

INCLUDING GENDER PERSPECTIVE IN MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE IN EUROPE AND SCANDINAVIA – A DISTURBANCE TO BRIDGEBUILDING OR A CONTEXTUAL NECESSITY?

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In Norway and in Europe in general interreligious and interfaith dialogue is an expanding field in different arenas, with a growing number of religious communities and participants involved and with a multiplicity of aims. In the theological rhetoric of the churches and of different Islamic organisations and faith communities the call for dialogue is generally high on the agenda. This does inspire several people and organisations to strive for bringing people together across religious borders. The current development has several reasons, which are clearly aiming at counteracting a growing atmosphere of islamophobia¹ in Europe amongst the majority non-Muslim population. It also aims at addressing an attitude of fear both amongst Muslims and non-Muslims linked to occasionally increased tension, ongoing armed conflicts which in some way include a more or less conscious constructed image of "the West" and "Islam" as enemies, and acts of terror. This situation can easily result in distorted images of those who are considered to be the 'other'. Edward Said launched the notion of 'orientalism' to describe the attitude of the so-called West towards the so called 'Orient', consisting of a view of the 'Orientals' and Islam in essentialistic, stereotypical images as 'irrational, fanatic and traditional', opposite the supposedly 'rational, democratic and dynamic 'West'². This view leads to the use of 'the Orient' and Muslims as a negative mirror by the 'West', a wish to create an identity in opposition to the negative 'Other'. Orientalism is still used as a key notion to describe many of the attitudes of fear and demands of assimilation amongst the majority population towards Muslims. This means that not only people living in the 'Orient' but Muslims living in the 'West' still are defined as 'Other'. This results in difficulties amongst Muslims to enjoy equal social status and equal possibilities to get jobs, and suspiciousness against them when practising the Muslim religion and acting out cultures of African, Middle Eastern, or Asian origin.

The need for Muslim-Christian dialogue is clearly coming from 'within' – as a the need for believers and communities of Christianity and Islam to relate to each other in the religious and

¹ The word 'Islamophobia' is from the 1990's in use as a new word as a "useful shorthand way of referring to dread or hatred of Islam – and therefore, to fear or dislike of all or most muslims" – p.1 in the Report "Islamophobia – A Challenge For Us All", by the Runnymede Trust, Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, London 1997

² Said, Edward: *Orientalism, Western concept of the Orient*, London 1978

social landscape in which they exist. But the need comes maybe even stronger from the 'outside', from a political and social context where the need is articulated to build bridges and decrease tension between people of Christian and Muslim faith –and between Muslims and 'general society'. Looking at the present European and Scandinavian context it is necessary for Christian theologians and churches in Europe to relate to the Muslim minorities and to their situation in the countries, cities and neighborhoods in which we live in order to relate adequately to our own context.

The context demands Muslim-Christian dialogue. But what are the aims and the content of these dialogues? The notion of dialogue used in different contexts is at the moment fragmented and ambiguous due to the fact that the word has increasingly become popular and used about all kinds of activities which include some extent of articulation and exchange of opinions. Additionally the word 'dialogue' has been regarded by many minorities as becoming part of a repressive language used in order to confirm and perhaps strengthen the existing status quo in the power balance between majority and minority population groups. To qualify the notion of dialogue in interfaith and interreligious context is necessary, in addition to critically analyze and evaluate the current praxis of such dialogue work continuously.

Let me sketch up the notion of dialogue in the way I will use it here: when talking about dialogue in an interreligious or interfaith setting the aim is to meet across religious tradition barriers to talk, to increase the knowledge of the other part and get new views upon ones own tradition, sometimes agree upon common action, to build personal and maybe institutional relationships in order to decrease tension and increase understanding, and peace-building efforts between people of different faith. One is not entering a dialogue with the aim of transforming the other(s), but to take part in the possible mutual transformation which might be the result of the encounter. The necessary respect required to start and to continue a dialogue is based on the principle that the partners in the dialogue are equals – equally controlling the themes, the presentation of themselves, the physical circumstances, and the aim of the effort. A dialogue of this type has spiritual, social, political, cultural and personal dimensions³.

