In Sweden in the spring of 2018 a major debate erupted regarding the right of Muslim mosques to issue *adhan*—public calls to prayer—by means of loudspeakers. An imam in a congregation in the southern town of Växjö had applied for permission from the local authorities to make a weekly, 3 minutes and 45 second-long, call, but neighbors worried that the ritual would be noisy and possibly disturbing. Once the issue was picked up both by traditional and social media, it quickly became the subject of an intense public debate. Although the impact on the people of Växjö surely was limited, the implications for Sweden as a whole were huge. Was a Muslim call to prayer a welcome addition to the life of the community or a threat to it? Should Islam be given a recognized voice, and Muslims a recognized place, in Swedish society?

The fact that parliamentary elections were to take place in September of the same year added urgency to the debate. While there formally speaking was no reason for the Swedish government to concern itself with a matter of local politics, the symbolism of the issue presented considerable challenges. The government—a two-party, center-left, coalition made up of the Social Democrats and the Greens—had in the previous election, in 2014, campaigned on a vision of a pluralistic, multicultural, society. At the time, the center-right coalition, consisting of four separate parties, shared those views. The Sweden Democrats, however, did not. A populist party running on an anti-immigration platform, the Sweden Democrats had emerged from the proto-fascist fringe to capture 12.9 percent of the votes in the 2014 election; in subsequent years their share of the electorate continued to rise—reaching 20 percent, according to some surveys. It was consequently clear that there was a lot to be gained from a policy seen to be “tough on immigrants.” Indeed, given that the left-wing and the right-wing coalitions in the spring of 2018 were running head-to-head in the polls, recapturing the voters who had defected to the Sweden Democrats could very well determine the outcome of the upcoming election. An easy way to manifest the required “toughness” would be to silence the Muslim calls to prayer.

The question was eventually settled in a pragmatic fashion. The calls to prayer could be publicly broadcast, but they could not be so loud that they disturbed the neighbors. Although this decision allowed the government to sidestep the issue, it did nothing to allay the fears of the growing number of people who intended to vote for the Sweden Democrats. According to them, the *adhan* is an alien practice which has no place in Swedish society.

**Abstract:** To understand why support for anti-immigrant policies is on the increase in Sweden, we need to think about Muslim demands for parity within the country. In this context, the *adhan* (Muslim call to prayer) is best understood as a practice, not merely as an expression, and as all practices it forms a part of a certain way of life. The real question is whether or not other, non-Swedish, forms of life should be allowed in Swedish society. To this question all Swedish politicians, not only the Sweden Democrats, currently give a negative answer.

**Keywords:** Muslim call to prayer, Sweden, welfare state, society
in Swedish society. The decision to allow Muslim calls to prayer, with its references to liberal rights, had failed to address what we might understand as a prior question of ontology—the question of what Swedish society is and what it should be.

If we want to understand why support for anti-immigrant policies is on the increase, we cannot do what the Swedish government did. We must take the ontological question seriously. The adhan, we will argue in this essay, is indeed best understood as a practice, not merely as an expression, and as all practices it forms a part of a certain way of life. The real question is whether or not other, non-Swedish, forms of life should be allowed in Swedish society. To this question all Swedish politicians, not only the Sweden Democrats, currently give a negative answer. Foreigners should not form “a parallel society” but must be “integrated” into the Swedish mainstream. And yet, this conclusion can itself be questioned. Otherness, we will argue, is not a choice but instead a feature of the human condition—the irrevocable otherness of others but also the otherness of oneself. The choice is only whether or not to acknowledge this fact. By reminding us of who we are, the adhan reminds us of what it means to be human. In this sense, the Muslim call to prayer must be answered by all Swedes.

Calls to Prayer and Liberal Rights
For anyone equipped with a copy of the Swedish constitution, the question of whether or not to allow the adhan should be easy enough to settle. Freedom of expression and freedom of religion are strongly defended by Swedish law. “Freedom of expression has an intrinsic value which we must cherish and protect,” as a contributor to the debate pointed out (Jalali 2018). Where there are Muslims, there will be Islam, and “Muslims too should be able to express their religion and follow their traditions without censorship or repression.” No one can silence another person simply because they object to, or take offense at, what is being said. “There is no generalized right to ‘avoid’ religion in the public sphere,” another contributor added, hence no one has a right not to hear the Muslim call to prayer (Svensson 2018).

