

# **GENDER JUSTICE IN MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN READINGS**

**Christian and Muslim Women in Norway Making Meaning of Texts  
from the Bible, the Koran, and the *Hadith***

**Dissertation submitted for the degree of PhD  
Faculty of Theology, University of Oslo  
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***Part I:*****Introduction**

## Chapter 1: Background, Aim and Focus

The Bible and the Koran are canonical scriptures with great significance for many in contemporary Norway as religious texts and as cultural and historical documents. The two scriptures are understood differently, both by the religious traditions themselves (according to their different statuses in Christianity and Islam respectively) and by the general public. *Hadith* is also considered an authoritative source of revelation among most Muslims.<sup>1</sup>

In two commentary articles in the largest Norwegian newspaper, *VG*, a journalist cited and gave his own interpretation of Sura 4:34 from the Koran (one of the texts in this study) to illustrate his opinion that, as a religion, Islam was totally unsuited to Norwegian society – because of its alleged view of women.<sup>2</sup> It is impossible to imagine an op-ed article in a prominent newspaper in Norway doing the same with a biblical text, even though it is not difficult to find biblical texts that could lead one to see the Christian tradition as generally oppressive to women. There may be several reasons for this. The Bible is no longer regarded as having a significant impact on the public sphere in Norway. There is also a general awareness that the Bible is interpreted in different ways among Christian believers, with the result that one text or interpretation alone cannot represent the Christian message.

The focus of this study is to analyze how Christian and Muslim women in Norway relate to and interpret texts from their canonical<sup>3</sup> scriptures (the Bible, the Koran, and the *hadith*) when reading the texts together. The interpretative situation to be analyzed covers both the encounter between readers and texts on the one hand and the encounter between readers on the other. The starting question was: Do Muslim and Christian women differ in their interpretative strategies when reading their canonical scriptures or do their strategies have commonalities and overlapping features?

Right from the beginning, however, the aim of the study was more than simply a comparison of interpretative strategies between women from the two traditions. I also wanted to map the interaction between the readers in interpreting the texts. This entailed two new

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<sup>1</sup> *Hadith*: “Report of the words and deeds of Muhammad and other early Muslims; considered an authoritative source of revelation, second only to the Koran (sometimes referred to as sayings of the Prophet). *Hadith* ... were collected, transmitted, and taught orally for two centuries after Muhammad’s death and then began to be collected in written form and codified.” (Esposito 2003: 101) The *hadith* text about Hajar in this study is taken from al-Bukhari, one of the sixth most authoritative collections for Sunni Muslims.

<sup>2</sup> Olav Versto, “Dette finner vi oss ikke i” (“We don’t accept this”) and “Hijab var et feilgrep” (“The *hijab* was a mistake”), commentary articles in *VG* 14.04.2007 and 21.02.2009.

<sup>3</sup> I will use the notion “canonical” instead of “sacred” or “holy” with respect to the Bible, the Koran, and the *hadith* in this study because it has a more descriptive sense, referring to texts that have a specific status as normative documents in a defined realm, such as a particular religion.

questions: What kind of interpretative strategies does a Christian or a Muslim woman use when reading texts from the other tradition? And how may an *encounter* between women from the two religions, with cultural background as a crossing variable, influence their interpretative strategies?

Another question underlying this study was: What can create a possible shared *agency* in such an encounter, if the participants assume the task of changing women's conditions in one way or another? On what basis would such an agency be constructed? What role do the texts and interpretative strategies play in the formation of an agency for change?

Reading and interpreting canonical scriptures may turn into reading processes that are not only directed toward the text but also toward the reading of the *context(s)*.<sup>4</sup> The positions of the texts and the positioning of the readers with respect to the texts are influencing factors in this respect. The term "readings" in the title of this study thus refer to both texts and context.

### **Frameworks and Outline**

I became aware of the term "Gender Justice" some years ago through a book written by Norwegian social scientists and feminists<sup>5</sup> commenting on the distribution of power in the Norwegian society. I later discovered that the Muslim feminist scholar Ziba Mir-Hosseini used the same term to describe an important aim for Islamic legal rulings (Mir-Hosseini 2007). The term *justice* can be interpreted both subjectively and objectively, and the interplay between the subjective and objective provides space for individuality and difference while at the same time including the political aim of equality. The use of the notion "gender justice" instead of "gender equality," however, makes it more apparent that the premises for the evaluation of equality are not fixed in advance. This means that the power of definition is not settled automatically in a hegemonic discourse but is open for negotiation.

Bringing the term "Gender Justice" into the contemporary Norwegian context provides an analytical background for taking a closer look at various discourses on women, gender equality, and religion. In the hegemonic discourse in Europe Islam is often targeted as a religion that discriminates against women, and this has implications for the general attitude toward Muslims and toward Muslim women in particular. At least in the Norwegian context (the situation may be different in other European countries), the Christian tradition is not targeted in the same way, and the general impression is that the Church of Norway has in fact "automatically" implemented Norwegian state feminism (Eriksen 2004).

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<sup>4</sup> When I use "context", I will specify which context(s) I refer to in each case. In some cases, however, "context" will refer to "the contextual" as a general hermeneutical/theoretical term.

<sup>5</sup> The title of the book was *Kjønnsrettferdighet* ("Gender Justice") (Holst 2002).

As a value, gender equality can be said to have become a significant part of Norwegian identity for many, and this is sometimes interpreted in a way that might contradict the individual's rights to define her or his situation (cf. the subjective element in Gender Justice), as, for instance, in discussions about Muslim women wearing the *hijab*. The value of gender equality and the right to be religiously and culturally different from the majority, often collide in these discourses. The figuration in the dominating Norwegian discourse of the oppressed Muslim woman and the liberated Christian woman (which may imply a figuration of the oppressive Muslim man and the liberating Christian man) motivated me to seek out some Christian and Muslim women to see how they as *subjects* would articulate their interpretation of texts from their canonical scriptures regarding women's roles and positions. To invite them to articulate this in a group process, as I have done in this project, is motivated by both *theoretical* and *methodological* considerations.<sup>6</sup>

Dialogue between Muslims and Christians in the Norwegian context has addressed issues connected to practicalities concerning the rights of practicing Islam in the country but has also led to joint statements about common challenges, such as violence against women in close relationships.<sup>7</sup> Muslim-Christian dialogue in Norway has generally provided arguments for dialogical solutions to possible tense issues between religions, cultures, and secular society.<sup>8</sup> But canonical texts from the two traditions have only occasionally been used as resources for more official dialogues. The political and social context, as well as sharing experiences, has been in focus in institutionalized dialogues. There are examples of more theologically oriented dialogues, but there are few organized dialogues oriented to reading the canonical scriptures.

This modus of dialogue is explored more in other contexts. In the UK the book *Scriptures in Dialogue* (Ipgrave 2004) can be cited as an example of documenting and reflecting on a Christian-Muslim co-study of the Bible and the Koran among religious scholars. In this book, gender and women's issues are part of the horizon.<sup>9</sup> I was motivated as a Christian feminist to concentrate entirely on women as readers and interpreters of texts about women in the canonical scriptures because of the patriarchal heritage of both the Christian and the Muslim tradition. What this entails and the considerations leading to these choices are displayed in Chapter 2 and 3. The practice of Scriptural Reasoning represents another model of religious encounter (Jewish,

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<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 2 and 3.

<sup>7</sup> See the homepage of the Contact Group between the Church of Norway and the Islamic Council Norway: <http://folk.uio.no/leirvik/Kontaktgruppa.htm> [accessed 23 June 2010].

<sup>8</sup> Organized dialogue can be called either Christian-Muslim or Muslim-Christian. "Christian" is often put first in European settings. There are, however, noticeable exceptions to the habit of putting "Christian" first: Islamisk-Kristent Studiecenter in Copenhagen, directed by Lissi Rasmussen, the journals *Islam and Muslim-Christian Studies* and *Islamochristiana*. In this study I will use Muslim-Christian dialogue.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. chapter 3 in Ipgrave 2004.



Christian and Muslim), also concentrating on the co-reading of canonical scriptures (Ford and Pecknold 2006). I will discuss this contribution in Chapter 2.

From a Christian feminist theological perspective, the UK-based Mukti Barton has explored, in her book *Scripture as Empowerment for Liberation and Justice: The Experience of Christian and Muslim Women in Bangladesh* (Barton 1999), how Christian and Muslim women in Bangladesh experience part of their canonical scriptures as empowerment. Barton uses the narratives of Hagar/Hajar as an example of the empowering reading of related texts, and it was part of my inspiration to use these narratives in this study as well. The Danish Christian theologian Lissi Rasmussen has worked on co-readings of the Bible and the Koran in Denmark and Nigeria (Rasmussen 1997) and has provided a theoretical model of what may be called interreligious hermeneutics. Again, I will discuss this in Chapter 2.

Interreligious (or *transreligious*, see Chapter 2 p. 28 ff.) hermeneutics is emerging as a field of its own within hermeneutical theory. This is marked by the publication of the ESITIS conference in 2009, where I found inspiration and valuable contributions to the theoretical framework of this study.<sup>11</sup> A book published in 2009 in Sweden (Stenström 2009) represents another resource since it addresses biblical and koranic hermeneutics and thematizes feminist and postcolonial perspectives in the interpretation of the canonical scriptures.

Thematically, the above-mentioned studies have commonalities with this study with regard to hermeneutical theory and other theoretical perspectives concerning feminism and Muslim-Christian dialogue. Methodologically, however, this study has a different approach. The above studies provide, in general, sparse information about the interpretative *processes* as they play out between the readers. Rather, the books I have mentioned present the interpretative *results* of co-readings or theorize about hermeneutics. So, after reading Barton's study, I wondered *how* the women involved in her project had actually talked about the texts while discussing them. Did the Christian and Muslim women participating share the same reflections about their contexts? What was their method of interpreting text and context? And, in the case of *Scriptures in Dialogue*, I wanted to know more about the conversations *behind* the reflections presented: Did the participants argue with one another at some point, and did the conversations keep close to the topic all the time? How did the participants express themselves? Gaining more insight into these aspects of co-reading requires the use of qualitative research methods to document and analyze the hermeneutical process(es).

To take part in organized activities of Muslim-Christian encounters is still a privilege for a few in today's Europe. At the same time, everyday encounters between people of different

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<sup>11</sup> European Society for Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies (<http://www.esitis.org>). The 2009 ESITIS conference was held from 15 -18 April and organized by the Center for Intercultural Theology and Study of Religions at the University of Salzburg, Austria. The theme was "Interreligious Hermeneutics in Pluralistic Europe".

religious and cultural backgrounds are increasing due to the European societies' growing plurality. To make a Muslim-Christian encounter accessible in some more detail, as will be done in this study, could show that the complexity of communication may not be very different in these communicative processes from what people experience in their everyday lives when discussing issues related to religion and gender.

The theoretical and methodological considerations will be addressed in Chapters 2 and 3. Theoretically, the study has three key terms that frame the study: Hermeneutics, Dialogue, and Feminisms. Methodologically, the study relies on qualitative research methods, and the empirical material is established from the discussions and conversations in a group of (originally) ten Christian and Muslim women living in Norway, with different cultural backgrounds crossing the religious boundaries. The participants<sup>12</sup> met six times for three and a half hours. At four of these meetings texts from the Bible, the Koran, and the *hadith* were discussed. The texts were the Hagar/Hajar narratives (from the Old Testament and the *hadith*), Sura 4:34, and 1 Timothy 2:8-15 (from the Koran and the New Testament respectively). A detailed presentation of the process of establishing the empirical material is given in Chapter 3.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 present and analyze the empirical material. Selections from the transcribed discussions are presented and analyzed in detail, followed by a more general analysis at the end of each discussion. There are ten discussions presented altogether, differing greatly both thematically and in their communicative modes. The discussions are presented in chronological order, in accordance with the group process. In this way I have tried to grasp some of the possible developments in the communicative process throughout the project.

Chapter 7 is the concluding part, where I present the most significant findings of the analysis in light of the theoretical and methodological framework. In this chapter I will also make some suggestions about the possible consequences of the findings and relate them to the broader interpretative situation in Christian and Muslim faith communities and in society at large.

### **Delimitations**

A few important delimitations of the work should be spelled out right from the outset. This is a study aimed at interpreting *readers* and communicative processes, not texts. This means that I will not conduct any independent exegetical analysis of the texts in question. Using qualitative methodology, the study has also no intention of evaluating the statements and interpretations of the participants in the project in light of established academic or religious understandings of the texts (according to Christian and Islamic theology and jurisdiction).

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<sup>12</sup> I will consistently use the term "participants", not "informants", for the women taking part in this study.

Regarding the important and ongoing debates about secular societies, religious and cultural differences, and women's rights, this study will relate to these debates occasionally but does not aim to give any comprehensive treatment of the rather large issues involved.

### **A Dissertation in the Discipline of Interreligious Studies**

Although I apply methods of qualitative research and relate my analysis to the social sciences, this study is situated as part of Christian theology.<sup>13</sup> More specifically, it is part of the field of interreligious studies. Still a field in the making, interreligious studies may be described as being concerned with the dynamic *relation* between religious traditions<sup>14</sup> as represented by texts and people. The field can be approached both descriptively and normatively (such as in participatory studies of interreligious dialogues). At the University of Oslo interreligious studies are based in the Faculty of Theology, as is the case in many other universities offering similar studies.<sup>15</sup>

With this study I hope to contribute to the field of interreligious studies in two ways: (1) through the establishment of a theoretical connection between hermeneutics, dialogue, and feminisms (Chapter 2), and (2) by offering qualitative research in the empirical field of Muslim-Christian relations – in this case, focused on readings of selected texts from the Bible, the Koran, and the *hadith* as done by women in Norway.

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<sup>13</sup> I use the term “Christian theology” for what is often just called “theology” in Western academia.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. the description of the field of interreligious studies at the Faculty of Theology, University of Oslo: <http://www.tf.uio.no/forskning/omrader/interrel.html> [accessed 23 June 2010].

<sup>15</sup> Cf. the list of institutions related to the European Society for Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies (ESITIS): [http://www.esitis.org/?page\\_id=17](http://www.esitis.org/?page_id=17).

**Part II:****Theoretical, Contextual, and Methodological Perspectives**

## Chapter 2: Theoretical and Contextual Perspectives

Theoretical, contextual, and methodological perspectives are viewed as closely related in this study. This position is based on the epistemological view that theory is always situated in a context. According to that same epistemological reasoning, method, and theory should be consistent. Some discussions relate to both method and theory, such as the discussion on representation, which will be done mainly in the next chapter.<sup>16</sup>

The theoretical perspectives and tools for analyzing the ensuing “thick” description of a communication process between Christian and Muslim women and canonical scriptures can be framed by the three terms hermeneutics, dialogue, and feminisms. Each of the three sections here starts with situating and discussing them with regard to this study more generally, before narrowing the scope toward establishing more direct analytical tools applied in the later analysis. It is significant to remember that the participants, as interpreting subjects, break new ground in their interpretations of text, context, and the actual encounter, reflecting as they speak. They use particular resources from their religious traditions, contemporary contextual discourses, references to time and space, as well as their own experiences and reflections, to create a web of different hermeneutical tools for use “on the ground.”<sup>17</sup> This influences how the theoretical framework is constructed.

I have consulted Christian and Islamic theology, philosophy, pedagogy, sociology, social anthropology, culture theory and social theory as well as gender studies to construct the project’s meaning-making web in this chapter and the next. Although eclectic, this was necessary in order to create the new theoretical and methodological framework where the search for knowledge from the empirical material can be situated and analyzed adequately. This kind of eclectic approach is challenging but required when the aim is to produce knowledge that, although framed by established academic disciplines, does not have an immediate and readily established theoretical and methodological framework.

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<sup>16</sup> The line between theory and method is drawn differently by the various academic disciplines, and the reader will find that I follow the social sciences pattern because of the need to go into depth with establishing the empirical material in Chapter 3.

<sup>17</sup> The formulation “facts on the ground,” which inspired me to use this expression, is used in the Middle East to emphasize that, when there is a discrepancy between what one sees and hears and what the politicians say, what matters is the basic experience of reality, of the “facts on the ground.”

## Hermeneutics, Dialogue, and Feminisms

What happens when these three broad and disputed fields intersect in a theoretical framework? *This is complicated*, no matter how these intersections are portrayed.

*Feminisms*, however defined, are ethical and moral projects of creating equality between men and women through transforming patterns of male dominance in religious and societal structures into patterns more consistent with gender equality. This may take different shapes. To reveal patterns of male dominance hermeneutics is needed to reach a situated understanding, representing a viewpoint of what *is*.

*Dialogue* is both a philosophical and an everyday term. It can be used normatively with respect to how human communication processes ought to be, but it can also be used descriptively regarding organized activities (cultural dialogue, religious dialogue). Although I will return extensively to discuss the concept of dialogue, the correlation of hermeneutics and dialogue, since it is related through the aspects of communication and expression, needs to be stated. In this study the term *dialogue* will be used normatively unless another use is explicitly indicated. Like feminism, dialogue used normatively implies a notion of human equality.

Feminism and dialogue thus represent normative determinations of hermeneutics in this project. The normativity should not be understood as being imposed on the participant's interpretation efforts of text and context but as a compass by which to navigate in the research process: influencing my questions regarding the empirical material, my selection of theoretical discussion partners, and my aims in the analysis.

## Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation and interpretation processes.<sup>18</sup> Although it still has a central position in philosophy, literary theory, and Christian theology, the term "hermeneutics" is no longer the property of the humane disciplines alone.<sup>19</sup> The field of hermeneutics covers different interpretation theories with shifting emphases on text, author, reader(s), and historical as well as current contexts. I use the term in two ways: first, to designate a method for

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<sup>18</sup> The term is derived from the Greek word *hermeneia*, meaning "to articulate in language" (Møller and Gulddal 1999). The Greek word was translated into Latin as *interpretatio*, but in the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Greek term, hermeneutics (*ibid.*), began to be employed again. Hermeneutics and interpretation thus have the same etymological roots in Latin and Greek respectively.

<sup>19</sup> Hermeneutics, originally a method of interpreting and understanding texts from antiquity (the pre-modern use), was extended to include the interpretation of texts in general through the works of the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and the philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) (Jeanron 1994: 50; 53). Their argument was that, to understand a text, one needed to understand both the author and the author's context, and a linguistic, "grammatical" work on the text itself was needed (Lægveid and Skorgen 2001: 27). Later developments in hermeneutics have focused more on the relation between text and reader, with less attention on the author, the author's context and personality and the historical context of the text's origin (*ibid.*: 25; Jordheim 2001: 58-62).

interpreting texts when I refer to a specific hermeneutical tradition, but mostly I use the term within a broader perspective to theorize on the interpretation of human life and communication. The latter includes the interpretation of texts, contexts, and human self-reflection, expressed through action and agency, discourses, and dialogues. There are two interactive levels of interpretation in this work: the interpretation by the participants and the interpretation by the researcher. To start with the hermeneutical framing of the project, I will now turn to theorizing about hermeneutics in qualitative research.

### *Hermeneutics in the Social Sciences*

The social sciences engaged with hermeneutical theory after the so-called linguistic turn. The sociologist Anthony Giddens suggested the term “double hermeneutics” (Giddens 1993: 170) to cover the research operations of social scientists. Giddens states that the researcher both interprets according to his own pre-knowledge and the research field and reinterprets the interpretation already existing in the field that is the object of research. The researcher thus interprets what is already interpreted as a meaningful universe among the informants in the field (Giddens 1993: 170). The term “double hermeneutics” is, however, somewhat unclear to a theologian trained in exegesis: Where, according to Giddens, is the “doubling”? Is it in the hermeneutical act? If the hermeneutical process is depicted as a circle, a spiral, or, as Ricoeur prefers to express it, as an arch (Ricoeur 2001: 76), and the researcher has a place in the hermeneutical process, does this mean that the circle, the spiral, or the arch are doubled, and there is actually two interpretation processes going on in the same research operation? The researcher is still not able to escape his/her place in the hermeneutical process and is not able to double (or split) himself/herself as an interpreter.

The doubling could refer to the researcher’s two areas of resources in the interpretative research: the research discourse and the empirical field. But the interpretations in a research process are not conducted separately in the two areas, since the whole point in a hermeneutical process is the dynamics between the material and its interpreters. A possible interpretation of Giddens’ “double hermeneutics” may be that he simply wanted to clarify that a researcher in social sciences is neither the first nor the only interpreter of a social field, and there are already interpretations in the field to which he/she has to relate. The “double” of the hermeneutical operation is to interpret the interpretation of others. In the use of the term hermeneutics in the humanities, this distinction is often not made – there is an assumption that the text one is

interpreting, is already an interpretation and exists in an intertextual relation to other texts and interpreters (Jeanrond 1994: 103).<sup>20</sup>

Giddens makes an important point when he emphasizes that concepts, theories, and interpretations do not exist in closed departments of “research” and “empirical field” but moves back and forth between them (Giddens 1993: 167). This study is an example of this. The interpreting participants possibly have access to theological and contextual interpretations of both texts and context done by researchers (such as Christian and Islamic theology and social scientists). The research – and the researcher – is a participating interpreter relating to the empirical field (the field of research), and should exercise self-reflection throughout the process.

Qualitative method and other postpositivist contributions on interpretation in the social sciences share the concern of hermeneutics to reject a notion of “objective research” and of a neutral researcher as much as possible in these types of research (Holter 1996: 28-29). But to suggest that social actions could be interpreted in the same interpretative modes as textual hermeneutics also opens up a new theoretical position for the anthropologist or sociologist, i.e. to read social interaction and human behavior as *text*. The social anthropologist Clifford Geertz claims that the inclusion of hermeneutics in anthropology made it possible to avoid both a first-person position (phenomenology) and a third-person position (observer, allegedly neutral) and assume instead a second-person position, which would mean establishing a dialogue with the research field and the informants. Here both the researcher and the informants are subjects (Geertz 1983).

In this study I will be engaged in what Giddens would call “double hermeneutics” in the sense that I interpret the interpreters. At the same time I interpret texts from relevant research fields to make a broader interpretative framework.<sup>21</sup> As stated above, I am not convinced that the innovative aspect of the term “double” is connected to hermeneutical work on empirical material, but the research operation done in this study is nevertheless consistent with Giddens’s *intention* behind the term “double hermeneutics.”

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<sup>20</sup> Jeanrond cites Mark C. Taylor (“Deconstruction: What’s the Difference”, in *Soundings*, 1983): “Since each text becomes itself in relation to other texts, no text is self-contained. ... There can no more be a text-in-itself than there can be independent signifiers. Texts, like the signs which comprise them, ceaselessly cross and criss-cross in a perpetual process of interweaving. As a result of this oscillating interplay, texts are neither stable nor static, but are transitory”.

<sup>21</sup> As mentioned in my introduction to this dissertation, I will not conduct my own exegetical work on the canonical texts in this study. The empirical material related to the texts is limited to the established material from the group of participants.



### *Hermeneutics as Part of the Western Tradition of Knowledge*<sup>22</sup>

As a term, hermeneutics was embedded in the Western and Christian philosophical and theological tradition and has become, as stated above, part of the social sciences in the West as well. If the words hermeneutics and interpretation are used as full synonyms, the misunderstanding may arise that knowledge systems other than the Western (or other religious traditions than Western Christianity) do not have interpretative systems or theories. Recent years have seen a development where the term “hermeneutics” is being used within Islamic theological discourse to a greater extent, gradually challenging the monopoly Christian theology previously had on the use of the term in a religious way (Esack 1997: 61). The terms “interpretation” and “reinterpretation” are, however, the dominant terms in Islamic literature in English.<sup>23</sup>

Historically, the word hermeneutics tends to be used in a *retrospective* manner in the Western tradition, a habit that might blur the understanding the temporal nature of the development of interpretative theory within these traditions. To use the term in the sense of “modern hermeneutics” regarding the Christian interpretation of the Bible in the early centuries is anachronistic. To resist the idea of any given unified universal notion of hermeneutics (this includes universal not only spatially also but temporally unified) is to take interpretative processes seriously, since they are always situated in a specific context and always done by *persons*. This is a view marked by my own comprehension of the term hermeneutics, where the context, the subject position, and the presuppositions of the interpretative subject is shaped by fluidity, although they often stand in relation to more fixed interpretative frameworks, such as religious traditions.

To interpret canonical texts and social and cultural contexts in religiously and culturally pluralist societies requires theoretical reflection on the processes of interpretation where this plurality is taken into account. The culturally and religiously pluralist interpretative situation for the participants in the group where the empirical material is established creates a complex web of interpretations. To map some of the challenges this represents provides a good reason for taking a closer look at the newly emerged discipline of *interreligious hermeneutics*.

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<sup>22</sup> I am aware that “Western” and “the West” are constructed terms used to refer to a cultural and geographical area that can easily be seen to be much too diverse to be included in one category. When possible, I prefer to refer to “Norway,” “Europe,” and “USA” for the sake of accuracy even if these geographical areas themselves also have many different representations and contexts.

<sup>23</sup> In koranic exegesis the terms *tafsir* and *ta’wil* refer to interpretations of the Koran: *tafsir* refers to philological “outer” exegesis and *ta’wil* to an “inner”, mystical interpretation (Esack 1997: 61). The Islamic interpretative concepts such as *qiyas* (“analogical reasoning”) and *ijtihad* (“independent reasoning”) are also part of what may be called Islamic hermeneutics; see p. 38 and 49.

### *Interreligious Hermeneutics*

Traditional<sup>24</sup> Christian and Islamic interpretations of their canonical scriptures and their traditional structures of interpretative authority often aim at confirming and continuing already existing interpretations of the Koran and the *sunna*, the Bible and the tradition. These hermeneutical structures are criticized from modern and postmodern as well as feminist and postcolonial perspectives for neglecting or limiting the autonomy of the individual interpreter and preserving existing power structures.

One of the substantial criticisms of *philosophical* hermeneutics is related to the various presuppositions of the existence of a coherent meaning, like the expectation of the emergence of a common horizon (Gadamer), and the possibility of interpretative consistency (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2008: 274-278). *Radical* hermeneutics suggests that the aim of interpretation is not to find meaning but to discover and then learn to cope with the loss of meaning (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2008: 274-279).

But between these two ways of engaging with hermeneutics – interpretation with a relatively fixed meaning and interpretation in the absence of meaning – there are many paths. Some of these are related to interpretations where more than one religious tradition is present, represented by the canonical texts or by the believers. This creates a new hermeneutical situation with more than one frame of reference, but the existence of several frames is not extraordinary in itself. The new element is that two relatively fixed frames of reference, represented by the religious traditions' interpretative structures, are present at the same time.

The term “interreligious hermeneutics” can relate to the interpretation of canonical scriptures or the interpretation of a cross-religious encounter (Frederiks 2005). The Christian theologian Oddbjørn Leirvik suggests that the latter comes close to comparative theology, which “engages the Self in a potentially transformative encounter with the religious Other” (Leirvik 2011 (forthcoming))The interpretations, for instance, of the Koran and the Bible together for Christians and Muslims in a common place may, however, still be separate hermeneutical acts that do not relate to any *shared* interpretative process involving the scriptures. An act of common interpretation may still happen, but it will then primarily be an interpretation of *modes* of interpretation or interpretations of the *contexts* represented or a shared context.

Frederiks' two ways of viewing interreligious hermeneutics may thus be intertwined in actual encounters. Leirvik asks: “Can the Koran and the Bible talk to each other?” His answer is:

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<sup>24</sup> When I use the term “traditional” as in “Christian and Islamic tradition”, I use it in a broad sense, implying that it does not reflect the plurality within the traditions. When I refer to a specific tradition, this will be specified. In Islam, the term “tradition” is used to refer to both the *hadith* and to the traditions of the law schools. I will refer to the “hadith” when I specifically mean the tradition of *hadith* and will use “tradition” when referring to Islamic law schools and the entire *sunna*.

“Books do not talk to one another; only living people can have a conversation” (Leirvik 2006: 123). There is, however, a level of intertextual relation between the Bible and the Koran, for instance. Leirvik modifies his rejection of a textual encounter outside a cross-religious human encounter when he points to the intertextual relation between the Christian and Islamic traditions. The New Testament comments on the Old Testament, creating an internal biblical discussion, and the Koran comments on the Jewish and Christian scriptures (Leirvik 2006: 124-125).

***The Need for Clarifications to Track Transpositions in the Encounter Between Different Sign Systems***

In exploring interpretation processes where different religious universes of meaning meet, Leirvik and the Christian theologian Lissi Rasmussen in her book *Diapraksis og dialog mellem kristne og muslimer* (Rasmussen 1997) refer to Julia Kristeva when explaining an intertextual process as a transposition of linguistic expressions from one specific system of signs to another where the linguistic expression(s) could have a different meaning (Leirvik 2006: 124). Leirvik makes a significant hermeneutical observation on the basis of Kristeva’s notion of the intertextual: the same word can carry different meanings and different connotations when used in different systems of meaning. Likewise, persons with the same name in the Bible and the Koran (and the *hadith*) can have different histories, positions, and functions (Leirvik 2006: 124). This means that in a conversation between people from the Christian and Islamic traditions substantial communication requires further clarification of the meaning of words – and named individual figures – that or who appear to be similar but refer to different universes of meanings and persons.

Words, ideas, and persons are situated and interpreted differently *within* the traditions. The traditions themselves consist of different sign systems, for instance, in different confessional branches of the Christian and Islamic traditions and in the different *cultures* in which the religious traditions are situated.

This means that in a Muslim-Christian encounter that includes more than one culture, there are more than two sign systems present as the framework for transpositioning. This indicates that the transpositioning of a term may happen more than once, and the complexity of sign systems present entails that one clarification may not be sufficient. To explain what one intends to articulate would be a constant process, and communicating would require particular effort. To make substantial communication happen across the different interpretive frameworks in a complex group, like the group in this study, requires a high communicative consciousness. This consciousness could be present from the beginning or develop gradually throughout the process as a result of the encounter.

An example of the need to clarify and situate the use of a shared Christian and Muslim *name* in the present study is the name of Hagar/Hajar. The person Hajar in the Islamic tradition has features in common with Hagar in the Christian tradition, but the stories and the portrayals of Hagar/Hajar also differ in significant ways in the two traditions. In this study I will use the combined reference “Hagar/Hajar” to express both the connection and the difference between the two when I refer to them or the narratives together. I use “Hagar” when I refer specifically to the figure as portrayed in the Christian tradition and “Hajar” when I refer only to the figure in the Islamic tradition. But the names sound alike, and many Muslims write “Hagar,” and not “Hajar” when referring to the Hagar/Hajar figure in the Islamic tradition.<sup>25</sup> But if I use the same spelling for the two figures, it would be impossible to know *which* Hagar/Hajar I am referring to, and the meaning of what I want to communicate to the reader would be lost or blurred.

### *Transcontextual Space*

In her search for theoretical framework of *diapaxis* between Christians and Muslims through readings of the Bible and the Koran together, Rasmussen finds that Kristeva’s use of the term intertextual (Kristeva 1984: 59) opens up a dynamic aspect on the interpretation of texts (Rasmussen 1997: 106).

Rasmussen suggests an intertextual model based on Kristeva and the theories proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin, where she outlines four levels of intertextual relations between the Bible and the Koran. **First** is the Koran and Bible in their original contexts, where both relate to other texts and to their historical contexts. **Second**, there is the intertextual relation between the Koran and the Bible as incorporating parts of other texts, including mutual exchange, shared themes, and ideas, or one text relating to the other both in historical and contemporary perspective. Rasmussen suggests this as the starting point of an invitation to dialogue because of the emergence of the intertext. **Third**, there are the texts (Koran and Bible) and their present contexts as represented through participants in a social process emerging as a discourse. The **fourth** level is to establish a space that is transcontextual (Danish: *transkontekstuel*). This happens through a shared practice of the intertextual.

The fourth stage of this process is where the actual reading of each other’s canonical texts as Christians and Muslims can produce a dialogue and a diapaxis when Christians and Muslims relate to both through textual, contextual, and social dimensions, interpreting the Koran and the Bible in their current, shared context *and* in their own separate contexts (Rasmussen 1997: 107-108).

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<sup>25</sup> The various pronunciations and spellings of the name Hagar/Hajar in Islam reflect the different Arabic dialects.

Rasmussen qualifies the transcontextual, dialogical area of interpretation through Bakhtin's notion of *polyphony* achieved through *orchestration* (Bakhtin and Holquist 1981: 430), requiring different voices, equally heard and equally valued (Rasmussen 1997: 107-109). Behind the emergence of the intertextual for Kristeva, in the sense of transpositioning sign(s) into another sign system, thus requiring the articulation of a new position, lie the Freudian processes of displacement and condensation in the work of the unconscious. For Kristeva, transposition implies the abandonment of one sign system for a new one, based on the articulated sign transfer, where the subject merges the old and new meanings (Kristeva 1984: 60).

In Rasmussen's model, the transcontextual space (level 4) is where new interpretations and new understanding emerge from the intertext between the Koran and the Bible, when the Christian and Muslim readers bring their own contexts and traditions into their interpretations. Some of the texts become intertext, and some of their contexts are/become shared, whereas other parts of texts and contexts remain separate. In the same movement of transposition the creativity and new understandings based on the combination of texts and contexts present in a dialogical encounter may be *re-situated* by the readers both in their shared context and in their separate religious contexts. Part of this process is that the religiously particular text is *re-contextualized* in the context of the other, opening a path to new insights on texts, contexts, and the process of making meaning itself. Rasmussen writes:

The intertext model as a dialogical text model based on practice has both a hermeneutical and a methodological function, since it explains the relation between dialogue and diapraxis, and to interpret and describe the transcontextual process that is started through reading each other's texts, something that is necessary and the basis for the diapraxis ... and the authentic dialogue between Christian and Muslims .... Together, people develop common knowledge that can be used to contextualize modes of action. (Rasmussen 1997: 110)<sup>26</sup>

Rasmussen's model provides an understanding of how interreligious hermeneutics may be applied in practical life, exemplified by Christians and Muslims coming together and reading each other's canonical texts. Rasmussen is concerned with the power aspects of such encounters, addressing the need to prevent the event from becoming a monologue of the strongest voice(s) in order to provide what she calls "authentic dialogue."

Linking hermeneutics, dialogue, and diapraxis together, Rasmussen provides a useful structuring of the process of interpretation in a cross-religious group, as represented in this study. Her most useful contributions are her situated use of Kristeva and Bakhtin and connecting the creative process of communication across readers, texts, and context in the aims of *common*

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<sup>26</sup> My translation.

*knowledge*, through what she describes as *authentic dialogue*. The common knowledge is achieved through the process, including the knowledge of texts and contexts represented by the participants, being discussed, negotiated, and recontextualized to create a shared contribution to a broader context. Authentic dialogue allows all represented voices to be able to share knowledge about text and context on an equal level and to be capable of creating common efforts. Rasmussen does not aim at synthesizing either the texts or the religious traditions but to extend the space for contextualizing the texts and to suggest the emergence of shared understanding and action when texts and contexts meet through the encounter of the *readers*.

The critical point of Rasmussen's model, in my view, is that the complexity of the communicative situation may be understated. The diversity among represented sign systems creates a complicated web. The different cultural universes of meaning across the religious frameworks are not taken into account other than through the religions.

### ***Transreligious and Transcultural Hermeneutics?***

The German Christian theologian Andreas Nehring claims that cultural representation generally overrules religious representation when people of different religious and cultural background meet (Nehring 2011 (forthcoming)). He argues that culture should be perceived not as static, fixed, normative structures but as a "coded network of constructions and negotiations of meaning" (Nehring 2011(forthcoming)). Cultures are, according to Nehring, both people's "first identification" (before religion) and a fluid, non-fixed system of meaning. How do these reflections challenge interreligious hermeneutics?

Nehring uses his observations to criticize what he claims to be a general lack of awareness about power structures and the presence of hegemonic political and cultural discourses in interreligious encounters. He blames this partly on the traditional premises of (Western) hermeneutics, claiming that these lack sensitivity about the otherness of other cultures or regard other cultures as static entities. This becomes particularly problematic in a postcolonial perspective when a Western Christian encounters a Muslim (Western or non-Western) presupposing that Islam, and cultures connected to Islam, are static.<sup>27</sup> Nehring claims that colonial hegemonic discourse conflicts with intercultural and interreligious relations (and interreligious hermeneutics) in ways not always recognized by hermeneutically oriented Western Christian theologians.

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<sup>27</sup> *Orientalism* as a concept was recast by Edward Said, in his book with the same title (Said 1978), where he presents orientalism as how Western scientists and researchers constructed an image of the Middle East and Islam that was static, repressive and viewed Islam and the Middle East as inferior. For Said, orientalism tells us nothing about "the Orient" but a great deal about Western misconceptions of the Middle East and Islam.

In order to avoid reproducing the image of (other) cultures as static, Nehring suggests the terms “transreligious” and “transcultural” to replace “interreligious” and “intercultural.” His reasoning behind this is that using the prefix “inter” usually implies a relation between two stable entities. If they are not stable in the sense of being completely fixed, they may still be identifiable as constructed patterns of meanings and codes. An interreligious/cultural hermeneutics has no third transcendent point where interpretation occurs, in his view, since the partakers are firmly situated in cultural and religious frames of reference. That these cultural and religious frames are fluid implies that encounters between people of different faiths and cultures are not encounters between representatives of stable, easily comparable constructions of meaning and symbols. The faiths and cultures are in themselves diverse, meaning that the encounters in transreligious/transcultural encounters are not only happening *across* religious and cultural representations but among different representations of allegedly the *same* religion or culture.

If culture is regarded as fluid and there is no third outside point *from* which one can interpret, how can cointerpretation happen? Nehring suggests focusing on creating a *common performative culture* through the encounter that may transform “one’s own respective articulation of a situation” (Nehring 2011(forthcoming)). Performativity aims at changing and shaping reality through words as a “speech-act.”<sup>28</sup> This may nuance Rasmussen’s distinction between “dialogue” and “diapaxis” where diapaxis is joint action in the world and the necessary step beyond dialogue, according to her. The distinction between “words” and “action” is difficult to make, and her distinction between dialogue and diapaxis may be related rather to the *location* of the speaking/acting, with dialogue referring to an internal activity in the group, and diapaxis referring to joint speaking/acting in broader society. Nehring is primarily concerned with theorizing on the interpretive situation within the transreligious, transcultural encounter itself, whereas Rasmussen includes broader society as an at least partially shared context in her theorizing.

### ***Common Interpretation Located at a “Third Place”?***

Nehring rejected the notion of there being a third, transcendent point of view in an encounter between two cultures (Nehring 2011 (forthcoming)). Because he refers to culture and religion as self-referential systems of meaning, he finds this to be the main obstacle in the attempt to identify a common hermeneutical ground, even if the traditions are regarded as fluid. Rasmussen’s intertext model may provide an answer to this, where there is no pure transcendent third point of view but only an immanent/transcendent one: the physical place of the

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<sup>28</sup> We find examples of performative speech in liturgical practices within the Christian and Islamic tradition, such as in the recitation of the Koran.

*transcontextual encounter* between readers of the Bible and the Koran. This is, however, not a stable ground but an unstable and shifting one. Leirvik used the spatial metaphor “the space between” for encounters between people of different faiths (Leirvik 2006: 113-119) (leaning on Buber and his “realm between” (Buber 2002: 117, 241-243)),<sup>29</sup> and thus reflects along the same lines as Rasmussen.

The “transcontextual encounter” and the “third place” Rasmussen and Leirvik suggest as possible locations for a common interpretation of texts and contexts can be described as a place where meaning is constantly negotiated and discussed. This implies that a “third place” is not a removed, outside place that provides a neutral, power-free zone to establish a universal intercultural, interreligious (or “Muslim-Christian”) hermeneutics as a theoretical position. It is rather a creative space where performative speech may happen, aiming at transforming the participants’ “articulation of the situation” (Nehring) and indicating possibilities for *diapraxis* (Rasmussen). The acknowledgement of fluidity in the interpretative reference systems (religious and cultural) is combined with a requirement for *situating* and *contextualizing* these frameworks as well as the encounter itself. This implies that an option for obtaining a common interpretation of the texts that is contextual and attempts to avoid cultural and religious dominance by the party representing a dominant discourse requires an unstable, complex situation/location where the canonical scriptures are interpreted.

### ***The “Second Gender” in the “Third Place”***

This project is concerned with the issue of gender, gendered hermeneutics, and feminisms in readings of Christian and Islamic canonical scriptures. Leirvik, Rasmussen, and Nehring do not address gender issues specifically. There are, however, elements in their hermeneutical reflections that can be implemented in a hermeneutics from a feminist perspective aiming at reflecting on gendered power structures in religious traditions and in encounters between them. First, there is the quest for criticism of power, and behind this is the requirement of *situating* texts and contexts culturally (Nehring). Second, all three argue that interpretations of canonical scriptures, of context, and of religious traditions and cultures are fluid and can thus change. In addition, they all emphasize the *possibility* of the individual participants and the groups formed in the “third place” to act.

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<sup>29</sup> The Indian postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha uses the notion of “in-between” with respect to cultures and spaces in his works as well when he aims to destabilize binary oppositions in what he claims to be a Western metaphysical attempt to frame the world. Bhabha seeks to establish a different view of cultures and nations as performative, fluid, and hybrid in order to interrupt what he claims to be ongoing processes of colonization (Bhabha 2005 (1996): 54).



*Scriptural Reasoning as a Common Space of Interpretation for Jews, Christians, and Muslims*

The initiative of Scriptural Reasoning (SR) creates places for Jews, Christians, and Muslims to read and interpret their canonical scriptures together. Reflecting on this practice, which started originally in Jewish and postliberal theological circles in the USA and later included Muslims as well and then spread to the UK and elsewhere, resulted in the book *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Ford and Pecknold 2006) to which participants from the different religious traditions contributed.<sup>30</sup>

The aim of SR is defined as giving a public response from the three religions together to meet contextual needs (Kepnes 2006: 26, 35). These needs are partly political, partly religious: to counteract a split between “Islam” and the “West” and to prevent religiously legitimated unrest and conflict by providing messages of peace and coexistence from representatives of three religions reasoning together on their scriptures. Stephen Kepnes also speaks about a “third space” as important in SR, but this does not refer to a point between the traditions or an unstable, dynamic space of interpretation. Instead he refers to the practice of SR as seeking a “third space” “between anti-modernist religious fundamentalism and modern liberalism” (Kepnes 2006: 25). SR does not aim at presenting a coherent theory of interpretation nor a consistent method but a diverse *practice* (Adams 2006: 43) between academia, faith communities, and contemporary society.

The initiative of SR was taken up by postliberal Christian theologians who may be seen as being influenced by the Christian theological movement of Radical Orthodoxy. Radical Orthodoxy’s quest for establishing a discourse beyond secularism (Cheetham 2007: 29) is shared by SR. SR, according to Kepnes, seeks to “move beyond much modern scholarship of religion and much liberal interfaith dialogue” (Kepnes 2006: 28). The focus is on healing the world and healing the traditions. The practitioners of SR find that this can be done through returning to the canonical scriptures *together* as skilled Jewish, Christian, and Muslim readers (often academic scholars) and meeting in a place referred to as a “tent,” a temporary place created for discussion. This “tent” is located between academia (“the campus”) and the religious traditions (“houses”) (Ford 2006: 7-13).

The Jewish theologian Ben Quash claims that SR is “committed to particularity” (Quash 2006: 60), meaning that the participants should speak on the basis of their own particular traditions, and the shared quest consists rather of parallel quests to return to one’s own tradition. The encounter is not in interpreting the texts but in sharing the respective interpretations and

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<sup>30</sup> Ford shows the origins of the practice of Scriptural Reasoning in his contribution to *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Ford 2006: 2-4).

highlighting the religious traditions' alleged ability to give the world what the West has lost: a divine grand narrative, however different in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, that is grounded in the belief in one God.<sup>31</sup>

The insistence on particularity throughout the encounters around the texts entails criticism of interreligious encounters that allegedly blur the boundaries between the traditions, claiming that this is a reductionism of the richness in each tradition as well as of the integrity of the believers. But the focus on particularity may also be influenced by Radical Orthodoxy, whose goal is to have Christianity reclaim its place as *the* cultural and social narrative of reference it used to have prior to the current influence of secularization in the West. In SR the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam *together* seem to inhabit the same role of providing a shared, monotheistic, religious understanding of the world.

### ***The Hermeneutical Practice of Scriptural Reasoning***

The hermeneutical reasoning behind the practice of SR, then, apparently starts with contextual needs, but prior to this is the theological project of rescuing human dignity on the basis of the canonical scriptures in the so-called Abrahamic religions and the faith in one God. The hermeneutical application is based on a respect for the differences between the three traditions that must not be violated, but the most significant difference in SR is that between the three religions on the one hand and secularism on the other. This is regarded as a difference that should be met by advocating and implementing the reasoning of "Abrahamic" faiths in the secular sphere and strengthening religious reasoning of this kind at the expense of secularism.

Kepnes' suggestion of a hermeneutical position for viewing the practice of SR is a "triadic semiotic": "meaning arises out of the relationship between the sign, referent and community of interpreters that reads the text" (Kepnes 2006: 24). The production of meaning is by the interpreters who bring their academic skills, knowledge, and traditional interpretations as individuals. The co-reflection on the texts should emerge in joint commentaries and "rules," including the reasoning of all three religions, and made public in order to fulfill the aim of "healing the world" (Kepnes 2006: 25).

In a reflection on the hermeneutical practice of SR, one of the participants, Tim Winter, describes the practice as "... not a method, but rather a promiscuous openness to methods of a kind unfamiliar to Islamic conventions of reading" (Winter 2006: 109). By this he means that the

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<sup>31</sup> The practitioners of SR maintain that the exclusion of other religions from the practice of SR, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, has to do with the fact that these traditions are less concerned with canonical scriptures. It is not a valuation of the religions as such. At the same time, however, the value of monotheism is highlighted as a moral meaning that establishes a special opportunity for respecting humans as being "in his image and therefore of infinite worth"(Kepnes 2006: 34). The inclusion of Buddhist and Hindu scriptures are debated by some SR participants.

Islamic conventions of reading Islamic canonical scriptures are less shaped by the non-religious or secular modes of readings and modes of interpretation than the Jewish and Christian ways of reading their texts are. In the encounter, the different ways of interpretation and readings meet and may influence each other.

SR wants to combine a revival of the religious traditions represented through a common space for interpretation, a self-critical reflection brought about by the encounter in this common space, and a distance to both relativism and any attempt to create universal principles as a substitute for the particular religious traditions (Kepnes 2006: 25). The above presented “triadic semiotic”, however simple it may seem, creates a complex hermeneutical situation when practiced. The *encounter* of different systems and theories of interpretation within the religious traditions are the actual object of this “triadic semiotics,” so one may say that this hermeneutics creates a transcontextual space (Rasmussen) or a space between (Leirvik). The difference between SR as presented in *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Ford and Pecknold 2006) and the two other positions on interreligious (or transreligious) hermeneutics is located in their respective views on the role of the interpreter and the interaction between religious and secular. In all its various representations SR seems to contain contradictory views of the interpreter (the reader, the “scriptural reasoner”) as a subject. Kepnes finds that the “triadic semiotic” empowers the reader in the hermeneutical process. At the same time the general aim of SR is to engage with the respective canonical scriptures as *resources* and a general attempt to avoid a *liberal* approach is stated by some of the participants. This may imply that the subjectivity of the reader is limited from the beginning and that the empowerment of the reader should not lead to criticism of the scriptures or engage with views labeled as “liberal.” Winter writes:

So Scriptural Reasoning, while admitting a certain postmodern reticence about final meaning, is by no means an intrinsically liberal method, and may turn out to be particularly hospitable to conservative thinkers who find that little is being communicated in academic or popular “dialogue” sessions driven by liberal presuppositions. (Ford and Pecknold 2006: 107)

I will return to the relation between SR and other models of interreligious dialogue and show implications of their respective views on religious difference in the section about dialogue. But for hermeneutics, and the role of the interpreter/reader, it seems that SR’s ideal is to empower readers as subjects while at the same time to limit the possibility for the reader to exercise her/his subject position because of the ideological framing of the project.

This position is not unknown. Even within the religious traditions themselves, the interpreter who wishes to remain inside may still balance between tradition and subjective interpretation of the scriptures. To transfer this position to an interreligious encounter can be seen to be just as problematic because it could deprive this new hermeneutical situation of some

of its possible dynamics that depend on the creation of an unstable ground. It may lead to a hermeneutical situation where overlapping discourses of power between the three monotheistic traditions are never addressed, such as gendered hierarchies of power. The interaction between the participants as described in Rasmussen's *transcontextual space* and Nehring's *performative speech*, creating new interpretations of text, context, and the interpreters themselves, may be limited by the focus in SR on upholding religious particularity as an ideal, constructing the secular as the significant other. The focus on religious particularity could lead to an interpretative situation where differences are emphasized at the cost of possible similarities. SR's focus on an alleged dichotomy between religious and secular, where the monotheistic religions' worldview is threatened by secular trends, may influence how the societal context is regarded and promote a strong advocacy for the religious traditions and their canonical scriptures, allowing them to escape intrareligious and interreligious critique. Culture is not really included in the SR as a decisive factor in interpretation, other than as an element that should be transformed by the ethics and ontology of the three religions.

SR represents a positive contribution of reflected experience of interreligious relations based on reading one another's scriptures among Jews, Muslims, and Christians. Behind the ideological framing people meet to discuss canonical scriptures in ways that cannot be pre-programmed, and representatives of SR emphasize personal relations being initiated and nurtured across religious boundaries, as well as the importance of shared knowledge and understanding. The question is if important possibilities of critique and self-critique on issues such as gendered power structures in interpretation of canonical scriptures are missed. Helene Egnell raises the following question in responding to the practice of SR: If SR aims at addressing contextual problems through reinforcing the resources of the canonical scriptures, what if the canonical scriptures *themselves* represent a problem? This question may be a unwelcome and perhaps illegitimate one in SR, but the issue the question addresses is the heart of the problem from a religious feminist point of view, according to Egnell (Egnell 2009: 3).

Leirvik, Rasmussen, Nehring, and the participants in the Scriptural Reasoning initiative share a position rejecting a universal, common interreligious (or transreligious) synthesized theory of interpretation. This would be my own position as well when I demand that hermeneutics to be *situated*. But in order to establish an interpretative situation capable of providing tools for self-criticism within the religious traditions in the interpretation and re-interpretation of canonical scriptures, I align myself more closely to the hermeneutical positions of Leirvik, Rasmussen, and Nehring, and the challenge from Egnell, which may be directed toward all attempts to facilitate a co-reading of canonical scriptures, and not only as done in SR. The attention toward power structures within hermeneutics, including gendered power structures, is part of the contextualization of interpretations. But it is also part of the act of interpretation

*itself* through the readers' presuppositions and by present hegemonic discourses as represented by the interpreters.

When moving closer to theorizing on and situating the hermeneutical situations subject to analysis in this project, the notion of the "third place" as a required unstable place to create a transcontextual space, the replacement of "interreligious" by "transreligious" and the reasoning behind this, and the suggestions about the possible outcomes of a hermeneutical encounter (diapraxis, a transformed articulation of a situation) will continue to be part of the theoretical framework. The tension between *protecting* the particularity of the religious traditions in encounters, including the canonical scriptures, and the request for change represented by feminisms to *challenge* the same traditions through the encounters will be addressed in the sections on dialogue and feminisms.

### ***Transreligious Hermeneutics on the Ground***

As stated earlier, Giddens emphasizes that in social research it is not only the researcher who interprets the informants – the informants have already an interpretation of their own lives and contexts. In this project the interpretation at the participatory level is that of the texts *and* of the transreligious, transcultural encounter in the group. The above discussion of interreligious/transreligious hermeneutics painted a broader picture. Now it is necessary to take a closer look at how to frame the interpretative processes taking place among the participants in this study.

My preferred term for the interpretations taking place in the group of participants will not be hermeneutics but meaning making. Meaning making includes all elements in the complex interpretative situation in the group and its context: the canonical texts, the discussions about the texts, the context(s) represented in the group, and the discussions about how to define and address this context. Part of making meaning is a process of situating oneself as an interpreting subject (as the "meaning maker"), and finding the roles that the canonical scriptures should play in meaning making.

By using the term "meaning making," I am trying both to avoid too close an automatic connection with the Western interpretative tradition and to make it *obvious* that the interpretation going on in the group is broader than textual interpretation, even if the texts are an integral part of the process.

The following section will concentrate on displaying a framework for some of the hermeneutical strategies used throughout the interpretation process. The selected elements elaborated on are thus derived from the empirical material by tracing the patterns of interpretation by the participants. Since the empirical material is established in a hermeneutical

process marked by religious and cultural complexity, the strategies and patterns of interpretations are shaped by this complexity.

### *Mapping the Hermeneutical Complexity*

The group of interpreters in this study consists of Christians and Muslims, with an intrareligious variation: Lutheran and Roman Catholic Christians, Sunni and Shia Muslims. Regarding cultural background, three of the participants were Norwegians “without hyphens,” whereas the other seven had Moroccan, Pakistani, East African, Iranian, and Middle Eastern backgrounds in addition to their Norwegian background.<sup>32</sup>

The complexity in the group is manifested in crossing relations between texts and the readers and between the readers. To read a canonical text from one’s own tradition is different from reading a text from another tradition. If someone from the other tradition is *present* while one reads the texts of the other, this entails that one relates not only to a text from another religious tradition but also to a person who may have a kind of ownership of the text. In the same way, the presence of people from a different religious tradition may have an impact on one’s reading and interpretation of one’s own texts and create a different interpretative situation than if one was alone or only among one’s fellow believers.

But it is not only *religious* differences that influence the interpretative situation for this study’s participants. Cultural background and identity are important variables in textual interpretations. In the group, the religious and cultural identifications of the participants are *crossing* variables. A connection between cultural background and the interpretation of religious canonical scriptures, however, is not always recognized within religious emic discourses that emphasize religion as a phenomenon separate from culture and give the religious tradition an epistemological preference as an interpretative framework – allegedly separate from culture (this seems for instance to be the case in the practice of SR). The relation between cultural and religious traditions when interpreting the canonical texts does become a theme in the group’s discussions, not only in trying to make meaning of the texts but particularly when trying to *articulate* this meaning to the participants of other religious and cultural backgrounds. The culturally diverse background of the participants are, however, most visible when they are negotiating about *context* and how to define a significant context for their making of meaning.

The participants’ relations to and individual stances toward religious, cultural, and political discourses play a significant role in the interpretative process as what hermeneutics would call presuppositions or pre-knowledge. They are all situated in their ordinary lives in

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<sup>32</sup> See a full presentation of the participants in Chapter 3. This chapter also includes a discussion on the composition of the group, and on the question of representativity.

different environments in between the interpretative sessions (the group meetings), and this links the discussions in the group to discourses of which the participants continue to be a part outside the organized group.<sup>33</sup>

### ***Meaning Making within the Frameworks of Islam and Christian Traditions***

When it comes to the participants' relations to their religious tradition, the relations between the traditions and the individual believer as a Christian/Muslim cannot be described by one general standard. Some believers are devoted members of a faith community, whereas others are more individualized believers.

How individual believers in Western Europe and in Norway relate to religious authorities and how they apply their own reading and interpretation of canonical texts and religious practices in relation to the established or authoritative interpretations can vary. The extremes would be not to relate to texts or to religious authorities at all and still have an identity as a Christian or a Muslim or to submit to a specific tradition and share this tradition's view on text, interpretation, and religious practice. In between these extremes are different positions and different strategies for the making of meaning of texts and tradition. How the various positions are distributed between Christians and Muslims in Norway in general is not discussed in this study. This project will only show examples of various possible positions.

### ***Islamic Interpretative Discourses***

In Islam most established discourses of interpretation of canonical scriptures may be called *cumulative*. This means that traditional ways of interpreting are still in use in contemporary efforts at making meaning, where "traditional way" is understood as an allegedly unbroken chain of transferred knowledge of interpretation from Islam's origin to the present. In recent reformist Islamic movements, however, there is a tendency to claim that access to the sources of the Koran and the *hadith* should be more direct, bypassing the accumulated decades of interpretation between contemporary and early Islam. Both the cumulative and modernist discourses of the interpretation of the Koran and the *sunna* are marked by plurality, and the practices of interpretations are diverse both historically and in contemporary representations of Islam.

In the Islamic tradition there has been, beyond the interpretative plurality, a general agreement that the Koran as text is God's revelation and literally the word of God. Muhammad is considered to be a prophet (*nabi* or *rasul*) or mediator of direct revelation. The view of the Koran as a literary divine textual revelation is currently being debated within Islam through

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<sup>33</sup> One incident in the group's process shows this connection very clearly when Inger (Norwegian Lutheran) brought up the issue in the group of the Muhammad cartoons that was intensely debated in the Norwegian context at the time of this meeting.

highlighting *principles* of interpretation at the cost of literal interpretation (Tariq Ramadan may be seen as representative of this development).<sup>34</sup>

Trying to grasp the meaning of the Koran is motivated by a search for God-given rules of life, to be able to live a life according to God's will. The theological interpretation theories of how to interpret the Koran are shaped by this aim, and the majority of the interpretative theories in the Islamic tradition are concerned with matters of law. Islamic law is a field that includes regulations concerning human relations, *muamalat*, and the relations between human beings and God, *ibadat* (Roald 2004: 73). There is an important distinction within the Islamic tradition between *sharia* (literally: the road to the waterhole) as a notion of God's eternal will and *fiqh* as an expression of the actual human-made rules and regulations based on *sharia*. The source for seeking God's will in the Islamic tradition is not only the Koran but also the *sunna* (the example of Muhammad, as reflected in the *hadith*) and *ijma*, the consensus of the Muslim interpretive scholars at a particular time (Esposito 2003: 329).

The tradition of *usul-al-fiqh* ("roots of law," legal theory) means, according to the Islamic reformist scholar Tariq Ramadan, "a methodology of linguistic, religious and juridical interpretation of the sources and ... a large frame ... of global rulings ... to direct the application of *ijtihad* ..." (Ramadan 1999: 55). *Ijtihad* can be explained as "independent reasoning" and is an important concept for Islamic reformists (Esposito 2003: 134). The reason is that *ijtihad* can open for new interpretations of the Koran and the *sunna* so as to facilitate a contextual interpretation for new situations and challenges for Muslims under changed circumstances.

The possibility of using *ijtihad* in contemporary times is disputed among Muslim scholars. Some regard the "gates of *ijtihad*" to have been closed since the ninth or tenth century, grounded in a belief that by that time the Muslim scholars had achieved the necessary level of interpretation of the sources and its application to human life and no further interpretation was needed (Roald 2001: 99). But for many Muslims and Muslim scholars today, *ijtihad* is seen as the possibility for the Islamic tradition to play a contextual role, both for Muslim believers and for Islam as a religion. To perform *ijtihad*, however, requires knowledge of the tradition, of the Arabic language, and the high personal morality of the *mujtahid*, the traditional name of the *ijtihad* performer (Ramadan 1999: 86-88). One of the Muslim participants in this study explains and uses the concept of *ijtihad* in her argumentation for the need of reinterpreting Sura 4:34, for instance.

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<sup>34</sup> The Swedish (Muslim) historian of ideas Mohammad Fazlhashemi claims that recent discussions within the Islamic tradition represented by the scholars Nasr Hamid Abu Zeid (Egyptian Sunni scholar) and Seyyed Mohammad Ali Ayazi (Iranian Shiite scholar) come close to developing an Islamic historical-critical hermeneutics (Fazlhashemi 2009: 49-51).



So, in their meaning making in this project, the Muslim participants relate to some of the classical hermeneutical tools in Islam such as *ijtihad* (“independent reasoning”). They also use the *sunna* as a resource for interpretation.

### ***Christian Interpretative Discourses***

The Christian tradition as a whole contains a variety of doctrinal differences on biblical interpretation and the role other canonical scriptures and traditions play in interpretation. But all Christian traditions share the view that the divine is located to the person of Jesus, and only indirectly to the Bible as a text or a book. This implies that the work a devoted Muslim needs to do while searching for the divine will in the koranic revelation is different from that done by a Christian with regard to the Bible. Biblical interpretation is crucial because the Bible represents the access to knowledge about the person of Jesus and God’s acts in human history. Pivotal to the Christian faith are the Biblical narratives of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and their theological implications.

The split in the Western church at the time of the Reformation was largely based on divergent views on the interpretation of the Bible, with Luther launching the principle of *sola scriptura* as a protest against the interpretational practice in the Roman Catholic Church of the time where the interpretation of the biblical scriptures was guided by the tradition. Luther’s protest was directed primarily against the clergy’s interpretative hierarchies. He did relate selectively to resources from the earlier tradition, negotiating continuity and discontinuity. Luther upheld the importance of the Church fathers (Augustine in particular) and the apostles whose authority for Luther was connected to their task of passing on God’s message, not to their personal status as such (Ulstein 2006: 98).

