Oddbjørn Leirvik

Critique of Religion and Christian–Muslim Dialogue

The title of this paper contains two catchwords: critique and dialogue. In human relationships, it is often difficult to strike the right balance between listening and receptive dialogue one the one hand and critical discussion on the other.

This is also a challenge in Christian–Muslim relations: to find a good balance between acceptance and argument, between dialogue and discussion. Let me, before I proceed, explain my personal background for choosing the title "Critique of religion and Christian-Muslim dialogue."

Radical and Liberal

From 1979 to 1983 I served as the general secretary of the Student Christian Movement (SCM) in Norway, after having spent much of my energy in the '70s as an activist in the Student Christian Movement and the closely related movement, Christians for Socialism.

I think it is fair to say that the Student Christian Movement in the seventies was rather critical to central expressions of Western Christianity. For instance, Marxist critique of religion as the opium of the people made a great deal of sense to us, faced with a type of Christianity that was preoccupied with personal morality and the eternal fate of the individual.

Such an attitude seemed irrelevant in view of the struggles for socio-political justice and ecological balance. Becoming aware of the Palestinian struggle, we confronted also the uncritical support for Israel prevailing in conservative Christian circles that were otherwise not much concerned with religion and politics.

We were also strongly influenced by feminism, and its unmasking of the deeply patriarchal structures in Christianity. Nor could we accept a type of sexual ethics that restricted love relationships to the framework of marriage only. The issue of gay liberation, however, did not enter the agenda of the Student Christian Movement in Norway until the '80s.

In a sum, we were critical of the socially conservative nature of Western Christianity, advocated third world liberation theology, promoted feminist theology and demanded a more liberal sexual ethics.

Therefore, we were both *radicals* in socio-political terms and *liberals* in cultural terms. But our critique of Christianity was not a critique of religion as such. On the contrary, we were deeply *pious* liberals and radicals, living a life of prayer and devotion.

We were calling not only for a political renewal of (mainly) Protestant Christianity, but a liturgical one as well. Those were the (student) days … But what about the issue of interreligious relations in those times?

Until the mid-'80s, the question of interreligious dialogue was outside of my horizon. In the Student Christian Movement, we were deeply impressed by the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua in 1979, which for some time brought liberation theology to power.

But we were not particularly interested in the Islamic revolution that took place in Iran during the same year, and which has lasted much longer than the revolution in Nicaragua. It was not until I was appointed as a pastor to a multicultural parish in Oslo in the mid-'80s that I turned my attention to interreligious, and in particular Christian–Muslim, relations.

Since then, I have spent an increasing amount of my personal and professional energy on Christian–Muslim dialogue at local, national and international levels. In the Norwegian context, I took up the challenge to interpret Muslim concerns to a public audience that did not always take an understanding attitude towards Islam, to put it mildly.

Before long, I found myself defending the religious rights of a Muslim minority that largely held more conservative views than my old Christian opponents on lifestyle and even more so in women's issues.

In general, the Norwegian Muslims I related to from the late '80s

were also more fundamentalist in their approach to the Qur'an than the Christian conservatives in relation to the Bible.

So what had really happened to me? Was I totally confused—or maybe just a good Lutheran? I am thinking of Martin Luther's explanation for the eighth commandment: "You shall not lie."

According to Luther's *Small Catechism*, the eighth commandment enjoins upon us not only to abstain from lying about our neighbour. It also obliges us "to defend her or him, say good things about her or him, and see the best side of everything she or he does," even though we might disagree with her or him in crucial issues.

Actually what I think happened was this: I had discovered a religious minority that was just as vulnerable in a Christian-majority society as, for instance, women were in a male-dominated church.

But I still have not resolved the question of how to balance my commitment to gender equality with my advocacy of religious minority rights—rights that may endanger the interests of women or homosexuals.

Are we, if we want to be liberal, obliged to defend the right of conservative Muslim or Christian communities to discriminate against women and gay people? How can we combine a *liberal* defence of religious minority rights with a *radical* commitment to gender justice?

To be sure, this is not a question of how to balance a Christian concern with a Muslim one. In the second generation of Muslims in Norway, gender equality is high on the agenda and in 2002 the only purpose-built mosque in Norway elected a young woman as their spokesperson.

