

Theological Principles versus Secular Language: An Analysis of Joint Statements of the Council on Ecumenical and International Relations of the Church of Norway and the Islamic Council of Norway

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Introduction

In 1993 Christians and Muslims of Norway established a dialogue forum which they called “Contact Group”; a name that signified a hope for the beginning of a new era of interreligious communication and existence in this Scandinavian country.¹ The Contact Group has issued a number of joint statements dealing with critical issues which marked the last two decades of Christian-Muslim dialogue in Norway.² Two important aspects of these statements are particularly interesting for this paper. The first is whether the Council on Ecumenical and International Relations of the Church of Norway (Mellomkirkelig Råd for Den norske kirke, MKR) and the Islamic Council Norway (Islamsk Råd Norge, IRN), as official representatives of Christianity and

Islam in Norway, use religious language in these statements, or whether they found other forms of language which can faithfully convey their respective traditions and views in a specific case. The second issue is how MKR and IRN has managed to communicate jointly different theological positions in a predominantly secular context. In other words, do these texts contain elements and qualities which could appeal to the majority of Norwegian population regardless of their religious and ideological background?³

Chronology, Themes and Audience

The Contact Group issued its first joint statement in June 1994 and it was titled: "Statement about ethics and religion in school". The statement was sent to the then Minister of Education, Gudmund Hernes.⁴ It calls for "more space for ethics and religion in schools". This statement was worked out by "a dialogue group appointed by the Council on Ecumenical and International Relations of the Church of Norway and Islamic Council of Norway". It was signed by the Contact Group's Working committee ("Arbeidsutvalget for samtalegruppen").

Three years later, in February 1997 MKR and IRN published another statement addressed to Christian and Muslim congregations in Norge, encouraging them to make contact ("Til kristne og muslimske menigheter i Norge, med oppfordring til kontakt"). It was signed by General Secretary of MKR and the President of IRN.⁵

It was not until 24. September 2001 that another relatively short but lucid statement was out, addressing the aftermath of 9/11 with the message that "Christians and Muslims must take part in each other's grief and concern" ("Kristne og muslimer må ta del i hverandres sorg og bekymring").⁶ This statement emphasizes that the Christian majority in Norway should initiate contact with Muslim minority because it is seen to have the responsibility and resources to take up this task. It was also signed by General Secretary of MKR and the President of IRN. On 27th May 2004 there was a statement on Israel/Palestina-konflikten signed by Shoib Muhammad Sultan for IRN and Vebjørn L. Horsfjord for MKR. It appeals not only to "Christian and Muslims communities" but also to the "Christian, Muslim

and Jewish religious leadership". It also calls on "Norwegian authorities" and "religious leaders in Israel and Palestinian territories".

On the 3rd February 2006 MKR and IRN launched a statement in which they distance themselves "from the publication of caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed, as well as from the violent reactions which the cartoons have unleashed".⁷ The statement is signed by top leadership from not only MKR and IRN but also from the Roman Catholic Church, the Christian Council of Norway, the Pentecostal movement, Oslo Christian Centre, the Contact Group and Kirkens Nødhjelp.

A year later, on the 22nd August 2007, MKR and IRN announced a joint statement about the freedom of religion and the right to conversion ("om trosfrihet og konvertering"), signed by their respective general secretaries in which they endorse freedom of religion and conversion.⁸ These two statements appear as public declarations, aiming both at local and global audiences. On the 9th of November 2009 MKR and IRN came up with a statement condemning domestic violence.⁹ This document is signed by the general secretaries of the two organizations and (in two separate document) accompanied with theological reasoning from both the religious traditions. It appeals to a wide range of audiences. It goes from "our own", i.e. Christian and Muslim congregations in Norway, to "politicians", "the general public" and even down to "each individual" irrespective of his/her gender, ethnicity or religious orientation. The two supplements are probably intended for those who are interested in deeper theological discussions. They also prove that serious theological considerations stand behind this statement.