Luther, unlike the Roman Catholic interpretative tradition, was not open to other sources of reasoning, such as philosophy, when interpreting what he claimed to be the Bible’s essential message of divine justification as crystallized in the Gospel. Whereas the traditional Islamic and Roman Catholic paradigms of knowledge aim at merging knowledge about the divine and knowledge about the world, the classical Lutheran position is to claim these as different areas of knowledge that ought to be kept separate (Ulstein 2006: 97).

The status of the Bible as a source for Christian *ethics* is a complicated question in itself. Luther’s principle of *sola scriptura*, further qualified as *solus Christus* (Christ alone) and *sola fide* (by faith alone), was originally formulated with a view to salvation and soteriology. In the Lutheran interpretative tradition, ethical guidelines and the message of salvation (the Gospel) are thus separated – as reflected in the distinction between “Law” and “Gospel” as interpretative keys for biblical texts (Ulstein 2006: 114-116).

Luther's interpretative principles have also been activated in recent discussions in the Church of Norway on gender equality and homosexual relationships as a resource for fresh ethical reasoning beyond the established positions and practices in the Lutheran tradition. Regarding the question of homosexual partnership, Church of Norway theologians have referred to the principle of "Christ as the centre of the Scripture," together with the overriding ethical principle of neighborly love, to legitimize a more accepting attitude toward homosexual partners (Kirkerådet 2006: 43, 49-51).

The position of the Bible in contemporary Christian communities generally is another question. Gerd Theissen states in his book *The Bible and Contemporary Culture* (Theissen 2007) that, among non-conservative Christians (liberal, progressive, radical), there is a tendency to view the Bible as nothing more than part of their cultural background, and that currently "even Protestants often look to other sources to provide the resources for faith" (Theissen 2007: ix-x). He claims that one of the reasons may be that conservative Christians (according to him) have monopolized the Bible to serve their particular views, since a wave of fundamentalist approaches to the Bible have hit the West from the late 1970s on. Together with a greater religious pluralization and secularization, Theissen is concerned with the lack of interest in the Bible among the general public that seems to be the result of these developments (Theissen 2007: xii-xiii).

For the Lutheran Christian participants in this study, the biblical texts presented to the group are not granted an immediate authority on the basis of their biblical status. In line with Theissen's impression of Western Protestants mentioned above, at least one of the Norwegian Lutheran Christians in the study states that she prefers the biblical texts to be communicated to her through sermons in the worship services or to read literature *about* the Bible instead of reading the biblical texts herself.<sup>35</sup> The reason she gave is that she finds the biblical texts hard to convert into a spiritual source for nurturing her Christian belief.

The difference between the roles of the Koran for the Muslim participants in this study and the role of the Bible for the Christian participants creates challenges in the communication about the texts, as will be shown in Parts III and IV.

### ***The Question of Interpretative Authority in Christian and Islamic Discourses***

When exploring the interpretative situation in the Christian and Islamic traditions, the question of *interpretative authority* regarding canonical scriptures is a significant part of the field. Interpretative authority is closely connected to the act of textual interpretation: the structuring of this authority determines what is to be regarded as the legitimate interpretations of the canonical

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<sup>35</sup> This was Inger, at the first group meeting with self-presentations.

scriptures, which religious positions possess the authority to state this, and who is qualified to inhabit these positions. The issue of interpretative authority includes what is regarded as legitimate methods of interpretation.

In the interpretative traditions of Christianity and Islam the question of interpretative authority is not merely a question of direct execution of power by stating legitimate ways to understand a text. It is also a question of how this power influences the individual interpreters and the faith communities in their textual interpretations. There is a dynamic relation between hermeneutics, religious practice, and power structures here.

In both the Christian and Islamic traditions hermeneutics or interpretative structures are integrated into a larger doctrinal system. Changes in the interpretation of texts, new interpretations of the status of texts and new views about how the interpretative authority should be allocated are not only relevant to the area of *textual* understanding. Views of divinity, humanity, and the world are intimately connected to modes of interpretation of canonical scriptures. This is why discussions and disputes about hermeneutical/interpretative matters are often seen as striking at the heart of the believers and the core of the traditions.

The interpretation of canonical scriptures within religious communities is both a matter of how a tradition is transferred and how the tradition develops. The representation of the past and the shaping of representations in the future are at stake. Structures of interpretative authority may serve to safeguard the dogmas and practices of the religious traditions. This could imply that the more emphasis a religious tradition puts on its canonical texts, the more crucial the question of interpretative authority becomes. However, stating this needs further clarification to see if this chain of reasoning is really valid: it may depend on *how* the focus on scripture is expressed in the tradition.

In the Christian Lutheran tradition, there is a strong emphasis on the Bible. Access to the Bible for every Christian believer is seen as crucial. Lutheranism gives every believer the authority to interpret the biblical text for herself, based on the belief that the Bible defends its own authority (Ulstein 2006: 109). This particular weakened the hierarchical structure of interpretative authority in Lutheranism. The Lutheran Churches nevertheless operate with a hierarchy, since church leaders, ministers, and doctrinal committees have a mandate to guide believers as to which interpretations are valid for the church as a *community*. If interpretations are meant to be valid for the religious community, they must be tested. The testing is seen as a *mutual* process between the minister and the congregation, between the religious leadership and scholars and laypeople.<sup>36</sup> In Roman Catholic tradition, the question concerns not only the

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<sup>36</sup> The doctrinal commission of the Church of Norway includes both laypeople, theological scholars and representatives of the Church leadership, all elected by the Church synod: <http://www.kirken.no/?event=doLink&famID=240> [accessed 23 June 2010].

authority to interpret the Bible but how to interpret the tradition, viewed as ongoing revelation.<sup>37</sup> In Islam the question of interpretative authority is not generally reduced to a question about (who is entitled to) the interpretation of the Koran but also includes the use of the *hadith* and *sunna* in the rulings of *fiqh* (“legal interpretation”).<sup>38</sup>

The Christian and Islamic history of interpretation and their respective management of structures of interpretation authority share some concerns. One is to balance the relationship between the individual believer and the religious community, where the community is generally decisive, at least at an official level. Another shared concern is the struggle to maintain a tradition and at the same time make its message *relevant*.

Christian and Islamic communities share the fact that the overwhelming majority of interpreters in the communities are *men*. This observation is of special importance in this study. Both Christian and Muslim feminist theologians have addressed this as a crucial and problematic part of their interpretative traditions. Their common view is that this allowed patriarchy to shape the interpretative traditions. They all claim to various degrees that the male interpreters have overlooked parts of the tradition where women are represented (“gender blindness”), that they interpreted the texts and the traditions to women’s disadvantage in order to execute power over women, and that God’s message has been *distorted* in order to discriminate against women because it supported men’s own interests. I will elaborate more on this in the last section of this chapter, under the section on feminisms.

In this project women discuss canonical texts, and to a certain degree they also address their own traditions’ history of interpretative authority. The extensiveness of the authority the participants claim for themselves to interpret the texts from their traditions is a question that concerns both the participants’ identity as interpreting believers and their attitudes toward their tradition.

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<sup>37</sup> See the document *Dei Verbum* from the Holy See:

[http://www.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651118\\_dei-verbum\\_en.html](http://www.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html) [accessed 23 June 2010].

<sup>38</sup> The *hadith* literature generally have a strong position in Islam as an authoritative source. The different parts of the *hadith*, however, are separated into “stronger” and “weaker” *hadiths*. The strong *hadiths* are considered more reliable and thus more authoritative than the weaker ones in their reference to the words, deeds, and advice of Muhammad. Whether a *hadith* is judged to be strong or weak has to do with the codification process of *hadiths*, where both the content and, particularly important, the *trading* process (*isnad*) were evaluated. *Hadiths* must be traced back to Muhammad by reliable transmitters (Roald 2004: 70). This makes a *hadith* strong. Originally, only strong *hadiths* were supposed to influence the jurisdiction and the interpretation of the Koran, but in reality, *hadiths* with a weak *isnad* have also been used (Roald 2004: 72).

### ***Everyday Hermeneutics and the Use of Time and Space to Make Meaning***

There is more to the interpretation of canonical texts than is found in public versions of the Christian and Islamic traditions respectively. The texts can be read and interpreted as narratives, as moral guidelines, or as inspiration to carry on struggling with life's various challenges. The person who picks up her Bible to read, simply to feel that she is not alone in her struggles, or the one who meditates on a koranic verse while trying to get a good night's sleep may be examples of everyday use of the canonical scriptures.

The hermeneutical challenge for the participants in this study is to make meaning of texts in a shared, transreligious, and transcultural space. They use tools from their own tradition to interpret the texts, but, due to the encounter of different sign systems and self-referring systems, the meaning making had to transgress the boundaries of these systems in order to communicate across them. This is a demanding interpretative situation, impossible to prepare for or to control. Reflections are still in the making at the time of speaking, and the discussions often change directions. In this situation the development of useful interpretative and communicative tools was required.

Two interpretative tools that became significant in the interpretative situation between the participants, the texts, and the contexts were the concepts of *time* and *space*. Making meaning implies situating a text, issue, experience, or feeling for the reader. To situate a canonical text is to place it in time and space, and this includes, directly or indirectly, situating oneself as a reader. It often also includes contextualizing the text to find out how the text can relate to a present that is known to the reader but obviously not to the text.

To identify and situate one's position as an interpreter may not be done once and for all in an interpretative process and, in a transreligious interpretative situation, the positions may vary according to whether the texts are from one's own tradition or another's.

### ***Space and Place, Text and Context***

Spatial hermeneutical tools in making meaning of the texts are linked to images of the text's contexts, historically and in the present, and to the interpretative context itself. In an interpreting group, this question is also about positioning within the group: the space that is given, taken, or negotiated. The negotiation of space could mean inclusion or exclusion in a shared interpretation. Identification of contextual space concerns the relation between the defined interpretative space and the surrounding world. One of the questions that emerged in the group process was if making meaning of canonical texts taking place in Norway should apply *beyond* a Norwegian context, and also how the "Norwegian context" itself was to be defined. Many of the participants in the project have backgrounds from cultures and spaces outside Norway. These spaces and

experiences became important resources in the meaning-making process in negotiating and defining the significant context.

### ***Gendered Space***

Taking a step back from the actual interpretation process to reflect on the interpretative space, the term of *gendered space* becomes relevant to this project. All of the participants are women. This was a deliberate methodological and theoretical decision by me, derived from the postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak's concept of strategic essentialism.<sup>40</sup> The interpretative place in this study is *perceived* as gendered space and commented upon by the participants. But what does this imply and how does it influence interpretation of text, context, and interpreters? Strategic essentialism as a concept makes it possible (at least theoretically) to establish gender-segregated space *temporarily* in order to reach a further specified aim and at the same time work to avoid an ontological confirmation of men and women as binary oppositions.

The traditional position of most interpreters of the canonical scriptures within the Christian and Islamic traditions is, however, gendered space as well: It is predominantly a male space. A question would be if the participants construct the gender-segregated place of interpretation as being *in opposition* to the traditional male space of interpretation or as *a response* to it. They may not have only one but many views on this.

### ***Texts and Readers, Readers and Text: Situating the Interpretative Position***

Does being a *reader* automatically imply becoming an *interpreter* of a text? This was the theme in one of the discussions of the group.<sup>41</sup> Eva, who has a Lutheran Christian Norwegian background,<sup>42</sup> claimed that readings of a canonical text must imply interpretation. Shirin, who has a Shia Muslim Iranian-Norwegian background, argues that, for some, it could be possible to look at oneself as a reader without being an interpreter. For some, the term "interpretation" may imply compromising the content of the Koran (or the Bible, when this position is found among Christians) as a believer.

The question is if it is possible to place oneself as a reader outside the interpretative process and seek for a "pure" or "original" meaning of the text. It is possible to claim a reading position outside interpretation, but this is still an interpretative position from a hermeneutical point of view. This answer could seem to be sufficient in theory, but in reality discussions between positions acknowledging *versus* disclaiming interpretation as a given fact are difficult,

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<sup>40</sup> I elaborate on this in Chapter 3, p. 106-109.

<sup>41</sup> This discussion is shown on p. 285-286.

<sup>42</sup> The participants are presented on p. 89-91.

since the parties might not acknowledge each other mutually as having legitimate positions. In this project, however, none of the participants disclaim interpretation as a valid way of relating to the texts. Interpretation and the allocation of interpretative authority take different shapes, but they are acknowledged as important.

Another position in making meaning of canonical texts that represents a particular challenge in an interpretative discussion is the position of abandoning the text(s). If the text is abandoned, this could imply that there is nothing left to discuss. The abandonment may, however, take different interpretative forms. It may imply dismissing the text(s) as authoritative and placing the sole authority in the interpretative situation in the reader/interpreter. A more radical approach is to dismiss the text(s) as irrelevant and claim that interpretation of the text(s) is also irrelevant. The interesting hermeneutical investigation in this case would be to explore the reasoning behind the rejection of the texts and its implications. The perspectives from radical hermeneutics may be used to address this situation: How is one to deal with the loss of text or the loss of meaning in the text (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2008: 279)? To abandon the text may still be a way of relating to the text, as a hermeneutical position – just as the claim not to engage in interpretation may be seen as a hermeneutical position. The position of abandonment in various ways is present in the empirical material, mostly among the Christian participants.

The reading position from which the participants most often distance themselves is that commonly referred to as “fundamentalist.” No one identified with this position, and in the discussions on the texts in 1 Timothy 2:8-15 and Sura 4:34 all warned strongly against this position. This is a position where there is no acknowledged distance between reader and text, and thus the reader withdraws from any responsibility as a subject.

### ***Text, Context, and Interpreter in Interchanging Positions***

How the *texts* are positioned in relation to the readers is a spatial hermeneutical question that concerns the placing of the text as close to or far from oneself as a reader. The participants relate to texts from their own tradition and to texts from a different tradition. It is possible to relate to both kinds of texts as texts and/or as context. To relate to a text as *text* implies taking the position of a reader and, from a hermeneutical/interpretative view, the role of *interpreter* in relation to a written (or oral) text.

To relate to the text as *context* implies being concerned with the text’s historical and current interpretation and impact but comprehending the text only indirectly through other sources and not directly as a reader in direct dialogue with the text. This position implies a greater degree of distance to the text. If, on the other hand, one relates to the texts only as written texts without a context, the interpretation history and the contemporary context could shift to the background. Paul Ricoeur claims that understanding and interpreting a text are two different

reading positions. The former keeps the reader within the universe of the text, without regarding its context. The second position entails recreating the text as communication and bringing the text in contact with the reader's context (Ricoeur 2001: 67).

The Christian Korean feminist theologian Chung Hyun Kyung problematizes the relation between the Bible as text and readers as part of the context. This problematization is based on Asian (Christian) women's reclaiming of their own history as authoritative after living through what Chung describes as decades of Western and patriarchal dominance of biblical interpretative authority. She suggests the theological slogan "We are the text" (Chung 1991: 111) for the future development of Asian women's theology. This means not only that the readers become the privileged subjects in the interpretation of biblical texts but also that the texts are primarily part of the context, and that the primary object of interpretation within the Christian communities should be people (women) and their stories and experience. The Bible can become a spiritual source, according to Chung, only if a connection is established between the time of the texts (then) and the time of the readers (now) so that the stories (and bodily experiences) of divine liberation placed in the "then" and the "now" are equally acknowledged as significant texts about God's revelation (Chung 1991: 111). Chung's reasoning is framed within the Christian tradition, although she also actively relates to other religious traditions in her works. But would her slogan "we are the text" work for a Muslim reader of the Koran?

The Islamic tradition strongly encourages learning the Koran by heart and being able to recite the whole text. In this way, the text of the Koran is embodied in the reciter, reciting the texts with her/his own voice. Even if this is not what Chung originally had in mind, this way of relating to the Koran makes the text as recited closely connected to the believer's body. The distance between the divine revelation and the believer is still maintained, however, by the conviction that they are *separated* and that human experience cannot replace the divine revelation.

The positioning of the reader toward the text is significant in order to investigate the process of interpretation. Is the position of the reader to understand, evaluate, or judge the text? Or, is the reader to position herself as the text and the text as context? These questions situate the reader as subject in different ways. But there is also the question of the placing of the subject: Is the reader or the text the defining subject? This way of posing this question may suggest that the position of text and reader is *stable* throughout the process of interpretation. I suggest that the location of the subject moves between text, reader, and context but to different degrees, depending on the interpreters' view of the text.



***Kwok Pui-Lan: "Diasporic Imagination"***

The Christian feminist and postcolonialist theologian Kwok Pui-Lan, of Chinese origin and currently based in the USA, shows how the concept of *place* can be critically investigated in hermeneutics. Her main project is to create a "postcolonial theology of religious difference" and to move *beyond* religious pluralism, which she states is constructed with Christianity as its norm and, as a construction, fixes the religious traditions in favor of the people having authority and to the disadvantage of all others (Egnell 2006: 259-261). Kwok uses the term *diasporic imagination* (Kwok 2005: 47) for a female diasporic subject's multi-located consciousness negotiating between past and present, here and there, as an interpreting subject who as a result of her life narrative, always is doubly located (Kwok 2005: 46). Without going into the debates about the use of the term "diaspora," I find Kwok's term useful. Kwok states that the diasporic imagination is a *skill* that makes a subject able to mediate between tradition and modernity and between the past and the future. She claims that because the female diasporic subject has to reinvent her identity, as an individual, or as part of a collective, she has to struggle to find ways of expressing herself and may be able to formulate alternative views and agencies for change (critical discourses) because she negotiates with multiple others (imagined or present). In her postcolonial critique of Christianity, Kwok states that diasporic imagination can deconstruct universalism based on Western "common sense" and thus be open for other cultures and places to define Christian faith in their own context (Kwok 2005: 48-49).

Kwok is basically concerned with *transcultural* negotiations of the representation of Christianity from a feminist perspective. But to return to what she calls "the episteme of nineteenth-century European religious discourse," she finds that anti-Semitism, colonialism, and women's subordination are three connected elements in this discourse (Kwok 2005: 49). By this means Kwok brings feminism, postcolonial criticism, and the discourse about the religious other together. I would add that Jews were not the only representatives of the religious other in this nineteenth-century discourse; Muslims also figured as the religious other through what Edward Said called *orientalism* (Said 1978). In addition, Muslims represented the *cultural* other and the colonized, allegedly (according to Said) in need of being controlled and defined by Western colonizers.

Kwok's term "diasporic imagination" is relevant to this project in at least two ways: First, the backgrounds of some of the participants are more than simply Norwegian (the Middle East, Iran, Africa, and Pakistan), and this creates a negotiation about which contextual perspectives to include when the texts are being contextualized. Second, the current hegemonic discourses in Norway and in the West on Muslims, Islam, and Muslim women also influences the participants' interpretation of text, context, and each other. Islam as the other religion and Muslims as the religious other – using here the term "other" in an orientalist way – are part of these discourses.

### *Analogical Reasoning and Moral Enrichment/Moral Critique*

Analogical reasoning in making meaning of canonical texts is a way of juxtaposing the space and experience of the reader and the space and context of the text. The interpreted message of the text is tested on the reader's perception of reality and her/his own experiences: Could I understand the text if I imagined myself in one of the positions of the textual figures or imagined myself as the author or historical listener of the text? The information this produces in the reader – thoughts, understandings, reactions, and feelings – is then woven into the meaning making of the text.

In the encounter with narrative texts an analogical way of relating could also be to articulate a new narrative based on one's own experiences and reflections. This new narrative could be harmonious with the textual narrative or it could be disharmonious as a kind of counter-narrative. Another way to relate to a narrative is performative: to include oneself in the textual narrative through identification with one of the figures, reactivating the original narrative in one's own life without creating a new narrative. Rituals within the traditions may provide space for this.<sup>43</sup>

If the text read is a non-narrative, prescriptive text from a canonical scripture conveying ethical or ideological standpoints and reasoning, the analogical response and interpretation might be shaped more by reflections on ethics and ideology.<sup>44</sup> But prescriptive texts are also likely to activate readers' *experiences*, which may be articulated as narratives or statements. And narratives may also activate ideological and ethical reflections and interpretations of the reader.<sup>45</sup> In the group's discussions on the Hagar/Hajar narrative, the second discussion starts with an ethical criticism of Hagar/Hajar's action in the narratives, when she leaves her son Ishmael in the desert (Chapter 5, p. 162 ff). Hagar/Hajar's act in the narratives might be seen as a criticism from a modern ideological/ethical point of view but could also be expressing the reader's own experience. Other participants defend Hagar/Hajar's action and thus relate closer to the exchanged interpretation of the narratives. Both parties, however, use analogical reasoning in the discussion to evaluate Hagar/Hajar's action, and one of the sources of this is their experience.

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<sup>43</sup> The narrative about Hajar is, for instance, the frame for the ritual of *sa'y* in Islam. The Eucharist in the Christian tradition comes close to this aspect.

<sup>44</sup> The connotations of the concepts ethics *versus* ideology are different in interpretative theory, where "ideological reading" might be seen as a reductionist interpretation of a text, whereas ethical reading is more legitimate. Feminist readings are sometimes criticized for being ideological and thus reductionist, but their reading may be called ethical by feminists themselves.

<sup>45</sup> On the ideological criticism of narratives from other times (and other cultures), see Mieke Bal *Narratology* (Bal 1997: 181-182), where she suggests that the suspension of reality in narratology is the only way to dissolve an ethnocentric interpretation (othering) of such narratives because it can reveal the structures of the narratives and through this show that "the nature of the otherness is sameness" (Bal 1997: 182). This makes it, according to Bal, possible to engage with narratives without being trapped in the ideologies of the present as a pre-understanding.

It seems relevant to connect the general hermeneutical tool of analogical reasoning to religious traditions of interpretation. In traditional Islamic interpretation, the principles of *qiyas* (analogical reasoning) and *urf* (custom) are used within the Islamic law schools. Analogical reasoning is part of *ijtihad*, although not as an independent act of an individual believer if she stays within the frameworks of the Islamic tradition.

The spatial impact of *qiyas* in the positioning of the reader *versus* the canonical texts (from the Koran or the *summa*) is that the interpreter is granted a role in interpreting the context and mediating between text and context. *Ijtihad* can be seen not only as mediating between canonical text and context but also as a *moral enrichment* of the text. The Muslim academic Abou el Fadl explains the concept of moral enrichment in the following way:

[T]he text will morally enrich the reader, but only if the reader will morally enrich the text. The meaning of the religious text is not fixed simply by the literal meaning of its words, but depends, too, on the moral construction given to it by the reader. (Abou El Fadl, Cohen, and Lague 2002: 15)

He claims that the Muslim reader of the Koran has an ethical obligation to obtain a certain level of moral consciousness the Koran *itself* assumes its readers will contribute (Abou El Fadl, Cohen, and Lague 2002: 15). On this basis Fadl criticizes authoritarian structures and gender inequality in Islam, as a criticism of the Koran's *readers*, not of the Koran itself. The position of the reader is thus to evaluate the text, but mostly to interpret the text in a way that morally enriches it. This places a strong obligation on the reader and at the same time gives authority to the reader as the interpreter of the text.

In Christian theology, the concept of *ethical* or *moral critique* of canonical scriptures themselves has been addressed by critical theologians such as feminist ones but also by Palestinian Christian theologians struggling with the biblical concept of "chosen people" and theologians working for the acceptance of homosexuality. Criticism of biblical *interpretation* is not enough for advocates of the ethical critique of the scriptures. The texts *themselves* must be ethically evaluated by the readers (Leirvik 2011 (forthcoming)).

In the section on feminisms later in this chapter, I will elaborate on what could be designated moral enrichment and moral critique by Christian and Islamic feminist theology on texts from the Koran, the *summa*, and the Bible. It seems that moral enrichment and moral/ethical critique of the canonical scriptures aim at empowering the reader as well as making her responsible for her engagement with the texts. The question is what the difference between them may be in theory and practice, due to the different status of the Koran and the Bible in their respective traditions. The participants in this study all engage in moral evaluation of either the texts themselves, or existing interpretation of texts. Sometimes this is marked by self-criticism

on behalf of their traditions. The analysis will show if Christians and Muslims do this differently because of their respective backgrounds, and this sheds more light on similarities and differences between these ways of engaging with the texts as represented in this study. But there is one important question that has not yet been raised: What about morally enriching/criticizing canonical texts from a *different* tradition? I will return to this in the later section on dialogue.

Analogical reasoning in the meaning-making process thus has two main aspects that are not contradictory: it may function as an existentially motivated strategy of interpretation – and this may or may not lead to ethical and moral evaluation of the canonical scriptures themselves – or the interpretation of these. Before it can be used to make meaning, however, analogical reasoning must in some way or another find a way to resolve what is perhaps the most classical hermeneutical challenge – at least regarding religious canonical scriptures in Christianity and Islam: How is one to relate to the time gap between context of the reader and the context of the text’s origin?

### ***Time and Temporality in Making Meaning***

Both *spatial* and *temporal* expressions can be seen as fundamental to human interpretation of the world. They not only appear as concrete references to time and space/place through articulation of narratives but are also used metaphorically when describing and interpreting human relations, texts, and discourses. To situate text, context, and interpreters also implies situating them in *time*.

One of the challenges when religious canonical scriptures are read and interpreted in a different time is the almost unavoidable use of anachronisms. Anachronisms, in the sense of mixing past and present with the result that notions, terms, and figures belonging to the present are applied to the past without reflecting on the time gap, represents a challenge for making meaning in relation to ancient texts. The cultural theorist Mieke Bal discusses the use of anachronisms in understanding the past (Bal 2008: 47-49) She argues that a deliberate use of anachronisms could actually entail taking the past seriously as human existence in a different time and that *not* to use anachronisms understood as contemporary concepts and ideas on historical material could also be anachronistic.

Her position seems to be that anachronisms are unavoidable. As long as we engage in the past we are doomed to produce anachronisms in one way or another, according to Bal. It would be better then, in her view, to do it consciously and deliberately so that our own paths through the interpretation process are traceable. Bal suggests the use of anachronisms as “temporal metaphor[s]” (Bal 2008: 48) to understand a phenomenon both in its “own” historical terms and in contemporary terms (Bal 2008: 48). For Bal, knowledge of the present and the past is an

important criterion for using anachronisms in a way that may become open to a substantial analysis.<sup>46</sup>

Bal's main warning is thus not against the use of anachronisms but against regarding other cultures, different in time and space from our own, as homogeneous entities. To make simplistic images of foreign or past cultures can lead us to believe that we have grasped them and thus give us the idea that we have a real chance at avoiding the temptation to confuse times. According to Bal, we should acknowledge the fluidity and accept our own position as limited with respect to our possibility of having access to other times. It is we, in our present time, who are the constructors of the past, and the past should not be "othered" and shaped into an entity that we are able to grasp in full.

Bal suggests that we "boldly endorse anachronistic terms" (Bal 2008: 48) in analyzing phenomena to achieve understanding – both of the past and of the present. She underlines, however, that one should always situate oneself when doing this and do it consciously and in an informed manner.

The participants in this study are not engaged as professional interpreters, even if many of them have the relevant education for interpreting their religious texts. The knowledge they show in their making of meaning is often more contemporary and contextual than historical and academic, even if the latter is also represented. The use of anachronisms in their making of meaning may be a way to relate morally to the texts as contemporary readers, engaging in moral enrichment or moral critique. In the analysis this is connected to how the participants position themselves as interpreters. One of the questions may be if the participants are found "guilty" of othering the texts or othering other cultures. The task would not be to frame the participants and accuse them of conveying stereotypical images of other times or other cultures but to investigate the interpretational circumstances: What is at stake for the participants when this happens? Could it be that they, when and if they use stereotypical images, are caught in a defensive position and feel othered *themselves* by the texts or by other cultures?

### ***Temporal Categorization as Discourses of Power***

If analyzed critically, the use of temporal and spatial categories in interpretation processes may yield valuable information for detecting present discourses of power. The social anthropologist Johannes Fabian made a critical study at the beginning of the 1980s on how social anthropology as a discipline has used/uses the concept of *time* (Fabian 1983). He claims that his own discipline

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<sup>46</sup> In her book *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Bal 2002) Bal discusses the relation between human memory and anachronisms in her chapter on performance and performativity. She states: "For memory is doomed to anachronism. But its fundamental anachronistic nature is not a consequence of a failure to produce 'the truth' of the elements of the past.... Memory can't transport its time frame" (Bal 2002: 190).

has rested on a tradition of constructing an oppressive distance between the anthropologist and his/her research object by placing the research objects in a different time than the researcher. Fabian claims this to be a legacy of anthropology's colonial past. He discovered what he calls a habit of denying *coevalness* between researcher and informants. Denial of the coevalness of cultures (e.g. the researchers' own culture, and the culture of the informants), which is often done only implicitly, is based on a temporal categorization that rests on a discourse of *historical evolutionism* (Fabian 1983:39).

Following Fabian's line of thought, the placing of another culture in "another time" creates a distance loaded with (negative) meaning. Even if Fabian's work is mainly about exercising self-criticism on behalf of his own academic discipline and he basically focuses his criticism on the relation researchers have constructed with their informants, some of his discussions are theoretically and methodologically relevant for the analysis of the empirical material in this project. Obviously, it is a critical reminder of how I as a researcher situate and interpret the empirical material and the participating informants. His reflections on the use of temporal categories to commit symbolical violence against the other may, however, also be useful when analyzing discourses occurring in the empirical material. To place texts, cultural or religious practices, such as views on gender relations, in a different "time zone," even though being contemporary, may be to deny a coeval relation. This, in line with Fabian would imply a construction of distance and of hierarchies of meaning.

To deny coevalness may also be to *refrain from* establishing a moral enrichment or moral critique of a religious and cultural text or practice because these acts imply *engagement*, not distance. Just as Bal requires knowledge of past and present in using anachronisms in a responsible way, the notion of coevalness requires knowledge about the involved parties, the self and the other.

Fabian claims that *created* and *acknowledged* coevalness is a condition for communication because the acknowledged shared time is necessary to create a space of *intersubjective time* in which communication is possible (Fabian 1983: 30-31). Without acknowledged coevalness, communication will not happen because one of the subjects (or both) has distanced herself from the other through temporal categorization.

In the discourse of "Islam and the West" in Europe, there is a position that denies coevalness between the West and the Muslim majority countries, based on a view that Islam is allegedly behind Christianity in its historical development. The argument rests on historical evolutionism,<sup>47</sup> claiming, for instance, that Islam has "not yet" gone through a period equivalent

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<sup>47</sup> This is based on an understanding of history where cultures, religions, and "civilizations" are bound to develop in the same way through universal laws of history, and thus take a certain amount of time to pass from one "historical stage" to a next.

to the European period of Enlightenment and represents a “medieval worldview.”<sup>48</sup> The denial of coevalness can also be found as a position in Muslim majority country discourses, resting on the view that Christianity (along with Judaism) was only a preliminary phase before the final divine revelation represented by Islam. In both cases, the positions denying coevalness may block the creation of *intersubjective time*, hindering communication *now* with its main reference to present, shared challenges.

Does Fabian’s notion of coevalness then include shared space as well as shared time? It is appropriate to ask if it is possible to split time and space in this respect. Intersubjective communication does not necessarily require the communicating subjects to be in the same place. But if one is focusing on the spatiality of interpretation, understood, for instance, as the act of interpretation situated within a specific context or as a contextual act, a mutual understanding between the interpreting subjects on what to acknowledge as the significant context could be a criterion for coevalness. This could include agreeing (perhaps after negotiation) on where to draw the spatial lines for the significant context(s) or who to include in it, collectively or individually.

Fabian’s aim of creating *intersubjective time*, which was formulated in the beginning of the 1980s, could be viewed from a Western perspective as outdated in an age of worldwide web and globalization where knowledge and human contact across the world is regarded as having increased the understanding of other cultures (and religions). From an ethical perspective, however, the possibility of making the other an *object* rather than an equal human being is hardly outdated. The examples above show that othering through temporal categorizations in discourses are not outdated. Fabian himself underlined that the intersubjective time needs to be *created*; it does not simply occur (Fabian 1983: 31). This implies self-reflexivity, not only on the part of oneself, but also on the part of what one may be seen to represent.

### ***Defining Space and Time as Strategies of Meaning Making***

In the groups’ conversations, temporal and spatial tools in the interpretations can be traced by looking for the terms “here” and “there” and “then” and “now.” “There” and “then” express distance and may be used for the possible exclusion of a text, story, or argument from a discussion. “Here” and “now,” on the other hand, may be used as terms signaling closeness,

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<sup>48</sup> Examples of this view in the Norwegian contemporary context are found in public debates, and among some journalists. See for instance Halvor Tjønn in Aftenposten 02.28.2010: “Islam. Hvorfor så mye konflikt?” (“Islam. Why So Much Conflict?”). Academic discussions on Islam, modernity and secularization sometimes echo this view more implicitly, if modernity is linked to the concept of secularization. Against this view, José Casanova argues that this is only one (mostly Christian-European) way of viewing the relation between religion, secularity and modernity, and that “theories of secularization and modernization should be open to the possibility that other religions may also play a role in institutionalizing their own particular patterns of secularization” (Casanova 1994: 234).

relevance, and presence. But the temporal and spatial organization of texts, contexts, and the participants themselves are not *necessarily* loaded with significance at all times. A closer analysis is necessary to study how the cues “then” and “there” and “here” and “now” can function as an invitation to or closing up of communication and community. Space and time may function in a combined way in evaluating texts and context on basis of expressed ideals, such as gender equality. But expressions of hope and agency about text and context in *the future* may also be expressed through temporal and spatial categories. Notions of ideal situations, expressing hope and yearning, may be spatially and temporally defined.

The canonical texts discussed in the study call for the participants’ temporal and spatial interpretative tools. They are *placed* differently in time, as well as in space through contextualization, to be close or distant and evaluated as relevant or outdated. “Old” and “ancient” may signal distance to a text but not necessarily. “New” and “relevant” could be used as equivalents but not necessarily to construct a distance to the “old” or “ancient.”

Returning to Fabian’s notion of coevalness as an expression of equality and a valid expression of intersubjectivity, an articulation of a shared “here and now” in a group could express a mutually experienced coevalness. The ability and power to be present “here and now” as a subject, and not as an object vulnerable to others’ projections, is part of the actual experience of coevalness. A mutual recognition of the participants in the group as subjects sharing a “here and now” may make it possible to construct a space for a shared agency. Going back to Rasmussen’s transcontextual position and Nehring’s performative speech (enabling a transformed articulation of one’s position), experienced coevalness may be the premise for this.

An important question linked to analyzing a process, stable or more shifting, toward an acknowledged experience of a common “here and now” is to ask what it takes for an interpreting group to reach this point, and how to recognize it. In a critical perspective, one may ask what/who may be excluded and defined as out of place, out of context, or outside the horizon. The creation of common “we’s” within the group of meaning makers can be seen as an expression of an emerging coevalness, an acknowledgement of a shared “here and now.” The common “we” might be unstable and shifting, and consist of different persons at different times.<sup>49</sup> It is, however, reasonable to ask if the meaning-making process in this study gradually creates a more inclusively stable “we” between the participants throughout the process. The canonical scriptures in this project meet in their common readers; a transcontextual space, a shared “we,” or a “third space” may occur and be more or less stable.

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<sup>49</sup> The emergence of an “interpretative we” connects the notion of coevalness with the content of Stanley Fish’s term *interpretative communities* discussed later in this chapter.



## Dialogue and Hermeneutics

Dialogue can be explored from different positions: descriptively, i.e. describing various kinds of human communication, or as a more qualified, normative concept. The discussions above on transreligious *hermeneutics* displayed critical perspectives of power and the view of the other related to human relations in transreligious hermeneutical efforts.

Both hermeneutics and dialogue refer to human relations and communication. Hermeneutics is involved in the interpretation of the personified other, not only of texts (cf. Giddens).<sup>50</sup> There is always more than one presence in a hermeneutical situation of text and reader: the reader and the text. Some descriptions of interpretation and hermeneutics are transferable to a discussion on dialogue. But where hermeneutics is primarily concerned with the struggle to interpret (which may involve dialogue), dialogue is concerned with the struggle to *communicate relationally* and may address this normatively.

When there is more than one reader present, a relation is established between the readers, as in this project. The ethical and conceptual framing and dynamics of this relation is the focus in this discussion on dialogue.

### *Dialogue in this Project*

The term dialogue will be used in this study in both a normative and a descriptive way. When I refer to organized activities of transreligious/interreligious encounters that are called dialogue or encounter, I will be using the term descriptively. When analyzing the study's empirical material, and generally in all other cases than describing activities that are called dialogue, I will use it normatively. This means that rather than calling the interpretative group a dialogue group,<sup>51</sup> I will examine the empirical material for qualified dialogical events and processes and specify further what these may express, particularly regarding how cultural and religious *differences* are related. To look for dialogical events and processes in the group, it is necessary to clarify criteria for evaluating communication as dialogue and dialogical.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Rasmussen, Nehring, and Leirvik connect hermeneutics and dialogue in different ways. The participants of Scriptural Reasoning (SR) did not call their Jewish-Muslim-Christian shared readings *dialogue*, thus hinting that in their context the term "dialogue" for cross-religious encounters is contested because its alleged connection to religious liberalism. Other criticisms of the term for cross-religious and cross-cultural encounters are that a dialogue would always be dominated by hegemonic discourses and thus be more of a monologue in real life, that the term is overused and thus emptied for any significant meaning, and finally, that dialogue may cover controversies between different religious and cultural groups and hence create false harmony.

<sup>51</sup> See the Chapter 3 for a further discussion on the naming of the group and on dialogue and qualitative research.

<sup>52</sup> A further clarification: the evaluation of the empirical material by the criterion of dialogue is not done to evaluate the participants individually or to establish an ideal the group ought to obtain. Rather, I believe that the use of the term itself needs to be discussed and evaluated, that it is useful to distinguish between different forms of dialogue, and that the empirical material in this study may be used for this purpose.

In the following I will explore dialogue as a normative term first by discussing the philosophers Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas. I will then turn to Paolo Freire's pedagogical approach. A short comment on their thinking on human equality *versus* gender equality will conclude this philosophical/pedagogical introduction. I will then suggest two different models represented in the reflections of transreligious/interreligious encounters/dialogues I refer to in the theoretical framework that differ in their evaluation and signification of differences. The models will be established via social theory using the concepts of *multiculturalism* and *cultural complexity* respectively. Finally, in this section on dialogue, I will suggest some more concrete tools for identifying dialogical processes and events in the empirical material.

### ***Buber, Levinas, Freire***

The word *dialogue*, just like the word *hermeneutics*, is of Greek origin. The Greek words *dia* and *logos* mean "through" and "word" respectively. Plato used the term for the processes of education between teacher and pupil and for discussions open to everyone as a way of seeking knowledge and self-reflection (Svare 2008: 258-270). The Jewish philosophers Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas use the term to describe an ideal relation between Self and Other. The Latin American pedagogue Paolo Freire applies it to the sphere of social action in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 2000).

Buber is concerned with relational communication, insisting that a true dialogue must take place between two subjects to establish an "I-Thou" relationship. Only through such a dialogue, according to Buber, does a human being become a *person* and not simply an individual (Buber 2002: 24). The process of dialogue requires the participants to reveal their uniqueness. Thus, playing out the differences between the partners is a sign of a genuine dialogue (Rundquist 1998: 210).

Levinas claims that the otherness of the Other must be fully respected in a dialogue. To violate the otherness of the Other is the most serious violation of the Other that can take place. For Levinas, Buber's concept of reciprocity is not sufficient as an ideal. He claims that the relation between the "I" and the "You" is asymmetrical, since the ethical claim of the "I" to respond to the "You" is the basis of all human duty as being infinitely responsible for the Other (Levinas 1999: 101-102). In a dialogue, Levinas states, "the I as I is the servant of the You" (Levinas 1998: 150). Levinas claims that the reciprocity of which Buber speaks turns into an exchange of good behavior because it presupposes that the generosity shown by the "I" will be responded to by a similar generosity toward the "I" from the "You." Levinas insists that the ethical responsibility rests solely on the "I."

Buber and Levinas are both addressing ideal human relations in general in their philosophy of dialogue. Applying their thought to the development of values for transreligious

and transcultural dialogue would mean implementing general norms of dialogue (as suggested by them) into a particular setting. It may nevertheless be useful to contextualize their reflections on a communicative situation of religious and/or cultural plurality. Buber's point that one is not to make one's dialogue partner an object of knowledge but grants her/him full subjectivity and cherishes differences in a mutual process presupposes absolute equality between partners in the dialogue. Levinas' claim of the total responsibility of the "I" means that initiatives for dialogue and the maintenance of dialogue would always be the duty of the "I," no matter what the other party's intention or reaction might be.

Speaking from a pedagogical and action-oriented point of view, Freire draws attention to two dimensions of dialogue: reflection and action. According to him, the word dialogue is an empty term without the dimension of action (Freire 2000: 87). Freire calls that the act of dialogue *naming the world*. This naming is a process of transformation where those taking part obtain significance as human beings. Freire claims that humility, faith in humankind, hope, love – and critical thinking – all are necessary qualities in a dialogue. For him, dialogue should aim at transforming reality as a social and not an individual effort. The aim of the transformation is to restore humanity to the marginalized. The transformation is not separate from the process of dialogue but takes place through the "naming of the world" that leads to re-creation. According to Freire, then, a dialogue should have a transforming aim, not only for those participating in the dialogue at an individual level but also for society at large.

Freire applies the concept of dialogue to the social and political sphere. He includes the criticism of power and a political analysis of the social context as necessary ingredients of dialogue. His reflections are highly relevant for transreligious dialogue, not least those concerning dialogues taking place in contexts where there is an overwhelming majority and small minorities of religious communities – as in most European countries. Dialogue in such contexts requires an analysis of power relations between the majority and minorities, and considerations of how both the religious majority and minorities are affected by their respective status. Freire's description of the aim, namely to work toward a re-humanization of the dehumanized, does not discriminate between different *kinds* of dehumanization. His reference is "the people," i.e. the unprivileged masses and, leaning as he does on a Marxist-materialist perspective, there is clearly an economic and political dimension in the foreground. These aspects of marginalization are relevant matters in interreligious dialogue, but Freire's main contribution is how he explains dialogue as a pedagogical process, a process where the participants should both *teach* and *learn* as *subjects*. According to Freire, words cannot be separated from praxis but must be integrated in action. Transreligious dialogue could then have the aim of naming the world *together*, across religious boundaries. Through a shared reclaiming of the power to name the world, which should be based on equal rights to do the naming among

the dialogue partners, transreligious dialogue would contribute to the world being “transformed and humanized” (Freire 2000: 89).

In practice, this may entail exploring a common, shared context, be it the global context or the contexts of the faith communities represented in the dialogue, and to examine these to disclose where and why transformation is needed. This would make it possible to work out a common, open agenda for the dialogue, aimed at exploring what this “transformation and humanization” could actually imply in a given context.

### ***The Battle over “Naming the World”***

Each of the world religions, including Christianity and Islam, has a worldview and thus their own traditions of “naming the world.” The traditions, including the canonical scriptures, represented by the believers as interpreters and performers, are constantly defining the world and also defining their own power of definition. Francois Burgat, who researches political Islam, believes that the main conflict between the West and Muslim majority countries in the contemporary world concerns the symbolic power of defining the world. He claims that Muslim majority countries feel humiliated and oppressed by an increased domination of the West that has gradually obtained global hegemony of power of definition.<sup>53</sup> This means that the dominant political and social discourse about political and social goals and what is “good” and “bad” refers increasingly to hegemonic discourses of Western ideals and political aims. For Muslims living in the West, this could mean being caught in between discourses. Conversely, the experience of Christians living in predominantly Muslim societies could be that hegemonic discourses in their societies marginalize them. Christian tradition and the West are not concurrent entities. In a situated dialogue, sharing the power of definition may begin with a conscious analytical reflection on power structures influencing the encounter in order to obtain space for creating intersubjective communication.

The act of “naming the world” in Christianity and Islam may be seen to include an act of “gendering the world” in the two traditions. In recent decades in both Christianity and Islam feminist criticism has been raised regarding the traditional definitions of gender and the constructions of gender models. One may ask if a representation of *two* religious traditions deeply shaped by patriarchy in a transreligious dialogue (as would be the case in a Christian-Muslim dialogue) would double or confirm further the effect of the traditional “gendering of the world” in the religious traditions respectively through a cumulated power of definition supported by two religious traditions instead of one. If this is plausible, what would happen to the content

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<sup>53</sup> In his books *Face to face with political Islam* (Burgat 2003) and *Islamism in the shadow of al-Qaeda* (Burgat 2008), Burgat discusses the impact of this symbolic struggle in some Muslim majority countries and how the representation of Islam in the West influence on internal struggles about the representation of Islam among Muslims.

of Freire's hope for transformation and humanization of the world concerning gender models and gender roles? The aim of Christian and Muslim feminist theology is to transform the traditions to be less oppressive against women, and their analyses may be used to *gender* Freire's aim for dialogue as "transforming and humanizing the world." In the name of human equality, women should take part in the act of naming and transforming the world.

The dialogue philosophies of Buber and Levinas and Freire's dialogue pedagogy all insist on values that must be part of a communicative relationship called dialogue. These include criticism of power structures that marginalize humans (Freire), respect and care for personal integrity (Levinas), and what may be called relational justice and equality (all three). None of them, however, explicitly use a gender perspective or reflect on what these values might mean or entail if they were applied to gendermixed human relationships or gender mixed societies. This could be understood as self evident, when interpreting their contributions in a different time. However, considering that experience tells us that when questions of gender and power structures are not addressed openly and are thus not dealt with in an explicit way, this becomes a problem of *gender justice*. Does Freire's transformation include a transformation of gendered power structures, so that women may take part in the naming of the world at the same level as men? Freire may easily be interpreted as supporting such a position, but he does not explicitly articulate this. The question is if these values posed by Freire, Levinas, and Buber may lack credibility if they do not explicitly include a gender perspective. If dialogue means the implementation of equality and justice, must this not include equality between women and men, and gender justice?

In an attempt to grasp the meaning of dialogue, I have elsewhere suggested a definition of the term, qualifying dialogue to be:

... a mutual encounter between equal parties, without hidden agendas, not aiming at transforming the other but at taking part in a mutual transformation that may happen through the encounter.  
(Grung 2005: 88)

This is a normative definition, and it qualifies the process of *transformation*. It speaks of dialogue in ideal terms, as a created space that should be free from power imbalances and where the whole process should be totally transparent for all participants. In the following I will suggest two models of transreligious dialogues that provide views for qualifying transformation (although differently) but also situate the dialogue closer to organizational and theological realities.

## Two Models of Transreligious/Interreligious Dialogue<sup>54</sup>

The various initiatives of transreligious/interreligious dialogue on the global scene are situated in different contexts. They have emerged out of various contextual needs, and cover a large scale of diverse content and activities. There may be only one common feature between them: they include persons from at least two different religious traditions. Without qualifying the act and aim of transreligious encounter/dialogue, it is clear that *religious difference*<sup>55</sup> is anticipated, expected, and needed in order to call an activity interreligious dialogue, interfaith dialogue, or – the term preferred in this study – transreligious dialogue. It follows that the differences between the participants with regard to religious identity, belonging, and background are most commonly indicated to be the *most important differences*. Cultural, social, ethnic, and gender differences are often not signified in the same way. This does not mean that they do not exist in transreligious dialogues. Nor does it imply that these other differences are not crucial in meaning-making processes and the construction of agencies within transreligious dialogues. Some claim that these other differences actually play a larger role than religious identity and representation in the transreligious dialogues.<sup>56</sup>

The growing cultural and religious plurality in Western societies has produced social theories suggesting how society should be organized to facilitate the different needs emerging out of a more heterogeneous population. There are two main positions to start from in reflecting on this heterogeneity, and they differ in their views of what might keep a society sufficiently together across differences. One position views community as being established through the *shared values* of the individuals, and thus society should provide them possibilities for being organized in various groups with others thought to share the same values, and society as a whole is preserved as a patchwork consisting of different groups. The other position views *communication* to be the crucial activity for sustaining and creating a community. To put it very briefly: The former has been labeled the multicultural view, the latter could be called the “travelling concept”<sup>57</sup> of *cultural complexity* (Eriksen 2009).

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<sup>54</sup> I use the term transreligious in accordance with the conclusions of my discussion on pages 28-30. The inclusion of the term “interreligious” is because it is still the most common term. The term “dialogue” is used, although some of the participants of Scriptural Reasoning do not wish to be associated with the term “dialogue” on an organizational level because they consider it to be a term co-opted by liberals.

<sup>55</sup> The use of the terms “difference” and “diversity” are debated: “difference” seems to be used to signify awareness of power structures and the need to acknowledge these. “Difference” thus expresses dissimilarity in a more significant way than “diversity” does, which may have more of a connotation of harmony.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Nehring, who claims that the cultural representation is the first identification people make (Nehring 2011 (forthcoming)), and the Christian feminist theologian Jeannine Hill Fletcher who claims that some feminists want feminism as their first identification (Fletcher in Egnell 2009).

<sup>57</sup> To frame a concept as a “travelling concept” is to acknowledge a certain degree of fluidity in its use and content. Mieke Bal states that concepts “on the road” travel between disciplines, historical periods, and different social and geographical areas, making them “travelling concepts.” Bal acknowledges that this may create a situation of

To emphasize *difference* as a starting point may be a useful place to begin when reflecting on transreligious dialogue. An organized dialogue implies communication that may potentially create partnership, community, and friendship. This requires reflection on the significance of difference and how it should be handled in practice and theorized.<sup>58</sup>

### ***Two Proposed Models: Difference as Constitutive, Difference as Challenge***

In recent decades, what is usually called *interreligious dialogue*, including Muslim-Christian dialogue, has become a social field of its own in Bourdieu's sense of the term "field": a defined area where there are different positions negotiating and struggling over the power of definition, with, for instance, regard to naming and qualifying the dialogue itself (Bourdieu 1975: 19).

I propose two models of transreligious dialogue, diverging with respect to the role of religious differences and how they relate to these differences in the encounters. The possible implications of this for the *aims* of dialogues and the inclusion of gender perspectives and women's issues will be discussed after the presentation. It is, however, important to emphasize that, like all models, they simplify and do not do justice to the diversity existing "on the ground." The boundaries between the two models are porous rather than watertight.

### ***Difference as Constitutive***

The first model is represented by the practitioners of Scriptural Reasoning (SR), and could be placed under the label "Difference as constitutive of the dialogue." SR is a practice for interreligious encounter, focusing on reading canonical scriptures in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Religions are considered to be stable entities, not primarily in the sense that they are not dynamic or capable of adjusting but in the sense that the boundaries between them are stable and should be safeguarded in the encounter. Interaction between the participants may lead to friendship and strong personal relationships across religious boundaries. This is strongly encouraged, but the *place* of the encounter rests on constant stable relations between the traditions represented. This means that the method/practice of SR does not encourage entering into a profoundly challenging position to the authority of the scriptures or self-criticism in the traditions connected to the scriptures. The shared aim is rather to strengthen the visibility of the

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"muddled multidisciplinary" (Bal 2002: 25), but she also states that the traveling make the concepts flexible and useful when situated in new surroundings and can create a "productive interdisciplinarity" (ibid.). The latter requires an open and transparent use of the concepts, a constant redefining and articulation of how a concept is used in specific situations.

<sup>58</sup> In the empirical material, the challenge that arises through the presence of difference is handled and reflected on in various ways, and both models can be referred to in analyzing the group's process in this study, but at different times.

religions in societies regarded as secular and to defend the religious traditions represented in SR as representing crucial resources for society.

This implies that the respect for the religious other is (ideally) safeguarded, and the religious other is regarded a representative of a whole tradition. The establishment of SR is clearly defined as a response to contextual needs, basically emerging from outside of the religious traditions themselves. These are needs the religions can meet from a SR perspective. SR conveys a positive view of religions and corresponding skepticism toward secularity. Religious practitioners in the so-called Abrahamic religions need to learn to know one another and one another's traditions through their canonical scriptures, to find the resources to "repair the world" (Kepnes 2006: 34). In this model religious differences seem to be signified as the only significant difference, and the differences between the religions are constitutive for the practice because what SR participants call liberal attempts to blur these differences would mean forcing participants to compromise their religious beliefs. The religious tradition as *collective* is the focus here, rather than individual believers.

The social theories behind *multiculturalism* and the way they view cultural differences may help in evaluating this method. Multiculturalism is marked by its organization of cultural differences per *group* to secure that society grants people of different cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds rights based on their group membership.<sup>59</sup> The aim is to provide space for and legitimization of difference, within the same nation-state or social community. In its "strong" form (Roald 2009: 32-33) as a political and social system for governing cultural and religious differences, multiculturalism focuses on group rights and group identity, and has been criticized for neglecting the individual rights of people within the groups. Multiculturalism has also been accused of creating and legitimizing parallel societies within a society and to providing a static view of cultures as unchangeable.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> The debate on multiculturalism is marked by diversity. Roald states one may speak of "strong" or a "weak" multiculturalism, with the latter trying to balance group and individual rights (Roald 2009: 32-33). What I mainly have in mind when suggesting this model of dialogue is a "strong" version of multiculturalism with a normative aim. Roald claims that this "strong" multiculturalism has generally been less implemented in practical politics than the "weak" (Roald 2009: 32).

<sup>60</sup> The definition of "culture" is central in this debate: Is culture a description of past and existing traditions, a fixed frame of reference for the individuals or is it something that happens through a constant flux of new references, ideas, and interpretations of the world where the past and the existing reference frames together create a dynamic movement in how both groups and individuals identify themselves? The Norwegian social anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen suggests culture to be "something that happens, not something that merely exists; it unfolds through social processes and therefore also inherently changes" (Eriksen 2009: 13). In one of his earlier works, *Kulturelle veikryss – Essays om kreolisering* (Cultural Crossroads – Essays on Creolization) (Eriksen 1994), Eriksen argues that there are two basic ways to view the constitution of culture. The first is to view it like a coral reef where the culture is based on continuity with the past and the culture is built up gradually, layer by layer, where only the coral on the surface is alive – but that rests on the traditions located in the specific space of the coral reef, clearly separated from other coral reefs (cultures). One may also view culture as a complex electrical field, with no defined spatial boundaries and the constitution of the field is based on the electrical voltage – a metaphor for human activity



I suggest that the practice of SR follows a multiculturalist-like pattern of theorizing about difference through viewing religious difference as the only significant difference and at the same time emphasizing the stability of the religious traditions. The collective view of the representation of religious traditions and the declared particularism in the interpretational processes of the encounter is consistent with a multicultural view. The constructed opposition between the religious and the secular in SR may be seen as a transposition of the view of religious differences when constructing a dichotomy between monotheistic religiosity in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam on the one hand and secularism in society as a whole on the other.

Given SR's closeness to the principles of multiculturalism, a similar criticism directed toward multiculturalism may also be made of SR: it might strengthen and legitimize religious boundaries as significant and overlook intrareligious differences and dynamics, through this confirming a certain pattern of parallel societies along religious lines as well as between the religious and the secular. A result may be that the space of individuals for acting within the traditions could be limited, with religion and secularism being seen as contradictory. Lastly, there is the problem of representation: Does the participant represent her-/himself or an entire tradition?

### ***Difference as Challenge***

I propose calling the second model of transreligious dialogue represented by Rasmussen and Leirvik "difference as challenge." Although conceptualizing transreligious dialogue in different ways, they share a view of interreligious dialogue as entailing a possibility for *change*. They do not see religion as a stable entity. Both claim that religion needs to be interpreted and reinterpreted by its followers and believers, and that the space of transreligious dialogue is necessary for doing this in a pluralistic cultural and religious context. Rasmussen highlights the need for common Muslim-Christian action based on dialogue, emerging from the transcontextual place ideally created in a dialogue.<sup>61</sup> The aim of the dialogue is thus not to safeguard the

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as human thought, verbalization, and action (Eriksen 1994: 23). The coral reef metaphor implies that culture is based on a group of people sharing something that is regarded as stable or at least semi-stable, like values and traditions. The metaphor of an electrical field implies that culture is about making communication between humans possible. The boundaries between different cultures do not constitute the cultures themselves, nor does a metaphysical existence of the culture. Culture is fluid and linked to human activity in a way that makes it difficult to talk about cultures as distinctively different and separate (ibid.). In this understanding, culture is more detached from its spatial dimension. Eriksen links multiculturalism to the coral reef understanding of culture and makes a connection between creolization and the electrical field metaphor.

<sup>60</sup> See Rasmussen's model described above in this chapter, p. 26-27.

boundaries of Christianity and Islam or to emphasize the difference between the religious and the secular but to create a new space by what is shared (= communicated) in the space of dialogue.

Leirvik argues that transreligious dialogues need to be critical of power, and that both the Islamic and the Christian tradition have elements of what he calls “prophetic criticism” toward injustice and power abuse. He suggests that participants in Christian-Muslim dialogue distinguish between their cultural, religious, and political identity in order to identify the different challenges dialogue should confront (Leirvik 2001: 186).

Leirvik is concerned with the respect for the religious other in a dialogue, but his argument is not directed primarily at protecting the religious traditions as other traditions but at protecting the *individual* participants in the dialogues from being violated in their otherness. He does warn against downplaying or trying to diminish differences between the religious traditions, but his main concern appears to be the integrity of the individuals (Leirvik 2001: 89-91). Possibly inspired by Levinas, he claims that violation of the integrity of the other as the radical Other, of trying to shape the other in one’s own image, is the worst possible violation of the other’s integrity (Leirvik 2001: 90). On this basis, he dismisses any attempt to create a harmonized, global theological synthesis of the religious traditions (Leirvik 2001: 91).

Is it only the *religious* aspect of the religious other that should be treated with such respect, or should attempts to resolve cultural, social and gender differences be given a similar warning against reducing otherness into sameness? Leirvik emphasizes that transreligious dialogues sometimes need to address problems within the faith communities and their practices and confront each other in respectful ways, not only on theological and scriptural issues but also with respect to ethical questions and actual practices within the faith communities. To view culture and religion as static – or stable – entities is, according to Leirvik, to underestimate the actual potential for change within both cultures and religions (Leirvik 2006: 23). He constructs an opposition between dialogue and identity politics and claims that both cultural and religious identity politics construct conflicts based on an essentialist view of both cultures and religions, conflicts that may be prevented with insights from cross-cultural, cross-religious dialogical encounters (Leirvik 2006: 32).

This view on differences and dialogue indicates that Leirvik views religion and culture as more fluid than the multiculturalist approach does. He views fluidity not only descriptively but normatively as well.

Rasmussen and Leirvik’s view on transreligious dialogue is more in line with the approach to difference in the *cultural complexity* view. The “cultural complexity” view of culture allows individuals and society to challenge the multiculturalist position at different levels. This is so, first, in the concept of culture, which is suggested to be fluid and dynamic rather than stable or static. Second, this is apparent in stating that cultural boundaries can be strengthened and

reproduced through multiculturalist politics to facilitate cultural and religious differences because differences have been signified and politicized (Eriksen 2009: 11). *Complexity* in “cultural complexity,” according to Eriksen, refers to a *relational* complexity consisting of infinite mutual relationships in a modern society, acknowledging that humanity and humans cannot be reduced to “products” of social, cultural (religious), or genetic circumstances. In addition, “complexity” means that a researcher admits her limitations in representing or grasping an exhaustive description of reality (Eriksen 2009: 18). The “cultural complexity” view is thus not a coherent position of its own alongside a more established multiculturalist discourse, but it does raise important criticisms about the very basis of multiculturalism.

To view religious traditions as *fluid* poses some challenges. One of them is to not violate the other in his/her otherness through an apprehension of the other’s tradition as fluid from the outside, and in a way the believer her-/himself does not recognize. The question of representation is also a challenge for this model but from the opposite angle: if a representative of a religious tradition represents only her-/himself, what would be the legitimization of the individual as representative if not of the religious tradition as community?<sup>62</sup> And what impact may the encounter/dialogue have in a religious community if the representatives do not follow the tradition as it understands and practices its faith?

### ***The Two Models: Possible Consequences***

Transreligious dialogue is always situated in a particular context, and positioned in a dynamic relation where it may both influence the context and be influenced by it. The political organization and contemporary views of cultural and religious differences in a society may influence how difference is viewed and facilitated in transreligious dialogue.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Leirvik argues that if a representation aims to be of common *interest*, it needs to be in touch with what he calls “mainstream currents” within the Christian and the Muslim tradition *and* relate to the context (Leirvik 2006: 117). If this is not done, he claims that there is a danger of misrepresentation or of privileging some representations of Islam or Christianity (or representations of the Christian and Islamic interpretative traditions) at the expense of others, without reflecting on doing so. But Leirvik adds a claim of self-reflexivity, as well: in order to make an attempt at presenting a view of Muslim-Christian relations in general one has to position (or at least locate) oneself in the total landscape to clarify one’s own position, to make one’s aim and moves transparent.

<sup>63</sup> How do social theorists and social scientists place transreligious encounters/dialogue in their models of facilitating and governing religious and cultural difference? There is not much written interaction between the two fields, and less by the social scientist, but in an analysis of the press discourse on the case of the Muhammad cartoons, what is called “dialogical multiculturalism” includes a “religiously inclined version” (Kunelius and Eide 2007: 18). Dialogical multiculturalism is set up as a category alongside “liberal fundamentalism,” “liberal pragmatism,” and “religious or ethnic fundamentalism” to map the global discourse linked to the cartoon controversy. Dialogical multiculturalism is marked by its highlighting of dialogue as the highest priority, with possibilities of mutual education and self-reflexivity, and the dismissal of universalism (understood as a hegemonic discourse) and ethnocentric epistemological privilege. The religious version is to include a respect for what is sacred to the religious other.

