, the Swedish Somali medical doctors' association announced that Swedish Somalis were overrepresented in the statistics regarding those who had fallen ill and those who had died (Randhawa 2020). Several individuals who had participated in media debates stated that

those who had been hit the hardest were socioeconomically marginalized groups for whom it would have been impossible to visit a ski resort (or work from home). Instead, they worked within the service sector and were employed as, for instance, cleaners or taxi drivers and were therefore amongst the first to come into contact with the tourists who arrived at Stockholm Arlanda Airport or Stockholm Central Station upon returning from their ski trips (Olsson & Pirttisalo Sallinen 2020). This is an issue to which we shall return below.

Salafism in Sweden and Islam.nu

Salafism is an umbrella term for fundamentalist currents within Sunni Islam, and it has become common among researchers to differentiate between puritan, political, and jihadi (or militant) Salafism. What these currents have in common is that they strive to model both private life and the organization of society after what they believe to be the example of Muhammad and the first three generations of Muslims. Their ideas about just how such a society should be realized, on the other hand, differ. The largest group, puritan Salafis, generally distance themselves both from political work and from violent methods and instead want to make society Islamic by reinforcing their own piety and by missionizing in order to win more people over to their own interpretation of Islam (Wiktorowicz 2006; Olsson 2020).

One of the most active Muslim actors in the Järva area is Islam.nu, which is also one of the most visible puritan Salafi groups in Sweden.² Islam.nu is the name of the group's social media platforms but is also used as a branding name that can be found on the products and services that they offer, such as courses, books, software applications, etc. (Sorgenfrei, forthcoming). They previously ran an organization called the Ibn Abbas Center (Ibn Abbas-centret) in the Rinkeby area of Stockholm and have for some time operated the Andalus Knowledge Center (Andalus Kunskapscenter) in the Kista area where they also offer their services and products such as courses, lectures and print media. The fact that this area is home base for the group has led to them sometimes being referred to in the media and academic literature as the Järva Salafis (Ismail 2017; Ranstorp et al. 2018: 137–139. For a more critical view of this group, see Järlerup 2018 and Orrenius 2017). The preachers responsible for

² Preliminary result from an ongoing study by Jonas Svensson

the activities of Islam.nu were educated at the Islamic University of Madinah (IUM) in Saudi Arabia, a country to which they maintain ties in several ways, for instance through continuing their studies there and by organizing group tours in connection with pilgrimage trips. It is upon this group that the present article will focus, and the primary material consists of Instagram posts about COVID-19 published on a joint account and on individual accounts.

Interest in Salafism has increased in Sweden as in the rest of Europe, and the past decade has witnessed the appearance of a number of academic studies and journalistic works that shed light on this topic. This is happening in parallel with signals that Salafism is becoming an increasingly popular expression of Islam, not least amongst young people with a Muslim family background and amongst converts (Sorgenfrei 2018: 172; SVT 2018).

A detailed study of Salafi groups in Sweden has been carried out by Susanne Olsson, who has published the monograph *Contemporary Puritan Salafism: A Swedish Case Study* as well as a number of articles (some of which can be found in the reference list at the end of this article). The Swedish Defence University has, under the direction of Magnus Ranstorp, compiled the report *Mellan salafism och salafistisk jihadism. Påverkan mot och utmaningar för det svenska samhället* (2018), which is based upon previous research, media materials, and interviews with social workers, police, and other societal actors. Journalist Magnus Sandelin has written about Swedish jihadi Salafis in the book *Svenska IS-krigare: från Al-Qaida till Jihadi cool* (2016) and in the report *Vad vet vi om islamistiska terrornätverk i Sverige?* (2018). He is also connected to the organization Doku, an association primarily made of journalists who investigate jihadism and militant Islam.³ The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) finances the project *Wahhabism i Sverige – nätverk, praktiker och mission*, which focuses upon individuals and groups connected to Saudi Arabia and to the Islamic University of Madinah (IUM). This article was written within the framework of that project.

