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The Power of Faiths in Global Politics

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Interfaith Dialogue and Liberation Theology: between Liberal Multiculturalism and Interreligious Activism

By Oddbjørn Leirvik

In international debates about interfaith dialogue, the relation between a *liberal* acceptance of cultural difference on the one hand and a *radical* commitment to justice on the other has become a pressing issue. In national politics, it overlaps the tension between *multicultural communitarianism* and *value-based universalism* (as opposed to merely procedural forms of universalism). Whereas multiculturalism seeks to expand the space for legitimate disagreement between communities about norms and values, value-based universalism aims at a maximum of value conformity in general society. Hence, value-based universalism is also concerned about demarcating the limits of acceptable disagreement.

The tension between multicultural communitarianism and value-based universalism takes on a particular form in the Nordic countries, which all have a legacy of cultural and value-based uniformity. The tension between communitarianism and universalism also has theological dimensions to it and overlaps to some extent with the relation between interfaith dialogue and liberation theology. The critical relation between interfaith dialogue and liberation theology constitutes a particular challenge to contextual theology which seeks to clarify the relation between universality on the one hand and sensitivity to differences on the other (Stålsett 2003b).

Contrast experiences

In the Nordic countries, Per Frostin of the University of Lund (who died in 1992) was one of the main pioneers in the field of contextual theology. His writings include critical examinations of liberal theology in the West (Frostin 1970), reflections on Christian-Marxist dialogue (Frostin 1978; 1971), and contributions to a contextually well-reflected "liberating theology" which in the case of Frostin was related to both Africa and the West. In his book about African theology of liberation (Frostin 1988), and in a collection of articles on liberating theology that were published posthumously (Frostin 1994), he often speaks about "contrast experience" as the point of departure for a renewed theological reflection (Frostin 1988; 1994: 21ff, 100f).

The expression "contrast experience" originates from the Catholic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx who applies it as a reference to experiences that challenge the dominant pattern of thought in a given society. It may be one's *own* experiences, for instance as a women in a male dominated society, or the narrated experiences of others who suffer disregard and suppression. The notion of contrast experience has a certain affinity to the French, Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas who speaks of

the shattering encounter with the Other – an Other which (through the vulnerable face) forces us to abandon our safe and well arranged "home".

During the 1990s, there has been a certain inflation of references to the Other – with a capital O – among theologians and philosophers. Behind the mode of expression looms the experience of once having been forced to leave behind a dominant pattern of thought and enter a foreign landscape that may have been felt as both enticing and frightening. Many theologians of Frostin's generation can tell a story of contrast experiences that have challenged one's accustomed religious and political ideas. My own background lies in the Christian socialist revolt against a so-called "bourgeois" theology, which we thought was too much focused on the salvation of the individual and a purely "existential" interpretation of life. When a young student, I read Per Frostin's critical discussion with Rudolf Bultmann as laid out in his book about "politics and hermeneutics" (Frostin 1970). By this, I was led to understand that Bultmann's apolitical analysis of the human condition was not universal but rather a highly contextualised attempt to overcome the modern European sentiment of existential alienation or "uncanniness" (cf. Heidegger's notion of "Unheimlichkeit"). In the view of Frostin, the existential analysis of Bultmann and other liberal German theologians corresponded to the self-experience of a certain social group at a certain point in history, namely the well-educated class' experience of homelessness in a more and more industrialised and democratic society which deprived them of their previously privileged position (Frostin 1970: 139). Linking up with this sentiment, and inspired by Heidegger, Bultmann reinterpreted Christianity as a religion of committed, existential choice.

Against the apolitical theology of Bultmann (and its underlying compartmentalisation of reality in one existential/religious and another political/secular sphere), Frostin argued that the Lutheran reformation was simultaneously a religious and political act. According to Frostin, the entire theology of Luther should be seen as an interaction between social practice on the one hand and prayer, meditation and Bible study on the other (Frostin 1970: 112). Later on, Per Frostin unfolded his critical as well as creative vision of the connection between politics and the Gospel in a book entitled "Prayer and revolution" (Frostin 1979).