The first model, “difference as constitutive,” where the main focus is to protect the integrity of religious traditions and accentuate the respective religions’ positive contribution to society, may in many ways be the mainstream representation of transreligious dialogue. The dialogical value of respect for the other is operationalized through the aim of establishing relations based on knowledge and community across boundaries, not on agreement. Defense of one’s own religious tradition and protection of its boundaries would be expected, and accepted.

The agency for change in this model is to work actively for Western societies to be more open to the message of the religions and to reduce discrimination against the religious other (Hardy 2006: 186). Internal critique of the religious traditions and the canonical scriptures, as well as shared critique where representatives of the religions criticize each other, is not accentuated. This means that marginalized groups within the religions risk being silenced, and that the encounter/dialogue may take place at their expense. The encounter itself does not aim at becoming a “third space” but rather at establishing a pluralistic religious workshop, where no new sign system emerges from the encounter since one relates primarily to the established sign systems (cultural or religious). For feminist theologians or for religious believers with an agency of change within the religious traditions, this model does not provide sufficient flexibility.

The second model, “differences as challenge,” balances mutual respect and agency for transformation. It could be criticized for focusing too much on the individual participant, at the risk of losing the connection to the mainstream discourses in the religious traditions. However, this model provides tools for accepting diversity within the traditions and for self-reflection that provides space for both respect and transformation, when functioning at its best. Freire’s slogan for dialogue as “transforming and re-humanizing the world” fits this model well. The perspective of fluidity regarding culture and religion is also applied to the relation between the secular and the religious, which is not static but intertwined and fluid.

Agreement is not an aim for this type of dialogue either. The establishment of a “third space” requires that an unstable, plural place emerge from the encounter. But there is an expectation of mutual transformation and possibly of a shared agency coming out of the encounter (*diapaxis*, cf. Rasmussen) and moving beyond a reestablishment of religion as a contributor to secular societies. One may, for instance, imagine an encounter of this kind to establish a common criticism directed not only at society but at the religious traditions themselves, including the canonical scriptures. The second model is therefore to be preferred by religious feminists opting for change in the religious traditions themselves.

### ***Models in Conflict – Or Mutual Dependence?***

One may say that there can never be too many spaces available for religious encounter or too many models for how these encounters should happen. I believe this is true. At the same time, critical investigation is necessary to provide tools of self-reflection.

The two models can be seen as complementary: both are needed, and together they provide spaces for religious people having various positions and aims. Representatives of the two models may challenge and criticize each other and thus develop discourses of criticism that are useful for all involved.

But the models may also be seen as contradictory. If the hegemonic discourses within the religious traditions prefer the first model to the second, there may gradually be less space for encounters aiming at transformation and self-criticism, which is bad news for feminists and other marginalized groups within the traditions.

Another possibility is that the encounters shaped by model two gradually change the hegemonic discourses in the religious traditions, together with intrareligious discourses of change. This would be a long-term process and should probably not be relied on as the only way forward for those aiming at transformation of the religious traditions.

### ***Facilitating Difference and Encounter/Dialogue in the Group***

The part of the analysis of the empirical material that focuses on the *relational* side of the interpretative process concentrates on possible instabilities and changes in the modes of interaction. By this I mean changes in interpretative positions toward texts and contexts, toward the other representatives in the group and toward oneself, as it is traceable in the transcriptions. But I also include the analysis of how the meaning making of the texts influences this positioning, asking if the Hagar/Hajar narratives create a different way of communicating than the prescriptive texts of 1 Timothy 2:8-15 and Sura 4:34.<sup>64</sup> One of the questions will be if the group's process can be related to one of the two models of dialogue or if it relates to both but at different stages in the group process. Useful concepts for exploring the material in this way would be to look for the appearance and disappearance of *interpretative communities*, the occurrence of statements formed as *testimonies*, and how *differences* are addressed and dealt with.

### ***Interpretative Communities***

The expression "meaning making" in this study is an attempt to coin a term for a type of interpretation process that is comprehensive in character, including the interpretation of texts,

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<sup>64</sup> For a further presentation of the texts and the selection of the texts see Chapter 3.

contexts, and self and other. The term refers both to an act of understanding and to the creation of a platform for acting through words (performative speech, diapraxis). Meaning making in this project is a collective act, and it is *relational*.

According to Stanley Fish,<sup>65</sup> *interpretative communities* arise when it becomes apparent that people share *interpretative strategies* (Fish 1980:171). Fish emphasizes that he does not mean sharing interpretative strategies of reading texts in a conventional way. He places the existence of the interpretative strategy prior to the reading, focusing on the way readers shape the text. In more traditional hermeneutics this may be called pre-reading or prejudice.

For Fish, the interpretative communities are not stable entities. They shift as people and texts vary and change. But the *existence* of interpretative communities is a stable fact to him – not because they are naturally present or universal but because they are “constitutive of being human” (Fish 1980:172). Fish claims that one cannot really systematize the interpretative communities in any fixed way. Rather, in his view, their existence is demonstrated by a mutual recognition of fellowship among the “members” as a shared pre-understanding (Fish 1980:173). An interpretative community thus, according to Fish, already exists before it is *confirmed* in the common encounter with the text, the speaker, or whatever is the object of interpretation. It becomes visible through the mutual recognition.

The use of the notion of *interpretative communities* in the analysis of the empirical material in this study needs some further reflection and adaptation. Whereas Fish limits the appearance of the interpretative community to its prior understanding, I will look for understanding acquired in the group’s process. I will include *acquired understanding* as a term. This means that I regard pre-understanding as fluid and in constant flux. This fits well with Fish’s understanding of interpretative communities as shifting and unstable, but the perspective that will be added in this study is the process of establishing potentially *new* pre-understandings among the participants.

Linking up with the earlier discussions on hermeneutics and dialogue, I suggest that one sign of an interpretative community may be the appearance of a common “we” openly articulated or more indirectly expressed. Fabian says that a common “we” requires coevalness, the creation of an intersubjective time. He seems thus to focus more on the agency of the individual than Fish’s more descriptive approach to community. Creating intersubjective time does not require agreement but mutual recognition. The creation of a common “we” related to dialogue suggests that differences and disagreements do not prevent participants in dialogues from creating a common “we”.

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<sup>65</sup> Fish is an advocate of *reader response criticism*. This school emphasizes the readers and the interpretation by the readers as the decisive part of textual interpretation. The author and the textual expression itself are thus shifted to the background.

Through a close analysis of the transcriptions presented in the analysis, it will be possible to identify the “we’s” that occur: What makes them appear and disappear? Do they occur more often toward the end than in the beginning? And are they patterned across religious and/or cultural lines, or do the occurring “we’s” cross back and forth over these lines? The answer to the two latter questions may indicate which of the two models of transreligious dialogue the group mostly relates to at that moment.

### ***Testimony***

Paul Ricoeur reflects on testimony as part of biblical hermeneutics in his book *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (Ricoeur 1980). Claiming that investigating testimonies is required for biblical interpretation (Ricoeur 1980: 144), he states that they have a *narrative* and a *confessional* pole. The narrative is the “facts” and experience, while the confession is the process of making meaning of this (Ricoeur 1980: 135). Testimony is the integrated expression of these two poles. Ricoeur sees the interpretation of a testimony as a violation of the integrity between the two poles, and suggests that a testimony should be interpreted within its “internal dialectic” (Ricoeur 1980: 144-145). This requirement obviously represents a challenge in a transreligious dialogue. It would require an intimate knowledge of the other religion represented to be able to interpret testimonies in this way. Testimonies are expressions conveying self-reflection as well as religious belief, and they require an audience, or at least a listener. Testimonies may represent transformative speech addressing the “here and now” in a transreligious context; giving a religious testimony may open the way up for others to do the same. Although usually a form of expression shaped by religious particularity, a testimony could thus create a space for others to express themselves in the same way.

The participants in this study use religious testimonies in their making of meaning. One question would be how this impacts on the relational interpretation: Does it create closeness or distance between the participants when religious particularity is spelled out in this way? Is it the personal narrative aspect of the testimony that communicates the strongest, or is it the confessional message?

### ***Managing Differences and Power Discourses***

The discussion about the two models of transreligious dialogue views differences differently. One question in the analysis would be how the participants make meaning of and relate to the cultural and religious differences in the group. There are other differences present as well: personal opinions, educational background, age, and social status. Is the significance given to the religious and cultural differences, for example, stable throughout the process, or does it shift?

The questions of how to signify difference and how people use and relate to differences in power discourses are intertwined. Differences may be regarded a threat within a hegemonic discourse, requiring everyone to submit (aiming at the assimilation of “the different”), but in more open discourses and in dialogue differences are (ideally) acknowledged to be a part of the communication.<sup>67</sup> The Norwegian social scientist and feminist Randi Gressgård claims that a dialogical approach toward differences might open up new, creative ways of looking at oneself and the other, without fixing others and without getting stuck in one’s own frame of reference. To her, a dialogical view implies an acknowledgment of heterogeneity and difference as a “productive force and not as aberrations from a given norm” (Gressgård 2005: 170-171).<sup>68</sup>

The participants comment directly on the issue of differences, saying that differences in views are anticipated and wanted in whole project and, therefore, should not be seen as a problem (Inger23-25, p. 222). At other times, the participants struggle with how to handle differences, a struggle that manifests itself mainly in the forms of communication that are sometimes marked by confronting and defending strategies. How familiar the respective participants are with being part of pluralistic interpreting communities may be reflected in how they relate to differences in the group. The challenge in the analysis will be how the significances of difference impact on the meaning making of text, context, and the group’s self-understanding. Can difference, for instance, be seen as a possibility for obtaining new knowledge and new understandings? Does difference automatically produce distance? Or do acknowledged differences also contribute to creating a “third space,” a conversation marked by transparency, equality, and possible *diapaxis* growing out of a transcontextual space?

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<sup>67</sup> Randi Gressgård elaborates on the dilemma of difference in relation to multiculturalism in her book *Fra identitet til forskjell* (From Identity to Difference) (Gressgård 2005). Her message is the need to recognize human difference in a way that does not fix and “other” those defined as “different.” The problem in defining someone as “different” is, according to Gressgård, that this defining usually implies a hierarchical social organization where the majority (those who are not “different”) defines the others (the minorities or the “different”). This will, to follow Gressgård’s argument, lead in the long run to the assimilation of the “different” into the “non-different” (the assimilation of minorities into the majority) and result in a lack of necessary self-reflexive moves among the majority (the “non-different”). Gressgård denies essentialist ideas about group identities and points out that essentialism suppresses differences within these groups (Gressgård 2005: 178). She writes about dialogue as a tool for avoiding fixed stereotypes of groups (as well as of individuals), since a dialogical openness toward the other is the only possibility for having access to one’s own potential to be self-reflexive on “evaluating standards” (Gressgård 2005: 169). Gressgård refers to dialogue as a space where one should be prepared for shocks and surprises and includes perspectives of change (Gressgård 2005: 170). Leaning on Christopher Falzon’s interpretation of Michael Foucault, Gressgård suggests that “dominance is the radical negation of dialogue” (Gressgård 2005: 170).

<sup>68</sup> My translation.



## **Feminisms, Muslim-Christian Dialogue, and Hermeneutics**

This section will discuss the role of feminisms as challenging the terms “hermeneutics” and “dialogue” in this study in a more focused way than my earlier more occasional use of a feminist perspectives have done.

The term “feminism” is contested,<sup>69</sup> and by expressing it in the plural I indicate that in this study “feminism” is defined as a multitude of normative criticisms and agencies aimed at changing women’s statuses and roles so that they are equal to men. I only discuss this in the following to the extent that is relevant for this study. Following a broad definition of feminism, one can state the task of feminisms to be detecting and analyzing gender injustices and assuming the role of agency for change in line with *gender justice*. This elaboration (not definition) on my use of the term “feminisms” can include both a model of total equality between women and men and a complementary model where the genders have different roles, although viewed as being of equal value and importance. The notion of *justice* is the key word, having both an objective and a subjective element.

In this section I will discuss the relation between Muslim-Christian dialogue and feminism and situate this relation in the Norwegian dialogue scene. I shall present various ways feminist interpreters in the Christian and the Islamic traditions give a brief review of some of the particular *hermeneutical* challenges coming from Christian and Islamic feminist theology. The views and interpreters presented are examples only, selected because of their relevance for this study.

Lastly, I will introduce some of the tools for the later analysis: the search for a gendered hermeneutics in the group, how one should look for the construction of gender and the implications for making meaning, and how possible shared agencies among the participants to work together for a change in discriminatory practices against women can be identified.

### ***Feminism and Muslim-Christian Dialogue***

The English Christian feminist theologian Ursula King, who is one of the pioneers in viewing interreligious relations in a feminist perspective, has declared *feminism* to be the missing

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<sup>69</sup> Often regarded as a Western concept connected to European and North American women’s movements, I believe that the strong connotation between “Western” and “feminism” is about to change because the more inclusive “third-wave feminism” has been influential the last decades (Cudd and Andreassen 2005: 7). The acknowledgment of diverse goals for feminists and the move toward the intersectional analysis of powered structures, where not only gender, but ethnicity, class, sexuality, etc. are seen as interacting with gender in structures of oppression and power, has been decisive in making feminisms provide available tools *beyond* the classical (Western) feminist struggle for gender equality at all levels through signifying gender difference as the only significant difference.

perspective in interreligious dialogues (King 1998). She states that organized interreligious dialogues lack both women participants (or includes very few women) and a general, or even limited, gender perspective. The Swedish feminist theologian Helene Egnell states that feminism, as an ethical and ideological program for changing patriarchal structures, is generally not in view in interreligious encounters, except for specific women-initiated dialogues that take place within influential organizational structures, such as the World Council of Churches, but have limited effect in creating new ways of reflecting on gender within the religious traditions and within the field of interreligious dialogue (Egnell 2006: 325). Egnell addresses Muslim-Christian encounters and Islamic sources as fields where only a few Christian feminist theologians are active (unlike e.g. Buddhism and Buddhist-Christian encounters). Egnell asks if this is a sign of Islamophobia in Western feminist thought (Egnell 2006: 329). She further claims that Muslim-Christian dialogue and the relation to Islam will be the next “test case” for feminist theology, meaning Christian feminist theology.

In the section on dialogue, I discussed some issues related to feminist agencies for change through transreligious encounters related to the two suggested models. I found that the first model evaluates and relates to religious differences in a multiculturalist manner, trying to protect the boundaries between the religions and the self-referring hermeneutical traditions. Multiculturalism has been criticized for neglecting individual rights – and women’s rights in particular. Susan Okin’s criticism of multiculturalism and her question: “Is multiculturalism bad for women?” (Cohen et al. 1999) could be rephrased into the question: Is transreligious dialogue bad for women?<sup>70</sup>

I have argued elsewhere that awareness of gender models and gender roles in Muslim-Christian dialogue initiatives is crucial to the contextual relevance of these dialogues in a European and Scandinavian context (Grung 2008). Because people in the Scandinavian contexts are generally concerned with gender equality as an issue of justice, religions and the interreligious initiatives would be expected to comply with ideals of gender equality. The main areas of conflict in the public sphere between Muslim minorities and the majority often seem to be related to gender issues and women’s rights. In this respect, the multiculturalist dilemma of how to balance group-based rights and individual rights is often intertwined with a widespread stereotypical image of Islam as a monolithic, static, and oppressive religion for women. Islam and Muslims are targeted mainly with reference to their religious identity in this matter; culture and social position are discussed only to a lesser degree. The practices regarding gender roles

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<sup>70</sup> Okin’s concern is that multiculturalism grants specific culturally identified groups the right to continue oppressing women based on the political legitimization of oppressive cultural practices. Okin, however, has been criticized for a lack of self-criticism on behalf of majority populations and their possible questionable practices in gender issues and for aiming at the assimilation of the cultural Other (Jacobsen and Gressgård 2002: 198-202).

and women's rights within Christian churches, on the other hand, are not discussed to a great extent.<sup>71</sup>

My suggestion in my 2008 article for Muslim-Christian dialogues in Norway was to include women in dialogue activities at all levels and to include a critical gender perspective in the substance of the dialogues. The latter would mean addressing particular themes concerning women in the religious communities and applying a gender-sensitive openness and a gender perspective when discussing *all* themes and issues in the dialogues (Grung 2008: 297). The background for these recommendations is twofold: first, to use the Muslim-Christian dialogues/encounters to counteract hegemonic stereotypical images of Islam as only negative for women (with links to colonial, neoconservative and orientalist thinking about Islam and the East) *and* stereotypical images of Christianity as spotless in this respect. In a dialogue there is a possibility for a mutual learning about the religious traditions in their diversity, as represented by believers (women and men) who can elaborate on historical and contemporary religious practices from within. Second, my recommendations aim at enabling dialogues to address important issues to improve the current situation of both Muslim and Christian women within these traditions and to ensure that the dialogues contribute to gender sensitivity as part of self-reflection within the field of transreligious dialogue as such.

In this way, Muslim-Christian dialogue may avoid a view of religions as static entities and prevent dialogue from becoming a space where patriarchal patterns and structures are confirmed. The problem in practice seems to be first and foremost connected to the power of definition: Who decides about the participants, the themes, the method of meeting, and the "general perspectives"? Who decides how religious differences should be facilitated and addressed?

The challenges can be articulated as follows: How can one enter into a space of dialogue where religious identity is the significant, expected, and respected difference between the participants and at the same time prevent dialogue from reproducing a view of religion as static and unchangeable? How can a neglect of differences between the participants other than the religious one, such as culture, gender, and social background, be avoided in a Muslim-Christian dialogue? To neglect or underplay these other differences might lead to a culture-blind, gender-blind, and socially blind dialogue, and my concern is the possible production and confirmation of gender blindness in transreligious dialogues in particular.

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<sup>71</sup> On this issue, see Gry Friis Eriksen's report on the implementation of gender equality in the Church of Norway where she claims that gender equality generally seem to be taken for granted in the Church, with no need for a further discussion about "facts on the ground" (Eriksen 2004).

### *Feminist Critique from Within*

The participants in this study engage in feminist critique of Christian and Islamic interpretative practices of the Bible, the Koran and *hadith*. The earlier presentation of Christian and Islamic interpretative discourses thus needs to be completed with a more pointed feminist approach – in order to frame and give perspective to the participants' meaning making.

The historian of religions Anne Sofie Roald compares Christian and Islamic feminist theology to look for similarities and differences in their hermeneutical strategies in reading the Bible, the Koran, and the *sunna*. She divides Christian and Muslim feminist reinterpreters into two main groups: *reformists* and *reconstructors*, and, basing herself on the New Testament scholar Carolyn Osiek, she suggests five hermeneutical approaches: *loyalist*, *revisionist*, *sublimationist*, *rejectionist*, and *liberationist* (Roald 1998: 19; Osiek 1985: 99-103).

The reformists aim at reforming their tradition, and Roald divides them further into Osiek's suggested approaches of *loyalist*, *revisionist*, and *sublimationist*. Loyalists accept canonical scripture as divine revelation and reject the need for feminist agency. Revisionists claim that the theological content of the scriptures does not pose a problem for feminists. It is the social and historical structures that need to change. Sublimationists interpret the texts allegorically (Roald 1998: 19).

Reconstructors, whom Roald divides into *rejectionists* or *liberationists*, Osiek's two final approaches, work for more radical changes. The rejectionist view finds the canonical scriptures to be penetrated by patriarchal ideas to such a degree that they have to be rejected. Liberationists focus on transforming the social structures shaped by patriarchy (Roald 1998: 19).

Roald finds many similarities in the ways Christian and Islamic feminists challenge the traditional interpretation of canonical scriptures. She identifies the different approaches of reformists and reconstructors among feminists in both traditions. Roald describes the differences between Christian and Islamic feminist theologians in two ways: first, the view of the Koran as a divine text among Muslim feminists *versus* the view among Christian feminists of the Bible as written by humans (men) (Roald 1998: 41). The question of male authors is thus exempt from the interpretation process of the Muslim feminists. Second, the interpretation history in the Christian tradition mostly includes a historical-critical approach to the biblical texts, and Roald finds that Christian feminist theologians continue to work within this framework, although they supplement it with, for example, gender studies. In Islamic interpretative history, the historical-critical method is generally not applied, and recent research, including many Islamic feminists, focuses on how to apply laws and regulations to a changing social environment through the use of textual analysis (Roald 1998: 40).

The implication of Roald's comparison is that to a large degree the Muslim feminists focus on interpreting the *hadith* and *fiqh*, with a close analysis of the contemporary context and

its gendered power structures. One exception is the American Muslim feminist Amina Wadud who concentrates on the Koran (Wadud 1999). Christian feminists' work focuses mostly on the Bible, but this may, for rejectionists, even include a moral/ethical rejection of the biblical text or parts of it.

### *Examples of Islamic Feminist Hermeneutical Critique*

Amina Wadud declares that “patriarchy is a kind of *shirk* [ultimate violation of divine unity], stemming from the Satanic notion of *istikbar* [thinking of oneself as better than another] ... ” (Wadud 2009: 102). This is perhaps the strongest possible accusation in Islam, since it is seen as undermining the unity of God.<sup>72</sup> Wadud criticizes the Islamic tradition for not implementing what she claims to be the koranic message about the relation between women and men: that they are different but have the same rights, obligations, and “equally significant responsibilities on the social-functional level” (Wadud 1999: 102-103). She makes it clear that if she has to choose between the Koran and the *sunna* on this issue, she would say that the Koran overrules the *sunna*. Wadud is careful not to dismiss the status of the *sunna*, although in practice she introduces an interpretational hierarchy between the Koran and the tradition (*sunna*).

Other Muslim feminists claim that the most important interpretative work has to be done in the area of *fiqh*, in the human applications of the divine law (*sharia*). The Islamic feminist Ziba Mir-Hosseini addresses primarily the interpretation of the *sunna* as the most efficient way to reform the Islamic tradition in order to improve and secure the rights of women. Mir-Hosseini points to the distinction between *sharia* and *fiqh* and claims that the difference between them is underplayed in present Islamic jurisprudence, resulting in patriarchal influences on *fiqh* being mistaken for divine, eternal principles in *sharia*. The crucial element is that laws, if made by

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<sup>72</sup> In Islamic tradition the doctrine of the unity of God, *tawhid*, is fundamental, together with the perception of the Koran as God's revelation (Hjärpe 1985: 15). Together, these doctrines have implications for the interpretations of the Koran among both Sunni and Shia Muslims since they emphasize consensus within the *umma* in interpretative matters. The oneness of God reflected in the community and the *umma* may be seen as referring to the same frame of *tawhid* (Esposito 2003: 317-18). The South African Islamic scholar Farid Esack elaborates on the meaning of *tawhid* in the hermeneutical situation in South Africa during apartheid. To him, the concept of *tawhid* means opposing the divisive structures of apartheid and working actively for the equality of all people, regardless of ethnicity. It also meant rejecting the dualism between the secular and the spiritual (Esack 1997: 92). According to Esack, to apply *tawhid* as a hermeneutical concept in the interpretation of the Koran is to use “... the different approaches to the Qur'an – philosophical, spiritual, juristic or political – [which] must be regarded as components of a single tapestry. All of these are required to express the fullness of its message” (Esack 1997: 93) Esack claims that the former South African apartheid system was a rejection and destruction of *tawhid* because it was divisive for humankind (Esack 1997: 92). He claims that this may be interpreted as an act of *shirk*, which means to “put someone or something in the place of God” (Esposito 2003: 293). It is interesting to note that Esack both addresses and includes all of South African society in this matter, not only Muslims or the *umma*. Esack does not explicitly categorize a patriarchal, gender-divisive hierarchical system as *shirk*, even if he is concerned with women's rights (Esack 1997: 239-248).

humans, can also be changed by humans. Mir-Hosseini strongly suggests that affairs concerned with human relations (*muamalat*) should be particularly open to *ijtihad* and places most gender-related issues in this category (Mir-Hosseini 2007: 86-87). Mir-Hosseini and Wadud thus have different foci regarding the importance of the *sunna versus* the Koran in addressing a need for a new interpretation of the Islamic tradition.

Mir-Hosseini is concerned with what she experiences as a discrepancy in Islamic practice, i.e. that, on the one hand, the Islamic tradition highlights justice and equality as an integral part of Islamic practice but, on the other, does not treat men and women on equal terms in Islamic jurisprudence (Mir-Hosseini 2007: 85). She suggests that a “democratic, pluralist and rights-based Islam” would acknowledge the current social context and open the way for the value of gender equality (Mir-Hosseini 2007: 85). Mir-Hosseini relates the concept of justice to equality and turns to the sources of Islamic jurisprudence to argue that gender justice and gender equality both can and *must* be implemented through a new interpretation of *fiqh*.

Mir-Hosseini and Wadud have different backgrounds. Mir-Hosseini is Iranian but now lives in the UK, whereas Wadud is an African-American convert to Islam, living in the USA. Shia Islam, which is the predominant Islamic tradition in Iran, traditionally has a more flexible approach to *fiqh*. This is grounded in the position of the Shiite *ulama*, which takes a more independent position toward making new juridical interpretations than their Sunni counterparts (Roald 2004: 158-160). This gives the *ulama* more interpretative power in Shiism. To work for change would then mean engaging in the interpretation of the *fiqh*. In a traditional Christian culture like the USA, where Christian Protestants have enjoyed an epistemological hegemony for centuries, focusing on the “scripture itself” (in this case the Koran) would be more natural. Both Mir-Hosseini and Wadud explicitly claim that they relate to both the Koran and the Sunna, but in fact they focus on only one of them in their arguments for new and more gender-inclusive interpretations. If one were to locate them according to Roald’s categories, they would be both reformists and revisionists. The rather significant difference between them shows, however, that the categories are useful only to a certain degree for describing common interpretative strategies, at least in the case of Wadud and Mir-Hosseini. What they share is a commitment to establish new interpretations and practices derived from the Islamic tradition itself.

### ***Examples of Christian Feminist/Womanist Hermeneutical Critique***

The Swedish feminist theologian Anne-Louise Eriksson demonstrates the dilemma between viewing the Bible as authoritative and being a feminist at the same time (Eriksson 1999). She identifies the interpretative power over the biblical texts as the crucial question. Along with “third-wave feminists,” she questions “women’s experience” as a unified category. She claims that there is no unified expression of women’s experience, thus abandoning the position that

women should be epistemologically privileged in the interpretation of the Bible because of their gender. Rather, for Eriksson, feminist hermeneutics in biblical exegesis is a matter of *revealing the gendered power structures of the biblical texts* (Eriksson 1999: 95). The next step, to apply the interpretation of the biblical text as an authority in one's own life, should, according to Eriksson, be tested in terms of whether the interpretation of the text(s) contributes to one's own "liberation and re-creation" (Eriksson 1999: 96). This is where her article ends. Eriksson suggests a hermeneutical principle with a feminist argument behind it, emphasizing the gendered power structures in the Bible and the gendered power structures of biblical interpretation. Her emphasis on personal experience is a significant marker. The hermeneutical issue Eriksson addresses is how to understand and deal with the relation between text and reader in biblical interpretation. If the message of the Christian Gospel is incarnated in the reader as a quest for liberation and divine re-creation, may this not be a hermeneutical principle of the Gospel as *experience*? The crucial point in this connection would be the relation to the tradition and the community for the biblical reader. Christianity is not an individual faith but a community-based religious practice. The question of interpretative authority is not solved but seriously *questioned* on the basis of Eriksson's feminist hermeneutics.

The earlier mentioned Christian feminist theologian Kwok Pui-Lan combines feminism and postcolonial criticism in her suggestions for biblical hermeneutics (Kwok 2005). Kwok states that feminist postcolonialism stresses the connection between colonialism and patriarchy, and she insists that a relevant Christian feminist theology must apply intersectional analyses of biblical texts and of contexts (Kwok 2005: 80-81). One of the most important ways to subvert what Kwok calls the "dominant Western patriarchal interpretations" (of the Bible, that is) is to "emphasize the roles and contributions of ordinary readers" (Kwok 2005: 83) in order to "enlarge the interpretative community and stress that these readers possess the 'suppressed knowledges' that academic elites often dismiss" (Kwok 2005: 83). The integration of "suppressed knowledges" is thus seen as crucial to completing the interpretative community of the churches. If this is to have a real impact, it would require other parts of the community to listen – and to share interpretative authority.

A branch of Christian theology from a gender-perspective is the African-American *womanist theology*. Sharing some of the perspectives of feminist theology, womanist theology insists that making the liberation of women an isolated issue in a particular community is not necessarily a preferred way for African-American women in the USA because their path to liberation is more intertwined with the struggle of African American *men* than with white, middle-class American women.

The womanist theologian Delores S. Williams discusses the Bible as providing both *liberative* and *survivalist* strategies for Christian women (Williams 1993). Focusing on African-

American women in the USA, she calls for attention for the role the figure Hagar has played for African-American women *and* men. In a discussion with Christian feminist hermeneutics, she states that historically, for African-American women, both men and women from the ruling “white” class represented patriarchy. Liberation from oppressors in the days of institutionalized slavery could easily mean putting one’s life at risk, and thus a strategy of survival and quality of life was preferred above attempted liberation. Williams says that even today in the USA “the welfare of the oppressed is tied into the welfare of the oppressors” (Williams 1993: 195), just as the welfare of men and women within the African-American community is mutually dependent because they need to stand together in the struggle for a decent life. The hermeneutics of liberation and the hermeneutics of survival/quality of life should be present in dialogue, Williams claims (Williams 1993: 194). Going back to the Hagar narrative, Williams state that this narrative in Genesis is not about liberation but about *survival* – it is not the image of a liberating God that is present in the narrative but of a God rescuing Hagar and Ishmael from dying of thirst in the desert (Williams 1993: 196-197).

Williams does introduce a transreligious perspective, but only to a limited degree. She does not make any thorough transreligious connections, although various forms of Islam have played a significant role in identity construction among Afro-Americans in the USA. However, the hermeneutics of liberation *versus* the hermeneutics of survival/quality of life might be transferable to hermeneutical discussions between Christian and Muslim women on the readings of the Bible and the Koran and the *hadith*. The connection would be contextual, and not necessarily textual.

Eriksson, Kwok, and Williams explore the challenge of the interpretation of biblical texts. Kwok and Williams integrate biblical interpretation into contemporary as well as historical power discourses. Eriksson could perhaps be viewed as being partly a rejectionist, whereas it would be possible to place Kwok and Williams among the liberationists. This would put all three of them in Roald’s category of reconstructors. But it would be possible to categorize parts of their approaches as reformist/revisionist, since all three relate to elements within the Christian tradition in order to transform that tradition, as I understand them.

### ***Shared Hermeneutical Challenges among Muslim and Christian Feminists?***

Although the different dynamics of the interpretation of canonical scriptures in the Christian and Islamic traditions are reflected in Christian and Islamic feminist hermeneutics respectively, they share at least two positions. The first is that one of the crucial battles concerns interpretative authority, including the internal textual hierarchies in Islam. The second is that what these theologians define as patriarchy should not influence the interpretations of the canonical



scriptures or the practice of a tradition. For some, patriarchy is situated on the interface between gender, class, culture, and ethnicity.

A point of *disagreement* would be on the question if the scriptures and traditions themselves represent patriarchy beyond the contemporary (and historical) existing interpretations, and the balancing of the Koran and the *sunna* among Muslim feminist interpreters. The difference between the Christian and the Islamic traditions regarding the status of the Bible and the Koran makes feminist theologians focus their work differently. Muslim feminists are more reluctant to criticize the Koran than Christian feminists are to criticize the Bible.

### ***Muslims, Christians, and Feminism in Norway***

As shown above, the feminist challenge has come from within the religious communities as well as from society and public discourse in countries where feminism and gender equality are highly regarded. Muslim women in the West often face a particular challenge because stereotypical images of Muslim women as subjugated by their religion are common (Thorbjørnsrud 2003). Thus, they often have to struggle for their positions and rights on at least two fronts: to defend their religious faith and practice of Islam outside their community and to defend their rights as women within their religious community. Christian women in the West are in a similar position in some places, but in the Norwegian majority context arguments from the secular feminist movement are to a large extent consistent with the practice in, for example, the Church of Norway. The Church has changed its practice through new interpretations of traditions and doctrines but has also gradually adapted to mainstream society's norms. It is important to remember, however, that as recently as 1993 the announcement of the first woman bishop in the Church of Norway, Rosemarie Köhn, aroused debate among the Christian religious leaders in the Church of Norway because of her gender.<sup>73</sup> Both secular and Christian Norwegian feminists would say that there is still a considerable way to go both in the Church of Norway and in Norwegian society as a whole before gender equality is fully achieved.

Christian and Muslim women in the Norwegian context are challenged in different ways if they want to keep their religious faith and feminist views together. This becomes apparent in the empirical material in this study, where some of the Christian participants with a Norwegian background synthesize the message of the Christian gospel with the ideology of gender equality and relegate discrimination against women in the Church of Norway firmly to the past. Other

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<sup>73</sup> The perhaps most difficult question after the appointment of Köhn was how to resolve the question of supervision by a (woman) bishop with regard to ministers in her diocese who did not accept her authority on theological grounds (because of her gender). The Council of Bishops in the Church of Norway decided that the ministers in question could refrain from Köhn's supervision, and instead seek this from her dean (October 1995). See <http://www.kirken.no/?event=doLink&famID=11821> [accessed 26 June 2010].

Christian participants with other cultural backgrounds do not equate the practice of the Christian churches and feminism. For the Muslim participants, a completely different picture emerges: they struggle for a reinterpretation of the canonical scriptures within their Muslim communities to obtain a form of gender justice they believe is deeply rooted in an authentic message of Islam, and at the same time they defend their right to be Muslim women in Western society. The participants in this project share one belief: they all agree that Christianity and Islam originally carry a message of gender justice and gender equality. What this means for the Christian and Muslim participants in practice may differ and how to obtain this in present religious practice is perhaps viewed differently, but I believe that this is how the participants keep their religious faith and their faith in gender justice integrated.

### ***Gendered Hermeneutics and Feminist Interpretations in the Empirical Analysis***

In a feminist analysis of making meaning of texts, context, and the group's self-understanding, the question of how *gender* and *women* is understood by the participants is relevant. I have already mentioned that the participants keep their religious faith and their feminist views integrated by claiming that both the Christian and the Islamic tradition were not originally oppressive with respect to women, and that discrimination against women in the name of these religions is to be seen as a distortion. But this is the view they have of their *own* religious tradition, be it the Christian or the Islamic. What are their views of the tradition of the other, and of the existing cultural and religious plurality? How the religious and cultural *differences* in the group are interpreted with regard to feminisms and the mainstream discourse that sees Muslim women as subjugated is presented in the discussions will be shown in the later analysis.

My main focus will be on how the participants use gendered hermeneutics in their interpretations of texts, interpretative discourses of text, and context. By gendered hermeneutics I mean how views of gender/women influence the interpretation as a pre-understanding and as a concurrent reflection in the conversations. Do the participants, for instance, use moral enrichment or moral critique as a tool for feminist criticism or evaluation of the canonical scriptures? Do they apply what Delores Williams calls strategies of liberation, strategies of survival, or both when interpreting the texts? To what extent do they engage with feminism when evaluating the interpretative practices of the canonical scriptures in their religious communities, and do they criticize intrareligious hierarchies of canonical scriptures?

One of the main questions in this project is if the Christian and Muslim participants can reach a shared agency, a common project, through co-reading each other's canonical scriptures. This agency or project could be to establish a shared critique of canonical scriptures or of the interpretative situation. But it may also mean working to change contextual religious or societal practices or discourses they identify in the process.

### **Chapter 3: Methodological Considerations, Choices, and Tools**

In this chapter, I will discuss the methodological approach to the empirical material in this study and clarify my methodological choices. The first part of the chapter is descriptive in nature, explaining the process of establishing the project's empirical material: the selection of participants, texts, and working methods. The choices behind these methodological steps are based on normative reflections. The most significant normative discussions related to the methodology follow the description: to establish a group as the primary entity of research and what type of group this is, the relation between the method described, and the normative concepts of dialogue and feminisms, and finally, the use of categories and the problem of representation. These discussions are also connected to the theoretical framework.

The question of how to carry out research on a transcultural group of Christians and Muslims in a Norwegian context needs to be addressed both methodologically and ethically. Part of this discussion is about my own role in the group, in the establishment of the empirical material, and in analyzing the material.

At the end of this chapter, I will discuss and argue for the way the empirical material is presented in the analysis and the methodological challenges connected to this. We need to start, however, by situating the project more generally within a methodology, to clarify the working premises for the selection of the participants, texts, and working methods.

#### **Situating the Project Methodologically**

The empirical material in this study has been established through a process of qualitative research. In Christian theology, empirical research on human informants and human social, religious, and cultural behavior is not yet a common working method for producing new knowledge, except by sociologists and social anthropologists of religion within the field of Christian theology who have been using the methods and theories from the fields of sociology and social anthropology for decades. The growing influence of and collaboration with the social sciences, however, may result in an increase of empirical research projects within the field of Christian theology, also outside the defined fields of sociology/anthropology of religions, such as this project. The reason this project is not framed within the established sociology/anthropology of religion is because I am searching for knowledge of a sort other than what these fields usually provide: They map existing religious and cultural practice in religious groups or organizations. This study is a detailed exploration of the hermeneutical process of Christian and Muslim women initiated by the project itself, interpreting Christian and Islamic canonical texts. While applying

methods of social science, the project's theoretical framework is more connected to the field of interreligious studies, as shown in the introduction.

Qualitative research was the most relevant method for establishing the empirical material in this study. The qualitative research method is consistent with a hermeneutical perspective, since the establishment of empirical material is seen as a part of a broader process where all the different steps in the research process occur in a dynamic relation of interpretation and reinterpretation. The presuppositions of the researcher, the selection of respondents and research aims, and the theoretical and methodological resources are thus connected and interact throughout the whole research process of qualitative research (Holter and Kalleberg 1996: 12-14). The subjective element of the researcher is acknowledged; she is not viewed as either invisible or objective but is to make her presuppositions, views, and working process *transparent*. The questions qualitative research generally asks are less related to statistics and large overviews of vast material than to studies of a strategic selection of informants or material where the researcher decides on the strategy. The aim of qualitative research is often to disclose some kind of meaning and interpretation of meaning rather than primarily looking for causes and explanations – the question is often *how* rather than *why*. This implies that qualitative studies usually have a relatively small number of informants/participants compared to quantitative studies, where validity is based on large numbers of informants generally recruited to correspond to some sort of representation. Validity in qualitative research is not secured through representativity but through transparency of how the study is committed and through its analytical and hermeneutical processes (Holter and Kalleberg 1996: 22-23), mapped in social sciences by the term “double hermeneutics” (Giddens 1993: 170).<sup>74</sup>

Qualitative empirical studies usually include individual interviews with informants, but studying *groups* of people has become more common (Holter and Kalleberg 1996: 145). Different methods and practices are applied in various qualitative research involving groups. A *group interview* is a tool where the researcher collects information from several persons at the same time. The researcher asks the questions and facilitates the group's discussions. In a group interview, the informants share their information with one another, and not only with the researcher. This is the case in other forms of qualitative research of groups as well. Group interviews could be in the form of focus groups: focusing on one topic and moderated according to a specified interview guide (Puchta and Potter 2004: 6) Or, it could be an “in-depth” group interview, covering a broader spectrum of issues.

Action Research is a form of research related to qualitative research. Usually having the explicit aim of introducing specific *changes* through research projects, it is a strongly value-

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<sup>74</sup> See Chapter 2 for elaboration on the term “double hermeneutics” in this study, p. 21-22.

oriented research method often working with groups of informants/participants (Reason and Bradbury 2006:xxii). Most often, in Action Research the researcher is a full participant in the groups, usually introducing an agenda of processual change through her research.<sup>75</sup>

The role of the researcher and the empirical material emerging from the various ways of conducting qualitative studies involving groups would thus be different in organized group interviews, focus groups, and Action Research groups. I will discuss this further below.

### **Establishing the Empirical Material: Selecting Texts, Participants, and Working Methods**

The selection of texts, participants, how the group was organized, and how the actual group meetings proceeded, will be described below. A short presentation of the participants and a description of their presence and absence throughout the process are included.

#### *The Texts*

The texts selected from the canonical scriptures in Christian and Islamic tradition represents both narrative and non-narrative prescriptive texts. I wanted to include different types of texts to see if this created different ways of making meaning in the group. The texts had to relate to women, as figures in the text or as prescriptive texts concerned with women and should in some way correspond with each other across religious boundaries.

Islamic tradition relates to the Judeo-Christian canonical texts, visible both in the Koran and the *hadith* literature. Several characters in the Judeo-Christian Bible figure in the Koran and the *hadith*, such as Abraham/Ibrahim, Noah, Josef/Yusuf, Jesus/Isa, Moses/Musa. There are two women among these “shared” figures, Mary/Maryam, the mother of Jesus/Isa, and Hagar/Hajar, the mother of Ishmael. The figure of Mary/Maryam provides the most extensive text material in both the Koran and the Bible, but because of the special status of Mary in the Christian tradition, I was reluctant to choose her. I thought this might lead the discussions and interpretations in the group to be less focused on communicating about the texts and more protective of their “own” views of Mary. In addition, the view of Mary in the Christian tradition is marked by confessional differences and the textual material on her is scattered throughout the biblical scriptures, giving a complex representation of the Mary figure. Thus, I chose the figure of Hagar/Hajar instead. This choice also presents challenges of balancing: Hajar is a figure of great importance in the Islamic tradition. The narrative of Hajar is well known and Muslims often refer to it. Hagar is less important in the Christian tradition, and she does not generally have a high status. She remains

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<sup>75</sup> It is also possible to do research on groups through participatory observation, where the role of the researcher is to observe only. This would be done in already existing groups, as part of a broader fieldwork, for instance.

the poor and excluded slave woman who gave birth to Abraham's oldest son, and she disappears from the story when she and Ishmael are banished into the wilderness.<sup>76</sup> The Muslim participants would have been able to relate more closely to Mary/Maryam than the Christian participants could relate to Hagar/Hajar, which could have been an argument in favor of choosing the Mary/Maryam narratives.

But the *content* of the Hagar/Hajar narratives (in both traditions) includes the dramatic event of Hagar/Hajar alone with her son in the desert, an event representing a physical and existential threat of her own (and her son's) life. I found the dramatic quality of this story to be promising for a group discussion. In addition, through selecting the Hagar/Hajar narratives, I included texts from both the Old and the New Testament and from the *hadith* and the Koran – since the prescriptive texts were taken from the New Testament and the Koran. This makes it possible to evaluate the participants' meaning-making strategies applied to different types of canonical texts within the traditions.

The decisive argument for choosing the figure of Hagar/Hajar, however, was that she is closely connected to the narrative of Abraham/Ibrahim in both traditions. Abraham has become a “favorite figure” for illustrating both historical and current close relations between Jews, Muslims, and Christians, as a patriarch they have in common. Dialogues and encounters between Christians, Muslims, and Jews are often called *Abrahamic*, and the believers *children of Abraham*, suggesting that Abraham/Ibrahim is the ancestor of all Jews, Christians, and Muslims. To select the Hagar/Hajar narratives is to enter into the story of Abraham/Ibrahim and his family differently, exploring what “Abrahamic” dialogue would yield if Christians and Muslims were gathered around the family story through Hagar/Hajar. This could provide new knowledge and perhaps generate some new and possibly critical perspectives on the use of Abraham/Ibrahim as a symbol of community, with its patriarchal connotations.

The non-narrative or prescriptive texts were also selected on the basis that they should correspond to each other. Sura 4:34 from the Koran is seen as a challenge among Muslims because of its reception history. The text has been – and still is – used to legitimate men's violence against women in marriage and to legitimize a gendered hierarchy in marriage where men can rule over women (Roald 2001: 145-184).

Unlike the Bible, there are not many verses in the Koran that specifically prescribe normative gender roles and gender models. The selection of a prescriptive text from the Bible

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<sup>76</sup> Hagar does play an important role as a figure in some fields of Christian theology, particularly in the African-American womanist theology. In her book *Sisters in the Wilderness* (Williams 1993) Delores Williams explores the meaning of the Hagar narrative for Christian African-American communities. In the New Testament Paul refers to Hagar as a symbol of the old covenant in his letter to the Galatians, as the slave woman who is the image of the old slave status of people under the law before the new covenant in Christ (Galatians 4: 21-31).

was thus more difficult. The New Testament was preferable because this part of the Bible generally has a higher status in the Christian tradition and because the prescriptive texts on gender models and gender roles in the New Testament are included in the current or recent debates on gender within the Christian tradition, generally speaking. The text from 1 Timothy 2:8-15, which includes a restriction on women teaching and a statement about women being saved through childbirth, was considered to be the most relevant text. This text places men above women in a hierarchy based on its interpretation of the narrative of the Fall of humankind (referring to Genesis), but it also refers to childbirth as the only way to salvation for women, constructing a rigid role for women in making divine salvation for women accessible only through fulfilling a role as female procreator.

Basically, I chose the two most problematic – from the perspective of gender justice – texts I could find in the Bible and the Koran regarding prescriptions of the women's role and place in the two traditions. These texts share a potential for being used as a religious legitimization of female subjugation: women as subordinated to men, opening the way to physical abuse in marriage, the silencing of women in both the public and private spheres, and opening the way to confirming and reinventing a patriarchal, hierarchical social system. If Christian-Muslim encounters and a common reading of canonical scriptures was to confront the oppression of women based on canonical texts, I figured this was one of the most urgent places to begin. In deliberately looking at the challenging texts, I also had another agenda: to prove that it was possible to discuss allegedly problematic texts and difficult issues in a Muslim-Christian encounter. Organized transreligious dialogue/encounters are sometimes accused of avoiding the "difficult questions."<sup>77</sup> Even if I personally disagree with statements suggesting this, there is always a temptation to assume that communication is best built through following paths that seems to be easy.

The selection of texts reflects my research interests. That I selected the texts alone is significantly different from the way I would have done it if I planned a dialogue group. Selecting themes and texts for a dialogue should ideally be a mutual decision in a group or done by some of the participants from different traditions in a preparatory group *together*.

At the last meeting of the group I asked the participants for their views on the selection of texts. Some of them said that if it had been up to them, they would have selected other texts to discuss, texts they regarded as more central to their own religious tradition and beliefs. The Christian participants in particular took this view, but at least one of the Muslim participants later shared in a conversation about the transcriptions that she had felt the same way. They felt that it

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<sup>77</sup> The Norwegian researcher Jill Loga claimed, for instance, in an article in the Norwegian newspaper *Klassekampen*, that religious dialogue in Norway is dominated by liberals, avoiding sensitive and difficult questions and thus engaging in dialogue at the expense of the rights of others (*Klassekampen*, 10.24.2009).

was particularly the two prescriptive texts that not only threatened to misrepresent their whole tradition if viewed alone as representative texts but were also far from representing what the critical participants themselves appreciated the most in their canonical scriptures. The selection of texts ended up being choices that provided useful knowledge for me but possibly at the cost of what the participants themselves would have been more interested in discussing.

The criticism of the selection of texts by some of the participants is, however, significant: Does this project's use of particularly the two prescriptive texts contribute to a narrow perspective of the traditions? While spotting isolated texts and giving them attention, more important discussions regarding women in the traditions might be overlooked. In focusing on a pair of texts used often by the most extreme patriarchal representatives of Christianity and Islam to advocate their views, would this project actually risk fuelling the fire and confirm these texts as crucial to the traditions – perhaps even reviving them from a life in the shadows? The same argument could be made from a perspective from outside the traditions. For some, these texts represent the negative image they already have of the Christian and Islamic traditions as hopelessly lost in patriarchal structures. The selected strategy in the project by using these texts is confrontational, shaped not only by the emic perspective of the canonical scriptures from within the traditions but also by how outsiders might read the texts.

The four texts selected for the project, two pairs of texts from the two traditions, represent two different *kinds* of texts as the basis for discussion. Part of the project was to investigate how the strategies of making meaning differ when the group interpreted different kinds of texts. Would there be significant differences in the way the texts worked as providers of meaning, and how would this influence the transcultural, transreligious communication in the group? One might anticipate that narratives provide a “better” material for a dialogue than prescriptive texts, based on the diversity a narrative may invite its readers to reflect on. On the other hand, prescriptive texts could prove easier to discuss for the same reason: a possible lack of invitation from the texts to project individual, different life stories on to them. Prescriptive texts are argumentative and may generate a more ethical/ideological discussion. The question about how the texts influence communication is addressed in the analysis (parts III and IV).

### ***The Selection of Participants and Composing a Group***

I searched for ten women participants, self-declared Christians and Muslims<sup>78</sup> (five from each tradition), with various cultural backgrounds. I opted for the Muslim contingent to be dominated

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<sup>78</sup> By self-declared I mean that the participants themselves identified with the Christian or Muslim traditions and that none of the participants were evaluated by me or anyone else regarding how “strong” or “weak” their identification to their tradition was. More significant was the criterion of *activity* either within the religious community or in transreligious/transcultural dialogues/encounters.



numerically by Pakistani-Norwegian Sunni Muslims and the Christian contingent by Norwegian Lutheran Christians.<sup>79</sup> This idea was based in having a majority within the respective religious contingents in accordance with the patterns of cultural majority groups among Christians and Muslims in the Norwegian context.<sup>80</sup> This was not based on the notion of creating a representative group but on the idea that having “two majorities” (Norwegian and Pakistani-Norwegian) might reduce the risk of a hegemonic discourse based on one majority group and increase the possibility of a conversation with more varied and shifting power dynamics.

The idea of selecting participants from specific different religious and cultural backgrounds reflects a premise of representation, even though the group as such was not intended to be representative of the Norwegian Christian and Muslim landscape. To categorize people primarily according to religious and/or cultural background and as a requirement for participating seems to be based on the idea that they represent something distinctively different. This idea of representation could be problematic if it implies a notion of religious, cultural, or ethnic *essence* and differences between these variables as *essential* differences. As discussed in the chapter on theory, a view of cultures and religion as static entities entails the risk of stereotypes and may impede communication across boundaries as well as self-reflection. At the same time, different religious categories are one of the premises of this project, since it is based on Christianity and Islam as two separate, religious categories.

But to separate the traditions into two categories is not necessarily to essentialize them or fix them. To counteract any such fixing of “Islam” and “Christian” in the study, I selected participants with different cultural backgrounds (Norwegian, Pakistani-Norwegian, Iranian-Norwegian, etc.) and from different denominations within the religious traditions (Sunni and Shi’a Muslims, Lutheran and Roman Catholic Christians). This methodological choice should not be interpreted as an attempt to compose a representative group where the participants were expected to represent all these cultural and religious categories. A group of ten is too small to meet the requirements for being representative in any way, and my aim was not to fix the identity of the participants or to impose an image of essential identity or differences upon them. My aim, rather, is to prevent the project from becoming a confirmation of differences based on categories through aiming at a strategically planned diversity among the participants.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> For the participants with a different cultural and contextual background in addition to the Norwegian, I use hyphens, starting with the other background: Pakistani-Norwegian, Iranian-Norwegian, etc.

<sup>80</sup> By 1 January 2009, 508,000 people out of a total Norwegian population of 4, 8 million were immigrants or descendents of immigrants. The Pakistani group was the second largest (after the Polish) consisting of 30,000 people, mostly Muslims ([ssb.no/innvandring/](http://ssb.no/innvandring/))[accessed 23 June 2010]. Among Norwegian Muslims, including around 93.000 members of Muslim faith communities ([ssb.no/trosamf/tab-2009-12-09-01-html](http://ssb.no/trosamf/tab-2009-12-09-01-html))[accessed June 23 2010]. Sunni Muslims are a majority (divided into several organizations and mosques) and the Lutheran Church of Norway is the largest religious community in the country, with 3.87 million members (2008).

<sup>81</sup> Cf. the discussion later in this chapter.

I also employed criteria other than religious and cultural background in selecting participants. One of them was the requirement that the participants be able to express themselves in Norwegian. Because I wanted variation with respect to age, I included participants from various age groups, the youngest being in her early twenties, and the oldest in their sixties. The variation in ages was as similar as possible between the Christian and the Muslim contingents. Further, it was one of the criteria that the participants had some level of education in their own religious tradition. I did not include Christian theologians, however, because it would be difficult to find Muslim women in Norway with an equally advanced education in Islamic theology. To include Christian theologians would thus detract from the balance regarding educational capital. But this choice also had another reason, even though it would have been interesting to study the meaning making of Christian and Muslim women theologians: it was more important to me to find active practitioners of the traditions than to find theologically trained persons. Most religious practitioners are not theologically trained, and their making meaning of texts and contexts are often overlooked in theological research (both Christian and Islamic), including the field of interreligious studies. To include them in research could open up some new perspectives on texts and context because they face the challenges of text and context in a different way than trained theologians often do.

I searched actively for participants who participated in either the work of their own faith community or in transreligious/transcultural dialogue/encounters. The latter criterion possibly worked both ways. The project would most probably appeal only to people who were active in these fields.

I did not have a declared feminist agenda or a particular view of gender and gender issues included in the criteria for selecting participants. I assumed, however, that the women who accept the invitation to participate were engaged by or involved in women's issues and/or feminism in some way because they were told beforehand about the texts and that it would be a women's group.<sup>82</sup>

Although I composed the group very carefully, as shown above, a quite different question was how the group would function in reality, not least concerning the participants' attendance and absence. I will return to this matter when addressing the issues of absence and presence in the group.

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<sup>82</sup> The participants were also informed of the working title of the project, which in the beginning was: *Women, Experience and Sacred texts: A Feminist Christian-Muslim Hermeneutical Analysis*.

### *Recruitment and Presentation of the Participants*

To return to the establishment process of the empirical material: the participants in this study were recruited in two ways. Some of them were people I already knew about and had met in various contexts of interreligious dialogues/encounters in recent years. Some were recruited through asking resource people in the field of interreligious and intercultural work for possible candidates. I made direct contact with potential candidates by phone and later by letter to inform them about the project and ask if they wanted to participate. All of the candidates I asked appeared to be positive about the project, but some declined to participate because they did not have the time and opportunity. I learned that Christian and Muslim women engaged in interreligious and/or intercultural work are generally busy and often requested as resource persons within the Norwegian religious and political structures.

The participants will be presented below regarding information about their approximate age, civil status, cultural/geographical backgrounds, work status, education, religious membership, and, to a relevant degree, activities. They appear in this text with fictive names, chosen either by themselves (they were asked to do so if they wanted, and some did) or by me. I have generalized the information to protect their anonymity. How they were recruited for the study and how many group meetings they attended is added at the end of each presentation.

**Aira.** Aira is in her sixties, married, with adult children. She was born and raised in Pakistan but has lived in Norway for many years. Aira was educated in Islamic studies and comparative religion at Pakistani and European universities and is employed in the field of education. She is active in her mosque and in community building across cultural and religious lines. Aira was recruited for the study by me directly, since I had met her in community building work. She had met several of the other participants before at various occasions before the first group meetings. Aira took part in all the group meetings in the study.

**Eva.** Eva is also in her sixties, divorced, with adult children. She was born in Norway and has lived there all her life. Eva is now retired but worked as a teacher of religion for decades after completing a university degree in Christian theology. She is a member of the Church of Norway, where she has been an active church member at many levels, but she was not involved in interreligious activities before.

Eva was recruited to the project through resource persons in the Church of Norway with whom I had contact, and I had never met her before the first group meeting. She met the other participants for the first time at the first meeting. Eva took part in all the group's meetings except for one.

**Shirin.** Shirin is in her forties, married, with children. She was born and raised in Iran and lived there until she fled the country for political reasons and migrated to Norway with her family some years after the 1979 revolution. Shirin obtained a university education in Iran and did further studies at the university level in Norway after she arrived, including studies in religion. She has occasionally worked in Norway, but for the moment she is not employed. Shirin is a Shi'ite Muslim and has occasionally taken part in interreligious encounters in Norway.

Shirin was recruited directly by me to join the study since I had met her at interreligious activities. Shirin attended all of the groups meetings except for the last.

**Inger.** Inger is in her forties, married, with children. She was born in Norway and has lived there all her life in various parts of the country. Inger has a university degree but does not have any formal education in religion. She works in public health care and is an active member of the Church of Norway. She had not participated in organized interreligious activities before. She met the other participants for the first time at the first meeting.

Inger was recruited to the project in the same way Eva had been, i.e. through resource people in the Church of Norway, and I had never met her before the first group meeting. Inger took part in all of the group meetings in the study.

**Senait.** In her late twenties, Senait is a student at one of the universities in Norway. She is unmarried and was born in Norway of parents of Pakistani origin. She is active in several mosques in Oslo and had taken part in organized interreligious activities before the project, which is where I met her and recruited her for the study. She had met some of the other participants before the first meeting.

Senait took part only in the first group meeting of the study, because shortly after she had to move too far away to be able to attend further meetings.

**Maria.** Maria is in her forties, divorced, with children. Maria grew up in an Eastern African country as a member of the Roman Catholic Church, but she is presently a member of the Church of Norway, which she joined after she moved to Norway several years ago. She is educated in social work and works as a social worker. Maria has not been engaged in organized interreligious work but has worked on intercultural community building.

Maria was recruited to the study through resource persons on interreligious work in Norway, and I had never met her before the first group meeting. Maria met all the other participants for the first time at this meeting as well. Maria attended all of the meetings of the group except for one.

**Kafia.** In her forties, Kafia was born in Morocco and migrated to Norway some time ago. She is married and has children. Kafia works in social services. She is a Muslim but does not attend any mosque at present.

Kafia was recruited for the study through a contact person in the social services, and I had never met her until I interviewed her in the middle of the study. She did not attend any of the group meetings but did read the reports of the meetings so as to be informed about the work. Kafia felt that she had too many obligations and was too busy to be able to come to the meetings. She also struggled occasionally with health problems.

**Rima.** Rima is in her forties, married with an adult child. She was born and lived in a large city in the Middle East for about thirty years before migrating first to Sweden and then to Norway with her family. Rima was educated in the Middle East and works in Norway in a position that matches her educational skills, which do not include religious studies. Rima is a Roman Catholic Christian who is active in her parish. She has been engaged in culturally based dialogue work in Norway.

Rima was recruited to the project through resource persons in the interreligious dialogue field in Norway, and I had never met her before the first group meeting. She met all the other participants for the first time at this meeting. Rima attended the first two meetings but, due to health problems, could not be present at the rest of the meetings.

**Fouzia.** Fouzia is in her thirties, born and raised in another European country by parents who had migrated from Pakistan. She then moved to Norway where she has lived for some years with her husband and children. Fouzia works in social care and is a member of one of the Pakistani mosques in Oslo. She has been engaged in cultural dialogues and was recruited to the study through a contact person in social care in Oslo. I had not met her before the first group meeting, and she met the other participants for the first time at the first meeting. Fouzia attended the first two group meetings.

**Susanne.** Susanne is in her late twenties, married, with children. She was born in Norway and has lived there most of her life except for parts of her childhood spent in a different country. Susanne has a university degree that included studies in Christian theology. She is employed by the Church of Norway and is also an active member. Susanne has taken part in organized interreligious activities before.

Susanne was recruited to the study directly, since I had met her in organized religious work. She had met some of the other participants before the first meeting. Susanne participated in four of the group meetings throughout the study.

### *The Group Meetings*

There were six group meetings in total, lasting between two and a half and three and a half hours each. They were organized between 3 June 2005 and 15 September 2006, a period of somewhat more than a year and three months. On the average, this meant one meeting every second month, except in the summer. Some of the participants wished to have the meetings closer together, which would have provided the possibility of a more intensified process and possibly a greater continuity between the meetings. When suggested, this proved impossible, since finding times that suited everyone was generally a great challenge. All the meetings were in the afternoon and took place at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Oslo.

Here is a brief overview of the overall structure of the meetings' contents: at the first meeting, the participants shared parts of their life stories, selecting what information they wanted to give to the others. The participants thus knew one another to a certain extent when discussion on the canonical texts started.

To start a group process by sharing life stories is to start constructing a shared space of mutual trust and is sometimes used in transreligious dialogue as a methodological tool for initiating a communication process through listening and narrating life stories (Egnell 2006: 156).<sup>83</sup> To start a group process by presenting claims and opinions may, on the other hand, quickly create a space where positioning according to different positions and opinions might freeze communications in determined patterns (Eidsvåg 1997: 227). The analysis does not include empirical material from the first meeting but only cites it, since the focus of the study is on making meaning of the texts. But in the analyzed material, the sequences of communication vary between being confrontational and being more marked by narrating and listening. This may suggest that trust on the one hand and more confrontational positioning on the other are more intertwined than suggested in the references above and perhaps show that trust can emerge from confrontational discussions as well if communication is not too fixed in this pattern over a long period of time.