Behind Islam.nu and the Andalus Knowledge Center, we find primarily three individuals – Abdulwadod Frank (b. 1974), Moosa Assal (b. 1984), and Abdullah as-Sueidi (b. 1985) – all of whom grew up in Sweden and all of whom have converted to Islam (Assal 2020; Karlsson & Johansson 2012; Shavit 2019: 353–355; ÖKV Play 2015). All three have degrees from or are current-

3 See <https://doku.nu>.

ly studying at the Islamic University of Madinah. At the center in Kista as well as on their website and via other platforms, they offer one-off lectures, longer courses, and other products that one can partake of online or in real life, such as books and software applications for tablets and cell phones. These products seem often to be financed by crowdfunding, i.e., donations from followers, to enable distribution free of cost to Muslims and Islamic congregations throughout the country. They also organize trips to Saudi Arabia, for instance in connection with pilgrimage trips (Sorgenfrei 2021). The individuals responsible for Islam.nu also hold lectures and sermons in other places in Sweden, and, taken together, these activities can be seen as the expression of extensive mission activity (Ranstorp et al. 2018: 139–141).

Source materials

The three preachers who are responsible for Islam.nu thus publish materials on a range of platforms both under the name Islam.nu and via their individual accounts. For the purposes of this article, I have chosen to analyze material that they have shared on the Islam.nu account and on their individual Instagram accounts. These accounts are individual rather than personal in the sense that they are used in order to share material that is usually related to their shared activities and they appear as representatives for Islam.nu and as Muslim role models and preachers. The accounts are open in the sense that one does not have to “follow” them in order to read what is published on them. In addition to these materials, this article also analyzes a lecture about COVID-19 that was announced on Instagram and that has since then been published on the website Islam.nu. I have collected and analyzed sources published between March 1, 2020, when information about COVID-19 was on the rise in Sweden and started to appear on these accounts, and July 31, 2020.

During the period in question, 100 posts were published via the Islam.nu Instagram account, but not a single one concerned the pandemic. Instead, the posts published informed readers of their activities and the products they provide, offered daily advice during the fasting month of Ramadan, which in 2020 started on the 23rd of April, or were comprised of some other sort of theological content.

During the same period, 83 posts were published on Abdulwadod Frank's account (abdulwadodfrank), and of these only 1 had to do with COVID-19. This was a post made to inform readers about the above-mentioned lecture, which was published on the website Islam.nu on March 23, 2020. The other posts that appeared on Abdulwadod Frank's account during the period in question consist of short films in which he answers questions about the fast during Ramadan and a series of interpretations of *Arāf*, the seventh surah of the Qur'an.

On the Instagram account of Moosa Assal (medinastudenten), 65 posts were published during the relevant period, 6 of which concerned COVID-19. Assal's account contains several different categories of posts but the majority consists of posts belonging to a series with the hashtag #dagensråd ("advice of the day") and other similar encouragements or words of wisdom from the Qur'an and hadith or of a more general religious character.

The largest number of posts that concern COVID-19 were made by Abdullah as-Sueidi. During the period in question, he published a total of 101 posts on his Instagram account (abdullah_sueidi), 28 of which concerned the pandemic. One can note that 26 of these, i.e., 93%, were published between the 2nd of March and the 20th of April. After that, the majority of posts published concern Ramadan. The final two posts that concern COVID-19 on the account were made in July when it became clear that Saudi Arabia would not allow pilgrims to visit during the pilgrimage month due to the ongoing pandemic.

It is these posts published on the accounts of Abdullah as-Sueidi and Moosa Assal and the lecture by Abdulwadod Frank that comprise the primary source materials analyzed in this article.

The main themes

After coding the material, it was divided into three distinct although sometimes overlapping categories: 1) *rhetorical responses*, which, using stylistic markers such as irony, comment upon news about COVID-19 in order to, for instance, criticize what the authors perceive as being the prevailing political order or to focus on the superiority of their own position; 2) *social responses* in which their own social responsibility and that of their fol-

lowers in relation to the challenges posed to society by the pandemic is emphasized; and 3) *theological responses*, which often utilize various didactic elements primarily taken from the Qur'an and the hadiths, that offer an explanatory framework and a program of action in regard to the current situation. This way of categorizing the source materials will also inform the structure of the article.

Rhetorical responses

A rhetorical question is a frequently employed rhetorical device that is characterized by the fact that the answer to it is implied and obvious. It can be used to emphasize a message in order to engage one's audience or to undermine the arguments of one's opponents (Hägg 1998: 116). In the Instagram posts analyzed for the purposes of this article, irony was sometimes used when commenting upon reports about COVID-19. Rhetorically, ironic statements seek to show that something is not as it should be by emphasizing the opposite of the current situation (Encyclopædia Britannica 2019).