Yet, critics argued, the adhan should not be understood as an expression as much as an action, and actions, even in a liberal society, are often quite constrained. According to the so called “harm principle,” you cannot act in such a way that it imposes costs on others or limits their freedom of action (Mill 1859). This, according to the critics, was exactly what the adhan did. Pointing to the Act on Religious Freedom, 1951, they insisted that people are free to practice their religion only as long as “the public peace” is not disturbed or “a public nuisance” created (Sveriges riksdag 1951). The adhan, said the critics, is a perfect example of a disturbance and a nuisance (“Stoppa böneutrop i Växjö!” 2018). Yet their legal position was weakened by the fact that the 1951 law now has been superseded by the European Convention on Human Rights, to which Sweden is a signatory, where the wording in the equivalent passage is considerably less open-ended (Sveriges riksdag 1994). Moreover, the European Court of Human Rights has been reluctant to rule in favor of restrictions. Jehova’s Witnesses have, for example, had their right to proselytize affirmed by the court (Kokkinakis v. Greece 1993). By comparison, Muslim calls to prayer are surely only mildly annoying.

In addition, as defenders of the adhan have pointed out, the practice is really not all that different from the ringing of church bells. Church bells too constitute a public call to prayer, and it can be described as loud and invasive in exactly the same way. At Swedish cathedrals, the bells ring three times a day, three additional times on Sundays, but also in connection with other religious services throughout the week (“När ringer Domkyrkans klockor?” 2015). Since all religions should be treated equally, the adhan should be allowed as long as church bells are. Moreover, in modern societies there are many different things that emit intrusive sounds. Highways are noisy, and so are airplanes, political demonstrations, ice-cream trucks, marching bands, wind turbines, and much else besides. In addition, the public sphere is regularly invaded by olfactory and visual stimuli—notably by advertising, which it too is a call to prayer of sorts. Learning how to cope with the noise, smells, and clutter produced
by other human beings is a part of learning how to cope with modern life.

This is also how the case of the Växsjö adhan eventually was settled. While acknowledging that a call to prayer indeed can impose costs on others, harm can be minimized if the calls are short, infrequent and not too loud. “If [the call to prayer] is experienced as disturbing,” Stefan Löfven, the Swedish Prime Minister, concluded, “we should not allow it. But if it is not disturbing it is another matter. This is why it is important that local authorities decide the issue, depending on conditions that vary from place to place” (Larsson 2018). Not surprisingly, critics accused the Prime Minister of missing the point (Arpi 2018; Hakelius 2018). By reducing the question of the place of Islam, and of Muslims, in Swedish society to a pragmatic issue to be determined by local authorities, and by means of decibel meters, the government failed to address people’s fears (“Kommunen sa sitt om böneutrop – en fråga om ljudnivåer” 2018). Yet if the government had missed the point it was surely on purpose. As the Prime minister knew only too well, the entire issue was far too toxic to be properly addressed before the election.

On May 25, 2018, the first officially sanctioned, public and amplified, call to prayer was issued at the Växsjö mosque. Earlier the same day a political meeting in the city-center, organized by a right-wing fringe group, had gathered some 150 protesters calling for an “end to the Islamization of the country” (“Stor polisinsats bevakar torgmöte mot böneutrop” 2018). At the mosque itself, everything proceeded without incidents. The adhan was greeted enthusiastically by the crowd who had assembled, while neighbors and passers-by seem take little notice. The subsequent Friday prayer was attended by some 500 worshipers, twenty policemen, a police helicopter, newspaper reporters and TV crews (“Här hörs böneutropet över Växjö för första gången” 2018).