From 2000 to 2003, even the president of the Islamic Council in Norway was a woman. Nevertheless, discrimination against women is probably more widespread in Muslim immigrant cultures than in general society.

Nor in Christian circles has full gender equality been achieved yet, although strong progress has been made in most churches during the last two decades—with two female bishops in the Church of Norway as the most striking symbol of what has been achieved.

The question of how to balance women's rights with religious group rights is therefore a *common* challenge for Muslims and Christians, since both liberal and conservative attitudes to the position of women are well represented in both camps.

Critical Dialogue

In interfaith relations, the task before us is to find the right balance between *accepting differences* on the one hand, and engaging one another in *critical dialogue* on the other. As I see it, a critical dialogue between Christians and Muslims should not shun a radical re-examination of our holy traditions.

Both Christians and Muslims like to reassure one another and the general public that human rights are in perfect agreement with the Bible and the Qur'an respectively. That may be so. But it is a historical fact that mainstream Christian theologians long considered the modern idea of individual human rights as a threat to religion.

And when Muslim theologians endorse human rights, they often add the reservation "as long as it is not in conflict with shar'ia." In my view, we should be honest enough to admit that the modern idea of non-discrimination between the sexes and between religious groups is a historical novelty.

The idea of non-discrimination may certainly draw some support from our holy scriptures, but it is also contradicted by them. Both the Bible and the Qur'an were shaped in deeply patriarchal cultures that are sometimes challenged but also confirmed by the Scriptures.

As for interreligious relations, we may certainly find some support in our scriptures for the modern idea of tolerance and non-discrimination, but the Bible and the Qur'an are both deeply marked by religious conflict and a competitive attitude towards other faiths.

And we cannot easily say that those who advocate gender discrimination or a confrontational attitude towards other faiths are totally mistaken in their interpretation of the scriptures.

A critical dialogue, then, must address the hard fact that dominant interpretations of Christianity and Islam have supported practices and attitudes that modern liberals must firmly

confront: discrimination against women; authoritarian attitudes; religious intolerance; even violence in the name of God.

To be sure, our scriptures have also proved to inspire the opposite: more rights to women; peaceful coexistence between different faiths; non-violent conflict resolution. But which tendencies have been stronger hitherto, and which tendencies will have the upper hand in our present world?

And can we honestly say that our scriptures are totally innocent of what liberals prefer to term discriminating and confrontational misuse?

Critical Dialogue or Mutual Accusations?

What I am implying now is that a critical dialogue between Christians and Muslims must also address—and respond to—a more fundamental critique of religion and its actual function in society.

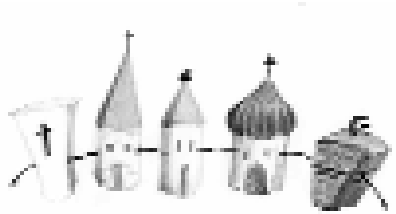
Both Muslims and Christians have often warded off necessary self-critique by criticising or attacking the other. As a religion born after Christianity, Islam accepts the previous revelations to Moses and Jesus. But Muslims have always criticised the actual *form* of Judaism and Christianity—often accusing Jews and Christians of having altered or falsified their revelations.

In societal terms, Jews and Christians were generally better off in Islamic empires, compared with the regrettable fate of Jews and Muslims in Christian Europe. There are notable exceptions, however, to the general rule, such as the unfortunate fate of the Armenians.

It is also clear that followers of Moses and Jesus were always regarded as subordinate citizens in Muslim lands. As for Christianity, the dominant attitude towards Islam was either to see Islam as an aberration of the true Christian faith, or Muhammad as the Anti-Christ.

In the Middle Ages, Islam was also accused by Christian theologians of being a violent religion that spread its faith by the sword, and a religion of sexual pleasure that allowed a man to take four wives and enticed the believers with virgins in paradise.

The accusation of Islam being a violent religion is, of course, quite ironic in view of the violent expressions that Western Christianity took on in the same period, during the Crusades.



As for being preoccupied with sexual pleasures, that accusation against Islam should probably be seen as the sweet Oriental dream of a Christian Europe that insisted on monasticism as the supreme form of religious morality.

European Critique of Religion: Christian Self-critique?

