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# CULTURAL ISLAM IN NORTHERN EUROPE

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**S. Yu. Dianina**<sup>a</sup>

**M. A. Khalil**<sup>b</sup>

**V. S. Glagolev**<sup>a</sup>

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<sup>a</sup> MGIMO University,  
76, Vernadskogo pr., Moscow, Russia, 119454

<sup>b</sup> Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs,  
2 Fakher Tower / Othman Towers, Cairo, Egypt, 11728

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*In this study, we aim to analyse the position of cultural Islam in Northern European countries. To this end, we examine publications in major print media. Content analysis of relevant publications gives a detailed picture of narratives produced in mass consciousness as a reaction to the presence of Islam at the local and regional level and makes it possible to identify individual trends in the evaluation of such narratives in both scientific and popular analytical literature. The growing secularization of Islamic communities in Northern Europe and changes in the value-driven behavioural algorithms of believers lead both to the polarization of Islam and changes in attitudes to Islam from outside the religion. Studies into the factors affecting the dynamics of this phenomenon have both theoretical and practical significance since they help to evaluate the most promising forms of cooperation within regional collaborations and national programmes for international partnership. The forces promoting the cultural Islam project position it as an antidote for political and radical Islam. At the same time, the main factor preventing the legitimation of cultural Islam across immigrant Moslem groups (or, more precisely, communities, i.e. associations of people originating from countries where Muslims predominate) is the relevant isolatedness of those groups and their commitment to the Ummah. The novelty of research into how Islam and culture interact within those groups is closely associated with the goal of establishing whether cultural Islam is viable as a phenomenon of collective consciousness and whether it meets the following requirements: 1) satisfying the essential need for preserving the tradition and 2) ensuring flexible adaptation to a foreign cultural context. Our analysis of the data obtained has led us to conclude that cultural Islam is gaining ground within immigrant communities and associations. This can be viewed as a practical contribution to studies into the dynamics and mechanisms of adaptation, acculturation, and, perhaps, integration of Muslims and corresponding social groups into the socio-cultural space of Northern European countries.*

**Keywords:**

cultural Islam, political Islam, periodicals of Northern European countries, immigrant communities, mechanisms of acculturation

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## **Introduction**

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Sociocultural project defined as “Cultural Islam” represents one of the few potential gradual acculturation strategies of immigrant communities into the hosting society. Studying specific tendencies characterizing the real state of affairs with the representatives of “Cultural Islam” in the countries of Northern Europe becomes relevant for understanding the future of the region considering that the flow of immigrants from Muslim countries has played and is still playing a noticeable role in the development of the European North [1; 2, c. 261].

Thus, the object of research is not only the situation with Islam, but also social attitudes that are sensitive to any change in sociocultural reality in a potentially conflicting field.

It is well known that several generations of Muslim immigrants live in Sweden, Norway and other countries of Northern Europe. Some of them naturalized long ago, having received full-fledged citizenships with their children becoming citizens by birth. The diasporal structure of these Muslim communities is contributing to preservation of their traditional life style [3–5]. Religious and social issues are often resolved within the diaspora. The current migration crisis promotes the dependence of this Northern European population segment on the Islamic values as they turn to be profoundly acute and relevant. At the same time problems of Muslims, including issues related to identity, prospects for interaction with a non-Muslim environment, etc. represent a research area of extreme importance for understanding the social dynamics of the region as a whole.

Provided that initially Islam is positioning itself as a holistic religious system, the question under discussion is how values that unite these people are being transformed (if they are), which creates a foundation for controversial interpretations of the role of Islam in secular societies.

The purpose of this study is to identify the extent to which Muslim communities of Northern Europe are ready to implement the project of “Cultural Islam” as long as it seeks to overcome the “dichotomy of faith and unbelief” [6, p. 11]. Thus, the study focuses on the dynamics of the “Cultural Islam” diffusion in the region and the degree of acceptance of this concept in the collective consciousness of both Muslims and non-Muslims. The latter can be evaluated by analyzing articles published in the leading newspapers since they remain the main source of official information for the local population. Such an approach allows us to trace a number of relatively new trends containing hidden contradictions that exist both within Muslim communities and between Muslim and non-Muslim communities. A question can then be raised of a sociocultural segment of “secularized Muslims”, as well as of identifying the most common aspects of the Muslim religiosity modification in a non-Muslim (i.e., “Western”) environment.

The initial hypothesis of this research was that officialdom and non-Muslim citizens wish to support the project of “Cultural Islam” as an alternative to traditional Islam because the latter is often perceived by the host societies as a source

of radical ideas and a breeding ground for terrorism. On the other hand, it is possible to assume that “Cultural Islam” does not enjoy wide support among Muslims of Northern Europe in general and Muslim immigrants in particular, at least at the level of an openly declared position.

### **Literature Review. History of the “Cultural Islam” Concept**

Analytical works in two spheres deserve a special interest. First, publications actually interpreting the notion of “Cultural Islam”, which has not been explored enough in academic literature. Second, when investigating the place of “Cultural Islam” in North European countries it is important to take into consideration research dedicated to the recent migration crisis, and as a result — intensification of public discussion around it. It is also necessary to pay attention to the results of scholarly research of the value matrixes in collective consciousness. Special importance is attached to the topics of Muslim-Christian dialogue in Northern Europe [1; 7–10].

The analysis of the activities by migratory communities, their adaptation to the culture of host societies deserve particular attention, namely Ash’s *Islam in Europe*, Miller’s *Immigrants, Nations, and Citizenship*, *Muslims in the EU and Russia* by I. S. Semenenko, a chapter on Western Muslims in A. V. Malashenko’s *Islamic Alternative and Islamic Project* and others. Among the works dedicated to certain aspects of integration in Scandinavian countries the studies of Andreassen, Brenner, Bennulf, Brunet and others should be singled out.