Calls to Prayer and Social Practices

Although the Swedish government refused to acknowledge the real issue at stake in the adhan debate, there is no reason for us to do so. The concern of the critics was not a 3 minutes, 45 seconds, call but rather the impact on Swedish society of the large number of foreigners, many of them Muslims, who had arrived in the country in recent years. This is consequently what we need to discuss. The problem with the adhan is quite simply that it is a practice alien to Swedish society and as such yet another example of the many alien practices in which Muslims engage. We ring bells since it is a part of “our Christian tradition” and “our way of life,” critics asserted; Muslims have other traditions, they are free to practice them in their own countries, but they are not free to practice them here. “We just don’t want these people in our country,” the Sweden Democrats could say, and an ever increasing portion of Swedish voters agreed.

It is this self-image which is undermined by the Muslim call to prayer. The adhan reminds you of your religious duties, tells you to turn towards God, but you are only reminded and told if you are a Muslim. Swedes are not Muslims and for that reason they are not called. This makes church bells different (Sverigedemokraterna 2018). The Christian call to prayer applied to the whole community, to all Swedes, and for hundreds of years they had no choice but to respond. This is why critics find the adhan troubling. It is a reminder that foreigners live here, people who follow alien practices in a community of which we are not a part (Hellström and Nilsson 2010; Norocel 2011). This is offensive to nationalists for whom a state only can consist of one body of citizens. We should all belong to the same nation, the same community. If there is to be any calling, we should all have the same opportunity to respond.

Since it is Muslim practices which are at stake, it is practices, not rights, that we need to discuss (Bell 1990). A practice, for our purposes, is a standardized way of behaving in which we quite automatically engage once we find ourselves in a certain situation (Rouse 2006). As such, practices are crucial features of all religions. Practices such as chanting, kneeling and praying constitute to a large extent what we mean by a religion. Indeed, if we took these practices away, a religion would concern nothing but the texts of the scriptures and the tenets of a faith. What would remain, that is, would be explicit
statements of various kinds, attempts at rationalizations and explications, intended to appeal to our cognitive faculties. The problem is only that none of this explicit material, taken by itself, is particularly convincing. If this is all that religion is, believers would be forced to believe the unbelievable and defend the indefensible. There is no scientific evidence after all for the existence of God. Pointing this out, it is easy for atheists to score points.

Practices face no similar challenges. A practice is something that we do; it is something that happens right here and now. As such it draws us in and focuses our attention on certain objects and events. Practices require us to move, and to follow the movements of others, and as such they appeal to our bodies rather than to our minds. By paying attention to what is transpiring before us, our bodies are entrained—captured, held and carried long by the practice—and so, eventually, are our minds. Although we certainly can engage in religious practices on our own, we often do so together with others. Collective practices make us coordinate our actions with our fellow practitioners as we move and speak and sing in sync. As a result, our muscles are synchronized too, and so is our breathing, heartbeats, and with them a number of precognitive physiological processes (Collins 2004; Schüler 2012). This is how people who engage in the same practices increasingly come to feel the same things, but also to think about the same things and to develop social bonds. When engaged in a religious practice we are no longer alone, but a part of a collective body.

In contrast to the cognitive material which a religion tries to foist upon us, religious practices have no opposites and they cannot be contradicted. Thus, while a practice may be inappropriate, or perhaps boring, it cannot deceive or lie. And many practices are indeed perfectly convincing. A practice convinces, not by providing answers to questions, but instead by responding to the situation in which its practitioners find themselves. The practice is not right, it can never be right, but it feels right. The situation has a mood which calls out for a certain kind of behavior and when we find ourselves in this mood, we simply do what is required of us. In this way the practice comes to imply a certain bodily posture and gait; it has a rhythm and even an accompanying musical score. And before we know it one thing has led to another. One practice implies other practices, ways of feeling and thinking, and to the extent that we engage in the practice together with others, these practices, feelings and thoughts are shared. In this way, an entire way of life comes to be evoked.