One example of such a rhetorical post employing irony can be found in the very first post made that concerns the virus. It was published on Abdullah as-Sueidi's account on March 2, 2020. It consists of a screenshot of the tabloid *Aftonbladet's* website and the following comment:

"Stop shaking hands". That's what the hashtag that is going viral on social media says. An air hand-shake is the new thing – shake without touching.

As-Sueidi's comment posted in connection with his sharing of the image reads as follows: "To all the brothers and sisters who can't get a job because they refuse to shake hands with the opposite sex: now's your chance :)". This post can be read as an ironic comment on the so-called handshake cases that received media attention in Sweden, one example being the case of a female Muslim substitute teacher who was dismissed from her job because she did not want to shake hands with male colleagues but instead chose to greet them by putting her hand over her heart (Sydsvenskan 2018). In connection with a 2016 debate about shaking hands, Swedish prime minister Stefan Löfvén said: "In Sweden we greet each other. We shake hands with both

women and men" (SVD 2016). As-Sueidi's post is directed towards these events and such statements as the one quoted above. Through an ironic twist of fate, the government and the public authorities are now forced to encourage citizens to abstain from shaking hands.

As-Sueidi offered a similar formulation two weeks later, on the 16th of April. Under a screenshot of the daily newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet's* report about Denmark temporarily abolishing a requirement introduced in 2019 that forced those wishing to become Danish citizens to go through a handshaking ceremony, as-Sueidi wrote "Ouch! Denmark, this has got to hurt. Some Islamophobe is going to come along soon and blame Islamists for having invented the coronavirus in order to Islami-cize the Western world". Further rhetorical phrasings of this kind directed against Islamophobia were also published during the month of March:

COVID-19 has actually brought some good things with it. Islamophobes and racists have been kept busy by writing about the pandemic instead of by attacking us Muslims and immigrants while ISIS is encouraging its supporters not to go to countries where the illness is spreading. Look on the bright side. :) (March 18)

COVID-19 has led to pubs closing, faces being covered, and handshakes stopping. Despite all of this, I have not heard of any Islamophobe blaming the virus on Muslims. Earth-shattering. (March 21)

These instances of irony are of course directed towards the Danish handshaking ceremonies – which are perceived as being Islamophobic – but also towards social commentators and others who see public expressions of Islam as a sign of an Islamization of society and who thereby are opposed to the mission activity that is characteristic of the group behind Islam.nu.

As we can see in the post from the 18th of March, irony is not only directed towards Islamophobia but also towards the terrorist group the Islamic State. It refers to news reports that stated that the Islamic State told its members to abstain from traveling to Europe (Larsson 2020) and thus is an example of the divide that one can find between militant (jihadism, takfirism) and non-violent (puritan) Salafism (Wiktorovich 2006). Islam.nu and the individuals responsible for its activities have

for the past several years explicitly distanced themselves from jihadism and are eager to highlight their work against radicalization and violence, which has also been observed in earlier studies (Ranstorp et al. 2018: 137-139; Olsson 2020).

During the same period, as-Sueidi also shared several posts in which he emphasizes that Muslims had set a good example during the pandemic in contrast to the "ski tourists" (who here should probably be seen as representatives of the majority society, i.e., the ethnically Swedish middle- and upper classes) suspected of being the cause of the spreading of the infection. For instance, on the 20th of March, he shared a screenshot of a report from the tabloid *Expressen* that stated that roughly 25,000 Swedes had been on skiing trips in the Swedish mountains and that 499 people had been allowed to take part at one time in related parties at hotels and restaurants. (The Public Health Agency of Sweden still had a limit of 500 people set for social gatherings at that time.)

As stated above, it was long believed that the virus had principally come to Sweden via tourists returning from skiing trips who themselves had been infected in the Austrian Alps. In a comment accompanying the image, as-Sueidi asks rhetorically: "How have Muslims and skiers, respectively, protected themselves from COVID-19?" He continues, writing that "practically all" mosques had been closed for Friday prayers while skiers attended events where one typically "drinks alcohol, dances, and parties". This difference between "skiers and Muslims", he suggests, shows that "Muslims, in this case, really care about their fellow human beings [...] They showed that Islam really is a religion of mercy that Muslims strive to implement". The skiers, it is implied, are egoistical and act irresponsibly regarding others in a way that goes against what as-Sueidi sees as being Muslim values. (The fact that there might be skiers who also happen to be Muslims seems to be inconceivable in this context.)

