

Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations in Norway:

Popular realities, political and religious responses, interfaith cooperation

Printed in *Islamochristiana* vol. 29, 2003, pp. 121-140.

The Norwegian scene

Christian-Muslim relations in any given country must always be understood against the background of the specific cultural and political context in which they develop. In that respect, there are substantial differences even within Europe. At the sub-regional level, the Scandinavian countries share some important cultural, religious and political characteristics. This implies that Christian-Muslim relations might be expected to develop differently in this part of Europe than in the central or southern parts of the continent. For instance, in all the Scandinavian countries women's issues range high on the cultural and political agenda. As we shall see, this affects not only the way Islam is perceived by the populace, but also (as I will argue) the way in which the Muslim community itself develops.

Another uniting feature between the Scandinavian countries is the existence of large Lutheran national churches, comprising between 80 and 90% of the population. Whereas Sweden introduced "changed relations" between state and church in 2000, Norway, Denmark and Iceland retain a solid state-church system. In the case of Norway, the constitution still says that "The Evangelical-Lutheran religion remains the public religion of the state". Despite a steady process towards church autonomy, the state appoints the bishops, and church finances are fully integrated in state- and municipal budgets. At the political level, half of members of the Norwegian government are still required to be members of the Lutheran church. And public schools retain an objects clause which states that "primary school is supposed to help in giving the pupils a Christian and moral upbringing".

The cited paragraphs are not just fading words on yellowed paper. They correspond to strong tendencies in the 1990s among some Norwegian politicians to reaffirm the so-called "Christian cultural heritage" (alternatively, "Christian and humanist values") as the uniting bond of the Norwegian nation and the foundation stone of its institutions.

Parallel with the state church legacy, Norway has developed a strong commitment to freedom of religion and human rights protection. The advent of Muslims and adherents of other world religions has challenged Norway to rethink the relation between state and religion, and to strike the right balance between individual and communal rights as regards freedom of religion.

It was not the Muslims, however, who raised these questions in the first place. Long before the advent of Muslim immigrants in the 1970s, the state-church system was challenged by the other churches (which make up for about 4.5 % of the population) and by the Norwegian Humanist Association (the secular humanists, who organize 1.5 % of the population but exercise a public influence that far exceeds its amount of formal membership). Increasingly, the state church system has also been challenged by church leaders, who combine their desire for more church autonomy with a growing commitment to non-discrimination and religious freedom. This means

that in the last two decades, the state-church system has received less enthusiastic backing from “the church itself” than from the politicians and the population in general.

Another salient feature of Norwegian society (shared with Sweden but not to the same extent with Denmark) is the high level of organisation in the field of culture and religion. By virtue of compensatory measures to the state-church system that were introduced in 1969, every faith and (from 1981) life stance community that registers itself is entitled to exactly the same amount per member in state- and municipal support as goes to the Church of Norway. This gives, of course, a rather strong incitement towards being Muslim not only by conviction but also by signing up for membership in a Muslim organisation. The logic of the system is that as long as church budgets are financed by the general income tax, taxpayers need to be reimbursed in some way or another in order to avoid discrimination. The uniqueness of the system lies in the fact that the reimbursement goes to the faith communities and not to the individual taxpayers. This means that in financial terms, not just Lutheran Christianity but also Catholicism, Pentecostalism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism etc. may be referred to as “established faiths” with state support in Norway. Muslims in Norway have often made the point that this rather unique system has enabled them to enjoy relatively high degree of freedom vis-à-vis Muslim interest groups abroad.

In the context of a state church system balanced by compensatory measures, the Muslims in Norway have wavered somehow between joining the secular opposition against the state-church system and siding with Christians and other believers who. Instead of relegating religion to the private sphere, and building upon certain elements of the present system, many Christians and Muslim would like to develop *inclusive* ways of treating religion as matter of public concern.

Islams in Norway

Muslims in Norway either trace their Norwegian roots back to labour immigration from the 1970s, or they have come as refugees and asylum seekers from the late 1980s onwards. Recent estimates indicate that more than 100 000 Norwegian residents (many of whom have acquired Norwegian citizenship) are Muslims by background. This means that the Muslims constitute more than 2 % of the total population of 4.5 millions, with the normal concentration in certain urban areas which implies that parts of Oslo have got a majority of Muslim pupils in primary schools. In 2003, as many as 76 000 of the perhaps 110 000 inhabitants with a Muslim background had signed up for membership in a Muslim organisation. This means that the degree of organisation among Norwegian Muslims is exceptionally high, also in comparison with Sweden and Denmark where the total percentage of Muslims is higher (about 3%).

Among Muslims who first came as labour immigrants and have later enjoyed family reunification and experienced family growth in Norway, the far most numerous group consists of those with a Pakistani background (about 26 000). Turks make up for 13 000 and Moroccans 7 000 of the immigrant population. Among those who came as refugees and asylum seekers, Bosnians, Iraqis and Iranians amount to about 13 000 each, whereas both Kosovo and Somalia account for some 11 000. As in Britain, where South Asian Muslims are also most numerous, the entire variety of Pakistani Islam is now well established on Norwegian soil. Both Barelwi groups and Jamaat-i islami are well represented, competing with Minhaj ul-Quran, Tabligh-i Jamaat and others for adherents who – in their new homeland – may choose freely

between the available Muslim options. Almost the entire spectrum of Turkish Islam (Diyanet, Süleymanci, Milli Görüş, Bekhtashi etc.) is also represented. In most Muslims nation groups, the combined effect of imported Islamic varieties and organisational impulses from Norwegian society, result in a high degree of intra-Muslim pluralism, including several different shia-groups and a small but active Ahmadiyya community. Gradually, the varieties of Norwegian Islam materialise also in different kinds of adapted architecture and iconography, as demonstrated by Saphinaz-Amal Naguib in her study of mosques in Norway.^{1[1]} Among the 25 or more mosques in Oslo, most of which are located in converted flats, factories or office premises, only one is purpose-built – by the Pakistani organisation World Islamic Mission. (Indicative of Islamic globalisation, its interior and exterior are decorated with Iranian tiles, and the beautiful prayer hall is lit by a giant Turkish chandelier.)