The second and third meeting focused on the Hagar/Hajar narratives from the Bible and the *hadith*. The fourth and fifth meeting addressed the non-narrative prescriptive texts. The sixth meeting was an evaluation and a closure of the process.

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<sup>83</sup> Egnell's empirical study on organized interreligious dialogues for women shows that listening to/narrating the life story is part of many dialogues. The reasoning behind it is that it creates trust; it constructs the persons as subjects for themselves and for the others through telling their life story. In Egnell's material this is often connected to feminist perspectives on communication (Egnell 2006: 156-157).

The meetings were recorded by a tape recorder and a video camera, the audio recording being the primary one.<sup>84</sup> The visible presence of the tape recorder *and* the video camera during the meetings clearly reminded the participants that they were being recorded and filmed at all times.

A discussion ensued at the second meeting on the question if the recording should be paused during the breaks. This occurred after the participants had read the transcriptions from the first meeting,<sup>85</sup> in which the conversations in the breaks had been included. Several of the participants regretted this and wanted to introduce a distinction between a “public” and a “private” space within the frame of the meetings. They asked me to turn the recorder and video camera off during the breaks in the future, which I then did. The discussion in itself showed me that the participants, or at least several of them, were conscious of the different spaces created in the meetings: there was one shared space for all, a “public space,” the “official” talks, that was subject to research. Then there were “private spaces,” occurring primarily during the breaks, where two or more of the participants shared information or reactions literally “off the record.” This indicates an awareness of which information to share in the different spaces, as well as a consciousness of being subject to research in the shared “public” space. The discussion also showed another important aspect: the participants felt they were in a position to control my access as a researcher to their different spaces.

To stop the recording during the breaks meant that I would miss the informal chatting between the more formal discussions as part of the empirical material. I made the decision I did because I wanted to respect the participants’ need to have a break. Allowing them some “private space” was in line with my general policy of granting the participants the opportunity to participate in decisions regarding the organization of the group meetings, including the possibility of correcting or deleting their own transcribed statements in the transcriptions (more on this later).

I was interested in access to knowledge and utterances the participants would identify with and regard as representative of their views. I had no wish to obtain information they did not want to submit. It turned out that the conversations were focused and marked by intense discussions and conversations. This may have been promoted not only by the engagement of the participants but also through the distinction between “public” and “private” sections of the meetings.

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<sup>84</sup> I included the videotaping to consult it in case I was unable to recognize the speakers when transcribing. The project was not aimed at analyzing the video recording separately. I later found that I did not have any problem identifying the various speakers by their voices, so I did not need to consult the recorded videos.

<sup>85</sup> The participants were given the transcriptions from the meetings to check them; see elaborations on this later in this section.

I initially intended to include some of the participants' personal reflections on the group's process as voices in the empirical material. So, at the first meeting I gave all the participants a notebook and said any notes they made during the process could be an important additional source for me if they were willing to make such notes and give them to me at the end of the process. I believed that this was a way to have access to a different kind of material than what was revealed during the meetings. In the end none of the participants wanted to give me their notes at the end of the process. Some had not used the book at all, while others claimed that their notes were too personal. The notebook had been defined as part of the "private space" for those who used it.

### ***Structure and Moderation of the Meetings***

The six meetings followed more or less the same organizational structure. They started with a light meal since most participants came directly from work. Other than providing necessary nutrition, this also created the possibility of sharing a meal: eating together is a way to establish community. The meal, however, was not an event on its own – the conversations on texts or themes started immediately. There was at least one break during the meeting. The beginning and the end of the meetings were fixed and they usually started and ended on time because of everyone's tight schedule. This structure meant that there were little room for informal chatting and exchange of information outside the structured conversation.

At the four meetings concentrating on the texts, the "texts of the day" were read at the beginning.<sup>86</sup> Both texts were read aloud (except for the third meeting, where they were read silently) by volunteers among the participants. In all meetings except the last, one or two Christian participants read the text from the Bible, and one or two Muslims read the text from the Koran/*hadith*. Sometimes the the Christian text was read first and sometimes the Muslim text was read first.<sup>87</sup>

The initial plan was that I would moderate only the first meeting when the participants introduced themselves, and then pass the role on to the participants. My role as moderator at the first meeting was primarily to keep to the schedule and ensure that everyone had the time and opportunity to speak. One of the participants suggested that each meeting should have two chairs, one Christian and one Muslim. The group – and I – approved of this. At the end of the

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<sup>86</sup> The four texts were divided into two groups, one for the Hagar/Hajar narratives (discussed at meetings two and three), and one for the prescriptive texts (Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15, discussed at meetings four and five).

<sup>87</sup> The texts were also sent by post to the participants in advance, to ensure that the ones wanting to prepare themselves had the texts available. This way they also had a first encounter with the texts in the project as presented to them at the same time or at least in the order they preferred to read them.



first meeting, however, nobody volunteered to moderate the next meeting. It was only after the second meeting some of the participants felt ready for this.

The plan of having two moderators did not work out as planned because of the absence of some of planned moderators. It turned out that Inger, Aira, and Maria moderated one meeting each, and I moderated the last meeting. It was important to me that my plan of passing this role on to the participants was at least partly successful because this made me able to take a more observational role, not influencing the conversations through that process. Even if the role of the moderator at the meetings was generally one of non-intervention and a merely organizational duty, I regarded the double role as researcher and moderator as something I wanted to avoid as much as possible. As moderator, I risked influencing the interaction between the participants in the sense that, for instance, they would be concerned what I might think about what they said, if it was “correct” according to their tradition or not, or if they engaged in conversations in a way I approved. They may have been thinking about these things anyway (and this is sometimes evident in the transcriptions), but I found this to be a way to limit it.

### *Individual Interviews*

Between the fourth and the fifth meetings I conducted individual interviews with all the participants except for one, who had moved too far away (Senait).<sup>88</sup> My motivation behind this interview was primarily to obtain knowledge about how the participants experienced the group meetings and the group process. Since all information shared in the group was shared not only with me but with everyone present, this was an opportunity to respond to the process while still in progress, and it gave me an opportunity to ask them questions directly, something I hardly ever did in the group meetings. The aim of the individual interviews was not, however, to collect a different kind of empirical material or to broaden my research focus. This is why there are few references to these interviews in the study, and they are not analyzed separately. The interviews thus provide a “backup” for the quality of the main empirical material and function primarily as background material for my analysis to check my interpretations. The individual interviews did not yield any material that contradicted the material from the meetings.

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<sup>88</sup> The participants selected the location of these interviews. Because all the group meetings were held in a meeting room at the University of Oslo, which meant traveling and the interruption of their daily routines, I wanted to minimize the added effort this interview meant for them. I also considered the interview to be a part of my research where the one-to-one situation created a different power balance than in the group, with me as the interviewer and researcher emerging more clearly as the defining party. To give the participant the possibility of determining the location, would possibly make them more empowered and in control of the situation. The interviews were done at my university office (four) or in the participants’ homes (two), at the offices of the participants (two) and in a café (one). The interviews lasted between one and three hours, and the participants were given an interview guide beforehand.

Since my main focus was on the group process and the events at the meetings, I did not want to conduct the individual interviews before the group had met several times. If I had started out with individual interviews before the group met, there would have been the risk that the participants would relate primarily to me or be more aware of their relation to me when talking in the group, with the possible result that the interaction with the other participants would be weakened. The reason I selected the exact timing between the fourth and fifth meetings was that the group at this point had discussed the Hagar/Hajar narratives and the non-narrative, prescriptive texts, and there were still two scheduled meetings left.

### *Attendance and Absence of the Participants*

It is not unheard of in qualitative research that informants drop out, although this problem is not often addressed in the literature on method. Dropping out as an informant/participant in a research project could be coincidental, but I believe it also could be a message articulated through absence – a way of becoming visible when one does not feel visible and listened to when present. It might also be interpreted as a way to reject a project or to reduce its meaning for oneself after one has been disappointed, or simply finding out that what was in it for one since being a participant was not enough to induce one to make the effort.

The participants in this project knew beforehand that they had consented to a process involving six meetings and one individual interview. A crucial element in the project beyond my control was how many participants would turn up at the meetings. The participants all had multiple obligations in different fields: work, family, friends, volunteer work in their faith communities. Some had to travel a rather long way to attend the meetings. The group was compiled in such a way that there would be an equal number of Christians and Muslims and of the cultural variations in the Christian and the Muslim parts of the group. So any absence changed a presupposed numerically balanced representation. My previous experience in transreligious/transcultural dialogues was that often the most difficult part was to get people together physically. I addressed this as a possible challenge at the first meeting and suggested that there should be a specified minimum number of both Christian and Muslim participants present in order for a meeting to be considered part of the study. There were two reasons for suggesting such a minimum of balanced participation as a requirement: to ensure that the conversations and interactions were more diverse, and thus more valuable as research material and to avoid a situation where a Christian or a Muslim participant had to carry the possible burden of representing their tradition alone.

The end of a discussion on the need for a minimum numerical balance between Christians and Muslims was that the participants decided there should be at least two Muslims and two Christians present at each meeting.

The first meeting had the highest attendance: Nine participants attended; only Kafia did not turn up.<sup>89</sup> At the second meeting the numbers of participants was eight, and the third meeting was held with five participants. The fourth had four, and the fifth and sixth five and four participants respectively. The required minimum of two Christian and two Muslim participants was accomplished at all meetings except the sixth. The participants present at the sixth meeting, an evaluation of the project, decided that they wanted the meeting to proceed anyway.

Six of the participants were regular in their attendance: Susanne, Inger, and Eva, all with a Christian Norwegian background but belonging to different age groups; Maria, a Christian of African-Norwegian background, Aira, a Muslim of Pakistani-Norwegian background, and Shirin, a Muslim of Iranian-Norwegian background. These six participants thus provided most of the continuity in the project, becoming a group within the group.

The patterns of absence and attendance among the participants raise some important questions. What impact did this have on the group process and the dialogue process? What impact did it have on the quality of the empirical material, and can these patterns give some relevant information about the whole process of making meaning of texts and contexts?

To address the first question: for a group, the presence and absence of participants impact both stability and content. To some degree, one could say that the instability regarding the presence of about half of the participants made it necessary to reconstitute the group at every meeting. On the other hand, there were six participants who created stability and continuity. No new participants were invited to replace the absentees for two reasons. First, nobody withdrew formally from the project, and I did not want to close the door on them if they returned. Second, replacements would create an even greater instability in the group process.

The effect on the empirical material is obviously that the different perspectives of the absent participants were lost. The empirical material proved, however, to be sufficiently complex and broad to proceed with the project as planned.

How the absence of nearly half the participants at two thirds of the meetings regarding the project as a whole is to be interpreted is another question. I asked the absentees about this in the individual interviews. The major drop in the participants came between the second and third meetings. Did something happen at the second meeting to keep some from attending further? Did

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<sup>89</sup> Kafia did not attend any of the meetings. The reasons she gave in the individual interview I had with her was that she had been too busy with work and family obligations, had experienced some health problems, and had to travel several times to assist her family in Morocco. She stated that she would have liked to have been there and that she did not want to withdraw from the project. She did say she would try to make it for the two last meetings, which, in the end, she did not do. But Kafia's situation touches on a problem that may be representative for many active women belonging to minority groups in Norway: The expectations that they work, be engaged in their communities, take care of family both in Norway and abroad, as well as being addressed by the public to be representatives of their faith or cultural community is simply too much. The total pressure may in the end affect their health and well-being.

their absence have something to do with being exposed to the texts, with the issues discussed, the other participants, or with something else connected to the project? Or were there other causes, ones outside the project itself? All the absentees interviewed claimed that the reason they did not make it to the meetings was due to busy periods, conflicting and more demanding obligations, or their own health situation. No one mentioned anything connected to the project as a reason for being absent. This does not exclude those causes from still being factors in the project or that they may have been combined with factors related to the project or even other factors. The material from the individual interviews, however, does not provide any other explanation than those mentioned above.

The stability among the Christian participants of Norwegian background was significantly higher than for all other categories of participants: All three of them were among the six most stable participants. Maria (a Christian with a African-Norwegian background) and the two Muslim participants who showed a similar stability (of Pakistani-Norwegian and Iranian-Norwegian background) all had a university education. They were first-generation immigrants to Norway and had the experience of being exposed to plurality in groups over many years with a cross-cultural and/or cross-religious network. It is not possible to generalize on how the issue of participation reflected the degree to which the participants felt themselves to be part of the Norwegian society based on such a small group of informants. But if a strong cultural membership in the Norwegian majority context should be considered a variable providing higher participation than the opposite, the pattern of participation in this project would at least partly support this empirically. One of the participants who withdrew had lived her entire life in Norway as a descendent of immigrants (Senait), and she did not withdraw because she did not feel part of Norwegian society.

The meetings in this project were rather long, usually around three and a half hours, and the discussions were generally intense and challenging. The prescriptive texts could have scared participants away beforehand. A message, which the absentees never stated explicitly, could be that they did not find their participation to be worth the effort and/or that other obligations were more important to them. Possible different *expectations* of the project could also have played a part: perhaps the six participants who constituted “the group within the group” experienced the project more as meeting their expectations than the others did.

The result for the establishment of the material was that the group often had a majority of Christians present, and this may have shaped both the material and the communication in the group.

### *Transcriptions*

The group meetings and the individual interviews were recorded and transcribed. The complete transcriptions of the meetings were sent to the participants by post. I was usually able to do this between meetings, so that the transcriptions would provide a certain degree of continuity between the conversations and discussions at the different meetings – if the participants read them. But the initial reason for doing so was to give the participants access to reading what they had said. To seek approval of the transcriptions by the interviewees (participants) establishes transparency and thus increases the validity of the material because errors could be discovered and corrected (Holter and Kalleberg 1996: 22).

I exceeded the possibility of feedback for the participants beyond correcting possible mistakes: I also granted them the right to *delete* parts of their own transcribed statements after the first reading. By doing this, I risked losing valuable material, but I still decided to do it, not because I believe qualitative research requires this as a rule but because I thought it had a function in this particular project. I wanted the participants to feel as safe as possible when entering into a demanding space of encounters and discussing sensitive issues like faith, gender, and canonical texts.

Some of the participants in this group may become future partners in trust building activities of dialogue/encounter, or I may meet them as dialogue partners myself. Trust cannot be compartmentalized into separate spaces between research and dialogue activism. This matter touches on a possible conflict between establishing research material and being active in dialogues/encounters outside the field of research. This problem arises if the interests of the participant and those of the researcher conflict, and the researcher feels obliged to leave important material aside in order to ensure possible future relations. The material the participants might not want to release could provide possible interesting knowledge. In this project, however, I was not looking for this kind of material, and my decision about the transcriptions was not motivated by possible future projects inside or outside academia.

The motivation is partly grounded in the dialogical values I want to integrate into the project both theoretically and methodologically, and in the fact that I want to listen to feminist postcolonial theories criticizing the “Western” and “male” dominance in mainstream research in order to objectify the cultural and gender “other.” To construct a representation that fits into one’s own presuppositions of “the other” could mean reducing the representation of “the other” in a way that makes her unable to recognize herself. Giving the participants the right to influence the representation of them is an attempt to reduce the risk of othering the other through research. The researcher would still have a separate and different responsibility for the project than the participants. But I believed – and still believe – that it is possible to include a participant’s right to influence her own representation, and at the same time ensure the necessary distance and

professional integrity of the researcher. I will return to this when I discuss my own role in the project.

It appeared that there were few places in the transcriptions that the participants wanted to change or remove. A few obvious errors due to language problems were corrected,<sup>90</sup> and in two separate cases there was a wish to remove references to Iranian law (in one case) and comments on the translation of the koranic text (this case is described in the material, with the consent of the participant).<sup>91</sup> These cases did not change the content of the more general and relevant contributions. When the analysis of the empirical material was finished, the participants were invited to read the transcriptions of their own contributions as they were presented in the finished text. This was primarily to correct misunderstandings, but it also opened the way for other comments. Due to the situation in Iran at the time of completion (the first six months of 2010) the Iranian-Norwegian participant was granted the right to edit her own contributions for safety reasons. Both Aira and Shirin asked to read the complete analysis beforehand and did so. The outcome of this was that some of Shirin's sayings were deleted, but these did not concern the interpretation of the texts nor were they related to the group process. Several of Aira's contributions were, at her suggestion, reformulated into more correct English that communicated what she intended to say more precisely, without changing the original meaning of what she said. Some of her contributions were also deleted according to her wishes: these were mostly repetitions of earlier sayings, but a few of them were changed due to misunderstandings that had occurred, without changing the meaning bearing content.

If the withdrawals had been many, and significantly changed the material, this would have been a challenge, and could have implied necessary changes for modifying the project in some way.

### *Languages and the Transfer from Oral to Written Language*

The language in the group meetings was Norwegian. This was the only common language that made communication possible, even if it did create a difference between the participants. Some had Norwegian as their first language, some as their second or third language. The difference concerning Norwegian language skills is likely to have influenced the interaction between the participants in favor of the native Norwegian speakers. It probably influenced negatively the possibility of some of the participants to express themselves in the conversations. Everyone,

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<sup>90</sup> One example was that I had mistaken the word "tool" for "watchdog" in one of the transcriptions (in a discussion on what the Koran and the Bible represented in the traditions). In Norwegian the words *verktøy* ("tool") and *vakthund* ("watchdog") can sound somewhat similar. This mistake caused amusement in the group, and it proved to me that showing the transcriptions to the participants was a good investment in quality proofing the transcriptions.

<sup>91</sup> The participant with an Iranian-Norwegian background found that she was mistaken in her reference to the laws on punishment for causing traffic accidents in Iran. This was deleted from the transcriptions.

however, spoke Norwegian fluently, even if it was not their primary language (cf. criteria for the selection of participants).

The texts from the Koran, the *hadith*, and the Bible were all presented to the participants in a Norwegian version. This was because it was the only possibility for everyone to be able to read the texts and because this is the way the texts are accessible for most of the Norwegian public. There was only one native Arabic speaker among the participants, a Christian from the Middle East (Rima). Some of the Muslim participants did know some koranic Arabic. None of the Christian participants knew Greek or Hebrew, the original languages of the biblical texts in the project. The texts used in the dissertation are English versions of the Bible and the Koran, selected because of their degree of closeness to the Norwegian texts in the project rather than their closeness to the text's original language.<sup>92</sup>

The transfer from oral language at the meetings to a written text in the transcriptions was done without changing the way the participants expressed themselves, meaning that the language was not modified or improved but kept its distinctive oral character. When reading the transcriptions, the participants reacted to this in a skeptical manner at first. I did not change it because I did not want to change the intended meanings or manner of speaking, which would have been unavoidable if I "corrected" the language. The participants got used to this and accepted it; in the end, some of them also appreciated it and said that the distinctive oral manner of speaking had a value of its own and should not be changed.

The participants were constantly challenged to respond to the texts and to one another. The hermeneutical situation was complex, and reflections had to be done quickly and on the spot, since the challenges emerged fluidly through the conversations. A requirement of "reflecting while speaking," and "reflection through conversation" as part of the speaking conditions for the participants should be in the minds of the readers of *this* text when reading and interpreting the transcriptions later.

The translation of the transcriptions from Norwegian to English were done by me, and even if I tried to translate them into oral English, nuances and meanings that were present in the Norwegian transcriptions may have been lost in translation. There have been some linguistic improvements made without interfering with the content in order to improve the transcriptions' ability to communicate. Transcriptions of statements by participants with Norwegian as their second or third language, translated into English by a native Norwegian speaker, requires particular attention in this respect.

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<sup>92</sup> See the notes regarding the versions I use in the analysis where the texts are also cited in a full (English) version.

## Methodological Discussions

There are two points to be made in introducing this methodological framework: First, there is the question about the group as the object of the research and the further situating of the methodology connected to this. Second, there is the question of representation.

### *Why Establish a Group for this Project?*

Because the aim of this project is to study a Christian-Muslim process of reading texts to gain knowledge about the process of interpretation in a relational perspective, including how this process influenced or changed the interpretation of texts, contexts, and the relation itself, the research presupposes a *group*. But a group of the kind this project requires (consisting of women, both Christians and Muslims, in a cross-cultural situation, and reading their canonical scriptures together) was not readily available in the Norwegian context. If there had been one, I would have asked for permission to do research on this established group. But given the situation, I decided to put a group together for the purpose of this project.

Doing qualitative research into a *group*, rather than into people as individuals, has a significant impact on the role of the researcher vs. the informants/participants. Not only does the group relate to the researcher(s), but the individuals in the group also relate to one another. The balance of power between researcher and informant is numerically changed. This may imply that the empirical material established by studying a group is less vulnerable to the influence of a researcher's questions and anticipations. The presence of the researcher or the knowledge that what is said is recorded and becomes research material will affect the process but to a lesser degree perhaps.

What would be a suitable category into which the group in this project should be placed? Is the group a focus group, a group interview over a period of time, or is it a "dialogue group"? If the group is called a dialogue group, what methodological implications would this have, and how is the described process of establishing the material in this project to be seen in relation to Action Research?

### *Is this Action Research?*

Action Research (AR) is research where the researcher is a *participant*, through her research, in the field she is researching. The aim of the research includes improving current practices and/or implementing change. AR is deeply rooted in practical life and is strongly value-oriented (Reason and Bradbury 2006: xxii). The strong value orientation seems to fit well with the themes of this study that is theoretically and methodologically related to the normative fields of *dialogue* and *feminism*. But where action research clearly expects the researcher to have an active, participating role, which might blur the distinction between the researcher(s) and (other)



participants (Reason and Bradbury 2006: xxiv), this project intends to study the meaning-making strategies and processes of the *participants*, without my direct participation in the substantial discussions related to this. In the group meetings, I did preserve the distinction between the researcher and the informants/participants in this respect.

Conducting the establishment of the empirical material through group interviews was ruled out for the same reason: Through formulating questions – a crucial part of making meaning – I could easily enter into a leading role, providing premises for the conversations and discussions. I did not ask follow-up questions or pursue themes during the meetings, except on a few occasions to clarify the meaning of what had just been said, and once at the end of the fifth meeting, when I asked the participants summarize their views.<sup>93</sup> Thus, the group meetings cannot be characterized as group interviews.<sup>94</sup>

Action Research often aims at implementing concrete changes in a specific field, and in a particular direction, often located in a specific community. This project is not directed toward implementation of concrete changes or changes in a specific direction. This would violate the theoretical framework of the project based on reflexive interpretation, hermeneutics, and dialogue. But what about the incorporated values in the concept of dialogue and the critical perspectives of feminisms and power criticism, also present in the project's framework?

The distinction between the interpretation of the participants and my interpretation and analysis of this interpretation is established in the chapter on theory (cf. "double hermeneutics"). If findings in the analysis show strategies of making meaning to be consistent with agenda(s) of feminism(s), identify occurrences of dialogical events/communication, or exercise different kinds of power criticism, these findings will be significant. But this is different from presupposing or influencing the process of the group in these specific directions. What might emerge as action or agency by the group is in the hands of the participants. To be involved in constructing an agency for change at the group level in this project is not part of my role as researcher in the group, unlike the researcher's role in AR.

However, to put together a transcultural Christian-Muslim women's group to study specific gender-related texts from the Bible, the Koran, and the *hadith* in a Norwegian context where gender equality is regarded a crucial value is clearly a value-loaded act.<sup>95</sup> Some of the participants also knew me as active in various Christian-Muslim dialogues. So, even if the project as such does not have a specific aim at transformation or a concrete plan for further

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<sup>93</sup> See p. 322 ff.

<sup>94</sup> And even if I was present mostly as an observer during half of all the meetings, and at the meetings I chaired did not enter into conversations on substantial matters, my participation in the group could not be called participatory observation because I did more than observe – I organized the events.

<sup>95</sup> As described above, I initially used the word "feminist" in the working title of the project, and this was given to the participants when I asked them to participate.

action, it could provide a challenge to the participants in a way that might change their perspectives or agencies. This challenge may have been communicated through the project's framework, through the group process, or through both.

The two models of transreligious dialogue/encounter suggested in the chapter on theory, i.e. "difference as constitutive" and "difference as challenge," both relate to different aspects of and possibilities connected to dialogical values.<sup>96</sup> When I say that I want to relate to core values in dialogue throughout this project, the values of dialogue (such as equality, not violating the otherness of the other, re-humanizing of the world), and the mutual transformation defined as a possible result of a dialogue according to the second model in particular might fit Action Research methodology. The difference would be that an action researcher could possibly have decided on the desired direction of the change from the beginning, whereas a dialogue-based transformation should, ideally, be impossible for *one* person to direct. A dialogical transformation may take different shapes and directions for the different participants.

If starting a process of reflection in a group is defined as an aim in itself, this work would be close to AR in this respect. But AR requires a decision by the researcher, implying that a particular worldview (that of the researcher) is exempt from discussion at the level of the participants. Even if Action Research claims to be dialogical and empowering for the objects of research, it cannot, in my view, be seen as equivalent to dialogue, and it may endanger the reflexive interpretation process of the researcher if the aims of the research (implementing change through research) are too fixed.

***Naming the Method: "Qualitative Research into an Organized  
Transreligious/Transcultural Group"***

I believe the methodology worked out for this project comes closer to "traditional" qualitative research than it does to Action Research, since I maintain the distinction between researcher and participants rather consistently. The hermeneutical framework has methodological consequences since it entails the constant questioning of the researcher's presuppositions and interpretation. The project does, however, have some similarities with Action Research: strongly value-oriented, with the *possibility* of creating and/or changing the agency of the participants. The analysis will explore if the group's meaning-making results in communicative events of dialogue or the establishment of fluid and shifting interpretative communities.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> See Chapter 2, p. 60-67.

<sup>97</sup> See Chapter 2 for the theoretical discussion on the concept of interpretative communities, and the relation between dialogue and interpreting communities.

### *Is the Group a Dialogue Group?*

Dialogue was discussed theoretically in the former chapter. What are the implications of this for methodology? Could the group in this project be called a dialogue group? Should it be called a focus group?

The “group process” and “meaning making”<sup>98</sup> are the preferred terms to describe what happens when the participants meet and discuss. By “group process” I mean the relational meaning making taking place in the group, including the self-reflexive work of the participants, and the reflection they did in between the meetings. The “group process” starts when the group first meets and ends when the sixth and last meeting is finished. There is a distinction between the “group process” and what I would call the “dialogue process,” both regarding content and extent. A dialogue process can have a distinct start, but the end is not clear-cut because the relations and conversations among participants in a dialogue might continue after the organized process. For the participants in a dialogue, the narratives and insights from the dialogue might continue to shape their lives and reflections about other and self. In this way the dialogical process may continue when a group, and a group process, has vanished.

Dialogue, according to how I use the concept theoretically, presupposes differences between the participants and does not aim at agreement. The agenda of dialogue is to explore differences and investigate possibilities for common reflection, and possibly shared agency (*diap Praxis*). This might be the case in a focus group as well, but a dialogue group is qualified differently through the emphasis on differences and concentrating on the communication process in the group. A focus group often has a narrower focus decided by the researcher. In a dialogue group the foci should not be under the complete control of anyone, whether or not that individual is the researcher. If this happens in what is supposed to be a dialogue, some of the participating subjects cease to be subjects as such and become observers or are marginalized into roles where they are defined and controlled by others. A dialogue needs to have more than one defining subject and, ideally, it should provide equal shares of control and power to all those participating. This is common for the two models presented earlier.

Transreligious dialogue groups are established mostly to function for a certain period of time. If the dialogue aims at building relationships and trust, and investigates complex matters (theological, ethical, political), it is an advantage that the same people meet every time. In more institutionalized dialogues, where the aim is to establish formalized contact between religious communities or organizations, the representation of the institution as such might overrule the personal dimension, with the result that different people might be present at different times.

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<sup>98</sup> See Chapter 2, p. 35.

In a dialogue, everyone is contributing ideally to the conversations and the meaning making. In the case of this project, everyone contributed except me, the researcher. This violates the principle of a dialogue. If I had chosen Action Research as my method, this problem would have been solved. Instead, I would have the problem of dealing adequately with the plurality claim of the dialogue, as stated above. I would also not be able to avoid contributing to my own research material.

The end result, then, after these considerations of the research method and naming of the group is that what I do is *qualitative research*, including a methodology influenced by qualified dialogue values, which is precisely why I cannot call the group a dialogue group because, according to dialogical values, this would mean that the researcher had violated the principle of equal access to the power of definition among the participants by defining normative aims for the group alone and in advance. Instead, it would need to be called a *meaning-making group*. If it is impossible to use the term dialogue about the group as a fixed term in advance, it is possible to investigate how the group's process relates to dialogical values (cf. p. 365 ff) and to the two proposed models of transreligious dialogue presented in the former chapter.

### ***The Question of Representation***

Framing this study as “Muslim-Christian” in the title, I thus determine religious identity to be more crucial than cultural identity. This should be discussed further. Organized transreligious work could run the risk of neglecting cultural differences and presuppose a strong religious identity among the participants – at least strong enough for one to be identified as a “Christian” or a “Muslim” – and to take part in an activity based on one's religious beliefs. The expected difference in such a dialogue, which ideally would provide a more open space for interaction with a lack of hegemonic discourses, could turn into a *confirmation* of differences, overlooking similarities and underplaying differences of a different, non-religious basis. Even though religious differences are the only explicit kind of differences presupposed in transreligious dialogues/encounters, the *expectation* of difference over similarities may extend beyond religious differences, and include other parts of people's identities and backgrounds as well. This is related to similar dilemmas in cultural studies of various kinds, gender theory, and philosophical discussions on sameness and difference: if the aim is to create a greater degree of *equality* in a community, across differences, the identification of differences and establishment of categories in building the premises for such work may instead reinforce or create the differences it aims to overcome (Gressgård 2005).

In this project the participants are identified in terms of their religion above that of their culture.<sup>99</sup> But by mixing religious and cultural categories in the composition of the group, there were various cultural and intrareligious backgrounds both in the Christian and in the Muslim contingents. I intended via this means to avoid a reproduction of a “waterproof” binary system of Christianity and Islam as unified, opposing categories. A binary system of “Norwegian” and “hyphen-Norwegian,” as coinciding with religious backgrounds, was more difficult to challenge, since all the Muslims were immigrants or descendents of immigrants. But through including immigrants (“hyphen-Norwegians”) among the *Christian* participants, a possible binary relation between “Norwegian” and “hyphen-Norwegian” would at least not coincide with “Muslim” and “non-Muslim,” “Christian” and “non-Christian,” or “Muslim” and “Christian.” The Christian participants of the group were not intended to bear any common notion of “Norwegianness” or the Muslim group the notion of “hyphen-Norwegianness” or “immigrants” alone.

Regarding religious traditions and representations, the participants addressed this issue at the second meeting.<sup>100</sup> The question was if they were to represent a whole religious tradition or themselves as individuals within a tradition. They agreed that they should only “speak for themselves.” How the participants viewed their own representation, however, varied throughout the process.

### ***Representation and Gender: Why Only Women?***

I made the choice to construct a group consisting only of women. One of the strategic challenges in religious communities within the Christian and Islamic traditions for agents of change in gendered hierarchies seem to be how to engage *men* in discussions about gender issues and in interpretations of canonical texts and their implications for both men and women. A binary system of men and women as dichotomic categories, based on an essentialist view on gender, including an idea of universal experiences of all women without differentiation, are problematic with respect to understanding the meaning of gender as a category. To be more specific, the problem that arises through any use of the category of gender and gender dichotomy as stable, universal, and fixed is that these statements are always situated in a particular *context*, which is never stable, universal, and fixed.

As stated in the Chapter 2, “third-wave feminism” challenged the earlier feminist view of universal experiences for all women, claiming that this idea reflected white middle-class Western women’s experiences only. The call for a more comprehensive critical power analysis than those

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<sup>99</sup> I deliberately did not include people with a history of religious conversion, since I thought this might complicate the material in a way that did not accord with my primary aim. Still, I was unaware that one of the participants appeared to have been converted – from Roman Catholicism to the Church of Norway (Lutheran).

<sup>100</sup> See Chapter 4, p. 127 ff.

based on gender as the only variable opened up the way for the concept of intersectional analysis. In intersectional analysis different identities and backgrounds that could be *separate* reasons for discrimination are viewed together in order to explore how the different factors relate in different kinds of oppression (McCall 2005: 1771). Intersectional analysis aims at showing how the various factors causing oppression work together: Are they cumulative? Or does one of the identities play a different role in a certain discourse of power/lack of power?

After having said all this, why *did* I select only women as participants? The simple answer is that I was interested in what women had to say about the texts. The texts speak about women: What do women have to say about the texts?

The complicated answer has to do with the traditional gendered power structures in the Christian and Islamic traditions. Men have been the dominant textual interpreters in both traditions. This is due to their privileged access to education and knowledge, but most of all because the positions having authority to interpret and to decide what are legitimate interpretations were mostly reserved for men. In order to make room for women's voices, women's interpretations, and to involve women in negotiations on the authority to interpret, it is necessary to implement what the feminist postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak would call "strategic essentialism" (Spivak 1993). Strategic essentialism involves making a strategic choice regarding the essence of something and should not be confused with *ontological* essentialism. Essentialism is based on strategy, not theory. The reason for doing this, according to Spivak, is to create a space that makes it possible to work for contextual changes for feminism and against sexism. This space should be specific in its aims in order to avoid a confirmation and reinvention of the fixed binary gender system. To avoid the latter, Spivak insists that this praxis must be self-critical and conscious about its strategic aims.<sup>101</sup>

The social theorist bell hooks discusses the same dilemma. This is the dilemma that exists between the need to fight injustice created by essentialism and at the same time to have to use identification with a particular group to be able to make one's claims and address the injustice directed toward a person as member of a particular group, such as African Americans in the USA (hooks 1990: 29). In hook's reasoning, the anti-essentialism among postmodern theorists may *undermine* the needed agency for change for underprivileged groups.

My choice to put together a group of participants consisting only of women is consistent with the Spivakian concept of strategic essentialism, if her requirement of having a self-critical approach, and a strategic aim, is interpreted as directed toward me as a researcher and not to the participants. This means that I must bear in mind that the work I do in this project is embedded in

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<sup>101</sup> Spivak emphasizes that her term "strategic essentialism" should not be misused to reintroduce essentialism as a goal through the back door. The *aim* for strategic essentialism should not be hidden at any time but displayed openly and integrated in a process of creating more consciousness.

specific binary systems, and that I should include a self-critical reflection on how my theoretical and methodological choices affect my analysis of differences in order to avoid a fixed essentialism to be reestablished through my research.

### ***What Did the Participants Think about Being Only Women?***

I asked the participants at the last meeting about *their* reflections on being a part of a group consisting only of women. Aira (Sunni Muslim with a Pakistani-Norwegian background) stated that she believed that the fact that the group consisted only of women had created more openness within the group. She believed it had reduced the risk of being misinterpreted and created an opportunity to talk in peace and quiet. She highlighted, however, that drawing conclusions and implementations of changes was impossible without the collaboration of men and that it was important to communicate the results of the group to men. This comes close, I believe, to the Spivak's notion of "strategic essentialism."

Eva (Lutheran Christian, Norwegian background) claimed that if there had been men in the group, "they would have dominated us – at least they would have tried to do so." She emphasized, however, that it was important to remember that women's issues in the Norwegian society were addressed and fought for by men first. Maria (Lutheran Christian, African-Norwegian background) thought it would have been interesting if men had attended as well. She claimed that women's issues regarding minority groups in Norway is typically very concerned about women, forgetting about immigrant men and *their* needs. Inger (Lutheran Christian, Norwegian background) stated that "it was right to have this as a women's group" and that women had some common experiences that they needed to articulate. Inger, too, claimed that it was important to communicate the interpretations of the group to "the right men," meaning challenging men with an *oppressive* interpretation of the texts.

When the participants discussed this, they also reflected on their religious context. Maria claimed that she believed the developments to be generally positive for women: even if things were proceeding slowly, they were still moving in the right direction in Norway. She added that her African background could be the reason why she viewed the situation in Norway more positively than she felt the other participants did. She stated: "I view this more positively than you because you are a bit spoiled, to put it that way. You have female ministers and all that, and then I think: Oh! How nice it is here that it's like that!"

Thus, all said that they preferred a women's group to a gender-mixed group in the project, except Maria. Inger was the only one who suggested gender-specific experiences as a reason for a separate group of women. The importance of communicating and working with men toward change, however, was emphasized. I will return in the analysis to looking at the participants on gender, texts, and contexts, and how they view their own agency.

## **Ethical Perspectives**

This project was approved by NSD, the Norwegian Social Science Data Services, and follows the procedures required by this institution regarding research ethics and safeguarding personal information about the participants.

### ***Anonymity and Confidentiality***

The participants were granted anonymity. Full anonymity is, however, difficult to obtain, since people who know some of the participants may recognize them in the text if they add up all the information revealed about them. The real names of the participants have been changed in this study. Two of them took the opportunity they were given to pick their own pseudonyms while the others are given a name by me.<sup>102</sup> The names I selected are picked to give a cultural and religious connotation to their religious and cultural backgrounds.

Revealing other information about the participants, such as country of origin, place of work, exact age, etc., is generalized into less traceable information. The participants with East African and Middle Eastern backgrounds are not presented with their specific country of origin, because the number of people in their category within Norway is small. The Iranian-Norwegian participant was given the right to edit her statements throughout the process with a view to the safety of her family and friends in a currently unstable Iran (2010).

One of the participants wanted to appear in the dissertation with her real name. I found this difficult to grant, given that it was not the same praxis for all. This does, however, raise an ethical question: Why should participants in a research project not get credit for their contributions if they invest a large amount of time and effort, sharing knowledge and experience crucial for the research? It would be interesting to follow a discussion on this issue, which I believe belongs to the field of research ethics as well. If I chose not to do so, it was, in addition to what I mentioned above, because the researcher is responsible for the study and its outcome. It may be difficult for a participant to overview the possible consequences of a study, and a participant should not be held accountable for the researcher's analysis, over which the participant has no control.

### ***My Role***

Qualitative research is not an objective activity; it always implies selection of material, methods, and theory, and relates to at least one, usually several, discourses of power. The researcher is not a *tabula rasa* but is shaped through her experiences, background, opinions, and perspectives. The

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<sup>102</sup> I wanted the names to be an issue they could decide if they wanted, in order to give them a subjective influence on something as personal as a name is, even in a confidential research process.



challenge is to make the subjective elements a resource, rather than a weakness creating blind spots. This demands a self-reflexive process by the researcher, being able to be transparent and conscious about her situated role and work.

Throughout this project, I had more than one role. The most important one was to be a researcher, but in order to conduct the study I was also the organizer of the meetings, as well as moderator at half of the meetings. There are two areas where my role is particularly important as a subject for discussion. The first is my presence and sometimes my role as moderator at the meetings. The second has to do with conducting the analysis of the material, as a person with a particular background. I am a Norwegian Christian, trained as a theologian, as well as a known participator in Muslim-Christian dialogues/encounters in Norway for the “insiders.” Obviously, I have perspectives and experiences that were quite important with respect to how the study was conducted. The participants knew about my background. I found that my background in dialogue work was both an advantage and a burden. The advantage was the experience of interpreting encounters like this and being able to make theoretical and methodological choices with a basis in practical dialogue work. The burden – and disadvantage – was that I could not freely take part in the process and could not get involved in a real encounter with the participants myself.

During the meetings of the group I did not enter into conversations or ask questions related to the texts or the participants’ discussions about texts and contexts. Given the main empirical material in this project, I wanted to distance myself from contributing directly. Through selecting both texts and participants, naming the project, and selecting the location of the meetings, I had decided the premises for the process. I did not intend to enter into the process itself. I articulated this to the participants, but they still asked me on a few occasions questions about the texts or other substantial issues during the meetings. I answered these questions briefly, with reference to other researchers or the religious traditions, and not with my own views. But these incidental questions showed that my withdrawal was not making me invisible in any way; my presence, even if I was inactive in the conversations, was noted and possibly influenced the participants.

To withdraw while present in a group might have a negative influence on the rest of the group, if the withdrawal is interpreted as lack of interest or creating a distance. It can also be interpreted as an act of executive power, since one does not show the vulnerability and openness needed for sharing. During the meetings, also when functioning as moderator, I brought my laptop and made notes while the others spoke. This was not primarily because I needed the notes (although they often proved useful afterwards) but because it made me visibly busy in the role of researcher and the participants would then rather address another than me.

I generally did not intervene in verbal conflicts or heated discussions. This put me in a difficult position sometimes and brought to light a problem with organizing this kind of group. I

had to break with my own habits from earlier dialogues, and my own belief in how to moderate a dialogue. The conflicts that occurred brought important information for the investigation of the participant's meaning making, and as such they were valuable as research material. At the same time I felt this to be a dilemma at times. Some of the participants may have expected me to take a more active caretaking role in the discussions.

I did, however, intervene in some of the heated discussions by asking the participants if they wanted to continue the discussion or if they wanted to spend the time differently. Sometimes they explicitly said that they wanted to go on with the discussion; other times they shifted focus. The possibility for everyone in the group to have their say became mostly a responsibility for the participants themselves, even if the chair (which was sometimes me) attempted to organize the discussions in a semi-structured way. This might have had the function of empowering some of the participants and doing the opposite to others.

The participants did make individual choices in the group process displaying consciousness of themselves as active decision makers. Examples of this are when one suggested spending some time discussing a current theme instead of the texts (Inger) and once when the ways the texts were discussed was organized a bit differently by one of the participants while moderating the meeting (Aira).

In the individual interviews and in the evaluation at the last meeting, few of the participants commented on my role. The direct comments were positive: Inger called the process democratic and said that she had felt free to speak. Others stated that the space in the group felt safe enough to share. The absent participants, however, might have had other and more critical comments on this that were never stated or heard.

My own role in analyzing the material is different from a more "classic" researcher's role in such a discussion: My background as a Christian theologian and an ordained minister in the Church of Norway means that I have a different and a much more intimate knowledge of the Christian tradition than I do of the Islamic tradition. Even if I try to compensate for this and am aware of it, it is still a premise for how I structure and analyze the material. The experiences I have with Muslim-Christian dialogues also influence the way I analyze as well as my selection of research method and theory.

## **The Empirical Material in the Study and the Analysis**

### ***Content***

The most important empirical material of this project consists of the transcriptions of the six group meetings, which amounts to around three hundred written pages. Additional material includes the individual interviews and the research log I kept during the process of the meetings.

The individual interviews and the research log will be consulted only when they illuminate the main material from the group meetings.

### *Presentation of the Empirical Material*

Through my analysis I want to show parts of the meaning-making process in a rather detailed way. The reason for this is because I find there is little empirical documentation following a process of this kind in most other research on interreligious (transreligious) hermeneutics and in women's transreligious encounters. I want to show what might lie behind theological and ethical statements about this field (transreligious relations, women's issues, and transreligious encounter including canonical scripture) in the actual conversations and reasonings of the participants.

This is why I have included selected parts of the transcriptions in the analysis (Part III and IV). The appearance of transcription material in this dissertation is rather extensive, and my reason behind this way of doing the analysis (besides documenting some of the conversations) is to make the analytical work transparent for the reader.<sup>103</sup> It is also, however, an *epistemological* choice to let the participants articulate their own viewpoints in the transcription, and I believe this influences how knowledge is signified through this study: The participants are both *knowers* and *interpreters*.

The transcriptions are structured in a particular way: they are edited into meaning bearing lines and numbered chronologically according to the participant's statements throughout the analysis. It was Catherine Riessman in her work on narrative analysis in medical anthropology (Riessman 1993) who inspired me to structure the presentation of the empirical material in this way.

This became a method for creating distance and space within the transcriptions, making them more accessible for reading, easier to refer to in the other parts of the text, and the participants' statements became more visible. The division of the transcriptions into numbered lines is part of the analytical work. After a while, I realized that the transcriptions looked almost like the traditional canonical scriptures of the Bible and the Koran, divided by numbered verses and *ayats*. The transcriptions became *my* text for "exegetical" investigation.

The transcriptions selected were the ones I considered to be the most significant discussions and conversations for further analysis. This is based on the issues coming up and how relevant I judged them to be for the subject of the study. They were also selected because of the relational dynamics.

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<sup>103</sup> Doing research on transcultural and transreligious hermeneutical processes while having a particular self-situated position as a Norwegian Christian Lutheran feminist theologian also requires transparency regarding the steps I take as researcher analyzing the material. Through the presentation of the transcriptions the reader is invited to follow the interpretative steps.

The transcriptions are organized mostly chronologically and are edited to a certain extent to keep the thread in the conversation. To structure them thematically would have allowed focusing on and illuminating specific themes. But since one of the aims of the study is to investigate meaning making in a group through *process*, the temporal dimension of the transcriptions and the chronological order makes it possible to show traces and dynamics of possible changes due to the group process.

### *The Analysis*

Although the presentation of the transcriptions is inspired by Riessman and by narrative analysis, the analysis in this study is not a narrative one. It contains elements from narrative analysis, where self-representation is seen as part of narrating and narrating is regarded as reflection on experience (Riessman 1993: 10). Narrative analysis also includes a relational aspect: as reflection on experience, stories change in relation to the listener(s), and this change may reveal information of the process of making meaning itself (Riessman 1993: 11). Narratives are thus a relational production, always situated in a relation and a context. These insights from narrative analysis are reflected in the analysis.

But the participants express themselves not only through narratives; they also use arguments and conduct argumentative discussions. They present their analyses of texts, contexts, power relations, and their own agencies. Discourse analysis could have been a possible tool for analyzing this part of the material. With its focus on power and power structures within meaning producing discourses, using the term “discourse” about a particular way of articulating and understanding the world (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips 1999: 9), discourse analysis is a method for disclosing the relation between making meaning and power. This is, however, too narrow a focus on this material if this method is the only one used. Several discourses are represented in the material, and the discursive struggles within which the participants would be involved (within the group in various contexts in which they participate such as their own religious communities) are complex. To show this complexity is important in this study, but at the same time it means that it would be reductionist to frame the meaning making in the group as a representation of one particular discourse. It is rather an encounter between several discourses, which means that the instability is too high for conducting a discourse analysis on the material. However, the analysis in this study is concerned with power and power criticism and shares the position of both narrative analysis and discourse analysis that the articulating subject is always to be understood in relation (narrative analysis) or decentered (in discourse analysis) (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips 1999: 24). This entails that the subject never produces meaning independently but is always part of a discourse. On the other hand, along with with feminist researchers (and others) using discourse analysis in their work, I find that reproducing discourses

always includes subjects as individuals (still always in relation) negotiating and possibly transforming discourses and creating new ones (Søndergaard 2000: 67). The Foucault-inspired fragmenting of power into discursive negotiable fields without larger structures of power beyond smaller discourses are criticized by many, including many feminists, who argue that larger structures that reproduce inequalities of power still exist (Woodhead 2007: 567).

The analysis in this study is influenced both by narrative analysis and discourse analysis, but the latter is used mostly as a useful methodological and theoretical *context*, and not as a method of analysis as such. The operative tools in the form of questions and themes are based on the theoretical and methodological frameworks in chapter 2 and 3. The analytical operations are based on the premises of reflexive interpretation and look for the appearance (and disappearance) of various communicative events in the material: interpreting communities, articulated coevalness, and moments marked by dialogue. It will search for different meaning-making strategies in the texts and see if these strategies change throughout the group process. Through investigating the meaning making of both texts *and* contexts, I will look for a possible emergence of a transcontextual space, a “third place” as a platform for a shared agency. The overall meaning given to the presence of the texts and negotiations of the meaning of context(s) and gender are on-going perspectives. In the concluding part (part IV) these findings will be discussed with the overall aims of the study (see the part I) and with the two models of transreligious dialogue/encounter: “difference as constitutive” and “difference as challenge.”

### *The Structure of the Analysis*

The analysis is organized into ten discussions, based on the transcriptions from four of the meetings: the first discussion concerns the participant’s general view of the Bible and the Koran, then four discussions follow that are connected to the Hagar/Hajar narratives, and five to the prescriptive texts. The presentation of the selected transcriptions is analyzed successively. After each of the ten discussions and the accompanied analyses, I address the most important analytical findings in broader discussions with the theoretical and methodological frameworks. The most significant findings in the analysis are addressed in Part V (Chapter 7).

**Part III:****Situating the Bible, the Koran, and the *Hadith*:  
Readings of the Hagar/Hajar Narratives**

## Chapter 4: Sharing Images and Experiences of the Koran and the Bible

The first meeting in the group produced an atmosphere of curiosity. Maria (African-Norwegian, Catholic and Lutheran background) said at the end of the meeting that she felt that the participants were characterized by openness, which made her feel that people had been saying what they really meant. Nine of the ten participants were present. They all spoke for about twenty minutes about themselves, their background, their work, and family life, and their personal reflections on religion. The group also decided on two matters of methodological procedure in the process. First, there was a mutual agreement not to share personal information revealed at the meetings to outsiders, although it was acceptable to share reflections on the process itself. Second, it was agreed that to hold a group meeting at least two Christians and two Muslims had to be present.

Some of the participants shared views on the Bible and/or the Koran at the first meeting. These views were often rooted in their experiences as readers. Inger (Norwegian, Lutheran) stated that she preferred not to read the Bible by herself in private but to listen to others explaining and preaching on the text in a church setting. Susanne (Norwegian, Lutheran) concurred with this. Rima (Arab-Norwegian, Roman Catholic) stated that she had started to read the Old Testament as a young woman, and then stopped reading it because she found it depressing. Eva (Norwegian, Lutheran) distinguished between the Old and the New Testaments and claimed that the Old Testament was “not to be recommended for sensitive souls,” whereas she, on the other hand, embraced the New Testament because it was about Jesus Christ. Maria emphasized that her favorite story in the Bible was the narrative about Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

Senait (Pakistani-Norwegian, Sunni Muslim), Aira (Pakistani-Norwegian, Sunni Muslim) Shirin (Iranian-Norwegian, Shia Muslim) and Fouzia (Pakistani-Norwegian, Sunni Muslim) said that they read the Koran regularly, since it was an important part of their lives. They displayed differences in how they related to the Koran: Fouzia emphasized the usefulness of the Koran in practical matters, as a concrete guide for everyday life. Senait focused on how the Koran could help women obtain their rights. Shirin stated that her experience of reading the Koran was that her understanding of the texts was changing all the time. Aira took the Islamic perspective of “the people of the book”<sup>104</sup> to say that she believed that, although there were differences, the

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<sup>104</sup> The Islamic tradition refers to Jews and Christians as “the people of the book” (Waines 2003: 14 ).

three religions all had texts. Her suggestion of a joint challenge was “to see how texts can help us, rather than hinder us.”

This short introduction to the broader discussion on the canonical scriptures seems to reflect the difference between the status of the Bible in the Christian tradition (represented by Lutherans and Roman Catholics) and the position of the Koran in Islam. The Christians, both Lutherans and Roman Catholics, appeared to be rather reluctant and selective in their use of the Bible, and most of them said that their religious practice was not based on individual Bible reading. Eva and Maria were the exceptions: they explicitly valued parts of the biblical text and claimed that they were important to them. The Muslims, on the other hand, stated that they feel a strong connection with the Koran and used it as a guide, as a communicative link to the canonical scripture of the religious traditions of all “the peoples of the book,” as a text that could be interpreted and reinterpreted and as a possible aid in improving the situations of women.

At the second meeting I asked the participants to share brief reflections on their experiences of reading the Bible and the Koran.<sup>105</sup> My question was not specified in such a way that I asked the Christian participants to talk about the Bible and the Muslim participants to talk about the Koran. Even if this was the pattern that would unfold through the shared reflections, I wanted to open the group up to cross-reflections if they occurred. The intention behind my question was twofold: to map existing general views on the Bible and the Koran so that it would be possible later to see how and if they were applied to actual texts, and to start a process of sharing knowledge and reflection within the group to prepare for later work on specific texts. Later in this meeting the conversation moved on to discussing the Hagar/Hajar narratives in the Bible and the *hadith*.

A complex conversation took place in the further discussion of the theme in the second meeting. The conversation went in different directions. For some of the participants, the most important matter turned out to be how to discuss rather than focusing on matters related directly to the Bible/Koran and the relation between them.

### **Is it OK to Leave the Bible on the Floor? Different Understandings of Materiality and Respect for the Bible and the Koran**

The physical aspect of the holiness of the Koran and the ritual dimension of reading it were thematized by Fouzia’s contribution.

Fouzia1:           Ok. Let’s take a look at how...

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<sup>105</sup> The question was also formulated in the invitation to this second meeting.



- Fouzia2: We have a lot of respect for the Koran.  
 Fouzia3: We need to prepare ourselves mentally when we are going to read it.  
 Fouzia4: I believe we need to go and wash ourselves and make ourselves clean before we touch it.

Fouzia speaks in terms of a “we,” referring to Muslims in general. She positions herself to speak on behalf of the Islamic tradition. The practice she refers to is *wudu*, the Islamic custom of ritual ablution before praying and touching the Koran (Esposito 2003: 341). She defines *wudu* as an act expressing respect. Then she shares a narrative:

- Fouzia5: Several years ago I had a Christian living with me.  
 Fouzia6: And suddenly she put the Bible on the floor.  
 Fouzia7: And when I went into her room I took the Bible and lifted it above my head ....  
 Fouzia8: [S]he got angry with me and said: “Why do you come into my room just like that?”  
 Fouzia9: “But you left your Bible on the floor.”  
 Fouzia10: “Look at my Koran. Because I have such respect for it I don’t leave it behind me, I will not put it ....”  
 Fouzia11: But then she said it’s only a book. It’s only paper and texts  
 Fouzia12: We pay respect to that.  
 Fouzia13: Reading the Koran gives us a lot of mental energy. I experience that when I have problems.  
 Fouzia14: When I am involved in a conflict, the first thing I do is to wash myself and then read.  
 Fouzia15: Then I feel I’m very close to God, that he’s listening to me.

Fouzia contrasts her own respect for the Koran *and* the Bible with what she perceived to be a Christian’s disrespect for the Bible. According to this narrative, Fouzia acted to stop disrespectful treatment of the Bible, and she used her own relation to the Koran as a model for how her housemate should treat her Bible. Fouzia’s act crossed religious lines and entailed entering another person’s private space without being invited. The question is: Why does Fouzia act like this? The narrative does not give a complete answer to that question. Does Fouzia act on her own behalf because she wanted to safeguard respectful treatment of the Bible in her surroundings? Or does Fouzia act on what she found to be in her Christian housemate’s best interest, namely to protect her from acting disrespectfully toward the Bible? If it is the former,

she is motivated by her own religious tradition to ensure that the Bible would be treated with the same signs of respect that she used to treat the Koran because of the Bible's position in the Islamic tradition. If it is the latter, she used her own religious patterns of behavior to correct the act of a believer from a different religious tradition.

The conclusion of the narrative has the form of a testimony (Fouzia13-15). By performing the testimony Fouzia returns to the here and now of the group and leaves the time of the narrative behind.

Then Fouzia shares another narrative, which is considerably longer:

- Fouzia16: I have a short story if I may .... I told it to a client.
- Fouzia17: There was a woman who had come from Pakistan. This was a couple of years ago.
- Fouzia18: Before she arrived here, her daughter died, sixteen years old, two days before they arrived in Norway.
- Fouzia19: She did not see her daughter one last time; she was busy meeting the guests who came by.
- Fouzia20: When she came here, she lived close to me, and I could hear her crying at her window every day.
- Fouzia21: One day I rang her doorbell and I asked her: "What is the matter with you? I can hear you crying from my house."
- Fouzia22: Then she told me that she had lost her daughter.
- Fouzia23: Then I asked her: "Why don't you pray for her?"
- Fouzia24: "I do pray. I am sitting here on my sofa praying."
- Fouzia25: Then I said: "Do you know what? Right now it's not prayer time, but if you wait for an hour, it will be. Then, you go and wash yourself."
- Fouzia26: The doctors here in Norway had tried everything. She had ... but it didn't help her.
- Fouzia27: Then I said: "I will pray, and then you can pray together with me."
- Fouzia28: Then she went and took a shower.
- Fouzia29: And I said: "Now you can pray. God will listen to you. He will not hear you if you are sitting on that sofa. You have to be clean in order for God to listen to you. You have to show him respect, that you are ... clean and close to God in order to speak with him. Then he will care."
- Fouzia30: She had been crying; her husband was upset because she did not take care of ....

- Fouzia31: Suddenly, she started praying. She was sitting on the carpet and started to cry.
- Fouzia32: Suddenly, she sat down on the sofa and said: “Now I feel more complete. God listened to me.”
- Fouzia33: Then she asked: “When is the next prayer time?” After this she started to pray five times a day.
- Fouzia34: And she started to look after her children and her husband and became an ordinary housewife once again.
- Fouzia35: She told me some weeks ago: “God can hear you everywhere, Fouzia It was what you told me, that God does not listen if I .... So I just have to go and wash myself, and then he will listen.”
- Fouzia36: He is everywhere. Of course he is everywhere. He can hear us.
- Fouzia37: It is how you think about it ... the situations ....
- Fouzia38: The Koran gives us an understanding of other religions. It is only the Koran that tells about other religions and other prophets coming to the world. It also tells a lot more. And I think we show respect for other prophets.
- Fouzia39: There is not much about previous religions in Christianity.
- Fouzia40: And the Koran gives us guidance about how to solve all our problems, solutions for everything between birth and death. So we can find ... we will get answers from it.
- Fouzia41: But when I read the old version of the Bible I found it a lot easier to understand, to compare it to what the Koran says about women. In the old version there are a lot of similarities. But in the new version the words and the content have been changed more.

This narrative, as told, contains multiple messages. First, Fouzia shows that she is deliberately using the narrative form to share experience and knowledge with the group (Fouzia16). She asks for permission to tell the story, showing her own awareness of the others as *audience*. Fouzia16 indicates that she had told the story before, to a client. The narrative is thus not any narrative but has most likely been used earlier as a means to share experience and knowledge. This suggests that Fouzia is familiar with expressing her experience and knowledge through narratives, and this seems to be the way she prefers to share her views with this group too.

The narrative has several pedagogical points, if read as an educational narrative: it emphasizes the importance of ritual ablution in Islamic religious practice (Fouzia25, 29, 35). The Islamic prayer to which the narrative refers is the ritual prayer, *salah*, which requires ritual ablution, and the prayer ceremony includes reading the Koran (Waines 2003: 24).<sup>106</sup> The narrative provides an image of God as a close and caring listener if the ritual ablution is followed (Fouzia29, 35). This is exemplified by the woman Fouzia is helping in the story (Fouzia32-35).

Fouzia35-36 do, however, underline that God's presence is not spatially limited to ritually clean spaces. God as the listener and the helper is established in the narrative through *wudu* and *salah* (including reading the Koran) but also as context-sensitive with respect to the believer's situation. God can help when the Norwegian doctors cannot (Fouzia26).

Fouzia's narrative ends with a conclusion about the Bible and the Koran, taking the listeners and the narrator back to the here and now (Fouzia38-41). This includes a testimony about the inclusiveness of the Koran to other faiths, and the koranic message about respecting other prophets than Muhammad. Christianity, not the Bible, is set up as a negative counterpart, according to Fouzia, without reference to other religious traditions. The Bible is mentioned in Fouzia41, where Fouzia talks about the old and new *versions* of the Bible. The old version is presented as having a great deal in common with the Koran, whereas the new differs more.

Fouzia's statement about the Bible could be referring to the Islamic dogma of *tahrif*, according to which an originally divinely revealed text has been corrupted and changed by humans into a new text not to be regarded as divine (Muslim-Christian Research Group 1989: 78-79). According to this dogma, the original Jewish and Christian scriptures are viewed as having been tampered with by Jews and Christians (Leirvik 2006: 132-133), and could represent the new version to which Fouzia is referring.<sup>107</sup> "The old version" would then mean the uncorrupted biblical scriptures, according to the dogma of *tahrif*, which are different from the Christian and Jewish scriptures as they appear today. A different interpretation of Fouzia's reference to the old and new versions of the Bible would be that she simply means the Old and New Testaments.

Through telling this narrative, Fouzia establishes a direct position for herself as a narrator to the group. She also shows the group her position as an educator and a helper within the

<sup>106</sup> The personal prayer in the Islamic religious tradition, *dua*, does not require ritual ablution (Waines 2003: 92).

<sup>107</sup> The Islamic dogma of *tahrif* has played a problematic role in Muslim polemics on the Christian canonical scriptures, and may pose a challenge to Muslim-Christian dialogue about the Bible and the Koran. Leirvik finds the dogma of *tahrif* on the one hand and the inclusive teaching concerning Christians (together with the Jews) as "people of the book" on the other as representing a tension within the Islamic tradition on how to relate to Christian canonical scriptures (Leirvik 2006:133). The challenge posed by the dogma of *tahrif* for Muslim-Christian relations has to do with the question of who has the right to define the canonical scriptures of a tradition as "true" or hold them to be "falsified." This may have a parallel in the view of Muhammad in the Christian tradition: Is he to be regarded as a prophet or not?

narrative she shares. This narrative gives a message through a positive example, in contrast to the earlier story about the Christian woman who left the Bible on the floor, illustrating a point through a negative example. The conclusion of Fouzia's narrative seems to have a certain apologetic character if she is referring to the dogma of *tahrif*.