To what extent, then, have Christianity and Islam allowed for self-critical examination of one's own religion? In Muslim societies, there has generally been little space for criticising dominant expressions of Islam.

This has been different in European history, where critique of religion has been carried out—and to a certain extent, allowed—since the Enlightenment. The target of the Enlightenment critique has for contextual reasons been mostly Christianity.

Trying to summarize the Enlightenment critique of Christian religion, we will find that it contains three different elements. First, a *rationalist* critique of superstition and the belief in divine intervention, contrasted with a strong faith in the human potential to change everything.

Then, a *modernist* critique of authoritarian forms of religion that were seen to hamper social and political progress. And finally, a

moral critique of oppressive and violent religion, against the background of religious wars in Europe.

Underlying all these forms of Enlightenment critique of religion, we will find two strong convictions. First, the criterion of a sound religion is whether or not it supports the *moral autonomy* of the individual.

It is this autonomy that allows the individual to criticize religion on moral grounds, on behalf of humanity. Secondly, Enlightenment critique insists that all religious traditions, including Holy Scriptures, must be open to *historical-critical examination*.

This requires a new and critically minded community of experts on religion, in the framework of independent universities. Later developments have added new elements to the critique of religion.

As we know, Marxist critique of religion has criticized religion for diverting the attention of the masses from social and political issues and for veiling class differences. Freudian and other types of psychological critique have accused religion of subduing the natural impulses of the human being and for locking up the human mind in authoritarian thought structures.

In the European context, it is important to note that the critique of religion has not necessarily been anti-religious. In one way, Enlightenment critique of religion has challenged the churches from the outside, as secular humanists continue to do in a combined rationalist and moral attack on religion as such. But given the fact that many Enlightenment philosophers considered themselves Christian, it was also a form of self-critique.

The churches have often defended themselves against what has been perceived as unwarranted attacks from the outside. Christian theology, however—as conducted at independent universities—has largely adopted the modern idea of individual autonomy and the method of historical criticism. To some extent, Christian university theology has also opened up for a moral discussion of holy texts and religious doctrines.

For instance, my Faculty of Theology has recently offered a course on "Problematic Bible Texts." Here, the students are invited to examine critically some difficult issues, such as Biblical accusations against the Jews. Other topics are the condemnation

of homosexual practices in the Bible; the subordination of women as called for by the apostle Paul; and Jesus' radical ethics in the Sermon of the Mount, which seems to call for asceticism and does not even allow for legitimate self-defence.

Considering the fact that Western Christianity has, to some extent, been able to accommodate and even institutionalize religious self-critique, one might ask whether Christianity has also got some *internal* potential for critical self-examination.

In the Judeo–Christian thought, there is actually an old tradition of morally based critique of religion, as expressed by the great prophets in the Jewish Bible, who daringly criticized anointed kings for their injustice and idolatry.

In Judaism, there is even a tradition of engaging oneself in critical discussion with God, as expressed in the Book of Job. Taken as a whole, the Judeo–Christian Bible with its many books can be read as a never-ending critical dialogue. It is a dialogue between exclusive and inclusive visions of God; between oppressive and liberating forms of faith; between violent and pacifist religion; and between strict adherence to the letter of the law and the freedom of love.

Even within the Christian New Testament, we will find that the apostles Paul and James hold markedly different views about the relation between faith and good works.

Muslim Self-critique

What about Islam, then? Is there a similar tradition of internal discussion within Islam? And what kind of Muslim self-critique can be found today? Historically, there is no doubt that Muslim cultures have often accommodated a vigorous internal debate between theologians and philosophers.

They also did so concerning debates between orthodox defendants of shari'a and religious mystics; and about almost all conceivable ethical and theological issues. In modern times, however, there has been less space for an open and critical debate within Islam.

I see two reasons for this. First, many Muslim-majority countries today have a serious democratic deficit and do not allow for open debate about anything, and certainly not about religion.

Secondly, in the Muslim world, a critical approach to religion has

not been institutionalized in the way it has happened in Europe, where religion has long been studied critically at the universities.

But things do not have to be like that in the Muslim world. I see no problem with "Islam itself" in having a more open and self-critical dialogue about religion. In the early Middle Ages, Islamic empires allowed for a more open debate about religion and philosophy than in Europe.