The growth in Muslim organisational life has largely taken place from the late 1980s and onwards. Whereas in 1980, not more than 10% of those with a Muslim background had actually organised themselves as Muslims in Norway, the relative numbers rose to 50 % in 1990 and (as we have seen) around 70 % in 2002. Although some trans-national organisations (mostly of a moderate Islamist brand) have evolved, most Muslim organisations in Norway are still ethnically based. But this is slowly changing. From the mid-1990s, separate youth and students' organisations have been formed, fully independent of the national background of the young Muslims' parents.^{2[2]} Separate women's organisations have also been established, and in 1993, the Islamic Council of Norway was formed as a national umbrella organisation. Indicative of the centrality of women's issues in the Nordic context, a Muslim woman was elected as the chairperson of the Islamic Council for the period of 2000-2002. (I will return to question of women's issues below).

Plural identities

In an early study of varieties among Pakistani Muslims in Norway, Nora Ahlberg made a fundamental distinction between the different strategies typical of "folk Islam", "normative Islam" and "modernist Islam" respectively when accommodating to a new cultural context.^{3[3]} In a more recent study of Islam in Norway,^{4[4]} Kari Vogt criticises attempts that have been made to label different mosques as representative of either "folk-" or "normative Islam". She argues that competing forms of Islam that are conventionally labelled as cultural or normative, low or high, popular and learned, national and international, mystical or law-oriented, should be expected to be found *within* the different Muslim organisations rather than constituting a dividing line between them.

Although Vogt's warning against simplified categorisation is timely, I would

1[1] Saphinaz-Amal Naguib: *Mosques in Norway. The Creation and Iconography of Sacred Space*. Oslo: Novus (The Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture), 2001.

2[2] Christine M. Jacobsen has researched the new Muslim youth organisations under the heading of "the many forms of belonging": *Tilhørighetens mange former. Unge muslimer i Norge*. Oslo: Pax 2002. The variety of young Muslims in Denmark is well represented by the anthology *Islam i bevægelse* ("Islam in movement" – edited by Mona Sheikh, Fatih Alev, Babar Baig and Noman Malik), København: Akademisk 2003.

3[3] Nora Ahlberg: *New challenges – old strategies. Themes of variation and conflict among Pakistani Muslims in Norway*. Helsinki: Finnish Anthropological Society, 1990.

4[4] Kari Vogt: *Islam på norsk. Moskeer og islamske organisasjoner i Norge* ("Islam in Norwegian. Mosques and Islamic organisations in Norway"). Oslo: Cappelen 2000.

argue that the distinction between local or national forms of religion on the one hand, and more normative and international visions of Islam on the other, may be a useful analytical tool when trying to come to grips with Muslim varieties. Whereas folk Islam typically does not distinguish between cultural and religious identity, it is exactly this distinction that is triggered by emigration and generational differences. Whereas representatives of folk Islam (for instance, the majority of first generation Pakistani Muslims in Norway, who mostly immigrated from rural districts) have tried to retain the totality of their inherited cultural conventions and religious convictions, the second generation (as well as the more educated ones in the first generation) feel the need to redefine the relation between culture and religion. Many of them take care to distinguish between “culture” and “religion”, in order to articulate an Islamic identity that is both universal and amenable to re-contextualisation.

The figures and facts given above beg the question of whether Muslim pluralism can really be captured by means of organisational mappings. In an article entitled “Muslim and Christians: changing identities”, Jacques Waardenburg notes that in post-modern societies, religious identities too have become increasingly personalised and plural in nature: “Leaving apart the influence of political and economic power, already the complexity of modern societies means that people now participate in several identities which are often juxtaposed to each other rather than being put in an hierarchical order”.⁵[5] Immigrated Muslims too participate in the post-modern, Western reality of plural identities. This should always be kept in mind, in order to avoid narrow descriptions of Muslim communities focused on religious or cultural belongings alone. Whereas some scholars tend to focus on the problems that many young Muslims in Norway face when torn between seemingly irreconcilable expectations, the researcher Sissel Østberg has focused on young Muslim believers’ well developed competence to handle what she terms “an integrated plural identity”.⁶[6] Plural identity implies the simple fact that irrespective of religious belonging, people share (or are divided by) such factors as musical preferences, a passion for football, or more importantly, political convictions that run right across cultural and religious divides.

Muslims in Norway seem to distribute themselves equally along most of the political spectrum. From the latter part of the 1990s, an increasing number of Muslim politicians (many of them are young women) have aspired for leading positions in the political parties. In 2001, a young woman of Pakistani family background was elected as the first Muslim member of Parliament. Representing the Conservative Party, she competed fiercely for her seat with a young Muslim sister from the Social Democratic Party. Also indicative of plural identities, the Christian Democratic Party can boast a considerable following among Muslims who appreciate not only their traditional “family values” and their restrictive policy regarding distribution of alcohol, but also their understanding attitude towards making religious claims in the public sphere.

As for political Islam, most of the moderate Islamist movements in Pakistan, Turkey and the Arab world (including the Muslim Brotherhood) are well represented in Norway. Although each of them has got their own agenda, their European profiles may often differ considerably from that of their mother organisation. It is also a fact that organisations and mosques representative of “normative Islam” and “moderate

5[5] Jacques Waardenburg: “Muslims and Christians: changing identities”, in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* vol 11, no. 2: 2000 (p. 159).

6[6] Sissel Østberg: *Muslim i Norge. Religion og hverdagsliv blant unge norsk-pakistanere*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2003. Cf. her doctoral dissertation *Pakistani Children in Norway: Islamic Nurture in a Secular Context*. Leeds : University of Leeds (Department of theology and religious studies), 2003.

