

Göran Larsson

Essays

# The future of the study of Islam and Muslims in the Nordic and Scandinavian region

A Swedish reading of *Tidsskrift for Islamforskning*

With classical orientalists, such as Frants Buhl (1850-1932) and Johannes Pedersen (1883-1977), and contemporary scholars like Jørgen Bæk Simonsen, Jørgen S. Nielsen and Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, Denmark has a proud history when it comes to the study of religion, including Islam and the wider Muslim world (on Buhl, see Læssøe 1979; on Pedersen, see Løkkegaard 1982). Besides these scholars, it is also possible to find others in the fields of sociology, anthropology, political science and media studies who have made, and continue to make, strong contributions to the study of Islam and Muslims (cf. e.g. *Tidsskrift for Islamforskning* 7(1) 2013). Denmark has also produced a number of strong female scholars, such as Garbi Schmidt, Lene Kühle, Kate Østergaard, Nadia Jeldtoft, Birgitte Schepelern Johansen, Jytte Klausen and Catharina Raudvere (who is Swedish, but holds a professorship in the History of Religions at the University of Copenhagen). Hence it is evident that the study of Islam and Muslims is thriving in Denmark. That said, however, it is also apparent that the academic study of minority religions (not least Islam) is often perceived as a controversial topic. From this point of view Denmark is not unique: studying Islam and Muslims generally causes debate and sometimes even tension within both academia and the public sphere. One important instrument for countering simplistic and populist conclusions about

**Göran Larsson**, Ph.D., is professor in History of Religions at the Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion at University of Gothenburg, Sweden. His main research field is Islam and Muslims in Europe, both past and present.

Islam and Muslims and for providing a more balanced picture is to have arenas for public debates and the presentation of academic findings. Hence it is very important to have good venues for publishing academic papers that are based on testable empirical data, as well as transparent theories and methodological assumptions. From a Nordic and Scandinavian point of view, the e-journal *Tidsskrift for Islamforskning* (*Islamic Studies Journal*) is unique in being the only specialised journal for the study of Islam in the region.<sup>1</sup> As a result, it is important for both academics and non-academics (e.g. journalists and policy-makers) to keep track of what is being published in this particular journal.

It is difficult to provide a summary of the content of all numbers of *Tidsskrift for Islamforskning*. As a general rule, each issue is put together by an invited guest editor, and so far the journal has initiated debates and research on topics like “Shiism today”, “Islam and minorities”, “Muslims and education” and “everyday Islam”. The journal accepts contributions from both Danish and international scholars in both Danish and English. A fair amount of the articles it publishes deal with various aspects that can be related to the institutionalisation and everyday practice of Muslims in Denmark (e.g. 2(1) 2007), learning and the transmission of knowledge within Islamic institutions (e.g. sermons), education in Danish schools, the Nordic welfare state, Sufism, the media, and Muslim-Christian relations. Most importantly, it is my impression that the majority of contributions are based on data from surveys, participant observation, ethnographic field research or interviews, but the journal also includes articles that are grounded in the textual analysis of Islamic texts, such as the Koran or on the early history of Islam (e.g. 1(1) 2006).

Although the journal seems to be an important arena for publishing academic results, it is unlikely that *Tidsskrift for Islamforskning* has a high impact rate, making it difficult to know to what extent the published texts are circulated or quoted among international scholars.<sup>2</sup> This may be an issue for some funders and even governmental agencies, but it is not automatically a problem from a more general academic point of view. It can even be seen as a healthy sign that Danish institutions give Danish scholars the opportunity to publish articles that can be used and quoted in debates in Denmark. But to what degree the

1. One possible competitor is the brand new e-journal *Nidaba* that is published by the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Lund University. On this journal, see [journals.lub.lu.se/index.php/nidaba?utm\\_campaign=cmp\\_593649&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=getnewsletter](http://journals.lub.lu.se/index.php/nidaba?utm_campaign=cmp_593649&utm_medium=email&utm_source=getnewsletter) (accessed 2016-09-15).

2. *Tidsskrift for Islamforskning* is, for example, not included in Web of Science, Scimago Journal and Country Rank or OMICS International that rank open-access journals. However, it is included in the Norwegian Register over Vitenskapelige Publiceringskanaler, where it is rated at “Scientific level 1”. I would like to thank Bo Jarnevig of the university library in Gothenburg for his assistance on these matters.

published articles are being used by Danish journalists, policy-makers and institutions of higher learning (e.g. universities and equivalent bodies) remains an open question.