A number of relatively recent papers by Russian scholars were devoted to analyzing specifics of modern Islam and its role in Europe, among them *Integration of Muslims in Europe: Political Aspect* by S. M. Khenkin and I. V. Kudryashova [11], *The World of Faith vs. The World of Disbelief: Expansion and Reduction of Religiosity* by V. G. Baranovsky and V. V. Naumkin [6]. The issue of political transformations resulting from immigrational redistribution of group preferences (based on materials from a different European region though) was successfully demonstrated in a paper by N. N. Bolshova [12], while an examination of the possibilities and limits of religious variety in relation to the problem of harmonizing legislation in the EU countries was carried out by I. N. Molodikova, L. L. Yemeljanova and A. Y. Lyalina [13, p. 64].

In order to correctly interpret processes related to Islam it is necessary to refer to the definition of “Cultural Islam” as a term used in the contemporary Arab thought as well as in the Western academic literature. Prominent Moroccan philosopher and writer Bensalem Hammish, who in 2016 published a book titled *On Cultural Islam*, can serve as a good example [14].

As for the Western academic literature, the literal tracing of the “Cultural Islam” concept is absent here, but the existing term “Cultural Muslims” defines a secular (non-religious) person who, having a Muslim origin (and living in a non-Muslim country), still identifies with Muslim culture or religion, while not practicing Islam.

According to the Australian scholar Milad Milani, the category “Cultural Muslim” is not only a testament to the cultural diversity associated with the faith, but a showcase of disenchantment with its religious institution [15].

Authors of *The Geography of Muslim Identities* published in the USA in 1988 and reprinted again in 2016, report first coming across the term “Cultural Muslim” in Central Asia and other countries of the socialist block [16]. Consequently, Russia appears to present one of the oldest and vivid examples of “Cultural Islam” concept: since the USSR atheist times many Soviet people, originating from traditional Muslim families, used to preserve memory of their roots and identify themselves according to Muslim religion, while remaining non-believers, for whom Islam was just a cultural phenomenon of their daily lives.

Similar picture can be drawn of the contemporary Russian society, where religion is just a part of cultural identification: according to public polls, the majority of Russians consider religion rather a “national tradition, ancestors’ faith” (39%), “ways to follow moral and ethical norms” (26%) or “part of world culture and history” (21%) [17, p. 81] than religious or cult practice.

Thus, it is possible to suggest that the term “Cultural Islam” appeared in similarity with the term “Cultural Christian” (or “Cultural Judaism”) that was spread in the Western humanitarian discourse in the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> — beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is worth noting, however, that the first use of the notion “Cultural Christian” can be traced to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, where it can be found in the works of the historian Henry Milman.

Cultural Christian usually refers to a person living in a nominally Christian society who has turned away from the Christian faith or has been brought up without reference to it [18]. Prominent British biologist and a convinced atheist Richard Dawkins has called himself “Cultural Christian” [19], and the famous Russian physicist and demographer Sergei Kapitsa was quoted saying, “I am a Russian Orthodox atheist”.

### **Acculturation as a Platform for “Cultural Islam”: the Case of Northern Europe**

One of the most relevant descriptions of acculturation strategies is provided by John Berry, an expert in cross-cultural psychology. The four strategies he identifies are:

- 1) assimilation, in the course of which individuals do not want to preserve their cultural identity and do their best to interact with the representatives of the new culture;
- 2) separation, during which individual highly appreciates his/her belonging to one’s culture and tries to avoid communication with the other cultures;
- 3) integration, which implies interest in both — sustaining one’s own culture and daily interaction with other cultures as well as learning from them;

4) marginalization implies a low level of interest in sustaining relations with other cultures as well as lack of cultural self-identity [20, p. 199].

Obviously, inclusion of a Muslim into the secularization process and formation of “Cultural Muslim” would take place only in the cases of integration or assimilation (since separation or marginalization presuppose that individual would prefer to remain tightly “closed” from the host society, which means that probability that he/she, for external reasons, would break with one’s religious and cultural tradition is insignificant).

Evaluating the degree of personal religiosity among Muslim immigrants of Northern Europe is a task that entails many difficulties. First of all, maintaining a declarative affiliation with Islam is important not only for maintaining group solidarity, but also for one’s security (“honor killings”). Furthermore, Islam does not exactly approve of the possibility of conversion into another religion (riddah or irtidad).

As a result, for Northern European immigrant Muslims, “Cultural Islam” remains almost the only strategy for implementing such types of acculturation as integration and assimilation regardless of their actual religiosity level.

Another issue that needs to be addressed in order to understand the boundaries of dissemination of the “Cultural Islam” concept deals with a fundamentally different vision of this phenomenon by the Western secular consciousness and traditional Muslim mentality. The extensive use of the term “culture”, which almost coincides with the concept of “lifestyle” in this case, allows one to distance from unambiguous secular connotations common for the Western scholarly discourse [21].

Features of Northern European causal attribution imply seeing “Cultural Muslims” as people who actively integrate into local societies, but nevertheless remain Muslims: they still have Muslim first names and surnames, they identify themselves as Muslims (the latter is frequently enough to dispel all doubts; while it’s hard to imagine that a modern European would identify oneself by religion, being a non-religious secular person). Meanwhile from the traditional Islamic viewpoint, “Culture Muslims”, who have reduced the sacred faith of their fathers and the last divine revelation to humanity to the level of formal identification would be univocally classified as apostates, who committed treason against the holy truths — and this behavior is regarded as one of the most severe forms of kufr (infidelity). Consequently, “Cultural Muslims” find themselves at a compromise point of “under-acceptance” by the new secular society and condemnation by the old community of religious traditionalists.

