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## **ISLAM AND MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS IN NORWAY<sup>1</sup>**

### ***Abstract***

*In this paper the author describes and analyzes central features of Islam and Muslim-Christian relations in Norway. By close observation of the tension between interreligious solidarity and aggressive identity politics, the author highlights some central features of the trust-building Christian-Muslim dialogue in Norway. He also notes how anti-Islamic sentiments in part of the majority population are reflected in radicalization among some Muslim youths. However, the situation in general is described in more optimistic terms. He also identifies two examples showing that the majority of the Muslim population seem to endorse strong values evident in society in general— such as the welfare state and gender equality. Finally, the author poses the question pertaining to the way in which Christians and Muslims may adopt a unified stance against extremism.*

**Keywords:** Islam in Norway, Christian-Muslims relations, interreligious dialogue, values

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Although I have a broad experience from Christian-Muslim dialogue in Norway, I am not always sure where to start my presentation when asked to reflect on Christian-Muslim relations in my country. Should I start with the work of the national Contact Group between the Church of Norway and the Islamic Council, a forum for Christian-Muslim trust-building and cooperation which

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<sup>1</sup> Rad je prezentiran na Međunarodnoj znanstvenoj konferenciji “Međureligijski dijalog u izazovima savremenog življenja”, koju je 3. novembra 2018. godine, povodom 25 godina svoga djelovanja, organizirao Islamski pedagoški fakultet Univerziteta u Zenici.

has been working for 25 years? Or should my starting point be the terrible terrorist attack by Anders Behring Breivik on 22 July 2011 which left 69 dead and 55 severely injured at the Labour Party's youth camp on the island of Utøya?

Breivik's massacre was carried out by a self-declared cultural Christian who was bent on defending Europe against a Muslim invasion made possible by naïve multiculturalists. This was the reason why he directed his attack on a multicultural youth camp organized by the social democrats who – in his perception – are the main responsible for the “Islamic occupation” of Europe.

Maybe a picture from the first funeral after Utøya can do as a point of departure. The first victim to be buried was Bano Rashid, a 19-year-old Kurdish-Norwegian girl. Her mixed cultural and religious identity was symbolized by the Norwegian and Kurdish flags on her coffin, and even more so by the male imam and the female priest who jointly officiated at the funeral.

For me, this picture visualizes the double reality of Christian-Muslim relations in Norway: Firstly, a faith-transcending sense of solidarity which corresponds with strong community values in Norwegian society as well as trust-building dialogue among religious leaders. Secondly, an aggressive form of identity politics which found its most dramatic expression on 22 July 2011 and which also – albeit in less violent forms – tend to dominate media debates about Islam.

In my following reflections, I will try to give a picture of Islam and Muslim-Christian relations in Norway with a view to dominant discourses in general society and developments in Christian-Muslim dialogue.

### **Muslims in Norway**

A recent estimate indicates that maybe 250 000 Norwegian residents – 5 % out of a total population of 5 million – are Muslims by cultural background. Around 150 000 (that is, 3 % of the population) are currently members of a mosque congregation.

The percentage of mosque members and of self-declared Muslims are considerably higher for Oslo and some other cities. Almost 10 % of the residents in Oslo are members of a Muslim

congregation and in a poll from 2012, 20 % of the capital's teenagers identified themselves as Muslims.<sup>2</sup>

Oslo can also boast of a higher number of purpose-built mosques (currently, seven) than in any other Northern European city.

In terms of cultural background, the largest groups of Muslims trace their roots back to Pakistan, Somalia, Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Morocco. The ethnic groups who in recent polls report the highest degree of religious participation are those with a Somali, Pakistani or Turkish background – with Iranians and Bosnians at the bottom end, and Iraqis somewhere in the middle.<sup>3</sup>

As for membership in mosques, it should be noted that Norway has a rather generous system of financial support for the faith communities. As a compensation for state funding of the Lutheran Church of Norway (historically a state church which comprises today around 70 % of the population), other faith communities are entitled to the same amount in financial support per member as the Church of Norway receives from state and municipal budgets. This gives, of course, a strong impetus for the mosques to recruit members.

