Jenny Berglund

The Teaching of Islam in Sweden

Religious systems depend on education for their upkeep, survival and preservation. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that religious instruction and education form the foundations of all major religions. The methods used by followers of a dominating majority religion to pass down their religious traditions to future generations are different from those used by adherents of a minority faith. Although formal education is also required for a religion's long-term survival, the majority religion has the effect of "marinating" the majority society in some ways.[1] As a result, certain religious values and narratives are "transmitted" through state institutions, official media, traditions, cultural expressions and other means. However, minorities have much fewer opportunities to pass on their religion to future generations, and as a result, Muslim minorities frequently rely on networks and institutions outside the state to maintain the administration and survival of their religious communities, as they cannot rely on governmental institutions to do so. While some Muslim children, teenagers and even adults attend privately operated after-school or weekend Islamic lessons, others attend private schools or receive instruction from parents or other family members at home. In the past ten years, there have been more, frequently international, online teaching opportunities, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the meantime, Islamic education has become a source of concern for most European governments due to the increased vigilance towards Islamism and Muslims since September 11, 2001, and the Islamist terror attacks in European cities. This is because Islamic education must be monitored and controlled to prevent the rise of radical Islam, while still upholding the constitutional right to re-

1 Berglund 2022, 111.

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ligious freedom of minorities.[2] This goal of striking a balance between providing for and controlling religious minorities explains why Islamic religious education (IRE) has become a topic of intense public debate; people are concerned that their government is either intervening too little or too much when it comes to shaping the spiritual beliefs of private citizens.

Policies have varied depending on national ideologies of secularism, multiculturalism and political culture.[3] State strategies have ranged from sponsoring Islamic education in state schools to providing state funding for religious schools, organising state-supervised training of teachers of Islam, and monitoring curricula and teaching practices in Muslim private schools.

Despite having been heavily influenced by Lutheran Christianity, today Sweden is regarded as one of the world's most secular nations. Sweden is a universalist welfare state that grants all citizens social and human rights, while maintaining the authority to meddle in their personal affairs in order to maintain social cohesion, equality and safety. High standards for the "integration" of minority groups are included in this, along with concessions to the majority's views on religion and secularism.[4] In this chapter, I will present and discuss in what way a highly secular welfare state, such as Sweden's, organises Islamic education in various forms.

Christianity and Secularism

Sweden's population stands at approximately ten million. Prior to 2000, the Evangelical Lutheran Church was Sweden's official state church. Today, however, its status is also that of a people's church (*folkkyrka*), meaning that it is no longer directly tied to the Swedish state. Membership in the Church of Sweden (Svenska kyrkan) has decreased to around 60 % of the Swedish population in recent decades[5], and sociological surveys affirm Sweden's status as one of the world's most secular countries; according to the Pew Research

2 Gent/Franken 2021 / Berglund 2015.
3 Taylor 1998 / Modood 2007 / Mannitz 2004 / Berglund 2015.
4 Gullestad 2002.
5 Willander 2019.

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Center in 2018, up to 72 % of Swedish respondents believe religion has no influence on their lives. Only about 15 % of people reply in the affirmative to the question, "Do you believe in a personal God?" On a typical Sunday, about 1 % of the population attends a Church of Sweden service. This is a low score, but statistical evidence suggests that the very low level of church attendance has been fairly consistent for as long as there have been numbers to compare. When church attendance in Sweden started to be registered in 1927, attendance was around 5 %.[6]