Islamism” are often more active in interfaith enterprises than their more traditionalist counterparts. Differently from the case of Denmark, radical Islamist movements such as Hizb al-tahrir have not been able to establish an organisational foothold in Norway. This does not mean that radical or extremist positions are not represented. For instance, accusations were put forward in 2002 that Mullah Krekar, a leader of the radical Islamist movement Ansar al-Islam in Iraqi Kurdistan, had maintained his militant activities with Norway as a safe haven. However, already in 1997 his group of radical followers were asked to leave the main Arab mosque in Oslo (Rabita, a mosque of Muslim Brotherhood inspiration). And in May 2003, when it was announced that Norwegian institutions abroad were put on the list of potential targets for al-Qa’ida, it was clear from the immediate reaction of the Muslim leaders who were interviewed that they instinctively identified themselves as Norwegians and felt threatened on a par with their Christian or secular humanist co-citizens.^{7[7]}

In Norway as elsewhere, it is hard to decide what kind of tendencies that can be found in more “hidden transcripts” of popular Muslim identity discourses.^{8[8]} Whereas some primary school teachers tell that some of their pupils (in particular, the young boys) seem to harbour a secret admiration of Osama bin Laden, others point to the fact that Muslim students often run into an identity crisis when confronted by terrorist acts perpetrated in the name of “Islam”, trying in the first place to deny altogether that such acts can possibly have anything to do with Islam (as they know it).

The centrality of women’s issues in public debates

The centrality of women’s issues in Scandinavian culture and politics has already been noted, as a determining factor for Christian-Muslim encounters in Norway. One the one hand, media conflicts focused on “Islam” tend nearly always to be related to gender issues. On the other hand, Muslims seem also to be influenced in a positive manner by gender patterns in Norwegian society.

The observation has been made by women involved in interfaith dialogue that mutual stereotypes between Christians and Muslims are often related to the perceived role of women in Western and Muslim societies respectively (as objectified victims of either a permissive or a patriarchal culture).^{9[9]} In both Norway and Sweden, the tragic honour killing of the Swedish-Kurdish woman Fadime in January 2002^{10[10]} aroused a far more heated debate about Muslims in the West than the events of September 11, 2001. From the mid-1990s, most media discussions on Islam have been focused on women-related issues such as arranged or forced marriages, the question of whether a Muslim woman may marry a non-Muslim man, female genital mutilation, and the headscarf. In February 2002, Muslim women (with or without the headscarf) angrily took to the streets of Oslo protesting both against female circumcision and dominant stereotypes about Muslim women. On the other hand,

^{7[7]} See interviews in *Dagbladet* and *Verdens Gang* 22 May 2003.

^{8[8]} I’m referring here to the distinction between public and hidden transcripts made by James C. Scott in his book *Dominance and the Art of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994.

^{9[9]} Anne Hege Grung: “Kvinneperspektiv på kristen-muslimsk dialog” (“Women’s perspectives on Christian-Muslim dialogue”), in *Islam, kristendom og modernitet – i Danmark og Norge*, Tiderne Skifter: Copenhagen 2004 (forthcoming).

^{10[10]} The Fadime case is summed up and discussed by Unni Wikan: *For ærens skyld. Fadime til ettertanke* (“For the sake of honour. In memory of Fadime”), Oslo: Universitetsforlaget 2003.

several young women of Muslim background have become publicly known for their vociferous protest against cultural practises associated by them with the religion of “Islam”.

Some of these young women (many of whom have experienced dramatic conflicts with their families) have been engaged by feminist activists and the media to record statements from Muslim leaders, by the use of hidden microphone or camera. The response of Muslim practitioners has been mixed. On the one hand, the use of hidden cameras increase the Muslims’ sense of a general distrust towards them. On the other hand, many Muslim leaders agree that the problems that have been revealed are indeed serious and need to be confronted, although not by means that violate the integrity of the person (as hidden recordings and subsequent clippings can easily do). The most dramatic episode occurred in the autumn of 2000 when a young Somali women equipped with hidden camera by a commercial TV-station, revealed that a number of male African Muslim leaders either supported female circumcision or did not (as it seemed) clearly oppose it. As an immediate result, the then president of the Islamic Council – a highly respected Muslim of Gambian background who has also a long record in Christian-Muslim dialogue – decided to resign.¹¹[11]

It was against this background that Lena Larsen – a female convert to Islam and also a dialogue- and human rights activist – was elected as the new president of the Islamic Council, an event of almost historic dimensions. Then in 2002, the central mosque in Oslo elected a young female student, Amber Khan, as their new spokesperson to the public. In addition, female activists play central roles in the Muslim youth organisations. As indicated above, many of the most profiled Muslim politicians in Norway are also young women.

The overwhelming majority of board members in Muslim organisations are still male. I would nevertheless argue that the cited examples of women leadership should not be regarded as incidental, ephemeral affairs, but rather as a telling sign of how Islam is being inculturated in a Nordic environment. In a wider European perspective, the female activists embody a tendency that Anne-Sofie Roald (who is also a Norwegian convert to Islam, but resident in Sweden) has documented and analysed in her book *Women in Islam. The Western Experience*.¹²[12]

In 2000, the election of Lena Larsen as president of the Islamic Council, was hailed as unexpected good news. However, the winds rapidly changed. Carrying the headscarf and involving herself in discussions about who could rightly claim to represent Islam in Norway (the Islamic Council, or critical Muslims outside of the Islamic organisations?), the sympathy of the media soon shifted to radical feminists with a Muslim background – such as the columnist and stand-up comedian Shabana Rehman who has forcefully attacked both “popular” and “normative” Islam as almost inherently oppressive structures.

In contrast, many young Muslim activists (with or without the headscarf) display publicly how they use the Qur’an and the Sunna as positive resources in their struggle to assert themselves as women with right in male-dominated, Muslim cultures. They are addressing women’s issues not from the outside, but from within the Muslim community.