These posts make use of various rhetorical strategies in order to demonstrate what is perceived as being hypocritical in Swedish (and Danish) majority society and in order to show the superiority of Islam and the righteousness of Muslims.

As-Sueidi uses irony and other rhetorical devices in these posts in order to show what he sees as being the defects in or potential hypocrisy of the majority culture while simultaneously presenting Islam as an alternative or a complement. They can be understood as a counter-discourse in the sense that they seek

to identify and question elements in majority discourse without necessarily distancing themselves entirely from, e.g., the recommendations made by the public authorities (Terdiman 1985: 149; Abu Lughod 1990; Faxneld 2015). The form of Islam that as-Sueidi represents is emphasized as a counter-cultural resource, a subversive complement characterized by mercy, compassion, and social responsibility.

Studies of irony have shown how it can simultaneously strengthen ties to an audience that shares one's opinions while creating or maintaining distance from an audience that does not (Kaufer 1977). Insisting upon the superiority of one's own group over an opposing group in this way can also be regarded as a means of tightening the bonds that link a group of followers to bring them closer together. It is a rhetorical device that is used regularly in posts published on the accounts analyzed in this article (Sorgenfrei, forthcoming; see also Graham 2016; Coser 1956), and Susanne Olsson has also noted similar othering strategies in her study of puritan Salafists in Sweden (Olsson 2019). However, in the Muslim ideal that is emphasized in these posts we also find an encouragement to work in a responsible way that overlaps with the next category.

Social responses

As we have seen, "Muslims" were presented as an ideal in contrast with "ski tourists" in the Instagram post discussed above, and what is emphasized in particular about their activity is precisely that they had behaved in a socially responsible way. To do so as a Muslim is also a prominent theme found in several other posts as well as the lecture by Abdulwadod Frank that will be analyzed below. On the 11th of March, for instance, Abdullah as-Sueidi offered two pieces of advice related to the spread of the COVID-19 virus in a post that can also serve as an example of how the analytical categories used in this article often overlap. He writes:

- 1) Follow all the regulations and recommendations given by the authorities and by medical doctors in order to avoid being infected or infecting others.
- 2) Attach your heart to Allah. Don't be afraid. Stay calm. Only a very few people have been infected. The number

of those who get infected and then die from it is extremely low, especially amongst the younger generations. And, in the end, the worst thing that can happen is that one dies, and then we return to our Creator. So why should we be afraid?

Here, what have in this article been classified as social and theological posts respectively are placed side-by-side. This is of course not unusual in the history of religions. We find an example in the Lutheran motto *Ora et labora*, "pray and work" and another in the Qur'an where the exhortation to pray is often juxtaposed with the expectation to give alms (see, for instance, surah 2, verse 3).

We can also note how as-Sueidi encourages his followers to obey the recommendations given by the public authorities. Doing so is presented as being religiously sanctioned in a post containing several further recommendations that was published on the 12th of March. These are said to be based upon what "several fatwa councils in a number of Muslim countries" have said about the matter. Here it is stated that: 1) one is not allowed to pray in a congregation if one is sick; 2) one should follow the advice of the authorities and their decisions regarding quarantining and the like; 3) if one is afraid of being infected or of infecting others, one does not have to attend the Friday prayer, which in that case must be compensated for by praying the *dhūhr* prayer (the noon prayer), four rakat (prostrations). These should, one must assume, be done at home.

In media reporting in particular, Salafism is often presented as a current that distances itself from the majority society and its institutions and that is driven by an ambition to create parallel societies informed by other values and norms systems than those prevalent in society at large (Abramovicz 2018. In some respects, this article can be regarded as a somewhat superficial reading of Ranstorp et al. 2018) The material analyzed here, however, implies that, at least in relation to the group and material discussed in the present article, such a distancing from Swedish authorities is not seen in this case even though criticism is directed towards certain tendencies in the majority culture and the majority politics (as seen in the examples above). By referring to fatwas, they are rather making it religiously sanctioned to follow the recommendations of the Swedish authorities regarding COVID-19.

During the period in question, Abdullah as-Sueidi also

made several posts informing readers about Muslims he saw as having made important contributions to society and encouraging more people to get involved and help others during the pandemic. On the 22nd of March, he published a post about something referred to as "COVID-19 Aid". "Some [Muslim] brothers in Stockholm have started a service where they help people who are isolated at home and need help to go shopping and similar things", he wrote, emphasizing that it is "a very nice initiative based upon compassion", something he would like to see more of. On the 27th of March, he posted a screenshot of an article about a Muslim couple in the city of Strängnäs who had in a similar way helped people affected by the pandemic. He added the comment that he "hoped more Muslims would get involved in similar things". Moosa Assal also highlighted the importance of taking social responsibility, e.g., in a post published on the 16th of March in which he praised healthcare workers.