The contrast experiences that triggered Per Frostin and other Christian socialists in the Nordic countries in the 1970s were of a threefold nature. First, there was the discovery of a post-colonial, global injustice of which we felt co-responsible and guilty. Secondly, we recognised the mechanisms of exclusion and social injustice in our own, social democratic welfare societies. Thirdly, there was the experience of alienation and repressive structures in our churches – structures (and attitudes) under which women in particular suffered. Correspondingly, the critical, contextual theology that emerged had elements of (1) third world liberation theology, (2) domestic socialism and (3) Western feminist theology.

From dialogue with Marxism to interreligious dialogue

To the extent that Christian socialists of the 1970s were committed to dialogue, conversation with Marxism was felt as the most pressing challenge (cf. Frostin 1971).

The Nordic countries still being relatively monocultural, interfaith dialogue was mostly outside of our horizon. From the 1980s, however, the religiously Other entered the scene, as migrating Muslims established their own faith communities in the Nordic countries. We were, of course, well aware of the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979. But as it represented a foreign pattern of thought, we didn't quite know how to interpret it. In general, we were more concerned with the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua in the same year. Personally, I didn't really reflect on the interreligious challenge until I took up pastoral service in one of the most multicultural parts of Oslo in 1984. Only then was I exposed to a new kind of contrast experience, emerging from the close hand encounter with neighbours who were both socially, culturally and religiously "Other".

From the beginning of the 1990s, intercultural and interfaith dialogue has been put on the agenda of both religious and political bodies. Interfaith dialogue in Norway has materialised in church-based forums such as the Emmaus Centre for Dialogue and Spirituality (from 1991), in bilateral forums such as the National Contact Group of the Church of Norway and the Islamic Council in Norway (from 1993), and in the multilateral Interfaith Council which was established in 1996 and named "The Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities" (the term "life stance communities" reflects the strength of secular humanism – as represented by the Humanist Association – in Norway). In 1998, the interfaith council initiated the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief, in which the faith communities engage each other in co-operation with organisations with a similar agenda in other parts of the world.

In the interfaith council (as in the Oslo Coalition), questions of religious freedom have come to occupy much of the attention. But the faith communities have also engaged each other in such controversial questions as the position of women. Increasingly, they have also addressed issues of intolerance and violence, in connection with global conflicts with interreligious dimensions.

Also in interfaith dialogues in Norway, then, the question has arisen of how to combine a *liberal* commitment for religious freedom with a *radical* commitment to non-violent conflict resolution, social justice and gender equality. In all these issues, there are fundamental values at stake. In the Nordic context, those values that point in the direction of equality would normally be identified as social democratic values. Liberal values, on the other hand, are more accepting towards fundamental differences (and, of course, always related to "freedom").

Theology of religion and theology of liberation

Theologically, the relation between liberal and radical values overlaps that between theology of religion and liberation theology. A central issue in the theology of religion is how to live well and reconciled – before God – with religious differences. In contrast, liberation theology is based on fundamental values of justice and equality that, if taken seriously, must be endorsed universally (i.e. interculturally and interreligiously). Theology of religion may thus be said to gravitate towards liberalism, whereas liberation theology is more akin to social radicalism.