The importance of religious practices was constantly emphasized by the Prophet Muhammad. Prayer, he is recorded to have said, is the “pillar of religion and the key to paradise,” and a religion that dispenses with prayer is for that reason no longer a religion (Bush 1900, 121). Likewise, practices have always been stressed by Sufi saints. Words can only take us so far in our journey towards God, but meditative practices can take us much further. Most spectacularly, the Sufis danced their faith. Or compare the importance of religious practices in the life of a new convert. Putting on a hijab identifies you to others, and to yourself, as a Muslim believer, but wearing it also feels a certain way and it places you in the world in a certain fashion (Norris 2003). Hence the significance of the adhan. Not all Muslims pray of course, but to the extent that they do, their bodies are attuned to and organized according to a mood. Engaging in five daily prayers, you come to take up a particular stance, bodily posture and an attitude. Suddenly your whole day is directed towards God. Moreover, you are directed towards God together with others. Once you respond to the call you join a community of other practitioners. This is why it is a mistake to think of a Muslim call to prayer as nothing but an expression which should be covered by liberal rights. Instead the adhan evokes a world-view and a way of life.

Welfare-state Nationalism

The claim is consequently that there is a clash between the religious practices of Muslim immigrants and what critics of the adhan refer to as “Swedish values” or “a Swedish way of life.” In order to assess this claim, we need to say more about Sweden. Obviously, values and ways of life differ from one Swedish citizen to the next and it
is in any case far from clear whether there is something distinctly “Swedish” about them. Instead “Swedishness” exists above all as a self-conception, as a way in which people in Sweden describe themselves and as they are described by others (Musiał 2002). The alleged clash is between Muslim practices and this collective biography. Although a self-conception of one kind or another is present at all times, it is at turning-points in the life of a person or a society that they become topics of explicit concern. At times of crisis discussions of “who we are” often take up much of our time. In the case of Sweden there are two examples of such crisis points—the first taking place at the turn of the 20th century; the second taking place at the turn of the 21st century.

Although the Industrial Revolution came late to Sweden—only in the latter part of the 19th century—the transformations it wrought, once under way, were rapid. The opening up of global markets presented new opportunities for Swedish exports but also threats to the traditional way of life (Ringmar 2016). Peasant society was broken up by a new division of labor which forced people to move—many to the cities to work in factories, but as much as a quarter of the population emigrated to the United States. The new generation of workers were tempted by radical political ideas, and to members of the traditional elite this was a cause of concern. Somehow or another their demands had to be accommodated, and the emigration stopped, but any concessions should at the same time not be allowed to undermine the traditional social order. This was when the metaphor of the “household” was revived (Marklund 2006). The metaphor of the state as a “house” had been commonly invoked in early modern Sweden, but at the time it was primarily a way to affirm the patriarchal powers of the king and the duties of his subjects. Now the metaphor acquired a more caring, more motherly, dimension (Tornbjer 2007). Although social classes are given different tasks and occupy different positions, conservative writers explained, they all live in the same household and have the kinds of obligations towards each other that family members have (Kjellén 1906).

This was the metaphor picked up by the Social Democrats and turned into the notion of a folkhem, a “home for all Swedes.” As the leader of the party, Per-Albin Hansson, explained in 1928, the folkhem was a home of a perfectly modern kind—a democratic and egalitarian institution, without traditional social distinctions, in which all Swedes were united by bonds of solidarity (Hansson 1928). It was no longer the king who was in charge of the home, but the state, and after the 1932 elections the Swedish state was run by the Social Democrats. Indeed, the Social Democrats were to remain continuously in power for the following 44 years. In the Swedish folkhem, schools, universities, hospitals and old-folks homes were all run by the authorities, and next to everyone was a member of the same nation-wide, state-supported, trade unions. Organizing their days by means of these institutions, a certain Swedish way of life came into existence. Swedes all picked up their children from the same government-run kindergartens, sat down to watch the same news on the same public service TV stations, queued up at the same state-owned liquor stores, went on the same state-funded maternity/paternity leaves and took the same four—later six—week, state-mandated, vacations.