¹¹[11] Although this leader did not personally support female circumcision, his approach to the issue – as presented in the TV-presentation – was seen in an unfavourable light by most commentators. The unbalanced way in which his position (and that of another colleague) was presented in the media, has later been critically examined by other journalists. Cf. the retrospective analysis by Inger Anne Olsen i *Aftenposten* 9 November 2002 (“Var rikets tilstand sånn som vi trodde?”).

¹²[12] London: Routledge 2001.

In a sum, the above developments imply that the question of women in Islam is not really any longer a debate between the Muslims and Norwegian society in general. It is just as much an intra-Muslim debate, in which Muslim women – inspired both by “normative Islam” and Scandinavian values – set the agenda.

It is hard to prophesy, however, what tendency that will have the upper hand in the years to come. When Mohammad Hamdan (an immigrant of Arab background) was elected as the new president of the Islamic Council after Lena Larsen’s period was terminated in 2003, he asserted that Islam supports the rights of women to equal participation in society (in this respect, they can learn from their Norwegian sisters) but reiterated also the traditional claim that Western women have something to learn from the priority that Muslim women will always give to family values.¹³[13]

Political responses to increased religious plurality

Political responses to the Islamic presence and the new, multi-religious situation in Norway, have been varied. Church responses, to be dealt with in the next paragraph, have sometimes differed markedly from those of the politicians. In the Norwegian context, Muslims have therefore had to learn how to distinguish between more or less “christianised” discourses in the political realm on the one hand, and the positions that have been voiced by the churches as faith communities on the other.

As for *state* responses, I shall distinguish analytically between (a) a state-supported, Christian communitarianism; (b) a politics of recognition affirming the rights of communities, and (c) universalist oriented policies focused on individual rights.

(a) State-supported, Christian communitarianism?

Like England, Norway has responded to the new religious plurality by developing a common subject of Religious Education in school. In Norwegian primary schools, the new and mandatory subject of religious education has been in function since 1997, replacing the previous system of multiple choices between (1) Christian education, (2) a Life Stances-alternative brought about by the secular humanists and (3) no religious education at all.¹⁴[14] The new subject was initially given the cumbersome name “Knowledge of Christianity with Information about Religion and Life Stances” (*Kristendomskunnskap med religions- og livssynsorientering*) which was read by the minorities as a sure sign that the subject would be dominated by Christian, cultural concerns.¹⁵[15] The minorities’ apprehension was strengthened by formulations in the general part of the reformed curriculum of which the new subject was but one part. Here, under the heading of ‘Christian and Humanistic values’, it was stated that “Christian faith and tradition constitute a deep current in our history – a heritage that unites us as a people across religious persuasions.” Adding a reference to humanism,

13[13] As expressed in an interview in the newspaper *Dagsavisen*, 07.03.2003.

14[14] An English version of the new subject’s syllabus can be found in *The Curriculum for the 10-year Compulsory School in Norway*. Oslo: The Royal Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs, 1999, p. 95ff. For a presentation and discussion of the new subject, see Tarald Rasmussen: “The New Norwegian ‘KRL’ Subject and Religious Freedom: a Report”, in *Studia Theologica* vol. 54, no1: 2000.

15[15] In the official English version of the curriculum from 1999, the name of the subject was translated in a more inclusive way as “Christian Knowledge and Religious and Ethical education”.

“Christian and humanistic tradition” was spoken of as “interwoven”.¹⁶[16]

On the other side, the new subject also offers ample space for teaching about and learning from the other world religions and life philosophies. Four religions (Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism) and one particular ‘life stance’ (Secular Humanism) have been selected as major topics along with Christianity and the more general theme of Philosophy and Ethics. Another major aim of the subject (and in the eyes of many, the most important aim) is to create a space for interfaith dialogue in school.

Leaders of the minority communities have nevertheless seen the new subject as overly self-affirmative on Christianity’s part and Muslims, Jews, Buddhists and secular humanists quickly formed an alliance to oppose the new subject. The Islamic Council and the Humanist Federation have also sued the state for having eliminated the right to full exemption, and hence the right to offer alternative forms of religious or ethical education in school.¹⁷[17]

Politically, the new subject was introduced by an alliance of the Social democrats and the Christian democrats. Indicative of the symbolic importance of the issue, the curriculum of the subject has been voted on in Parliament. Whereas the pedagogues foresaw a truly inclusive subject which would stimulate both identity formation and dialogue, the politicians may be said to have tilted the balance by overemphasising the opportunity of making all pupils truly familiar with Christian and humanist values. This has led some observers to characterise the subject as a form of state-supported, Christian communitarianism that should not, however, necessarily be confused with Christian conservatism. The underlying vision of leading politicians has rather been that of a liberal, Christian inclusivism which has nevertheless been felt as slightly suffocating by some of minorities.

However, the case is not closed. In 2002, the name of the subject was modified in a slightly less hierarchical direction and rephrased as “Knowledge of Christianity, Religion and Life Stances”. In practice, teacher creativity and the opportunity of local adaptation have enabled many schools with a multi-religious constituency to modify the subject in a truly inclusive fashion. Whereas Muslim leaders retain much of their principal objections, some Muslim parents and not least, many Muslim pupils, seem to view the subject in a more positive light.¹⁸[18]

Since pupils, parents and religious leaders do not necessarily agree on this issue, the debate also touches upon the question of representation and who should be the privileged bearers of rights. When negotiating the question of religion in school, to whom should the authorities turn: to the Muslim faith communities, to the Muslim parents, or (in the case of secondary school) to Muslim youth (in religious matters, the age of majority in Norway is 15)?

(b) Politics of recognition, focused on communities

According to both Norwegian law and human rights conventions, in matters pertaining to religious instruction and religious education in school parents are the privileged bearers of rights. It may still be politically wise to include the faith communities in negotiations about religion in school. In the initial phases of the planning process behind the new subject, neither the faith communities nor

¹⁶[16] *The Curriculum for the 10-year Compulsory School in Norway*, p. 23.