From the 1990s, the need for a critical synopsis of theology of religion and liberation theology has been widely felt. In his later writings, Per Frostin – the pioneer of contextual theology in the Nordic countries – often touched upon the new interreligious pluralism. But due to his early demise in 1992, he was not able to unfold a synthesis of liberation theology and interfaith dialogue. On the international scene, Paul Knitter has attempted such a synthesis in the above-mentioned book *One Earth Many Religions*, which carries the subtitle "Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility" (Knitter 1995). Here, he tells the story of his personal discovery of and journey with the "Other". Like Frostin, Knitter sees the encounter with the Other as a shattering contrast-experience of facing "the *really different*, the unexpected, the unthought-of, the surprising, the jolting. I'm talking about people or events that didn't seem to fit into the world that I had experienced or understood" (Knitter 1995: 1). Knitter distinguished between the "religious" and the "suffering" Other. In contrast with my own journey with the Other, Knitter's odyssey began with an encounter with "the religious Other" which led him – as a Jesuit missionary – to recognise that other religious traditions were imbued with a wisdom that both challenged and enriched him. Only through his subsequent solidarity work for refugees and illegal immigrants from Central America to USA, he explains, was he led to a shattering encounter with "the suffering Other". In his book, Knitter also tells the story of an ecological revival that led him to the fundamental recognition of living on a wounded Mother Earth.

For Knitter, so he explains, "the suffering Other" came to shatter his life far more than the "the religious Other". Knitter is adamant that if forced to choose between "pluralism" or "liberation", i.e. between interfaith dialogue or the struggle for social justice, he would have to abandon dialogue and give priority to the alleviation of suffering and the struggle for justice (Knitter 1995: 11). But luckily, he says, experiences from interfaith dialogue in Sri Lanka (as described in the book's final chapter) have demonstrated that there is a socially committed, truly liberating form of interfaith dialogue.

The urgent question for everyone committed to both interfaith dialogue and liberation theology must then be how to unite a *radical* struggle for justice that will always be controversial and create conflict with a *liberal* engagement for multi-religious co-existence in which respect of different opinions must be the corner stone. How can one, in shifting contexts, reconcile a double responsibility for the religiously Other and the suffering Other?

In some cases, the religious Other is identical with the suffering Other. In an article from 1996 about "The Hidden God. The Divine Other of Liberation", David Tracy speaks about the shocking encounter with an Other who is not only religiously different but also socially and politically marginalized – by an injustice that often coincides with cultural and religious barriers (Tracy 1996). The doubly Other, says Tracy, carries the trace of a hidden God before whom one is absolutely responsible.

But social contractions do not always coincide with religious borders. If one looks more closely into the matter, one will find that social and ideological differences are generally more conspicuous *within* the religions than *between* them.

Africans in the south than to their Arab co-religionists in the north. One such example was when a group of Sudanese church leaders visited Norway in 2000. The National Contact Group for Christians and Muslims in Norway facilitated a meeting with the president of the Islamic Council who at that time was a West African. He made no secret of his sympathy with the black African cause of the Christians in South Sudan.

Interreligious alliances of this kind clearly show the deceitfulness of the mounting discourse of identity politics which makes people around the globe believe that "religion" is the most defining factor in their personal or collective identity. Age, gender, class, ethnicity and culture may all constitute just as determining elements – as components of identities that are more often than not plural in nature. The fact that individual identities are complex implies also that one may feel affiliated to more than one group. This means that only in a critical awareness of shifting contexts, complex identities and "impure" alliances can one speak meaningfully about interfaith dialogue, whether in an individual or communal perspective.

Multiculturalism – for whom? A Nordic perspective

As indicated, interfaith dialogue in the Nordic context must relate itself critically to the tension between social democratic and feminist values of equality on the one hand, and a liberal form of multiculturalism that is more accepting towards differences on the other.

One of the most distinguishing features of the Nordic context is the strong commitment to gender equality, which one has sought to promote both by efforts at attitude formation and by legislation. More recently, there has been a similar commitment to gay rights, aimed both at changing popular attitudes and new legislation for instance by introducing homosexual partnership as a regulated alternative to marriage. Both issues are important parts of the horizon for interfaith dialogue and any discussion of faith-transcending commitment to equality and justice in the Nordic countries. In legal terms, the rights of women and homosexuals to equal treatment have already been safeguarded. In the churches, however, the question of women's and gay people's access to religious positions is still unresolved. A similar discussion is also emerging in the other faith communities, who are increasingly challenged from the outside on these issues.