As for today, in Indonesia (which is the largest Muslim-majority country in the world) we find both a fresh and functioning democracy and state institutions for Islamic studies that actually *invite* a critical investigation of shari'a and Islamic thought in general.

Proceeding to the question of Muslim self-critique in the West, I will highlight three different expressions of critical self-examination. First, many young Muslims in Europe are very outspoken in their critique of certain practices that have been widespread in traditional Muslim (and for that matter, Christian) cultures. Such practices are the discrimination or marginalization of women; forced marriages; and authoritarian forms of religious leadership.

The underlying premise of Islamic *cultural critique* is that such practices are not in conformity with the Koran. Whereas the Koran is always presupposed to support liberal reform in these areas, the Hadith collections are often subject to a more critical investigation.

The second form of intra-Islamic critique that I have come across in Norway is a more silent protest from ordinary Muslims against religious leaders that call for a "perfect" form of Islam that only very few people are able to practice. This has also to do with internal differences between Muslim cultures.

For instance, I have heard Bosnian and Iranian Muslims in Norway complain that the kind of halal and prayer time regime called for by Pakistani, Arab or Somali imams makes it very difficult to interact with other Norwegians in a relaxed manner. These critics call for religious appraisal of a less legalistic, in a sense less "perfect," but on the other hand a more open and flexible Islam.

The third type of Muslim self-critique is even more radical, and calls for a general revision of dominant forms of Islamic preaching

and practice. One example is the book *The Trouble with Islam. A Wake-up Call for Honesty and Change* by the female Canadian Muslim Irshad Manji.

Manji, who is a well-known media personality in Canada, lives in an open, lesbian partnership. In her book, Irshad Manji criticizes not only the dominant view of gender relations and sexuality in Islam, but also the authoritarian responses that she received from the mosques when she (as a youth) tried to ask difficult questions about Islam.

Perhaps even more controversially, she criticizes the widespread negative attitudes towards other faiths (in particular, anti-Jewish attitudes) that she finds in many Muslim circles all over the world.

But Irshad Manji is not one of those radical critics who are on the verge of leaving Islam. On the contrary, she insists on reading the Koran with fresh eyes, on her own terms, not in an individualistic manner, but as a respected member of the interpreting community.

Another example of a radical Muslim self-critique originating from North America is a book edited by Omid Safi: *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism*. This book too contains an essay that calls for a more open attitude towards homosexuality in Islam, implicitly arguing that the Qur'an might be a lesser problem than the Bible in this respect.

On the question of religion and violence, an article from September 2004 in the newspaper *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* (which is sponsored by Saudi money and widely read in both the West and the Middle East) has caught international attention for its self-critical challenge to Muslim cultures.

The article was written by Abdel Rahman al-Rasheed, a leading Arab editor. Abdel Rahman al-Rasheed is not content with proclaiming (as nearly all Muslims do) that Islam is totally against all forms of terrorism.

Under the heading "A Wake-up Call: Almost All Terrorists are Muslims," he writes: "It is a certain fact that not all Muslims are terrorists, but it is equally certain, and exceptionally painful, that almost all terrorists are Muslims."

Instead of explaining away attacks on civilians perpetrated by Muslims in Chechnya and Iraq as a desperate response to violent political oppression by Israel, Russia or the United States, he admonishes Muslims to examine critically the enemy images and

the (potentially violent) revolutionary ideology that is preached in many mosques.

The examples of critique just cited all come from inside the believing Muslim community. In addition, another critique against Islam was conducted by former Muslims that have left the believing community.

One forceful example is Ibn Warraq's book *Why I Am Not a Muslim*, which has also been published in Norway by the Humanist Association. This is clearly an example of a critique of Islam that is both rationalist and moral in its approach, but essentially fundamentalist in its many unwarranted generalizations about Islam.

Books written by "apostates" typically accuse Islam of being inherently expansionist, totalitarian and against the interests of women. Similar accusations against Islam can be found in pamphlets produced by Muslim converts to Christianity, such as Mark Gabriel in a book called *Islam and Terrorism*.

Gabriel, who seems to have converted to a rather fundamentalist form of Christianity, characterizes the history of Islam as a river of blood. He presents it as a matter of fact that Muslim theologians regard the peaceful verses of the Koran as abrogated by the belligerent ones.