The last joint statement of MKR and IRN so far was from 22. November 2011 against religious extremism and again co-signed by both the general secretaries.¹⁰ It lists "religious leaders" and "faith communities" in general; not specifically Christians and Muslims. And for the first time in 20 years of dialogue, the statement directly appeals to the role of media.

In average then, the Contact Group issued a new statement approximately every two and a half years which indicates that they gave a plenty of time for the preparation of each one of them. The addressees of the Contact Group statements are

wide in range and diverse in their political, religious or ideological orientation. The first two statements are composed and directed towards a specific goal. The former contains a formal proposal to a Ministry, while the latter presents a “challenge” to the Christian and Muslim congregations in Norway for establishment of mutual contact. The aim of these two statements was obviously to activate the dialogue between Christians and Muslims on the national level which involves both the secular government and religious institutions.

The general circumstances on the world stage from the beginning of the 21st century determined, so to say, a more global engagement of the Contact Group. In 2001, with 9/11, and in 2004, with the Israel/Palestine conflict, and 2006 with the caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad, the problems which the Contact Group tackled in its statements became increasingly violent in nature. Unlike the first two joint statements, these three statements were drafted as a response to big international incidents in which religion was blamed to play a negative role. It appears that it mattered not only for Muslims but for Christians as well to make their voice heard and to reaffirm the positive role religion can play to resolve these challenging issues. The statement on domestic violence coincided with the Norwegian Government’s program to decrease the violence that take place in families and close relations. The statement against religious extremism came after the terrorist attacks on Oslo and Utøya which took place on 22.07.2011.

For the evaluation of these statements, it is not only appropriate to take account of their chronology, content, context, specific purposes and the audience but also the form and language in which they were communicated. Christianity and Islam communicate in their specific religious languages but if these languages are to be changed or adjusted for specific audiences a very important issue becomes imminent, namely: to translate religious language for the use in the public sphere. Likewise, the question of institutional legitimacy and the right to interpret theological positions necessarily come to the fore. Because, in the words of Jane Dammen McAuliffe, “any translation is, of course, an exegetical act, a choice among varying – sometimes competing – understandings of the text.”¹¹

Institutional legitimacy and Interpretation of Theological Positions

The Church of Norway is the state church and the largest church in Norway with approximately 3.8 million members.¹² MKR is a department of the Church of Norway dealing with inter-Christian and non-Christian ecumenical dialogue and international relations. It is a specialized agency within a broader organizational structure. The Islamic council, on the other hand, is the umbrella organization for the majority of Islamic organizations, or what is popularly referred to as “mosques”.¹³ By its very nature, the Islamic Council is oriented towards dialogue within the Islamic community in Norway.¹⁴ It has also established permanent dialogue platforms with other world religions and humanistic ideologies.¹⁵

As can be noted, during their engagement in dialogue, MKR and IRN nominated different working committees to draft the statements. In some occasions as in 1994 and 2006 these committees have signed the documents on behalf of their organizations. In 1997, on the Muslim side, the president of IRN signed the statement. However, an emerging pattern that general secretaries undersign the statements can be traced from 2004. The formation of the working committees and signatures of presidents and general secretaries make the joint statements look formal and official. One cannot fail to notice that these documents represent activities of “organized religions” which, in that sense, exercise their legitimacy through institutional channels. Last but not the least, MKR and IRN have legitimacy among their members and are also recognized as partners in dialogue by the state. Consequently, it is understood that both MKR and IRN enjoy the right to interpret theological positions in dialogue on behalf of their respective religions.

However, it should not be forgotten that the partners on both the Christian and Muslim sides are big organizations, each in its own right, and that their members hold different theological positions and views. Having that in mind, a total agreement on each particular issue would be hard to expect. Many of the themes had to be discussed in both Christian and Muslim camps before they were brought to the dialogue table in the Contact Group. In many cases, the pros and the cons had to be carefully

weighed on each side and then painstakingly drafted into the text of the statements. The process, however, has not always been easy given the changing dynamics of representatives from both organizations. These challenges further amplified the requirement of a precise language in what appears to be very formal documents.

