

The study of Islam and Muslims in Europe: a critical evaluation

Göran Larsson

Department of Religious Studies, Theology and Classical Philology, Göteborg University

Goran.larsson@religion.gu.se

I was delighted when Marcel Maussen encouraged me to comment on his excellent and thought provoking report, *The governance of Islam in Western Europe: a state of the art report*. Several of the issues addressed by Maussen are of great significance for all researchers occupied with the study of Islam and Muslims in Europe. With the aid of the term “governance”, the text focuses on the “relationship between state intervention and societal autonomy”. The aim is to “contribute to the further development of a research agenda for theoretically guided, explanatory and comparative research on the regulation and accommodation of Islam in Western Europe”.

In addition to writing comments on Maussen’s report, I have recently been busy editing a book called *Islam and Muslims in the Nordic and Baltic Countries*.¹ Besides obvious differences, the content of this book can also be related to Maussen’s report. It contains, for example, chapters on Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Iceland and the Faroe Islands, and several of the chapters illustrates clearly that there is need for more empirical research to understand the history of Islam and Muslims in the West. For instance, the Baltic countries are generally left out in most introductions and encyclopaedia entries that deal with the history of Muslims in Europe. As a consequence, Islam in the West is predominantly presented as a recent phenomenon connected with immigration. For instance, the fact that Muslim Tatars arrived as soldiers in Finland and the Baltic rim in the sixteenth century is a neglected topic that deserves more attention. This detail is in itself an important reminder of the fact that the study of the governance of Islam in Western Europe is not complete – on the contrary. Furthermore, the dismantling of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s and the enlargement of the European Union has made it more difficult to talk about Islam in Western Europe.² For example, the history of Muslims living in the Baltic

¹ This book is to be published by Kegan & Paul in London, spring 2008.

² “Islam in Western Europe” is a very common phrase in book titles that deal with Islam and Muslims in Europe. See, for example, Jørgen S. Nielsen, *Muslims in Western Europe*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004; Martin van Bruinessen (ed.), *Producing Islamic knowledge: transmission and dissemination in western Europe*.

countries is on the one hand tied to the history of Russia and the Soviet Union and on the other to these countries' recent independence and liberation from the Soviet bloc. If we also include the Baltic countries in the study of Islam in the West, it is clear that it has become more difficult to limit the boundaries of our research objects. For instance, are we only talking about Muslims living within the European Union, or do we have a broader definition of Europe?³ What do we mean by Western Europe? And who are the Muslims we should be studying? Are we only talking about practicing religious Muslims? What about individuals that follow more secular ways of life, but still have Muslim cultural backgrounds? However, in order to develop the field and avoid earlier mistakes, it is essential to have a good understanding and overview of previous research. From this point of view, Maussen's report is an excellent introduction to the history of the study of Islam and Muslims in Europe.

The report contains a detailed analysis of the previous research published in Dutch, English, French and German, and the extensive bibliography illustrates clearly that the study of Islam and Muslims in Europe is not a new topic. The report covers four aspects of the field: 1. country studies; 2. accommodation of the Islamic presence and practices (covering mosques, Islamic schools and religious education, religious authorities, representation and political mobilisation, *halal* slaughter and cemeteries, and headscarves); 3. governance of Islam in Europe; and 4. towards a research agenda on the governance of Islam in Western Europe. The last section is more explorative, the aim being to point out possible new directions for research in the study of Islam and Muslims in Europe.

Observations from the field

Before reading my text, I should emphasise that my comments on Maussen's report are focused on those aspects and questions that I believe are missing from it. In making this criticism, I am not saying that the report is superficial or vague – on the contrary, it provides an excellent starting point and a good platform for the design of future research projects. Furthermore, to situate my comments in their proper context, I should also emphasise that my main academic background is in the history of religions, not the sociology of religions or

London: Routledge, 2007; Lars Pedersen, *Newer Islamic movements in western Europe*. Aldershot: Ashgate. 1999; W.A.R. Shadid and P.S. van Koningsveld (eds), *Religious freedom and the position of Islam in western Europe: opportunities and obstacles in the acquisition of equal rights (with an extensive bibliography)*. Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1994.

³ See, for example, Mark Brown, "Quantifying the Muslim Population in Europe: Conceptual and Data Issues", *Journal of Social Research Methodology*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2000): 87-101.

migration studies. In making this remark, I am not saying that historians of religions should not be concerned with sociology or migration studies. However, it is obvious that we need to pay more attention to historical and theological questions in order to understand the history of Islam and Muslims in Europe. From my point of view, it is, for example, important to focus on what Muslims actually do and say and how they practice Islam in Europe. As Jacques Waardenburg remarks, scholars of Islam and Muslims in Europe should be more self-critical and focus on what people of Muslim cultural backgrounds actually “think, say and do”, rather than on a vague perception of Islam as an explanatory factor.⁴ For example, more comparative studies should be focused on the reception of *fatwas*, Islamic jurisprudence, Friday sermons, transnational Islamic networks, the relationship between Islam in the West and Islam in the Orient. Besides these topics, it is also essential to focus on individuals of a Muslim cultural background who have adopted a more secular way of life. This topic is also closely related to the question of representation and authority. Who is talking for Muslims in Europe, and who is representing Muslims in the West? These questions are also closely related to the public image of Islam. However, to avoid oversimplified explanations, it is necessary to compare Muslims with other religious minorities. For example, expressions of Islamophobia could be analysed, discussed and analysed in relation to studies of anti-Semitism. Do Muslims find themselves in a different situation from other religious, ethnic and cultural minorities? If yes, why?