In an international perspective, there is also another striking feature of the Nordic countries, namely the legacy of a strong national religion of the Lutheran confession. Whereas Sweden introduced changed relations between church and state in 2000, in Norway, Denmark and Iceland the national religion is still underpinned by a solid state church system. Even more than the issues of gender equality, the dominance of the national religion has defined the agenda of minority cooperation and interfaith dialogue in the Nordic context.

The struggle for safeguarding freedom of religion or belief within the framework of the state church system is a liberal struggle focused on the *group-based* rights of the faith communities. In contrast, the equally liberal struggle against discrimination on the basis of gender or sexual orientation is focused on the rights of *the individual*.

The so-called liberal dilemma is about striking the right balance between state protection of individual rights on the one hand and the necessary freedom from state intervention that groups in civil society should enjoy on the other. With reference to Knitter's reflections on the relation between "the religious Other" and "the suffering Other", one should keep in mind that the suffering other may both be a [illegible] cultural, religious, ethnic) group that is discriminated against, and a marginalized individual who is denied his or her fundamental rights by the same group. The liberal dilemma might thus be rephrased as how to balance the right of the Other as a *group* in search of recognition with the right of the Other as a vulnerable *individual*.

In spite of the strong legacy of social democratic conformism, both Sweden and Norway have to some extent opened up for a group-based multiculturalism that allows greater space for value-based differences to express themselves. This gives [illegible] the faith communities a greater space to arrange their internal affairs in accordance with their conviction. It is therefore important to raise the critical issue about power relationships in multicultural societies, as the Swedish ethicist Elisabeth Gerle does in her book "Multiculturalism – for whom? (Mångkulturalism – för vem? – Gerle 2001). Who exactly is benefiting from multiculturalism? In her book, Gerle discusses the relation between the group-based right to establish Christian or Muslim private schools and the individual right of gender equality, which is sometimes restricted by private schools. She also discusses whether the right to establish religious private schools hampers the rights of children to be raised in an open atmosphere, an issue which links up with the wider question of freedom and authority in [illegible].

In Norway, the Gender Equality Act of 1978 is meant to safeguard the equal [illegible] of men and women in professional contexts but makes an exemption for the [illegible] "internal affairs" of faith communities. This enables the faith communities [illegible] discriminate against women without being punished by withdrawal of state funding [illegible] other public rights. In more positive terms, the exemption clause safeguards [illegible] of faith communities to arrange the relation between men and women in [illegible] ways, in practical arrangements that cannot always be neatly categorised [illegible] equality" or "discrimination". Many people think that in Islam, women are [illegible] from becoming religious leaders. In parts of the Muslim world, however, [illegible] have traditionally been able to serve as religious scholars and also as imams [illegible] female part of the mosque assembly. The issue of female imams does therefore [illegible] coincide with the modern discussion about gender equality but reflects the [illegible] principle of gender-segregated worship. In the context of Islam, then, the [illegible] is not whether women can become imams, but whether they can lead [illegible] and give the Friday sermon in gender mixed assemblies.

[illegible] is, of course, a very controversial issue and collides with traditional [illegible] Muslim as well as other faith communities. In most of the faith communities [illegible] Norway, there is an ongoing discussion of women's access to religious [illegible] governing bodies within the religious communities. The question of [illegible] gender-related issues is thus not a question between the faith communities [illegible] hand and the (Christian and social democratic) state on the other. [illegible] equality and power is fought *within* the faith communities, for

instance with regard to women's access to priesthood in the Roman Catholic church or to governing bodies in mosques. Whether the state decides to intervene or stay completely neutral in such internal affairs, it influences – for better or worse, depending on the eye of the beholder –the internal power constellations of the religious communities.