¹⁷[17] Their cases have been turned down in Norwegian courts, but the secular humanists are bent on taking the case to the human rights’ court in Strasbourg.

¹⁸[18] As documented by Sissel Østberg (2003) and others.

individuals representing other religions than Christianity took part. But because of the protests, representatives of the major faith and life stance communities were eventually invited to suggest how their living traditions should be represented in the curriculum. They were also allowed to comment on proposed textbooks.

The eventual inclusion of the faith communities in the formative process could be taken as a hesitant “politics of recognition” which relates to the *communal* dimension of moral and religious identity. The term “politics of recognition” or “politics of difference” have been used by Charles Taylor and others to characterise a liberal approach to religious plurality that has often been branded as multiculturalism.¹⁹[19] In contrast with liberal policies focused merely on the rights of individuals, multiculturalism treats the issue of religious freedom as a matter of the right balance between individual rights and the cultural rights of collectives. By contemporary Islamic democrats such as Ali Bulaç in Turkey, a “politics of difference” based on a contract between social and religious blocs has been put forward as a modernised version of the classical Medina-constitution. His way of reasoning combines a collective understanding of equal rights with the claim that a particular cultural-religious heritage (*in casu*, Islam) is recognised as the meta-narrative of the nation.²⁰[20] The Christian inclusivism that shines through in the new subject of religious education in Norway would in fact seem to fit well with this line of Islamic, communitarian thought.

In Norway, the Christian democrats have been more clearly advocating a politics of recognition than the Social democrats. Traditionally, Christian democrats in Norway have seen themselves as representatives of a conservative counter-culture. This may have made them better fit for a “politics of difference” than the modernist, unitary thought been typical of the Social democrats in Scandinavia.

In the early 1980s, however, Norwegian Social democrats turned to a kind of Christian-Humanist value policy that was propounded as more liberal and inclusive than the counter-cultural type of Christianity traditionally represented by the Christian democrats. Before that, Social democrats in Norway (as in Sweden) had typically considered religion as a private matter. Social democrats have also been sceptical towards religiously based private schools which are relatively few in Norway, and comprises only some 1.5 % of primary school students. In 1995, the Social democrat government turned down the first application to establish a state supported Muslim primary school, arguing that such a school would not be conducive of the social and cultural integration of immigrants. Marking also a state feminist concern, they were particularly worried on behalf of the girls. This implies that the social democrats did not treat the application as a question of religious rights but in the unitary perspective of ‘integration’ – leaving little space for religiously based differences.

Four years later, the Christian democrats approved the same application, and declared it as a principle that they would support Muslim schools on a par with private schools established by Christian minorities. As a token of the same politics of recognition, the Christian democrat prime minister (Kjell Magne Bondevik) made formal visits to the Muslim communities in 1999, and once more during his second term in service in 2001. (To date, such symbolic visits have not been made by Social

19[19] See Charles Taylor: ‘The Politics of Recognition’, in Charles Taylor et al.: *Multiculturalism. Examining the Politics of Recognition*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1994.

20[20] In the case of Bulaç, this has put forward as an alternative to prevailing secularist understandings of the Turkish nation. See Menderes Çınar and Ayse Kadioglu: ‘An Islamic critique of modernity in Turkey: politics of difference backwards’, in *Orient. Zeitschrift des deutschen Orient-Instituts*, vol. 40, no. 1:1999.

democrat prime ministers.)

The way in which Norway has chosen to deal with financial issues in the field of religion goes well together with a politics of recognition oriented towards communal rather than individual rights. As mentioned above, instead of reimbursing individual taxpayers (as in Denmark), financial compensation for the state-church system is offered to the organised faith communities.

The same is true of how the Law about equality between the sexes, which was introduced in 1978, is applied. Although state feminism has been a salient feature of Norwegian politics during the last decades (under the Social Democrats), faith communities have been fully exempted from the equality laws' claims and regulations. In this case too, the religious rights of faith communities have been given priority over against the religious rights of individuals (*in casu*, women).

The principle of a general exemption from the equality laws' regulations is, however, debated. Many Social democrats would like to see compliance with egalitarian principles as a prerequisite for receiving financial support from the state. That would imply putting up a limit to the politics of recognition. But exactly where should the line be drawn between communal interest and individual rights, between a politics of difference and a value-based politics aimed at safeguarding (for instance) the rights of women and children?

In some European countries, Muslims have claimed their right to communal autonomy in family law, in accordance with established principles in societies with a Muslim majority. So far, Norwegian Muslims have voiced no such claim. In the matter of family- and inheritance law, both Social and Christian democrats would probably draw a solid line against possible Muslim wishes, with reference to established principles of gender equality in modern Western law. In 2003, however, the question was raised in Norwegian media of whether the establishment of a national shari'a council (like in Great Britain) might be conducive to women's rights in the field of divorce. Whereas conservative Muslims do not always recognise a legal divorce obtained in a Western country, shari'a councils in Europe have often proved to be more liberal in this respect and has provided some Muslim women with an additional, religious legitimacy for their divorce. Although the issue is not that of establishing separate Muslim family courts, the question of establishing a shari'a council has triggered a discussion about principles and pragmatics in multicultural issues: should the state on one unified family legislation and a single system of cultural legitimacy, or should it recognise the need for communitarian legitimacy that religious bodies have traditionally offered in this field?

(c) Supporting the universal rights of individual believers

In the cited discussion about shari'a councils and women's rights, the question at stake is actually the safeguarding of individual rather than communal rights (although the latter is implicated). Even those who generally advocate a community-oriented politics of recognition, strongly affirm that certain individual rights must never be violated with reference to communal interests. Putting up limits against violence and forced loyalties would suffice as general examples. In Norway, new legislation was enacted against forced marriages and female genital mutilation in the mid-1990s. None of the faith communities objected to this. On the contrary: confronting the cultural practices of some of their adherents, several Islamic organisations and Muslim women's groups have signalled their readiness to cooperate with the authorities in order to abolish practices which involve force or violence.