Types of Religious Discourse

Since the early modern age, logical positivism disqualifies religious statements for the lack of cognitive meaning. Modern protestant theologians such as Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) struggled to reinterpret mythological elements contained in Biblical stories. Paul Tillich (1886-1965), on the other hand, claimed that all religious statements are symbolic.¹⁶ These approaches to religious language have been replaced by attempts to show that religious language is rich and that it can be classified into different categories.¹⁷

Christianity and Islam communicate their ideas through different bodies of texts. The main vocabulary is either related to their respective sacred texts or apostolic and prophetic traditions, but it occurs in different contexts and can talk in various forms of religious language. Rational explanations of sacred scriptures are commonly referred to as theological language which branches out into two major areas. One theoretical, related to beliefs and the other practical, related to religious laws and praxis. Pastoral language is the language that is often heard from the religious leaders within sacred places such as churches and mosques. Devotional text deals with expressions of individuals describing deep religious experiences, mystical visions and spiritual feelings. Liturgical language is the language of individual or congregational prayer. Ecumenical is the language of inter- and intra-religious dialogue where two or more different religions or groups communicate their views in a manner comprehensible to both of them.

This illustrates that religious language is not simple in nature and that it may contain different types of expressions.

Regarding the revealed or sacred texts, it is remarkable to notice that there is no single statement of MKR-IRN which

contains any verse from the Bible or the Qur'an or any other sacred text. It is known that many joint declarations worldwide usually do use excerpts from their sacred texts in order to appeal to religious feelings or fortify their common belief in revelation, but the Contact Group chose not to. This of course does not mean that sacred texts are unintelligible in nature but it perhaps indicates the fact that quotation from Bible or Qur'an is not the familiar norm in public space, even though it comes from religious organizations.

Another *specificum* is that the Contact Group did not use the common prayer formulas such as "in the name of God", and correspondingly, the statements do not end with any common prayer invoking the help from God for the purpose of realization of the objectives and hopes expressed in them.

The statements also do not contain any of the "foreign" words which are widely used such as *sola fide* from Protestant tradition or even the most common one, *Allab*, from the Islamic faith universe. The word Qur'an is mentioned only once without appearing as a central point and the name of Prophet Muhammad could of course not be avoided in the case of caricatures. The use of specific religious concepts is very limited. Words such as mercy, blessing, prayer, reconciliation, divine justice, and forgiveness, are not to be found in the statements. Notably, there is no place also for other phrases that are often associated with religious rhetoric.¹⁸ However, visible traces of traditional theology are present in the argumentations.

No liturgical language can be identified in any of the statements. "Archaic literary forms, difficulties in phraseology or unfamiliar customs" have also not found their way into the statements.¹⁹ Yet, the contents, meanings and messages of the statements express crucial issues that are closely associated with the teachings of both Christianity and Islam.

Neutral, Ecumenical and Human Rights Terminology?

It is suitable here to overview the terminology that is commonly found in all the joint statements. The focus of the early statements has been to discover "ground values" between Christianity and Islam and what is common in "Norwegian heritage" as the context in which the interreligious relations are actualized.

They call for “openness”, condemn “prejudices” and encourage flourishing of “one’s own identity” side by side with “the other”. This comfortable tone also continues after the terrible times of 9/11 insisting on “sharing each other’s worries and hope, and working against prejudices”. The condemnation of any “threats and harassment” is drafted in a neutral language and figures as a central point of these two statements.

The Israeli-Palestine Conflict statement calls for the upholding of “UN declarations and resolutions,” and “international law, people’s rights and human rights”. It insists that any “violation of human rights” and “violence against civilians” should be condemned. “The values of dialogue such as equality, respect and community should be valid across national and religious belongings”. “Peace”, “security” and “justice” should be maintained. Finally, neither side should act in a way that can “lead to the growth of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism”.

The statement on the cartoon affair confirms basic human rights principles. It unequivocally asserts that “Freedom of expression is a fundamental right which must be respected”. Conflicts must be solved with “peaceful means”, “through dialogue and common meeting points”. Everyone should contribute to the creation of “an atmosphere that is characterized by openness and dialogue”.