Exemption clauses, minority rights and common limits

In interfaith dialogues in Norway, there has so far been a general consensus that the state should abstain from intervention and that the exemption clause in the Gender Equality Act (and a parallel exemption clause in paragraph 55a of the Labour Environment Act regarding employment of homosexual partners), should stand. Does that reflect a lack of interest in the rights of women and homosexuals, or rather a shared commitment to a liberal, multicultural society that restricts the ambition of the state to regulate matters of religious conviction? Probably, the interfaith consensus reflects primarily a dominant concern for the minority rights of faiths communities in a Christian majority society, which continues to be supported by a state church system.

In general society, however, some of the most conspicuous inequalities are related to the dominance of the (cultural and religious) majority over the (cultural and religious) minorities. Whether the majority is Christian-humanist, Christian-conservative, Muslim-liberal or Muslim-fundamentalist, the issue remains the same: How far can the religious or cultural majority go in the direction of dictating the minorities and restrict their space of action?

With a view to minority-majority relationships, it should be noted that from the 1990s onwards, the agenda for interfaith dialogues in Norway has to a large extent been set by the religious minority communities. The Interfaith Council was established in the wake of a minority alliance between Muslims, Jews, secular humanists and Buddhists. The minority alliance came about in 1995 as a protest against the plans that were announced to establish a new and compulsory subject of Christian and Religious Education in public school – a subject that was (and is still) felt by the minorities to be too much oriented towards the dominant national religion and the so-called "Christian cultural heritage". In general, the minorities' fear of encroachment by the majority and their struggle to safeguard their group-based religious liberty has come to dominate a good deal of interfaith dialogues in Norway.

This has had some rather tangible effects on both the Church of Norway and (in a different way) the Humanist Association. With regard to the Church of Norway, there is no doubt that the national church has become more sensitive to minority issues over the last decade. This can be seen from the report on changed relations between church and state that was presented to the church synod in 2002 (Samme kirke, ny ordning), in which the principles of non-discrimination and equal treatment of different faiths constitute a main line of argument.

As for the Humanist Association, some leading secular humanists have openly declared that the principle of religious freedom includes the right of faith communities to discriminate not only against women but also against homosexuals. Among

the rank and file of the Humanist Association members, many have seen this concession as a sacrifice of the right of the individual on the altar of group rights. But many humanist leaders are insistent in their argument that liberal multiculturalism implies in the obligation to defend the right that other cultural and religious groups have to opt for conservative, perhaps discriminating solutions in critical issues. Defending the exemption clauses of the Gender Equality and Labour Environment Acts, General Secretary Lars Gule of the Humanist Association has argued (Gule 2002) that the right of equal treatment does only apply on common arenas in society, that is in public institutions and in trade and industry ("in the market place").

In the view of liberal multiculturalists, faith communities should be allowed a much greater space to discriminate, because they constitute communities that the individual may freely opt in and out of. The question of whether individuals who suffer from discrimination – women, children – enjoy such a freedom in practice, is of course a critical one. The freedom of opting in and out of faith communities must therefore be actively safeguarded by the state.All participants in Nordic interfaith dialogues (including liberal multiculturalists) seem to agree that the freedom of the faith communities must be restricted by some inviolable limits. For instance, in the mid-1990s Norway found it necessary to sharpen the legislation against forced marriages and female genital mutilation, in correspondence with the limit that is drawn by human rights conventions with regard to harms against live and health. No religious leaders have raised objections against this. But in the question of women's access to religious offices (for instance, in Muslim, Catholic or Orthodox communities), both religious leaders and the majority of legislators have opposed any attempt to restrict the freedom of the faith communities to arrange their internal affairs in accordance with their convictions (although many would regard actual practices as a blow against women's rights). Even many feminists have opposed state intervention in this field, out of the fear that a more interventionist state will jeopardise not only religious freedom but also the freedom of civil society in more general terms.