Moving to the issue of Muslim ecumenism, in 1993 an umbrella organization called the Islamic Council Norway was formed. Differently from many other European countries, the initiative did not come from political authorities seeking a representative Muslim body to talk with. Instead, the establishment of the Islamic Council came as a direct response to an invitation from the Church of Norway to form a national Contact Group for Christians and Muslims – an initiative that triggered an ecumenical effort on the Muslim side. During the last couple of years, the Islamic Council has been ridden with internal conflicts and a new umbrella organization has recently been formed.

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<sup>2</sup> Øia, Tormod. 2012. *Ung i Oslo 2012. Nøkkeltall*. NOVA Rapport 7/12: 144.

<sup>3</sup> Statistics Norway (SSB), "Levekår blant innvandrere i Norge 2005-2006 (Living conditions among immigrants in Norway)", SSB Rapport 2008/5. The survey was based on interviews with 3,053 non-Western immigrants and descendants of immigrants.

## Endorsement of social democratic values

Moving to political aspects of the Muslim presence in Norway, several polls

indicate that a large majority of Muslims (around 80 %) declare their support to the social democrat and socialist parties.

Correspondingly, quite a few Muslims in Norway have referred to the values of the Norwegian welfare state (which is generally associated with social democracy) as coming very close to Islamic ideals. Utterances such as “The Norwegian welfare state is Islam in practice” and “Norway is more Islamic than Pakistan” are often to be heard.<sup>4</sup> Already in 2005 Shoaib Sultan (who became later the General Secretary of the Islamic Council) stated that

Many Muslims see today’s welfare state in Norway as closer to the Muslim ideal state than many countries in the Muslim world and Norwegian Muslims want to keep the Norwegian state as it is.<sup>5</sup>

The cited tendency among Norwegian Muslims to associate social equality and welfare state principles could of course be taken as an expression of enlightened self-interest among immigrant groups who have benefited from welfare state arrangements in the process of integration. But it could also be seen as a reflection of a more general tendency among Muslim reformers to associate the Scandinavian welfare system with Islamic values. An interesting example of the latter tendency can be found in the books of Muhammad Qutb, a prominent member of the Muslim Brotherhood. In view of the Islamic ideal of social justice, Qutb says (as early as in 1964), “the Scandinavian states have in this

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<sup>4</sup> Døving, Alexa, Sidra Shami and Tore Lindholm. 2011. “Religious commitment and social integration: Are there significant links? A pilot study of Muslims in the Oslo area with a family background from Pakistan.” University of Oslo Faculty of Law Research Paper No. 2012-01. Available at [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1978709](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1978709)

<sup>5</sup> Sultan, Shoaib. 2005. «Muslimer i statskristendommens land» (Muslims in a land of state Christianity), in D. Söderlind (ed.): *Farvel til statskirken?* Oslo: Humanist forlag: 90 (my translation).

connection come closer than any other state in the world – to a realization of some aspects of Islam”.<sup>6</sup>

In my view, endorsement of welfare state values demonstrates how Muslim spokespersons express their commitment to Islamic values in terms of perceived common (even emblematic) values in Norwegian society such as social equality and – as we shall see – equality between the sexes.

### **The centrality of women’s issues**

In the Scandinavian context, the aim of gender equality has traditionally been a central part of social democratic policies and welfare state arrangements. But the question of gender equality has also become the focus of immigration-related controversies. From the mid-1990s, most media discussions on Islam in Norway have been focused on women-related issues such as arranged or forced marriages, female genital mutilation, and the headscarf. Negative stereotypes of “the others’ women” can be seen both in the majority population and in Muslim groups.

On the other hand, Muslims also seem to be influenced in a more affirmative manner by gender models in Norwegian society. Several young women of Muslim background have become publicly known for their vociferous protest against patriarchal practices associated with Muslim cultures. For instance in this year, a group of young women who call themselves “The Shameless Ones” has caught public attention for their fight against religiously based social control.