## **Methodology**

When choosing a methodology for studying the issues around “Cultural Islam” in Northern Europe one faces the difficulty of obtaining reliable informa-

tion. Methods of direct data collection by filling questionnaires or statistics of visits to mosques can give a false picture, because these acts are public and could be driven by the fear of expulsion from the Muslim community.

Among the promising strategies that overcome this difficulty are in-depth interviews and life stories. Being unable to interview a large number of respondents, we referred to processing information from the Northern European media, where we analyzed the frequency of using the term “Cultural Islam” or combination of the concepts “Islam” and “culture”, and explored a number of case-studies reflecting the range of problems associated with Islam’s adaptation to sociocultural conditions of the Northern European states.

The interpretation of results required certain caution, since the border between ideological use of the combination “Islam” and “culture” and an honest attempt to reveal the factual situation remains rather vague. At the same time, a sequentially conducted content analysis enabled to eliminate doubts regarding the limited number of samples and falsification carried out by bringing forward counterexamples, which enabled us to limit the tendency to extrapolate individual results to the entire region.

## **Results**

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Economic, political, social and cultural portrait of Northern Europe is drawn by a number of contradictions, conflicts and controversies. It is associated with increased migration into Northern European countries, governmental crisis (Sweden), strengthening positions of the rightist and populist forces. Along with the political instability driven by the sanction politics of the EU, which is influencing the labor market, debates about the perspectives of Sweden joining NATO create a certain background for social attitudes. These factors do not contribute to the stability of the swiftly transforming region.

## **Clash of Realities: Mahr, Divorce and Polygamy**

It needs to be pointed out that the seemingly united Northern European Muslim community is not too homogeneous. Apart from the traditional split into Sunnis and Shias, there, as in the Muslim world in general, exist a variety of segments. Consequently, the number of members in various Muslim groups of the region is uneven. This situation leads to the appearance of additional vectors in the process of integration into the region’s sociocultural space. Domestic and cultural views of Muslims that often differ inside the community have significant social and political projections. For example, Swedish law-makers faced the problem of adjusting such Muslim notion as mahr — a term, with

which Islamic family law defines the property allocated by husband to his wife during their marriage registration — to the national legislation. This notion as well as the corresponding legislative norms traditional for Muslims simply do not exist in the modern societies of Northern Europe. One more difference: the legislation of most European countries says that divorce is an absolute right that both spouses can use without providing reasons and without initiating costly divorce procedures. But in case the court (we take Sweden as an example) approves on the divorce of Muslim spouses, this still would not mean that they are divorced according to the Muslim law. Some religious interpretations restrict the right of Muslim women to divorce, and Islamic communities in Sweden, which support such interpretations, refuse to divorce the spouses. It provokes a paradoxical situation: according to the Swedish law, the spouses are divorced, while according to the Islamic law, they remain married. After getting such a civil divorce (unrecognized by Islamic law) and getting married anew, a woman might face death penalty upon her return to the land of origin (say, Pakistan): her last marriage can literally become the last in her life, because she will be considered as having extramarital illegitimate relationship, which is punishable by death in her home country. Similar paradoxes and complications take place not only in Pakistan, but also in Saudi Arabia and Iraq. At present, this particular problem can be solved by both spouses signing prenuptial contract, which is allowed in Muslim communities. Such contract contains a clause that gives the wife the right to divorce, and then such a document becomes compatible with the Islamic law.<sup>1</sup>

Muslim polygamy is another problem for the North European legislation. Sweden, being one of the most progressive countries in the region today, now officially recognizes polygamous marriages that had been registered abroad. According to the Swedish Tax Service, out of 169 polygamous families in Sweden, only 38 live with more than one partner (data for January 2018).<sup>2</sup> This may be explained by the family separation when some family members remaining outside of Sweden.

As an example, it is possible to compare the total number of issued documents confirming the right to a long-term stay in Sweden with the number of same documents issued to representatives of the four countries having a high level of Muslim religious affiliation (Somalia, Afghanistan, Syria, Eritrea) (Fig. 1).

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<sup>1</sup> *Sayed M. Svensk och islamisk familjerätt — en jämförelse. Juridisk publikation: vid Stockholms universitet, 2017. Sid. 201–234.*

<sup>2</sup> *Skatteverket, 'Månggifte i folkbokföringsregistret', Dnr 204402092—17/13, januari. URL: <https://www.skatteverket.se/download/18.4a4d586616058d860bc7b3a/1516808177859/M%C3%A5nggifte+i+folkbokf%C3%B6ringsregistret+204+402+092+-+17+113.pdf> (accessed 03.12.2018).*