Fouzia's two narratives marked the start of an intense discussion between some of the participants. Susanne and Eva immediately ask for a clarification of what Fouzia said about the old and new versions of the Bible: Did she mean the Old and New Testaments? After some questions, Fouzia says that she was talking about the Old and the New Testaments, but she still makes the point that the new version has been changed compared to the content of the Koran. Both interpretations mentioned above thus seem to be possible.

Eva is the one who is most provoked by Fouzia:

- Eva1: Yes, I can see that we have quite different understandings about the holy book ... because the Bible is holy for me too, in particular the Gospels ... they are about Jesus Christ.
- Eva2: I can leave the Bible on the floor; it's not very practical, but I can do it, and it has nothing to do with my respect for the Bible.
- Eva3: There is one thing I am very afraid of, and I think most Christians are, and that is magic.
- Eva4: So when you say that if you wash your hands, Allah will listen to you ... I'm almost provoked by that
- Eva5: because I think that a person who is devastated does not need to wash her hands first and only then will Allah listen.
- Eva6: This is a kind of external gesture that almost becomes like magic
- Eva7: because God is there all the time. I can pray to God without a prayer mat and I think I could be made dirty by anything, and God will hear me.
- Eva8: The more miserable I am, I would almost say, the less money I have for buying carpets, and the less opportunity I have to wash myself the closer God is to me. Because then I am a poor human being in need of God's help.

Eva's statement in Eva2 reveals a difference between her notion of respect and Fouzia's. Eva dissolves the connection established by Fouzia between holiness, respect, and the physical treatment of the Bible (and of the Koran). For Eva, respect is primarily connected with inner thoughts and feelings. Eva articulates that the most holy part of the Bible for her is the gospels in the New Testament because "they are about Jesus Christ" (Eva1). The *content* is decisive in her

evaluation of the texts as holy or not, and she does not talk about the holiness of the Bible as a physical book.

Eva proceeds by directly criticizing Fouzia. She accuses her indirectly of arguing for a magical relation between religious practice and achieving a wanted result (Eva3-4). She views the religious ritual of *wudu*, or Fouzia's representation of it, as a magic ritual, followed by stating a warning against magic.

While Fouzia expresses herself mostly through narratives, Eva communicates in an argumentative manner. The pedagogical points in Fouzia's narratives are criticized (Eva4-6, Eva8), and Eva speaks partly on behalf of "most Christians" (Eva3) and on behalf of the Islamic tradition when in Eva4 and 5 she makes claims about Allah. The group, both Christians and Muslims, usually uses the word "God," as Eva usually does as well. The use of "Allah" could be an act of distancing and a way of making it obvious that she is referring to Fouzia's presentation of the Islamic image of God with which she disagrees.

Eva acknowledges that different views of what she calls "the holy book" (in singular) exist within the group (Eva1). It is not clear if she is referring only to the Bible or to "a holy book" in a more general sense. Eva does not explain what she believes the differences to be nor does she evaluate them. But through her contribution as a whole, she contrasts Fouzia's narratives with her own belief in a God and Allah who listens without paying any attention to rituals, that respect and holiness have nothing to do with outward gestures, and that her own religious practice is based on the opposite correlation: the more the external frames are absent, the more God listens.

But Eva7 and Fouzia36 give almost the exact same image of God: omnipresent, listening to people everywhere and in all situations. Eva does not comment on this aspect of Fouzia's contribution. In Eva's verbal response, it is the *differences* between the two that are highlighted and accentuated. Both Fouzia and Eva are polemical in their communication, making a statement on behalf of the religious other or the other religious tradition in order to make things "right" according to their own standards. Fouzia does this indirectly through the message of her first narrative when she rescues the Bible from the floor where a Christian has put it, and Eva does it when she states that Fouzia's presentation of the Islamic godhead is wrong.

Eva continues:

- Eva9:           About the Bible, to me, the Old Testament ... it is not for me as a Christian, it is the background for Jesus and very interesting to read.
- Eva10:          But I see very clearly what it is that is new about Christianity, and that is when Jesus, for instance, says that the Sabbath is there for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath,

- Eva11: that means that humans are at the center. Not the laws. The laws serve humans, humans do not serve the laws.
- Eva12: And we are even liberated in Christ, we are liberated from these laws.
- Eva13: And you, now you say that in the Koran there are answers to all the questions of life. Is it an answer in the Koran when someone kind of opens it up that the answer will be right there?
- Eva14: If so, it is just like the Old Testament, and then one has the Torah, right, but it is not like that in the New Testament: there we have perfection.
- Eva15: That means the fulfillment of all the commandments: That you shall love the Lord your God and your neighbor as yourself. And that gives the answer to all life's situations.
- Eva16: This means that the individual has to think, that you have to use your head, and you have to think: What does it mean for me in this situation to be a neighbor for my fellow humans? What does it mean to love God in this situation?
- Eva17: Then it becomes what you said: the human being is made responsible.
- Eva18: I cannot point at one thing in the law, and then kind of follow it ... this is exactly what Jesus does not do, Jesus shows all the time that the human being is above the law.
- Eva19: And this is what I think is very different. That the Old Testament and the Law are very much alike in Judaism and Islam, but Christianity is different.
- Eva20: Because in Christianity, humans are made responsible and stand close to God in a way, and it is not these outward gestures that matter. What matters is the inner, spiritual life.

Eva argues for a sharp distinction within the Bible: the Old Testament is merely a background text, whereas the New Testament represents a completely new type of religion (Eva9-10, Eva19). She calls the New Testament “perfection” (Eva14). Eva’s argument is based on an interpretative position toward the Bible, considering the portrayal of Jesus and his sayings in the New Testament to be the hermeneutical key, the center through which everything should be interpreted. This is the classical Lutheran dogma of the biblical interpretation of the Law and the Gospel, as well as a Christocentric interpretation (Ulstein 2006: 110-111).

Eva juxtaposes the Old Testament, Judaism, and Islam (Eva19), stating that they all represent religious practices that are preoccupied with religious *laws*, unlike Christianity, which is concerned with *people*. The distinction Eva makes is based on her view of the difference

between casuistic jurisprudence (which Eva claims to be represented by the Old Testament, Judaism, and Islam) and more general ethical rules in religious practice (Eva claims that this is what the New Testament presents). Eva's proclamation of the uniqueness of Christianity and Christ is not only based on a positive presentation of Christian tradition and the New Testament but is also marked by a negative representation of the Old Testament, Judaism, and Islam.

Eva constructs a uniqueness of Christianity that consists of the following: humans as the center of religion (Eva11), "the golden rule"<sup>108</sup> (Eva15), human reason and responsibility, and proximity of humans to God. Within Eva's contribution, however, there are traces that she may have been influenced by two of the Muslim participants' earlier statements. First, Eva emphasizes human reasoning (Eva16). Aira told a story at the first meeting (which she will repeat several times throughout the process) about Muhammad asking a believer to use and trust his own reasoning in a situation when he could find no adequate answer in the Koran or the *hadith*. Eva may or may not have this story in mind when she emphasizes human reasoning, but her point corresponds with Aira's story. Second, Eva uses the same phrase that Fouzia used earlier about finding all the answers in the scriptures – Eva claims that she finds all the answers in "the golden rule" in the New Testament (Eva15). Influenced or not by Fouzia's earlier statements and however differently they develop this point respectively, they share the view about finding answers in the canonical scriptures.

The communication about views and experiences of the Koran and the Bible developed into a rather polemical mode of communicating. Shirin comments on the mode of communication:

- Shirin1: I must say that it would have been better if you did not talk like this because there are different opinions.
- Shirin2: You seem to have the opinion that the Koran does not make people responsible, but my opinion is that the Koran does make people responsible.
- Shirin3: You can have that opinion, but I don't think it's true.

Shirin comments not only on the content of what is being said but also addresses *how* Eva expresses her views. To articulate explicitly that one wishes something that was said not to have been said could be a rejection either of a person or of a view. But through articulating a response (Shirin1) instead of keeping silent about it, the response may contribute to the further communication process. The intention behind such a criticism could be decisive for how it

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<sup>108</sup> The Bible text referred to as the "golden rule" is Matthew 7:12 in the New Testament.



influences further communication. The speaker's evaluation of the quality of the communicative space in where the criticism is made also matters. The question is if this space is safe and sensitive enough to include criticism. Shirin1-3 may indicate that her response is so strong that she needs to articulate it in order to continue to be a subject in the communicative situation without being compromised. It can indicate that she judges the space in the group to be safe and solid enough to carry the weight of such a criticism. Shirin's possible expectations for the continued communicative process may also play a role.

Shirin's criticism of Eva consists of two main elements. First, she finds that Eva presents her views on Islam as if it was the Islamic view, presenting Islam as a monolithic, unified entity with one voice. Second, Shirin disagrees with Eva on the issue of the role of human responsibility in Islam. The latter disagreement seems to be the least problem for Shirin. She acknowledges the right and possibility of expressing different views and, based on this, claims her own right to disagree with Eva.

What Shirin initiates in this sequence is a negotiation of common communicative rules in the group.

- Eva21: No, but this is how I understand it ....
- Shirin4: You say that you understand it that way. Then you say that you think like that.
- Shirin5: Don't say that Islam says ....
- Shirin6: The way I see it, if one asks ....
- Shirin7: I'll say that you think this and that about Christianity, I don't say that Christianity is like that. Then you take responsibility for ....
- Eva22: So you say that this is "my understanding," and not the Christian understanding?
- Shirin8: It is the Christian understanding in the way you understand it.

Shirin launches the question of representation as part of the communicative process in the group: If one experiences one's religious tradition to be wrongly or inaccurately represented by another participant, who in this case belongs to a different religious tradition, this represents a challenge. The other challenge Shirin identifies as connected to the question of representation is how to present one's own tradition. The interchange between Eva and Shirin is a process of mutual clarification on the question of representation. Both Eva21 and Shirin4-7 emphasize the

personal, subjective representation in the communication. Eva22, however, reveals a critical point in the subjective representation: Does emphasizing the personal and subjective element of interpretation diminish the objective aspect of what is shared in the group? Is it possible to represent one's subjective opinions and views and a whole religious tradition at the same time? Shirin's answer (Shirin8) is inclusive. She links the tradition and the personal interpretation of the tradition together, suggesting a communication that entails distinguishing between but not separating the subjective and the objective in the representation.

Shirin is, however, clear about a communicative request for Eva in Shirin5. In Shirin's view, Eva should be more careful when framing the Islamic tradition. Shirin does not exemplify this further or say that Eva's representation of Islam was estranging her as a Muslim believer. Instead, she uses the example of how she herself interprets Eva's representation of the Christian tradition: she does not generalize about the Christian tradition based on Eva's representation of that tradition (Shirin7).

The problems Shirin addresses represent a further step in her negotiations on how the communication in the group should unfold. How is one to represent one's own tradition and to talk about the tradition of the other is a practical (and a methodological) matter in cross-religious and cross-cultural communication. But it is also an ethical matter and touches on the question of how to relate ethically to differences when communicating. The ethical aspect may be implied in Shirin's further reflection (Shirin13).

- Rima1: Do you know what I think? I think it's time to stop and go back to what Islam says and what Christianity says.
- Shirin9: Yes, it is ....
- Rima2: It's time to interpret.
- Shirin10: Christianity says, Islam says .... Isn't it better to say: I am a Muslim and I think in this way.
- Shirin11: I want to do it that way during the time we spend together. I think that is a better way. As a Muslim, as a Christian, I ....
- Eva23: So I should say: This is the way I see it; this is the way I understand Christianity. This is the way you want me to put it?

- Shirin12: As a Christian, you cannot ... I don't know ... It is better you say "as a Christian," and I say "as a Muslim," she says as a Muslim.
- Shirin13: I suggest that this is the best way to do it. Then we take responsibility for ourselves, not for the others.
- Shirin14: After she has written the book,<sup>109</sup> she will not come to you and say: Why did you say that about Christianity? I don't perceive it that way. Or somebody will come to her and say: Why did you say that about Islam?
- Shirin15: As a Muslim, I say this, and this is where I stand. You, in particular, say all the time "Christians say,".... I say as a Christian person, you understand it in this way.

The discussion is extended to include more than one issue when Rima enters the conversation, suggesting a change of perspective. She suggests returning to discussing issues of the Islamic and Christian tradition (Rima2), leaving the discussion about communicative moods behind.

Shirin nevertheless continues to clarify her views in Shirin10-15, suggesting how one should represent one's religious tradition in the communication process (Shirin10): the subjective, personal element should be acknowledged and included in the representations. This emphasizes the *interpretative element* in communicating a religious faith as part of a religious tradition. Shirin claims that there is a personal responsibility connected to representation in the communication (Shirin13), and thus turning the question of representation into an ethical one. She exemplifies the responsibility by stating her views on how one should represent one's own tradition: as an individual and not as if one speaks on behalf of the whole tradition (Shirin15). In this way she opens up the way for a plurality of representations of the religious traditions, possibly seeking to establish a space for her individual interpretations. As a Shia Muslim, Shirin represents a minority, both within the group and among Norwegian Muslims. A minority position may encourage one to work for spaces of plurality, where the majorities do not overrule or dominate the minorities or people are defined as "different" (Gressgård 2005: 170-171). Shirin has some former experience with transreligious and transcultural dialogue and may be drawing on this to articulate her suggestions for the mode of communication in the group (Shirin12-13).

The subjective aspect of communication has various positions in different models of transreligious dialogues.<sup>110</sup> If a dialogue is structured along multiculturalist-type patterns in its view of differences, the space for subjective interpretations of one's religious traditions may be

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<sup>109</sup> This is a reference to the researcher.

<sup>110</sup> See the two models of transreligious dialogue proposed in Chapter 2, p. 60-65.

more limited. The representation of a religious tradition is expected to be less fluid than fixed, viewed from both the inside and the outside of a tradition. To keep close to the authoritative mainstream interpretation of the traditions may be an aim in itself if one is concerned with stability and maintaining religious boundaries. This would affect how one presents one's tradition and how one addresses the other traditions. In dialogues closer to a cultural complexity view of differences, the subjective, personal interpretation is given more space, possibly at the expense of the legitimized representation of religious traditions. In the above sequence it may seem that Rima expresses a wish to leave a subjective discussion and enter into communication on other issues more directly connected to the content of the traditions. Still, she is concerned with *interpretation* of the traditions and thus seems to include the subjective element in her suggestion of a new turn in the conversation.

Shirin appeals to the framework of the study and to the researcher in her argumentation (Shirin14), in the hope, perhaps, of gaining support from me in the discussion. But more likely (since I explicitly stated that I would not take part in the discussion) this is an attempt to bring about a meta-reflection: It would not be right to give the researcher responsibility for what the participants said. The personal responsibility to speak for oneself thus exceeds the conversation here and now and is claimed to be a general principle.

Eva's question to Shirin (Eva23) indicates that there is communication between them, since Eva seems to check to see if she had understood Shirin's suggestion about communication correctly. Shirin criticizes Eva personally in Shirin15 and contrasts Eva's behavior with her own example. A polemical discussion that started on theological issues and continued as a discussion about communication mode in the group turns personal.

- Rima3: But some things are like a general truth, such as Jesus encouraging us to forgive and to revolt. That is a truth; it is an important part of Jesus.
- Rima4: This is not a question about her understanding or mine.
- Shirin16: No. I believe that all the religions of the book encourage us to do this.
- Shirin17: Personally, I become provoked when somebody claims that these are Christian values.
- Shirin18: I am a Muslim because I have heard this many times, and it is not right, and it is not the truth. Because all religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, have had the same values, until now.

Shirin19: If something gradually happened throughout history, OK, we can sit down and discuss it. But if one says “Christian values” all the time I become provoked. I don’t like that.

Right after this sequence I intervened and asked the group if they wanted to continue the discussion. I was not sure if everyone felt included in the rather heated discussion and decided to ask what they wanted. Aira said she believed the discussion was important, and should continue. Everyone seemed to agree with her, and so the discussion went on.

Rima tries once again to change the direction of the discussion, this time more directly toward an objective level of discussing the content of the religious traditions (Rima3-4). She challenges Shirin’s emphasis on the personal and subjective and claims to need to include an objective level of truth. This is a more open challenge about the mode of the encounter, suggesting that the religious traditions should be introduced in a different way, as substance, not only as references.

Shirin, while still in the discussion on representation, responds to what she probably perceives to be Rima’s claiming of “forgiveness and revolt” (Rima3) as exclusively Christian. There is nothing in Rima’s sayings that indicate such a claim, but the two of them address different themes in the same conversation, making the communication vulnerable to misunderstanding. Eva was the one claiming Christian uniqueness earlier in the conversation with Fouzia (Eva14 and 19). The process of communication has a certain cumulative character: what was said earlier influences how later sayings are interpreted and the succeeding communication.

Shirin refers to former experiences of the same kind: Christians (and/or possibly others) who claim values to be exclusive to their tradition, while Muslims (and people of other religious traditions) who recognize the same values within their tradition are not acknowledged. Her response, however, is not to quarrel about whether the values in question are Christian or Muslim but to claim that they are shared by many. She regards the values to be common ground rather than exclusively belonging to one tradition. If Christians, on behalf of their religious tradition, claim exclusiveness of values such as forgiveness, Shirin experiences this as an exclusion of her as a Muslim from having the same values and implying a wrong conception of Islam. Again, the question of representation is addressed but from another angle. Claiming specific values exclusively to represent a particular religious tradition leads to a mistaken representation of the other traditions:

- Shirin20: I just have to say this. It is not the first time I hear this. I have heard this many, many times.
- Shirin21: Now, we are friends here, aren't we? I don't want to leave. That is why I say out loud that I don't like this.
- Shirin22: Because I believe that all the religions have arisen for the same reason, that they are all equal.

Shirin poses a challenge addressed to the other participants in Shirin21. This leads the discussion about modes of communication to a further question about social relations. Shirin suggests the notion of *friendship* to describe the social relations in the group. Her articulated qualification of friendship includes the possibility of speaking out about what is on one's mind. The discussion so far in the meeting may have created a need for Shirin to clarify social relations and suggest a social contract in the group. The Christian theologian Nicholas Adams reflects on the notion of friendship in transreligious encounters, exemplified in the practice of Scriptural Reasoning (SR) (Adams 2006: 52-53). He states that SR values "friendship over consensus" (Adams 2006: 52-53), and even though he does not elaborate much on the content of friendship, he suggests that friendship is a possible concept for describing the social relations in SR.<sup>111</sup> His reasoning is that friendship (at least ideally) may encounter differences and disagreements and at the same time confirm a mutual engagement and concern between people despite those differences.

Shirin articulates an exit strategy for herself in the above sequence, formulated negatively: To say that one does not want to leave means that leaving is an option. It is possible to leave both the communicative and the physical space of the group. In either case, it would mean the end of communication, at least temporarily. Shirin thus establishes herself as a subject with a right to speak out and the freedom to decide whether she wants to stay or leave. She establishes subjective interpretations of the social relations in the group (friends) and of the relations between different religions (they are equal.)

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<sup>111</sup> In Adams use of the concept of "friendship" in the social relations in SR to frame a social relation that does not aim at agreement and consensus, he explicitly contrasts openness to plurality in a friendship with what he claims to be a general attempt to reach agreement and consensus in interreligious dialogues (Adams 2006: 52). This view of dialogue as an activity that aims at agreement, contrasts with other views on dialogue presented in Chapter 2. Only on this basis does it make sense to contrast the notion of friendship with interreligious dialogue as Adams does. He seems, however, to have in mind interreligious dialogues with a practical aim for solving particular social and political problems and challenges when he states this, and thus has the view that interreligious dialogue mainly represents an instrumental and political means of interacting across religious boundaries. Adams emphasizes that friendship in the context of SR is not to be regarded as private and not primarily to be seen as a relationship between two individuals. The notion of friendship in SR is related to the whole group of practitioners as a group of friends, and the character of the friendship is more public than private (Adams 2006: 53).

- Shirin23: Then we can continue. Excuse me for ....
- Eva24: No, I think it is really good that you speak out.
- Eva25: But I do believe it is somewhat interesting for you to listen to me, to how I view this as a Christian.
- Aira1: Yes.
- Eva26: Isn't it? And then, of course, you can argue with me and say that this is not correct, but ....

Eva acknowledges Shirin's right to speak out, and adds her appreciation of it (Eva24). At the same time, it may seem that Eva questions Shirin's interest in listen to her as a Christian. Aira confirms *her* interest in listening to Eva's contributions and interrupts the bilateral communication. In Eva25, Eva presents herself the way Shirin had earlier asked her to do (Shirin12), i.e. as part of a specific tradition but speaking as an individual subject, only on her own behalf. Eva shares some expectations about the communication in the group too. She wants to be listened to, expecting the others to be interested in what she has to say, and simultaneously also claims the right and the possibility of disagreements and mutual correction. These expectations may well be included in a notion of friendship suggested by Shirin.

- Shirin24: No, no, that is not the case, but when you say that Jesus Christ says this or that ....
- Shirin25: But the way you say that Muslims ....
- Shirin26: But you can go on ....
- Eva27: Then I must say that I didn't intend to say anything wrong. I can understand that you're provoked by that.
- Eva28: And it was perhaps wrong to say that humans are made responsible. It came out kind of wrong.
- Shirin27: No, it is correct.
- Aira2: It is entirely correct.
- Eva29: I just have to say one thing.

Shirin28: I perceived you [as saying], and you say every time ... that the Old Testament and the Koran does not say that. That was what provoked me.

Eva30: But there are huge differences between the Old and The New Testament. We cannot get past that.

This sequence is complex: Shirin continues the discussion on representation, addressing Eva in particular. Eva comes back to the former issue of human responsibility and tries to clarify an anticipated disagreement (Eva28) that does not really exist according to Aira (Aira2) and Shirin (Shirin27). All believe that humans are responsible for their actions, and they base this view on the Koran and the Bible respectively. Eva does not respond explicitly to Shirin's challenges: the issue of representation, the mode of communication.

Shirin defends not only the Koran but also the Old Testament (Shirin28). Eva reconfirms her view about the degree of difference between the Old Testament and the New, but, unlike earlier, she does not include the Koran with the Old Testament on the "wrong" side. But because Shirin groups the Old Testament together with the Koran (Shirin27), the connection between the two is still upheld.

Eva31: I must say something

Eva32: because when you say that Muhammad and Jesus are the same, I'll say stop. They are not the same. There is quite a big difference.

Eva33: I will hold to this. I just have to say that.

Eva continues to talk about differences, this time those between Muhammad and Jesus (Eva32). Nobody has suggested that Muhammad and Jesus are "the same" in the discussion, at least not in those words. Shirin had claimed that the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have shared values and had suggested that these might be a common ground for ethics. Her reference to mutuality and shared values may be the reason why Eva extends her presentation about her view on differences between the Christian tradition and all other religious traditions, and Christianity and Islam in particular. The differences Eva is concerned with are extended to include the view of Jesus and Muhammad (Eva32). Eva expresses a personal limit: this is a point on which Eva is not willing to compromise (Eva33).

The expression and role of differences as part of a transreligious encounter is significant and can be displayed in various ways. At an individual level, the right to claim absolute limits with respect to that on which one is willing to compromise as well as to grant others the same



rights can be seen as a dialogical value of not violating the otherness of the other.<sup>112</sup> The real challenge may be how to continue to be able to talk about the differences and sort out if some views represent a threat to a person's identity, or represent an important issue in need of clarification. The latter would mean acknowledging that there *are* differences without the need to overcome them or suppress them, which would mean choosing dialogue over domination, the latter expressed through construction and the maintenance of hegemonic discourses (Gressgård 2005: 170-172).

- Aira3: Yes. This was very interesting to listen to.
- Aira4: But there might be some misunderstanding when you talk about one thing in different contexts.
- Aira5: She talked about washing oneself before praying and that is mental preparation.
- Aira6: It does not mean that God does not listen.
- Aira7: God listens to me whether I have washed myself or not. God hears me everywhere, under all different conditions.
- Aira8: But sometimes if you feel that you have prepared yourself mentally, it might be ....<sup>113</sup>
- Aira9: It is written in the Koran that God responds to the distressed one,<sup>114</sup> the sad ones, the crying ones, the suffering ....
- Aira10: When we read the story of Hagar, she cried to God, and God listened to her prayers, and she did not have water to wash herself.
- Aira11: God will listen if one calls upon him. There is no doubt about it. It is not only under special circumstances that God is listening. God is listening under all conditions.
- Aira12: But you have to know how you can ....
- Aira13: If I am in despair, how can someone I ask for help help me if I doubt him?
- Aira14: No. If I give myself entirely to God, "it is only you that can help me," God will hear me no matter what, and he knows about my weaknesses.
- Aira15: Maybe I don't know how to call on God so that he can hear, but God listens to everyone.

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<sup>112</sup> See Chapter 2, p. 56.

<sup>113</sup> In a comment on the transcription of Aira8, Aira emphasizes with respect to *salat* and holding the Koran that one must perform the ritual washing beforehand.

<sup>114</sup> Cf. Sura 27:62.

- Aira16: It is not just the Bible that makes humans responsible.
- Aira17: The Koran says: one gets what one strives for.<sup>115</sup> Then it is my responsibility to strive.
- Aira18: And it is not like the laws are made for me and I get the answers.
- Aira19: I have ... if you read the transcription from the last meeting, I said that there was a person from the province whom the Prophet asked: “How will you solve the problems that you will get in that country?”
- Aira20: He said: “I will look in the Koran.” Then he said: “If you do not have it, what will you do?” Then he said: “I will find it in the tradition.” Then he said: “what if you don’t find it there?” and then he said that he would use his reason.
- Aira21: Then the Prophet said: “God bless you because you will use your reason to find out how we can solve different problems and challenges in different situations.”
- Aira22: So, there is not a direct answer to everything in the Koran. It is a guide for people. Laws, different laws. But we need to make new rules in new situations, this is called *ijtihad*.
- Aira23: *Ijtihad* is striving to find solutions .... You should stay within the framework of the Koran, that this is allowed and that is not allowed.<sup>116</sup>
- Aira24: We can argue. But we are not allowed to hurt anyone in any way.
- Aira25: So there is some difference when you say that you should wash your hands or wash your hands before you ....
- Aira26: To us, both the Bible and the Koran is the word of God, and when you read them, we need to be totally prepared. So, in the Koran it is written that nobody should touch them before they are clean.

Aira returns to Fouzia’s earlier contribution (Aira5). She refers to the discussion on modes of communication (Aira4), and her analysis seems to be that there have been misunderstandings due to the presence of different contexts. Aira24 may also be a comment on the recent communication in the group, seen from an Islamic, ethical viewpoint. To disagree and argue is allowed, but the boundary is when someone gets hurt – or when the intention is to hurt another. Aira24 is, however, referring mainly to the act of *ijtihad* as a possible process of

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<sup>115</sup> Cf. Sura 53:39.

<sup>116</sup> Aira emphasizes when reading through the transcriptions that one has to be equipped with scholarly knowledge of the Koran and the *sunna*, the Arabic language, *fiqh*, and Islamic history to be able to do *ijtihad*.

reasoning and arguing although it is to be done within the frameworks given through the Islamic tradition. Part of this is to ensure that it is not done in a way that creates destructive conflicts.

Aira clarifies the points discussed between Eva and Fouzia step by step through her Islamic theological reflection and knowledge. She communicates both through argumentation and through a narrative. The narrative she tells in this sequence (Aira19-22, including Aira's interpretation of the narrative) she had also told in the first meeting. She refers to the report of this meeting to underline that it has already become part of the group's story. Aira's narrative has many similarities, including its main point, with a narrative found in the *hadith* (Abu Dawud, Book 24, Number 3585) on Muhammad's conversation with his follower Ali ibn Ali Talib before sending him to Yemen. The Muslim reformist thinker Tariq Ramadan refers to the same narrative in Abu Dawud in his argument for reinterpreting the Islamic tradition in a European context (Ramadan 1999: 28-28).

Aira states that the pedagogical point is that Muhammad himself not only allowed but *encouraged* his followers to use their own reason when the Koran and the tradition were not sufficient providers of answers to current questions. Aira connects this with the notion of *ijtihad*, which covers the act of individual reasoning in the Islamic tradition. Ramadan uses the narrative from the *hadith* to argue for a typological Islamic use of intelligence and skills in the service of the Islamic faith, with the aim of implementing Islamic teaching as accurately as possible (Ramadan 1999: 28). Ramadan later develops this line of argumentation into the use of the concept of *ijtihad*. Aira also uses the narrative to introduce *ijtihad* as a concept (Aira22). She does not refer to Ramadan, but her own emphasis of this narrative may be central to her in constructing her own theological position on making meaning in the Islamic tradition. She constructs a position for herself as a believer with a right as well as an obligation to interpret – within the framework of the Islamic sources.

Aira claims that a believing Muslim will *not* find all the answers in the Koran directly (Aira22). This seems to be contrary to what Fouzia stated (Fouzia40) and may indicate a difference between their views of the Koran and the process of finding answers within the religious tradition to which they both belong. The situations of Fouzia and Aira are different: Fouzia is situated in a practical situation of assisting someone in need of help, whereas Aira is situated in Islamic theological reasoning. The difference may reflect more of a difference between someone with primarily practical skills over against a person with scholarly theological skills. Aira does not, however, emphasize the potential difference between herself and Fouzia. She rather *supports* Fouzia's points about ritual ablution and broadens the supply of theological reasoning behind it through her references to the Koran and the *hadith* in her arguments.

Aira comments on how she perceives the relation between the Bible and the Koran: Both scriptures make humans responsible (Aira16-17), and both are the word of God (Aira26). She

thus joins Shirin on the issue of similarity. She includes the ritual of ablution as a requirement even when reading the Bible. It is not clear if she means that this requirement applies to both Christians and Muslims or only for Muslims reading the Bible.

- Rima5:           It is a punishment.
- Aira27:           A punishment?
- Rima6:           That nobody should touch ....
- Aira28:           One has to be clean ....<sup>117</sup>
- Aira29:           It is for the believers, the ones that believe in it, isn't it?
- Aira30:           To me, it is not a punishment. To me it is a mental preparation for speaking to God.
- Aira31:           You understand this differently from me.

Rima's commentary on the ritual of ablution seems to come as a surprise to Aira, and Rima does not elaborate further on her negative claim. Aira responds to her comment as a question, once more explaining the meaning of ritual ablution. In addition, she brings in an element of subjectivity: The message of ritual ablution is for believers; it does not make sense outside the realm of faith. Aira refers to believers, most likely including only Muslim believers. The difference between her and Rima is merely stated by Aira (Aira31) and is not evaluated or judged for the rest.

Aira shows an attitude of inclusiveness and provides clear statements on her own views and reflections. Her experience in transreligious and transcultural dialogues as well as her education in Islamic theology probably shapes both what she says and how she says it. She does not address different views as a problem, whether or not they are between the traditions or within her own tradition.

Maria will be the last participant cited in this discussion that started with sharing experiences and views of the Bible and the Koran, and then gradually developed to include several complex issues:

- Maria1:           Yes. As far as I have understood, Christians and Muslims ....

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<sup>117</sup> When Aira read through the transcriptions in their final form, she pointed out that what she means in this statement is that washing and cleaning before reading the Koran is compulsory for Muslims.

- Maria2: I do not see any need to defend how one practices one thing or another because I feel that a religion is a belief and that it is up to each and every one to find how one can get in contact with God.
- Maria3: Some wash their hands and they pray; some do not wash themselves at all, they go to church or whatever.
- Maria4: To me personally, it is not important, because everyone has to find the way one thinks is the right one to get close to God.
- Maria5: And then I think that the discussion would be a little more interesting if it was concerned about substantial matters and not the way we practice. Then it gets very ... we kind of clash.
- Maria6: Because what you practice ... the way of practicing is perhaps not the same, but it doesn't really matter
- Maria7: Because to me it's really important to listen to what the content of the Koran is, how it is, and how you do it and what your faith means to you. Just like what Christianity means to me.

Maria finds a connection between the issues addressed, and the mode of communication. Her analysis is that the discussion became vehement because the participants were focusing on their religious practice. She describes these as non-substantial issues (Maria5) and says she misses discussions on substantial matters: the content of the Koran, and what faith means personally for the participants, including herself (Maria7). She suggests, perhaps, that the latter issue would be more subjective, and thus perhaps less prone to cause tension. To discuss the fact that people in the group have different religious practices is pointless for Maria; it should instead be shared and the differences simply acknowledged. Maria signals curiosity about the other religion and reveals her subjective view of both religion and religious practice: most important is that it is right for the individual believer (Maria4).

Maria distinguishes between individual faith and religious rituals and expresses an extensive tolerance with respect to differences in religious faith and religious practice. Her approach to differences is not that they are a threat in any way nor does she merely state that they exist; she declares differences to be *interesting*. This positive view of differences and diversity as expected and welcomed stands out in the group's discussion thus far.

Maria's last sentence in Maria7 is the beginning of a personal testimony. After presenting her curiosity about the other, she uses her own faith as an attempt to create common ground. Shirin and Aira both suggested common ground between Christians and Muslims on the basis of canonical scriptures and shared ethical values. Maria seems to suggest a common ground based on the individual participant's faith story and experience of belonging to a tradition. Instead of

suggesting an objective common ground based on acknowledged similarities between the traditions, she focuses on the subjective way of creating a community.

### ***The First Discussion in the Group: Complex Communication***

The sharing of experiences and views of the Bible and the Koran develops into a complex communication about several issues. After the first contributions by Fouzia and Eva, a discussion on modes of communication and how to discuss was established (launched by Shirin) and stayed intertwined with the communication that focused more directly on the issues connected to the Bible and the Koran. Both the hermeneutical and communicative processes are thus expressed and commented upon, and sometimes it is clearly stated that the mode of communication affects the interpretation of thematic issues.

The issues regarding the canonical scriptures of the Bible and the Koran were connected to other issues: the religious practice of ritual ablution, the views on the role of the Koran and the Bible in their respective traditions, and the relation between the Koran and the Bible as canonical scriptures within traditions all emerged as issues in the discussion. In addition, reflections on the nature of God, particularly on God's attitude toward humans, and the issue of human responsibility were raised.

This demonstrates the difficulty of structuring a discussion on a specific theme in a culturally and religiously diverse group. But the most significant interpretation of the complexity in the communication is perhaps how difficult it is to have a discussion on the canonical scriptures of the Bible and the Koran among Christians and Muslims without moving into other issues as well. Reading the scriptures and experiences connected to the scriptures seem to be matters deeply integrated into the life of the participants in the discussion. This implies that it makes little sense for them to focus the discussion so strictly on the Bible and the Koran as texts.

### ***A Web of Meaning Making***

Instead of a clear-cut thematic communication limited to the views of and experiences of the scriptures, the participants in the discussion create a web of meaning making. Fouzia's narratives are based on her interpreted experience. Both the first narrative about the Bible and the second about the Koran are framed in her own interpretations of the narrated events. Her attention is on the materiality of the scriptures, such as the physical treatment of the Bible and the Koran, and the preparation of oneself in relation to the scriptures. These issues represent a religious practice for Fouzia, grounded in her religious identity. Eva and Maria show through the discussion that they regard the matters important to Fouzia as insignificant (Maria) or dubious, perhaps unacceptable (Eva). Different views on what is regarded as important and acknowledged religious practice regarding the Bible and the Koran come to the surface. The differences

expressed contribute to the web of communication, and how one should relate to the differences is singled out as a separate issue.

Fouzia relates to her own religious tradition when interpreting her narratives, and reflects parts of the Islamic interpretative tradition when she frames her narratives. Aira relates even more broadly to the Islamic interpretative tradition and brings in material from the *hadith* (the story about the man asking Muhammad for advice), the Koran, and introduces the Islamic interpretative tool of *ijtihad*. Eva elaborates on her view of biblical interpretation and the differences within the Bible between the Old and New Testaments. She bases her views on the classical Lutheran hermeneutical tools of Law and Gospel and introduces a Christocentric hermeneutics. Maria and Shirin do not relate extensively to the sources of their respective traditions, although Shirin does relate to the Islamic tradition when she states that values Eva claims to be exclusively Christian are also a part of the Islamic tradition (and other religious traditions).

The Muslim participants in the discussion all relate to the Christian tradition as being close to their own, as part of “people of the book.” The acknowledgment of Christianity is sometimes clearly on Islamic premises, as in some parts of Fouzia’s contribution; in other cases there is recognition on more equal terms.

The Christian participants in the discussion lack Christian doctrinal support for how Islam could be included in a Christian view of the world. The three Christian participants in the discussion resolve this challenge in different ways: Eva categorizes Islam together with Judaism and the Old Testament as something “other,” fundamentally different from the Christian tradition. Rima does not demonstrate any explicit view on this, other than an attempt to turn the discussion to the interpretation of what she calls the truths in the two religions. But she expresses estrangement toward ritual ablution as an Islamic practice and calls it a “punishment.” Maria expressed her personal view that everyone needs to do what is right for her to get into contact with God. Maria does not discriminate between religions and expresses curiosity about Islam and the Koran.

All those who participated basically agreed that God cares for humans and listens to their prayers. They also agree that the canonical scriptures are useful and can provide support for humans, even if the majority believes that the scriptures must be interpreted through the use of human reason. The disagreements concern how to view the scriptures of the other.

### ***Searching for a Communicative Mode and Naming the Social Relations***

Part of the meaning making in the group in this discussion includes attempts to situate the communication, negotiating a shared communicative space, and naming the social relations within the group. It was Shirin in particular who argues for the need for this. But since this was

at the beginning of the group process, it is likely that the participants were trying to find out how to articulate their views, how to understand the presence of the others, and how to interpret the situation.

The participants express themselves either through narratives or argumentation, except for Aira, who uses both forms to express her views. There may have been a disconnect in the communication when a narrative is met by argumentation or the other way around. The communication between Eva and Fouzia is an example: Fouzia never answers Eva's criticism of ritual ablution. Aira may be able to communicate to all the other contributions since she combines narratives and arguments.

Through Shirin's questions, rephrased as "Who are we speaking on behalf of?" and "How do we speak about the other?", she addresses the mode of communication in the group. She describes a communicative problem when it is unknown who or what someone is representing while speaking or the uneasiness that is felt when one does not recognize what is said about oneself or one's tradition. Shirin thus starts to negotiate the communicative space but at the same time creates a space through her open-hearted articulations. Eva supports her through confirming her right to speak out and through openly appreciating her openness.

Maria also comments on the mode of communication but she argues that it might have to do with the way in which the issues were addressed rather than how the view of self and other is expressed. To agree on religious practices is beside the point for her – she addresses the expectation of agreement as an obstacle to a more open and harmonious communication. She seems to expect that a communication with a greater openness toward differences would make it possible to have a more interesting conversation.

The participants who address the mode of communication all state that openness is an aim. Maria seems to prefer a more harmonious communication, but for Shirin and Eva it could seem that openness is more crucial than harmony. The degree of openness and the question of conflict level may be related: A greater openness can possibly lead to a higher level of conflict. Shirin's addressing language and representation is a demand for respect but also for a truthful and inclusive reference practice regarding both one's own tradition and the tradition of the other.

Shirin extends her discussion on the communicative mode to include the question of social relations in the group. To her, it seems to be a connection between the mode of communication and the category of social relations. It is how the mode of communication develops that makes her question the character of the social relations. She suggests framing the social relation as "friendship." Nobody else comments on this suggestion at this stage of the process, or suggests other ways to frame the social relations in the group. The question about friendship thus still hangs in the air after the discussion.



To aim for a common ground of discussion, however, can be interpreted as a move toward framing a social relation, although this is mentioned at the level of religious traditions. The question is how an acknowledgment of common ground on the basis of the religious traditions influences the social relations in the group. A shared solution to the question of representation seems to be more urgent, with the result that the form and type of social relation of this group can be determined.

***What is at Stake for the Participants in this Discussion?***

The whole discussion was intense and sometimes quite heated. Behind this engagement may be a feeling that something important is at stake. If one asks what is at stake in this discussion and for whom, the answer would be as complex as the communication was.

Two keywords that represent crucial parts of the communication process are *difference* and *personal integrity*.

The participants describe difference in various ways. The differences that are addressed are related to religious differences as well as to different ways to communicate and situate statements. Religious difference is declared to be a problem for which Fouzia's first narrative, exemplified by different religious practices regarding the Bible, was to find solutions. The solution is presented as selecting one practice over the other. Eva, on the other hand, addresses the lack of recognized religious difference as a problem when she states that it would compromise her personal integrity if Jesus and Muhammad are said to be "the same" (Eva32). Aira says that differences are to be expected, and this is acknowledged to be correct. Rima wants to explore the differences more, and Maria claims that religious differences should be fully accepted and that the differences in faith stories create possibilities for listening and sharing. To Aira, Rima, and Maria it seems that religious differences do not pose any threat to their personal integrity.

Both acknowledging and protecting religious differences is presented as crucial. At the same time, and particularly for some of the Muslim participants, the acknowledgement of common ground between Christians and Muslims is equally crucial. The question of representation and respect for personal integrity is linked together by Shirin. For her, a lack of consciousness in the matter of representation of self and others jeopardizes the whole communication process and makes her question the social relations in the group.

## Chapter 5: Making Meaning Of The Hagar/Hajar Narratives

The first texts from the Islamic and Christian canonical scriptures that were read and discussed in the group were the narratives about Hagar/Hajar. The texts from both the Old Testament and the *hadith* were sent to the participants by mail before the meeting with the invitation. This was done to give the participants the opportunity to prepare for the discussions of the texts if they wanted to and to show which textual versions of the stories would be the starting point of the discussion. The participants' possible pre-knowledge about the narratives was not mapped beforehand.

The texts were in Norwegian, and the text from Genesis was edited to include the whole story about Hagar and exclude other parts of the narrative about the family of Abraham. The Hajar story from the *hadith* includes one verse from the Koran. The biblical text in Norwegian was taken from the most commonly used version, i.e. that by the Norwegian Bible Society 1978 (Bibelen 1978). The Norwegian version of the *hadith* narrative was taken from a textbook of source texts used by Norwegian teachers in religious education (Thomassen and Rasmussen 1999: 198-199). In this work I will use English editions of these texts: the New Revised Standard Version (Bible 1989) and an English translation of the *hadith* by Al-Bukhari (CMJE 2008-2009). My criterion for selecting these versions was their degree of closeness to the Norwegian text versions used in the group. I looked for similarity in both content and wording.<sup>118</sup>

The reading, conversation, and discussion of the Hagar/Hajar narratives took place during the last half of the second meeting and in the third meeting. The discussion presented in chapter 4 took place immediately before the group read and started to discuss the Hagar/Hajar narratives.

Four of the discussions/conversations from the meaning-making process of the Hagar/Hajar narratives are presented in this chapter. They are selected because of their relevance for showing various meaning-making strategies and for portraying discussions I found interesting, important, and conducive to the aim of the study. The presentation of the discussions follows the chronology of the group's communicative process, except for the first and second discussions, which overlapped in time. The first discussion concerns the practice of naming women in relation to their children, and it took place before and after the second discussion. The second is a discussion that started with questioning how Hagar/Hajar could leave Ishmael, her son, in the desert, and engages the participants in discussing possible answers. The third is a

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<sup>118</sup> Some verses in the Norwegian translation of the Genesis text are, however, closer to the King James Version (Prickett and Carroll 1997).

more general, reflective sequence that addresses several themes, but this discussion is marked by longer contributions and more thorough reflections on the narratives, many of them testimonial in character. The fourth discussion is concerned with the notions of obedience and forgiveness and their relevance in illustrating differences between the Christian and Islamic traditions.

At the second meeting both Hagar/Hajar stories were read aloud in the group by Susanne and Eva, who shared the reading of the Genesis story about Hagar between them, and Aira who read the text from the *hadith*. This meant that Christian participants read the text from the Christian tradition and a Muslim participant read the text from the Islamic tradition. The readers volunteered and, following my suggestion, the biblical text was read before the text from the *hadith*.<sup>119</sup> The third meeting also started with reading the two texts, but this time the participants read both texts silently before the discussion started. The Hagar/Hajar narratives are quoted in the following text, to invite the readers of *this* text to start with a silent reading of the narratives:

### **The Hagar/Hajar Narratives from the Old Testament and the *Hadith***

#### **Genesis Chapter 16:1-16 and Chapter 21:8-21 (New Revised Standard Version)**

1 Now, Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, 2 and Sarai said to Abram, "You see that the Lord had prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. 3 So, after Abram had lived for ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. 4 He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. 5 Then Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!" 6 But Abram said to Sarai, "Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her. 7 The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. 8 And he said, "Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai." 9 The angel of the Lord said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit to her."

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<sup>119</sup> The question of which text that should be read first represented a challenge. Obviously, one of the texts had to be read before the other. Since both texts were made accessible to the participants in advance, and thus presented simultaneously to them before the meeting, I suggested that the biblical text be read first, for historical reasons. No one objected. The chronological argument represents some problems, however, because this in itself may give the impression of a hierarchy among the texts. There was, however, no break between the readings of the two texts, so the discussion started with both texts at the same time.

10 The angel of the Lord also said to her, "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude." 11 And the angel of the Lord said to her, "Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has given heed to your affliction. 12 He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin." 13 So she named the Lord who spoke to her, "You are El-roi"; for she said, "have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?" <sup>120</sup>14 Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai roi, it lies between Kadesh and Bered. 15 Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. 16 Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

#### **Genesis 21:8-21**

8 The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day Isaac was weaned. 9 But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. 10 So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." 11 The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. 12 But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named after you. 13 As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring." 14 So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

15 When the water in the skin was gone, she cast her child under one of the bushes. 16 Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot: for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. 17 And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. 18 Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand for I will make a great nation of him." 19 Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin

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<sup>120</sup> In the King James Version, this verse can be read as follows: And she called the name of the Lord that spoke unto her, Thou God seest me: for she said, Have I also here looked after him that seeth me?

with water, and gave the boy a drink. 20 God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. 21 He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

**Hajar in the *Hadith* and the Koran: Al-Bukhari, Vol. 4, Book 55, Number 583:**

Narrated by Ibn Abbas:

<sup>121</sup>Abraham brought her [the mother of Ishmael] and her son Ishmael while she was suckling him, to a place near the Ka'ba under a tree on the spot of Zam-zam, at the highest place in the mosque. During those days there was nobody in Mecca, nor was there any water. So he made them sit over there and placed near them a leather bag containing some dates, and a small water-skin containing some water, and set out homeward. Ishmael's mother followed him saying, "O Abraham! Where are you going leaving us in this valley where there is no person whose company we may enjoy, nor is there anything (to enjoy)?" She repeated that to him many times, but he did not look back at her. Then she asked him, "Has Allah ordered you to do so?" He said, "Yes." She said, "Then he will not neglect us," and returned while Abraham proceeded onwards, and on reaching the Thaniya where they could not see him, he faced the Ka'ba, and raising both hands, invoked Allah saying the following prayers:

"O our Lord! I have made some of my offspring dwell in a valley without cultivation, by your Sacred House in order. O our Lord, that they may offer prayer perfectly. So fill some hearts among men with love towards them, and provide them with fruits, so that they may give thanks." (Koran 14.37) Ishmael's mother went on suckling Ishmael and drinking from the water.

When the water in the water-skin had all been used up, she became thirsty and her child also became thirsty. She started looking at him, tossing in agony: She left him, for she could not endure looking at him, and found that the mountain of Safa was the nearest mountain to her on that land. She stood on it and started looking at the valley keenly so that she might see somebody, but she could not see anybody. Then she descended from Safa and when she reached the valley, she tucked up her robe and ran in the valley and reached the Marwa mountain where she stood and started looking, expecting to see somebody, but she could not see anybody. She repeated that (running between Safa and Marwa) seven times.

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<sup>121</sup> The first sentence in this story from the *hadith* is not included in the Norwegian version used in the study. That is why it is not included here. The omitted sentence that begins this story is: "The first lady to use a girdle was the mother of Ishmael. She used a girdle so that she might hide her tracks from Sarah" (CMJE 2008-2009).

The prophet said, “This is the source of the tradition of the walking of the people between them (i.e. Safa and Marwa). When she reached the Marwa (for the last time) she heard a voice and she asked herself to be quiet and listened attentively. She heard the voice again and said, “O! You have made me hear your voice; have you got something to help me?” And behold! She saw an angel at the place of Zam-zam, digging the earth with his heel (or his wing) till water flowed from that place. She started to make something like a basin around it, using her hand in this way, and started filling her water-skin with water with her hands, and the water was flowing out after she had scooped some of it.”

The prophet added: “May Allah bestow Mercy on Ishmael’s mother! Had she let the Zam-zam (flow without trying to control it), Zam-zam would have been a stream flowing on the surface of the earth.” The prophet further added: “Then she drank and suckled the child. The angel said to her, “Don’t be afraid of being neglected, for this is the House of Allah which will be built by this boy and his father, and Allah never neglects his people.” The House (i.e. Kaba) at that time was on a high place resembling a hillock, and when torrents came, they flowed to its right and left. She lived in that way till some people from the tribe of Jurhum or a family from Jurhum passed by her and her child, as they were coming through the way of Kada. They landed in the lower part of Mecca where they saw a bird that had the habit of flying around water and not leaving it. They said, “This bird must be flying around water, though we know that there is no water in this valley.” They sent one or two messengers who discovered the source of water, and returned to inform them of the water. So, they all came.” The Prophet added, “Ishmael’s mother was sitting near the water. They asked her: “Do you allow us to stay with you?” She replied, “Yes, but you will have no right to possess the water.” They agreed to that. The Prophet further said, “Ishmael’s mother was pleased with the whole situation as she used to love to enjoy the company of the people. So, they settled there, and later on they sent for their families who came and settled with them so that some families became permanent residents there. The child grew up and learnt Arabic from them and caused them to love and admire him as he grew up, and when he reached the age of puberty they made him marry a woman from amongst them.”

### **The First Comments on the Hagar/Hajar Narratives**

Rima (Arab-Norwegian, Roman Catholic) was the first to say something about the stories. She recalled a story about an angel who dug for water in the desert with its feet to rescue a nameless mother and child. Rima remembered being told this story during her childhood in the Middle East, without any Christian or Muslim connotations: it was just a story, and she found it beautiful. The Middle East’s vast areas of desert make the search for water easy to understand.

To be in the desert without any access to water is a potentially life-threatening situation, and to be responsible for a small child or to be a child in such a situation adds to the dramatic content of the story. An equally dramatic rescue by an angel who saves the human figures in the story from dying of thirst gives a happy, miraculous end. It is not difficult to see that this story may work as a bedtime story for children in the Middle East and that it may function as a cultural narrative beyond religious and confessional structures of meaning.

Aira (Pakistani-Norwegian, Sunni Muslim) recognized the stories as providing the narrative origin of the Zam-Zam well in Mecca, where Muslims drink water during *hajj* (the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca) when they perform the ritual of *sa'y*: they run back and forth between the heights of Safa and Marwa seven times to search for water in remembrance of Hajar's struggle (Esposito 2003: 103).

Rima and Aira thus reveal a pre-established relation to the narratives. Whereas Rima's pre-knowledge is that of a nameless mother and child, a miracle story from the desert, Aira has specific religious pre-knowledge of the narrative as the origin of the performance of *sa'y* in the Islamic tradition.

Some of the Christian participants expressed reactions to the narratives' contents. Inger (Norwegian, Lutheran Christian) called the story "terrible, when looked at with modern eyes." Inger explained that she thought so because she thought the story implied that women who were not mothers did not have dignity, that the text legitimized slavery, and that Hagar was expelled with her son to the desert. Inger called this latter point "the utmost brutality you can imagine." She also said that she found the *hadith* narrative more substantial and vivid than the biblical text.

Susanne noted that Sarah was absent as a character in the *hadith* text. She found that in some ways the *hadith* could represent a continuation of the Hagar narrative from the Bible when it tells about Hagar and Ishmael settling in the valley after they were rescued, an event not included in the biblical story. Rima, too, asked about the role of Sarah in the Islamic tradition in general. Her question was if Sarah is considered a Jewish woman in Islam. Shirin answered by saying that in the Islamic tradition Abraham/Ibrahim was a Muslim.<sup>122</sup> There was no further discussion on the religious status of Abraham/Ibrahim, Sarah, or the other shared characters in the Judeo-Christian and Islamic narratives about the family of Abraham/Ibrahim. Thus the conversation did not induce a discussion about religious *ownership* of the figures but rather helped to clarify different interpretations of the figures in the traditions, in particular regarding

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<sup>122</sup> According to Islamic tradition, Abraham/Ibrahim was the first Muslim (Esposito 2003: 4). In the Koran, however, Abraham/Ibrahim is not called the first Muslim at first but *hanif*, which literally translated from Arabic means "God-friend" (Leirvik 2006: 42). To be a *hanif* implies being a monotheist, obedient to God, upright, and avoiding all kinds of polytheism (Esposito 2003: 108). In later koranic texts Abraham/Ibrahim is called the first Muslim (Leirvik 2006: 42).

their possible different positions in the respective religious universes. Mapping these kinds of differences is important for further substantial communication and for creating a possible shared interpretative space.<sup>123</sup>

Eva found that the portrayal of Hagar in the two narratives differed greatly. In Eva's view, the biblical Hagar is portrayed as a woman who finally took charge of her situation, and she referred to Genesis 18:21 where Hagar is the one who finds Ishmael a wife. On the other hand, Eva claims that Hajar in the narrative from the *hadith* is left completely in the hands of others. Eva further accuses the figure of Abraham/Ibrahim in *both* stories of being irresponsible and cruel to both Hagar/Hajar and Ishmael.

Eva's last comment in this introductory sequence touches on examples of *naming* related to Hagar/Hajar in the two narratives. In Genesis 16:13, Eva found what she characterized an important incident in the biblical narrative: when Hagar gives God a name.<sup>124</sup> She expresses surprise about this verse, and claims – on the basis of her own astonishment – to have noticed it for the first time, that the Christian tradition had in fact overlooked Hagar by focusing only on Sarah. She also stated that she was disturbed about her observation that Hajar was not mentioned by name in the text from the *hadith*: she is simply called the mother of Ishmael.

### **Discussion 1 Related to the Hagar/Hajar Narratives: The Practice of Naming Women**

This discussion took place in two rounds, before and after Discussion 2 about why Hagar/Hajar abandoned Ishmael in the desert. The internal chronology of the two parts of Discussion 1 was retained throughout the referred transcriptions. The discussion started after Eva expressed her views on the two narratives as recorded above. She continues:

- Eva34:           And I find it a bit typical that in the text from the *hadith*, Hagar is not in charge.
- Eva35:           Here you can see that she does not even have her name written in the text ... the Muslim tradition .... She is indicated in relation to her son. It doesn't say Hagar, it says "the mother of Ishmael," doesn't it?
- Eva36:           And, as a Western woman, it makes me a little upset to be called... John's mother because of my relation to my son, and not Eva...

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<sup>123</sup> See Chapter 2, p. 26-28.

<sup>124</sup> Genesis 16:13: "So she named the Lord who spoke to her, 'You are El-roi'; for she said, "have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?"".



Rima7: This has nothing to do with Islam. It is the tradition.

Aira32: Yes.

Eva34 raises a question: When Eva claims that Hajar lacks status as an acting subject throughout the text from the *hadith* and states that this is *typical*, to what is she referring? Does she mean typical of *hadith* literature, of the Islamic canonical scriptures, or the entire Islamic tradition? Or is she referring to canonical religious scriptures in general, both Christian and Islamic? What she does mean by typical may indicate if she is using the narrative from the *hadith* as a negative contrast to the biblical story about Hagar – where she stated earlier that Hagar is described differently.

Eva35 suggests that she is concerned with the text from the *hadith* but also that she may be referring to her own conception of the Islamic tradition in her argument. Her statement on Hagar's weak position is supported by an observation Eva made while reading the *hadith* narrative: Hagar/Hajar's name is not used; rather, she is called "the mother of Ishmael" (Eva35). Eva's pre-knowledge and presuppositions about Islamic tradition seem to be part of her references when interpreting the text from the *hadith*. The differences Eva claims to observe between the two Hagar/Hajar narratives in the portrayal of Hagar/Hajar is either deduced from Eva's presuppositions of the differences between the Islamic and the Christian traditions regarding women's position in general, or it is being used as a basis to claim this difference. The role of the text is thus either to function as a confirmation of Eva's presuppositions or else to serve as a suggestion to investigate if the position of women differs in the two traditions (generally).

Eva makes a self-reference about her interpretative position (Eva36). She refers to herself as a "Western woman" – a cultural and perhaps political but not religious reference. This may suggest that she is using her cultural/political identity to confront this particular practice of naming, of which she explicitly says she does not approve. Her identification could imply suggesting a dichotomy between "the West" and "Islam" on the naming issue, and not one between "Christianity" and "Islam."

Rima's comment, however, states that naming women in relation of their children is a traditional practice, rather than an Islamic religious custom (Rima7). Aira confirms this (Aira32). The separation of religion and tradition/culture as a possible way to analyze the naming, or rather the lack of naming, of Hajar in the text from the *hadith*, shifts the focus from Islam as the reason for this custom and addresses tradition and culture instead. Both Rima as Christian and Aira as a Muslim make the same point. Rima's cultural background from a Muslim majority country in the

Middle East provides her with knowledge about Islam and the experience of distinguishing between Islam and Middle Eastern culture. Neither Rima nor Aira evaluate the different customs of naming women in their comments, so they do not reveal what they think about these practices. Instead, they suggest an analytical tool for the discussion: a distinction between Islam and tradition/culture where the latter may or may not be influenced by Islam.

- Eva37: Yes, it is tradition, but it is written here, isn't it? So, we can see the origin of the tradition, can't we?
- Eva38: And not to have your own name is quite important.
- Eva39: And here, in the next sequence in the text it is written, God says: "And when he had reached the top, where they could not see him, he turned towards the Ka'ba, lifted both hands to Allah and said this prayer: 'Lord, I have settled a part of my offspring in a valley where nothing grows'."
- Eva40: This does not include Hagar, "offspring" ... he settled his son there, not Hagar.
- Shirin29: Everything belongs to him, both wife and son.
- Eva41: Yes, but she is not mentioned.
- Eva42: Hagar and her son ... he says "offspring."
- Aira33: Excuse me. In the Koran it says *ahli*. That means family, and that is both wife and children. It does not say so here.

Eva turns the argument made by Rima and Aira around in Eva37. She suggests that the tradition of naming women in relation to their children may originate from the *hadith* – as part of the Islamic canonical tradition. This questions the relation between cultural *versus* religious roots of traditional practices, and Eva may comprehend that the relation between Islam and the cultural tradition is more complex than Rima and Aira see it, both of whom distinguished rather sharply between Islam and tradition in this respect. However, Eva is not exploring a possible complexity around the origin of this practice of naming women. She is connecting the custom of naming women in relation to their children with Islam because of how she perceived the text from the *hadith*.

The underlying question is how one can distinguish between religion and tradition/culture. Since culture and religion are often intertwined in social practice and may

mutually legitimize each other's practices, it is difficult to distinguish between them on a general basis. Religion may be seen to be opposed to culture or to parts of cultural practice, or the two areas may be seen as complementary fields with no real mutual friction between them. The religious believer may identify herself arbitrarily with culture or religion or enhance the significance of culture and/or religion by referring to oneself as "Western" or "Christian," as "Arab" or "Muslim," or as "Western" and "Muslim." It is necessary to analyze the context further in order to tell if the use of cultural or religious categories in naming oneself and others carries a specific significance. However, how one identifies oneself in a discussion might suggest which discourse it is to which one relates at different times, given that there are several discourses present that provide room for a choice. As mentioned above, when Eva identifies herself as a Western woman, and the object of her criticism is defined as part of Islam, the probable line of conflict is drawn between the categories of the West and Islam, rather than between Christianity and Islam.

Eva38 underlines the importance of "having your own name," in a negative way. "Having your own name" is asserted over against being named in relation to one's own child, which then would mean *not* having one's own name. For Eva, having a name of one's own thus seems to mean that the name refers to a person as an individual, with no reference to relationships or kinship.<sup>125</sup>

The question of who is naming the children in relation to whom the mother is subsequently named is not raised. If one names one's own child, this would be an indirect way of naming oneself. If a relative or society names the child, they then indirectly name the parent of the child. The focus in the discussion is, however, not so much on the practices of naming but on the right to be addressed by others by a personal name and how to assess the practice of being named in relation to one's child. So far in the discussion, this is dealt with as exclusively a women's issue.

In Eva39 Eva moves into the broader area of patriarchal family structures she identifies in the text from the *hadith*. The sequence she quotes is the one verse from the Koran that is cited in this narrative, and thus it has a different status in the Islamic tradition from the rest of this text. Eva is critical with respect to how she perceives Abraham/Ibrahim talking about his family. She argues that he did not even mention Hagar/Hajar in this verse. Here she may implicitly be continuing a comparison between the biblical Hagar narrative and the text from the *hadith*, adding arguments for her comprehension of the *hadith* as a text where Hagar/Hajar is portrayed as being less in charge of her own and her son's destiny than in the biblical text.