Already in a newspaper article from 2009 entitled “Muslims in the process of change” the then leader of the Muslim Student Association in Oslo, Bushra Ishaq, stated:

We raise a struggle to realize ourselves as independent individuals, as Norwegian girls who have been taught to fight for gender equality. Were it not for the fundamental influence of Norwegian culture and the values of the

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<sup>6</sup> Mohammad Qutb: *Islam – the misunderstood religion*. Lahore: Islamic Publications Limited, 1972: 77. Cf. Gardell: *Bin Laden I våre hjerter. Globaliseringen og fremveksten av politisk islam*. Oslo: Spartacus 2007: 120f.

welfare state, the emerging Muslim feminism would not be a fact.<sup>7</sup>

A recent book by the same writer, based on a large poll, shows that 96 % of the respondents declared their support for gender equality. Critical commentators have suggested, however, that the figure probably reflect political correctness rather than actual family practices.

Gender-related issues have also been a challenge for the Islamic Council. In 2000, the council elected the convert Lena Larsen (a human rights activist) as their new chairperson, after the former leader had to step down since doubts had been raised whether he opposed female genital mutilation strongly enough. (It may not be a coincidence that Ingrid Mattson, who in 2006 was elected as chairperson of the Islamic Society of North America, is also of Scandinavian origin ...).

Despite the historic election of a female chairperson of the Islamic Council, instances of female leadership in Muslim organizations are hard to find and the overwhelming majority of board members in Muslim organizations remain male. A survey in 2010 revealed that less than 3% of the mosques' board members and public spokespersons were women.<sup>8</sup>

In sum, the above developments imply that the question of women in Islam is not really a debate between the Muslims and Norwegian majority population. It is just as much an intra-Muslim debate, in which young Muslim women increasingly set the agenda.

### *Anti-Islamic sentiments*

The cited examples may indicate that large sections of Norwegian Muslims seem to gravitate towards emblematic "Norwegian values" such as the welfare state and gender equality. But there is also confrontational identity politics going on between the majority population and the Muslim minority and public

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<sup>7</sup> Ishaq, Bushra. 2009. "Muslimer i endring" (Muslims in the process of change), *Aftenposten* 4 September 2009

(<http://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/kronikker/article3252237.ece>)

<sup>8</sup> "126 moskéer – én kvinnelig leder", *Vårt Land* 20 January 2010.

debates in Norway are no less influenced by anti-Islamic sentiments than other European countries.

Although the monstrosity of Anders Behring Breivik's violence shocked everyone, including anti-Islamic activists, ideologically his so-called Manifesto leans heavily on the writings of well-known anti-Islamic ideologues, in Europe and the US. The US report "Fear, Inc. The Roots of the Islamophobia Network in America", which was published in September 2011, documented the extent to which Breivik in his Manifesto had borrowed from anti-Islamic ideologues associated with neo-conservatism and the New Christian Right in the US.<sup>9</sup>

Among the political parties, the right-wing populist 'Progress Party' (which attracts ca. 15 % of the votes and has been a government partner since 2013), has an almost 30 years' legacy of singling out Islam as an enemy to Norwegian society and to Christianity. In 2009 the Progress Party leader Siv Jensen warned against what she called "creeping Islamization". Two years earlier, the former chairperson Carl I. Hagen publicly characterized Muhammad as a 'warlord, assailant and abuser of women ... who murdered and accepted rape as a means of conquest'.<sup>10</sup>

Anti-Islamic stands have also been voiced by groups associated with the New Christian Right, whose followers have been eagerly courted by the Progress Party. During the Danish cartoon crisis in 2005-2006, the New Christian Right's mouthpiece *Magazinet* re-published the Danish cartoons depicting Muhammad as a violent sexist. The alleged motive was to support freedom of expression which (according to the editor) "in our part of the world is threatened by a religion that is no alien to resorting to violence".