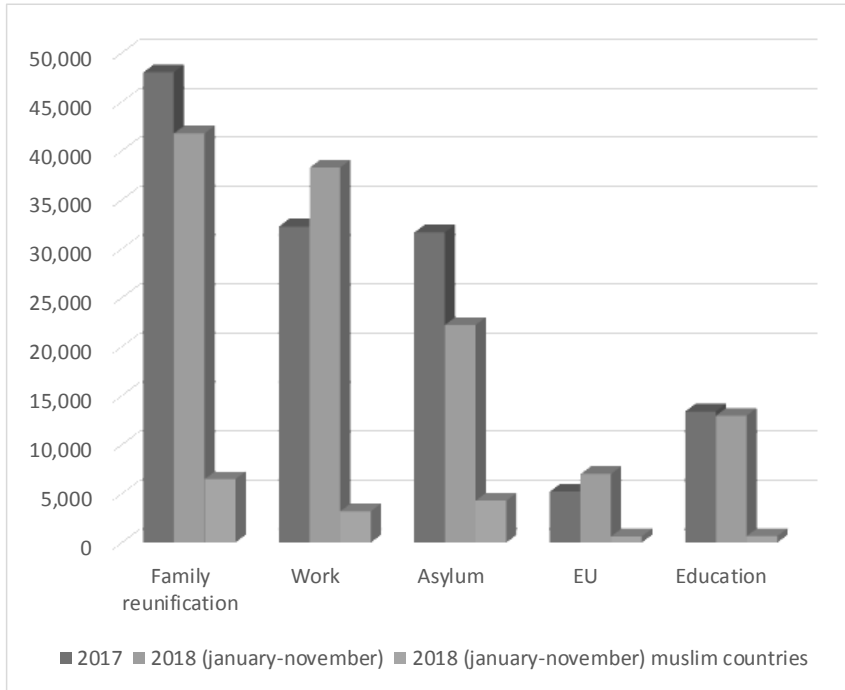


Fig. 1 Comparing the number of documents granting permanent residence in Sweden, 2017/ 2018 (January-November)<sup>3</sup>

Despite the fact that the correlation of the North European laws and Islamic Sharia has many “stumbling blocks”, one cannot deny that the process of bilateral interaction is gradually moving forward. Another question is that each settled issue evokes a number of new contradictions and difficulties: violation of the individual rights and freedoms, principle of equal treatment and absence of discrimination, question of raising children in polygamous marriages. Juvenile justice developed in the Nordic countries, which often comes into conflict with the laws of Islamic upbringing, contributes to the intensification of these contradictions.

### **Particular Cases of Cultural Clashes: Fir-tree and Concert**

Rapid growth of the Muslim population in Scandinavian countries is inevitably subjecting society and its everyday reality to specific transformations. Many people still remember the events of 2012 in Danish Kokkedal, when the clash of European cultural principles and the reaction of certain Muslims took place. Back then the administration of the city made a decision not to install the holi-

<sup>3</sup> *Migrationsverket*. URL: <https://www.migrationsverket.se/English/Startpage.html> (accessed 06.05.2019).



day's main symbol, the Christmas tree, in the city square, because five Muslim municipality members out of nine declared that it was inexpedient to spend seven thousand crowns (about 750 euros) on such a thing claiming they have come to this decision "by voting".<sup>4</sup>

Similar situations took place more than once. However, it is not easy to separate the real conflicts from those imposed by the local right-wing populist media. Thus, on October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018 a message was posted on the Orebro regional section of the Swedish television SVT web-site, in which the TV4 executive producer announced that the traditional Christmas concert that had been annually broadcast over the past several years had been canceled. Many international right-wing populists spread this message saying it was the result of the "pressure from the Muslim community". "Probably this one more example of Swedish traditions being suppressed not to annoy migrants who are not Christian,"<sup>5</sup> said an Emma R. on the Dutch site Voice of Europe, where it was possible to leave anonymous comments. A Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* later noted that the Voice of Europe website allowed over 30,000 different comments regarding this matter and similar statements constituted their majority. Representatives of SVT and TV4 repeatedly tried to convince the public that the broadcast cancellation was temporary (probably for only one year) and had more to do with a banal lack of financing than with insidious adversaries.

### **Islamic Traditions in European Culture: Paradoxes of Choice**

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One of migration side effects deals with the introduction of traditions based on the specific life experience as well as particular religious ideas accepted in a concrete sociocultural environment into the host society. These cultural constructs are being historically specific variants of interpreting religious guidelines. However, people sharing them believe these were the only true and fundamental interpretations. The disparity of certain Islamic provisions and the general cultural context of the host society is only one side of the value contradictions of Islamic culture as a social phenomenon.

With a relatively high degree of freedom in choosing particular religious practices (characteristic of Islam, which perhaps makes a non-economic background that determines attractiveness of Northern Europe for Muslims), a variety of Is-

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<sup>4</sup> How one local decision created a national 'War on Christmas' // The Copenhagen Post. 2012. URL: <http://cphpost.dk/news/national/how-one-local-decision-created-a-national-war-on-christmas.html> (accessed 02.12.2018).

<sup>5</sup> *Islam* inte orsaken bakom inställd julkonsert i TV 4. URL: <https://www.dn.se/nyheter/politik/islam-inte-orsaken-bakom-installd-julkonsert-i-tv4/?forceScript=1&variantType=AD> BLOCKER (accessed 02.12.2018).

lam interpretations within Muslim communities heterogeneous in their composition creates an angle of axiological contradictions and strengthens the space of possible value conflicts.

The data obtained shows that people who left their homeland for Northern Europe often did so because of their disagreement with Islamic rules, norms or regulations prevailing in their home countries. According to statistics, in 2016 only 32% of Norwegian Iranians remained Muslim, compared, for example, with 98% of Muslims of Somalian origin who still followed Islam.<sup>6</sup>

The Immigrants' Living Conditions Survey (*Levekårsundersøkelsen blant personer med innvandrerbakgrunn*) reports that in 2016 80% of Muslims in Norway claimed they were followers of the Islamic religion. Researchers claim that this figure corresponds to 200 000 people (out of 250 000 immigrants from Muslim countries living in Norway).