But instead of developing new possible areas of research, let us focus more closely on the actual content of Maussen’s report. It is my overall impression that the report covers the most important questions and issues addressed in current research about Islam and Muslims in Europe. However, in relation to the ‘observation’ of, for example, the establishment of mosques, it is clear that it is necessary to include and pay more attention to political developments following the 9/11 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States and the subsequent war on terrorism. For example, in what ways have the building and funding of mosques in Europe been affected by the war on terror, and has the image of mosques changed since the atrocities in 2001? The fear of so-called home-grown terrorists is also related to the discussion and setting up of various institutions for the education of Imams in Europe.⁵

⁴ Jacques Waardenburg, “Diversity and Unity of Islam in Europe: Some Reflections”, In *Muslims in Europe: From the Margin to the Centre*, ed. Jamal Malik, 21-34. Münster: LIT Verlag, 2004, p. 27.

⁵ See, for example, Welmoet Boender’s thesis *Imam in the Netherlands: Views about his Religious Role in Society* (2007) (ISIM, Leiden). See also J. Birt, “Good Imam, Bad Imam: Civic Religion and National Integration in Britain post-9/11”, *The Muslim World* 96 (2006):687-705 and Birgitte Schepelehn Johansen,

In relation to Islamic schools and religious education, it is also necessary to focus on the pedagogical aspects of Islamic education. For example, what kinds of Islamic interpretations are supported and transmitted by the various Islamic schools in Europe? In studying this topic, it should be stressed that it is impossible to talk about a single Islamic school. Ideological, theological and political variations will have an impact on both the organisation of the schools as well as on their pedagogical strategies.⁶ The development of Islamic schools and Islamic religious education is therefore closely related to the governance of Islam and Muslims in Europe. This topic is also linked to questions of how Islamic theology and Muslim cultures are preserved, transmitted and negotiated within and among various Muslim communities. To address this topic, it is also necessary to focus on gender and generational differences.

Even though Maussen has included a historical perspective – for example, by emphasising the link between Europe and its former colonies – there is a need for more historically oriented studies. By historical studies, I am referring to studies that focus on the early history of Islam in Europe – for example, the history of Islam in al-Andalus, the Balkans, central and eastern Europe – as well as on its early modern history. The history of the first generation of Muslim immigrants, i.e. those who came to Europe after the Second World War, should, for example, be recorded, documented and analysed before it is too late. For instance, what kinds of dreams and expectations did these early immigrants have? Their histories could also be related to more contemporary questions. For example, when did North Africans or Turks/immigrants Muslims become Muslims, i.e. when did their identity change from ethnic to religious belonging?⁷

In my view, the study of internal Muslim theological discussions cannot be emphasised too much. For example, what do Muslims discuss in their mosques, what kinds of books do they read, and what kinds of Islamic discourses are operating among Muslims in the West? To answer these questions, it would, for example, be important to study the questions and answers that Muslims are looking for, a topic that can be addressed by studying *fatwas* in European contexts. It is also necessary to document and analyse Friday sermons delivered in mosques. To cover these aspects of Islam, we need more empirical data.

Imamuddannelse i Europa – Udfordringer og perspektiver. Udredning vedr. Imamuddannelse i Europa – Rapport 1. København: Københavns universitets satsningsområde religion i det 21 århundrede, 2005.

⁶ See, for example, Jenny Berglund, “What takes place in the Quran class? Quran lessons, a part of the Swedish educational system.” in *Religion, Spirituality and Identity*, ed. Kirsi, Tirri, 203-220. Berlin: Peter Lang, 2006.

⁷ This question is partly addressed by Stefano Allievi, “How and Why ‘Immigrants’ became ‘Muslims’”, *ISIM Review*, No. 18, (2006): 37.

Without criticising Maussen's extensive work, his report makes no mention of several academic studies carried out in, for example, the Nordic or Baltic languages.⁸ This observation is, of course, related to the fact that I have access to the necessary languages, but researchers in other parts of Europe could probably make similar criticisms too. However, to solve this problem it is obvious and necessary for researchers from all over Europe to cooperate. As part of the solution, it would be necessary to map previous studies and set up a database that covers and documents the academic study of Islam and Muslims in Europe. The ambitious bibliographical project called *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History*, which aims to map and cover the relationship between Christians and Muslims from the early seventh century up until the present day, could, for example, serve as an inspiration.⁹ For example, by collecting information on all published academic works on Islam and Muslims in Europe, it would be easier to design and initiate future research projects that take notice of new theoretical and methodological insights, as well as earlier research.

Despite of my criticism and comments, Maussen's report is a very helpful resource tool that can be used in many different ways and for different purposes. First of all, it gives a general overview of the study of Islam and Muslims in Europe, especially for those interested in the governance of Islam in Western Europe. Secondly, it can "encourage researchers to reflect upon the strengths and weaknesses of their own research" (p. 60). From this point of view, I think that Maussen has been very successful and the aim of his report has clearly been fulfilled.

⁸ An annotated bibliography on the study of Islam and Muslims in Norway has been published by O. Leirvik, *Islam i Norge. Oversikt med bibliografi*. Retrieved from <http://folk.uio.no/leirvik/tekster/IslamiNorge.html>, 2006a. A similar study for Finland has been published by Tuomas Martikainen, *Immigrant Religions in Finland: A Commented Bibliography*. Draft, 10 December 2006. Retrieved from http://www.diaspora.fi/DG/DG_Immigrant_Religions_in_Finland.pdf. For Sweden, see Göran Larsson, *Islam och muslimer i Sverige: en kommenterad bibliografi*, Göteborg and Stockholm: Makadam, 2004.

⁹ For more information on *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical Project*, see <http://www.theology.bham.ac.uk/CMRBH/index.htm>.