But this is only one side of the picture. The anti-Islamic rhetoric of Norway's right wing populist party has been strongly countered by mainstream Christian leaders who on numerous occasions have warned against Islamophobia and defamation of

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. the report "Fear, Inc. The Roots of the Islamophobia Network in America." Center for American Progress, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Hagen, Carl I. 2007. *Ærlig talt. Memoarer 1944–2007*. Oslo: Cappelen, p. 539.

Muslims.<sup>11</sup> Attitudes towards Islam and Muslims have actually revealed a *cleavage* among Norwegian Christians – between (on the one hand) “cultural Christians” and branches of charismatic Christianity which have been courted by the Progress Party, and (on the other) mainstream church leaders whose solidarity attitudes have been influenced by more than twenty years of trust-building dialogue with Muslims.

Cleavages on the Muslim side are no less conspicuous. In recent years, fear of “radicalization” of Muslim youth has become a recurrent topic in public debate and groups of young Muslims have criticized the established Muslim leadership for being too soft and accommodating. In numerous controversies over anti-Islamic cartoons and film in the West, the Islamic Council has repeatedly warned against demonstrations – a warning defied by more radical groups of Muslims who have taken to the streets in vociferous protest. One of these groups, called “The Prophet’s Ummah”, has staged demonstrations in the streets of Oslo, publicly supported ISIS and heeded the heritage of Osama bin Laden.

Among Muslim youth, the fastest growing organization over the last years has been Islam Net, a markedly value-conservative organization with Salafist inspiration and apologetic orientation. Unlike The Prophet’s Ummah, Islam Net does not have a militant profile. The organization regularly stages large conferences which attract a considerable number of Muslim teenagers and young adults. Regular international guests include the British speaker Abdur-Raheem Green. Representatives of the organization take a confrontational attitude against “others” and markedly counter-cultural stands in issues such as gender relations (practicing strict segregation), homosexuality and the death penalty.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. «Kristenledere sammen mot islamfobi og muslimhets» (Christian leaders together against Islamophobia and defamation of Muslims), kirken.no 24 September 20054 (<http://www.kirken.no/?event=showNews&FamId=4679>)

<sup>12</sup> “Mener Islam Net-sjef er ‘uegnet som leder’ etter dødsstraff-uttalelser”, VG 04.09.11. Cf. Marius Linge: “Den konservative veknelsen. Om IslamNet, Profetens Umma og salafismens fremvekst i Norge” (The conservative revival. IslamNet, The Prophet’s Ummah and the emergence of Salafism in Norway), *Samtiden* 4: 2013, pp. 38-53; Sindre Bangstad and Marius Linge: ‘IslamNet – puritansk salafisme i Norge’ (IslamNet – puritan Salafism in Norway), *Kirke og*



The radical-militant and conservative-apologetic profiles of the Prophet's Ummah and Islam Net respectively are markedly different from that of the organization "Young Muslim" which – confluent with majority values – seeks to "contribute to the development of competent and well-integrated youth who is just as confident in their Muslim and Norwegian identity".<sup>13</sup>

### ***Christian-Muslim dialogue***

Has Christian and Muslim identity politics gotten the upper hand, then? Has nothing changed after the terrorist wake-up call of 22 July 2011? In terms of popular attitudes, figures from the so-called 'Integration barometer' in 2012 indicate that attitudes towards Muslims had actually become significantly less negative than before 2011. But four in ten still expressed skepticism of people with a Muslim faith.<sup>14</sup>

What then about Christian-Muslim dialogue in Norway? As for formal, representative forums, a bilateral Contact Group for the Church of Norway and the Islamic Council was established in 1993.<sup>15</sup> The Group's early agenda was marked by attentive listening from the majority church to Muslim minority concerns in Norway. The national Contact Group also laid the ground for the church leaders' frequent protests against the anti-Islamic rhetoric of the Progress Party and the New Christian Right.

However, what started with minority Muslims appealing for solidarity from majority Christians gradually evolved into a form of interaction with clear elements of mutuality. Thus the Contact Group has not only addressed Muslim minority issues in Norway but also engaged itself in the precarious situation of Christians and other religious minorities in Muslim majority societies – as

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*Kultur* 4: 2013, pp. 254-272; and Lars Akerhaug: *Norsk jihad; muslimske ekstremister blant oss*. Oslo: Kagge 2013.