³ In my article "Begrepet *dialog* i Emmaus – noen refleksjoner om bruken av begrepet på grunnlag av erfaringer i et flerreligiøst landskap" ("The notion of *dialogue* in Emmaus – reflections upon the use of the notion of dialogue based upon experience in a multi-religious landscape") in *Kirke og Kultur* 1/2005, Oslo , I am exploring how my experience in practical dialogue work in the center for Dialogue and Spirituality Emmaus in Oslo influence the use of the notion *dialogue*: Its possibilities, its limits, and how working with this notion is a dynamic process between praxis, religious and political context(s) on the one side and philosophical and theological theory on the other side.

As for the contents and aims of the different Muslim-Christian dialogues in Europe and Scandinavia, there are generally speaking two main areas dealt with in these dialogues in Europe and Scandinavia: Long term process dialogues aiming at peace-building and community building in different forms, or more ad-hoc addressing to emergency situations where there is a need to address fear, to correct constructed enemy images of each other and to act together to increase knowledge and understanding in general society. There are also dialogues where common religious praxis such as praying and relation to Holy Scriptures are the main focus, but these are largely overwhelmed by the more political and socio-ethical. The majority Christian churches in countries like UK (The Church of England) Sweden (Svenska Kyrkan/Church of Sweden) and Norway (Den norske Kirke/Church of Norway) has played important roles in defending religious rights of the Muslim minority communities within general society, both by acting on their own behalf as majority religious communities with an at least partly acknowledged particular responsibility for developing tools for politicians and the general society to handle issues concerning the growing multi-religious context, but also, and perhaps more important, by acting out based on dialogues established together with Muslim organisations and faith communities. The issues dealt with in this last way are both principal issues concerning different practical aspects of the freedom of religion, and socio-ethical issues such as Muslims and Christians together rejecting violent actions like the war in Iraq or terrorist acts in Europe or the US. Since 1992 a contact group between the Church of Norway and The Islamic Council in Norway has been meeting regularly, including leaders from both sides⁴. This group has dealt both with matters of practical importance for Norwegian Muslims, such as possibilities to establish graveyards for Muslims, possibilities for Muslim prisoners to be served by imams, but the group has also addressed the situation after 9.11.2001, urging Norwegian Christians and Muslims to pray for each other and to struggle against fear and islamophobia together, and discussed the situation for the Christian minority in Pakistan, the country from which most Muslims in Norway originate.

In the Scandinavian context, particularly in Norway and Sweden, gender issues can be identified as the area where conflicts between particularly the Muslim minority and general society have been most strongly articulated. This is due both to the fact that gender equality stands out as one of the most important community values and political aims in these countries,

⁴ Leirvik, Oddbjørn: *Islam og kristendom – konflikt eller dialog? (Islam and Christianity – conflict or Dialogue?)* Oslo, 2005 p. 29

to the lack of knowledge in general about Muslim communities which easily can lead to stereotypical images also in this field, and to the cultural differences between immigrants from Africa, the Middle East and South East Asia and the majority of Norwegians. The release of the so-called 'Barometer for integration 2005' in January 2006 - the first larger survey in Norway so far mapping attitudes in the Norwegian population towards immigration and cultural plurality - shows this with great clarity. The field covered in chapter 6 of the survey, called 'Attitudes towards current social issues', the respondents where asked questions in four areas. These were: Arranged marriages, circumcision (of girls), attitudes towards wearing the hijab, and family reunion. There were no questions about other cultural or political potential conflict areas – the concentration was entirely at gender (particularly women related) issues and 'family questions'. Being meant to be a 'Barometer' for measuring attitudes in the general Norwegian population, the survey is surely also a 'Barometer' concerning which questions the Norwegian ruling authorities consider the most central. This shows that the question on gender issues in general and women's issues in particular have become much of a test-question where your answer is defining your cultural identity, and questions of great symbolic value in addition to the importance they carry in their own weight. These questions in Chapter 6 of the survey also highlight questions relating to Muslim praxis, as the hijab and partly the circumcision of girls are questions relevant for the Muslims. Dealing with gender put as *the* conflict issue between 'Muslims' and 'General society' needs careful exploration to sort out the cultural, religious, political and social levels and to some extent to differentiate between them so that gender issues raised concerning women's situation and women's rights, including wearing hijab for Muslim women, circumcision of Muslim women, forced marriages and domestic violence is not stuck on all Muslims in general and thus becoming part of a stereotypical image of Muslims as in Orientalism. Unfortunately, this exploration is often not done, and the following process leads to more islamophobia, which is damaging both for 'general society' and for the Muslims (both women and men) because it can easily freeze or polarize positions without pointing at any solutions or strategies of cooperation.