Sweden has more than 200 years of history as a neutral state, and non-alignment has long been part of the Swedish self-image, which is evident in its attempt to define its role as a 'humanitarian superpower' but also in its feminist foreign policy. As Simons and Manoilo noted in 2019, cracks had been visible for years in the domestic consensus as the contradictions of the humanitarian super-brand and feminist foreign policy became more salient.[7] Today, Sweden has not only entered NATO, but it has also radically changed its migration policy, which was once a strong ideology of international solidarity and hospitality, as demonstrated during the 2015–16 refugee crisis, when many other countries closed their borders. In the 2014 election, the antiimmigrant and especially anti-Islam 'Sweden Democrats' political party received 13 % of the vote in the election, and in 2022 they gained 20 % of the vote, becoming the second largest party. Islamophobia and hate crimes are on the rise in Swedish society, and, in 2023, the polarisation of society entered a new level with the discussions on the burning of the Qur'an in front of mosques and Muslimmajority embassies. Muslims are often depicted in a negative light, and Muslim immigrants are regularly problematised in public debate, often being described as a minority that is resistant to democracy and secularisation and opposed to the established separation of church and state.

6 Gustafsson 2001 / Willander 2019.

7 Simons / Manoilo 2019.

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Muslims in Sweden

There are no reliable statistics for the number of Muslims in Sweden, only various estimates. According to those from 2016, Sweden's Muslims accounted for 8 % of the total population. The Pew Research Center estimates that 810,000 people identify themselves as Muslim in some way and that the country will have the largest Muslim population in Europe by 2050, ranging from 11 to 30 percent of the population depending on the migration rate. Muslim immigration to Sweden started with labour migration from Turkey and the former Yugoslavia in the 1960s. Since the 1980s, the majority of Muslims who have moved to Sweden have either been refugees or relatives of people who already live there.[8] In 2021, Thurfjell and Willander's large-scale quantitative study compared Swedes with Muslim family backgrounds to Sweden's secular, post-Lutheran dominant culture. Contrary to expectations, the Christian respondents show more affinity with their religious heritage than Muslims, and there is a noticeable fusion between the groups. While both groups largely distance themselves from their own religious heritage, Muslims do so in a more definite way, with Muslims upholding more secular values and identities than Christians. Thurfjell and Willander[9] conclude that, on the basis of their findings about Muslims in Sweden, equating religious familial heritage with religious identity is hasty. Nonetheless, although Sweden's Muslim population is to a large extent secular, the majority population perceives Muslims as more religious and the debate about Islam is coloured by an 'us' and 'them' dichotomy, with a tendency to support the idea that a 'normal' religion is one that is either protestant or invisible. This also affects religious education, both inside and outside the public school system.

8 Sorgenfrei 2018.

9 Thurfjell/Willander 2021.

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Religious education in state schools

In Sweden, the vast majority of Muslim children pass through the state school system. Indeed, in Sweden, 27 % of all pupils in school have an immigrant background[10], although as yet there are no available statistics on how many of them are Muslim.

Christianity was the main religious subject in all types of schooling for centuries after the Middle Ages, in a Lutheran evangelical form after the Reformation, and, while gradually pushed aside by other subjects and general secularisation, it was still taught as a denominational subject until recent times. It is worth noting that the Swedish approach to religious education differs from that in most other European countries. France, for example, is characterised by a strict secularist approach, banning religious symbols in schools, having no separate school subject for religion, and teaching the history of religion within the history syllabus. Central and East European countries have generally retained the teaching of religion and invited different religious communities into schools to conduct faith education for different groups of children.[11] The Swedish but also current Scandinavian and wider Nordic model, on the other hand, provides the teaching of religion in a non-denominational way, privileging Christianity to different degrees both quantitatively and qualitatively, including acknowledging the Christian holidays of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost.[12]

Sweden has a long history of non-denominational integrative religious education. A school reform in 1962 required the subject of Christianity to maintain an 'objective' profile with regard to questions of faith[13], and the subject's name was changed from Christianity to Knowledge About Religion in 1969, which is a direct translation of the Swedish word *religionskunskap*. This name change symbolised the transition from a denominational to a more non-denominational school subject that prioritises teaching *about* religion, including various non-Christian religions, from a Study of Religions perspective. Since 1996, non-denominational religious edu-