However, when considering questions of impact, outreach and pedagogical or educational texts, it can be argued that Danish scholars are in a better position than, for example, Swedish researchers in the same field. In Sweden today there is no specific journal devoted to the study of Islam and Muslims, potentially making it very difficult for Swedish scholars to reach out to policy-makers and the interested public.

Although this conclusion could justify a degree of envy from the Swedish point of view, I believe that my reading of this Danish journal should be a source of inspiration for Swedish researchers and not of gloom. Although there may be good reasons to start a similar electronic platform in Sweden, a more viable solution is to opt for cooperation and the extension of existing networks. From a Nordic and Scandinavian point of view, this should be read as a call for a larger academic research program that includes researchers from Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland. For example there are both important similarities and divergences between our countries that are related to the governance of Islam and Muslims, as well as how our respective countries handle challenges broadly related to questions of integration, the multicultural society and globalisation. Instead of writing the history of Swedish Muslims or Swedish Islam – and yes, I use the adjective “Swedish” instead of talking about Muslims or Islam in Sweden, since, no matter what we think about these traditions, they are today part and parcel of both Swedish history and the contemporary religious landscape – I strongly believe that the field must break free from its national shackles. Instead of confining our objects of study to national boards, we must consider their transnational and transglobal aspects. If academics from Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland manage to make this disciplinary turn, I believe we have a great potential to make a significant contribution to the study of Islam and Muslims. Whilst European politics and debates have become more inclined to adopt nationalistic tendencies, the study of Islam and Muslims in Europe is suffering from the same problem. Although the transnational and transglobal aspects are evident in the empirical data – for example, in migration patterns, the institutionalisation of Mus-

lim organisations and movements, Islamic theological debates, and the struggle over authority and legitimacy – major handbooks on the study of Islam and Muslims in Europe are still being written with a predominantly national framework in mind (e.g. Cesari 2015). So, instead of writing yet another book on Muslims in Sweden or Denmark, there is a growing need to paint the larger picture and look at Islam and Muslims as transnational phenomena not limited or bounded by geographical borders.

Furthermore, this academic turn will also mean scholars of Islam and Muslims embracing the fact that their object of study is not unique. In other words, it is now time to realise that Muslims and Islam are not unique phenomena and that the history of Muslims and the formation of Islamic theology must include a comparative dimension. Thus it is necessary to incorporate other religious traditions as well as so-called new religious movements into the study of Islam and Muslims (cf. e.g. Firestone 2012 on so-called Jihadism as a new religious phenomena). Although most academics who study Islam stress that this religion and its followers are not unique, many scholars, including myself, have a tendency to pay attention to Islam and Muslim affairs alone. This is most likely explained by the development of a university system that rewards specialisation, but I suggest that this is a serious problem we have to address if, as scholars of religions, we want to remain relevant to the public debate. However, it is also important to bring back the comparative perspective if we want to question so-called essentialist interpretations of Islam and Muslims that are so common in the contemporary societies of today (i.e. homogenizing tendencies that inform and influence anti-Muslim or Islamophobic stereotypes). As academics we have to engage in public debates about religion and use the scientific study of religions (i.e. study based on empirical evidence and inter-subjectively testable theories and methods) to show that Muslims too, like all representatives of religious traditions, are engaged in a constant power struggle over authority, legitimacy and representation (on religion and power, see e.g. Larsson 2015).

One way of resolving these problems is to turn our attention to earlier scholars like Johannes Pedersen and Frants Buhl and consider how they included Islamic history and Muslim texts in the general comparative study of religions. Compared to these

two classical scholars, we must also develop our own theoretical approaches, acquire a more self-critical awareness and refine our methods for studying religions to live up to contemporary standards of academic works in the 21st century. However, this demand should not stop us from making generalisations that can say something about the study object we call “religion” and from explaining why people have “religion” in the first place. Although it could be productive to return to the classical comparative scheme that dominated the early study of the history of religions, this suggestion will, of course, not solve the problems involved in operationalizing a comparative method (cf. Segal 2015). Nonetheless it is time to look back, not in anger, but for inspiration, otherwise I am afraid that the study of the topic we call “religion” will lose its importance, risking that academics who study religion are reduced to professors of curiosities and strange things in society. To avoid this gloomy scenario, we have to manage the challenges associated with comparative methods and be bold enough to offer scientific explanations that can be tested intersubjectively with the help of new empirical data, novel theories and innovative methods. As this demanding task is too large for the individual scholar, this is a call for cooperation and joint projects that include large conglomerations of scholars working towards a common goal. In my view, this is the future of both the study of religions in general and the study of Islam and Muslims in particular at Western universities.

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