A report made by a group of researches in Europe, financed by the EU, investigated how Muslim women in different European countries (Germany, Denmark, UK, Italy and Spain) experienced multiple types of discrimination⁵. The report itself concluded that the discrimination the women experienced did take place in the religious communities and that this was the most

⁵ Blaschke, Jochen (ed.): *Multi-level discrimination of Muslim Women in Europe*, Berlin 2000

important hindrance for them in order to live a fulfilled life socially and politically, but the women themselves stated that the most urgent problem for them was the discrimination perpetrated against them by social institutions, by state laws and regulations and mechanisms in the labour market. The discrepancy between the report's own conclusion and what most of the informants actually presented as their interpretation is interesting – and disturbing. It shows how the patterns of orientalism can be traced also in serious, up-to-date European research. Even if this report did not include Norway it is very likely that the same pattern is present to a certain extent here. The view of Muslim women as 'subjugated' in society represents a devaluation of Muslim women's individuality and resources, and a hindrance for their possibilities to obtain a life with the qualities one can expect to have in Norway. In addition to the current discourse of islamophobia in the 'West' this deprivation of possibilities for Muslim women is a hindrance in itself for having the strength to work on their situation and challenges related to gender models within Islam, and also for having the necessary surplus to enter into a interreligious dialogue. But the most important hindrance coming out of this is how the image of Muslim women is settled as collectively 'subjugated', also amongst Christian possible dialogue partners. This may create a very uneven power balance putting all dialogue initiatives qualified as dialogue between equal partners at risk.

To summarize: The outside context – or more precisely the socio-political context in Norway and the rest of Europe is presenting challenging issues related to Islam and gender. Christianity as being the dominant religion and an important part of the cultural heritage is to a certain extent used together with Islam in a dichotomy to construct an image where women and women lives are dragged into the construction of mutual enemy images of Muslims and so-called "Western culture". In Scandinavia, particularly in Norway and Sweden, the main conflict areas presented in the media between "the Muslims and the majority citizens" are not about terrorism – it's about women's rights. Muslim women are considered collectively "subjugated" because they are Muslims (which implies that Muslim men are collectively "subjugators"). On the other side many Muslims consider "Western women" to be lonely, likely to be unfaithful to their family and husband and oppressed by the commercial industry. Both these views are regarding women more or less "property" or at least victims of cruel men - the men being part of the "feared other". In these ways women can become a battlefield for religious and cultural identity.

Interreligious dialogue and Gender Issues

How can Christian-Muslim dialogue relate to gender issues? Firstly, I will draw the attention to a more general level to Professor Ursula King and her reflections on interreligious and interfaith dialogue in general relating to gender issues and women. She states in her article “Feminism: The Missing Dimension in the Dialogue of Religions⁶”

... Narrowness is evident with regard to the marginalisation, invisibility and exclusion of women, for wherever interreligious dialogue has developed, women seem to have little part in it at least at the official level. Proof for this is found in every single book on interfaith dialogue ... can these ‘religious leaders’ today still legitimately ‘voice’ the concerns of women and speak on their behalf, as if women could not speak for themselves?⁷

Ursula King uses the notion feminism – which needs a careful consideration when used in a Christian-Muslim context. But her point about men in dialogue speaking on women's behalf, and women's perspectives as missing from the agenda, is clear enough. It must be a crucial step to include women participants in dialogue, as well as including women's issues – in order to make a dialogue relevant. This gives a possibility of breaking up the stereotypical images as well as offering an arena of process and discussion.