A study by a Norwegian government agency responsible for implementing state policy on refugees and integration says that religion plays a lesser role for immigrants, who reside in the country for more than thirty years than for those who have immigrated relatively recently (fewer than 10 years in the host country).<sup>7</sup> Muslims born in the countries of Northern Europe were also less strict about religious customs and norms.<sup>8</sup>

### **Are Islamic Values Compatible with the Traditional Norwegian Society?**

In case of Islam there is more skepticism than with any other religion. At the same time, there is significant difference between, on the one hand, immigrants from Muslim countries and children of immigrants born in Norway, and immigrants from non-Muslim countries and the country's population as a whole, on the other. The last group has more people believing that Islamic values were incompatible with the values of the host society; while the first group, where the majority are Muslims, tends to see the "core values" of both sides as having a greater resemblance (Fig. 2). By such interpretation of their own religion the young generation of Muslims can distance themselves from some religious customs, which they deem unacceptable, and justify their preferences by cultural variations in Islam that overlap with common civil values.

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<sup>6</sup> Amundsen B. Hvor mange muslimer er det i Norge i 2017. URL: <https://forskning.no/religion-samfunn-samfunns- kunnskap/2017/11/hvor-mange-muslimer-er-det-i-norge-i-2017> (accessed 02.12.2018).

<sup>7</sup> Slettholm A., Stokke O. De fleste norske muslimer er ikke så religiøse. URL: <https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/i/LlK9/-De-fleste-norske-muslimer-er-ikke-sa-religiose> (accessed 02.12.2018).

<sup>8</sup> Bustad O. Synen på islam inom den svenska religionsundervisningen — med utgångspunkt ifrån andra generationens muslimer. URL: <http://www.diva-portal.se/smash/get/diva2:1113560/FULLTEXT01.pdf> (accessed 02.12.2018).

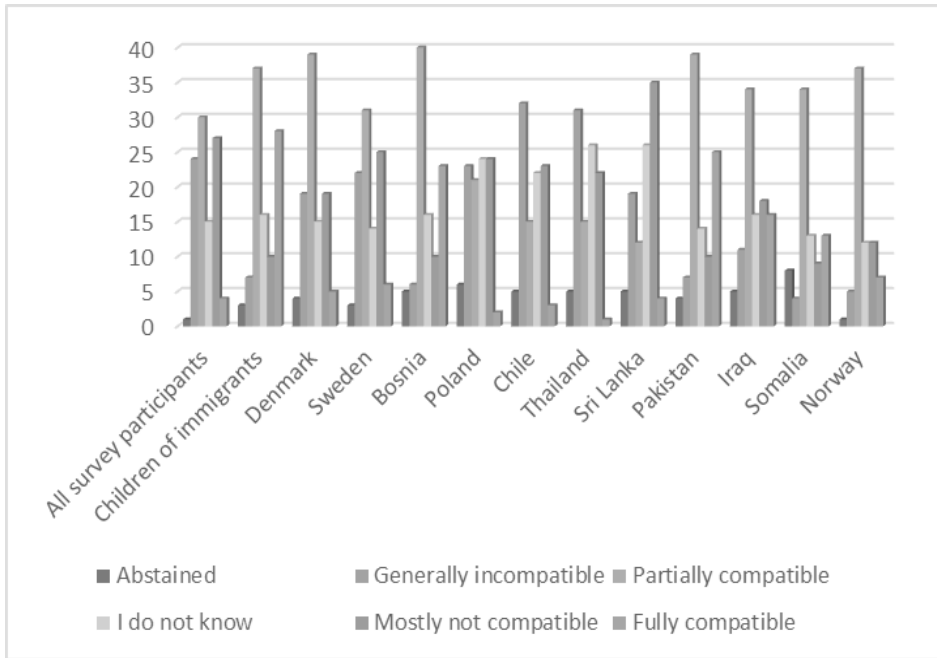


Fig. 2. Compatibility of Islamic values and the main values of the Norwegian society [22]

A note: N = 1364 (all research participants), 256 (children of the immigrants), 264 (Denmark), 248 (Sweden), 362 (Bosnia), 348 (Poland), 321 (Chile), 357 (Thailand), 211 (Sri Lanka), 278 (Pakistan), 367 (Iraq), 228 (Somalia), 74 (Norway).

## Statistics

*World values survey* monitored the role of religion around the globe in 2010–2014 and found that 49% of world’s population consider religion to be “very important” in their lives, further 22% said it was “rather important”. Naturally, different countries often demonstrate significant gap in their attitudes: the same question had 14% positive responses for Sweden and 98% for Somalia, for instance. Meanwhile atheist segment in Sweden grew from 6% in 1980–1990s to 15% in 2000s. Similar picture can be seen in Australia, Spain and Germany.<sup>9</sup>

In 2017 professor David Churfell (*Södertörns högskola*) undertook a research demonstrating the attitude of Sweden’s population towards religion. He conducted a sociological poll among 100 people, which showed that while 80% of the population had stopped going to the church, they continued to volun-

<sup>9</sup> Höjer H. Tro inte att religionen minskar. URL: <https://fof.se/tidning/2016/7/artikel/tro-inte-att-religionen-minskar> (accessed 01.12.2018).

tarily pay several thousand crowns as annual church tax and celebrate Easter and Christmas. Which means that religious affiliation through membership in the Swedish church was high, while religious activity at all levels was rather low, with only 23% of Swedes saying they believed in God. The researcher also asked a question about the degree of belonging to Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism or Buddhism. 24% responded that they feel strong or rather strong degree of belonging to Christian religion. For other religion systems the number was about 3%. One third of respondents said that they did not feel any belonging of this kind.<sup>10</sup>

Danish scholar Sune Leegaard, specialist in philosophy and religion, says that secularism does not equal atheism [23]. In his view atheism means absence of grounds for believing in God, while secularism is a “separating” point between politics and religion, non-interference of religion into political conflicts, which definitely does not mean it plays a secondary or insignificant role.