The values associated with the folkhem were more than anything the values of the Enlightenment—the liberté, égalité and fraternité of the French Revolution (Musiał 2002, 85; Andersson 2009). The welfare state was to make people free to live their own lives in their own fashion, but it was also to make them equal—everyone should have the same opportunities regardless of their social position. At the same time, all Swedes were united in a close fellowship—they were brothers and sisters who shared the same home. A society which is free, egalitarian and fraternal is a modern society, the Social Democrats concluded, and to make it happen another Enlightenment value was invoked—rationality. Swedish society was to be consciously recreated and reformed by means of scientific knowledge and state-run policies in order to make every aspect of it as rational as possible. Everything should be there for a reason; form should follow function; life itself should be
efficient, make sense, be logical and well planned. Sweden, as a result, was a country where everything constantly was changing, constantly improving. This is how Sweden, in the minds both of the Swedes themselves and enthusiastic foreign observers, became the “most modern country in the world” (Musiał 2002, 232). Sweden is the country which is leading the march into the future. As such, it was not only different from others, but better. Sweden had History on its side, showing everyone else the path which they had to follow.

Illusions of grandeur on this scale are obviously difficult to sustain. The Swedish economy suffered a beating in the 1970s, together with the rest of Europe, but it was the financial crisis of the early 1990s which took the biggest toll on Swedish self-confidence (Ringmar 1998; Andersson 2009). At the time, everyone suddenly talked about “The Crisis,” and the implication was that the Swedish model, and the Swedish way of life, no longer were sustainable. History itself seemed to have played the country a trick. Starting in the 1980s, borders between national markets had come down and far larger, eventually fully global, markets had been created. In this new international environment it was difficult to explain how a country such as Sweden, with its high taxes, would be able to compete. This was when Sweden joined the EU and when the government embarked on a series of radical reforms. While the universal insurance schemes were retained, more place was given to other providers. Suddenly social services were supplied by private companies too, not only by the Swedish state. And Sweden, it turned out, was once again successful. The economy made a spectacular recovery. The early 2000s was also when Swedes enthusiastically came to embrace the digital revolution and when they adopted new, more modern, ways of thinking about issues such as same-sex marriages and HBTQ rights.

And, much as during the first era of globalization in the nineteenth-century, migration became a hotly debated topic—although this time around, in the second era of globalization, people were coming to the country rather than leaving it. After 2003, some 74,253 asylum seekers arrived from Iraqi, and after 2011, 116,869 persons came from Syria and 61,206 from Afghanistan (“Översikter och statistik från tidigare år” 2018). The question was only whether all these homeless Muslims would be allowed a place in the folkhem.

Muslim Practices and Enlightenment Values

The refugee crisis has caused a nationalistic backlash all over Europe, putting right-wing parties in power. In every case, anti-Muslim prejudices have been formulated in terms of the historical traditions of each country, and in the case of Sweden, Islam has more than anything been contrasted with the values of the welfare state (Amin, Lindberg, and Dahlstedt 2002; Hellström and Nilsson 2010, 68; Norocel 2013). The Muslim refugees present us with a showdown between modernity and unmodernity, critics have argued, between reason and unreason, and the list of complaints is as long as it is familiar. The Muslim world is irredeemably “medieval”; it missed out on the Enlightenment and has ever since had problems accepting democratic institutions and human rights; Islam is antithetical to liberty, equality, and rationality. Muslims still actually believe in religion while Swedes, after the Chinese, are the most secular people in the world (WIN/Gallup poll 2017).

Religious practices are particularly difficult for Swedes to understand. From a rationalistic point of view, a ritual is just a movement, it has no cognitive content, provides no arguments and makes no sense. Practices are silent, empty, and formalistic, and they are conservative too. Practices force the body to follow certain familiar routines, and when everyone’s life has become fully routinized, nothing ever changes. It is the task of reason to examine these practices and to accept or reject them. Reason is the judge, say the defenders of Enlightenment values, and it exercises its judgments through public discussions. By discussing things in public, a certain way of life is examined from the outside, as it were, and in this way we can impartially study its preconditions and its consequences.
This is how reforms begin, yielding social improvements and political change.

Compare the way European nineteenth-century travelers to Muslim lands discussed the religion of the locals. Islam, they reported, is not a religious faith as much as a daily routine. Muslims pray as they eat or sleep or perform their toilet, but their minds are never engaged in these activities (Porter 1855, 141). In Islam there are laws to obey and practices to perform, but nothing to contemplate or investigate. Islam requires submission to a tradition “beneath whose tremendous weight, reason, thought, freedom, and progress have literally been crushed to death” (Osborn 1878, 46). The adhan illustrates the problem. These obeisances, with their submissive prostrations, the sociologist Herbert Spencer concluded, are characteristic of militaristic societies where people are used to coercion, but they no longer occur in societies “where freer forms of social institutions, proper to the industrial type,” have come to dominate (Spencer 1899, 2:143). Protestant missionaries in Muslim countries agreed. Their mission was to convert the locals to a less ritualistic, more rational, more modern, faith.