The need for addressing gender issues in Muslim-Christian dialogue

I will argue that the needs for this come not only from the social and political context in Europe and in Scandinavia, but also from within the Christian and Muslim religious communities and organisations. Both the Christian and the Muslim religion are (together with Judaism) traditions heavily rooted in a patriarchal structure, and both the sacred texts and the religious practices show this in different ways and to a different degree when it comes to present religious praxis. John Esposito states in his introduction “Women, Religion and Empowerment” to the book *Daughters of Abraham: Feminist Thought in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*:

However different, the daughters of Abraham, Sara, and Hagar have inherited a religious legacy that is not only the product of divine revelation but also of human interpretation ...

⁶ King, Ursula: “Feminism: The Missing Dimension in the Dialogue of Religions” in May, John (Ed.): *Pluralism and the Religions: The Theological and Political Dimensions*, London 1998

⁷ Ibid.

overwhelmingly male and patriarchal ...As a result, the image of women has been shaped by patriarchy as much as by revelation⁸.

So what happens when two of these religions enter into an encounter – will they confirm or challenge this particular part of their respective traditions? For every Christian or Muslim who wants to transform her own religious community into a space of more gender equality, this has to be explored. Within many Christian and Muslim communities there is a struggle going on at different levels concerning gender issues. This includes struggling with scriptures, tradition, and gender roles within the religious tradition. A Muslim-Christian dialogue able of including these efforts might be able to provide new tools for transformation from within. This can be tools of raised awareness, more knowledge of oneself and the other, having “blind spots” in one’s own tradition revealed, and finding new insights. In this way the challenge to distinguish between culture and religious norms can become more visible. For women engaged in dialogue the very experience from it can be empowering to enter into addressing new questions and in being more aware of oneself as an acting subject⁹.

The book *Scriptures in Dialogue – Christians and Muslims studying the Bible and Qur'an together*¹⁰ is the result of a seminar in 2003 where different Christian and Muslim scholars reflected upon Christian and Muslim texts and the aim and scope of dialogue. Gender issues were not addressed in particular, but in the summary it is stated that

There is clearly ample scope for further engagement of Christians and Muslims together in a dialogue grounded in reading the scriptures together. () This is especially obvious in relation to gender issues ... dialogue cannot be only with one another ... it must also engage with the secular understandings and forces in our religious and secular world¹¹.

How should one interpret this: Is it an indicative of openness towards including ‘secular’ European gender perspectives including ‘Western feminism’, or does it rather express a resignation on behalf of Christianity and Islam as religious traditions, suggesting that both

⁸ Haddad, Yvonne Yazbeck, and Esposito, John (Eds.): *Daughters of Abraham. Feminist Thought in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, Florida 2001, Esposito, John: “Introduction. Women, Religion, and Empowerment” p.1

⁹ Grung, Anne Hege: “Kvindeperspektiv på kristen-muslimsk dialog” (“Women’s perspective in Christian-Muslim dialogue”) in Larsen, Lena and Rasmussen, Lissi (Eds.): *Islam, Kristendom og det Moderne (Islam, Christianity and Modernity)* Copenhagen 2004

¹⁰ Ipgrove, Michael (Ed.): *Scriptures in Dialogue – Christians and Muslims studying the Bible and the Qur'an together*, London 2004

¹¹ Ibid. p.146

religions are lacking the necessary discourses or theoretical tools to deal with gender issues? The important first step is nevertheless clear: Christians and Muslims need to address this, together in a dialogue, but not isolated from the particular challenges and resources which arise from different contexts.