Let us stress again that Northern European societies in general have a very high level of secularization. A study by the international online edition “Salon” published in 2018 confirms it: according to the 2017 list of the most atheist countries, Denmark, Sweden and Norway took second, third and sixth places respectively.<sup>11</sup> This state of affairs is usually explained by quick technical and economic development and influence of information technologies — factors that make people doubt religious values.<sup>12</sup> Yet, *World Values Survey* polls of 2012 showed that every fifth Swede thinks that God plays a solid role in his/her life and every third Swede says that religion is important.<sup>13</sup> These answers refer to Christianity in the first place, but are also relevant for European Islam.

The difficulty is that many immigrants who choose Northern Europe for long-term and permanent residence come from the countries with a much more pronounced religious presence in daily life. If we compare the significance of religion in the life of Danish and Pakistani societies (Fig. 3), we will conclude that a compromise is hardly possible here.

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<sup>10</sup> Nylander L. Svenskarna tror — men inte på Gud. URL: <https://www.forskning.se/2017/04/12/svenskarna-tror-men-inte-pa-gud/> (accessed 02.12.2018).

<sup>11</sup> Marcotte A. The 8 most atheist-friendly countries in the world. URL: [https://www.salon.com/2015/08/17/the\\_8\\_most\\_atheist\\_friendly\\_countries\\_in\\_the\\_world/](https://www.salon.com/2015/08/17/the_8_most_atheist_friendly_countries_in_the_world/) (accessed 21.12.2018)

<sup>12</sup> Bustad O. Synen på islam inom den svenska religionsundervisningen — med utgångspunkt ifrån andra generationens muslimer. URL: <http://www.diva-portal.se/smash/get/diva2:1113560/FULLTEXT01.pdf> (accessed 02.12.2018).

<sup>13</sup> Bustad O. Synen på islam inom den svenska religionsundervisningen — med utgångspunkt ifrån andra generationens muslimer. URL: <http://www.diva-portal.se/smash/get/diva2:1113560/FULLTEXT01.pdf> (accessed 02.12.2018).

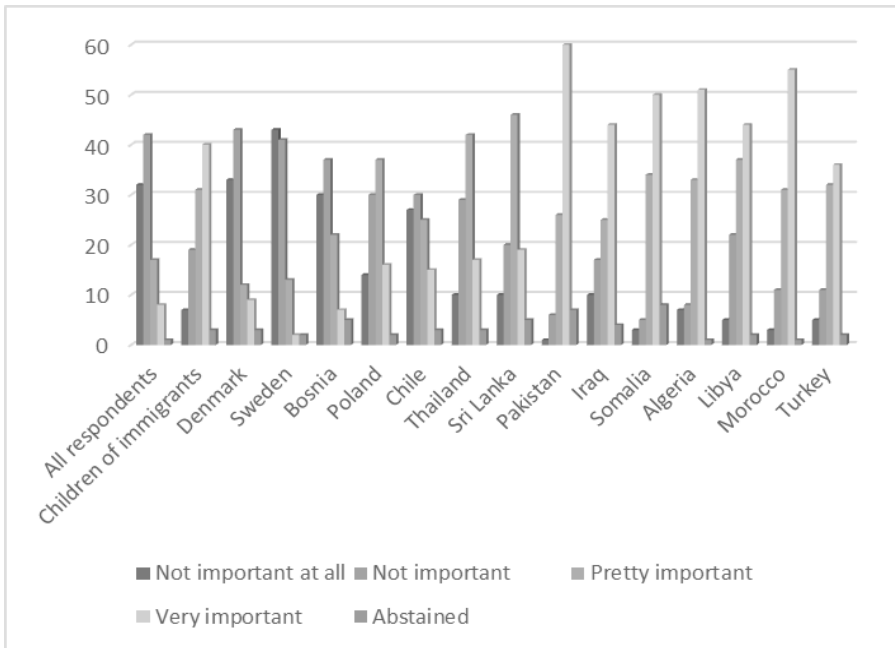


Fig. 3. Role of religion in one's life, by countries [22]

A note: N = 1290 (all research participants), 256 (children of immigrants), 264 (Denmark), 248 (Sweden), 362 (Bosnia), 348 (Poland), 321 (Chili), 357 (Thailand), 211 (Sri Lanka), 278 (Pakistan), 367 (Iraq), 228 (Somalia), 287 (Algeria), 214 (Libya), 321 (Morocco), 298 (Turkey)

Meanwhile, according to a study by the American analytical center Pew Research, which provides information on social issues, public opinion and demographic trends, four countries of Northern Europe — Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland — are headed towards becoming the first fifteen world countries with the largest Muslim population by 2050. If their predictions turn right these countries will be taking sixth, tenth, twelfth and thirteenth places respectively.<sup>14</sup>

## Mass-Media Materials

Content analysis of Sweden's biggest daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* (online version) for the period from January 1<sup>st</sup> to December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2018 showed that the word "Islam" was used in 195 articles, 13 of which were dedicated to the migration and assimilation matters, 22 — to participation of Muslims in terrorist organizations and criminal structures, 52 — to political problems, 64 to islamophobic manifestations and another 64 — to cultural/religious issues. It is obvious that negative connotations carry a serious weight, though not surpassing the value-neutral analytics and reflections on positive development of scenarios related to Islam.

<sup>14</sup> Sörbring K. Omstridd studie: Kan bli 30 procent muslimer i Sverige. URL: <https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/omstridd-studie-kan-bli-30-procent-muslimer-i-sverige/> (accessed 20.12.2018).