And yet, we are today in a position to conclude, this faith in reason was detrimental to a religious understanding of the world and detrimental to Protestantism. Religion, from the nineteenth-century onward, was only something that happened in your head, not in your body, but a faith which no longer is lived and felt is not going to be particularly convincing. As Immanuel Kant may have been the first to realize, once religion is reduced to a set of rational principles there is no need for, and thus no place for, the notion of a God (Kant 1798). When reason rules, it is instead human beings who are in charge of life on earth. This is the intellectual trajectory which Protestantism followed in the case of Sweden (Tomasson 2002). Here religion was first thoroughly rationalized and eventually it was quite imperceptively replaced by the Enlightenment values enunciated as embodied by the welfare state. From a country in which everyone had been a Christian, Sweden was transformed, in the span of about a hundred years, into a country in which next to no one was a Christian. Once the state was in charge, no other gods were needed.

In modern Swedish society a failure to respect the will of the welfare state is thus the new form of sin. No one is allowed to question the value of freedom, equality, and fraternity, and no one is allowed to doubt the state’s ability to rationally transform society. This, say the critics, are the sins which Muslim migrants commit. Consider freedom. In a modern society people are free to dress whichever way they like, but Muslim women are forced to wear garments like the hijab which conceals and imposes a uniform appearance on them. In modern society, no one should be an instantiation of a certain type and everyone should be allowed to freely express their personalities. Oppressed by their men and their traditions, Muslim women are unable to participate in public life as equals.

Or consider equality. In 2016, Yasri Khan, a leading politician in the Green Party, was forced to resign after he had refused to shake hands with a female TV reporter, preferring instead to press his hands to his chest as a sign of respect (“Swedish Politician Quits after Refusing to Shake Women’s Hand” 2016). Khan insisted that a handshake was an example of the kind of physical contact between the sexes which is frowned upon by Islam. His behavior was widely criticized on the grounds of equality. If men shake hands with other men, they should shake hands with women too. “In Sweden we greet each other,” as Stefan Löfven, the Prime Minister put it, “we shake hands with both women and men” (Sveriges Radio 2018). The handshake is a ritual conducted between equals, and by not shaking hands with women Khan had made clear that they are not equal with men. By stretching out our hands we acknowledge the existence of the other and establish a physical connection which is the basis of our future interaction. Likewise, a
parting handshake indicates our willingness to “stay in touch.”

As far as brotherhood—the fraternité of the French Revolution—is concerned, Muslims obviously fare much better. There is no doubt that Muslims have a strong sense of community, traditionally referred to as the ummah. Moreover, since Islam, much as Christianity, is a proselytizing religion, this community is potentially universal in scope. But the defenders of the values of the Enlightenment are proselytizers too and the rational values they embrace are equally universal in their application. “Civilization,” they claim, will eventually come to encompass everyone, everywhere. Yet to the extent that Islam is antithetical to modern society, the result is a clash of universalisms, where a gain for the one is regarded as a loss for the other. And crucially, say the critics, the ummah is a community of a distinctly pre-modern kind. The fellowship of Muslims is the fellowship of people who are subjected to the same omnipotent ruler. Islam is all about submission; indeed, “submission” is what Islam means. The rows upon rows of believers who fall flat on their faces during Friday prayer are a case in point. The modern, enlightened, community, by contrast, is like a republic made up of free and independent citizens. In a republic people know how to stand up for their rights and for themselves (Reinders 1997).

Exclusion, Separation, Integration

According to the stipulations of international law, people fleeing wars have an unconditional right to asylum. This is a principle which the Swedish government has undertaken to uphold. Yet what happens if Muslim practices are regarded as antithetical to the values of modern, enlightened, society, as expressed and embodied by the Swedish welfare state? Muslim refugees from Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria have arrived at the door-step of the folkhem, but what should now happen to them?