In these posts, they do not explicitly write that other Muslims should be the recipients of assistance but instead emphasize that willingness to help others is a Muslim ideal. There are, however, other posts that do emphasize that one should specifically help other Muslims. For example, in a post published on the 21st of March Moosa Assal remarks that many business owners had lost money during the pandemic and he added a comment in which he asks his followers to give the names of "the halal companies that you know of owned by our brothers and sisters". One can understand this as a way of supporting the entrepreneurship of Muslims rather than that of business owners in general and thereby simultaneously reinforcing a Muslim group identity and helping the local Muslim communities where their followers live and work.

These ambitions were however jeopardized by a post published on the 23rd of March, which noted that Swedish Somalis were overrepresented in the statistics regarding infections. Abdullah as-Sueidi wrote:

More than half of those who have died from the coronavirus in the Stockholm area are Swedish Somalis. Many of our older uncles and aunts don't understand Swedish and can't keep up with the safety precautions one ought to take in connection with this virus. I know that you who follow [my posts] know many different languages. Lend a hand by spreading information so that it reaches

as many people as possible and in particular those who don't understand Swedish. May Allah show mercy to those who have died.

That Swedish Somalis were overrepresented was, as we have seen, also taken up in the Swedish media, and several possible reasons for this were suggested, e.g., what are often crowded living conditions, living in tightly knit communities where there is much intergenerational socializing, and elderly Somalis not understanding enough Swedish to enable them to comprehend and follow the recommendations given by the public authorities (Krepner 2020; Randhawa 2020).

The reasons given for the overrepresentation of Swedish Somalis, in particular the notion that they could not understand information about COVID-19, were met with criticism (Frömark & Rajs 2020. Osman 2020). For instance, social commentator and former chairperson of the Association of Young Swedish Muslims (SUM) Rashid Musa said: "speculations about the ability of the victims to read and write as a cause for their deaths are not only shocking but also serve to place the blame on the victims and their families. These statements only reinforce the colonial notion of Swedish Somalis being illiterate and uneducated" (Musa 2020).

A post made by Abdullah as-Sueidi seems to have received similar criticism. In a new Instagram post published both in Swedish and Somali on the 25th of March in which a previous post was quoted, he apologized for the way in which the latter had been formulated. Under an image of a heart-shaped Somali flag, he wrote that "Somali brothers and sisters have felt offended by this since it can lead to increased racism against Somalis because people might believe that they are ignorant about the illness that is spreading or that they don't follow the hygiene recommendations given due to the virus". He emphasized that this does not only apply to Somalis and that it is "very important that we help each other spread information about COVID-19 to as many people as possible".

In the posts that have been discussed in this section, we have thus been able to see how Abdullah as-Sueidi asked his followers to be attentive to the recommendations made by the Swedish authorities and that he encouraged his followers to act in a responsible and compassionate way. Several of these posts highlight an ideal without specifying who the recipients of the suggested activities should be while others are more specific and

encourage those who read them to help other Muslims and what are referred to as "halal businesses". Taken together, these posts can be regarded as aiming to remind readers of, and strengthening, their Muslim group identity and the local Muslim community without necessarily being in opposition to the majority society. Islam is also in this case presented not as a competitor to the Swedish authorities and national initiatives but rather as a complement to them.

Theological responses

As we have seen, both Abdullah as-Sueidi and Moosa Assal use theological arguments in posts that have herein been assigned to the category of social responses. There are no clear boundaries separating these categories, and the need to take social responsibility is in particular presented as a religious virtue. However, during the period in question posts were also published that emphasized religion as a comforting resource. We find an example in a post made by Abdullah as-Sueidi on the 20th of April in which he encourages "those who feel fearful and anxious about being alone during the COVID-19 pandemic" to reflect upon a verse from the Qur'an: "Fear not – God is with us" (9:40).