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<sup>125</sup> The discussion is about the cultural practice of using a person's personal first name *versus* being named in terms of one's children. Last names or family names are not mentioned.

Both Shirin and Aira argue that what was meant in the text was that Hagar/Hajar was included in Abraham's declaration about his family (Shirin29, Aira33). Aira criticizes the translation in the Norwegian version of the *hadith* that was read in the group for causing this misunderstanding. She provides the Arabic term used in the koranic text, which means "family" (since this is a verse from the Koran) to correct the translation "offspring."<sup>126</sup> At the next meeting, however (Meeting 3), Aira corrected her own statement. She had checked the koranic verse in the meantime and found that the word in the Koran was not the Arabic word for family, as she had suggested, but the word for offspring, as it had been translated. She stated this in her first contribution at the next meeting but claimed that this did not change her overall perspective of the text. She argues, however, that this does not in any way mean that the text or Ibrahim means to ignore Hajar. She points to Ibrahim's prayer in the koranic verse in the *hadith* narrative as an expression of concern for both Hajar and Ishmael.

Shirin29 perceives the patriarchal perspective of the tradition in a different way. Shirin explains that Abraham is to be regarded as the "family owner" of both Hagar/Hajar and Ishmael. This includes Hagar/Hajar, as part of his property. Shirin's point, however, is that Hagar was not *excluded*.

The discussion now moved into what became Discussion 2, but Maria later went back to the discussion on the practice of naming women. She introduces a new perspective:

- Maria8: For me, when I read both these texts, I thought that very little has changed between those times and ours.
- Maria9: The only difference is that things are more formalized.
- Maria10: I believe that the difficulty of not getting any children still bothers women.
- Maria11: Just that today it is possible to have access to the technology .... So you can ... You don't need a man to have a child today.
- Maria12: But it is also that ... this is very interesting for me because there is a lot of tradition. Because when I read this, it could have been written from some of my places in Africa.
- Maria13: It's just right: if a woman is married and without children, they find another woman for the man in order for him to have children. So this is a current theme today, not only at that time.
- Maria14: And good technology has arrived, then it gets fixed with technology and as I said it is a little ....

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<sup>126</sup> In the Norwegian translation of the *hadith*: *avkom*.

- Maria15: And what Eva brought up, that she is named in relation to her son ... to me this is a joy when someone calls me in relation to my daughter because I am .... They call me mama Isabel, then I feel very proud.
- Maria16: So it is very traditional, too, what you are called. And in Africa, we don't call women by their names ... never. We call them in relation to their son or daughter, for instance ....
- Eva43: John, my oldest son's name is John.
- Maria17: Yes. If you came to Africa, people would say mama John. They would not call you Eva. They would call you mama John.
- Maria18: There is quite a lot of tradition in the texts.

Maria finds that the temporal gap between the historical contexts of the texts and present contexts does not automatically imply that significant changes have taken place. The text from the Bible and that from the *hadith* differ in their respective historical contexts as well as in their time of origin, but Maria does not reflect on this difference when fusing the times of the texts together as “those times.” The different cultural, historical, and religious contexts of the texts are thus underexposed as Maria constructs a common time for the two texts. Her main aim is to show the *similarities* between “those times” and “our time” concerning the position of women as connected to the social expectation of having children. The latter could be interpreted as “now” but perhaps also as “in our lifetime,” going beyond the exact present. The issue of childlessness is part the theme of the Genesis narrative but does not connect immediately with the text from the *hadith*.

If the perspective of time in Maria's meaning making is simplified into the categories of “then” and “now,” she constructs two different time categories in her statements. While recognizing them as different times, Maria still merges them by presenting the fact that barrenness for women today is still a problematic in exactly in the same way that it was in the Genesis text. However, the new perspective she includes is loaded with experiences from another geographical location than the immediate Norwegian context. A man is allowed or expected to turn to another woman if his wife is barren in order to ensure that he has children – just as Abraham did in the Genesis narrative. Maria states that “they,” without further specification, would find him another woman, thus describing it as a social and cultural act in the African context, rather than an individual one, to which she is referring (Maria13).

Maria extends the geographical and cultural area in view, merging the “then” and the “now” of the African contexts mentioned (Maria12). Through her use of spatial references she may be expressing her view that the *place* where a woman lives is more crucial for her life than the *times* in which she lives. In her use of the category of time, “then” and “now” merge, but her spatial perspective visualizes a difference that is already there but has not been articulated until now.

The technology mentioned as a solution for childless women in Maria11 emphasizes this point. Technology of this kind is not available for everyone at a global level. This creates a spatial as well as social division between women who have access to this technology and those who do not.

Maria does not apply the observed temporal merging between “then” and “now” – brought about through similarities between the African context and the historical context of the Hagar/Hajar narratives – in the same way to contexts outside Africa. The Norwegian context is not mentioned. The temporal merging expresses Maria’s view of the relation between the Hagar/Hajar narratives and the African context to which she refers: they are closely related on social and cultural issues concerning the naming of women and women’s status as parents. The interpretative or meaning-making problem Maria addresses is thus related to a gap between places or contexts, between African contexts and, for instance, Norway, and between the Norwegian context and the biblical text.

Maria’s temporal and spatial meaning making creates a new interpretation of the past represented in the texts through accenting a current context geographically distant. By connecting the African context to the Hagar/Hajar narratives, she brings the past (“then”) closer to the here and now.

The view of historical evolutionism, which is basically that the historical development of all cultures and societies follow the same pattern, and that cultures are evaluated by the extent to which they have embraced Western modernity, could also lump the pre-modern times of the biblical text and the African context together in one category. Johannes Fabian criticizes social/historical evolutionism for being ethnocentric and for denying coevalness and thus equality between people living in different cultures (Fabian 1983: 17, 30-31). But this is hardly what Maria intends in this sequence. Social/historical evolutionism and its categorizations of other cultures often portray the “then” and “there” as one-dimensional times/places – constructing an image of the people living in such times/spaces as inferior to the here/now, with the West as the epistemological center. Maria does not seem to mention the African context she speaks about as an example of the “distant” as *inferior*. Her message can be taken as an attempt to bring the realities of a distant context (“there”), into the space of “here,” in order to signify experiences from other places in the here and now. Maria displays an interpretative position as

being multi-located and uses this to challenge the presupposition that Norway or the West is the only (or the central) interpretative context for the Hagar narrative.<sup>127</sup>

Finally, Maria addresses the issue of naming women in relation to their children (Maria15). One of the problems of a childless woman in, for example, an African context as described by Maria may be that she had no children in relation to whom she could be named, so her childlessness would be confirmed every time her name was mentioned and in her self-presentation. In this way a woman's status with respect to motherhood and naming are linked together. It could be that this is exactly what a man must avoid through arranging a new partner if the present female partner does not produce children (Maria13). If a proper name in this context is linked with being a parent, to ensure a proper name for a man seems to be more important than doing so for a woman.

Against the background of Maria's descriptions of the consequences of childlessness for an African woman, the problems presented by Eva earlier (connected with being named in relation to one's children) are put in a different perspective. Maria does show that she perceives the custom of being named in relation to her children quite differently from how Eva does (Maria15). Instead of interpreting this as depriving her of a "name" of her own, she expresses joy and pride over being included in this custom.

In Maria16 Maria refers to the process of naming as "traditional." Naming a person is part of a broader tradition for Maria, and even if her further example of a tradition is African, she does not exclude other practices of naming as "not traditional." Maria's argument extends the discussion of naming from concentrating on cultural tradition and religion in Islamic and Muslim practice to including African customs of naming. She does not mention religiously motivated traditions or religion in her contribution. Through this the religious element in the discussion is supplied with a cultural perspective on the tradition. "Tradition" is introduced as something distinct from religion, at least it appears this way in the discussion.

In the discussion so far, the notion of tradition is used only concerning the practice of naming a woman after her child's name, not for the practice of addressing a woman by her personal first name. Tradition is thus connected to the African practice Maria describes and to the practice in the *hadith*, connected to a practice in Muslim communities at the time of origin of the *hadith* text. A direct religious legitimization of this practice in Islam is denied. Nevertheless, the spatial and temporal space of this particular practice of naming is described as being in the

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<sup>127</sup> Kwok Pui-Lan uses the expression "diasporic consciousness" as a skill that reveals dominant discourses in a feminist postcolonial based criticism of the notions of "center" and "periphery" as they are displayed in these discourses. She emphasizes that the multiple location of a diasporic female subject creates a need to negotiate contexts, and that this may situate her in a position to be able to decenter the center (Kwok 2005: 44-51).

“then” of the *hadith*, the “now and there” in Africa and not in the “then” of the biblical text about Hagar or in the “here and now” of the Norwegian context.

Maria (in Maria16) expresses herself in a way that may reflect both closeness and distance toward the practice of naming that she claims is “traditional.” She includes herself in an African “we,” while at the same time noting that the traditional naming of women implies that a woman’s “own name” is never used. What is a woman’s “real” name in a context where she is named in relation to her children? For Maria, it seems that she refers to a woman’s “own name” here as her first name. She might be putting it that way because she views the issue in that way, but it may also be because she wants to be understood by the others. If the latter, this might indicate that Maria relates to what she perceives to be a dominant discourse in the group, and this would be a discourse where the immediate interpretation of what the “real” name of a woman was is her first name. Maria may have internalized the perspective of looking at oneself and one’s own background from a dominant Western perspective. If it is done automatically, and the view of the other is internalized into one’s own view of oneself, this connects to postcolonial theory’s criticism that the colonized or dominated ones are made to look at themselves as through the eyes of the colonizers or the dominant group. But including the assumed or actual perception by the other of oneself may also be a result of self-reflexivity and communicative knowledge, if done deliberately. Maria’s perspective is perhaps best framed by Kwok Pui-Lan’s term *diasporic consciousness*, which is multi-located and may be able to recognize difference as “outsiders from within” (Kwok 2005: 49).

Maria ends her contribution by inviting Eva to name herself following the African custom as a performance (Maria17), and Eva accepts the invitation (Eva44). This act includes Eva in an imagined African context as a possible visitor, demonstrating that as a guest, she would be named according to the tradition there.

Maria18 connects “tradition” with “the texts.” In Maria16 the African practice of naming is called “traditional.” The spatial and temporal space of the texts (from the Bible and from the *hadith*) are connected to the current African contexts of Maria and thus all labeled as close to “tradition.”

Inger1: Can I just ask ... what do they call the fathers?

Maria19: It is the same. Father John, it is the same.

Eva44: Do they?

Maria20: And if they don’t have children you will be called ....



Eva45:            In relation to your husband.

Inger is the first participant in the discussion who addresses the naming of fathers, rather than only the mothers. This broadens the perspective to include both genders. Maria claims that in the African context to which she refers, both parental genders are included in the practice of being named in relation to their children. Inger does not ask about the practice in *hadith* or in predominantly Muslim cultures. Eva44 might show that Eva is surprised by this information. Maria then attempts to add information about how men, or men and women without children, are named, but Eva answers this question with regard to women (Eva45). Maria does not correct this statement, so Eva's answer is left as it stands.

The question of how men without children are named is not raised, nor does anyone ask how women without either husband or children are named.

***Practices of Naming as an Example of Discrimination Against Women  
in Text and Context***

The core issue in the discussion, which is the practice of naming a woman in relation to her child, was introduced by one of the Lutheran Christian Norwegian participants as an example of discrimination against women in the *hadith*. This is based on the observation that Hajar is referred to exclusively as the mother of Ishmael in this text. The way the participant reflects on this implies a possible connotation of the entire Islamic tradition, on the basis of the text from the *hadith*. In the *hadith* Ibrahim acts under his first name, and not as the "father of Ishmael." In the background is the biblical text, which calls Hagar by her personal name and in which Hagar names God. The premise for evaluating the *hadith* as discriminatory against Hajar in particular (and women in general) is that the practice of naming demonstrated in the *hadith* is regarded as discriminatory against women. Notably, the participant who addresses this does not start a discussion about any of the incidents or practices in the Genesis text that may be used as a starting point for reflecting on possible discrimination against women in the Bible or in the Christian tradition.

Throughout the discussion about religion *versus* cultural traditions, the participants with African, Middle Eastern, and Asian backgrounds (Maria, Rima, and Aira) all claim that the naming practice present in the *hadith* is not particularly connected to Islam as a religion. They connected the practice to cultural traditions in different times and places.

Not everyone agrees with the premise that this way of naming women is problematic or discriminatory against women. The Lutheran Christian African-Norwegian participant claims

that there are other cultural practices representing far more important challenges to women's situation.

It seems that Maria, Rima, and Aira together form a transreligious and transcultural interpretative community. They share a pre-understanding of where to situate the practice of naming women in relation to their children, namely in what they call "the traditional," which is distinguished from the religious, apart from Maria's statement linking "tradition" closely to the texts. What these participants have in common is that they are from so-called non-Western countries. They may all share a *diasporic consciousness*, sensitive to changing positions between outsiders and insiders and with a multi-local perspective (Kwok 2005: 49). To characterize a certain naming practice as "tradition" or "traditional," however, is only done to name practices of the "then" and "there," represented by the *hadith* and the African context to which Maria is referring. The "here and now" naming practice located in the West, and the naming practice in the biblical story, are not called "traditional." The question is how the labels "tradition" and "traditional" are being used and if the participants use them in the same way. If "tradition" is used as an antonym of "modern," it could suggest a certain distance (in time and space) to what is called traditional. The distinction between Islam and tradition that some of the participants propose may indicate that they do not regard Islam as foreign to modernity. The Muslim participants hesitate to criticize the text from the *hadith*. The translation is questioned, but not the text.

Maria, Rima, and Aira do not seem to evaluate the naming practice in the *hadith* as a grave example of discrimination against women, like Eva does. This means that her possible attempt to create a platform for a shared feminist criticism of the text from the *hadith* on this basis does not succeed. Instead, Maria introduces another issue as more problematic for women, namely the social consequences of childlessness in specific contexts.

Eva addresses the one verse from the Koran in the text from the *hadith* as another example of the devaluing of Hajar in the narrative. Eva may not know that this part of the text is quoted from the Koran. Shirin accepts the challenge and refers to the patriarchal structure of family ownership. Aira, however, turns to the translation of the Arabic term in the Koran to look for an inclusive interpretation with regard to Hajar, of what is translated as "offspring." Thus, the translation is suggested as being responsible for the exclusion of Hajar. Later, Aira corrected her information about the koranic text and confirmed that the word "offspring" was part of the original text. She pointed out, however, that Ibrahim confirmed Hajar's importance and his care for her through his prayer.

Inger's question about the naming of *men* in the African tradition to which Maria refers moves the discussion in a different direction: in order to say something about the gendered influence of a practice, it is necessary to map the practice regarding both genders. The

confirmation that both genders are included in the practice may show that possible gender discrimination has to be evaluated more closely in order to see the practice of naming in a larger context.

***Communicating across Cultural Paradigms  
in a Discussion of Religious Canonical Texts***

To identify oneself and situate one's speaking may shift according to contexts and circumstances. The participants who can be described as multi-located, inhabiting a diasporic consciousness (cf. Kwok), are skilled in distinguishing between religious and cultural practices and between various cultural practices. In a discussion or conversation one's self-identification can change due to the issue on the table or, as in this discussion, an issue derived from a religious canonical text. To address a question situated mainly in cultural and social traditions seems to make some of the participants identify themselves culturally rather than religiously: Eva identifies herself as a Western woman whereas Maria identifies herself as an African. Rima does not identify her position clearly either religiously or culturally, and neither does Shirin. Aira talks from a religious perspective.

In this particular discussion, adding the cultural perspective provides more clarity. It can be asked if this has an impact on the mode of communication in the group when a cultural identification emerges into the foreground of the communicative positions. Does this make them change either their reasoning or the discursive resources they use in the conversation? Some participants continue to speak from a religious perspective. But for others, the intersection between culture and religion might not be seen as an intersection at all but as a rope of different cords that are fully integrated.

In the former discussion, the issue of religious representation was discussed. In this discussion, the claim of speaking as a "Western woman" or as an "African" is not discussed further. The participants in question do not clarify further as to where they are speaking from or on behalf of whom. Nor is there any discussion concerning religious representation. This may suggest that the cultural identification is considered to be less problematic within the group and perhaps that cultural identity is regarded as less significant than religious identity. But it could also indicate that it becomes simply too much to question all different types of representation at the same time.

Returning to the former questions, it may seem that naming an issue as "cultural" opens the way for new interpretative communities across religious divides. For some participants, however, it seems to be less important to discuss issues identified as cultural practices, unless the intention is to claim a distinction between cultural and religious practices.

The fact that one of the participants criticizes the *hadith* on the basis of an explicitly *Western* perspective may indicate that a specific discourse on Islam, the West, and feminism, where Islam as such is viewed as contradicting ideals of gender equality, is used as a pre-interpretative frame for the criticism. The question also arises if this participant relates to the text from her own tradition (the Genesis text) as a religious text during the discussion and to the text of the other tradition more as a cultural expression or as part of the context than as a canonical scripture.

### *Naming and Dialogue*

Paolo Freire calls dialogue a shared act of naming the world (Freire 2000: 88). This act of naming re-humanizes human beings, since naming the world is a transforming act and humans were originally intended to name the world around them (Freire 2000: 88) In this discussion the issue is the naming of women, based on cases both within the texts and brought in from cultural contexts (the West, Africa). Even if the participants do not agree on calling the practice labeled “traditional” discriminatory against (and thus de-humanizing) women, there seems to be a general agreement that *naming* is important. Perhaps a dialogue about “naming the world” may be rephrased as “naming women,” and the act of naming together could be replaced by “exploring and discussing different ways of naming and their contextual significance.” And perhaps the act of naming the world is not as simple as Freire puts it but needs to be situated and discussed.

## **Discussion 2 Related to the Hagar/Hajar Narratives.**

### **Eva: “How could Hagar/Hajar abandon Ishmael in the desert?”**

Eva also introduces the next discussion initiated by reading the Hagar/Hajar narratives. The question Eva poses that dominates the following discussion is: How could Hagar/Hajar leave Ishmael in the desert and walk away?

- Eva46:           And there is one thing I find very strange in both texts. It is that both Hagers, I would almost say, Hagar in the biblical text and Hajar in the koranic text, abandon their child.
- Eva47:           I don’t believe that.
- Eva48:           This ... they can’t stand him screaming or watching him die, so they abandon him.
- Eva49:           And the child lies under a bush there somewhere, and then the mother abandons her child.
- Eva50:           Do you know what? I don’t believe that.

Eva51: This must have been written by a man.

*(Laughter among the participants)*

Eva52: I don't believe it for a minute.

Eva53: So, if I had a small child who was crying, would I leave him under a bush and walk away?

Eva's statement that the narrative was obviously written by a man makes everyone laugh. This shared laughter that also occurs on later occasions in the group and may be interpreted in different ways.<sup>128</sup> It is not obvious that Eva is trying to be funny, and it is not necessarily so that the other participants find what she says funny either. It can be interpreted as the result of a surprise, to indicate that Eva's suggestion is unexpected. The laughter could be a way to relieve tension or simply to express a mode of absurdity. However the laughter is interpreted, it is a shared and spontaneous expression without words in the group, even if the laughter itself could carry more than one meaning.

What troubles Eva is that she is not able to make meaning of the narrated event of Hagar/Hajar abandoning Ishmael in the desert. She refers explicitly to both texts and relates to parts of both narratives where they share the same plot, while still relating to them as distinctively different texts. The parts of the narratives that deal with Hagar/Hajar and Ishmael in the desert have significant similarities, and she identifies Hagar's abandonment of Ishmael as a point in common.

In Eva47 Eva states that a possible way of making meaning of this particular shared part of the narratives is to label it as "not true." She repeats this remark twice afterwards, in Eva50 and Eva52. But in what way does Eva mean that this narrated event could be called "not true"? There are different possibilities that would challenge the texts at different levels. She may mean that she does not believe that a historical event with a mother and a child alone in the desert is likely to have played out like this. This implies that the event of Hagar/Hajar abandoning Ishmael is not regarded as trustworthy historically, in the sense that what it narrates is unlikely to have taken place, historically. If this is Eva's interpretive step, it suggests that she wants to explore the plausibility of the narratives' historical reference.

But Eva is reading a written narrative and relating to a text, not a historical situation. She is interacting with the narratives in the present and not in the past time. Even if she addresses a problem concerning the historical plausibility of the narratives, she interacts with textual narratives, and with the other participants in the group – all situated in the present. Her struggle

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<sup>128</sup> I will elaborate more on this in the analysis of the meaning making of the prescriptive texts; cf. Chapter 6, p. 232-233.

to make meaning of the narrative is situated in the here and now, as a contemporary reader “in front of the text.”<sup>129</sup> When Eva accuses the text of being “not true” on this specific point, the accusation is directed toward the narratives in the present, since both the historical contexts of the texts and the narrators/authors are unknown and out of reach.

The above reflections do not, however, exclude the possibility that Eva means to address a historical situation, *even* if it is out of reach. According to Mieke Bal, the need to address moral dilemmas in the past by using contemporary approaches cannot be avoided if one takes the past seriously. At the same time it is necessary to be aware of the contextual difference and to accept the limited access of a present reader to the past (Bal 2008: 48). Eva’s approach, if it uses Bal’s criterion of taking the past seriously by addressing contemporary moral dilemmas, definitively does so.

Eva expresses rejection of the information from the narrative that Hagar/Hajar abandons her son three times in this sequence. This rejection includes a moral evaluation of Hagar/Hajar’s act of abandonment. The dilemma of leaving her son might be a moral dilemma for Hagar/Hajar in the narratives, but it now becomes a dilemma for the reader of the text, for Eva, when she tries to make meaning of the story.

Through her comments and statements Eva constructs a position for herself regarding the narratives/canonical scriptures: She relates to the narratives as written texts by positioning herself as a subject in relation to the text. As a subject, she defines her possibility and mandate to be critical of the texts, which entails asking critical questions, implying the possibility of abandoning the texts or parts of them. She does not establish this position only in relation to the text of her own tradition but also in relation to the text from the Islamic tradition as well. Her subjective position is not static and distanced regarding the texts: she is involved in the dilemma she derives from the narratives so that her own associations, reactions, and reflections are involved in exploring and challenging the narratives.

Her interaction with the text, substantial in her meaning making, occurs through analogical thinking. This is how Eva finds a basis for constructing a meaning of the problem she identifies in the text, as demonstrated when she states what she would have done in a situation analogous to the situation of Hagar/Hajar, shown by her rhetorical question in Eva53. She claims that she herself would never leave a child under similar circumstances. In addition, through her statement in Eva51, she widens the analogy based on her own presupposed acting to include all

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<sup>129</sup> The expression “in front of the text” is usually connected to what is called reader-response criticism in literary theory. Kwok states that biblical interpretation has become more and more located in interpretative communities (another term from the reader-response school, which was founded by Stanley Fish; see Chapter 2), and that this is now a collectively dominant emphasis in interpreting the Bible. The former dominant paradigms, i.e. “behind the text,” connected to historical criticism, and “in the text,” influenced by literary criticism (Kwok 2005: 103).

women, not only herself, by a negative expression eliminating all female as writers of the texts. Eva constructs a narrator/author who is to be held responsible for the appearance of the moral dilemma (Eva51) as a solution. The only and decisive attribute she gives the narrator/author is the male gender. The implication is that the gender of the author/narrator is important for how the text should be interpreted. The gendered limitation of experience has given the narrative of a mother and child in the desert a distorted content. Behind this reasoning is a view of women's and men's experience as profoundly different.

These interpretative steps suggest that she operates with a gendered hermeneutics that is based on analogical interpretation<sup>130</sup> and on a particular anticipation of the relationship between the genders and between experience and gender. Eva leans on reasoning where women and men are viewed as having different experiences and thus writing the story differently and in addition she equals being a woman with motherhood. Eva thus enters into a specific form of gendered hermeneutics related to so-called second-wave feminism (Cudd and Andreasen 2005: 7-8), where women's experiences are universally categorized as different from men's and bases a feminist critique on an anticipated unity based on gender.<sup>131</sup>

In Eva46 and 48 Eva refers to Hagar/Hajar as "they," i.e. in the plural. Ishmael is still referred to in the singular (Eva50). Doubling the person that leaves the child behind may have the effect of making the event even more dramatic: the child is abandoned by not only one but two mothers. In Eva49 Eva returns to the singular, talking about one "mother." It seems that Eva's alternation between the plural and the singular shifts in line with her view of the intertextual relation between the two narratives as fluid. She moves between relating to the narratives as one merged story at some points, and keeping the stories distinct at others.

Eva suggests two answers to her own question: The first is to reject the historical plausibility of the event of Hagar/Hajar's abandonment in the texts and see the author or the narrator as a man without the necessary knowledge of what he is writing/narrating. But when Eva searches for an answer to her own question *within* the framework of the narratives, she suggests an answer connected to her impression of Hagar/Hajar's emotional state (Eva48): Hagar/Hajar left Ishmael to avoid the emotional pain of watching her son die or to escape the sound of his screaming. In both answers Eva is deeply involved in the moral dilemma she describes as the obstacle to her relating to the text at all.

Rima and Aira suggest a different answer to Eva's question:

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<sup>130</sup> See the section in Chapter 2 on Analogical Reasoning and Moral Enrichment/Critique, p. 48-50.

<sup>131</sup> So-called "third wave" feminism, usually considered as having started in the late 1980s, is influenced by poststructuralism and criticizes the notion of universal experiences for women. Instead, this is seen as "essentialism" and criticized for not taking diversity among women seriously and for constructing the categories men-women as binary opposites (Cudd and Andreasen 2005: 8).

- Rima8: She walks away from him to find water, doesn't she? She walks away in order to find water?
- Eva54: No.
- Rima9: Yes.
- Eva55: Wait. Look here...
- Aira34: Yes, yes.

Rima and Aira both look for an answer within the frames of the two narratives. Rima finds an immediate meaning in Hagar/Hajar's act of abandonment: She leaves Ishmael to find water in order to rescue the both of them from dying of thirst. This does not rule out an emotional engagement on Hagar/Hajar's part, but the emphasis is on a different aspect of the action: she did not *leave* Ishmael primarily to protect herself emotionally. Rather, her action was directed *toward* a goal, i.e. to find water.

What is the basis of the difference in the meaning making of this act? It may be caused by different positions taken toward the texts as readers, or it may go back to different experiences as a reference framework for analogical meaning making. To take the first possibility: Rima and Aira may have greater confidence in the text and in the narrative from the beginning because it was already well known to them. Their analogical reference, to take the last possibility, may include different experiences of *existing* interpretations of the narrative. I will return to this later when Aira shares her meaning making of the texts.

In the further discussion, none of participants pay much attention to distinguishing between the two Hagar/Hajar narratives. The narratives have now merged – in the discussion.

- Eva56: Here it says in the biblical text:
- Eva57: "Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot: for she was thinking: I cannot watch the boy die."
- Eva58: That's why she leaves.
- Eva59: And it says: "She could not watch him ... she went ... and looked for people."



- Aira35: I cannot watch the boy die without doing anything; I will go up and find him some water.
- Eva60: It doesn't say that.
- Aira36: Yes. That's what it really is.
- Rima10: She's going around in circles, isn't she.
- Eva61: It says: "She could not endure looking at him." "Safa was the nearest mountain to her." "She stood on it and started looking at the valley keenly so that she might see somebody, but she could not see anybody."
- Inger2: She was looking for help.
- Eva62: She did.
- Eva63: But she cast him away ... she couldn't look at him.
- Inger3: And you could carry a baby even if you went out.

Eva claims repeatedly that Hagar/Hajar abandons Ishmael in order to protect herself emotionally. She bases her argument on both texts and quotes directly from the texts to legitimize her view (Eva57 and 61). The two narratives are quoted separately but face the same challenge from Eva. Inger and Aira relate to a common plot and do not differentiate between the narratives. Both interact with a merged narrative and suggest alternative answers to the puzzle of Hagar/Hajar's abandonment of Ishmael.

Aira keeps emphasizing what Hagar/Hajar is going to do (trying to find water) and not what she had done (leaving Ishmael). Inger1 is a contribution to the practically focused reasoning suggested by Rima and Aira earlier, still within the interpretative frame of the narratives. But in Inger2 Inger suggests a practical solution for the figure of Hagar/Hajar in the narratives, and thus she moves, as Eva did earlier, to a reading position that interacts closely with the narratives by suggesting an *alternative* plot to solve what Eva and now Inger see as the moral dilemma: Hagar/Hajar could have carried the boy with her when looking for water. This is an attempt to establish a contrafactual narrative, a "what if" question to bring in other premises for the narrative in order to change the plot. Inger uses analogical reasoning to do so, based on the

presupposition that anyone in Hagar's situation could carry a baby with her/him. This is presumably addressed to both texts but as a merged plot.

Eva64: She left him, and a mother doesn't do that.

Aira37: No, for me it's because she cannot let him die of thirst.

Aira38: Because he doesn't have water, so she has to do something.

Eva64 does not follow up on Inger's attempt to establish alternative premises for the story to solve the moral dilemma. Nor does she substitute her focus on the act of abandonment for a focus on the act of providing water. Eva64 may be interpreted in different ways. She could be criticizing Hagar/Hajar for being a bad mother, which would be a moral judgment on the Hagar/Hajar figure as a mother in the narratives (the mothers once again having merged in Eva's statements). If so, the problem of the abandonment becomes a moral dilemma in relation to the Hagar/Hajar figure. Or she might be indicating that the act of abandonment has to be dismissed as a trustworthy part of the narratives, because the texts clearly situate Hagar/Hajar as a mother, and a mother simply does not act this way. If this is the content of what Eva says in Eva64, the reason why this event is narrated like this is, Eva has suggested earlier, because the narrator is a man. In the latter case the problem of the abandonment moves from the figure of Hagar/Hajar to a dilemma in the interpretative interaction with the text.

Aira, as the only Muslim participant taking part in this discussion, repeats her understanding of the reason for Hagar/Hajar abandoning Ishmael: It is of a practical, literally life-saving character. This is not necessarily a rejection of imagining Hagar/Hajar to be less emotionally stressed, but the emotions would, according to this interpretation, have a practical outcome. Aira's comments relate to the debate about what a mother should or should not do as a moral dilemma (Aira38). According to Aira, Hagar's duty as a mother is not primarily, perhaps, to stay with her son but to do something to meet his life-threatening need for water, even if this means leaving him alone.

Eva65: You are interpreting something that is not in the text.

Aira39: Then it is written wrongly ... somebody has translated it from Arabic, this is not the actual text.

Eva66: So the translation is wrong?

- Aira40: Yes.
- Eva67: All right.
- Aira41: I will claim that one hundred percent. Because the meaning is that she had to do it out of necessity.
- Aira42: We who perform *hajj* ....
- Eva68: Yes, because it is written here: "She could not endure looking at him."  
Eva69: She went away and found Safa to be the nearest mountain.
- Aira43: Yes, because she would be standing at the top of the mountain searching for someone who could help her.
- Inger4: She was looking for water.
- Eva70: Because ... You put that meaning there; it doesn't say so.
- Aira44: The translation is wrong.
- Aira45: Because if you understand it ... she went there to find water, and she looked in that direction many times.<sup>132</sup>
- Aira46: I will tell you that, when we perform our pilgrimage then, as it says here, this is *sa'y*.
- Aira47: This is why one performs *sa'y*.
- Aira48: *Sa'y* means that one runs back and forth between Safa and Marwa, the two mountains.
- Aira49: And then she runs really fast at certain points in order to watch the child ... in between the places where she was not able to see the child.
- Aira50: So there are many women and men who are running quickly between the mountains ... to follow the tradition, in remembrance of her struggle.

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<sup>132</sup> Aira commented on this when reading the final text, stating that what she meant was to emphasize that, in the narrative from the *hadith*, Hajar could see Ishmael from the mountain top.

None of the written Hagar/Hajar narratives explicitly mention that the Hagar/Hajar figure leaves Ishmael to seek for water. This makes Eva accuse Aira of “interpreting something that is not in the text” (Eva65). Again, the two narratives are treated as one by Eva. Aira’s answer, however, is limited to the text from the Islamic tradition (Aira39), and she states that the reason why it appears as if she interprets outside of the texts is confusion in the translation process from Arabic. Aira39 shows one possible strategy to apply to a problem of making meaning of a translated text: the translation could be proven wrong, inaccurate, or contested, so that going back to the original text and critically evaluating the translation might solve or transform the problem. This may make the problem vanish, or make it appear easier to solve in a satisfactory way.

Although the narrative from the *hadith* does not explicitly say that Hagar went away to look for water, it does state that she went to look for other people to get help, and that the problem is Ishmael’s and her own thirst. Eva65 may then be concerned mostly with the Genesis narrative, reflecting that Eva thinks Aira does not include the biblical narrative of Hagar in her representation of the narrative. Aira’s answer in Aira39 clearly reflects only the text from the *hadith*. In this particular elaboration of the narratives’ contents, it seems as if the two participants limit their perspective to the text from their own tradition.

One of Eva’s comments (Eva65) is highly critical of Aira’s way of interacting with the narratives so far. When Eva quotes from narratives as a *basis* for her critique of Aira, this may seem contradictory to her own earlier criticism of the texts, questioning their validity. Eva can thus be said to take more than one position. On the one hand, she is ready to dismiss the text if she cannot accept it as consistent with her own analogical interpretation, but, on the other hand, she engages closely with the expressions and wording of the texts. In both positions she remains critical. Aira, on the contrary, takes a position where she defends the narratives as well as the acts of Hagar/Hajar. In this position she tries to argue for consistency and the existence of an acceptable solution to the moral dilemma Eva poses.

The question in this sequence is still: Why did Hagar/Hajar abandon Ishmael in the desert? It seems to be of utmost importance to find a satisfactory answer to this question for all parties in the discussion. Eva has stated earlier that her whole relation to the narratives is at stake here and that she may be ready to dismiss them if she does not find a meaning in the narratives at this particular point.

Aira elaborates on her answer to why she believed Hagar/Hajar left Ishmael to find water. This particular text and narrative is the origin in the Islamic sources for the later developed ritual of *sa’y* during *haji* (Esposito 2003: 103). The performance of *sa’y* is modeled after Hajar’s struggle to survive and rescue Ishmael in the desert, and the central act of *sa’y*, which is running between Safa and Marwa, is interpreted as an imitation of her struggle to find water. The ritual of

*sa'y* is highly significant to Aira in her meaning making of the Hagar narrative: The narrative and the ritual mutually interpret each other across the time gap.

In Aira<sup>46</sup> she uses the pronoun “we,” including herself and presumably all Muslims as potential and actual performers of *sa'y*. This may be why she is confident that Hagar/Hajar leaves Ishmael to find water: to Aira, this is the story of the first *sa'y* and in performing *sa'y*, one seeks the well of Zam-Zam (Esposito 2003: 103). Aira mentions explicitly that the ritual of *sa'y* includes both women and men. All Muslims who have experienced the *hajj* have thus become part of the Hajar narrative through reproducing or performing Hajar’s struggle across the temporal gap between “then” and “now” and across the line between the narrative and text on the one hand and religious experience on the other.

Aira thus presents another way of interacting with the narrative: by participating in a ritual performance based on the narrative. In the case of the Hagar/Hajar narrative, the performance of *sa'y* is exclusively reserved for Muslims, since non-Muslims do not have access to Mecca or to the *hajj*. Inger joins Aira’s assumption that Hagar/Hajar leaves Ishmael to find water (Inger<sup>4</sup>), but for Inger, this is not based on the ritual of *sa'y* as a source for the meaning making. Inger’s reasoning is possibly influenced by Aira’s inputs but it can also be the result of analogical reasoning. Aira and Inger may share a position toward the canonical texts in a less critical quest for meaning, at least in this particular section of the discussion. But when Inger suggests different premises for solving the moral dilemma of Hagar/Hajar in the narrative, Aira does not suggest any such change. There is no such need for her to keep the narratives consistent, only to keep a critical eye on the translation.

Rima<sup>10</sup>:           She was totally confused.

With a possible defense of the figure of Hagar/Hajar, Rima also moves to the position of interacting with the narratives, imagining the emotional state of Hagar/Hajar. Rima moves toward an analogical reasoning to an existential level that may draw on her own potential feelings in a similar situation. There is nothing explicitly narrated that would indicate that Hagar/Hajar was confused in any of the texts. Rima does not say anything more about this, however, and Susanne enters the discussion:

Susanne<sup>1</sup>:        But this is not a criticism of Hagar; it is a criticism of ....

Susanne<sup>2</sup>:        It is only an observation that this is written by a man because a woman might not ....

Susanne1-2 suggest a distinction between criticizing Hagar/Hajar as an independent figure in the narratives and criticizing the construction of the narratives' plot. Is criticism of Hagar/Hajar's action in the narrative a criticism of the figure of Hagar as such? Or is it a criticism of the textual narratives? Both Hagar/Hajar, as well as the authors of the text or the narrators, are beyond our reach. Only the presence of the narratives makes it possible to have access to Hagar/Hajar and to criticize her actions. Susanne does not suggest a connection between the criticism of Hagar/Hajar and the criticism of the canonical scriptures as such.

Susanne answers Aira by presenting a different defense of Hagar/Hajar. Aira places the problem partly outside the narratives, in the translation of the text, and partly interprets the Hagar/Hajar narratives within the reference framework of the Islamic ritual of *sa'y*. For Aira, the challenge is not to keep the texts consistent but to keep the *conversation* together and explain her views. Susanne seems to take a more distanced reading role than the others by using the word "observation" in Susanne2. However, she can be interpreted as supporting parts of Eva's reasoning (Susanne2): the puzzle of Hagar/Hajar's abandonment of Ishmael could be solved by constructing a male author/narrator in accordance with Eva's analogical thinking and gendered hermeneutics. Susanne does not, however, address the question of why Hagar/Hajar abandoned her son directly. Susanne is possibly defending Eva and relating more to the *discussion* than to the narratives.

Aira51: ... I can't accept that it is because it is written by a man or that he would neglect the status of Hagar. She has a high status for us, for all Muslims.

It is not clear if Aira is referring to both texts or only to the text from the *hadith* (Aira51). In the latter case, this would mean that for her both Hagar/Hajar stories have now merged into one – but this one merged story is the story as it is narrated in the *hadith*.

Aira brings in the status of Hagar/Hajar as a pivotal issue for her by referring to Hajar's high status in the Islamic tradition. She does not clarify how she perceives that Hagar/Hajar's status is in danger of being violated. A possible interpretation would be that claiming that Hagar/Hajar made a mistake or acted in a morally dubious way would imply disrespect for her status. This could, for instance, refer to Eva's criticism of the figure of Hagar/Hajar as a mother.

Aira strongly refuses to blame the supposedly male author(s). She dismisses the possibility that the author, male or not, would violate the status of Hagar/Hajar in any way. If Aira requires the portrayal of Hagar/Hajar to be flawless in the narratives due to her high position in Islam, this would not fit with interpreting her actions as a possible attempt to put her own life or well-being before the life of her son. Moreover, Aira dismisses Eva's gender-based hermeneutical position, since an alleged male author does not play any important role for Aira.

What is important to her is to explain Hagar/Hajar's status in Islam, as a figure above criticism. Hagar/Hajar's act of abandonment is, as stated above, not an interpretational problem for Aira, but she nevertheless rejects the idea that a male author would distort the narratives.

Eva71: This is not about neglecting her status.

Eva72: It is that she does it. A woman should say that she didn't.

Aira52: In my opinion she hasn't done it, if you understand it.

In this verbal interaction between Eva and Aira, their respective perspectives do not appear to relate to the same problem. Eva rejects any relevance of Hagar/Hajar's religious status for the discussion (Eva71). Her problem is how to trust the textual *narrative* as long as she feels that Hagar/Hajar leaves Ishmael alone in the desert. Eva's analogical interpretation seems to be based on the presupposition that, universally, women and men make different ethical judgments based on their gender or gendered experience, and there is a possible slide in her argument between the subjects "woman" and "mother" (Eva72).

Aira52 actually shares Eva's view that Hagar/Hajar did not abandon Ishmael, but the agreement is based on different premises. Aira agrees that Hagar/Hajar left the child, as the textual narrative states, but she does not agree that the reason was to spare Hagar/Hajar from emotional pain, as Eva suggested. Aira has claimed that Hagar/Hajar left to fulfill her duty as a mother: namely to get help for her son.

Both Eva and Aira thus defend the figure of Hagar/Hajar but on different grounds. Aira defends both the textual narratives as canonical scriptures, as well as the figure of Hagar/Hajar. Eva's defense of Hagar is based on the presupposition of how women (mothers) act as a universal principle. Their different premises may imply a difference between Eva and Aira in their perception of the texts and their own positioning as meaning-making subjects. This difference may originate from the different perception of canonical scriptures in the Christian and Muslim traditions, but this issue has not surfaced in the discussion so far. A different positioning as readers of the text has, however, become visible, for Aira's contributions are shaped mostly by her reference to the Islamic religious practice of *sa'y*.

Inger then enters the discussion again and turns back to the text from the Old Testament:

Inger5: In the Old Testament at least it says very clearly

Inger6: and I don't think it's a wrong translation that she abandoned her child.

Inger7: So I agree. You don't do that. You can carry a little baby with you.

- Eva73: No I mean, when he is lying there, dying, then you would want to hold your child until it dies – you don't leave him.
- Aira53: She wanted to climb a high mountain and to watch the child at the same time ....
- Aira54: Or perhaps someone else who is with her ... in a way it was her home right there where he is lying, wasn't it.
- Aira55: It was just her and the baby, right ... she is going up the mountain to see if there were people she could ask to help.
- Eva74: So, the kid is shivering down there, and you climb the mountain?
- Aira56: Only to find help. Only to find help.
- Eva75: All right.
- Aira57: It's a misunderstanding.

This is the closing sequence of the discussion, and the participants do not come to an agreement on why the Hagar/Hajar figure left Ishmael in the desert in both narratives. The arguments presented in the sequence by Inger, Eva, and Aira are basically similar to what they have already presented, but the tone is sharpened a bit and the engagement with the narrative is strong.

Aira is still the only Muslim participant taking part in the discussion. Inger states that she does not see that a critical evaluation of the translation is a possible solution to the problem of Hagar's abandonment of Ishmael regarding the biblical text (Inger4-7). But after she made this comment (directed to the biblical text), the two narratives seem to merge into one in what is left of the discussion: Hagar/Hajar climbed a mountain only in the text from the *hadith*, but in the discussion this evolves into a shared premise. Eva, now supported by Inger, strongly maintains that it is unacceptable that Hagar/Hajar abandoned the child, whereas Aira defends Hagar's decision of leaving him in order to get help.

In these closing sentences Inger, Aira, and Eva were all at the same level of interacting with the narrative(s), with the exception of the part Inger4-7. They talk primarily about an actual situation of a mother and her child in the desert, not necessarily limited to the textual narrative, although Aira's references are clearly to the Hajar narrative from the *hadith*. The question why



Hagar/Hajar left her son had become an existential question (for Inger and Eva in particular), beyond the text, about a mother and a son in a desperate situation in the desert.

***Making Meaning Through Interacting with the Hagar/Hajar Narrative***

In this discussion much of the meaning making is done through engaging in the plot of the narratives. To ask questions, to question the plot, and to engage emotionally in the desert drama portrayed in the texts are interpretative acts showing this engagement.

Two ways of interacting with the Hagar/Hajar narrative are represented in this discussion, and they are not mutually exclusive. One is to interact through analogical reasoning, sometimes including an element of existential interpretation. This way of making meaning entails that the reader searches her own experience and references to seek identification with the figures and with the narrative plot, thus entering into a discussion or conversation with the text and her co-readers of the text. This is what Eva, Inger, and Rima do in their search to make meaning of the text.

The other mode of interaction represented is making meaning through the religious performance of rituals as a personal or indirect experience. This may be regarded as a more specific variety of analogical reasoning, based on experiences within a religious tradition. Aira uses the ritual of *sa'y* to interpret the narratives, and she uses analogical reasoning to interpret Hagar/Hajar's intentions as similar to the ritualized imitation of her struggles.

Throughout the discussions the two narratives merge into one more often than not. A relatively small part of the narratives' plots is addressed, and, in addition, most of the information in this part is the same in both the Old Testament and the *hadith*. To be able to communicate, to merge them into one, makes the conversation more efficient. The differences are still present through some precise references where the participants explicitly state which text they are talking about. Eva's contribution, when quoting from both narratives to strengthen her own reasoning, is more than just trying to communicate as effectively as possible. It emerges rather as a deliberate comparison to argue for her own criticism of the plot – or of the Hagar/Hajar figure. Just as she refers to two Hagar/Hajars early in the discussion, she uses the presence of two texts from two traditions to strengthen her criticism.

Constructing a common ground for communication between two textual universes and a diversity of religious and cultural frameworks requires the transposition of linguistic expressions from one sign system to another (Kristeva 1984: 193 ff). In the movement from one sign system to another, the content of the expression may change according to a new context or a new text. This requires knowledge as well as contextual sensitivity in intertextual studies (Leirvik 2002: 28). But what is required to reach a transcontextual space, which Lissi Rasmussen suggests as an

aim for interreligious encounter (Rasmussen 1997: 110)? Is awareness of the presence of different sign systems a necessary requirement for reaching a transcontextual space?

With regard to the possible emergence of a transcontextual space, the participants do not explicitly address differences between their interpretative frameworks. Still, the differences are expressed and thus become part of the communication. An exchange of different viewpoints happens through their engagement with the Hagar/Hajar narratives and their respective quests for interpretation. This exchange represents at least a possible start of a transcontextual space in the making.

Eva concentrates on a moral dilemma she finds in both narratives, making use of her own resources of gendered hermeneutics and analogical reasoning in an attempt to make meaning of the narratives. She does not discriminate between the two texts in this respect. The latter means that she has moved from a critical position regarding the text from the *hadith* (in discussion 1) to a critical position regarding both texts.

Aira relates to Eva's dilemma, even if she does not share it, and thus moves into the interpretational context of the other when she becomes engaged with Eva's statements. Aira, for her part, uses her religious tradition as a resource for making meaning of the narratives. The Christian participants do not engage much in Aira's presentation of her interpretation throughout the discussion, thus missing an opportunity to relate to Aira's interpretational context. They may still be influenced by it, but the discussion is dominated by Eva's introductory question regarding the moral dilemma of Hagar/Hajar's abandonment of Ishmael.

The places in the discussion where the two narratives merge may signal the appearance of a transcontextual space. Analogical reasoning is the form of interpretation that opens a way for this kind of merging. When the participants engage in the narrated situation of Hagar/Hajar and Ishmael in the desert, relating it to their own experiences or imagining themselves in the situation of Hagar/Hajar, this implies the appearance of an interpretative community, and provides a transtemporal and transcontextual space. But when the differences in the interpretations of Hagar/Hajar and the abandonment of Ishmael are addressed, the shared interpretative space seem to dissolve because of one of the texts' relocation in a specific religious tradition. Since the Christian participants in this discussion do not consult with their own religious tradition in their interpretations but limit themselves to analogical reasoning, the Islamic tradition emerges as the distinguishing factor. Since the status of Hagar/Hajar is radically different in the two traditions, as exemplified by a Christian Hagar being a neglected figure and the Islamic Hajar as an important foremother and model for the ritual of *sa'y*, this is not very surprising. The merged narrative, however, and the shared engagement in the figure of Hagar/Hajar are expressions of shared interpretative spaces.

### ***Temporal and Spatial Interpretative Maneuvers and Various Reading Positions***

The hermeneutical question of how to make meaning of an ancient text from a different temporal and spatial context becomes apparent in the discussion. It is Eva who struggles the most with this when shifting between addressing a presumed historical event behind the narratives and addressing the narratives themselves. Her starting point is a question based in a moral dilemma of here and now. She operates with two notions of time: Her own time, now, and a concept of existential time that transcends the temporal gap and constructs a space for Eva to use analogical reasoning to interact with the narrative. The concept of existential time functions with a basic notion of human universality, across time and place. But Eva does not relate, however, to the particularity of time and place behind the two texts. To her, the texts do not represent history but a contemporary, existential challenge. Mieke Bal's notion of "temporal anachronism" as a tool for taking both the past and the present seriously in addressing, for instance, moral dilemmas (Bal 2008: 48) thus covers Eva's interpretative maneuver only partially. Bal's request to accept the fluidity of time and acknowledge the reader's limited access to the past is not reflected on in Eva's meaning making.

But lack of reflection on the temporal gap and one's own limited access to the past is not only represented by Eva in this discussion. In fact, none of the participants in the discussion pays attention to this as an interpretative problem. Aira's temporal and spatial interpretation of the two narratives is done through the ritual of *sa'y*, and this adds the perspective of ritualized time and space, in addition to relating to the *hadith* narrative as historically trustworthy. Performance of a ritual such as the *sa'y* based on the narrative of Hagar's/Hajar's struggle for water is a deliberate mixing of times where the past and present merge. The ritual of *sa'y* is exactly where the *hadith* narrative locates Hajar's running for water, since this ritual cannot be done at any other location. Aira uses the ritual of *sa'y* as her main interpretative frame in this discussion. This interpretation provides her with an answer to the question posed by Eva's moral dilemma. It is the ritual of *sa'y* that Aira uses and not her own possible experience of taking part in the ritual. For Aira, the ritual of *sa'y* actually seems more important than the Hagar/Hajar narratives in the texts in this discussion.

### ***Modes of Communication***

Eva's question, which she repeats many times, dominates this discussion. The question is posed in the here and now and is thus addressed primarily to the other participants and their interpretation of the narratives, rather than the texts. The others engage in the discussion on her terms, although Aira's contribution is also independent of these premises. Thus, the discussion is rather intensely concentrated on the here and now, without meta-reflections about the mode of communication. The focus is on the narrated drama in the desert, Eva's moral dilemma, and

Aira's ritual of *sa'y*. The criticisms that appear are not those of the Christian or the Islamic tradition in general, and mostly not of the co-participants (except for Eva65). The criticism is addressed to the figures in the narratives, the translator, and the presupposed narrator or author. It is specific and concretized. This may be the result of the intensity of the discussion, which is instigated by Eva's quite focused question.

### ***Moral Enrichment of the Narratives and Gendered Hermeneutics***

The questions concerning Hagar/Hajar's abandonment of Ishmael cause different types of hermeneutical positions to appear.

An ethical reading of the text, where the reader identifies with figures in a moral dilemma and tries to solve the dilemma by engaging morally with the text may be situated in a consciously mixed time (as a kind of responsible anachronism) or situated in the here and now. The concept of the moral enrichment of the text (Abou El Fadl, Cohen, and Lague 2002: 15) could be perceived as a modified expression of the moral critique of canonical scriptures, entailing that the reader needs to engage her moral convictions in front of the text in order to be morally enriched by it. Hence, the concept of moral enrichment is more relational in the dynamic between reader and text than in a moral critique, since the text and the reader are both involved in a mutually enriching process. Hagar/Hajar's decision to leave Ishmael is in need of moral enrichment or moral critique only by a reader who comprehends this act as a moral dilemma. The readers' moral construction of responsible motherhood is applied to this incident in two ways: the primary duty of a mother is either to stay with her child, regardless of what happens, or to provide life-sustaining supplies by all means.

At a textual level, there are two interpretative positions derived from the question about the narrator/author's gender. The first position was established as a reflection on the consequences of the narrator/author anticipated as male. Historically, this is likely to be the case, but here the anticipation was made on the basis of the content of the text itself. This position (as explained) has two supports. First, the gender of the author/narrator matters for the content of the text because men and women universally have different experiences that would be reflected in the narration of a story. Second, the moral criticism should be directed to the author/narrator as the one responsible for the content of the text. The second position came as a reaction to the first, implying that the gender of the author/narrator was not important either to the content of the narrative or as a reflection of universal experiences of women and men viewed in binary opposition. The first position was taken by some of the Christian participants, the second by a Muslim participant.

### **Discussion 3 Related to the Hagar/Hajar Narratives.**

#### **The Complexity of the Hagar/Hajar Narratives in the Process of Making Meaning: Sharing Testimonies in the Search to Identify Messages from the Texts**

The last two discussions related to the Hagar/Hajar narratives took place at the third group meeting. For the first time in the process one of the participants was the moderator.<sup>133</sup> The meeting started with a *silent* reading of the Hagar/Hajar texts from the Old Testament and the *hadith*, following Maria's suggestion.

Discussion 3 was, for the most part, in a more relaxed conversational mode than the former discussions. The participants reflect more openly about their own meaning making than in the previous discussion, perhaps because the focus is not directed intensely at one specific question but shifts more. Some parts of the contributions, particularly toward the end, are formulated as testimonies.

- Shirin30: Yes. What I look for in these two texts are ... I am not the kind of person who looks at it sentence by sentence ....
- Shirin31: But when I read both texts, in particular when I read one verse from the Koran that comments on it, on the story, I don't find any sign of anyone looking down on Sarah.
- Shirin32: It is a kind of message from God to Abraham
- Shirin33: that says that I will ... that Ishmael and Hagar will wander in the wilderness, if I am correct. And there a new civilization will be established.
- Shirin34: After Sarah had a son as well, things became kind of scattered, since faith takes another direction.
- Shirin35: What is very important for me is that perhaps it was so that it should go other places than where Abraham originally stayed.
- Shirin36: From the Koran I don't look at this in the same way as one looks at it from the text from Genesis.
- Shirin37: But it is, isn't it, if two women have the same husband, if it becomes kind of a problem. It was like that in the old days, and it is like that now.
- Shirin38: But I don't know why, I can't say that this particular story should tell us something about that.

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<sup>133</sup> The plan was that Maria and Fouzia would moderate the meeting together in order to have both a Muslim and a Christian sharing the role. Fouzia was, however, prevented from coming, so Maria moderated the meeting alone.

Shirin39: The most important message is that it was supposed to be two nations.

Shirin provides a key for understanding how she usually makes meaning of texts: by looking for the main points and overall messages rather than concentrating on details (Shirin30). She explicitly mentions both texts in her next sentence, when the question of Sarah's status arises. Shirin probably remembers that the status of Sarah was addressed in the former meeting (Shirin31). Thus, the earlier conversation is included in the present one, without any further reference, indicating that there is continuity in the process, at least for Shirin.

While addressing both texts, Shirin emphasizes the verse from the Koran cited in the *hadith* narrative. She thus shows her pre-knowledge about the structure of the text from the *hadith*: she is aware that it actually consists of two different types of Islamic canonical text, a koranic verse integrated into the *hadith* narrative. The text she describes as a message from God to Abraham/Ibrahim is exclusively this verse from the Koran (Shirin31-33). She does not refer specifically to the text from the Old Testament.

Shirin observes that there is no mention of Sarah in the koranic verse but rejects any suggestion that this indicates that the Islamic tradition looks down on Sarah. Looking for the main points in the text, she claims that the essential message of the story is *not* to describe a possible rivalry between two women. The essence of the message is that God created two peoples out of Abraham/Ibrahim's double fatherhood. The two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, meant the founding of two nations instead of one, and the situation of Hagar/Hajar and Ishmael in the desert created the possibility of establishing a new civilization (a new branch of the family and a new religion) in Mecca.

This message to Abraham/Ibrahim, according to Shirin, is also addressed to later readers of the narrative, since it provides a formative story about the establishment of the Islamic civilization in Mecca – and an explanation of the existence of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as willed and planned by God.

Sarah is Abraham/Ibrahim's first wife, but Ishmael is his oldest son. Shirin refers to Sarah's giving birth to a son as the point where "faith takes another direction" (Shirin34). Seeing Islam as the original faith, starting with Adam and Eve, and with Abraham/Ibrahim as the first Muslim believer (*hanif*, or even *muslim*), this is the point in history where Judaism and later Christianity split from Islam. This reflects the Islamic view that even if Islam is more recent than Judaism and Christianity its roots go back to the origin of humanity. Christianity emerged from Judaism and remains in an ambiguous relation with Judaism in different ways. However, both the Islamic and the Christian traditions recognize that there has been a religious development where other religions have been crucial in the making of the two: Christianity in relation to Judaism and Islam in relation to Christianity and Judaism.

- Shirin40: And Hagar wasn't oppressed.
- Shirin41: In our faith we respect both women, Sarah and Hagar.
- Shirin42: I can't see that it is a difference of class ... that one looks down on ... or that Sarah asks why should Ishmael have the same status as my son. I as a Muslim have never thought like that from our tradition.
- Shirin43: What I can see as a difference, perhaps, that if a slave woman ... at that time it was a kind of accepted social order to have a slave woman or a slave man, if I am correct.

Shirin's reference to class and slavery in the texts viewed from an Islamic perspective signals that these categories are unfamiliar to her when discussing the Islamic narrative about Hajar. The question of slave status and social class is, on the other hand, disclosed and is crucial to the plot in the Hagar narrative in the Old Testament. Shirin rejects the view that social difference plays a role in the Islamic version of the narrative, just as she stated that the later religious difference that supposedly emerged from the events of the narrative is not a problem. Nevertheless, she makes a comment about slavery as an institution as socially accepted "at that time" (Shirin43), referring to the historical context of the narratives. This contextualization of slavery may be an indirect defense of the Old Testament text. Shirin does not, however, use this text's reference to Hagar as a slave to criticize the canonical Jewish-Christian scripture: instead she finds parallel references to slavery in the Koran (Shirin47):

- Shirin44: And since we know that religion is not intended to make a revolution.
- Shirin45: It will take the traditions and start with reforms, and .... At least this is my perception of Islam.
- Shirin46: The day it came, it did not come as a revolution but as a process to transform society.
- Shirin47: That's why, for instance, in the Koran, you can see that there are some rights for slaves and slave women that one wonders about today. Why was one supposed to accept it in that way?
- Shirin48: But afterwards one can see that it was there, just as a lot of other things that ought to change, this was the way it should change.
- Shirin49: Today one talks a lot about things in the Koran that ought to be changed and that should be reformed.
- Shirin50: Today one cannot accept that there are slaves or slave women. Because society has developed and changed. That is why it can be changed as

well. They couldn't see then that it was a problem. Today we can see that it is.

Shirin51: There are many things that should be reformed within the religion.

Shirin uses institutionalized slavery as an example of a changed social practice and suggests that the general interpretation of the koranic texts referring to slavery may have changed too as a result. Shirin is not referring to details in the Hagar/Hajar narratives. Instead, she states how social changes, as well as changes in koranic interpretation, should happen from her point of view. From the beginning the way of change was intended to be through reform, rather than revolution (Shirin45-46). Shirin states very clearly a need for change and reform (Shirin49, 51).

In Shirin49, however, it is not entirely clear if Shirin means that the Koran itself ought to change or only its interpretation. Her emphasis on new social structures and new insights that make the reader ask different questions “now” in contrast to “then” (Shirin47, 50) may imply that her focus is on change in koranic *interpretation*.

Shirin suggests that it is not only religion that has the capacity to change society, social changes can and should change religious practice as well. Shirin establishes a connection between social and religious change. When she emphasizes that the way of change should be reform, rather than revolution, her Iranian background may be playing a role in her dismissal of revolutionary change as a tool in Islam, since she experienced the Iranian revolution in 1979 and left with her family to go to Norway for political reasons some years later.

Aira58: Perhaps I see this a little ... when we read these two texts it is very ... I feel that they have different mindsets.

Aira59: One of them is viewed, as she said, as status oriented. It seems discriminatory that one sees that Sarah herself gets hurt, that she feels that Hagar is looking down on her.

Aira60: But when she says: Cast out that slave woman ... she does not have any respect for her.

Aira61: And this, it seems to me, is not really... for me, I don't know what you believe, but to me divine revelation is not like that.

Aira62: That this is part of the revelation ... it might be that people's own opinions have entered this because they have traditions like that.

Aira63: Those traditions are present in all tribes when there are two women sharing one man, they have ... between them, and one wants more status than the other, and the other wants another status.



Aira elaborates on the relationship between Hagar/Hajar and Sarah and comments on the difference she finds between the Hagar/Hajar narratives in the Old Testament and the *hadith*. Shirin mentioned this relationship briefly and claimed that it was not a main theme in the texts. Aira uses the portrayal of the troublesome relationship between Sarah and Hagar/Hajar in the biblical text to discuss the question if this part of the text qualifies as divine revelation in her view. She uses this to distinguish between the two narratives according to the Islamic doctrine of the divine revelation represented in the Bible: it may be mixed up with people's opinions, and thus not part of divine revelation (Leirvik 2006: 132-133). Aira takes the conflict between Sarah and Hagar in the biblical narrative to be part of a general human experience across time (Aira63), much like what Shirin stated earlier about the timeless character of a situation where two women compete for one man.

Aira64: Here we don't find any of this scene instigated by jealousy; it is not even mentioned in the text that she ... that Ibrahim had taken one of them away from the place because of Sarah's wish.

Aira65: When Hagar asked him: "Why do you leave us here, is it God who has told you so?" then he said: "Yes." This shows that she, Hagar, had great faith in her God and great faith in her husband.

Aira focuses on the narrative from the *hadith* and uses it in contrast to the biblical narrative: the text from the *hadith* does not include any description of conflicting interests or jealousy between the two women (Aira64). Sarah's absence from the *hadith* narrative is not commented upon. Explaining her presence in Aira's reflection could be a reference to Shirin's earlier statements. Or it could be a spillover from the biblical narrative into Aira's reflection on the text from the *hadith*.

