Introduction:
Islam and Muslims in European News Media

Titus Hjelm
School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London
t.hjelm@ucl.ac.uk

If there is one thing scholars of religion currently seem to agree about, it is that the demise of religion predicted by the secularization thesis has not happened—or at least has not happened on a scale previously thought. Although there are very good social scientific reasons to treat this ‘return of religion’ with caution,1 what is undoubtedly true is that no matter what people individually believe, ‘God is back’2 in public discourse—and Islam is at the heart of this global resurgence.

As has been noted by many observers, 11 September, 2001 and the consequent “war on terror” marked a watershed in the new awareness of Islam and Muslims as a global presence.3 During the following decade, terrorist attacks in Madrid and London, intensified migration and different understandings of religious pluralism and multiculturalism have brought Islam under scrutiny in Europe. Anti-immigration has become a winning ticket for parties across the continent and the discourse on ‘civil war in Europe’, allegedly to be fought between ‘indigenous’ Europeans and Muslims, is spreading across the Internet.4 Anders Behring Breivik’s terror spree in Norway in July 2011 was a horrid manifestation of that discourse.

While concern and fear—moral panic, one could say—about Islam and Muslims seems to be on the rise, the fact remains that most Europeans have never had personal contact with a Muslim. In other words, knowledge about Islam and Muslims in Europe is overwhelmingly mediated knowledge. The articles in this special issue examine the representation of Islam and Muslims in European news media. The news is consumed in different ways—from naïve to critical—of course, but whatever the individual interpretations, the (“fair and balanced”) news media has the power to set the agenda for collective discussion. Although there is no definitive research on the issue, it would be reasonable to argue that most people get their first impressions from the news and then turn to, say, anti-immigration discourse on the internet to buttress their negative reading of the news.

The important issue here is that public discourse (including news) about Islam, perhaps more so than about any other religion, is never just about a religious tradition. It is as much about ‘us’ as it is about ‘them’. Both Elizabeth Poole and Melanie Becker & Yasemin El-Menouar demonstrate that the news media actively engages in definitions of what it ‘truly’ means to be British or German, respectively. Becker & El-Menouar perceptively argue that Islam and Muslims are ‘culturalized’, i.e. ‘[f]ailed integration on various levels is mainly associated with a lack of cultural integration instead of other factors such as socioeconomic deprivation, injustice of the educational system, recursive processes of discrimination and retreat, or the like. Cultural integration, the implicit assumption seems to be, is not the result, but rather the basis for other forms of integration.’ For Poole, the key issue is how denying the right wing, anti-Islam Dutch politician Geert Wilders entry to the UK in 2009 provided a platform for conservative and liberal groups alike to assert their own versions of ‘Britishness’ through the media.

Kristian Steiner’s Swedish case brings a new dimension to the analysis: Instead of looking at mainstream secular news media, Steiner examines the image of Islam and Muslims in an Evangelical newspaper. The interreligious discourse has its own particularities, but the patterns of representation seem to follow a familiar line: Islam is seen as a threat. Although strange bedfellows, the Swedish case shows how Islam (and the fear of Islam) unites seemingly incompatible views from both ends of the religious-secular spectrum.