The most obvious example of how one theologically can and should respond to COVID-19 from the perspective that is represented by Islam.nu is found in the lecture by Abdulwadod Frank that was published on March 21, 2020, as a sound file on the website Islam.nu (Frank 2020). It is just over 52 minutes in length and is loosely structured around 10 points that can be summarized as follows:

- 1) COVID-19 should be understood as a reminder of the weakness of humanity and of the fact that health is one of the most beautiful gifts that humanity has received from Allah. Abdulwadod Frank cites here a statement attributed to the early theologian and jurist al-Shafi'i (767–820): "Health is a crown that the *healthy* wear on their heads, but only the sick can see it."
- 2) Everything that happens has a divine cause and a purpose. It is predestined, and there is wisdom behind

all of Allah's decisions. "Perhaps we see it in negative terms, but, ultimately, it is positive". Muslims must therefore strengthen their faith and their confidence in Allah wishing them well and in there being divine wisdom behind everything that happens.

3) COVID-19 can therefore be seen as a trial and as an opportunity to deepen one's relationship to Allah and to Islam.

4) Abdulwadod Frank also emphasizes that Islam teaches that illness can afflict people as a punishment from Allah. "This is a wakeup call ... Allah is not pleased with humankind... It's time to make *tawbah*. To turn to Allah and to repent of one's sins".

5) Through repentance and confidence in God (*tawbah* and *tawakkul*), one can return to Allah, but that does not mean that one does not at the same time have to do everything one can in order to prevent becoming infected or infecting others. If one nevertheless becomes sick, it is fate.

6) Frank emphasizes the importance of getting one's information from the right sources and of not listening to or spreading the conjectures and conspiracy theories that abound on social media.

7) There is both worldly medicine and religious medicine and they complement each other. Regarding worldly medicine, he encourages his listeners to follow the advice of "the Public Health Agency, medical doctors, and researchers". He exemplifies this by showing that they, just like Muhammad, recommend imposing a quarantine when an epidemic emerges by quoting a hadith: "If you hear of an outbreak of plague in a land, do not enter it; but if the plague breaks out in a place while you are in it, do not leave that place." (Bukhari n.d., 71: 624).

8) He also emphasizes the importance of not shaking hands, of covering one's mouth when sneezing, of washing and disinfecting one's hands, and of doing what one can to strengthen one's own immune system by exercising and maintaining a healthy diet. He points out that Muhammad has also recommended honey, black cumin – the remedy for all afflictions except death – and *Zamzam* water (water from a well in Mecca) for their medicinal properties.

9) He touches upon the topic of medicine and advises

everyone to read a book about “prophetic medicine”, *Tibb al-Nabawī*, by Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (1292–1350), but he also emphasizes that Islam does not prohibit the use of conventional medicine, (“Allah has not sent down an illness without also sending down a medicine”), but the medicine must be permissible within the framework of Islam. For instance, if somebody were to say that smoking a joint or drinking a shot of tequila helps against COVID-19, one must not partake of them. He also emphasizes that the Qur’an and the hadith contain advice about performing *du‘ā’* and *dhikr* (forms of prayer), asking Allah to make one well again. Therefore, he concludes, it is not medicine nor is it one’s immune system that restores one’s health; it is Allah who does it.

10) Finally, Abdulwadod Frank refers to a hadith that stresses the importance of doing good, being helpful and spreading happiness, and performing *du‘ā’* and *dhikr*, which is presented as the best way to banish evil and receive protection.

To begin with, we can note that Abdulwadod Frank, in a way that is typical for the Salafī current within which he positions himself, derives his statements and recommendations from the Qur’an, hadith, and early jurists and uses theological terminology in Arabic, all of which anchors what he says in the first epoch of Islam which is normative within Salafī discourse. According to the lecture by Abdulwadod Frank, one should as a Muslim understand the global pandemic as part of Allah’s plan, and within this insight lies both consolation and instruction. Allah’s actions are good even if their goodness cannot always be perceived by human rationality. COVID-19 thus offers an opportunity to practice and deepen one’s faith in God and one’s prayers because, according to this perspective, just as Allah created the pandemic, it is only Allah who can liberate humankind from it.

Frank is, however, not advocating fatalistic passivity: faith in God should be complemented by action and taking social responsibility. Like as-Sueidi and Assal, he insists that Islam does not contradict what he calls “conventional medicine”. They should be understood as complementing each other.