In 2017 Swedish mass media published a total of 64,000 materials related to Islam or Muslims. On average it churned out about 175 materials per day. The analysis of Sweden's five largest newspapers (*Dagens Nyheter*, *Expressen*, *Sydsvenskan*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, *Aftonbladet*) makes it clear that the term "Islamophobia" is used in 187 articles, 11 (5.9%) of which are written by Muslims, while the rhetoric of 7 articles (of these 11) is targeted against the spread of islamophobia (i.e. there is a deliberate journalistic struggle with negative assessments of Islam as a way of life). So, it can be concluded that the vast majority of articles on Islam (about 96%, or 176 articles) are written by people not identifying as Muslims who either do not see the islamophobia problem or do not consider it necessary to bring this topic to public attention (Fig. 4).

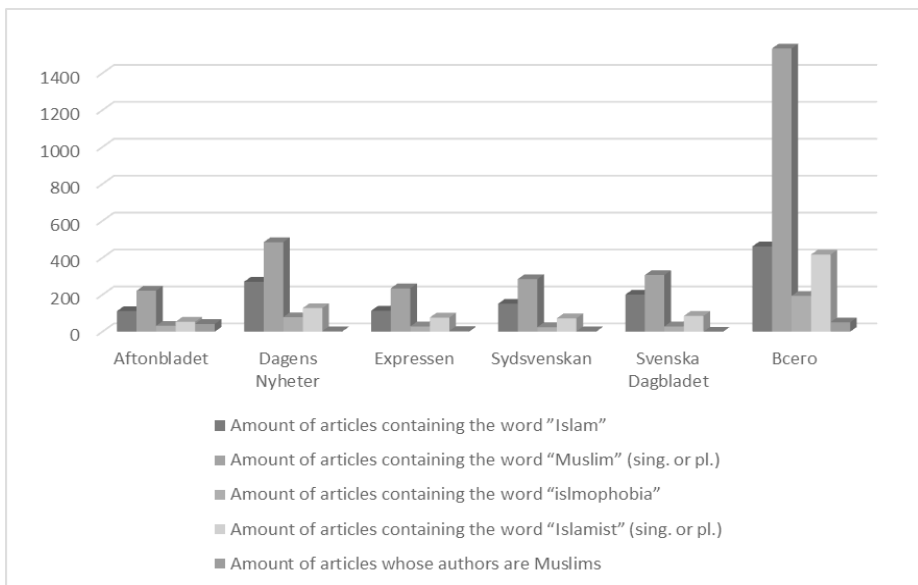


Fig. 4. Leading newspapers of Sweden (2017) [24]

Media readily publish references to various studies about the situation with Islam in the world carried out various by non-governmental organizations. For example, in 2015 Norwegian Directorate for Integration and Diversity (*Integrerings- og mangfoldsdirektoratet (IMDi)*) conducted an "Integration Barometer" (*Integreringsbarometer*) research in eight countries with the largest Muslim migrant groups (Bosnia, Poland, Chili, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Iraq, Somalia). When asked how important religious freedom was for them the majority of immigrants from Muslim countries replied "very important". More than half of immigrants from Somalia and Pakistan responded similarly, while eight out of ten Iraqi Muslims said "rather important". Fewer than 50% of Muslim immigrants from Sweden said it was "very important".<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Slettholm A., Stokke O. De fleste norske muslimer er ikke så religiøse. URL: <https://www.aftenposten.no/norge/i/LIK9/-De-fleste-norske-muslimer-er-ikke-sa-religiøse> (accessed 02.12.2018).

In 2018 the attitude towards Muslims was the toughest in Finland — 62% of Finns responded that Islam was fundamentally incompatible with the host (Finnish) culture and its values (Italy ranked second after Finland — 53%). More than one fourth of Finns (28%) said they were not ready to see prophet Mohammad as their family member; 14% would not accept him as their neighbor. However, according to the *Pew Research Centre*, Finland's Christians were the exception: only one out of five church-going Finns would wish to curb immigration (19%). This number was higher among religiously non-affiliated adults (33%) and non-practicing Christians (37%).<sup>16</sup> About 32% of Finland's population consider themselves non-believers (2015).<sup>17</sup>

At the same time many young Muslims of Finland do not enjoy easy relations with both culture and religion of their parents' homeland. Unlike their parents, second-generation Muslims are more inclined to have dual identity — identifying themselves as Finns when travelling abroad, but feeling foreign inside Finland. A dissertation thesis recently defended in Finland listed features that unite Finland with the Muslim world: modesty, honesty, reliability as well as some hygienic customs (sauna for example). Those young Muslims, who participated in the study, believed that there was only one “true” Islam common for all its adherents in the world, leaving no room for national or ethnic religious differences. Moreover, in their view traditions specific to a particular geographical region or ethnic group actually fall within the scope of “culture” rather than “religion”.<sup>18</sup>

### **What do Muslims Think of Cultural Islam?**

Hanna Gadban, a Muslim actively participating in public debates and a journalist of Swedish newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet*, thinks that such reform of Islam in the Northern European countries is necessary not least because of “increased radicalization among young people living in some kind of parallel society, even in Sweden”.<sup>19</sup> Rationality, morals, justice, humility and other qualities promoted by Islam are substituted among these radicals by hatred, vengeance and disdain towards everything and everyone not embracing the fundamentalist worldview.

<sup>16</sup> *Teivainen A.* Most Finns view that Islam is incompatible with Finnish culture and values, finds survey. URL: <http://www.helsinkitimes.fi/finland/finland-news/domestic/15575-most-finns-view-that-islam-is-incompatible-with-finnish-culture-and-values-finds-survey.html> (accessed 12.12.2018).

<sup>17</sup> *Granroth A.* Vi tror i smyg. URL: <https://svenska.yle.fi/artikel/2015/04/14/vi-tror-i-smyg> (accessed 20.12.2018).