Right-wing nationalists, for their part, reject the right of asylum. To them it is obvious that Sweden only can contain one way of life. We must keep all Muslims out, and those who already are here should be expelled or forced to renounce their faith (“SD-politiker vill förbjuda islam” 2012). Yet in their attempt to present themselves as a mainstream party, the Sweden Democrats have been prepared to make certain concessions. The refugees can be given temporary asylum, they have agreed, but we should not allow them to settle in our country permanently. Once the wars in their countries are over, they must go home. Parties in the center-right coalition have recently advocated similar restrictions. Refugees should apply for asylum in the first European country in which they arrive—which, given Sweden’s geographical position, would reduce the number of asylum-seeking Muslims to a trickle. And in 2016, the law on asylum did indeed change (Sveriges riksdag 2016). Refugees are now given temporary, not permanent, residence permits, and their next-of-kin are no longer automatically admitted into the country. Yet, as the center-left government was careful to point out, this change in policy was dictated by the sheer number of refugees who recently had arrived and had nothing to do with their place of origin or their religion.

An alternative is separation. According to this solution the refugees would be admitted, and they would be allowed to live according to their own traditions, but they should at the same time have as little contact as possible with Swedish society. Muslims would stay in their own enclaves, as it were; live in their own ghettos. A solution of this kind was common in empires where people of many religions and ethnicities lived side by side. Indeed, it was a solution common in the Muslim world—known as the dhimmi system in the Arab caliphates and as millet in the Ottoman empire. The system was often highly successful, allowing both peaceful coexistence and exciting, inter-cultural, encounters. Yet, in the Swedish context, a multiculturalism of this kind is unthinkable. All Swedish politicians take it for granted that rights and obligations are universal in scope and there is no way that, say, sharia law could be implemented among only a part of the population. We cannot, in the oft-repeated phrase, allow immigrants to form “a parallel society” or to “cut themselves off” from the rest of Sweden (Carlbom 2003).
The remaining option is integration, and this is the solution which all Swedish politicians prefer (Kulturdepartementet 2006; Gardell 2013). Yet integration can mean many different things. According to a minimal definition, it means economic integration—that the foreigners get jobs and somewhere to live—but according to a maximal definition it means complete social and cultural assimilation—that the foreigners become indistinguishable from Swedes. All mainstream political parties advocate a minimal definition, but they presuppose a maximal outcome, at least in the long run. In the 1930s, we said, the ruptures caused by the first era of globalization were healed by the folkhem, and today the hope is that the revamped and updated folkhem will heal the ruptures caused by the second era of globalization in much the same way. The welfare state has a strong civilizational impact, as it were, and the proponents of the welfare state are confident that no one in the end can resist civilization. Muslim refugees too will get there in the end. Thanks to the generous parental leaves provided for by the Swedish government, Arab men too will before long be pushing prams and changing diapers. And Islam will eventually be relegated to the private sphere where it can do little damage. Indeed, one can imagine that Islam one day will be rationalized in much the same manner as Protestantism before it. The welfare state will make Allah too redundant.

The Unheimlichkeit of the Folkhem

The adhan in Växsjö raises an ontological question regarding what Swedish society is and what it should be. To this question all Swedish politicians provide the same answer. Regardless of their position on the political spectrum, they take it for granted that Sweden is and should be a country where people live according to “a Swedish way of life,” identified, more than anything as “a modern way of life,” that is, life in a society organized according to the rational principles of the Enlightenment. The only difference is that the nationalistic right believes this means Muslims should be kept out while mainstream parties assume that integration, leading to assimilation, is possible. Behind these different policy prescriptions we find two different views of the Muslim other. The right-wing view is pure Orientalism—Muslims are in all respects the opposite of Swedes and Swedes are the opposite of Muslims. The other has to be radically other for the self to be reliably the same. Mainstream politicians, for their part, are what we could call “Civilizationalists.” Muslims are indeed different from Swedes, they assume, but these differences can be overcome. Eventually everyone will be as modern as we are.