The statement on conversion fortifies yet another principle of freedom which is “freedom of religion” and “freedom to choose faith”. The statement addresses the controversial issue of religious conversion and in crystal clear words reaffirms “the right to convert to another religion”.

The domestic violence statement stresses on “fundamental human rights” and declares domestic violence as “criminal acts”. These acts “violate both our religious teachings and human rights” both “in Norway and internationally”.

The statement about religious extremism reiterates the importance of “human life, welfare and rights” on one hand, and condemns the “attacks and violence” on the other. It calls for protection of “each other’s members, holy places and other institutions”. The connection between “our religious teachings and fundamental human values and rights” is highlighted again. This idea that religious teachings and moral values of Christi-

anity and Islam are similar, if not the same, as reflected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, runs through all the statements and is implicit in all the appeals.

As can be seen then, these joint statements do not have a traditional theological outlook and shape. They do not deal with the strict theological issues such as the existence of God, after-life or miracles nor do they discuss religious beliefs in which the element of the irrational or the mythical is perceived to be too prominent. Rather, the key concepts that figure out in the statements tend to be conventional, rational, and secular. They belong to the realm of common Christian-Muslim concerns which regulate *coexistence*, *relations* and *dialogue*.

One can observe in a few cases that the concepts are “borrowed” from human rights terminology. However, there is also a general feeling that when religious organizations promote human rights, the “secular” somehow fades away and the “religious” fills in. For a religious audience, to care about human rights then does not seem like showing mere respect to the human rights conventions but rather obeying an obligation which acquired a shade of additional importance because it was taken up by religious leaders.

Although MKR and IRN announced plans in their early joint statements to initiate dialogue not only about the “common interests in the local community”, but also about each other’s faith and belief, yet they never realized these plans in the form of joint statements.

Since the targeted audience of the statements is so wide that it includes not only Christians and Muslims but also the followers of other religions and those who do not regard themselves as religious, the language of the statements cannot be characterized as exclusively Christian or Islamic. It cannot be regarded even as religious language. Rather, the language appears religiously neutral. But what is significant is that this language succeeds to express a religious motivated message in a very efficient way. The question therefore arises whether these opinions can be seen as a peculiar expression of a form of “sacralisation” of the language or rather as an expression of a contextual “secularization” of religion.

Exploring the Theology behind the Statements

Many of the key concepts discussed in the joint statements can be formulated in what could be loosely termed as new theological categories which can be summarized in following headings: religious diversity, dialogue, peace, justice, equality, freedom of expression, freedom of religion, freedom of conversion, security, non-violence, anti-extremism and even communal ethics.

Although these themes appear to be of contemporary importance and human rights oriented, corresponding themes with different titles and terminology can be found in traditional religious teachings and theological discussions both in Christianity and Islam. It is perhaps difficult to find them under these modern formulations because they are scattered under other traditional theological topics.

It is interesting to make an attempt to determine what kind of theology Christians and Muslims had arrived at in the first place which enabled them to produce this kind of statements. Keeping in mind the contents, audience and language it appears that the authors of the statements believe, for example, that both religions teach that God is the creator of humankind and that Adam and Eve are the parents of the whole humanity irrespective of the colour of the skin or ethnical belonging. The modern principle of equality could similarly be founded on traditional religious understanding of the brotherhood of humankind. Furthermore, the authors seem to hold that God created us alike, men and women, and hence the modern principle of equality can naturally be endorsed in the statements.

Religious diversity is yet another subject that deserves attention. The statements do not see it as a problem. Theologically perhaps, religious diversity is perceived as a sign of God's Power and Creation. Accordingly, on the existential plane, these religions teach that relation building among humankind should be characterized by highest ethical standards and governed by tolerance. Justice, as a modern construct, is one of the most important of these standards. But this is so because in traditional theology, for both Christian and Muslim, God is just and does not do injustice to anyone. God is good and He does not do evil.

When it comes to freedom, the statements presuppose

perhaps that unlike other God's creatures human beings are endowed with freedom of choice, to choose their life paths and their religions, or to change them if they want to without being harassed or attacked for doing so.