There may, however, be different opinions about the most efficient way of protecting individual rights in these fields. Is the integrity of the individual best safeguarded through long-term work from within the relevant cultural or religious groups, or by firm pressure on the groups in question from the outside? Although many Christians in Norway would be sympathetic to Muslim claims that cultural abuses are most efficiently combated “from the inside”, Christians have also pointed to the fact that changes in the direction of gender equality in the churches have often come about by pressure “from the outside” (i.e., from the labour and feminist movements which have surely had many committed Christians as their *members* but challenged church *structures* from the outside).

In the case of religion in school, we have seen that there is a delicate balance between individual rights and group-oriented approaches. Formally, when suing the state for taking away the right of exemption from religious education, both the Islamic Council and the Humanist Association have represented groups of parents rather than religious interest groups. However, as indicated above, local reports testify to the fact that other parents (Muslims and secular humanists) are relatively happy with the way the new subject works in practice. There is probably a general lesson to be drawn from this: in monitoring Muslim responses to majority projects, one should never be content with listening to the attitudes of organised Muslim communities and their spokesmen. As many Christians, many Muslims too have individual opinions that run counter to views expressed by their leaders. In some cases, they may be more liberal than their leaders. In other cases, they may hold more conservative views – for instance on behalf of their cultural heritage.

The question of communal versus individual rights becomes even more delicate when reformulated as a question of how far that state should go in favouring this or that position in an internal Muslim (or Christian) debate. Should the state take value-based action, intervene in the matters of faith communities and support individuals (for instance children and women) and their rights against the current leaders of their faith communities? Or should the state confine itself to a liberal politics of recognition and only intervene in the internal affairs of faith communities when the life and health of individual believers is endangered?

In the case of gender equality, Norwegian authorities have a legacy of active intervention in the church matters. Although being a state-church, the Church of Norway (on a par with other faith communities) is exempted from the Law about equality between the sexes. But since clergy has traditionally been appointed by the state – which still appoints the bishop – state feminism has supplied the national church with female ministers since 1961 and (from 1993) female bishops. But in the case of the other faith communities, the state has recognised their right to autonomy and renounced of any kind of state intervention – for instance, by not requiring a practice of gender equality as a prerequisite for receiving financial support.

Towards a renegotiated politics of religion

With only 25 years of experience to accommodate for multi-religious pluralism, Norway enters the future with a mixed heritage of state religion *and* strong subscription to individual human rights. Many people committed to human rights issues would like to abolish the remnants of the state church system as soon as possible. This is probably also true of most church leaders. But it is not at all sure that a state *without* a religion will give better opportunities for the religious minorities. The alternative to a state church system is not necessarily a society in which religion

is regarded as entirely a private matter. It could just as well be a society committed to a policy of multiculturalism, by which religion continues to be regarded as a matter of public concern. Religious and life stance communities would then be valued in their pluralist expressions and could even continue to be supported financially (to some extent) by the state. By use of the term “an actively supporting politics of religion”, this was actually proposed by a church committee that in 2002 recommended changed relations between state and church.²¹[21]

Many Norwegians – both Christians and Muslims – would probably agree that moral values and religious belief should continue to be regarded as a matter of communal concern. Here, the northern European state church legacy (in a modernised, liberal version) might seem to converge with some classical Islamic concerns. But in concrete matters, conflicts will probably continue to arise. And many hard questions will have to be resolved – at the intersection between value-based state policies, the liberty of faith communities and the rights of individuals.

Church responses and interfaith initiatives

In the general public, inclusive attitudes have long competed with mounting anxiety towards Islam and Muslims. In cultural and political debates about Christianity and Islam, church leaders in general have defended Muslim minority rights and protected their integrity against populist assaults. During the last decade, liberal forms of Christian communitarianism (as cited above) have competed with more conservative and aggressive versions. For instance, in the 1990s representatives of the influential right wing populist party *Fremskrittspartiet* (“The Progress Party”) repeatedly singled out Muslims as a threat to Norwegian society and Christianity. In general, such attempts have been met with firm resistance from the church leaders. 1997, Christian leaders of all confessions and theological tendencies joined hands with the Muslim community and warned publicly against the enemy images of Islam produced by populist politicians.²²[22]

Two examples from 1990 may serve to indicate the difference between populist, conservative reactions to the new Islamic presence on the one hand, and the more welcoming response of church leaders on the other. That year, a Christian organisation had invited a well-known media celebrity, Rolv Wesenlund, to address their annual meeting, perhaps as a voice from the periphery of the church. The invited voice of the people took the opportunity of summoning the assembly to a “spiritual warfare” against Islam “which is not a tolerant religion”. He also admonished the audience to strengthen Christian education in school, in defence of what he termed “our Norwegian, Protestant faith”.²³[23]

Afterwards, some conservative Christians proposed that Wesenlund should be regarded as a “honorary bishop” for his courageous defence of Christianity. The actual bishops, however, demonstrated less apologetic attitudes. In 1990, the former missionary Bjørn Bue paid the first formal visit of a bishop to a Norwegian mosque and its imam who was also a prominent Sufi of the Chistiyya order. The visit ended by the bishop and the imam drinking a toast for the temperance movement – in Pakistani tea (in significant parts of Norwegian Christianity, abstention from alcohol

21[21] *Samme kirke, ny ordning* (“Same church, new arrangement”), Oslo: Kirkerådet 2002.

22[22] *Vårt Land*, 3 September 1997: “Kristenledere mot norsk muslimfrykt” (“Christian leaders taking a stand against Norwegian fear of Muslims”).