He also warns his fellow Christians that Muslims who involve themselves in dialogue are almost always trying to conceal their ambition of world hegemony under the veil of multiculturalism.

This form of critique of Islam is currently being embraced by conservative, confrontational Christians, as in the new Christian right in the United States or the Norwegian right-wing politician Carl I. Hagen, who has recently tried to strike an alliance between anti-Islamic politicians and charismatic Christians.

At the same time, secular humanists in Norway have redirected their critique of religion from Christianity to Islam, coming dangerously close to the kind of critique purported by fundamentalist Christians.

What we are witnessing then is a *clash of fundamentalisms*: humanist fundamentalism, Christian fundamentalism, and Islamic fundamentalism. All agree that there is only one saving truth—be it atheist rationality, Jesus Christ, or the qur'anic

revelation. And all seem to imply that there is only one truth about the other faith, thus denying the very real pluralism in all these traditions.

Critical Dialogue and How to Deal with Moral Disagreement

The question is: how can we deal with religious and life-stance pluralism, then, without becoming either fundamentalists in response or laid-back liberals who do not take anything seriously?

I believe that the only remedy is critical dialogue. But before we can engage each other in critical conversation, there must be trust building. One important aim of trust-building dialogue is to deconstruct the deeply ingrained stereotypes on both sides about the other.

In the Norwegian context, Christian and Muslim leaders have engaged themselves in trust-building dialogue for fifteen years or so, partly in forums where also Jews and the secular Humanist Association have taken part.

In this process, several leaders of different faith communities have become each other's trusted friends. In Norway, Christian–Muslim trust building has also taken place in the groundbreaking dialogue and diapraxis between the Student Christian Movement and the Muslim Students' Association.

On this foundation of trust, which must still be reinforced, I think we are now ready to address also the hard issues together. Earlier this year, in the national Contact Group between the Church of Norway and the Islamic Council, we were able to produce a common statement on the issue of Palestine.

But in a recent debate about suicide bombings, the Church of Norway and the Islamic Council released two markedly different although not antagonistic press statements; the Islamic one being more "understanding" in its attitude to Palestinian suicide bombers.

I think we can tackle such differences, but we must also be willing to discuss them together in a critical way. In many issues involving religion and politics, one critical question is that of aims and means.

I also believe that we need to discuss more what we mean by the notion of political religion itself. As I have explained, in the '70s I called for a more politically radical Christianity committed to the cause of the underprivileged.

As the years have gone by, I have got serious doubts about whether political religion is such a good idea after all. I have been discouraged by politicized and violent forms of Christianity that identify Christian religion with national identity (as in Serbia) or with the absolute good (as in current U.S. policies).

I have also been discouraged by political Islam, which often takes authoritarian and violent forms in its legitimate resistance to foreign dominance. But I still firmly believe that true religion must be prophetic in the social and political realm, unmasking illegitimate lordship and calling for justice.

I have, however, come to think that revolt in the name of God is a dangerous idea. Identifying one's own cause—be it as just as it may—is not that in itself totalitarian? In my view, Christians and Muslims who are committed to the cause of social and political justice should rather struggle together under a different banner than religion.

For those who fear that Muslims in Norway shall go political in the name of Islam, I have good news: Norwegian Muslims seem to distribute themselves evenly over the entire political spectrum, joining hands with Christians and atheists in almost all kinds of political parties.

These are the realities on the ground, behind all slogans of "Christian" or "Islamic" solutions to this or that social ill. When Christians and Muslims take concrete political actions, they are always divided among themselves—and hence also united politically right across religious divides.

This is also the case when Christians and Muslims respond to current conflicts on the global scene. Christians are deeply divided among themselves over, for example, the issue of Israel and Palestine.

Muslims may seem united in their opposition to U.S. interventionism, but they are divided among themselves when it comes to finding a political model for the future in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In the case of Afghanistan, many Christians and Muslims in

Norway joined hands against the "war on terrorism" that was waged by the United States and her allies. But other Christians in the West supported the U.S.-led war, as well as some in the region itself.

The United States was even able to rally important Muslim support for her policies from both the Pakistani government and the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan (that was no less Muslim than the Taliban).