Orientalism and Civilizationalism are both problematic positions. They both make a caricature out of the other and thus, by implication, a caricature out of the self. The Orientalists create differences that do not exist while ignoring obvious similarities; the Civilizationalists have no respect for people who are different from themselves and fail to see that there may be limits to their power. In either case, the superiority of one’s own culture is taken for granted. As a result, we are unable to encounter others face to face and as equals. In the history of European relations with the rest of the world, Orientalism and Civilizationalism have both justified European hegemony, colonialism, and occasionally acts of barbarism and genocide. In contemporary Sweden, they justify the hegemony of “a Swedish way of life” and, all too often, prejudices and misunderstanding.

There is a way out of this impasse, if we want it, which would make inter-societal encounters less conflictual and relations between mainstream society and Muslim refugees less tense. The problem has a logical form which makes a formal solution possible. To wit, instead of finding otherness only in the other, we must find otherness also in ourselves; instead of finding sameness only in ourselves, we must find sameness also in the other (Kristeva 1988; Said 2004). What this formal solution would correspond to in practical terms is quite clear. Something has been lost along the road to modernity, we said. We know how to think rationally and how to make explicit arguments, but we no longer understand the role played by practices and by rituals. We have privileged our minds at the expense of our bodies. We have come to see life from the outside, as an analytical problem, rather than as a lived, and experienced,
reality. Reason has allowed us to protect ourselves from nature, but in the process reason has separated us from nature, thereby allowing us to manipulate and exploit it (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002).

With Sigmund Freud, we can think of modernity as a consequence of a collective form of repression (Freud 1989). We have repressed our human nature which, as a result, we no longer recognize as ours. Indeed, on occasions when we are confronted with it, we find ourselves in the presence of what Freud called the Unheimlich, the “uncanny” (Freud 1919; Csordas 2004). The uncanny is unsettling since it at the same time is strange and perfectly familiar. With its etymological root in Heim, “home,” it is the end-point of a process of estrangement whereby the familiar becomes increasingly taken for granted and thus pushed out of the way, routinized, and eventually entirely forgotten. The Heim makes things heimlich, “secret.” When we unexpectedly are confronted with these secrets we are not only surprised but terrified. The secrets are revealed, the heimlich becomes unheimlich, the person we know so well turns out to be a robot or a corpse.

In the most modern country in the world, uncanniness is produced at the same rate as the rationalization of life progresses. All the truths propounded by the Swedish welfare state are premised on one big lie—on the notion that reason can save us and give meaning to our lives. Yet the more rational life becomes, the more difficult it is to confront our human condition (Berggren and Trägårdh 2014). A society in which everything makes perfect sense cannot deal with the senseless, yet the senseless has not gone away; senselessness is always waiting for human beings, even for Swedes, and it will always, sooner or later, intrude even on the most well-organized life. There will always be wars, pandemics, environmental and economic disasters, and if nothing else there is always the prospect of our own, individual, deaths. Yet people who only know how to be themselves will never be flexible enough to cope with any of these challenges. Allowing the Swedes to forget the human condition, the folkhem has made life itself—on the occasions when Swedes are forced to confront it—perfectly unheimlich.

And then a Muslim call to prayer can suddenly be heard. It is a strange incantation, not at all what Swedes are used to. As such it is a reminder of the existence of other kinds of people, living other kinds of lives, in a world outside of the folkhem. The adhan is disturbing to anyone who does not want such reminders. It is unsettling, after all, to be confronted with the desperation of others and to be forced to answer questions regarding our role in relation to their predicament. What are the causes of their poverty and desperation? Who started the wars they are fleeing from and who failed to prevent them? To what extent, if any, is the safety of our home premised on their homelessness? (Davies 2014, 158). And yet, the call to prayer is unsettling above all since it forces us to confront ourselves and a life which once used to be ours. What we hear is a call to prayer, an invitation to join with others in a ritual practice which literally makes no sense but which acknowledges that part of ourselves which we for so long have repressed. It holds out a promise of an escape from rationality. To that extent the adhan is not only a call to Muslims but to Swedes too. A call to rediscover ourselves in the other.

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