<sup>13</sup> [www.ungmuslim.no](http://www.ungmuslim.no)

<sup>14</sup> Integreringsbarometeret 2012, *Holdninger til innvandrere, integrering og mangfold* (Integration barometer 2012, Attitudes to questions concerning immigrants, integration and diversity), IMDi Rapport/Report.

<sup>15</sup> <http://folk.uio.no/leirvik/Kontaktgruppa.htm>

expressed in joint statements such as “Stop the violence against Christians in Pakistan” (2009).<sup>16</sup>

Gradually, a noticeable step has also been taken from group solidarity to a growing concern for *individuals* whose integrity and well-being may sometimes be threatened by their own cultural and religious group. In some statements of the Contact Group, about the right to conversion (2007)<sup>17</sup> and violence in close relationships (2009)<sup>18</sup>, the focus of attention has clearly moved from protection of minority *groups* to defence of vulnerable *individuals*. In the joint statement about the right to change one’s religions, which evoked international attention, Christians and Muslims jointly promise to protect those who embark upon the risk project of changing one’s religion:

[...] everyone is free to adopt the religious faith of their choice. We denounce, and are committed to counteracting all violence, discrimination and harassment inflicted in reaction to a person’s conversion, or desire to convert, from one religion to another, be it in Norway or abroad.<sup>19</sup>

If the above statement can be taken as representative, Christian-Muslim dialogue has in fact taken quite a few steps away from religious group interests, in the direction of a commitment to human rights that challenges traditional attitudes within the religions.

Two years later, in 2009, the Christian-Muslim Contact Group issued a joint declaration against violence in close relationships.<sup>20</sup> In this joint statement, violence against women is characterized as “brutal breaches of fundamental human rights” and “criminal deeds that violate both our religious teachings and human rights”. On a self-critical note, the statement emphasizes that “we

<sup>16</sup> ‘Stopp volden mot kristne i Pakistan’, kirken.no 13 August 2009, <http://www.kirken.no/?event=showNews&FamID=93378>

<sup>17</sup> See <http://www.kirken.no/?event=showNews&FamID=101461>) [accessed 18.07.13].

<sup>18</sup> See <http://www.kirken.no/?event=showNews&FamID=17453>) [accessed 18.07.13].

<sup>19</sup> See <http://www.kirken.no/english/news.cfm?artid=149142>) [accessed 18.07.13].

<sup>20</sup> See [http://www.kirken.no/english/doc/engelsk/Joint\\_declaration\\_violence\\_relations\\_0911.pdf](http://www.kirken.no/english/doc/engelsk/Joint_declaration_violence_relations_0911.pdf)) [accessed 18.07.13].

strongly condemn any misuse of the teachings of our religions in order to legitimize violence in the family or in close relationships.”

Although these statements were formally representative at the time of publication, they only live as long as new leaders and activists are willing and able to re-commit their faith communities to human rights and humanistic values. After the joint declaration on the right to convert, it also turned out that some of the imams did not really identify with it – suggesting that the right to convert is valid in Norway but not in Muslim world.

### **United against extremism?**

Let me conclude with a Christian-Muslim statement on religious extremism, issued in November 2011. In post-22 July debates, a recurring issue has been the relation between narrow and broad definitions of extremism. The question has been how to understand Breivik’s extreme violence: Was his actions driven by a violent motor that could be fueled by anything? Or must they be seen as an extreme expression of relatively widespread anti-Islamic attitudes, as reflected in Breivik’s Manifesto?<sup>21</sup>

The group’s statement takes a broad approach and stresses the need “to identify and oppose tendencies to religious extremism as early as possible“. Thus it indicates a sliding scale which begins with the extremists’ conviction ”that they are alone in interpreting their own religion correctly” and ends with the explicit willingness to use violence to enforce their convictions on others who are defined as deadly enemies. On this sliding scale from attitudes to action, the statement also notes the refusal to coexist with certain groups of people, and the language of hate, as signposts on the road to violent expressions.