<sup>18</sup> *Rautio P.* Religious and national identity of young Finnish Muslims varies by situation. URL: <https://www.helsinki.fi/en/news/language-culture/religious-and-national-identity-of-young-finnish-muslims-varies-by-situation> (accessed 21.12.2018).

<sup>19</sup> *Gadban H.* Liberal islam i skuggan av Sveriges politik. URL: <http://fritanke.se/liberal-islam-i-skuggan-av-sveriges-politik/> (accessed 23.12.2018).

This propaganda attracted some young Swedes to Islamist groups, such as al-Nusra and ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria),<sup>20</sup> whose goal is to fight infidels and die as martyrs in the name of faith (as shahids). However, under the pretext of realizing the utopian dream of an ideal state with harmonious sameness of the law and the legal system, they transmit inhuman, senseless in its cruelty calls for destruction of culture as long as it does not meet the perceptions of their narrow group. Gadban is especially outraged by the fact that due to intermittent success of such propaganda, Swedish Muslims can be associated with Islamists and their organizations, which is not true. On the other hand, such associations may fuel radicalization trends among young Swedes, for whom religious freedom might result in pseudo-religious permissiveness.

### **Imams from Abroad**

Most Scandinavian Islamic organizations invite imams from abroad, with the exception of Finnish Tatars, who traditionally receive imams from their lands of origin. Often it means that an imam who has just arrived to a completely new country does not possess sufficient understanding of the local legislation and public affairs. In this regard Swedish, Norwegian and non-Tatar Finnish Muslims expressed their desire and need for launching national education for imams. Governments of Northern European states are currently taking concrete steps to elaborate target educational programmes. Norway has made particular progress in this regard: following such requests from Muslims a two-year program has been launched at the theological faculty of the Oslo University including such courses, as *Norwegian history and society*, *Human rights*, *Spiritual counselling* and *Various religious interpretations*. The University is also working on creating a program of higher Islamic studies. Combined with theological education from foreign Islamic universities it would grant those interested a possibility to acquire official imam qualifications.

At the same time, representatives of Sweden declared they did not consider the issue of higher education for imams, because it would mean interference of a foreign state into the internal affairs of Muslim countries as well as distinguishing Muslims from other religious communities living in the secular Swedish state.<sup>21</sup>

### **Conclusions**

The very fact of increased public interest towards the issue of Islam and Muslim culture confirms the hypothesis of a parallel growth of both fundamentalism

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<sup>20</sup> Activity of this organization is prohibited at the territory of the Russian Federation.

<sup>21</sup> *Mårtensson U.* 'Public Islam' and the Nordic Welfare State: Changing Realities? URL: <http://islamforskning.dk/files/journal/2014/FIFO-2014-1-del1.pdf> (accessed 02.12.2018).



and secular attitudes inside Muslim community of the Nordic region. Cases studied for the purposes of this research show that the drastic disproportion between Islam and culture as a way of life characteristic for the majority of Northern Europeans seems especially obvious from the perspective of abstract theorizing by influential personalities, who are out of domestic, legal and religious realities of Northern European Muslims. Undoubtedly there are certain inconsistencies (like in the case of the Muslim family law), but over time gradual adaptation of Muslims the host society conditions, as well as the adjustment of the host society to peculiarities of the Muslim lifestyle is taking place. The latter is particularly important in the light of the predicted growth of Europe's Muslim population, especially in Northern Europe.

Content analysis of materials published by the leading Scandinavian media demonstrates polar trends in the assessment and interpretation of Islam's role in the cultural space of each Nordic country. However, the answer to the central question about the fate of "Cultural Islam" as an antidote to radicalization and unconstructive fundamentalist politicization of Islam remains open. Still it is possible to assume that in the mid-term (within the next 30 years) trends will remain that lead to singling out a significant part of Muslim believers (from quarter to half) into a specific group who would be practicing religion only externally. "Cultural Islam" in its factual manifestation confirms the assumption that in a foreign cultural environment one seems to lose the need for spiritual dimension as it was formulated by the classical Arab thinkers and representatives of Islamic centers. At the same time, some immigrants from the Muslim countries might be placed outside their religious tradition (mainly adults who have escaped religious persecution at home and fled to the Nordic countries not so much for political or economic, but for religious reasons).

Despite existing doubts regarding the viability of the term "Cultural Islam", there are great opportunities for combining the words "Islam" and "culture" in Northern European media and sociocultural space. At least there is a sign that public attitudes set the vector for public expectations, which are ready to accept Islam as a culture or a way of life, but not ready to see it as a political ideology or a radical social movement. Thus, it is possible to consider the prospects for expanding cooperation between the Baltic region and Nordic countries focusing on countering radical Islamism and developing multifaceted contacts, taking into account dynamics of the religious transformation. Islam is therefore, in a sense, "doomed" to position itself as a cultural phenomenon, i.e. "Cultural Islam". The extent to which such interpretation can impede self-identification as an "orthodox" Muslim and what an "orthodox" community can oppose to individuals and groups choosing their value preferences and behavior in accordance with the "Cultural Islam" requires further study as part of future interdisciplinary projects.

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## **The authors**

**Dr Svetlana Yu. Dianina**, Moscow State Institute of International Relations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (MGIMO University), Russia.

E-mail: dianina.svetlana@gmail.com

**Dr Mona Abdel Malik Khalil**, Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs, Egypt.

E-mail: mona\_khalil@mail.ru

**Prof. Vladimir S. Glagolev**, Moscow State Institute of International Relations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (MGIMO University), Russia.

E-mail: silvari@mail.ru