In the case of women's issues, we have also seen that Christians and Muslims are deeply divided among themselves. We should not be discouraged by this fact. For does not this mean that Christian and Muslim feminists have every opportunity to join hands against patriarchal attitudes in both communities?

On the one hand, the fact that moral and political differences cut right across religious divides opens up for controversial interreligious alliances. On the other hand, the painful differences we face both within and between the religions challenges us also to live respectfully with moral disagreement.

On the question of women's and gay rights, churches worldwide have had to face what has been called a "morally well-grounded disagreement." On the question of religion and war, too, Christians have had to live with a long-established disagreement between pacifists and adherents of the just war theory (that prevails also in Islam).

In most of the issues I have touched upon in this lecture, both Christians and Muslims will have to live with different views of what is morally right, and what can be justified or not on the basis of the scriptures.

In general society, I think there are good reasons for establishing a liberal form of multiculturalism that allows both liberals and conservatives to practice their views freely, without illegitimate intervention from the state.

But there must also be some limits to what I call *legitimate* disagreement. Christians and Muslims should be able to agree on some fundamental *restrictions* to religious freedom—related to protection of life, health and personal integrity.

To take a concrete example: neither Christian nor Muslim communities should be forced by the state to employ homosexual partners. With regard to possible sanctions against

homosexuality, however, it is not acceptable to say (as some Muslim students in Norway did when the issue was raised in 2004) that it is up to each state to decide how homosexual practice should be punished (in the worst case, by the death penalty).

In my critical dialogue with Muslims, as a liberal Christian, I will argue that homosexual love relationships are not against Christian or Muslim ethics. Obviously, we will have to live with different views in this respect, both intra- and interreligiously.

But I will draw an absolute line against any form of punishment for homosexuality, be it in the name of Islam, Christianity or any other ideology. As for interreligious relations, I will oppose any kind of religious mobilization that does not respect the integrity and vulnerability of the religiously other.

I will also oppose any kind of political religion that aims at world hegemony in the name of one faith. Absolutist forms of religion can simply not be reconciled with peaceful multireligious co-existence.

These are just a few examples of where the limit to legitimate moral disagreement (in my view) should be drawn: against any kind of religious attitudes or actions that *violate the integrity* of the individual, or the religiously other.

In my interpretation, Christian belief supports such a position, which can draw inspiration from Jesus Christ's border-transcending practice and his enduring care for the vulnerable individual.

But I admit that I would perhaps not have seen this as clearly, were it not for Enlightenment critique of oppressive and intolerant religion, and modernity's focus on the integrity of the individual.

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Jamie Moran

Hard Wakan

It is important to situate the most essential values of human life in a frame that illumines what they 'really' are, and what they are not.

I. Moral Values: What They Are Not

Modern understanding and practice of morality seems stuck on one or another of three basic stances: a morality that is too harsh, punitive, rigid (*authoritarianism*); another morality that is too flabby, permissive, weak (*liberalism*); still another morality that is too *above it all*, in some romanticized, idealized, or falsely spiritualized 'world' that escapes too easily from what is arduous at the ground level, and tends therefore to be either facile about the challenge of that level, or cruel in expecting too much from it.

Authoritarianism is a disease of 'heart,' liberalism a disease of 'mind,' and being above-it-all a disease of 'soul.' Authoritarians are hot, but blind, in heart; liberals are cold, but sophisticated, in mind; above-it-alls are elevated, but dissociated, in soul.

Most people, if they are honest, will be able to identify which of these three is their more likely 'home.' But we can also jump around from position to position, like musical chairs. Thus, sometimes people start authoritarian and, discovering the secret fear and violence in authoritarianism, turn liberal; or, they start liberal, and discovering the hidden sentimentality and selfishness in liberalism, turn authoritarian.

Sometimes those who are above-it-all, discovering the secret evasion (safety-seeking) and baseless arrogance in this position, simply become disillusioned and embrace cynicism, once their beautiful bubble gets punctured by reality's sharp edge: then they glory in tearing off the wings of everyone else's butterfly.

Authoritarianism is quintessentially about a heart that cares in the wrong way: it wants to coerce love, truth, goodness. It does not trust the freedom of the human person. It often produces a cramped, inhibited human being, who is offended if other people are too free: they must conform and be cramped, too.