Modern humanitarian concerns related to human sufferings are prominent in the statements too. The statements suggest that the way to approach deteriorating human conditions is through compassion and solidarity, categories that sprang from religious fountains. Consequently, human life appears as the most sacred treasure that humankind is entrusted with, and therefore, it should be respected and protected. In line with that, violence is rejected and killing of innocent people is considered deeply reprehensible. The family is seen as the place where real religiosity and moral values are tested. Finally, statements underline that extremism does not represent Christianity or Islam in any way.

In short, this appears to be the implied theology of Christianity and Islam as represented by MKR and IRN. It is not explicit in the statements but without it, it would be hard to imagine that the statements would take the shape they did.

Creating a Common Discourse

It is obvious that MKR and IRN avoided particular Christian or Islamic religious language and terminology in their statements in favour of a neutral, or, if your wish, a new ecumenical language which is acceptable and understandable by both sides. By doing so, they reached an extremely important consensus on language which enabled them to communicate to each other in a reasonable and comprehensive way. Furthermore, this language consensus enabled them to jointly convey their agreements and arguments to others in the public sphere. In words of Jürgen Habermas, they offered "reasons that all sides can equally accept".²⁰ Thus, they were able to create such a common discourse which has the qualities to appeal not only to their own members but also to religious and non-religious peoples from other faith and ideological communities. With this language they could easily communicate to secular representatives and institutions inside and outside of Norway. Hence, the concept of communication in the public space largely complies

with what John Rawls calls “the public use of reason”, which involves justifying a particular position by reasoning in a way that people of different moral or political or even religious backgrounds could accept.²¹

The Contact Group clearly wanted to share their ideas with everyone and convey their message in a simple and easy way. They were aware of dangers of misinterpretation and unintelligibility which could lead to increased misunderstanding and even animosity and hostility. The terms used in the statements are not taken for granted but are clear and well-defined. By doing so, they tried to secure maximum understanding and support from the majority of the people.

Although the statements, overall, do not appear to be religious in terminology they do, however, promote religious and theological positions of both religions. Christians and Muslims will not find their religious sermons in these statements but will nevertheless recognize the indispensable message their religions teach. They will recognize that Christians and Muslims believe many of the same things, even though they do not use the same terminology in their respective theologies. On the other hand, the types of language in the statements make important elements of the two religions accessible for those who do not share their particular religious ideas and discourse. To borrow a term from communication engineering, the amount of “noise” is reduced to the minimum.²² They chose to communicate the relevance of their beliefs to contemporary society in an accessible and easy to understand language, the common language of this age.

Importantly enough, the freedom of using one’s own theological methodologies and terminologies was left available to each side. There appears no pressure to use this “secular language” all the time and in every situation and at all costs. MKR and IRN exemplify this understanding by issuing separate supportive theological statements as in the case of domestic violence. By that, each one of them appears to recognize the right of the other to communicate ideas publicly in their peculiar terms.

Conclusion

Christian and Muslim authors of joint statements perceive themselves as representatives of mainstream theologies of their respective religions and they promote the best of their religions' teachings and traditions. They clearly and timely distance themselves from any kind of fundamentalist, extremist or violent approaches and condemn such instances in their own ranks.

Christians and Muslims were able to recognize the most problematic issues of the last twenty years and address them jointly across religious boundaries. As such they chose to play a proactive and constructive role in Norwegian society. Globally, they resisted prevailing ideas of the clash of civilizations and impossibility of practical interreligious cooperation.

Looking inwardly, Christians and Muslims did use religious language and theology to explicate their positions on issues they dealt with, and to construct views directly related to the sacred texts and their theological books. They appeared to have shared this type of language interreligiously in the process of the preparations of the statements. But outwardly, they communicated their beliefs in a contemporary language which exhibits elements that can make it accessible to the majority of people who would like to read them.

Finally, these statements are not just theoretical formulations. They contain practical implications also. The statements always suggest ways of concrete implementations through various means suitable for civil, social, religious and political organizations. In this sense, the joint statements appear more like commitments or even agreements and contracts between the two, which are open for other potential partners who can identify themselves with their goals.