Some would argue, however, that a certain minimum of gender democracy should still be enforced by the state, at least in faith communities that receive some kind of financial support from public budgets. With regard to youth organisations, women's access to their governing bodies has already been defined as a requirement to obtain public grants for their cultural activities. If that were made a universal prerequisite for obtaining financial support, would that jeopardise religious freedom in an unacceptable way? Or could it be seen as a necessary minimum requirement upon which the state should actively seek interreligious consensus?

The line between legitimate minimum requirements and an unacceptable degree of state control cannot be easily drawn. The question is how far one is willing to go in the direction of a state policy that enforces practical endorsement of certain values or regulations. In exactly which matters should the state to set up minimum requirements for public recognition, or even use coercive means to implement equality regulations without exemptions for certain sectors of civil society?

The crucial question here is how to balance one's conviction about what is ethically and religiously right with a critical reflection on what kind of state intervention that can be regarded as politically rightful (i.e., legitimate). But the further one goes

in the direction of multicultural liberalism, the more obliged one should feel to join the agents of change in civil society (in accordance with one's value-based conviction which may, of course, be either of a "conservative" or "liberationist" inclination). If holding the view that the state should grant a maximum of freedom to the faith communities, it becomes even more important to build alliances in civil society – between Christians, Muslims, humanists and others who want to promote common values in controversial issues. Exactly where the limits should be drawn between state protection of individual rights and the freedom of the religious communities is hard to resolve and should probably continue to be one of the top issues on the agenda of Nordic interfaith dialogues. But is it equally important to promote a culture of interreligious activism, and to build interreligious alliances that may engender a fertile strife in civil society.

Well-grounded moral disagreement

The *political* question of where the limits for state intervention in civil society should be drawn touches the *ethical* question of how far one is ready to go in acceptance of "well-grounded moral disagreement" within and across the faith communities. The expression "well-grounded disagreement" is borrowed from the Swedish ethicist Göran Bexell who lists a series of criteria for what can be counted as a morally acceptable position (and hence, a legitimate disagreement) within a particular tradition (Bexell 1990: 4; and Bexell 1992: 31-36). Within the Christian tradition, to which Bexell relates, there is for instance a long standing tradition of accepting that the fundamental value of non-violence as expressed in the Gospels may be interpreted as both absolute pacifism and just war regulations.

When speaking of "well-grounded moral disagreement" one should always make it clear whether the term is used in descriptive, contractual or normative way. In *descriptive* terms, it is a fact that (more or less absolute) pacifists and (more or less restrictive) proponents of just war theories have managed to live side by side in the churches, right from the times of Constantine. But well-grounded moral disagreement must refer to something more than descriptive facts. To give sense, it must at least refer to a *contractual* agreement in the religious community to live side by side with different views in critical issues (a modern classic is the way in which different views on alcohol consumption have been accommodated for in the Nordic churches). But the concept of well-grounded moral disagreement may also take on more *normative* dimensions, implying that both views can in fact be counted as plausible interpretations of the same traditions and hence equally legitimate. If a pacifist decides not to leave a church which accepts warfare (and even a uniformed military chaplainry, as in Norway), this implies that he and his counterparts have either *contractually* accepted to live with incompatible differences in opinion, or *normatively* accepted that more than one interpretation (pacifism, just war) of the Christian tradition may in fact be counted as morally well-grounded.

