The Ahmadiyya Mission to the Nordic Countries

Brian Arly Jacobsen, Göran Larsson and Simon Sorgenfrei

Even though Ahmadiyya missionaries played a crucial role in the arrival and establishment of Islam in twentieth-century Europe and North America, very little academic attention has been paid to this Islamic reform movement. However, it is not our aim in this chapter to outline the theology or global history of the movement, but rather to try and give a brief presentation of how the movement was established in Sweden, Norway and Denmark. The first Ahmadiyya missionary came to Scandinavia in as early as 1956, placing the Ahmadiyya among the first Muslim groups to establish themselves in the Nordic countries. Despite slow beginnings, the number of followers has increased, and contemporary leaders of the Ahmadiyya community give the following estimates of current members in Denmark, Norway and Sweden.

But before we delve into the institutional history of the Ahmadiyya movement in the three Nordic countries, we need to describe briefly the emergence of the movement and its theological background. The reader who wants to learn more about the movement and its theological positions should consult the works of, for example, Yohanan Friedmann (2003; 2013), Anonio Gualtieri (2004), Simon Ross Valentine (2008) or Spencer Lavan (1974). The following section is primarily built on Friedmann (2013) unless otherwise stated. Besides the sparse academic literature it is also worth consulting the large number of Ahmadiyya books and articles that have been made available in print copies or as pdf's online. A large part of this literature has been translated into Western languages, but it is also possible to obtain the original works in Urdu or Arabic.

According to Yohanan Friedmann, the Ahmadiyya is often presented as a “messianic Islamic movement” that was founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (d. 1908) in Punjab, India, in the late 1880s. At the end of the nineteenth century a variety of new interpretations of Islam were emerging in South Asia, the Middle East and other places in the so-called Muslim world. This was also a period of a strong awakening and of the establishment of a number of messianic and new religious movements (NRM) in the West. Just as a number of such movements emerged in Euro-America (Melton 2004), partly as a result of and in response to eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophy and nineteenth-century modernization, the Ahmadiyya can be understood as a response to similar needs of reform and change in the Indian Muslim world. The Ahmadiyya mission and theology also contain new elements and novel
interpretations of older traditions that have led scholars to consider it a new religious movement (Rothstein 1997: 84f). Consequently, the Islamic/Muslim background, as well as both indirect and direct linkages to the backgrounds of new religious movements, should not be neglected when the early years of the Ahmadiyya community are analysed.

The Ahmadiyya was founded in 1889 by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad from Qadian in India. To write the biography and early history of Ahmad and the movement he founded presents us with some difficulties, as most information is based on so-called insider points of views, and much of the material can best be described as hagiographic. It is also important to stress that the movement split into two branches in 1914, the Qadiyani's and the Lahoris, primarily over different views of the founder Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's status as a prophet. Theologically speaking Ahmadiyya Islam is mainly controversial for what one could call “mainstream” Sunni and Shia Muslims for two reasons. First the founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, is seen as a prophet and as the Mahdi and the promised Messiah by the Qadiyani branch, as a result of which this branch is often perceived as not conforming to the principle of the “finality of Prophethood” (khatm al-nubuwwa), namely the idea that the prophet Muhammad is the final prophet given to mankind, a tenet held by a majority of Sunni and Shia Muslims. Followers of the Lahori branch, however, do not believe Mirza Ghulam Ahmad to be a new prophet, but rather a renewer (mujaddid) of Islam. For the Nordic countries, it is the Qadiyani branch that dominates and to our knowledge there are no organized followers of the Lahori branch in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Secondly, according to Ahmadiyya doctrine Jesus was not taken up to heaven to return at the end of time, as most Sunni and Shia Muslims believe. Instead they believe that Jesus disappeared for a number of days (usually three) and that he then left for India, where he died in Kashmir (Ahmad 1989). In a way similar to Jesus, Mirza Ghulam Ahmed is believed to be someone to whom God speaks directly (he is seen as a muhaddath). Consequently, it is believed that his function and mission are to perfect God’s religion. This interpretation is also contrary to the beliefs of most Sunni and Shia Muslims and is thus controversial with them.

Because of the theological interpretations presented above and the sensitive political situation that followed the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, members of the Ahmadiyya movement have suffered both discrimination and sectarian violence since the 1950s. Several anti-Ahmadiyya riots have been reported from Pakistan, and in 1974 the constitution of Pakistan declared Ahmadiyya Muslims to be non-Muslims. This classification was soon put to use by other countries: for example, Ahmadiyya Muslims were not allowed to participate in the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj) because they are viewed