When Aira moves on to her interpretation of the *hadith* narrative, she develops the image of Hagar/Hajar further as a model figure with respect to faith in Islam. While being abandoned with the child, she kept her faith in both God and her husband. In Aira65 Hagar/Hajar's faith in God and in Abraham/Ibrahim seems to be linked together.

Aira66: She knew that Ibrahim would not lie, that he would not let her down if it was not necessary to do so.

Aira67: It comes from the will of God, and when God has said that you ... he will not let you down.

- Aira68: So she does not become afraid in any way; it is her strong faith. It is conviction. If I had the same conviction and faith in God, I could have sat all alone ....
- Aira69: And it says here that she did not show any worry because she has only one child, and then her husband leaves her, she does not have anything to eat or drink, how long can the child stay alive with that bag of water and some dates. There is nothing there. But she had trust in God, and that means that what we see here is strong conviction.
- Aira70: And then, we have great respect for Sarah, and here I believe that some of people's own opinions have come in, and this part of the Genesis story is not a part of revelation as far as I can understand.
- Aira71: But if we see this from an entirely feminist perspective, then yes, there are two women, and this and that can happen. But to call Hagar a slave woman is degrading to her status for Muslims.
- Aira72: She is ... according to our belief, she is the wife of Ibrahim, and he is a great prophet, and God promised Ibrahim that he would make him the father of great nations ... and to talk about Sarah and Hagar like this is to show little respect for them.

How can Aira say that Hagar/Hajar knew that Abraham/Ibrahim “would not lie”? The answer comes in Aira67-68, where Aira continues to reflect in the form of a personal testimony on the basis of what she finds to be crucial in the story, namely Hagar's/Hajar's faith: To follow the will of God has the consequence that God will not let the believer down. In Aira67-68 Aira establishes a close relation between Hagar/Hajar in the narrative and Muslim believers in general, including Aira herself. These statements show a high degree of identification with the figure of Hajar in the *hadith*. Through this identification the temporal and spatial gaps between the narrative and experienced reality represented by Aira and other contemporary Muslim believers cease to exist. In the former discussion it became apparent that Aira used the ritual of *sa'y* as an important reference for her interpretation of the narratives. Here she does not mention the *sa'y* but only the consequence of faith in God as a shared experience between Hajar, all Muslims, and herself.

According to the British Muslim Scholar Tim Winter, Muslims who engage in the practice of Scriptural Reasoning “see themselves not just as interpreters, but as para-witnesses to the scripture and the exegetic cumulation” (Winter 2006: 110). The background of Winter's suggested term “para-witness” is the practice of succession (*isnad*) among Muslim scholars. The historical chain of interpretation is the transmission of living knowledge that does not cease to

influence the believers' own life, and thus the texts' interpretation is never far from the context of the believer.<sup>134</sup> According to Winter, it is the formal restraints on interpretation in the Islamic tradition and its relation to history as an axiom that makes it possible to operate with the term "para-witness" (Winter 2006: 110).

What is the distinction, then, between being a witness and being an interpreter? Paul Ricoeur discusses the relationship between interpretation and testimony and investigates how the two may be related in biblical interpretation: he claims that, without testimony, hermeneutics lacks perspective and a temporal dimension in history (Ricoeur 1980: 144; Ricoeur 1980: 144). Testimonies, on the other hand, need to be interpreted, but this interpretation needs to be done within their own dialectic that, according to Ricoeur, consists of *narration* and *confession* (Ricoeur 1980: 154). Aira's testimony constructs a role for her not only as an interpreter but also as a *witness* of the narrative from the *hadith* when including herself in the reception history of the text in the way she does. Her own narrative and confession merges with her making meaning of Hagar/Hajar's faith.

Aira repeats that she does not regard that part of the Genesis story that relates the conflict between Hagar/Hajar and Sarah as a part of "revelation" (Aira70). Here she refers to the teachings about divine revelation in Islam. Apparently, she does not reflect on the difference between Christianity and Islam regarding the issue of divine revelation since she relates only to the texts themselves and from an Islamic perspective. Her aim is to explain her own interpretation and give her own testimony.

To address a problematic relation between Sarah and Hagar in the Old Testament narrative is possible, according to Aira, if one reads the text only within the interpretative frameworks of feminism (Aira71). She finds this way of discussing irrelevant. She follows up her views of the limits of feminist interpretation:

- Aira73:           So both of them were promised by God that they would be blessed.
- Aira74:           So, when we see here it is ... the story gives a worldly impression in itself, but the story of Hajar is more spiritual, when I read it ...
- Aira75:           But we believe in both of them, that Sarah was there, and we respect her, it is possible that it might have been a conflict between them, we cannot deny that.

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<sup>134</sup> Winter claims that Islamic exegesis and interpretation of the Koran and the *hadith* has followed a different track than the Christian and Jewish traditions. He states that he believes the Islamic tradition has escaped the "reductionist Enlightenment" (Winter 2006: 110) event and "continued in fidelity to classical paradigms of faith, worship and devotion, while the Renaissance re-paganised European thought, and the Enlightenment secularised it" (Winter 2006: 109).

- Aira76: But we don't believe that God creates stories for the sake of stories alone ... that one should create a story about it ... to pass on that conflict to us.
- Aira77: Both are humans. They can disagree, fall out, or be in conflict. That is not unthinkable.
- Aira78: But, at the same time, when you look at both texts, and it is we, Muslims, who believe in the ways of God, he knows that one person will be in this country and spread the message of God there, and the other will spread the word of God there at the other place.
- Aira79: I don't read the text with a typical feminist mindset ....
- Aira80: The koranic text shows that he stood there, worried about them, and at the same time prayed to God for them ... God, I have left my offspring in a deserted valley, let the people have mercy on them.

The reason why Aira dismisses criticism of the text from a “feminist mindset” (Aira79) may be found in Aira73: According to Aira's meaning-making of the Hagar/Hajar stories, both women “are promised by God that they would be blessed.” For Aira there is no need to dig into the texts looking for possible relational conflicts between the two women; focusing critically on the conflicts in the texts is to miss the stories' main message. Aira does not deny that there could have been conflicts between Hagar/Hajar and Sarah, but in order to be able to include this element of human flaw, she moves beyond the frames of the narratives to which she relates (the *hadith* text and what she evaluates as part of divine revelation in the Old Testament text). She talks about real conflicts, in real lives, where the “now” and the “then” merge as part of human experience. But, in her view, divine revelation is not a place for human conflict-oriented storytelling.

Aira asks: Why should God want to pass this conflict on to us by including it in the revelation? The question indicates that if something is included in the divine revelation, it should be done for *pedagogical* reasons. The inclusion of the Hagar/Hajar-Sarah conflict in revelation may cause a problem regarding human division, according to Aira: It could potentially create a ground for the conflict between Sarah and Hagar in the narrative to be transferred to the narratives' readers, inducing the readers (as social agents) to realize the conflicts in contemporary contexts between people identifying themselves (or others) as descendants of either Sarah or Hagar/Hajar. Aira might think that, if the narrative were regarded as divine revelation, it would have a possible greater authority and thus possibly be more likely to be used to legitimize antagonisms. Thus, Aira cannot find room for this conflict in the narrative because she feels that it would not be in accordance with God's will that a divinely revealed narrative transmit such material to fuel possible forthcoming hostilities.

Aira agrees with Shirin that one of the main messages in the narratives is the origin of more than one divine tribe, which would mean that the word of God would not be limited to being propagated in one location. She explicitly includes both narratives in Aira78 when addressing this but highlights her own tradition as the viewpoint for expressing what she finds to be the core meaning. In addition, she explicitly calls Muslims the “people who believe in the ways of God” (Aira78). This expression can be interpreted as exclusivist, but since she has just acknowledged that the word of God has two differently located sources that develop into the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious traditions, to see this as Islamic exclusivism would seem to be mistaken.

The viewpoint of Muslims as “people believing in the way of God” may be seen as a testimonial statement within the group, perhaps to clarify possible further divisions between the Muslim and the Christian participants in the discussion on the narratives. To Aira, the Muslim way is to believe in the “way of God.” This statement may be an indirect question or a challenge to the other participants, perhaps to the Christian participants in particular: Do they believe in the “way of God” as well? Aira does not explain what she means by “the way of God” in the singular, other than saying that it is something in which Muslims believe.

In the last part of her contribution, Aira takes sides in the two conflicting portrayals of Abraham/Ibrahim in the two narratives. In Aira79 she seems to link feminist critique to the Abraham/Ibrahim figure in the Genesis narrative, as interpreted by her Christian co-participants. She might not reject a feminist critique of Abraham as he is portrayed in the biblical text, but her way of expressing the content of the koranic verse in the *hadith* narrative shows which Abraham/Ibrahim figure she relates to: a caring, faithful believer (Aira80). Aira does not see any need for a feminist critique of the Hagar/Hajar narrative in the *hadith*, including criticism of Abraham/Ibrahim. The verse from the Koran is referred to as “the text” (Aira80). For Aira, it is the koranic verse that represents the main testimony about how Abraham/Ibrahim acted in history. Then she returns to the event of *sa’y*, which she mentioned several times in earlier discussions, but this time it is in a more personal way:

Aira81:            Yes, we say this, and millions of people go there. And, as it is mentioned here, that *sa’y* ... the Prophet said that we, because of that, because Hagar was the one who ran seven times from one mountain to another ... Safa is one of these two mountains. Marwa is the other. She went there only to find water. It was not because she could not bear to see her child cry. She has a strong faith that nothing bad would happen to them: God is with him, I will go out and try to find out if there is anyone who can give me water or help me.

- Aira82: So today when we perform *sa'y*, it is only a way of remembering the struggle of that day, the struggle of Hagar. Because all the pilgrims, men and women, everyone runs seven times.
- Aira83: I have been there, and I ran seven times from Marwa to Safa. Then it was just as if I had the same worries that Hagar had, and when you look at it, you feel God's presence, and feel that ... God said, I am here for you, I have heard the boy's cry, so she stayed and we feel that in remembrance of that day we run seven times; it is called *sa'y*. Then we feel that God will listen to us too.
- Aira84: These are spiritual things, if you think about it, so one cannot see it with feminist critique.

Aira expresses the identification between Hagar/Hajar even more strongly than before: all Muslims performing *sa'y* and herself as participating in the *sa'y*. The Hagar/Hajar narrative, acted out as ritual performance, goes beyond the role of both interpreter and witness in relation to the text. The performative aspect invites one to act out the narrative ritually and opens the way for a physical identification with, in this case, the figure of Hagar/Hajar. And what Aira shares is her experience of running in the desert to search for water, like Hagar/Hajar, while experiencing the same struggle, the same fear – and the divine presence.

The experience of *sa'y* seems to be Aira's main key for making meaning of the Hagar/Hajar narratives. In discussing the background of these narratives, she repeats that she believes that Hagar/Hajar left Ishmael to seek for water (cf. the earlier discussion), and that the caring and listening God is present throughout the narratives for all the figures involved. Through the interpretation of the *sa'y*, however, the divine presence is not limited to the time of the narratives ("then"), but is present in the ritual ("now"). The testimony of Aira in its narrative part, to use Ricoeur's distinctions, is connected spatially to the Hagar narrative: it happens at the place where it – according to the *hadith* narrative – happened to Hagar/Hajar. The ritual is connected to the place between Safa and Marwa in Mecca, and the time is set in the month of *haji* in the Islamic calendar.

Aira emphasizes that the ritual of *sa'y* is gender inclusive: all the pilgrims, regardless of gender, culture, and social status, take part in the same rituals as equals. The only requirement for participating is religious; all are to be Muslims.

Aira84 may be seen as a conclusive remark, related to the various criticisms of the Hagar/Hajar narratives in earlier discussions in the group. Aira seems to claim a need to separate what she calls "spiritual things" from feminist critique. It is not entirely clear if she refers to her own experience of *sa'y*, the Hagar/Hajar narratives themselves (those elements of them she

considers to be part of the revelation), or both. Perhaps it expresses a wish to share a personal religious experience without being criticized from a feminist perspective.

Earlier in this discussion Aira distinguished between worldly and spiritual things (Aira74), and later related this distinction to the feminist critique of the narratives, with feminist critique as part of the “worldly.” Does this interpretative say something primarily about how Aira views feminism? Or does it say something about where she wants to place feminism in the meaning making of the texts? In any case, it says something about Aira’s confidence in her own religious tradition and the canonical scriptures. This confidence may include an expectation of equality between women and men in the Islamic tradition, as shown in the practice of *sa’y*. Aira’s statement that one cannot see spiritual things with feminist critique (Aira84) implies that Aira is setting a limit for the relevance of feminist perspectives. It does not necessarily mean that Aira dismisses feminist perspectives in all other cases. The question would then be exactly where Aira places feminism in her views of religion and her own religious identity and in her interpretation of canonical scriptures.

Eva76: I think I have a feeling that you, Aira, are entering into a very defensive position, defending Islam and kind of feminist women ...

Eva77: because I regard myself a feminist, but I am a feminist because I am a Christian, and when I see the message of Jesus I believe that as a believing Christian I have to be a feminist.

Eva78: And I need to have that respect for my sisters, and when I see everything that has been committed against women throughout history, I am very happy we live in a time when we are trying to get rid of all kinds of discrimination against women and people of other races, other sexual orientations, and everything.

Eva79: But since women are half of all of humanity, that is perhaps the most important thing.

Shirin52: And, in addition, one raises kids; that is a position.

This sequence relates primarily to Aira’s preceding contribution, not to the Hagar/Hajar narratives. The narratives may be included as a negative background for Eva’s remarks in Eva78 through bearing witness to a “time of discrimination.” Eva establishes a gap between “those times” (“then”) and “our time” (“now”) with respect to the level of human discrimination. She claims human discrimination to be something “we are trying to get rid of” in the present, whereas previous times were characterized as times of discrimination. Eva’s use of the term “our

time”, when describing a time where discrimination is combated, may go *beyond* a temporal perspective and include a spatial one through a further location of the “we.” The statement can be interpreted as a universal claim, but since the “we” is not specified further, the statement may reflect a contextually bound “we.” But Eva is mainly concerned with historical changes and does not specify, culturally or contextually, the location of the change. Eva’s use of “we” may refer to everyone living in “our times,” to the group of participants, or another group identity in which Eva includes herself. Thus the “we” also can refer to “Norwegians,” “Christians,” women in “our time,” or everyone fighting discrimination. In the sequence right before this one Aira refers to the community of Muslim believers in her use of “we.” Like Aira, parts of Eva’s contribution (Eva77-78) may be regarded as a testimony, but of a different kind. Eva states that she finds Aira’s position in the discussion to be defensive with respect to Islam. But Aira’s openness and testimonial statements about her own experiences may have inspired Eva to share *her* personal experiences the way she does in Eva77-78. Eva gives a double testimony that is not linked directly to the textual narratives. Her confession is of feminism and the Christian faith together. The narrative of Eva’s testimony is her narrative of a struggle against discrimination against women throughout history, and she refers to women in general as her “sisters.”

While declaring herself a feminist, Eva argues that her feminist standpoint came to her as the only logical response to Jesus’ message as interpreted by her. Even if she applies this conclusion as a necessity only to herself, her argument is made in such a way that could imply that she views being a feminist as the only way to be a true Christian.

Eva does not, however, base her feminist stance only on the Christian tradition but more specifically on the message of Jesus. In the narrative part of her testimony she adds a historical and universal reason for taking this stance (Eva78). Eva relates feminism to other kinds of anti-discriminatory strategies but suggests a ranking of them with feminism on top because “women are half of all of humanity” (Eva79).

Shirin’s comment (Shirin52) may be seen as confirming and extending Eva’s more general reasoning about feminism in adding the role of raising children, which she calls “a position.” This can be a descriptive or a normative statement: simply to state that women raise children or that it is the women who should raise children.

Eva80:           That too. But the way I view this, and I believe I see this very clearly, it is God’s revelation through history. And this is a different time, people live in different ways, and we have gradually understood more of what God wants to say to us, and what God is, what divinity is, and this belongs to a different time.



- Eva81: And the way I see it, it is quite clear: slavery is inhuman, and the view of women ... it is not equality, but it is a different time and I would say that luckily we have gradually seen more of God's revelation, and I do believe that Norway has never been as Christian a country as it is today.
- Eva82: I believe that two thousand years ago we had .... We did not find it easy to understand the message of Jesus, it was really radical ... it was difficult to understand it.
- Eva83: And we see that, after the period of Jesus' life, Paul had a huge job to soften Jesus' revolutionary message.
- Eva84: But I do believe that, as time passed, we have come closer to the understanding of the message of Jesus, perhaps. With respect for every human being, everyone, regardless of black or white skin color, woman or man, small or big, rich or poor.
- Eva85: To me the most striking thing is that this describes a different time, when lots of discrimination went on, and the people did not understand perhaps as much as I believe we understand today, I do believe that we understand more.

Eva still does not address the Hagar/Hajar narratives directly, presumably only in Eva85, where she once again referred to “a different time” as a negative background for “today.” If she really does make use of the narratives as a negative background in this sequence, she relates to them *en bloc*, without distinguishing between the two concerning their historical chronology or cultural and religious differences. In addition, she refers to “the people” who were living in her constructed past and characterizes them as inferior in their understanding of the connection Eva makes of divine will and human rights compared to her constructed “we” in the present.

Her main focus is to explain further her view of a historical process that has led humanity to less discriminative practices, generally speaking. In the historical process toward less discrimination, Eva claims that Christianity, or more precisely the message of Jesus, has played a crucial role. To her, it is improved understanding that brought about the change she claims. It is not entirely clear if she means that the improved understanding consists solely of a more correct understanding of Jesus' message or if it includes other elements as well. Does she suggest that the changes she describes took place as a process of social evolution, in which the message of Jesus – gradually interpreted as anti-discrimination – was the basis of a change but engaging broader social reflection as well?

In any case Eva does not *explicitly* include sources for the change she describes other than a better understanding of the message of Jesus. She might in fact seem to be defending an

exclusivist view of Jesus' message as the only (or the most important) source of an anti-discriminatory development of humanity that she believes has taken place. Through this, she shows a confidence in her own tradition that has some similarity to Aira's earlier declared confidence in the Islamic tradition. How Eva is to be understood depends partly on whom she means to include in her "we." One of the questions would then be: Is the change Eva describes found further on in the discussion?

Even if Eva talks mostly about time and change in general, she does refer to a specific place and context in Eva81 where she states: "Norway has never been as Christian a country as it is today." If the "we" in the sequence is "Norwegians" and the context is "Norway," this may imply that she meant that Norway – as shaped by the Christian Protestant tradition (and possibly other forces or dynamics that she did not mention explicitly) – is the place for her where this non-discriminatory practice is taking place. She explains this social practice as deeply connected to a better understanding of the divine revelation of Jesus' message. In Eva80 she refers to God's revelation and includes herself in the "we" who, according to her, have seen this "very clearly." Eva does not mention any countries or locations other than Norway as examples of places where this level of understanding has been attained.

If this way of comprehending human history and the impact of the Christian tradition is to be seen as exclusivist or perhaps even triumphalist, in relation to what is it exclusive or triumphalist? What seems at first to be an example of Christian exclusivist standpoint may turn out to be more closely connected to *Norway* in particular and to imply a certain idea of what Norway represents, with reference to the Christian tradition as practiced in Norway. Eva does not elaborate further on what she is referring to specifically when she says "Norway." It may imply the Norwegian state at a political level, but it could also mean the inhabitants of Norway, which would beg further questions about a precise determination. Does it include all inhabitants or does it refer to a religious and/or cultural majority? In any case, the concept "Norway" is used as a given entity, and it is, together with the message of Jesus in the Christian tradition and a temporal "now," the place and time Eva determines to be closest to a human community without discrimination, particularly of women.

The way Eva speaks about current times in Norway as the place and time where human equality is unfolding shares similarities with Aira's testimony of the performance of *sa'y* as a ritualized space where human equality is performed in the remembrance and co-experience of Hagar/Hajar's struggles and of God's concern. Whereas Aira bases herself on the narrative from the *hadith* and the Islamic ritual of *sa'y*, which is open only to Muslims exclusively, Eva places her trust in the Christian message of human equality as it unfolds in Norwegian society, perhaps also as institutionalized in the Norwegian welfare state. The question of *access* to these times and spaces of human equality, however, is not without limits. Spatial access to Norwegian welfare

system is shaped by political decisions, whereas access to Mecca is restricted to Muslim believers.

Eva uses the narratives of Hagar/Hajar in precisely the opposite way than Aira, namely to demonstrate the discriminative practices of the “then” as a negative background, whereas Aira uses it to open a way to the experience of equality in the *sa’y*.

- Eva86: And there are lots of things I could say, but when you say that some look at this in a spiritual way and some look at this in a more material way,
- Eva87: I do not agree that seeing something in a more material way is better than seeing it spiritually,
- Eva88: I do not agree that I am less of a believer because I am a feminist. Just to make that clear.
- Aira85: I will not say that ... a Christian could see it the same way that I do. I also call myself a feminist.<sup>135</sup>
- Aira86: I have my own frameworks where I can be a completely independent woman and do not tolerate any discrimination.
- Aira87: But when I read the text in a spiritual way, I refer to my belief in God. It is not only Muslims who can see this in different ways. I believe that many people who believe in God will view this in different ways.
- Aira88: But there is a mixture of revelation and some experiences from different people in the Genesis text. That is my ....

The verbal interaction between Eva and Aira develops into a discussion about two issues: what it means for a Christian or Muslim religious believer to be a feminist, and what it means to have a spiritual versus a material or “worldly” way of interpreting the canonical scriptures.

Eva does not explicitly refer to the Hagar/Hajar narratives or to textual material as the object of her own interpretation. Through her reflections earlier on the developments throughout history and the present on what it means to be a feminist, she expands her horizon of meaning making. The object of interpretation is broader than just the narratives or canonical texts. Eva’s horizon seems to be just as much about the interpretation of the context and of concepts like that of feminism. The Hagar/Hajar narratives are only in the background.

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<sup>135</sup> When Aira later commented on the transcriptions in the text, she highlighted that she does not believe that a feminist is any less of a believer than others, and that she believes the different positions in this discussion may be related to different religious backgrounds, and not to the question of being a feminist.

It is difficult to understand the meaning of Eva87 in relation to the whole sequence. Does Eva change the order of the qualifications “in a material way” and “spiritually” here? The overall meaning is nevertheless similar, regardless of whether the order of qualifications is changed or not. Eva resists an epistemological hierarchy between interpreting in a material/worldly way *versus* a spiritual way. She does however accept it as a fact that some do operate with such an epistemological order (Eva86). She may link different ways to “see something” with her own rejection of being “less of a believer because I am a feminist” (Eva88), when she resists the distinction between spiritual and worldly interpretation. This is her basis for rejecting being placed within a worldly framework of interpretation as a feminist.

Aira denies that the different ways of interpreting she suggests correspond with being a Christian and Muslim believer respectively (Aira85). She also indirectly denies that her way of interpretation prevents her from being a feminist. She does not specify the object of interpretation at this point, although in her former sayings she concentrates on the narratives. Here, however, she does not reintroduce the narratives as her focus. She may thus be moving into Eva’s broader (and less clear) focus of what the object of meaning making, including contexts and concepts, is.

Aira explicitly identifies herself as a feminist too (Aira85). She also explains what being a feminist means to her (Aira86). She emphasizes that she has the right to define her own frames of how to be a woman and the right to define herself as a feminist by her own frames of reference. It seems that just as Eva does not want to be suspected of being less of a believer because she is a feminist, Aira does not want to be regarded as *not* being a feminist because of her claim to interpret the Hagar/Hajar stories in a spiritual way. This implicitly poses the question of the right to define someone as a believer or a non-believer or to be regarded as a feminist or not. In other words, the question of representation shows up again, as it had done earlier in the group’s process, but now from a different angle. This time the question is about the right to define one’s presentation of oneself as a believer and as a feminist.

In Aira87 and 88, Aira repeats her main points on interpretation but includes the fact that she views interpretative plurality to be a matter of fact among people who “believe in God” (Aira87). This signals a consciousness and possibly openness toward different ways of interpretation within the Islamic tradition as well as in other religious traditions. Christian tradition is not mentioned here explicitly, but Christians are most likely to be included as part of the general statement regarding people who believe in God. Aira’s main focus stays with the Hagar/Hajar narratives in her meaning making, whereas Eva explores other areas more connected to the discussion in the group and the broader social context of women.

- Inger8: Yes, well, I do have a difficult relationship with many of the writings in the Old Testament.
- Inger9: Because I believe that much of what is written there goes against what I have learned from Jesus.
- Inger10: In a way, I have ... it is the New Testament and the story about Jesus that is ... that I link my own belief to, and if the Old Testament can elaborate on that to any extent, that's fine, but if not, I don't hold on to it and put it aside.
- Inger11: But I do get curious, it is after all a central part of the origin of our faith, so it is interesting to read it.
- Inger12: And I get curious about what the Koran says about Sarah because we do not get to know anything about her in this text. How is she presented or is she presented? I can get answers to that later on. If you, if we, if you can say something about that.
- Aira89: There is not one word about that story.
- Inger13: There is nothing about Sarah?
- Shirin53: When you are done, we can take a look at it.
- Inger14: Then you can say something about it. Yes, I am curious about that.

Inger starts by introducing her own relation to the Old Testament in general as part of the Christian canonical scriptures and does not enter directly into the Hagar/Hajar narratives. Nor does she comment on the recent issues of feminism and different ways of interpretation that have been discussed by Eva and Aira in particular.

Inger10 describes the implications of her hermeneutical position for her attitude as a reader of the Old Testament. The problem, as she puts it, is that she finds that some of the writings in the Old Testament contradict the teachings of Jesus – on which she bases her own religious belief. Inger presents herself as a selective reader of the Old Testament: if she finds that the particular text she is reading elaborates on the teachings of Jesus, she accepts them, but if she finds that they do not, she puts them aside (Inger10).

In Inger11 she does refer to the Hagar narrative as central to “the origin of our faith” while investigating her own hermeneutical key (as presented earlier). This may be a way to include it in the category of texts from the Old Testament to which she wants to relate. She does

not establish a connection between the Hagar narrative and Jesus' teaching, and this may indicate that Inger operates after all with an open, and not fixed, perspective of how to relate to the Old Testament texts. Her attitude can also indicate that she acknowledges that her personal hermeneutical way of relating to the Old Testament text should include "an open window" for a broader Christian community of readers and interpreters in the past as well as in the present. Since Inger was presented with a text from the Jewish-Christian tradition that is not of her own choosing but chosen for her, her reflections in Inger12 could also simply be a way to reflect in such a way as to make the best of making meaning in the situation she is in.<sup>136</sup>

Inger articulates a double curiosity: first toward her own tradition and the Old Testament narrative on Hagar, and then toward the Islamic tradition regarding the Hagar/Hajar narrative. This may disclose one of her reasons for engaging in the conversation. Her curiosity is directed not only toward the other tradition but also toward her own. Her curiosity leads to an articulated question that in turn results in an interaction: she gets answers, or rather promises of answers later on, from two of the Muslim participants, Aira and Shirin. These promises lead to an articulated expectation (Inger14).

- Inger15: Well, when I read the texts, then the one from the Koran is a very kind text. It is almost without ... it is very kind, gentle and caring, and Abraham does show concern ... even if she has to go out and manage on her own, but he expresses concern and has feelings of care for her.
- Inger16: She is abandoned in the Koran as well, but at least he expresses concern, and in a way he leaves her in the care of God.
- Inger17: But here, in the Bible, it is as if ... there is no concern for Sarah by Abraham, so he is really awful, as I pointed out last time.
- Inger18: The biblical text is a bit more realistic, perhaps more true about how we humans really are: we are jealous, we are evil, we can't bear anyone threatening our position. So in this way it is perhaps more ... well, true about how we really are as humans and what we are struggling with.
- Inger19: And then there is this that I find difficult throughout the whole of the Old Testament: that some are chosen above others. This contradicts our sense of justice so much, doesn't it ...?
- Inger20: That Sarah and Isaac are chosen above Hagar and Ishmael. I find this a very provocative idea that I object to.

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<sup>136</sup> See Chapter 3 for the participants' view of the texts selected for discussion, p. 85-86.

- Inger21: And then, on the question if there is a revelation here, that is, if it is God's voice in this text, I find that difficult to grasp here, for my part. These are my first reactions to these texts.
- Inger22: Let me just say one thing: I think it is great that breastfeeding is mentioned three times in the Koran, and once in the Bible, and this, as a part of women's lives, is lifted up and appreciated. I think that's cool; it's a tiny little bit of women's perspective in the middle of all this.

Inger reflects on the Hagar/Hajar narratives through comparing them, and she makes the comparison by shedding light on how the figure of Abraham/Ibrahim is portrayed in the two texts. Inger finds that Abraham/Ibrahim in the narrative from the *hadith* is portrayed as "kind, gentle and caring" (Inger16) toward Hagar/Hajar and Ishmael, whereas in the Old Testament narrative he is portrayed as "awful" and without concern (Inger17). Inger describes the biblical narrative as being "perhaps more true about how we humans really are" and hence states that the Old Testament version of the Hagar/Hajar narrative is more realistic.

Inger's evaluation appears to be based on her own knowledge and experience of humanity and reality. Her reasoning functions as an acknowledgement that the harsh reality presented in the narrative by the Old Testament ("then") is more analogous to the reality she observes and experiences today ("now"). This view of the present represents a contrast to Eva's earlier presentation of a far more positive view of the development of history and contemporary times. Their respective analysis of the current context seems to be strikingly different. Inger's perception creates a connection between the Old Testament narrative past ("then") and the present ("now"), possibly bridging the temporal gap (at least to a certain extent) through her view that human conditions are difficult both "then" and "now" and that human beings have not basically changed much through history. Eva focuses on the distance between the different times and claims that conditions as well as humans have improved.

Inger and Eva, with supposedly a rather equal background both culturally and religiously, display radically different views of the present living conditions for humans. This could suggest that they relate to and include different contemporary contexts in their perspective of what present "reality" is. Eva concentrates on the Norwegian context in her positive evaluation in the "now"; Inger does not locate her perspective geographically or spatially but assumes a universal view on how human beings behave in "reality" across contexts (Inger19). Inger may represent a different and more pessimistic view of the position of women, regardless of historical context, but claims rather that human conditions and human actions have always been, and still are, full of conflict and difficulties.

Inger's view of the two narratives is similar in a certain respect to Aira's view: the Old Testament narrative displays human conflicts and brutality, whereas the *hadith* story has a more clear-cut educational and moral aim. They do reach different conclusions, though. It is not clear in the end if Inger prefers the "niceness" of the *hadith* story to the "reality" of the Old Testament story, and perhaps this kind of competitive approach is not something Inger is aiming for but rather wants to avoid. She starts by comparing the Abraham/Ibrahim figure in both narratives, claiming that the Old Testament narrative is closer to "reality" in portraying a more "realistic" image of Abraham/Ibrahim as well. Inger's relies on her own analogical reasoning with respect to human conditions in making meaning rather than trusting the texts as such.

Aira's conclusion is, as mentioned above, that the revelation in the Old Testament narrative is mixed up with human experiences and views, and she deals with the problems she finds in the Old Testament text (regarding the text's unveiling of human relationship problems) by questioning the quality of revelation in this text. In doing this, she is in line with the traditional Islamic view of the Old Testament and its relation to divine revelation. Inger, too, addresses the question of revelation in the Old Testament but from a different vantage point. The issue that makes her question if the Hagar story in Genesis can be regarded as divine revelation is the text's representation of the notion of divinely chosen people. Inger claims that this particular notion is part of the Old Testament in general. In the text from Genesis the different status of Sarah and Isaac *versus* that of Hagar and Ishmael is the reason why Hagar and Ishmael are driven away, reflecting the notion of Sarah and Isaac as "chosen," and Hagar and Ishmael as the "not chosen." The problem Inger articulates about the concept of the "chosen" here is that this contradicts "our sense of justice" (Inger20). If someone is chosen, it implies that somebody else is not chosen. If justice means equal treatment for all humans, this unequal categorization of the chosen and not chosen can establish a basis for systematic religious and social injustice. Inger does not explicitly take the issue further by asking if injustice can be part of divine revelation, but I interpret this to be the underlying question here. The "chosen" in religious canonical scriptures like the Bible are chosen in a context of religious legitimization and presented as chosen by God. This makes Inger's critical question transcend this particular narrative.

Inger22 appears as an appendix in this sequence, with no direct connection to what Inger has been saying previously. She expresses appreciation of the appearance of breastfeeding in the biblical and koranic texts, calling this "a tiny little bit of women's perspective in the middle of all of this." Breastfeeding is, of course, an activity practiced by women only, but to be more specific it is practiced by women by virtue of being mothers. Not all women are mothers, and not all mothers breastfeed their children. To be in a position to breastfeed is then to be in a specific role as a woman and a mother; thus highlighting the inclusion of this part of some women's lives is a thin basis for claiming a comprehensive women's perspective. Inger22, however, does not at all



claim the presence of a comprehensive women's perspective on biblical and koranic texts. It seems, rather, as if Inger is looking for something positive to say about the texts from a women's perspective. She relates to both scriptures together on this matter, and her comments include both. This may be interpreted to mean that she, despite the view she presents on the two Hagar/Hajar narratives as different, does not distinguish too much between the Christian and the Islamic canonical scriptures when it comes to a missing women's perspective.

- Maria21: Yes. When I read these two, I think they are highly relevant, I believe that they could have been written today.
- Maria22: Because I see that it is all about humans and our relations, or how we relate to each other. And the crucial point I find in them is faith, that we need to have faith.
- Maria23: And that God keeps promises with no difference between the Koran and the Bible. In the end he does what he promised to do, to protect humans and that humans will become more numerous in the world.
- Maria24: Then I think like you said, that this is very real, with Sarah and all, it happens today, in many societies today. That if a woman can't have children, then men turn to other women and have children with them.
- Maria25: And, of course, this creates jealousy, and a lot of ... it's the same problem really.
- Maria26: And what you said about position, that is highly relevant in our workplaces; everywhere people fight for their status and situation.
- Maria27: And then it is what we talked about, if you talk about slavery at that time, we do have a kind of slavery today and that is the traffic in humans. It happens today, it is exactly the same. People buy other humans to use them.
- Maria28: And in some countries, maybe not so much around here, but in the Third World, for instance, when there are wars going on, women are used as sex slaves.
- Maria29: So this is highly relevant, all the problems that existed then are perhaps worse today because we should know better, and still it happens.
- Maria30: And when you say that about chosen ones, about Sarah and Ibrahim, I think yes, today we have the royal family. They do get a better life than other people.
- Maria31: Why? What kind of rights, why is it that everyone in Norway has to provide for them? It is exactly the same.

- Maria32: Throughout history they have been chosen as a particular group through inheritance, their children will be king, princess, and prince. It is the same even if we don't call it so.
- Maria33: So I think, for me when I read this, I think that yes, we have developed a lot regarding technology and all that, but human beings are the same. If it was a thousand years ago or today, it is the same, our struggles are the same. We do the same things, even if we might do it a bit differently because we have technology.
- Maria34: So this is how I read this; it is very interesting when I read it. This is today. Yes.

Maria addresses several contemporary issues that she believes threaten human dignity and make women's living conditions worse, and connects them to her making meaning of the Hagar/Hajar narrative. She claims that several of the issues she finds to be represented in the Hagar/Hajar texts exist in a similar form in present times, such as slavery and sexual abuse, rivalry, and conflicts among humans, abandonment of barren women, and the existence of surrogate mothers. These matters are, says Maria, highly relevant in different contexts today, in the "now." Through her contextual focus in making meaning of the narratives, she explicitly challenges the opposite view, namely that the temporal gap between the times of the narratives ("then") and the current time ("now") means that the issues represented in the narrative are outdated. Instead, Maria claims that the similarities between women's living conditions "then" and "now" are more significant than the differences. Several times Maria challenges the view that the temporal gap makes the narratives irrelevant when illustrating women's living conditions (Maria21, 27, 34).

Maria's comments on the living conditions for women "now" thus contradict Eva's positive evaluation of the present. Maria thus approximates Inger's views. But whereas Inger talks in more general terms about human nature and human struggles as basically the same across the temporal gap, Maria relates human/women's dignity more to social structures and contexts. She relates closely to both the texts and the contemporary context at the same time, engaging perhaps in what Mieke Bal calls a "[bold] use of anachronistic terms" (Bal 2008: 48) when connecting the slave status of Hagar in the Old Testament text to the modern slavery in human trafficking.

Maria locates the human problems she mentions in "many societies today" (Maria24). She does not specify the spatial dimension further, but she has mentioned related issues earlier while referring to a specific African context.

Let us sum up the positions in the discussion on status quo for living conditions for women. Eva insists that the situation of women has improved significantly, whereas Inger is more reluctant, and Maria holds a view contrary to Eva's: The conditions have not become better but worse (Maria29). What does she mean by this? She does not mean necessarily, perhaps, that human/women's conditions have worsened, objectively speaking but that critical knowledge about other people's situation is available in a way today that is quite different from before. This makes the existence of these problems a moral challenge.

Maria seems to contradict Eva's view that improved education and a true understanding of Jesus' message have lessened human discriminatory practices. She does not automatically connect improved understanding and knowledge to improvements in women's situations. Rather, she points out that the increased knowledge, combined with a lack of action for change, creates a bigger moral dilemma than people faced "then," anticipating that they did not have access to the same amount of information. Maria's African background is obviously an important source for her reflection, and experiences from the African context provide different information than the Norwegian context. In this way the contextual gap becomes visible as an obstacle to agreement on a common analysis of the current situation for women.

Maria seems to lessen the historical gap that Eva presupposes, introducing instead a *geographical* gap between "the countries around here" and "Third World countries" (Maria28). When stating the similarities between the living conditions at the times of the narratives and the present, Maria does not mention the Norwegian context until she draws in the Norwegian royal family as an example of the notion of chosen people as practiced today (Maria30-32). Inger introduced the problem of the chosen earlier, and now Maria actualizes it with a Norwegian example. Maria argues that the privileges granted by birth to the royal family of Norway can be compared with the privileged status of Sarah and Isaac in the Hagar narrative of Genesis.

Whereas Eva uses the Norwegian context as a positive example of less discrimination due to historical processes influenced by Christian values, Maria uses an example from the Norwegian context to illustrate injustice between chosen and not chosen people. There is of course a difference here regarding the legitimization of the status of chosen between the narrative in the Old Testament and today's Norwegian constitution; the chosen in a religious sense is legitimized religiously or by divinity whereas the sense of being chosen in a political system is legitimized by human society. The social result is nevertheless the same: privileges for the chosen only.

But Maria also establishes a link between "then" and "now" in a more hopeful way. Just as she claims that human living conditions basically stay the same over time, she also states that God's *promises* stay the same too. In her description of human challenges and brutality at the crossroads of the textual narratives and the current situation, Maria relates mostly to the

Hagar/Hajar narrative of the Bible when establishing the challenging issues, although she does not say this explicitly. The narratives may have merged into one for Maria, with parts of the biblical narrative dominating her elaborations. In her testimony-like statements in Maria23, however, she relates explicitly and without discriminating to both the Bible and the Koran as canonical scriptures where God makes and keeps promises to humanity. This shows that her image of a promise-keeping God is not limited to her own Christian tradition or the Bible.

Maria's statement "we need to have faith" (Maria22) is directed to a "we" and a "now." Maria places the promise-keeping God in a shared Christian-Muslim "then." But since Maria stresses that the temporal gap between the "then" and the "now" to be non-significant or even non-existent, this may even be a way of placing the shared God in the "now." To Maria, the acts of God may also transgress the temporal gap between "then" and "now," just as she declared was the case for human conditions.

Aira establishes the meaning of the Hagar/Hajar narrative as a divine legitimization of religious plurality and a testimony of Hagar/Hajar's faith in God. Maria opens the way for a religious plurality too. For Maria, plurality is represented by two canonical scriptures both testifying about a shared promise-keeping God. This God, according to Maria, wants to protect humans and make humans numerous (Maria23). Maria's general expression of "humans" may suggest that she claims that this divine protection takes place across space and over time of human existence, regardless of religion.

### *Time and Place for Testimonies in Making Meaning*

Compared to the discussions presented earlier, the mode of expression and communication is different during this third discussion at the second meeting on the Hagar/Hajar narratives. There are fewer interruptions, and thus the participants share longer reflections. This means that the interaction between the participants is less intense, but the participants do relate to what the others say. They also relate to the earlier discussions to some extent. Discussion 3 is dominated not so much by one or two of the participants raising questions or issues but is marked by a greater presence of the different aspects of the Hagar/Hajar narratives in the participants' contributions. Shirin sets the tone of the discussion perhaps when she says that she wants to turn to the general meanings of the texts.

Two other factors that make this meeting different from the previous ones are that Maria is moderating the meeting as one of the participants and that the meeting starts with reading the texts silently, not aloud. It is difficult to say in what way these various factors influence the mode of communication. The participants also know one another better and are possibly more at ease with the overall situation. But, in sum, all the above-mentioned factors may have made it possible for the participants to be more open both for listening and for sharing more personal

contributions. But there is another way to interpret the more coherent and focused communication in the group at this point: the stakes are higher because differences have gradually been revealed and the participants have invested more effort in the process. The situation may call for stronger statements based on one's own reasoning and for extensive articulation of one's own meaning making.

The concept of testimony and witness comes to mind as categories for expressing the mode of communication and the roles of the participants. In general, the place of a witness and a testimony is often a contested place, where truth is on trial, or in a situation that requires a clarification of one's stance. In the Christian tradition, the religious use of the concept testimony often refers to a personal narrative about one's own challenging experiences as interpreted within a divine framework.

A testimony is more than a mere statement of an opinion or a personal reflection. According to Paul Ricoeur, it contains "a fusion ... between the confessional pole and the narrative pole" (Ricoeur 1980: 144). Ricoeur further states that a testimony has "an aspect of *manifestation*" and is an expression of "[t]he absolute declaring itself here and now" (Ricoeur 1980: 144). Ricoeur mainly discusses the notion of testimony within the framework of the Christian tradition and biblical exegesis. The difficulty of interpreting a testimony is obvious: it claims, in some form, an absolute truth. Still, the testimony needs to be interpreted, according to Ricoeur, just as it itself is an interpretation (Ricoeur 1980: 143-144). The testimony is a self-reflective act that has a claim beyond the identity of the witness.

Does testimony as a category of speech necessarily have to be religious in its motivation and content? In this setting, however, the presence of the canonical texts sometimes frames the conversation and at other times functions as a catalyst for discussion. Thus, the testimonies display both a narrative and confessional pole, framed by the Christian and the Islamic tradition present through the *texts*, and the experience, knowledge, and meaning-making present by the participants. The testimonies themselves can be considered to be a combination of relating to the canonical texts, to one's own religious experience or reflection, to ethical/ideological stances, to contextual knowledge, and to personal narratives.

In Discussion 3, Eva, Aira, and Maria all express themselves in ways that can be categorized as testimonies. In addition, Shirin gives a normative statement about how she views the role of religion and the need for change in the interpretation of the Koran. This too may be categorized as a kind of testimony.

A closer investigation of the testimonies in this discussion would necessitate an examination of their narrative and confessional contents, with a view to the similarities and differences between them in the way they relate to each other and to the Hagar/Hajar narratives. The narrative presence of the texts may encourage or influence the participants to express

themselves in specific ways. The plurality of the narratives, and the fact that there are two narratives on the table that are related but still different may open the way for a plurality both between and within the testimonies.

Shirin's statements about the need for "change in the Koran" (most probably addressing a need for change in the *interpretation* of the Koran), as well as her claim that change in the religious realm should happen through reform, not through revolution, is not made in first person and is thus not really a personal testimony. When I include it in the discourse of testimony, I do so because Shirin expresses these views as a "confession" of how she relates (together with others – she includes a "we" in her statements) to her own religious tradition. Her statements appear at the end of her contribution in this discussion, as a wish for the future based on her interpretation of the past.

The next testimony appears at the end of Aira's contribution. Her testimony is closely intertwined with the performative aspect of the Hajar narrative in the *hadith*, since her narrative and confession is based on her own experience of the ritual of *sa'y*. The narrative and confessional elements are intertwined in Aira's testimony. She describes her own feelings and experiences during *sa'y* as a way of experiencing God's closeness as she performs Hajar's physical struggle. Aira, like Shirin, includes a "we" in her testimony, referring to her fellow Muslim pilgrims doing the same as she does. Through the performance of *sa'y* Aira experiences equality between men and women because they all, men and women alike, run together seven times between the mountains Safa and Marwa. Aira's testimony shares an experience of a state of coevalness with Hajar, as well as with her female and male co-performers of *sa'y*, and with God – across boundaries of time, gender, cultures, interpreted as the divine presence in the human realm. The boundary that is not crossed but constitutes the experience of coevalness is the religious confession of Islam.

Eva's testimony, when she declares herself to be a feminist and a Christian believer, is an immediate continuation of her critical statement about Aira's former sayings. Her testimony appears in the beginning of her contribution to the discussion. The testimony itself does not contain criticism of other participants' statements nor of other traditions, religions, or cultures. Eva's criticism of the past is only indirectly posed as a negative mirror to current, more positively portrayed developments. At this point, the narrative part of her testimony is not directly related to her religious tradition. But elsewhere in her contributions Eva refers to the effect of Jesus' message in history as a decisive factor in bringing about the change in times: from the times of discrimination to a current time less marked by discrimination against humans.

The confessional part refers to "the message of Jesus" and to feminism. When Eva declares herself to be a Christian feminist, she relates her interpretation of Jesus' message to the basis for her feminist stance by presenting that stance as a logical result of her understanding of

Jesus' message. Her testimony is thus double: both the Christian religion understood as the message of Jesus and feminism are manifested, as is the combination of the two. Eva contextualizes her Christian and feminist confession in the Norwegian context as the place where she describes the practice of equality between people to be closest to the ideals of a non-discriminatory human society. In this part the confessional and narrative are intertwined with ideological statements and a presentation of her view of history. Eva's manifestation of Norway as a Christian country, more Christian than ever before throughout history, according to Eva, is based on the image of Norway as the place of human equality, and has the shape of a religiously based political statement. Eva can be said to confess her own Norwegian-ness, alongside her confession of the Christian faith and of feminism. However, she does not make this a personal statement about herself but about Norway. Eva's testimony is related to the Hagar/Hajar narratives only when she uses them to illustrate a discriminatory past that, according to Eva has been fought back through a greater understanding of what the Christian message is really about and to general historical developments of enlightenment. The place of equality for Eva is contemporary Norwegian society, and this view is based partly on a particular understanding of other times. Other places are not reflected upon as such.

Maria's statements about the necessity of having faith and the presence of a promise-keeping God in both the Bible and the Koran also have the character of a testimony. These sayings are clearly made on the basis of the Hagar/Hajar stories, used by Maria as a positive example of the faith of Hagar/Hajar (and possibly the other characters as well) and of God as promise-keeper. The striking aspect of Maria's testimony is that it is not really a confession of one specific religion, although it is a confession of faith in God. Her testimony is simply a confession of a plural admission to God's promises for both Christians and Muslims. The narrative part is connected to the description of human relations in the Hagar/Hajar narratives (and Maria may relate more closely to the biblical text than to the text from the *hadith*) as a valid description of human challenges in present times.

What I have presented above as testimonies in the discussion thus have significant differences, although they are given in a conversation/discussion on the same texts. The Hagar/Hajar stories are integrated into the testimonies in different ways: as a positive or negative background in the narrative part (Maria and Eva), as an example of how change in religion and the plurality of religions should occur (Shirin), or as a narrative performed in a ritual frame as the source of religious experience (Aira). Defining contexts and situating one's own position, however, seems to be as important as relating to the texts – at least for Shirin, Eva, and Maria.

To give a testimony is a way to fix a "here" and "now" by grasping a momentum for contributing one's own confession and narrative(s) with a particular emphasis. The testimonies in Discussion 3 relate simultaneously to a larger historical frame and to self-reflection. The

testimonies given by Aira, Eva, and Maria differ in content, but they are still connected through sharing the elements of confession, narrative, and manifestation.

***Testimonies about Narratives of Equality and Hope:***

***Temporal and Spatial Aspects***

A thematic summary of the contents of the testimonies admonishing people to different forms of action or agency would include having faith and hope, working for change, acknowledging religious differences, believing in a caring God in both the Bible and the Koran, and thus establishing a shared image of God in Christianity and Islam. The controversy between Aira and Eva on what it really means to interpret the Hagar/Hajar narratives in a spiritual way is blended into their testimonies, expressing a disagreement between them on this particular issue.

Both Aira and Eva, however, testify to the experience of human equality, relating it in different ways to the canonical texts of the two traditions. Aira relates directly to the Hajar narrative in the *hadith* and Eva indirectly to the message of Jesus in the New Testament and to the Hagar/Hajar narrative as background for illustrating that message. The narratives of human equality are framed in time and space: for Aira, the place of equality is during *sa'y* in Mecca; for Eva, it is in contemporary Norway.

Maria does not testify about any experience of equality but to an experience of coevalness between the events in the Hagar/Hajar narratives and events taking place in the present. The human misery represented in both eras is contrasted with a faith in a caring, promise-keeping God who operates freely across the canonical scriptures of both traditions, across Christian and Islamic religious boundaries, and beyond space and time. In Maria's testimony, human equality is present only within the divine perspective of humanity.

**Discussion 4 Related to the Hagar/Hajar Narratives.**

**Obedience *versus* Forgiveness in the Christian and Islamic Traditions**

*Chronologically* speaking, this discussion is a direct continuation of Discussion 3.<sup>137</sup> When Susanne however, addresses the question of obedience as possibly a significant difference between the Christian and the Islamic religious traditions (Susanne7-15), the discussion becomes thematically focused on this particular question, and it is extended to include the notion of forgiveness in the two traditions. The mode of communication shifts from testimony to a more discursive mode, more like the earlier discussions.

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<sup>137</sup> We are still in the second (and last) meeting where the participants are discussing the Hagar/Hajar narratives,. This is the third meeting in the overall schedule.



- Susanne3: I think this is really interesting to listen to; there have been five different reflections, so I have actually just noted some things along the way that I haven't had the opportunity to ...
- Susanne4: But as ... to what you said, Aira, about spiritual and worldly reading, do you think that one text is spiritual and the other worldly, if I understood you correctly?
- Aira90: It ...
- Susanne5: That one is more spiritual and the other is more worldly.
- Aira91: I find that it can be described in that way. One text touches you emotionally, and the other describes God's commands.
- Susanne6: Ok. But this fits well with what I was about to say.
- Susanne7: Because just that, and something that was said about the reading of texts, whether it is God's revelation or not, has a lot to do, I think, with the view of scriptures .... it is very different in Christianity and Islam ... and perhaps the concept of God.

After expressing an affirmative comment to all the previous contributions so far in the meeting, as well as a slight regret that she has not been able to enter into the conversation thus far, Susanne checks with Aira to see if she understands her earlier statements correctly before she starts to make her own point. This way of communicating serves the purpose of minimizing possible misunderstandings and thus provides a verbal interaction where the participants involved have a chance to develop a conversation on equally understood premises.

In her explanation of the difference between the two ways of reading, Aira seems to locate the difference in how the subject position is situated in the reading process (Aira91). To read with an epistemological basis in human feelings is to situate the reader as an autonomous subject, whereas to read with the intention of finding God's will in the text makes reading an interaction between God and a reader equipped with the intention of following her interpretation of God's will as expressed in the text. The latter way of reading does not exclude the reader as a subject, but it does erect some limits to the autonomous subject. The subject position is established in the dynamics between the text and the reader and situates the final authority in a place at least partly projected *beyond* human/one's own feelings and experience.

- Susanne8: But that this text from the *hadith* in a way reflects a kind of religion of obedience, or a kind of thinking about obedience, where Abraham ...
- Aira92: To God.
- Susanne9: To God. And where Abraham is obedient too. He is, but it is still a bit different ... the emphasis is on different things.
- Susanne10: In the *hadith* God tells Ibrahim “Go and do this” and he does that.
- Susanne11: But here there is a kind of jealousy, and Sarah chases Hagar away, and she comes back and Sara forces Abraham to chase her away again, is a lot more ... realistic, more the way we already know the world.
- Susanne12: And then I think that this might have something to do with the way one thinks about God, and ... this is a bit difficult for me to explain, but do you understand what I mean?
- Susanne13: A kind of obedience against more of an understanding of the incarnation, that God became human, and that this gives the human more space, in a different way.
- Susanne14: I don’t mean to say that Islam is not a humane religion or something like that ... but that there is a different kind of importance attached to human emotions on the bases of these texts.
- Susanne15: And this is not an attack on anyone in any way, it is just an observation on the text.

Susanne concentrates her reasoning on possible differences between Christian and Islamic tradition regarding the issue of obedience. Her starting point is Aira’s two ways of reading the Hagar/Hajar narratives. Susanne poses the question if the narrative from the *hadith* could be interpreted as reflecting a general dogma of obedience within the Islamic tradition (Susanne7). Aira immediately intervenes and specifies that the notion of obedience in Islam has to do only with obedience to God (Aira92).

The core of Susanne’s reasoning seems to be her question if the Christian tradition provides more space for the human because of the Christian dogma of incarnation, whereas the Islamic view of the God-human relationship emphasizes human obedience to God. Does Susanne interpret Aira’s suggestion about the two ways of reading that only an “Islamic reading” is to be considered “spiritual”? Susanne may be trying to establish a broader comparison between the two traditions that emerge from the two narratives and is based on earlier comments and interpretations of the narratives in the group.

Susanne14-15 are hedging remarks to ensure that her thinking on the differences she finds between the Christian and Islamic traditions are not received as criticism. Her motive may be concern for others, fear of being misunderstood, or both. Her statement in Susanne14-15 could give a hint about what kind of misunderstandings she has in mind. Susanne tries to explore certain differences through questioning based on her own presuppositions and comprehension, which is also made transparent through her open manner of questioning. She wants to explore, but she does not want anyone to be offended by it.

Susanne16: And then I thought, after you spoke, Inger, you said that Abraham was a scoundrel, and didn't care, I don't know if I agree, because Abraham is in a way the one who ... does what Sarah tells him to do, and actually it is Sarah who is the scoundrel here and the reason why Hagar has to leave, but it says in verse 11: "The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son."

Susanne17: So, it really hurts him to do it, and that tells me ... that Abraham didn't do this easily. He did it because his wife forced him to. And the reason was jealousy. For me, Sarah is more the scoundrel than Abraham. Even if he could have said no, but ....

Susanne takes up the frame of the narrative, including the earlier comments made in this type of engagement with the texts, and then the discussion about who is to blame for expelling Hagar and Ishmael to the desert. Earlier (in Discussion 3) Inger had put the responsibility and blame on Abraham/Ibrahim. Susanne presents a different view of the Old Testament narrative: the blame is to be put on Sarah who forced Abraham to do what he did. She finds that Abraham's room for acting in the narrated situation is controlled by Sarah and suggests that he acted against his own feelings. This is one of the rare comments among the Christian participants during this process that *defends* the figure Abraham in the Old Testament narrative or at least presents an option for sharing the blame between him and Sarah.

Any suggestion that *God* is to blame for Hagar's precarious situation, however, has not occurred so far. Only the Christian participants have addressed the question of responsibility and blame, mostly related to the Old Testament narrative (and sometimes in a merged narrative that incorporates the *hadith*). Within the frame of the narrative, the figure of Abraham/Ibrahim and now that of Sarah have been included in one way or another in the blame. In addition, an alleged male narrator/author has been blamed. So why have they not blamed God, either as a figure in the narrative or as the ultimate source and guarantor of human existence, according to Christian and Muslim beliefs?

It may be that the participants who criticize the figures in the narratives, who are all Christians, do not connect the Hagar/Hajar story with their own concept of God. Maria's testimony in discussion 3 represents an exception, when she uses both narratives to state her belief in a promise-keeping and caring God (Maria23). Most of the Christian participants have stated that they relate primarily to the message of Jesus in the New Testament as the basis for their faith. The Hagar narrative was not well known to them in the first place, and they may struggle to relate to it as having something to do with their image of God.

Susanne18: And then there are some observations I made when I read the text now that I didn't see the last time, and that is when God, or the angel of God, reveals himself to Hagar in the Genesis text and tells her not to be afraid. In the text from the *hadith* it says that she hears the voice of an angel of God after she had been running around a certain amount of times.

Susanne19: So there are different reasons why the angel talks to her. It is because of her deeds, she ran and acted based on a feeling of despair because she didn't have any water, while in the text in Genesis she isn't doing anything. I think ... I don't know how to interpret it, but I found it interesting. These are very scattered and incoherent comments, but ....

This might be a repeated but extended pattern of interpretation if compared with Susanne12-14. The interpretative point of access from the Hagar/Hajar narratives is a different one. In Susanne19 Susanne interprets the *hadith* narrative as a plot where the divine messenger addressed Hajar and Ishmael only after Hajar's own struggle to rescue them. In the Old Testament narrative Susanne observes that Hagar is passive before the divine message. The repeated pattern or framework of interpretation may be the opposition Susanne sees between human obedience and hard work in the *hadith* narrative, and the room for human emotions and human weakness/powerlessness in the Old Testament narrative. The question Susanne is asking is if these observations are useful for constructing a more comprehensive perspective within the Islamic and Christian traditions respectively or if the comments are limited to addressing differences between the two Hagar/Hajar stories. At the beginning of the group's discussions (the discussion analyzed in Chapter 4) Eva introduced a distinction between religions of law and emphasized Christianity as the religion of grace. This distinction was contested by some of the Muslim participants then.

- Shirin54: I have done some research, and it is only this particular verse that is in the Koran, about this incident. It is in the second paragraph toward the end ....
- Susanne20: Ok.
- Shirin55: "I have made some of my offspring dwell in a valley without cultivation, so let people have goodwill towards them and give them fruit to eat, so that they may give thanks." That is the only part in this story that comes from the Koran. Everything else is from the *hadith*.
- Shirin56: Personally, I believe that one should ... look at it anew, which has happened in Iran.
- Shirin57: I feel very close to you when you talk even if you are a Christian ... I mean, when you start to interpret. For instance, you say that some of the things you read in your book you can understand and some you don't understand. It is the same with me.
- Shirin58: I won't say that it's not the word of God, but I can't understand it and it is not revelation to me when I read the Koran. It is written in a different time and place, but personally, when I read the whole book, what I focus on is the spiritual values.
- Shirin59: When I see that ... but, for instance, that episode, I don't know where ... only this verse, not the story coming from the *hadith*, I decide that no matter what happens in my life, I will not lose hope.
- Shirin60: Then, her viewpoint on obedience and view on humanity, that obedience is only to God, you see, in difficult situations.
- Susanne21: I see.

Shirin uses her pre-knowledge about the intertextual structure of the Hagar narrative in the *hadith*, and establishes a difference between the one verse of the Koran integrated into the *hadith* text (which she recites in Shirin55) and the rest of the text. In Shirin59 she repeatedly highlights that there is a difference between the koranic part of the *hadith* narrative and the other parts of the text. Shirin does not, however, elaborate on what this difference might entail for the interpretation or explicitly say anything about a possible difference concerning status or mode of interpretation of the two types of tradition material. But in Shirin54 and 55 she shows the difference in status through referring only to the koranic verse from the text and explicitly ruling

out any reference to the *hadith* when she is presenting her personal outcome of the narrative: the message Shirin embraces is not to lose hope, no matter what happens to her.

Shirin repeats what Aira earlier claimed, i.e. that in the Islamic tradition the only object of obedience is God. Shirin adds a circumstantial modification to the obligation to obey God in the Islamic tradition: “in difficult situations.” She may be referring to the situation of Hagar/Hajar in the narrative as an example.

Shirin expresses a felt closeness to another participant who is referred to as a Christian, but Shirin only calls her “you.” The description of what the “you” has been saying matches what Inger said earlier. Shirin’s rephrasing of the critical view of the Old Testament corresponds to what Inger presented (Inger8-10). This felt closeness is presented as an unexpected experience or at least a bit contradictory since Inger is a Christian whereas Shirin is a Muslim. But this may not necessarily reflect surprise on Shirin’s own part. It could be that this is a statement meant to underline that an experience of common ground is possible between Christians and Muslims (which Shirin had earlier advocated between the religions).

Shirin’s feeling of closeness is addressed to a person, a “you.” This makes it more personal than declaring an agreement on a statement or an argument, even if the latter is included in the presentation of what this felt closeness consists of for Shirin. Shirin addresses a need to look for spiritual values, perhaps exemplified through identifying a common ground across religious boundaries. It seems as if Shirin does not find different ways of relating to the scriptures an obstacle to this but rather a search for a shared selective reading of the canonical scriptures (Shirin58) with a spiritual focus. Shirin does not, however, explain what she means by “spiritual values.”