With regard to the position of homosexuals in the Church of Norway the agents of change have initially struggled to reach a contractual agreement that living together in homosexual partnerships should not entail any reduction of rights (in access to reli-

...ffices or governing bodies). On both sides, many have already expressed their ...ness to accept that opposite views on homosexual partnership may both be ...grounded in relation to the Christian tradition. In the report "Homosexuals in the ...h" (*Homofile i kirken*) that was produced in 1995 by a committee appointed by ...shops, the theologian Kjetil Hafstad refers explicitly to Bexell's theoretical per...tive when explaining his view on "well-grounded disagreement within the com...ity of the church" (Hafstad 1995: 162ff). The question is what comes next, when ...ents of change have won their first victories. Will they continue to regard differ...iews on homosexual partnership – or on women priests – as legitimate expres... of a well-grounded moral disagreement, or rather fight for the normative trump ...their own position? In the issue of gender equality, the Church of Sweden has ...more radical than the Church of Norway, by requiring those who oppose ...en priests to cooperate with them (the Church of Norway gives more rights to ...nservative opponents to opt out of pastoral cooperation in local contexts).

In the struggle against apartheid in South Africa both Christian and Muslim ...ists fought to *restrict* the space for well-grounded moral disagreement, by ...ing off apartheid as totally unacceptable in normative terms (in the light of ...Christian and Islamic ethics). In which matters should one – by concern for the ...iously Other and/or the suffering Other – draw an absolute line against unac...table attitudes and arrangements, and in which matters should one rather learn ...ve with a (controversial but recognised) plurality of moral and religious posi...tions? Should issues pertaining to race, gender and sexual inclination respectively ...e treated differently? In this case, what is the ethical criterion for drawing an ...ute line in e.g. race issues but not in gender issues? This is one of the most ...rtant questions to be dealt with in interreligious dialogue, in order to reach a ...imum of consensus on legitimate and illegitimate disagreement in society.

Interreligious activism – and disagreement across religious divides

In multi-religious societies the conversation about well-grounded moral disagree...ent should not and cannot be restricted to the inner affairs of each faith commu...ity. The dialogue must be conducted right across religious divides. As indicated, ...e different views on non-violence, gender relations and sexual ethics do not coin...de with religious borders. On the contrary, disagreements run right across the reli...ous divides.

This is most evident when analysing how people of different faiths take a stand ...oncrete moral and political matters. In what follows I will demonstrate this by ...ristian and Muslim reactions to the terrorist acts of 11 September 2001 and the ...owing bombing campaign against Afghanistan. In general, Christian and Muslim ...aders have no difficulty in endorsing basic values such as non-violence. In Nor...way, Muslim and Christian leaders joined hands with Jews and secular humanists in ...public symbolic action against religiously motivated violence just after 11 Septem...ber (*Dagsavisen* 17 September 2001).

However, when the United States embarked upon their war on terrorism by bombing Afghanistan things soon became more complicated. As in many other Western countries, Norwegian church leaders (including several bishops) were quick in criticising the bombing campaign (*Klassekampen* 29 October 2001). The Committee for International Affairs in the Church of Norway characterised the war against Afghanistan as "ethically doubtful and strategically unwise" (*kirken.no* 18 October 2001). Not surprisingly, the Islamic Council took a similar stand. At a certain point, a joint letter was sent from the Church of Norway's Council of Ecumenical and International Affairs and the largest Pakistani mosque in Oslo, criticising the Christian democratic Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik for giving too uncritical support to the American bombing campaign (which the Norwegian government at a later staged joined). Christians and Muslims together demanded a halt to the bombing for humanitarian reasons and called for international responses to terrorism that did not inflict suffering on innocent civilians (*Aftenposten* 31 October 2001).

The Christian-Muslim letter could be cited as a good example of an interreligious activism that is potentially highly controversial. Not all church leaders were of the same opinion as the activists in the Council for Ecumenical and International Affairs and the critically minded bishops. When the Synod met in mid-November, it had to recognise different moral judgements as to the legitimacy of the bombing campaign. Neither should it be forgotten that in the regions close to the battlefield, Muslims too were divided among themselves. The American bombing campaign could not have been conducted were it not for the solid Muslim support of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan and regional stakeholders such as the Pakistani government.