23[23] *Vårt Land*, 4 and 9 September 1990. Cf. Oddbjørn Leirvik: *Religionsdialog på norsk*, Oslo: Pax 2001, s. 63.

has been just as much a Christian cause as it has always been a Muslim one). After the meeting, the bishop commended the imam for his hospitality and openness to dialogue.²⁴[24]

In 1991, a missionary organisation initiated the first centre for inter-religious dialogue in Norway, called the Emmaus Centre for Dialogue and Spirituality.²⁵[25] The Centre has provided both Christians, adherents of new religious movements, Buddhists and (to some extent) Muslims with a space for dialogue that is not only political but also spiritual and deeply personal. Then in 1993, a bilateral Contact Group between the Church of Norway and the Islamic Council was established. Interestingly, it was the invitation from the church to set up a structure for dialogue that triggered the formation of the Islamic Council. Although the Islamic Council has spent most of its efforts in lobbying and co-ordinating minority concerns of a more practical kind, it has also lived up to its initial commitment to dialogue.

The Contact Group has provided a space for dialogue between the Muslim organisations and the Norwegian churches as *faith communities*, transcending the dominant discourses in society that are often highly apologetic on the part of either the majority population or the minorities and their cultures. Although some Muslims and Christians anticipated that the Contact Group might also provide an opportunity for conservative alliances around traditional values (for instance, against homosexual marriages which was legalised in Norway in 1993), the dominant focus has rather been liberal. First, the Contact Group has maintained a strong focus on minority rights, discussing both Muslim interests in Norway and the situation of Christian minorities in Muslim majority societies – not apologetically by in relation to global standards. Secondly, one of the most successful projects of the Contact Group brought together a group of Christian and Muslim women who jointly reflected on the empowerment of women in religious communities.²⁶[26]

Bilateral forums such as the Contact Group have later been supplemented by multilateral ones like the (interfaith) Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities which was established in 1996. The interfaith council was formed against the background of the minorities' resistance to the proposed common subject of Christian/Religious Education mentioned above. Differently from many other interfaith initiatives, it was initiated by the minorities who – on the basis of a minority alliance that was struck the year before – invited the churches to form a joint interfaith council.

A few personal examples may serve to illustrate the degree to which religious and life stance leaders have engaged each other on the basis of shared standards of equality and a joint commitment to dialogue. The first president of the interfaith council was a Pentecostal Christian, the second one a Norwegian-born Buddhist. Their first secretary was a secular humanist, who was offered an office by the Council of Christian Churches in Norway. The interfaith council has later widened its scope by forming (in 1998) the so-called Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion and Belief in which Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists and secular humanists in Norway engage like-minded partners abroad in setting up and strengthening structures for inter-religious dialogue and tolerance training.²⁷[27] Since 1999, the coordinator of the Oslo Coalition has been a female Muslim convert – the one who was also elected

24[24] *Aftenposten* 29 October 1990.

25[25] See the web-page <http://folk.uio.no/leirvik/emmaus.html>

26[26] As documented in the book by Anne Hege Grung and Lena Larsen: *Dialog med og uten slør* ("Dialogue with and without the veil"), Oslo: Pax 2000.

27[27] See the Oslo Coalition's web-site <http://www.oslocoalition.org>

as the president of the Islamic Council in the end of 2000.

A salient feature of these and other initiatives from the 1990s is the firm distinction that has often been made by dialogue activists between cultural and religious values. Muslim dialogue activists have often felt the need to dissociate themselves from traditional – e.g., patriarchal or honour code-dominated – attitudes and actions. Correspondingly, many Christian leaders are keen on distinguishing between national religion in its cultural expressions on the one side and evangelical values on the other. The shared tendency to distinguish sharply between “religion” and “culture” has proved to be both a strength and weakness of Christian-Muslim dialogue in Norway. Its strength lies in the common commitment to ideals and values. Its weakness lies in its potential neglect of actual attitudes among the majority of both Christians and Muslims in Norway. For example, in current discussions about arranged marriages Muslims leaders have been criticised for only declaring that such forced marriages can not be defended by Islam, instead of confronting widespread practices that are actually considered as an integral part of the Muslim identity of those who stand for it. In particular, secular humanists (who have otherwise often sided with the Muslims in matters of minority interest) have challenged Muslim leaders to leave aside idealist discourses and face the social reality of Islam as it is.

Some secular humanists have also tended to overlook the finer nuances of modern Muslim identity discourses. Christian leaders, on the other hand, have supported their Muslim counterparts’ endeavour to construct an identity that is often modern and counter-cultural at the same time (modern in its endorsement of individual freedom rights; counter-cultural its insistence on the right that both individuals and communities have to take unpopular stands in matters such as alcohol, sexual ethics, and dress code). But at the level of rights, also leading representatives of the Humanist Association have recently affirmed the right of Muslims and other believers to take conservative stands without being met by e.g. financial sanctions against their faith communities.²⁸[28]

The most important thing, however, is to recognise the fact of internal plurality in all faith communities. Also in the Norwegian context, it has been demonstrated that Muslims may be just as divided among themselves as Christians have been; in both doctrinal, ethical and political matters. Maybe in the future, one will witness competing “conservative” and “liberal” alliances between Christians and Muslim who hold different views in moral and political questions. Some of the cited dialogue initiatives in Norway may point in the direction of liberal alliances in crucial matters (e.g., regarding women’s rights). But internationally, examples can also be cited of conservative, Christian-Muslim alliances – as when some Christian lobbyists and representatives of Muslim countries find together in the United Nations in such questions as abortion and homosexuality.

In many cases, however, potential conservative allies seems to keep a distance from each other, because of deep-seated prejudices against the other religion which also in Norway surface occasionally, among both Christian and Muslim leaders of a more traditionalist type. In the case of the Pentecost movement, an interesting shift has taken place among some leaders in the direction of more open attitudes to Muslims, with the world wide evangelist Aril Edvardsen’s friendly approach to Islam as the most prominent example. In both 1999 and 2002, he combined evangelistic

²⁸[28] See Lars Gule: “De vanskelige rettighetene” (“The difficult rights”), *Dagbladet* 18 August 2002.

campaigns in Pakistan with large-scale dialogue events in which he co-operated with prominent Muslim leaders.²⁹[29]

The initiatives of the Pentecostalist Aril Edvardsen are indicative of the fact that Protestant Christian-Muslim dialogue is no more the exclusive cause of liberals. It also engages conservative Christians who recognise the spiritual and counter-cultural potential of Islam; perhaps also seeing Islam as a potential ally against secularism and the privatisation of religion.