There should be plenty of reasons why dialogue arenas should be acknowledged as gendered space and “gender issues” discussed and articulated openly: The participants always are present in the dialogue either as a man or a woman, the religious space and praxis of both Christianity and Islam is marked by a patriarchal heritage, and one gender (men) is dominating the level of leadership both in civil society and in the religious communities of Christianity and Islam.

Gender issues and Gender perspective in Norwegian Christian-Muslim dialogue

So what about gender issues in the Christian-Muslim dialogue arena in Norway? Is the dialogue arena able to contribute constructively to dealing with gender issues?

The experience from the Norwegian dialogue context is ambiguous: On the one side, we do have examples from the Norwegian context of Christian-Muslim dialogues dealing with gender issues and women issues in particular. The formerly mentioned Contact group between Islamic Council in Norway and the Church of Norway initiated and supported a project where Lena Larsen from Islamic Council of Norway and me representing the Church of Norway, as members of the contact group were asked to produce relevant material of interest about experiences of Christian-Muslim dialogue. Our choice was to create a group of Christian and Muslim women and go through a dialogue process, meeting regularly, and then write and publish a book about it later on. The contact group was supportive of this, and the book *Dialog med og uten slør (Dialogue with and without veil)* was published in 2000¹². This project was simply giving different women in a group a possibility to explore Christian-Muslim dialogue, and then telling the story about the process and the reflections which arose, in addition to sharing more general information about both Islam and Christianity in Norway. It was not particularly using feminist analysis of the two religions or the dialogue – but the voices heard in the project were women’s voices, and there were reflections upon the meaning of women being subjects in sharing and articulating traditions and experiences.. In the larger dialogue projects and processes which have taken place in Norway involving more broad participation, there has

¹² Grung, Anne Hege and Larsen, Lena: *Dialog med og uten slør (Dialogue with and without veil)* Oslo 2000.

been an effort to have a gender balance amongst the participants – and this has to a large extent succeeded.

On the other side, it seems that rather than acknowledging a gender perspective as integrated in Muslim-Christian dialogue processes, this field and particularly so-called ‘women issues’ are also sometimes put aside in order not to create ‘unnecessary tensions’. And even if there mostly has been a gender balance amongst participants in different dialogues, as most religious leaders from all religious communities are men, a balance in gender participation does not necessarily imply an equal power balance. Often ‘gender issues’ or ‘women issues’ are either fragmented into single-case discussions without including an overall gender perspective, or put as secondary issues under headlines like ‘family issues’, ‘discrimination against Muslim women because of the use of hijab’ and so on. Most dialogue participants in the different ongoing dialogues would agree that ‘gender issues’ and ‘women issues’ are very important to deal with in the dialogue, some will say ‘time is not right yet’ - one needs to wait for the right moment to appear some time in the future. Being polemic towards this quite familiar argumentation is relatively easy, but what are the issues needed to be addressed, and how is it possible to create a discourse in the Muslim-Christian dialogue for discussing gender related issues? Is it too ambitious to throw this into a dialogue arena as some of the religious communities are still struggling amongst themselves to have open discussions about this? Or perhaps the dialogue arena can be an open space for discussing ‘gender issues’ and ‘women issues’ to a greater extent than within the respective traditions, because the aim in this dialogue is not to achieve agreements so much as to explore the differences? These questions are to be asked in the current Norwegian Christian-Muslim dialogue contexts.

A gender perspective is necessary for a qualified and relevant Christian-Muslim dialogue

To qualify a Muslim-Christian dialogue requires a consciousness of the context in which it takes place. Gender issues and issues concerning women’s rights and women’s lives are an important part of our context, and Christian and Muslim wrestling with their own tradition, in different ways. An overall gender perspective is necessary, as well as securing participation of both women and men, but also to address issues both from within the traditions of Christianity and Islam (scriptures, tradition, praxis and culture) and from the socio-political reality. It is, in the European and Scandinavian context of growing islamophobia, of utmost importance that

both traditions refuse to enter into a construction of stereotypes on both sides, but rather address current problems and challenges openly and thoroughly in dialogue processes.

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