Interestingly, the Christian-Muslim statement also includes religiously motivated violence against women in its broad definition of extremism: “Extremists use gender-based hierarchies and power structures in which women are denied human rights and human dignity on the same level as men.” Correspondingly,

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Lars Erik Berntzen and Sveinung Sandberg: «The Collective Nature of Lone Wolf Terrorism: Anders Behring Breivik and the Anti-Islamic Social Movement», *Terrorism and Political Violence* 2014 (published online 56 February 2014: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2013.767245>)

Christian and Muslim congregations are urged “to oppose hateful descriptions and harassment of women” – in order to identify tendencies towards religious extremism as early as possible.

### **In conclusion**

I have tried to demonstrate how Muslim identity discourses in Norway reflect central features of the Scandinavian context such as welfare state values, gender equality, and a culture of dialogue. Despite seeming convergence in terms of values, confrontational identity politics is still endemic in both Christian and Muslim groups.

As for Christian-Muslim dialogue, it can partly be seen as a critical response to confrontational identity politics in general society. Dialogue may take the form of faith-transcending solidarity. But importantly, an interreligious concern for the vulnerable individual can also be noticed.

I am not sure what direction Christian-Muslim cooperation will take in the future. That depends on the next generation of leaders. Will they slide back into group interest? Or will they consolidate a joint commitment to the integrity of the individual – across religious divides? I hope for the latter.

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## **ISLAM I MUSLIMANSKO-KRŠĆANSKI ODNOSI U NORVEŠKOJ**

Prof. dr. sc. Oddbjørn Leirvik

### ***Sažetak***

U ovom radu, autor daje opis i analizu ključnih karakteristika islama i muslimansko-kršćanskih odnosa u Norveškoj. Pažljivim promatranjem tenzije između međureligijske solidarnosti i agresivne politike identiteta, on ističe neke ključne karakteristike izgradnje povjerenja u dijalogu između kršćana i muslimana u Norveškoj. Povrh toga, uočava kako se protuislamska osjećanja kod dijela većinskog stanovništva odražavaju na način da se jedan dio muslimanske omladine radikalizira. Glavnu sliku, ipak, opisuje optimističnije. Također, navodi dva primjera prema kojim se čini da većina muslimanske populacije prihvata prave vrijednosti općenito u društvu – poput socijalne države i ravnopravnosti spolova. Na koncu, autor postavlja pitanje, kako kršćani i muslimani mogu zauzeti jedinstven stav protiv ekstremizma?

**Ključne riječi:** islam u Norveškoj, kršćansko-muslimanski odnosi, međureligijski dijalog, vrijednosti

أودبيرن لايروك، كلية اللاهوت، أوصلو النرويج

## الإسلام والعلاقات الإسلامية المسيحية - في النرويج

### الملخص

في هذه الورقة، يقدم المؤلف وصف وتحليل الخصائص الرئيسية للإسلام والعلاقات الإسلامية المسيحية في النرويج. ومن خلال متابعة دقيقة للتوتر بين تضامن الأديان والسياسة العدوانية للهوية العدوانية، أشار إلى بعض الخصائص الرئيسية لبناء الثقة في الحوار بين المسيحيين والمسلمين في النرويج. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، ويلاحظ أن المشاعر المعادية للإسلام عند غالبية السكان تنعكس في ظهور تطرف بعض الشباب المسلمين. وفي هذا الصدد يصف الصورة الرئيسية وصفاً أكثر تفاعلاً.

ويستشهد أيضاً بمثالين يشيران أن غالبية السكان المسلمين يقبلون بالقيم الحقيقية بشكل عام في المجتمع - مثل الدولة الاجتماعية والمساواة بين الجنسين. أخيراً، يتساءل المؤلف كيف يمكن للمسيحيين والمسلمين اتخاذ موقف موحد ضد التطرف؟

الكلمات الأساسية: الإسلام في النرويج، العلاقات المسيحية الإسلامية، الحوار بين الأديان، القيم