10 Skolverket 2022/2023.

11 Mannitz 2014 / Gent/Franken 2021.

12 Berglund/Gilliam/Selimovic 2023.

13 Skogar 2000.

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cation (RE) has been an obligatory school subject taught in all state-funded schools (i.e. also in all independent schools, including the denominational ones) from primary to upper secondary level. The emphasis in primary school is on the local community and storytelling, whereas at higher levels it is on key ideas within what are called "the world religions" (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, according to the syllabus) as well as on secular world views, or 'outlooks on life' as they are called in the English-language documentation from the National Agency for Schools.[14] In upper secondary school, one RE course is obligatory. The first sentences in the syllabus clearly show its departure point:

> The subject of religion has its scientific roots primarily in the academic discipline of religious studies, and is by its nature interdisciplinary. It deals with how religions and outlooks on life are expressed in words and action, and how people formulate and relate to ethical and existential issues.[15]

The use of the term "non-denominational" (the term used in the official translation to English) is meant to imply that education is to be presented in such a way in the Swedish school system that no particular world view is prioritised and that pupils from all cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds should feel comfortable.[16] This neutrality, however, does not apply to the realm of what is described as society's "fundamental values", the mediation of which the national curriculum considers a primary task of Sweden's educational system.[17] Even though all school subjects are supposed to be non-denominational, they can be understood to be "marinated in Lutheran Protestantism"—not only the country's factual history, but also in terms of how people think and talk about religion in society, how religion is taught and holidays are celebrated in schools, how institutions are built and who receives state subsidies.[18]

Although one might expect the neutral religious studies approach to the teaching of religion in Sweden to result in a more neutral pre-

14 Skolverket 2011.
15 Skolverket 2022.
16 Skolverket 2018, 5.
17 ibid.
18 Berglund 2023.

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sentation of Islam, this does not seem to be the case. Two studies of textbooks about Islam for non-denominational religious education in Swedish schools have shown that throughout history, the choice of words and events used to describe Islam has often been negative. Although the content is not specifically wrong, this reiterated pattern creates a tedious picture of Islam as a whole.[19] Berglund's studies on the subject demonstrate that Swedish textbooks follow the format of "the man, the book, the faith",[20] a type of presentation that is prone to cause problems since it indicates to students that the Qur'an is the same type of text and serves the same purpose as the Bible in Christian traditions. Both are, of course, books and can thus be compared as such; they have a common story and gallery of characters, but what is important to remember is that their function in theology differs. Another problem that is not specifically related to Islam but to all religions presented in Swedish textbooks is that people who represent a religion in textbooks are often 'maximalists': in other words, those who are most devout and most self-assured about a specific tradition. This could have two negative consequences: (1) students belonging to a specific religion may believe they are not good adherents because they do not live as the maximalist representative depicts, and (2) students not belonging to the religious tradition depicted may believe that all its adherents live according to the maximalist representation.[21]

Despite the secular (not favouring any specific religion or world view) but not secularistic (favouring a world view in which religion should be kept in the private sphere) outlook of the Swedish school system, studies have shown that religion is frequently associated with a historical time when people did not know better—that religion may have played an important role in the past, but modern people do not need it anymore. Karin Kittellmann Flensner[22] demonstrates that taking a nonreligious and atheistic stance is often considered a neutral and normal attitude towards religion and that being religious is frequently presented as problematic for a modern, rational and independently thinking human being. Apart from this

19 Otterbeck 2004 / Härenstam 1993.

20 Berglund 2014.

21 Berglund 2020 / Berglund 2021.

22 Kittelmann-Flensner 2016.

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dominant discourse, which can be understood as a specific form of normativity, some students and teachers in Kittelmann Flensner's study talked about Sweden as a Christian country with reference not to beliefs but to Swedish traditions and history, frequently using them to define a 'we' in relation to 'the others', who were frequently religious people in general and Muslims in particular.[23] An interview study from Sweden also shows that pupils who receive Islamic supplementary education—often consisting of memorising passages of the Qur'an—have been the target of negative comments which express that such education is at odds with modern, rational Swedish society.[24] Although it was common for Swedish pupils to have to memorise not only poems, hymns and Bible passages but also features such as the periodic table and Sweden's rivers and lakes (which are numerous) 50 years ago, this is no longer the case. Instead, the school system's discourse on memorisation is very negative and frequently referred to as 'old fashioned' in contrast to the prevailing educational ideal in Sweden—and the West more broadly—of interactive learning. Muslim pupils thus face an underlying presumption of negative outcomes if they discuss the knowledge and skills gained in their supplementary education, with teachers and friends labelling them as 'too religious'.[25]