Noter

- 1 For a general overview about emerging religious diversity and interreligious relations in Norway, see Oddbjørn Leirvik *Religionspluralisme. Mangfold, konflikt og dialog i Norge*. Oslo: Pax forlag 2007. About Muslim-Christian relations in particular, see: Oddbjørn Leirvik "Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations in Norway. Popular realities, political and religious responses, interfaith cooperation", in *Islamochristiana* vol. 29, 2003, pp. 121-140.
- 2 Johanne Håvarstein provides a good overview of the first decade of Christian Muslim dialogue in Norway in her master thesis titled "Kristen-muslimsk religionsdialog i Norge: en studie av dialogarbeidet mellom Islamsk Råd Norge og Mellomkirkelig Råd", University of Oslo, 2002.
- 3 A comprehensive list of joint statements, press releases and other relevant documents can be found at the following link: <http://folk.uio.no/leirvik/Kontaktgruppa.htm>
- 4 The whole statement is available online at: <http://folk.uio.no/leirvik/MKR-IRN/MKR-IRNskule,%20juni%2094.htm>.
- 5 See: <http://folk.uio.no/leirvik/MKR-IRN/brevtilmenigh,%20mars%2097.htm>
- 6 See: <http://folk.uio.no/leirvik/MKR-IRN/TaDelSorgBekymring.htm>
- 7 The document is available at: <http://www.kirken.no/?event=showNews&FamId=4483>. There are three master theses that dealt with this problem at the University of Oslo: Freweini Katerina Weldeghebriel "En rammeanalyse av karikaturesaken i Norge" (2008); Pål Espen Kapelrud, "Offerets makt: En diskursanalyse av karikaturstriden i Norge" (2008) and Marianne Engelstad "Sataniske vers og Muhammed-karikaturer" (2013).
- 8 See: <http://www.kirken.no/?event=showNews&FamID=17453>
- 9 See: <http://www.kirken.no/?event=showNews&FamID=101461>
- 10 See: <http://www.kirken.no/?event=showNews&FamID=223367>
- 11 *Qur'anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991). p. 93.
- 12 See: http://www.ssb.no/en/kultur-og-fritid/statistikker/kirke_kostra/aar/2013-06-19?fane=tabell&sort=nummer&tabell=116210
- 13 For the nature of membership in mosques and Islamic organizations, see: Shoab Sultan: "Medlemsskap i norske moskeer." In Ingunn Folkestad Breistein og Ida Marie Høeg (red.) *Religionsstatistikk og medlemsforståelse*. Trondheim: Akademika forlag, 2012. pp. 165-180.
- 14 Presently, the Islamic Council has 41 member organizations and about 60000 members which is more than a half of total number of Muslims registered in any Muslim organization in Norway. See: <http://www.irn.no/om-irn> and <http://www.ssb.no/trosamf>
- 15 On the official website the Council lists Samarbeidsrådet for tros- og livssynsamfunn, Mellomkirkelig råd, Det Mosaiske Trossamfund, Den katolske kirke, Ny arbeids- og velferdsforvaltning, Politiet and other organizations. See: <http://www.irn.no/samarbeid>

- 16 See, for instance, Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York, Harper 1958), p. 45.
- 17 Luther J. Binkley, for example, offers empirical, tautological, emotive, ceremonial, prescriptive, mythical and paradoxical usage. See: Luther J. Binkley and John H. Hick, "What Characterizes Religious Language?" in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Autumn, 1962), pp. 18-24.
- 18 See: David Crystal, Language and Religion in L. Sheppard (ed.), *Twentieth century Catholicism* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1966), p. 22.
- 19 Ibid, p. 17.
- 20 See: The Holberg Prize Seminar 2005 titled "Religion in Public Sphere", p. 11 available online at: <http://www.holbergprisen.no/en/juergen-habermas/holberg-prize-symposium-2005.html>
- 21 "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited", *The University of Chicago Law Review*, vol. 64, Summer 1997, no. 3, pp. 765-807.
- 22 See: David Crystal, Language and Religion. p. 17

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