One hadith can be said to summarize the position Frank preaches (even if he himself does not explicitly refer to it). In this narrative, a man asks Muhammad if he should tether his

camel and trust Allah or if he should let his camel walk around freely and trust Allah. Muhammad is then said to have answered: tether your camel and rely upon Allah (Tirmidhi n.d., Vol. 4, Book 11, Hadith 2517). In other words, one should first do what lies within one's own command to prevent the camel from escaping – in the present situation, getting infected or infecting others – but, at the end of the day, one must be aware that everything ultimately lies in the hands of Allah.

However, Abdulwadod Frank also emphasizes the importance of becoming a better person. Here, COVID-19 is presented as a sign that Allah is displeased with humanity and that He demands more repentance and a greater reliance upon Him. The only real cure is to turn to Allah and Islam. Hence the message of the lecture can simultaneously activate feelings of guilt and feelings of comfort. This, too, is common in the history of religions: religion can supply rituals and messages that provide consolation in difficult situations but also narratives that cast blame on those who are afflicted (Larsson 2018). At the same time that religion can be a resource for reducing anxiety, religious narratives can also increase anxiety in connection with diseases and great personal trials (O'Brien et al. 2019). In the lecture by Abdulwadod, these narratives go together, since COVID-19 is presented as being a trial from Allah while Allah at the same time is also the only one who can protect or cure those who fall ill. Prayer, repentance, and moral betterment become the answers to all the challenges that COVID-19 poses to the believer, and the group behind Islam.nu is presented as having the religious education that is needed to guide those who are worried on the straight path.

Conclusions

As I have shown, three different but overlapping categories of responses to COVID-19 can be found in the source materials that have been collected and analyzed for the purposes of this article. I have named these categories *rhetorical*, *social*, and *theological* responses. Under the first heading, we saw how various rhetorical devices are used in order to criticize what are seen as being Islamophobic tendencies in society and to simultaneously reinforce a sense of a shared Muslim group identity. This can be seen in relation to earlier studies of puritan Salafis in Swe-

den, which have shown that they strive towards achieving at least a partial separation from the majority society which they consider to be un-Islamic and immoral (Olsson 2019; Dogan 2012). In the source materials analyzed here, however, we could not detect any unambiguous distancing from the majority society. Instead, a counter-discourse was activated that presented Islam as a complement to the recommendations presented by the public authorities.

In posts that could primarily be classified as belonging to the second category, the importance of taking social responsibility in order to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic for society was emphasized. The material analyzed here shows that the three preachers upon which this article focuses encouraged their followers to heed the advice and recommendations outlined by the Swedish authorities and the Swedish government. This, however, does not mean that they by definition think that Muslims should submit to the directives given by Swedish politicians and authorities. We found examples of this in the posts that discussed the custom of shaking hands and in the lecture by Abdulwadod Frank where he emphasizes that medicine violating the principles of Islam is not permitted. One can also see in connection with this category how the sources present Islam as an alternative and complement to the majority culture rather than as being in conflict with it. We also saw in a number of Abdullah as-Sueidi's och Moosa Assal's posts an emphasis on strengthening the local Muslim community.

Lastly, in the third category, we could see how Abdulwadod Frank connected social responsibility to an ideal of piety. COVID-19 was explained as being a punishment or as a challenge given by Allah that simultaneously offered the opportunity to strengthen one's individual Muslim piety by intensifying one's prayers and one's trust in God and by acting in a morally responsible way in society. Abdulwadod Frank and the others behind Islam.nu thus at least indirectly present themselves as religious authorities who can guide their followers through the challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis.

The source material is interesting not least because it shows how representatives of a current that is often seen as being separatist in relation to the majority society can – at least in regard to some matters – represent an ideology and a praxis that advocate following the advice and recommendations given by the Swedish authorities. Islam is presented here not in contrast to

the majority society but rather as a complement to it. The recommendations and theological interpretations that appear in the source materials analyzed here do not differ to any great extent from those presented by Förenade Islamiska Församlingar i Sverige (the Union of Islamic Associations in Sweden) as quoted in the beginning of this article, or from the as undertaken in relation to the ongoing pandemic by, e.g., the Church of Sweden (Svenska kyrkan 2020), which provided similar theological answers in response to the challenges posed by COVID-19 (Molén 2020).

Like other puritan Salafi groups, Islam.nu is focused on mission, and this article has shown that such missionizing ambitions are an important element in all three categories. Their responses to the challenges that COVID-19 poses for society in general and their followers specifically are formulated in a way that aims to strengthen individual Muslim piety, a Muslim group identity, and the local Muslim community while bolstering their own authority as religious experts.

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