Since both “conservatives” and “liberals” (if such slippery categories give any meaning at all in the 21st century) now engage in interfaith network building and dialogue, both Christians and Muslims will increasingly have to confront the reality of a moral and political disagreement that cut right across religious divides.

Neither in the question of war and peace and the pressing issue of how to combat terrorism, do the dividing lines in any way coincide with that between “Christians” and “Muslims”. On the global scene, this has become abundantly clear in the aftermath of 11 September 2001 and the ensuing war in Afghanistan, and even more so in connection with the war in Iraq.³⁰[30] In the case of Afghanistan, Muslim and Christian leaders in Norway sent a joint letter to the Christian democrat prime minister, criticising him for giving unreserved support to the American campaign (which Norway later joined with supplementary military forces). Christian and Muslim leaders together demanded a halt to the bombing for humanitarian reasons and requested that the war against terror should not be conducted in a manner which only inflicted more suffering on innocent civilians.³¹[31]

But both church leaders and Muslims (at least those in the region) differed among themselves as to the legitimacy or wisdom of the bombing campaign. In the case of the Iraq, it is commonly agreed that the firm resistance from church leaders was a major reason for the fact that the Norwegian government took a different stand vis-à-vis the US policy in this case. On the other hand, many Iraqi Muslims in Norway were favourable towards the American-lead intervention (although of course opposing the ensuing occupation).

The majority on both sides, however, were critical of the war in Iraq and apprehensive of its long-term consequences in terms of both international law and Christian-Muslim relations. Shortly after the outbreak of the war in Iraq, Muslim and Christians came together in a solemn gathering in Oslo’s main mosque in which they joined hands and hearts in shared prayers for the victims of war.³²[32]

Conclusion

Interfaith dialogues can be an important element in fostering a culture of recognition. But dialogues between Christian and Muslim leaders have also some obvious limitations. Many of those who identify themselves as Christians and Muslims are not affected by formalised dialogues and may not even be aware of the rather intimate interaction across religious divides that has evolved at the leadership level. And despite a growing awareness dialogue initiatives at the national level, many are marked by globalised discourses of clashing Christian and Muslim civilisations.

²⁹[29] Cf. his magazine *Troens Bevis*, June 1999 and January 2002.

³⁰[30] Cf. Oddbjørn Leirvik: “Global ethics and moral disagreement after September 11, 2001: A Christian-Muslim Perspective”, in *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 1: 2003, pp. 18-29.

³¹[31] *Aftenposten*, 31 October 2001.

³²[32] *Dagsavisen* 24 March 2003: ”Ber sammen for fred” (“Praying together for peace”).

In Norway as elsewhere, formalised dialogues tend to be dominated by faith communities and leaders who profess a culture-transcending, normative identity. Institutionalised dialogues may also easily get out of touch with more deregulated, individualised forms of religion. Many ordinary Christians and Muslims have also a different agenda from that of their leaders – be it the personal agenda of ‘migrating souls’, the cultural interests of a particular group of Muslims, or the identity politics of a nationalist kind of Christianity.

Dialogues at the top level may also run the risk of overlooking the experiences of those who are, in a way or other, victimised by their faith communities. A deep-going interfaith dialogue will have to be self-critical on behalf of the faith communities, and address some hard questions which the state for a great part must leave to the faith communities to handle. The theme of gender equality is one obvious example, the dynamics of enemy images another. Although enemy images and disrespectful ways of talking about the Other are always decried in normative discourses, they continue to flourish in the internal lives of the faith communities.

Only by honest and self-critical approaches to religion and culture can interfaith dialogue change anything in the perception of the Self and the Other.^{33[33]} Mutual transformations will often be the enriching yet painful experience of the few who make a personal commitment to dialogue. For more wide-ranging changes to take place, public arenas for all are needed. With its unified school system and its tradition for teaching religion in school, Norway is heir to a legacy that may provide a unique space for dialogue and interfaith learning – learning not only *about* but even *from* each others’ religious traditions. If religious education in school is not overruled by majority-dominated interest and minority apprehensions, it may contribute to interfaith bonding and mutual change for the many. But as indicated, religion in school has so far proved to be one of the most difficult questions to handle in Christian-Muslim dialogue in Norway.

Slowly, Norway is getting accustomed to being a multi-religious society. There are several challenges to be faced, by both the religious majority and the minorities. From the perspective of the faith communities, a major challenge to be faced is the tendency on the part of the majority population to equate “Norwegian” with “Christian” (alternatively “Christian-humanist”) values. Although it is not always clear what Christian-humanist values would imply (considering the wide array of value positions within the Christian majority population), minorities are apprehensive of a public discourse that is sometimes heavily marked by a distinction between “us” and “them”.

Increasingly, the interests of the state and those of the national church are perceived as different. Whereas the state authorities seem always to focus on ‘integration’ – often on Christian, communitarian premises – church leaders focus rather on the autonomy of faith communities and the rights of religious minorities in civil society. There are in fact many indications that the churches will be in the forefront of a process towards more inclusive expressions of national unity – acting not only as representatives of the “Christian cultural heritage”, but just as much as defenders of minority rights. In this respect, the institutionalised dialogue between the churches and the Muslim communities in Norway may be a good start.

33[33] A striking example of how dialogue and “diapractice” challenges traditional images of the Other is the joint but controversial Christian-Muslim alliance against apartheid in South-Africa, as reflected upon in by Farid Esack in *Qur’an, Liberation and Pluralism. An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity Against Oppression*, Oxford: Oneworld 1997. A major chapter deals with “Redefining Self and Other”.