The cited example is but one out of many concrete moral and political disagreements among people who profess the same values (and even the same faith). The realities of interfaith relations are revealed in moral and political practise rather than in general values discourses. The most prominent example of an interfaith value statement is perhaps the *Declaration Toward a Global Ethic* which was adopted in 1993 by the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1993. The Declaration calls for commitment to (1) a culture of non-violence and respect of life, (2) a culture of solidarity and a just economic order, (3) a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness, and (4) a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women (Küng and Kuschel 1993). Sermon-like declarations may contribute efficiently to changed attitudes. But the impact of the Chicago Declaration and Hans Küng's *Projekt Weltethos* is limited by a universalist idealism that is not related to concrete issues and contexts. In discussions about global ethics, the approach has often been purely *deductive*: Drawing on the great traditions, one has sought to identify some general values around which one aspires to reach an interreligious, "overlapping" consensus.

The limitation of identifying abstract values is revealed by the fact that it is difficult to find anyone who would actually publicly disagree with them. But in real life, one has to face the fact that people do constantly disagree in moral and political issues, even when they profess seemingly identical values. The decisive question, then, is what it means *in practice* to build a culture of non-violence, ensuring eco-

economic justice or safeguarding equal rights for men and women. At the *orthopractical* level, the emerging interfaith orthodoxy (centred around general values) may be of little help. Normally, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and humanists distribute themselves equally along the entire political spectrum. In moral issues, too, they often experience more painful differences among themselves than in relation to "the others"– notwithstanding their profession of certain values that may sometimes be spoken of as particular to this or that faith.

A more inductive approach to the issues of global ethic can be found in Elisabeth Gerle's book *In Search of a Global Ethics* (Gerle 1996). With Seyla Benhabib, Gerle calls for a discourse about global ethics that is sensitive to context and power, and interactive rather than conceptual (Gerle: 19, 38f). In a practice-related approach to global ethics, it becomes evident that any moral and political position reached at in a dialogical process is controversial, and must by necessity be so if it shall ever have the power of changing anything.

In every *concrete* moral challenge that arise locally or in global society, one has to cope with substantial differences in opinion not only within but also across the borders of the faith communities, even among those who profess the same fundamental values.

What consequences should be drawn from the fundamental recognition that moral and political differences cut right across religious divides? One might either opt for greater acceptance, or greater restriction. Many people would like their co-religionists to become more accepting towards different moral and political views. Such acceptance does not necessarily entail unrestricted value relativism. Any multi-religious society will have to draw a demarcation line against attitudes and acts that cannot in any circumstances be accepted. Such limits must be sometimes be protected by legislation.

Conclusion

A major task of interreligious dialogue, then, would be to define the space of well-grounded moral disagreement and its outer demarcations *together*. How to limit or expand the space of well-grounded disagreement, is both an ethical and political question. *Politically*, at least in a liberal perspective, the best one may hope for is perhaps the equal distribution of Christians, Muslims and other along the entire spectrum of political parties. *Ethically*, the challenge is twofold. First, the faith communities should be challenged to reconsider the space they allow for well-grounded moral disagreement, so that lines are not drawn in an oppressive manner. Secondly, society at large will have to define some limits for acceptable disagreement. Through dialogue, one should seek a maximum of interreligious legitimacy for the necessary lines of demarcation that must be drawn against unacceptable acts and attitudes.

Theologically, the challenge may be formulated as a critical reflection on the relationship between the religious Other and the suffering Other. This requires also a critical re-examination of inherited images of God, which in the Abrahamic tradition may carry both generous and delimiting, wounded and powerful features.

As for the *ethico-political* dimension, the equation could be as follows: the greater space one allows for ethical and political disagreement, the more pressing the need will be for the agents of change to form interfaith alliances in civil society. Such alliances will always be controversial in nature, whether the issue at stake is gender equality or the best way of containing religiously motivated terror.

In such and other controversial issues, Christians, Muslims and humanists alike have an important task before them – in order to become more liberal without becoming less radical, committed and willing to take action.