Islamic schools

In Sweden, only 1 % of all pupils attend a faith-based school. Sweden's first state-funded Islamic school (a state-funded, independent, faith-based school) opened in Malmö in 1993. At most, there were eleven schools that were classified as Islamic by the National Agency of Education. Today, there is only one left. Like other independent schools in Sweden, the Islamic schools are / were 100 % funded by the state. No new Muslim schools have been founded since 2004.[26] One of the reasons these Islamic schools were established in Sweden in the early 1990s is that the Education Act was amended in

23 Kittelmann-Flensner 2016.
24 Berglund 2017 / Berglund 2018.
25 Berglund 2017.
26 Henrekson 2023.

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1992 to make it easier to establish independent schools. Although independent schools (including faith-based schools) must have the same basic goals as municipal schools, an independent school is allowed to have a profile or mission that distinguishes it from a municipal school, including a specific school ethos and extracurricular subjects (such as Islamic religious education [IRE] in Islamic schools) that are incorporated into the weekly schedule. Denominational school subjects or gatherings can consequently be added to the weekly schedule, but these subjects cannot be mandatory. The goals outlined in the national curriculum (see above) must be met in faith-based independent schools, meaning that non-denominational religious education is taught as a mandatory school subject in Swedish Islamic faith schools, whereas Islamic religious education (IRE) must be optional. The profile of one Islamic school may be very different from that of another, and a distinction is frequently made between schools with 'strong' and 'weak' profiles, classifications which are based on the degree to which a specific religion influences the school's profile.[27]

Several studies show that parents' decision to let their children attend an Islamic school is not primarily influenced by the presence of IRE or even the Islamic school ethos. In her study, Mohme[28], for example, shows that parents often choose an Islamic school for their children primarily to provide them with a good academic education, one that, in the parents' opinion, is not possible to obtain in the suburb where they live, whose municipal school's standard is perceived to be low.[29] Other studies of school choice show that parents send their children to Muslim schools for reasons of security and well-being, that is, to avoid discrimination and achieve acceptance of difference.[30] Although RE or IRE may not be the most important factor in parents' decisions to send their children to Muslim schools, these schools do provide an environment in which children can be educated about Islam through textbooks based on a secularised study of religions approach, and also through denominational lessons in

27 Roth 2007 / Berglund 2010.

28 Mohme 2016.

29 ibid.

30 Bunar / Kallstenius 2006 / See also: Berglund 2010.

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which Islam is the norm and the child learns about the 'good life' from an Islamic perspective.

What does this mean for teacher education?

As mentioned above, RE in Swedish schools is not connected to any specific religion, so teachers need an education where they study different religions from a religious studies-based perspective. In Sweden, this kind of teacher training takes place at universities. The programme for the diploma required for RE in the Swedish school system thus includes courses from religious studies departments, where Islam is also taught and studied. This means that Islam is studied from a historical, sociological or anthropological point of view. Short introductory courses can be found in many universities, but at a number of universities it is possible (from BA to PhD level) to enrol in religious studies with a particular focus on Islam. Triggered by the present media attention on Islam, an increasing number of teachers have requested further education about Islam at universities. In order to respond to this request, Stockholm University, as well as some other universities, have established start-up courses on Islam, which are specifically directed at teachers and school personnel on both a basic and an advanced level. As part of the same request, students can also participate in exchange programmes (IMPACCT).

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