

Douglas Mattsson

## “Meet the Doctor” – Interview with Gustav Larsson

Congratulations, Gustav Larsson, on successfully defending your dissertation, “Positioned orthodoxies: Muslim diversity in contemporary Sweden” (2024) and on completing your doctorate in the field of Religious Studies.

***Can you tell us a bit more about yourself? Who are you – both as a person and a researcher?***

My research interests are quite broad, but I prefer to focus on that which is empirical, sensed, and “real”. Thus, while I see the obvious value of philosophical and theoretical elaboration, I have much more patience for practical investigations that yield tangible results. I guess this sums up many of my non-academic interests and overall personality as well. In short, I am more of a builder than an artist. I play no musical instruments but know how to construct a simple house and am endlessly fascinated by masonry.

***What was your dissertation about?***

I studied ways in which notions of Islamic orthodoxy are constructed within and used to maintain boundaries around certain Muslim congregations in contemporary Sweden. In this, I focused on intra-Islamic debates and dialectics – namely, on narratives used for the “othering” of Muslims whose faith and practice are considered incorrect or unorthodox. I examined these issues ethnographically, by engaging with and observing the activities of several different Muslim congregations operating within the same residential area.

***What results did you find particularly interesting in your dissertation?***

While I focused mostly on intra-Islamic debates, I encountered many interesting examples of how non-Muslim discourses on Islam and Muslim migration (including what Petersen and Ackfeldt call “non-Muslim Islam”) affect these Muslim debates on orthodoxy. All of the Muslim groups I studied were well aware

of how Islam is considered by and portrayed to non-Muslim Swedes and were accordingly positioning both themselves and other Muslims in relation to these contemporary and mainstream Swedish debates on Islam.

***Did anything surprise you?***

Beyond the above-mentioned impact of non-Muslim discourse, I was also surprised by the extent to which my findings and observations aligned with those of other researchers. For example, I found traces of historical and cultural processes that have been identified by scholars working on Islam in Lebanon among the Lebanese Swedish communities I studied. Overall, I identified much in terms of continuity across time and space. That continuity was not a surprise per se – but the degree to which I could draw parallels between phenomena observed in a Swedish residential area and various processes, debates, etc., that other researchers have described in relation to developments elsewhere, or at different time periods, did surprise me.

***Was there something in the process that you found challenging? If so, what and why?***

I gathered my data through ethnographic methods – and the greatest challenges I encountered came with the structuring and analysis of the materials. Before embarking on this project, I had no previous experience of doing ethnographic work. Partly for that reason, I seriously underestimated the amount of time needed to process the data, develop my findings into coherent narratives, etc.

***In retrospect, is there anything you would have done differently?***

The above-mentioned challenges were made worse by the Covid pandemic – which began at a critical moment in my project, just as I was beginning my fieldwork. Considering this, I probably should have redesigned parts of my project so as to de-emphasize ethnography and do more in terms of (for example) internet-based research. Instead, I ended up doing most of my ethnographic work in the year just after the lifting of Covid-related restrictions – and therefore did not have much time for the proper structuring of data, transforming it into academic writing, and so on. A redesign of the project would therefore have saved me many stress-related problems at the end – but all of these challenges nevertheless taught me important lessons about the ethnographic working method. In that sense, I think I have grown as a researcher.

***Were there aspects of working on your dissertation that you found particularly fun or rewarding? If so, which ones and why?***

The data-gathering and ethnographic process itself was immensely rewarding – mostly for social reasons, as I was warmly welcomed to all of the congregations I studied. It was also intellectually rewarding, granting me opportunities to study and discuss Islam in non-academic and more natural settings. I experienced this as quite freeing – in the sense of moving beyond the shells and confines of academia, its paradigms and detachments from reality, and so on. Experiencing the things we study as they really are, among the people for whom they truly matter, is so much more fun and inspiring than discussing them during seminars.

***Now that your doctorate is completed, is there something special you would like to do afterwards? Any academic or non-academic interests that you would like to begin pursuing?***

At the moment, I am focusing most of my attention on non-academic interests that I have neglected in the last two years of intense writing. In short, I'm using my hands a lot more than my brain these days. I am also rediscovering the joy of reading – now that I feel free to choose whatever piques my interest without considering its value to my dissertation project!

In terms of academic interests, at the moment, I feel most inspired by the prospect of teaching undergraduates. This, since it grants me opportunities for reading and talking about the things that got me into the study of Islam in the first place – namely, deep history and macro developments over centuries. I have always enjoyed teaching, and I see the current moment as an opportunity to devote myself to it in a more wholehearted manner than was possible while working on the dissertation.

***Do you have any future research projects in mind? Or areas of research you would like to delve into?***

I have several more-or-less developed ideas that may turn into proper research projects. First, I want to write a few articles where I can flesh out or introduce theoretical elaborations that did not really fit with the overall themes of my dissertation. These will deal primarily with issues of how the structuring of certain rituals may contribute to different forms of religious organization and mobilization. In the local context where I conducted my research, I noticed that most Sunni Muslim groups tended to orientate towards consensus and deculturalization,

whereas local Shiites were split into various nationality-based congregations. To make additional sense of these differences, I am working on an analysis that applies various forms of ritual theory to make sense of how differences between the main rituals emphasized in these various Muslim congregations contribute to variations in how they organize and imagine the boundaries of community.

Beyond that, besides Moreover, beyond revisiting and elaborating on my own ethnographic materials, I am also thinking about how to test and elaborate on the conclusions I have drawn by looking at Swedish Islam at a larger scale. So far, I have only conducted a qualitative study in a delimited locality – and what I would like to do next is therefore to complement my previous work with more quantitative research. These ideas are still at an early development stage, and I am currently experimenting with ways in which to do large-scale and AI-assisted analysis of materials available online (such as recorded Friday sermons uploaded onto YouTube by Swedish mosques).

***If anyone would like to get in contact with you for future research projects or presentations, how can we reach you?***

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