Shirin’s reference to Iran in Shirin56 is not explained, but she returns to the case of Iran in the next sequence:

- Shirin61: But it is different when some Muslims are so weak and subjugated that they only listen to the people in charge ... that is not my view, you see.
- Susanne22: That was what I meant.
- Shirin62: Yes, yes. I just wanted to tell you that this obedience is to God in difficult situations.
- Shirin63: But in issues connected to society, you have to start thinking, and then to solve it. You see?
- Shirin64: And there is a lot of discussion, at least in Iran, I cannot really speak about other countries because I don’t have enough information about

them, but since a kind of Islamic state was established there, and you see how stupid some people are ... God, if I say the right thing ... in abusing the Koran. I can talk about so many stupid things, for instance, that the President has said that Israel should be wiped off the world ....

Susanne23: The map.

Shirin65: The map. Could you believe how stupid he is, even in the name of God? Then I think that the obedience is what they represent, you see.

Shirin now discusses the concept of obedience in Islam related to her perception of the political context of Iran. Iran is said to represent an Islamic state (Shirin64) but Shirin is careful to underline that her references are only to her own experiences in Iran, not necessarily to other countries where Islam is the majority religion or part of the constitutional framework. Obedience to political authorities is not included in Shirin's perception of religiously legitimated claims of obedience (Shirin62). She uses the political leadership in Iran as a negative example of aggressive and misinterpreted application of the concept of obedience, falsely legitimized by Islam. She distinguishes issues in a certain society – Iran still being the example – from issues between humans and God “in difficult situations.” Reflection and reasoning should, according to Shirin, be the guide for behavior in a society – not obedience to the authorities. The echo of Aira's narrative about Muhammad sending his representative to a foreign place, telling him to use his common sense (Aira19-21, p. 136), may be heard in Shirin's appeal to reason.<sup>138</sup>

Shirin differentiates between the leadership and the people in contemporary Iran. Discussions within the country itself as a good practice are mentioned in Shirin64, but people showing obedience to the system is listed as part of the problem (Shirin61). Shirin states that there is a connection between the interpretative practices of the Koran and the requirement for human obedience to authorities. What she means to say is not obvious, but in the sequence the connection between the need to interpret and discuss the Koran and a need to qualify the notion of obedience is established in a social setting.

Susanne interrupts Shirin's contribution with one approving comment that signals that she shares her critical view of obeying authorities (probably referring to political authorities), and one comment showing that she is aware of the statement by the Iranian president Shirin

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<sup>138</sup> Among Shiite *ulama*, reasoning (*aql*) has a more central position than among their Sunni counterparts. See Chibli Mallat's book *The Renewal of Islamic Law* (Mallat 1993: 33).

refers to, i.e. when President Ahmadinejad is supposed to have said in 2005 that the state of Israel should be wiped off the map.<sup>139</sup>

- Shirin66: You have to be critical about ... you have to take it from there, think, and then solve problems. Jews living in Israel and the Palestinians living there ... they are all humans.
- Shirin67: Now everybody is saying that there cannot be two states because of the politics, but some people think that it should be a democratic country where all can live in peace....
- Shirin68: But I do think it will be discussed eventually that we are all humans, and that we should live together in peace and harmony.
- Susanne24: There is something about obedience, to the people in power or to God, that is well known in our own tradition.
- Susanne25: As with Martin Luther, who emphasizes that you should not obey rulers unless ... if it is against what you believe, the word of God, or the Gospel.
- Susanne26: So, that was the reason why, during the Second World War in Norway, the church opposed the Nazi regime, and that was based on the division Luther made between that he called the spiritual and the secular realms.
- Susanne27: So, when I mentioned obedience, I was thinking of obedience to God, and that this text mirrors a little bit of that view of obedience to God in difficult situations, as you say.
- Shirin69: But then, politics is difficult, isn't it, because it is misused? Politics is a secular question. You take the real situation, start to think, and then you can reach some strange decisions.
- Susanne28: I agree with you that it has been mixed, but if you consider obedience to God ....

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<sup>139</sup> The president of Iran (2005-), Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, gave a speech in Iran on October 26, 2005, where he stated, according to the Western press, that "Israel must be wiped off the map." The exact wording is disputed, and one suggested translation into English from the original speech in Farsi is that he said "the regime occupying Jerusalem must vanish from the page of time." In the discussions after this statement Ahmadinejad claimed that the official Iranian policy was to support a one-state-solution to Israeli-Palestinian conflict, after a referendum. He denied that his statement was some sort of military threat ([news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/6733487.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/6733487.stm)) [accessed 24 June 2010].



Susanne29: I still think, regardless of what has happened, that this text provides an example for me ... it says something about Islam as a religion, with a concept of obedience to God in difficult situations.

Susanne30: I find this different in Christianity; I don't know if you agree with me.

In this sequence Susanne also applies a political perspective to the religious concept of obedience by using the example of the Norwegian church's resistance to the Nazi occupation of Norway during World War II, based on Christian Lutheran reasoning. Shirin broadens her political scope and adds reflections on the Israeli-Palestine conflict to her earlier reflections on the Iranian case. But Shirin does not, however, address the issue of obedience in her reflections on the Israeli-Palestine conflict, introducing instead a new issue about human equality for the population in the area regardless of them being Israelis or Palestinians (Shirin66-67). Obedience, understood as uncritical acceptance and support of politicians, is, in her view, not a way to achieve peace.

Susanne's comparison of Shirin's example of Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Lutheran doctrine of the two realms applied by the Norwegian church in its resistance to the Nazi authorities in Norway 1940-1945 brings together two examples where religious and political power are intertwined. Susanne's use of Luther is interpreted on the basis of this Norwegian case. The doctrine of the two realms has been used in other political conflict situations by Lutheran churches for opposite purposes, such as the view that the (Lutheran) church, as part of the spiritual realm, should not interfere with politics or resist governments in order not to interfere in the secular or worldly realm.<sup>140</sup>

Susanne's point is to introduce an example, generally well known in Norwegian society, to illustrate the discussion on obedience to political authorities *versus* obedience to God, from her own tradition and context. Still, Susanne claims in Susanne29-30 that her understanding is that the Islamic teachings on the need to obey God are different from the concepts of obedience in the Christian tradition.

Shirin69 emphasizes that politics "is difficult," "secular," and can be misused. The meaning of this statement seems to be that religion would be less vulnerable to misuse if religion and politics were separated or, more specifically, that, without a clear separation from religion, politics could lead people astray in its demand for obedience.

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<sup>140</sup> An example of this in recent church history is the action (or rather non-action) taken by the Lutheran churches in South Africa during the apartheid period (Lodberg 1988).

- Shirin70: Just one more thing, that there are many verses in the Koran that say that if you commit a sin, coming to God with it will give you, what is it ....
- Eva89: Forgiveness.
- Shirin71: Forgiveness. You are forgiven. In many, many verses.
- Susanne31: But that ....
- Shirin72: You shouldn't make it so difficult that you say that you will never sin, and if you commit sin, you go to hell. It is not like that.
- Susanne32: That's not what I am trying to say.
- Shirin73: Some say that.

The verbal interaction on obedience is mainly between Shirin and Susanne, and it seems to take a sudden turn when Shirin introduces the concept of forgiveness as understood in the Islamic tradition. Why does Shirin apparently shift her focus or, formulated more precisely: How might the introduction of the notion of forgiveness in Islam fit into the discussion on obedience? The answer might be that Shirin does not see the discussion as being mainly about obedience as such but rather about how to interpret differences between the Islamic and Christian traditions. This is how Susanne introduced the discussion of obedience from the beginning: as a way to explore differences between the two. In an earlier discussion Shirin opposed what she perceived to be a Christian monopolization of certain values (Shirin16-19, p. 130-131).

Shirin's intention by introducing forgiveness into the discussion may thus be to *change* the premises of the current comparison between the two traditions. Susanne suggests that, or rather asks if, the views on obedience and grace differ in the Islamic and Christian traditions. Shirin has already contested the notion of obedience in Islam, and it seems as if she now wants to complement her view of Islam by presenting the notion of forgiveness in the tradition. Shirin thus states that both obedience and forgiveness are part of Islam, and any differences between the Christian and the Islamic tradition cannot be properly understood by interpreting Islam as a tradition without divine forgiveness, even if there may be differences. These differences, though, have not yet been presented in a way that everyone in the group can agree on.

Shirin72 describes a non-identified religious system with no space for making mistakes or sin, and with going to hell as a necessary consequence of committing a sin. Shirin does not

explicitly link this merciless system to either the Christian or the Islamic tradition. Susanne's response in Susanne32 possibly means that Susanne does not intend to present this merciless religion as a representation of Islam. Shirin73, however, claims that this is actually expressed by "some." There is no further indication of who these "some" are. They might be in the group or outside it. It may be that Shirin72 is meant to criticize all religious practice that has no place for human errors, since this makes life "too difficult."

- Susanne33: Let me just finish with one sentence: I think that Christianity is not so much about sin, hell, and all that, and forgiveness, but a kind of obedience to God, that I ...
- Susanne34: I don't know how to say it, but I ... in Christianity, I believe, there is perhaps another mindset ....
- Susanne35: Oh, I don't know how to say this. But more like, listen to God, but also use your sense.
- Susanne36: It sounds wrong because I don't think that ....
- Shirin74: No, no, what you are saying is right, but Christianity did not used to be what it later became, you see, don't forget what has happened in the name of Christianity.
- Susanne37: No, no, we have our history, and what I am trying to make my starting point here is how I perceive it today, maybe I am wrong ....
- Shirin75: No, you are not wrong.
- Susanne38: This is what I think today.
- Eva90: Now you are saying something like what I tried to argue for, but I don't know if I was clear about it.
- Shirin76: About what?
- Eva91: No, but it is Christianity, you say.
- Shirin77: Yes, that's right, but it developed because of the mistakes someone made three hundred years ago, right.

Eva92: Not three hundred years ago; they started two thousand years ago.

Susanne continues her struggle to express her impression of the difference between the Islamic and the Christian tradition. She finds that the differences are there, but the closest she gets to explaining them in this sequence is to suggest the existence of “different mindsets” (Susanne34). Susanne takes a strong stand against the merciless form of religious practice that Shirin described earlier and denounces it as part of the Christian tradition. Instead, Susanne explains how she understands obedience in the Christian tradition to be a matter of following the will of God as well as using human reason. The inclusion of human reason as an important part of the Christian and Islamic interpretive traditions thus continues to be a shared concern among the participants. Aira’s story about the place of human reason in the example of Muhammad (Aira19-21, p. 136), which she tells in both the first and second meetings of the group, may be part of Susanne’s resources of reflection. This narrative may in fact have become a part of everyone’s internal reference library throughout the process.

Shirin’s response (Shirin74) is a reminder to Susanne and the others of the history of Christianity. Her concern is that the Christian “then” and “now” are two very different representations of the same tradition. The question about difference thus moves from exploring dissimilarities between the Islamic and Christian traditions to highlighting changes within the Christian tradition. Shirin74 brings in a historical perspective and with it, the question of representation in a new version – as historical variations of the Christian tradition. Shirin approves of Susanne33 as a way of viewing the Christian tradition but questions this as a valid representation of Christian tradition throughout history. Shirin, moreover, introduces a distinction between Christian tradition in its historical versions and deeds made “in the name of Christianity.” This distinction, suggesting that a religious tradition may be represented in many ways, opens the way for interpretations of their respective validity.

Susanne agrees to include a historical perspective on her own tradition, but at the same time she claims the right to express her view based on her present context (Susanne37). Eva then enters into the discussion supporting Susanne by referring to her earlier contributions, which she is not sure she managed to communicate well enough. The question is: What is Eva referring to and identifying with? If her comment is directed toward the overall theme of the discussion as introduced by Susanne, she may be supporting an accentuation of differences between the Christian and Islamic traditions through their respective views of obedience and forgiveness. In the discussion about views of the Bible and the Koran, as was already mentioned, Eva argued that Christianity and Islam diverged in their views regarding forgiveness, grace, and obedience to divine laws (Eva9-20, p. 124-125). Eva’s reasoning at that time was not focused primarily on

exploring differences between Christianity and Islam but was aimed at stating a difference between the Christian tradition and all other religious traditions.

The verbal interaction in this sequence is somewhat fragmented in its expression, and the information disclosed in the statements does not always display the context(s) or issues to which reference is made. Not all the participants are sure they get the others' points either (Shirin76). The fragmented reasoning that makes some parts of this sequence difficult to grasp might be caused by the difficulty of the theme, fear of being misunderstood, or simply by the complexity of all the different issues brought up during a short period of time.

At the end of the sequence, however, Eva and Shirin join in a shared critique of the Christian tradition as played out in certain historical periods. Shirin seems to have specific historical incidents in mind, perhaps what has been done politically in the name of Christianity, such as colonization or wars, whereas Eva seems to integrate human error as part of the Christian tradition from the start.

Since none of them are referring to concrete, specific matters in this sequence, their statements are a bit difficult to analyze. They clearly agree that mistakes have been made within the Christian tradition, historically speaking. Shirin says this from the viewpoint of another tradition, whereas Eva expresses it as self-criticism or at least self-reflection on behalf of her tradition. Eva's use of "they" (Eva92) suggests that she distances herself from the representatives of the Christian tradition whom she believes committed the mistakes that are criticized. Self-criticism that leads to self-reflexivity when answering on behalf of an entire religious tradition is a demanding exercise.

- Aira93: I want to make one thing perfectly clear. When we sit and say spiritual or secular, I don't want to offend anyone. It's not that I am more spiritual, it's just a way of expressing myself.
- Aira94: And it is not like ... I don't criticize the Bible in the sense that it has no status for me.<sup>141</sup> To me, it is very important; to me, the Bible or the Old Testament has the same status as the Koran.
- Aira95: But when I say that it has come ... it describes people's feelings. Nothing is written in the Koran about that. It's just very ... not any different from what we find in the Koran, only this verse ....

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<sup>141</sup> When reading the final transcriptions, Aira clarifies that her intention is not to criticize the Bible but that, to her, it seems that in some places human experiences are blended with the word of God.

- Susanne39: But I wasn't ... because I was the one commenting on that, I just feel ... I wasn't offended in any way, not at all.
- Aira96: No.
- Susanne40: I just think it's interesting because it gave me an association, and I tried to follow that in a quite vague way. It wasn't that easy ... it goes both ways.
- Susanne41: I didn't want to offend anyone, either, even if one might do so without the intention of offending anyone. But I wasn't at all ... I thought it was a simple observation that I shared.

Both Aira and Susanne articulate hedging remarks to the effect that they had no intention to offend anyone by what they said. To express concern for the emotional well-being of others in an encounter where the social, cultural, and religious codes differ among the people involved, is to show empathy and respect. To include the possibility that one can offend someone unintentionally is an acknowledgment of the complexity of the situation and the limits of one's own knowledge about this complexity. Reflections of this kind may be important for the possibility of communication and for the quality of the communication.

Aira elaborates on her own previous reflections on different kinds of reading, and probably on how Eva might have interpreted her earlier (in Eva86-88, p.193). This may also be the direct background for Aira to say that she did not intend to offend anyone, in case Eva felt hurt by Aira's earlier comments. She also makes it clear that she has no intention of constructing a hierarchy among the participants regarding their spiritual qualities and that she certainly did not mean to put herself at the top of such a hierarchy (Aira93). Following up her earlier statements about reading and attitudes to the canonical scriptures, Aira94 and 95 once more articulate her respect for the Bible in granting the Bible the same status as the Koran. At the same time, she advocates her view that there is a difference between the Bible and the Koran. She relates the difference to the Hagar/Hajar narrative and her earlier statements about these differences and is careful to refer to only that part of the *hadith* narrative that is a Koranic verse. Aira now addresses differences, as Susanne did earlier. An underlying question in this sequence seems to be: How can we talk about differences without offending one another?

- Eva93: But it is important that we can speak frankly, too, that we are not so careful that we can't say what we think, in case we hear something that contradicts our opinions, we must be able to speak ... to be a little tough?
- Aira97: Yes, but when I say that it is the word of God, and when I say obedience to God, that is an absolute for me, whether I understand it or not.
- Aira98: It is one thing that is fundamental for a Muslim, and that is, we believe, that all the prophets came, that God's will shall prevail.
- Aira99: And when we say that it is the will of God that we submit to, that is actually obedience to God.
- Aira100: The other message that all the prophets and the New Testament give is how to improve human relations. These two issues are the main ones and they are present in all religions.
- Aira101: We have the same values, the same message. We might understand it differently and it can arrive at different times ....
- Aira102: For me, all three books are sacred books and come from God. They have come at different times to guide people in various situations.

Eva comments on Aira and Susanne's concern about the danger of offending one another during the discussions by expressing a requirement for openness across different opinions. She worries that openness in the discussions might be at risk if everyone becomes too careful about what they say and do not say. The question arises as to whether they are referring to the same situations. Eva is probably referring to a situation where someone articulates something with which others would disagree, whereas Aira and Susanne are referring to remarks understood to be offensive. Eva argues strongly that the participants – both in the positions of articulators and listeners – should be able to cope with openness, even if some courage is required. Eva's remark seems to be aimed primarily at preventing self-censorship that would threaten the substance of the conversations. Aira and Susanne are more concerned about avoiding offending others unintentionally. These concerns could be regarded as contradictory, but they may also be seen to express a *common* search for openness, at the level of opinion as well as the emotional and responsive level.

Aira's comments (like Aira97) indicate that there are limits to what she wants to put at stake: she states that submission to God and the improvement of human relations constitute the core not only of her own tradition but of "all religions" (Aira100). She wants to uphold these – in her eyes irreplaceable – values, regardless of the mode of communication. Through her

statements she admits a great plurality within the interpretations of core values. This plurality is expressed in temporal and spatial terms, but it shares the confession of one divinity.

- Inger23: I just want to say that there is no point in ... well, it's not pointless but unnecessary to apologize because this is exactly why we are here, and that's why it is important that you brought together people from different countries, everyone has different opinions, and I think it is very interesting to listen to how you interpret.
- Inger24: And I hope that you find it interesting too, how we Christians, or how I, interpret.
- Inger25: And this is what's interesting. If we all said the same things and agreed upon everything then there is nothing ....
- Aira103: I get a little offended if anyone thinks I consider myself to be a better Muslim than anyone else. I am the last person to think that.
- Maria35: There is one other thing. I want to ask if we could meet more often, because when a long time elapses, things fade ... we lack continuity. I don't know how the others feel.

Inger reminds the group that the articulation of difference within the group is an intentional situation, implicitly addressing the researcher who brought the group together. She adds that she finds the differences interesting and that they signify something (Inger23). Against this background, Inger sees no need to apologize for being different. She refers to the Muslim and Christian participants as two groups within the group (Inger24), referring to the Christians as "we" but adds an "I," thus expressing both a collective and an individual identity as a participant.

Aira103 is a personal confession. Aira says openly that she is offended if someone suspects her of feeling superior to others in a religious sense. She does not explicitly claim that this has happened in the group, and by doing so she avoided a possible further dispute on this. Aira addresses the mode of communication and the content as well. The question of emotional concern as part of the communicative process is accentuated more strongly than before.

As the moderator, Maria closes the discussion as well as the meeting by addressing a practical matter. She wants the group to meet more often for the sake of better continuity in the group's communicative process. This remark can be interpreted as a positive sign, as a valuation of what is happening in the group. But it can also be critical to say that the organization of the group's meetings has a direct influence on the communication and the quality of what happens



and that there is room for improvement. There was no time to discuss Maria's suggestion since time was up and everyone had to leave. What she says is a reminder not to underestimate the importance of practicalities, the opportunity to meet and talk face to face when trying to build complex communities of making meaning. The logistics have an impact on the communication.

### *An Attempt to Frame Differences*

The issue of obedience seems to come up as a response to the meaning making regarding the Hagar/Hajar narratives so far as well as exemplifying differences between the Islamic and the Christian tradition. Susanne takes the opportunity to articulate her view by asking for the response of the others. General views of the canonical scriptures within the traditions are woven into the issue. The hypothesis Susanne presents is that the Islamic tradition is more focused on God and obedience to God, whereas the Christian tradition is connected to humanity because of the doctrine of the incarnation. Susanne uses her knowledge of the Christian tradition to establish a possible connection between the incarnation's expression of intimacy between the divine and the human, and the existence of human feelings and imperfect human relations in the Hagar narrative from the Old Testament. Susanne thus turns the exposure of human feelings and relations from being a problem into a strength in her view. With this reasoning she tries to discuss the concept of obedience in Islam as a different way of viewing the relation between humans and God. She exemplifies the relation between humans and God through the obedience of Abraham/Ibrahim in the story from the *hadith* and by referring to the view of canonical scripture in Islam (possibly as represented by some of the Muslim participants in the group). Susanne thus discusses obedience regarding both the human-divine relation and the reader-text relation in Islam through bringing the room for humans and for human flaw into question. The relation between humans' work and divine help is added later as a possible point of division between the two traditions, again based on observations from the Hagar/Hajar narratives. The Lutheran Christian tradition with its focus on divine grace, salvation through Christ because of the incarnation, and the confession of human imperfection as a presupposition for the acknowledgement of God's love can be detected in Susanne's reflections and questions.

The political turn in the discussion broadens the perspective on obedience when Shirin does not stay within the premises established by Susanne (obedience as a theme in the relation between God-humans or reader-text). Shirin establishes a new area for discussing obedience: the relation between people, political leaders, and religion. In Shirin's example from Iran, the relation between the people and the political leaders are intertwined with the other two areas where obedience was described relationally. Shirin reflects on the dangers of obedience to a political leadership that is religiously legitimized and states her own autonomy in her role as a reader of Islamic canonical scripture. Susanne's tradition and Norwegian history provides her

with a reference for political disobedience legitimized by Lutheran doctrinal reflection. This is a positive example from Norway that contrasts with the example given by Shirin from Iran but makes the same point: the combination of political and religious power could create unbearable situations. Susanne does not integrate the difference between the two examples from Iran and Norway into her project of exploring the differences between the Islamic and Christian traditions.

Obedience in Islam is defined by Shirin to mean “obedience to God in difficult situations.” But Shirin exceeds Susanne’s suggested premises for exploring the differences between the Christian and Islamic traditions: she insists that the concept of forgiveness is crucial to Islam and, by doing so, disputes Susanne’s way of conceptualizing differences between the two traditions. Through the way Shirin expresses herself, it seems as if she has some negative presuppositions about how Islam is currently portrayed, which she wants to correct. Susanne may have touched on some of these issues in her attempt to explore the differences.

The discussion on obedience and forgiveness, as an exploration of differences between the Islamic and Christian traditions, becomes a discussion on the question if these notions are constructive tools for analyzing and framing differences between the two traditions. The Muslim participants do not recognize Islam as a religion based primarily on obedience to God or the text of the Koran, although they do agree that a qualified obedience to God exclusively is part of their tradition. But forgiveness, critical discussion about political issues, and the interpretation of the scriptures are also central in Islam in the way they understand and practice their religion. What both Muslim and Christian participants agree on in this discussion is not how to conceptualize differences but that religions should not be without mercy and that mistakes have been made throughout Christian history. On the issue of obedience, religion, and politics, both Susanne and Shirin question any political authority based on religious legitimization.

### ***How Are Differences to be Discussed?***

The mode of communication is addressed again in this discussion, and this time it concentrates on how to avoid offending others and at the same time to feel free to express what one wants to say. Both aims require openness and self-reflexivity. The required, expected, and desired differences among participants in interreligious and intercultural dialogues and encounters raise the question: How are people to relate to existing differences in a way that the emotional pressure on the participants is acceptable to them and still address difficult questions in an open manner?

To return to the philosophical discussions on dialogue, respect for the otherness of the other and appreciation of the dialogue as a place of equality and shared power of definition is

regarded as important. But what do these ideals mean in practical life? And what can we say about the fear of offending someone unintentionally or the fear of being offended by someone?

In this discussion the example given of a potentially offensive speech act is the case in which someone's religious tradition is presented in a way that one does not recognize. To express one's view about the others' religion and/or culture and to discuss differences between one's own tradition and that of the other(s) requires some knowledge and trust in oneself and in the other in order to communicate well. Matters of religious belief such as the interpretation of canonical scriptures and religious experience may be regarded as personal and thus be vulnerable areas with the possibility of causing emotional distress. But the separation of what is public and what is to be regarded as personal or private is culturally dependent. This makes it difficult to navigate in a cross-cultural situation. The ideals of dialogue are, however, to communicate across such borders. Communication is a risky business, where the possibility of misunderstandings always exists. The risk may appear even greater in a complex group. On the other hand, because of the expected and acknowledged differences, the communicative openness may be achieved more easily than in environments where everyone is expected to share similar opinions and background.

Personality and personal attachment plays a role in trustful communication. As Inge Eidsvåg has pointed out, personal issues are sometimes turned into issues related to religious background or cultural belonging, and *vice versa* (Eidsvåg 1997: 230). This can block communication. To identify and address a communicative problem may be needed in those cases to put communication back on track.

How differences are viewed influences how they are communicated. The identification of differences, as either fixed or important to maintain and perhaps defend, represents a view of differences where an effort of bridging the gap is seen as irrelevant or unsuitable. There can still be communication across the gap, but identification across the differences might be difficult to obtain. If differences are viewed as more fluid and perhaps diversified into various categories that are considered fluid as well, the possibility of obtaining an identification and closer communication across religious and cultural gaps would be present to a larger degree.

***Warning: Transreligious Encounters May Affect One's Feelings***

In this discussion about differences, it seems that the participants have different concerns. None of them, however, suggest stopping communication. The opposite happens: it is suggested that the group meet more often. The struggle is about being able to express oneself according to one's intentions, to be able to speak up if one is offended, and to find the delicate balance between frankness and care.



**Part IV:****Situating the Contexts****Readings of 1 Timothy 2:8-15 and Sura 4:34**

## Chapter 6: Making Meaning of Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15

The two texts of Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15 were read and discussed at the fourth and fifth meetings of the group. Some immediate observations of differences between the meetings four and five on the one hand and the former meetings about the Hagar/Hajar texts should be noted. The form of the texts subject to discussion changed from narrative texts to non-narrative, prescriptive texts. The number of participants attending dropped, and the role of the moderators became more active. All these developments influence the meaning-making process, as will be shown. In addition, the participants have become more familiar with one another as well as with the form of the meetings.

Aira (Norwegian-Pakistani background, Sunni Muslim) moderated the fourth meeting, with four participants present, including herself (Shirin, Aira, Inger, and Eva). Inger (Norwegian background, Lutheran Christian) moderated the fifth meeting, which was attended by Aira, Maria, Susanne, and Shirin beside herself.<sup>142</sup> The group had decided that the meetings could proceed as planned with a minimum of two Muslim and two Christian participants attending.<sup>143</sup> The fourth meeting met this requirement exactly, while the fifth ended up with three Christian and two Muslim participants.

Aira decided that the fourth meeting should proceed in a slightly different manner from the previous ones: She suggested that the Christian participants make their comments on the texts first, and then the Muslim participants make theirs. In this way the conversation and discussion became more structured than before, since it divided the contributions from the Christian and Muslim participants.

At the fifth meeting Inger expressed the need to discuss an incident she experienced as connected to the conflict over the Muhammad cartoons<sup>144</sup> that was very intense at that time in Norwegian public debate. The group decided to spend half an hour on this. This implied that the group's original purpose of discussing texts was expanded to cover a current issue from the broader context, a move changing the function of the group for a while. This case may be seen as an example of the dynamic of a transreligious, transcultural encounter as fluid and could change the original agendas and aims when participants experience ownership of the process. This is an expression of a need to situate the group's meetings in the contextual present, in a possibly shared "now," in order to address experiences of cultural and

<sup>142</sup> Fouzia and Rima did not attend any of the remaining meetings, Rima because of health problems and Fouzia because of other obligations. See Chapter 3 for discussions on the participants' attendance and absence (p. 96-98).

<sup>143</sup> This was decided at the first meeting to ensure a minimum of balance in the dialogue and as an attempt to avoid a situation in which the burden of representation was left to one person. See the Chapter 3 for a full presentation of this discussion.

<sup>144</sup> In the winter of 2006 the so-called "Muhammad cartoons" were printed first in *Jyllandsposten*, a Danish newspaper, and then reprinted in the Norwegian newspaper *Magazinet*, causing a major discussion in both Denmark and Norway, as well as demonstrations against the artists, publishers, and Norwegian and Danish governments in many Islamic majority societies.

religious encounters outside the group. The inner space of the group cannot be separated entirely from its contextually situated space because the participants take part in both and move between these spaces. The distinction between the “inner” and the “outer” space of a transreligious, transcultural group is a way of dividing space with no correspondence to people’s lives. The discussion itself displayed feelings and experiences connected to the incident about the cartoons and illustrated how offensive it could be to be the personal target of someone’s anger in a way that felt unfair, how it felt to see significant symbols of one’s own belief and identity ridiculed and violated, and how being a Muslim and a Norwegian in this situation could mean being doubly affected.

The fourth meeting started with reading the texts aloud. Aira asked Shirin to read the koranic text and Eva to read the New Testament text. Like before, a Muslim participant read the text from the Islamic canonical scriptures and a Christian read the text from the Christian canon. The texts were read in Norwegian. The texts below are in the English translation closest to the Norwegian versions:

**The texts: 1 Timothy 2:8-15 (the New Testament)  
and Sura 4:34 (the Koran)**

**1 Timothy 2:8-15:<sup>145</sup>**

8 I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; 9 also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, 10 but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. 11 Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. 12 I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. 13 For Adam was formed first, then Eve; 14 and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. 15 Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

**Sura 4:34:<sup>146</sup>**

Men are in charge of women,<sup>147</sup> because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good

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<sup>145</sup> The text printed in the dissertation is from the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV) of the Bible, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, 1989. The text read and distributed in the group was from the Norwegian *Bibelen*, 1978 edition in *bokmål*, The Norwegian Bible Society.

<sup>146</sup> The text printed in the dissertation is from *The Glorious Qur’an: Text and Explanatory Translation*. Muhammad M. Pickthall, and Marmaduke William Pickthall, Tahrike Tarsile Qur’an, 1996 (first edition 1984). The text read and distributed in the group was from the Norwegian version of the Koran *Koranen*, translated by Einar Berg, Universitetsforlaget, 1980. In the Norwegian version Sura 4:34 is numbered Sura 4:38.

women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded.<sup>148</sup> As for those from whom ye fear rebellion,<sup>149</sup> admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then, if they obey you, seek not a way against them. Lo! Allah is ever High Exalted, Great.

### **Discussion 1 Related to Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15.**

#### **Inger: “Why do I have to read this, in 2006? These texts belong to the past”<sup>150</sup>**

Compared to the Hagar/Hajar narratives, Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15 are short texts and thus the reading was quickly finished. Aira states explicitly that comments should be on both texts but suggests that the comments should focus on one text at a time. She also wants the two Christian participants to comment on both texts first. This structured moderating might be a way to have a more systematic discussion than before and could be taken as a precautionary measure to ensure that both texts are given equal attention. Separating the comments and the commentators into religiously divided sections could concentrate the conversations thematically instead of giving rise to a discussion where new themes or new perspectives are introduced all the time. Some of the discussions on the Hagar/Hajar texts were quite fragmented thematically, and this could be what Aira wants to avoid.

Inger volunteers to start commenting:

Inger26: Well, this is ... the way I see it, both these texts, from the Koran and the New Testament, they are both part of the explanation why women throughout history up until today have been oppressed.

Inger27: And they have been part of the legitimization and reason for men to ... to actually abuse women in different ways. I would say that.

Inger28: So this has ... these are old texts.

*(Laughter among the participants)*

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<sup>147</sup> In the Norwegian version of the Koran that was read in the group, the word for “supporter” is the Norwegian word *bestyrelsesautoritet*. This could be translated as “executive authority” and has different connotations in Norwegian than the word “supporter” has in English. In the later discussion the Arabic word *qiwama* from the Arabic Koran is brought up and discussed.

<sup>148</sup> In the Norwegian version of the Koran, this is expressed as “(de skal) bevare det som er hemmelig, fordi Gud ønsker det bevart,” which in English would be “they shall protect what is secret because God wants it to be protected.”

<sup>149</sup> In the Norwegian version of the Koran “rebellion” is the Norwegian word *oppsetsighet*, which could be translated as ill-will, insubordination, or disobedience.

<sup>150</sup> Certain subheadings in this chapter are selected from the participants’ statements in the transcribed texts.



- Inger29: I get really angry when I read them, both of them, and I think: Why do I have to read this, in 2006, these texts belong to the past.
- Inger30: But still, they are part of our background, and these texts still shape the situation of women up until today.
- Inger31: So this is my spontaneous ... or the first thing I want to say. But of course, there are other things one can say too.

Inger describes her reaction when reading the texts as “anger” (Inger29). Based on this anger, and by describing the texts as outdated, she asks why she has to read them. She questions primarily the significance of *reading* the texts, not the meaning of the texts themselves. Inger partly answers her own question in Inger30, where the texts are acknowledged as part of “our background,” and thus changes meaning from being mere reminiscences of a distant past to becoming part of the present – still influencing the situation of women. Based on the premises that it is important to know one’s background and that these texts still represent an ethical challenge, Inger constructs an answer to her own question of “Why read them?”

But Inger’s question may not be merely rhetorical. There can be an existential aspect as well, intertwining with the rhetorical aspect. If that is the case, the question is not fully answered by Inger’s own reply, since this still does not give any answer to the question of how to relate to the texts in the present and how – or if – Inger will relate to the texts as a contemporary reader. In her analysis given above, women lack agency and are not seen as acting subjects. Her question of “why read them,” however, constructs a subject position toward the text for herself as interpreter. For Inger, this positioning begins with investigating the significance of *reading* the texts rather than by starting to interpret the texts themselves.

Inger26-27 states that the oppression of women is an undisputable fact, happening in the past and present, both “then” and “now.” She does not situate the oppression contextually and uses temporal expressions to show the extensiveness of the oppression of women. This might express a spatial reference for her as well, implying that the locations are “everywhere.” She does not specify the basis on which she makes her review of the abuse and oppression of women. Inger seems to consider this to be self-evident for everyone present.

Inger relates to both texts in her first comments. She starts by identifying a relation between the texts’ reception history and the situation of women. Her analysis of this relation is that the texts are both an explanation for the oppression of women and a legitimization of this oppression. She does, however open the way up for the inclusion of elements other than the texts to explain the legitimization and origination of the oppression of women by stating that the texts are only one part of the total picture. She does not elaborate on how she believes the texts

interacted with their cultural, social, and political contexts to construct oppressive situations for women, but she does suggest that men have been or are the agents of oppression.

Crucial questions to take her reasoning further are: What roles have the texts played in introducing and delivering premises for the oppression of women, and what are the roles of socially and culturally constructed gendered hierarchies in this respect? Is there any significance in establishing “text” and “context” as two different categories, with separate roles in the construction of a gendered hierarchy, if the texts are intimately intertwined with the cultural and social contextual practices of oppression? And what is the role and responsibility of the male and female readers of the texts as social agents?

To analyze the relation between texts, contexts, and agency in order to find the origins of a gendered hierarchy is a complex task. Inger’s point is to stress the connection and to state that text, context, and agency interact in constructing a social structure where women are oppressed. When she portrays men as the agents of the oppression of women (Inger27), she may be pointing to men as readers and interpreters of the texts, but she is also possibly pointing to men as social agents upholding cultural and social systems that interact with the texts. In addition, Inger frames men as the actual oppressors and abusers of women. Women stay in the background as inactive throughout Inger’s comments. Men relate to the texts, and women simply face the consequences of this.

In the middle of Inger’s contribution above, everyone burst into laughter. Laughter erupts suddenly three times within the first half hour of the meeting. How is this laughter to be interpreted? What does it express? Nobody comments directly on the laughter; it just happens. What causes the laughter? The texts themselves are not particularly amusing. The laughter does not seem to be related directly to the texts but rather to comments on the texts. The comments preceding the outbursts of laughter seem to be received as critical statements about the texts (as in Inger28) or, in one case, a critical statement about Paul as the alleged author of the text from the New Testament. One of the comments causing laughter is a comment including Sura 4:34. It is either Inger or Eva who make the comments that are followed by laughter in this discussion.

Laughter in a communicative situation may express relief of tension or a reaction of surprise to a discrepancy that has been suddenly revealed, if not simply amusement. Laughter can be seen as an expression of distance, such as irony, or a confirming act to ensure that a controversial statement has been accepted. What is interesting is that there have not been many such sudden outbreaks of laughter in the group before they encountered the texts of Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15.<sup>151</sup> Perhaps the laughter provided a balancing of the texts’ contents and

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<sup>151</sup> There was an outburst of laughter in the group when Eva claimed that the Hagar/Hajar narratives had to have been narrated/written by male authors/narrators in Discussion 2 about these narratives (Eva51, p. 163).

was needed as a confirmation of a community between the readers in front of these texts because of a challenging interpretative situation?

Inger32: That text from Timothy, then we are into the New Testament, this is after the time of Jesus, and even then, one is actually saying things like this.

Inger33: But it is not Jesus who says these things, it is Paul, and one has to take Paul with a pinch of salt.

The relation between texts from the Old and New Testament were commented on occasionally in the discussions on the Hagar/Hajar narratives, and one of the hermeneutical strategies used by the Christian participants in making meaning of the Hagar narrative was to establish an epistemological barrier between the two parts of the Bible, where the New Testament was given an epistemologically and hermeneutically privileged position.

Inger now addresses the question of intrascriptural hierarchical authority within the New Testament. The question is framed as Paul's authority over against that of Jesus. Inger introduces a new hermeneutical distinction in the New Testament texts (Inger32-33). This distinction is between alleged sayings of Jesus and alleged sayings of Paul. She claims that the authority of the alleged sayings of Jesus overrules the alleged sayings of Paul. Inger comments directly on Paul's authority – he has to be “taken with a pinch of salt” – and says that the one speaking here is “not Jesus” (Inger33). Inger thus establishes a center for the interpretation of the New Testament, which are the alleged sayings of Jesus. The Christ-centered hermeneutical principle is used in Lutheran hermeneutics both as a general principle and as a *critical* principle of interpretation (Ulstein 2006: 110-111, 113). Classical Lutheran hermeneutics, however, also rests on an emphasis on apostolic authority.<sup>152</sup> Thus Inger's reasoning may be related more to Christian liberal theology where the sayings of Jesus and those of Paul are viewed as being in conflict and preference is given to the sayings of Jesus.<sup>153</sup>

<sup>152</sup> The authority of the apostles in Lutheran hermeneutics is grounded in their being the first witnesses to Jesus Christ not in an authoritative position as such. Luther seems to acknowledge criticism of the apostles if they compromise what he held to be Jesus' message. But their credibility as such, being the crucial witnesses to Jesus' message, should be retained (Ulstein 2006: 112-113).

<sup>153</sup> Gerd Theissen explains the contribution by Rudolf Bultmann to biblical hermeneutics as “identifying a core in the New Testament: the proclamation of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus, which transforms believers through faith as they die and rise with Christ. Life before and after this transformation is interpreted in existentialist categories of authentic and inauthentic experience” (Theissen 2007: 26-27). According to Theissen, this leads to a dismissal of the ethical imperatives derived from the Bible because the biblical *kerygma* was to be interpreted only in an existentialist way. Theissen claims this view to be “Protestant to the core” (Theissen 2007: 27) and that this approach may imply a reductionist and individualist way of biblical interpretation (Theissen 2007: 27). European Christian theologians following Bultmann re-vitalized the focus on Jesus as the historical Jesus starting in the first half of the 1900s. This was based on the quest for the origins of the Christian message and to explore the particularity of the Christian tradition (Henriksen 2006: 206).

- Inger34: But at least he makes some demands on the male in the first sentence: he should be, he should have clean hands and be “without anger and argument.” So there are some requirements for how this male should behave.
- Inger35: And perhaps if the male himself did not live properly, he might not be granted the right to decide over the female. At least we can hope that this is the case.
- Inger36: And we are to be invisible; we are not supposed to dress up, as it says in the New Testament,
- Inger37: although it is nicely said that our good deeds will be to our credit.
- Inger38: That is ... well ... it should be to the credit of all people, not only women.
- Inger39: And then we are asked to be silent and submit ourselves.
- Inger40: And luckily enough, when it says that “I do not permit a woman to teach” – this means that she should be silent – it is Paul who is saying that.
- Inger41: And then I think: What did Jesus say about the position of women? And I can’t remember. It means that I have to look it up or someone has to tell me.
- Inger42: But this is said by Paul, and we can criticize him.

In approaching the text from 1 Timothy Inger evaluates the statements in the text from the perspective of gender equality. That the text makes demands on men as well as on women is evaluated positively, but all the demands directed exclusively to women are judged negatively. In verse 8, however, the commandments are directed to men only, but Inger still evaluates this positively. The reason may be that the content of this verse (“pray with holy hands, without anger and argument,” 1 Timothy 2:8) is of a different character than the commandments addressed to women (to learn in silence, not to teach or to have authority over men, 1 Timothy 2:11-12). Although gender exclusive, 1 Timothy 2:8 does not imply gendered restrictions on specific acts but offers a prescription of how an act (of prayer) should be performed. Inger summarizes the text’s commandments for women as openly gendered restrictions on activity.

The question of Paul’s authority versus Jesus’ authority is addressed again. Inger expresses relief about this text being a statement by Paul and not one by Jesus (Inger40) because Paul represents a possible object for criticism. It seems that, for Inger, this would have been a more difficult approach to take with respect to the sayings of Jesus (Inger40 and 42). Inger’s relation to the text thus seems to be framed by the view that Paul is behind the message of the text as a real person and that this notion helps her in making meaning of that text. Scholarly discussions about authors and editions of the New Testament text is beyond the scope of the discussion, and Inger needs to use knowledge that is accessible in order to make meaning. Inger continues her positioning as a subject toward the text from 1 Timothy. She now moves on to

make meaning of the text, even though she may not have found a satisfactory answer to her first question “Why read it?” The tool she uses in her interpretation is the value of gender equality, on the basis of which she criticizes the text, and evaluates Paul. She legitimizes her criticism of both the text and Paul through correlating a hermeneutical principle of interpreting the Bible from a center: the narrated messages of Jesus. She does not refer explicitly to a Lutheran hermeneutics: the two pillars of her interpretation are narratives about Jesus, and gender equality. Inger puts both the text and Paul in what she regards to be their place and herself in a place as the interpreter and evaluator, assuming an agency.

In Inger41, however, she indicates a problem: she does not know what Jesus said about the position of women. She knows, after reading the text from 1 Timothy, what she does not accept but not what Jesus, a much more authoritative figure for her, said about the position of women. She states that this is knowledge she needs to seek but does not have at that time. To recognize a need and admit a lack of knowledge about one’s own tradition can contribute to creating interaction with others. It may result in others bringing their own knowledge – or lack of knowledge – to the table or create a common search for knowledge. In addition, the admission of a need can create an example so that others are empowered to admit *their* possible needs in the conversation.

- Inger43:       And then they give the reasons for why women should be subordinate, and that is because they believe that Adam was created first, although there is nothing in biology that suggests this, as far as I know,
- Inger44:       But then that he did not let himself be tempted, it was this apple that ... it was the woman who let herself be tempted.
- Inger45:       In a way, these are two things: One should behave properly, and the man was created first, and that is in a way the reason why the man is in a special position to be in charge over the woman.
- Inger46:       But then, there is something here that I find to be completely unchristian, in verse 15 it says: “But she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.”
- Inger47:       Jesus never said anything about being saved through one’s childbearing.
- Inger48:       It is ... but perhaps it is the thought that you have to go through suffering to be set free, but this is not Christian, the way I see it, the way it is written in this text.

Inger engages in a critical examination of the validity of the arguments about why women should be subordinate to men. The text’s argument that Adam (as a representative of men) was created before Eve (as a representative of women) should legitimize female subordination is

dismissed by Inger with reference to biology. Inger's use of biology in making meaning may seem surprising, but she is using references from Norwegian "common knowledge," which includes biology. Perhaps Inger's view of the New Testament text is that it should be interpreted like any other text, which would entail that it be consistent with other knowledge systems.

The second argument in the text for women's subordination, i.e. that the gendered hierarchy is a consequence of the Fall of Humankind, where 1 Timothy 2:13-14 interprets the narrative taken from in the Old Testament book of Genesis, is not commented upon. Inger moves on to what she categorizes as a "completely unchristian" statement (Inger46). Now Inger is back in reasoning hermeneutics within Christian theology, and leaves the common knowledge, biological argument aside. The claim that a statement in a text from the New Testament is "unchristian" is based on a perception that the fact that the text is included in the New Testament in the Christian canon is not enough in itself to guarantee its content as "Christian" for Inger. Her reasoning at this point is analogous to Lutheran hermeneutics, where the content of the scriptures has to be critically evaluated from the perspective of the hermeneutical center.

Inger's argument for the dismissal of any causal link between women's salvation and childbearing and the reason for categorizing it as "unchristian," comes in Inger47. She does not display any knowledge about what Jesus said concerning women's salvation in the New Testament, or at least about what Jesus did not say. Again, the distinction between the authority of Paul's sayings and that of Jesus' is made in line with the hermeneutics of center and periphery.

Inger48 shows, however, that Inger still makes an attempt to understand the text on "women's salvation through childbirth" in a way that might make meaning in the Christian tradition. The move she makes is to address salvation through suffering as a general concept that includes both women and men and thus includes painful experiences other than just giving birth. Inger evaluates even this more general concept of salvation through suffering, however, as "not Christian."

Her making meaning of the text from 1 Timothy thus makes Inger dispute the connection between suffering and divine salvation in the Christian tradition – in a broader perspective that is gender inclusive. The New Testament narratives of the suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ constitute a pillar in traditional Christian confessions of faith. Inger's view could challenge parts of the Christian tradition where identification with Jesus' sufferings is seen to be essential for the pious Christian believer (Bowker 1995: 94-95). Inger has not addressed the case of Jesus' sufferings, but her comments might be rephrased into these questions to elaborate the question of the connection between suffering and salvation: Is the alleged suffering required for divine salvation limited to the sufferings of Jesus, or does it include all Christian believers? And if it does include all, is this suffering gender distributed, so that there is one kind of suffering for

men and another for women? Or, is suffering an exclusive requirement for women, limited to giving birth?

Inger's view of the concept of divine salvation is not presented, but *salvation* would imply something positive, however she views it – and she claims that the access to it should *not* be gendered and that human suffering should not be required to obtain it.

Eva94: I must say that I agree with what you have said, generally speaking.

Eva95: And we must take Paul for what he was; he was not Christ.

Eva96: He ... he did not even know Christ. But, of course, he is an apostle, and he has said a lot of nice things, some of the nicest in the Bible ... for instance, in 1 Corinthians 13:1, about love.

Eva97: But here, it seems as if he was having a bad day.

*(Laughter among the participants)*

Aira104: Well said. That is possible to understand.

Eva98: But then, this is not consistent with what else is said about Paul, that he had female co-workers, who traveled around talking to congregations, like Priscilla, for instance.

Eva99: So this is not consistent with what we know was practiced, and that makes me think that this was contextual, what he said here.

Eva100: It could have been some particular women he wanted to put in their place, I believe.

Eva continues the critical line toward Paul, as the assumed source of the messages in 1 Timothy 2:8-15. She follows up with a further argument to weaken Paul's authority, probably aiming at weakening the authority of this text. Eva follows the line of Inger's argument, introducing a hermeneutical distinction between the authority of Jesus' sayings *versus* Paul's sayings (Eva95). The new argument introduced by Eva to weaken Paul's authority is that Paul "did not even know Christ" (Eva96). Eva thus points to a difference between the authority of the apostle Paul and the other apostles who, according to the Christian tradition, gained authority through their personal interaction with Jesus Christ according to the New Testament texts.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> The argument that Paul was not himself an eyewitness of Jesus' words and deeds was activated in the so-called "Jesus-Paul debate" referred to earlier (Patterson 1991: 23).

Eva does not, however, deprive Paul of the status as an apostle, and she starts to defend him with reference to other alleged Pauline writings in the New Testament that she evaluates positively. These other texts are viewed as more central. A hermeneutical principle in the Lutheran tradition is that the Bible is its own interpreter (Ulstein 2006: 100). This may remind one of the Islamic concept of *naskh*.<sup>155</sup> In Eva98-99 Eva argues that the message about the subjugation of women and the prohibition of female teachers contradicted Paul's own practice, as described elsewhere in the Pauline writings in the New Testament. Eva thus gives an interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:8-15 as a text that is not representative of Paul's teaching on women's roles. Suggesting that this text may be Paul's response to a specific situation and to specifically located women (Eva100), Eva makes this text particular and disclaims any universal message that may be derived from the text.

The connection Eva makes between the authority of the text and the authority of the (assumed) author of the text is that the text's authority rests on the authority of the (assumed) author. This way of making meaning of texts, i.e. that the author bears the meaning as well as the authority of the text, may be called an author-focused hermeneutics. This implies that the readers need to understand the author in order to understand the text.<sup>156</sup>

Eva's statement about "Paul having a bad day" (Eva97) reminds us of Inger's earlier statement (Inger8). The general amusement in response to this and Aira's voiced approval of Eva's comment (Aira104) indicates that no one seems to be offended by this way of speaking about Paul.

Eva, however, seems to view the figure of Paul differently from Inger, even if she says that she agrees with what Inger says about this text. Eva's argument is that this text has to be read as an exception within the writings credited to Paul in the New Testament. There is a difference between taking someone with "a pinch of salt" in general and excusing someone for "having a bad day." Whereas Inger constructs an autonomous reader's role for herself and evaluates the text on the basis of gender equality and gives Jesus higher authority than Paul, Eva looks for a different Paul from the one she sees in this text and finds him.

Eva101:           And he ... these things about the men, that is fair enough, but then it is the things about women, that they should not dress up, that they should not have braided

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<sup>155</sup> The concept of *naskh* in koranic exegesis is a "Theoretical tool used to resolve contradictions in Quranic verses, hadith literature, tafsir [...] and usul al-fiqh [...] whereby later verses (or reports or decisions) abrogate earlier ones. Based on Quranic verse (2:106) according to which God occasionally replaces older verses with better ones." (Esposito 2003: 230)

<sup>156</sup> Reading and making meaning of koranic texts do not have to deal with the question of the author in the same way, as I discussed in Chapter 2.



- hair or gold jewelry, no pearls and expensive clothes, and so on, that is understandable.
- Eva102: Because one should share, right, the first Christians, if they possessed expensive jewelry, they were to sell that jewelry and share with everyone in the congregation. I think that's perfectly fine. Their pride should be good deeds, as "proper for women who profess reverence to God." That's all fine.
- Eva103: But: "A woman should be silent" – that is not fine. That she should submit – that is not fine at all.
- Eva104: But Paul was supposed to make the message of Jesus work in the Roman empire, wasn't he? It could not make too much fuss and trouble, and these male women who had entered into ... who had been granted the status of a person and whatever, they might have become a bit unmanageable.
- Eva105: Then he says: "I permit no woman to teach." Well, that must be put to his account. Not "to have authority over man, she is to keep silent." Well, this is not consistent with what Paul says in other places.
- Eva106: Then he says something that is quite absurd, actually. That Adam was created before Eve. But this is ... there are two narratives of creation in the Bible, and they are very different. I like the first one, the first narrative of creation.
- Eva107: The next one, where Eve is created from Adam's rib, it's a wonderful legend, but it is ... rather unfortunate. So I use the first one.
- Eva108: "And Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor." Yes, there it is, we can discuss with Paul on this matter. Because he, too, gladly ate of the apple, this Adam guy. It's just that he had someone to blame for the whole thing.
- Eva109: So, I think Adam was really being cowardly; he could have said something that should happen to Adam because he was such a coward.
- Eva110: And then, that she will be saved through childbirth, as you say, it is very weird that it says this, and besides Paul recommends staying unmarried. Very strange. It is completely strange.
- Eva111: "Provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty." I guess we can say that what is really meant here is that women should behave properly, in order to prevent trouble around them, that if they dress up and start preaching to congregations and start governing the men and things like that, that might arouse trouble in the congregations. Perhaps that is what he wanted to prevent.

Eva112: But I don't think that this text has anything to say to us today. It is a kind of text that ... what did Luther say... "Do not make this my stumbling block." Get on with it, and step over that rock.

Eva, as Inger did earlier, is evaluating the content based on how it fits into an ideal of gender equality, which would imply equal commandments and requirements for men and women. But, unlike Inger, she includes, in the act of making meaning, situating the text within its historical context and her tool is to use her knowledge from her studies of Christian theology.

Eva's includes a reflection on the commandment about modest dress among women (1 Timothy 2:9), and she draws a link to the message of another New Testament text, where the issue of shared wealth among the Christians is addressed (Eva102).<sup>157</sup> Eva transforms the question of how women should dress in 1 Timothy 2 into an ethical question of the distribution of goods.

Then, Eva turns critically to the text's content. She characterizes the argument of creation used to legitimize female subjugation as "quite absurd" (Eva106). Eva calls the second story of the creation of Eve from Adam's rib, to which 1 Timothy 2 refers, "a wonderful [but unfortunate] legend." She accepts the narrative as such but not for this use.

The most substantial criticism is directed, however, toward the other premise for female subjugation in the text, namely the role of Eve in the narrative of the Fall of Humankind in Genesis. Eva suggests that Adam and Eve sharing the blame would be fair<sup>158</sup> but accuses Adam further of acting cowardly because he puts the blame on his female partner when confronted by God in the narrative. Eva suggests a "discussion with Paul" on the interpretation of blame on the basis of this narrative. Thus, she articulates a quest for critical interaction with the Pauline text, since Paul as a person is obviously out of reach. Eva, just as Inger did earlier, is now positioning herself as an interpreting subject toward Paul or, rather, the Pauline text. But Inger constructs herself as an interpreter who evaluates Paul and the Pauline text by placing the text in the category "old" and by saying that Paul had "to be taken with a pinch of salt," thus establishing herself as the interpretative authority in the relationship situated in the "now." Eva, however, seems to be interested in a different kind of interaction with the text: she uses her knowledge of Christian theology and tradition to situate the text in its historical, particular context. This does not imply that she is a less critical reader.

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<sup>157</sup>The text to which she is referring is probably Acts 2:44-45 and 4:34 in the New Testament.

<sup>158</sup>This is the general view in the Islamic version and interpretation of the narrative of the Fall. Moreover, the classical Christian interpretation that the woman was the main transgressor is used by some Muslim feminists to claim that Christianity is more oppressive toward women than Islam is (Hassan 1987).

Eva105 and Eva110 are addressing concretely what Eva perceives to be an inconsistency between the statements in 1 Timothy and other Pauline writings, following up the hermeneutical principle of interpreting New Testament Pauline texts by juxtaposing them. She points out that women are told to be silent in this particular text, whereas Pauline writings elsewhere in the New Testament do allow women to speak. And whereas women are told here that they will be saved only through childbirth, in other texts Paul explicitly advises men and women not to marry. To imagine that Pauline texts would encourage women to have children without being married seems unlikely to Eva.<sup>159</sup>

Eva104 and Eva112 represent the two different strategies for how Eva makes meaning of the text: One is the strategy of situated explanation and one that of evaluation. In Eva104 she continues to provide explanations of the text, and her explanation here is that the text was supposed to function as a guide for the Christian community (and the women in particular) on how to behave without offending other people in their broader social context. Eva's expression "male women" (Eva104) suggests a mix of gender roles by women in this particular community as a possible destabilizing factor in their social context. According to Eva, this behavior could have been motivated by their new dignity as humans when becoming part of the Christian community.

No matter how eager her attempt to defend the Pauline texts through twisting a positive meaning out of 1 Timothy 2:8-15, and despite her hermeneutical work in constructing a broader perspective of the Pauline texts and marginalizing this particular text in the general frame Eva112 does, however, entirely dismiss the possibility that this text could represent any value "today." And not only does Eva find 1 Timothy 2:8-15 to be of no value, she also claims that this text has a *negative* value and warns that it could cause problems as a "stumbling block." She refers to herself as someone who would simply "step over it." Eva's theological education seems to have provided her with the tools to make a qualified critical interpretation of 1 Timothy. This does not, however, prevent her from dismissing the message of the text, just like Inger does. The difference between their respective reasoning leading to the dismissal of the text is that Eva situates the text historically, and she is not ready to dismiss the Pauline texts altogether on the basis of the text from 1 Timothy alone.

Aira105: We can proceed to the other one.

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<sup>159</sup> Precisely this point has been made by New Testament scholars to argue that Paul is not the author of the text in 1 Timothy. Possible motivations behind still claiming Paul to be the author were discussed in a paper at the SBL (Society of Biblical Literature) Annual Meeting of 2007 (Kartzow and Solevåg 2007), Kartzow and Solevåg suggest that this is done to strengthen the authority of 1 Timothy and that a certain conservative agenda may be behind this, since mainstream (and feminist) New Testament researchers dismiss Paul's authorship (Kartzow and Solevåg 2007: 4).

Inger49: Yes. The text from the Koran is not any better.

*(Laughter among the participants)*

Inger evaluates both texts negatively. This is approved by shared laughter, which could indicate approval or surprise over Inger's statement about the koranic text, or it may be an expression of distance or resistance to both. The text from the New Testament has now been evaluated critically and rejected as a text of authority by the two Christian participants present, and this exercise of self-criticism on behalf of their canonical scriptures may have influenced all. The next text on which they both will comment is Sura 4:34, and perhaps the laughter contains a certain anxiety as well, felt by the Muslim participants in the group: What will happen when Eva and Inger start commenting on the Koran?

Inger50: I must say ... I think it is a bit difficult to understand too.

Inger51: I cannot see that any reason is given why the man should be put in this position of authority over the woman. It's just like ... it's like, this is just the way it is. You just assert it, kind of.

Inger52: It only says that "Men are in charge of the women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other" by the fact that God has given one more than the other. So something was not given to all, just to some of them? And "because they spend of their property for the support of women." Well, I then think about expenses, that they have the responsibility of maintaining a family, the fact that they have this responsibility gives them this authority.

Inger53: But what ... I don't understand, it would have been interesting if any of you had any thoughts about what men could ... what kind of qualities men have that they are given this position.

Inger54: And then it comes again: "good women are the obedient" and "guarding in secret what Allah hath guarded." What kind of secret is it? What is it that is a secret for us that men don't know about? I put a question mark here.

Inger starts by showing a questioning attitude. Her questions are posed to the text, but she articulates them in a way that invites her fellow participants to answer or to co-reflect. This provides an opening for a conversational space around Sura 4:34. This text belongs to the other tradition for Inger, and this seems to shape her attitude in a more questioning direction. When she commented on the New Testament text, her way of expressing herself was more confident and openly critical. The role she constructs for herself as a reader of the text of the other seems

different – not perhaps in how she constructs her own role as an autonomous subject toward the text but in how she involves the Muslim participants in her own making of meaning as co-readers and interpreters through questions.

Inger asks why it seems “natural” to put men in authority over women. She evaluates this text from a perspective of gender equality, just as she did the New Testament text. Inger argues that she does not find the argument in the koranic text for saying that men should be in charge of women convincing. This makes her ask for further explanation from the other participants, instead of dismissing the text right away.

- Inger55:       And then there is this section that I find ... If I understand it correctly, I think it is terrible. It says: “As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them.” Scourge them, that means that you beat them or whip them.
- Inger56:       And here, the women haven’t even been disobedient, it is only something one fears; you fear that it will happen.
- Inger57:       And then they should be put to bed, and then beaten, if I read this correctly. I don’t know any other way to do this. I am reading this literally now.
- Inger58:       But then, if it turns out that they become obedient after a while in bed, then one should “not seek a way against them.”
- Inger59:       I don’t understand these points that I have mentioned: what kind of qualities the man has that gives him the right to rule over the woman, what kind of secrets women should keep for themselves, I wonder what that is, and this point that you don’t only have the right to punish if one is disobedient, I interpret that word as resisting, the opposite of being obedient, if one is disobedient. To fear that someone is going to be disobedient is enough to take measures against the women.
- Inger60:       So, reading this text makes me sad. I would rather ... if anyone can read it in a different way, it would be really good.

What Inger finds most problematic to relate to in the Koranic text are the words about a husband’s right to scourge the wife. Inger questions the arrangement of a gendered hierarchy within a marriage in which the man rules over the woman, just as she questioned the gender hierarchy in social settings in the New Testament text. Her moral evaluations are similar in both cases.

But even if Inger is strong in her criticism of the koranic text, she hedges her critique by questions using verbal signals: she does not know if she is reading it “correctly” (Inger55) and expresses a wish for someone to read the text in a “different way” (Inger60).

Inger did not search a great deal for ways to “rescue” the New Testament text but used it as a way to establish her own authority to interpret and evaluate it and later dismiss it. She obviously has a different stance toward the text from 1 Timothy than she does toward the text from Sura 4:34 – perhaps not as a reader but with respect to the authority she claims in relation to the text. The New Testament text is a part of her own tradition; most probably she felt she could criticize it with more authority. The koranic text, on the other hand, is part of someone else’s religious tradition. This “someone” is present in the room – and has not yet commented on the texts.

Inger’s shift between interpretative stances may be motivated either by the wish to show respect to a tradition that she does not know as well as her own, of the desire to pay respect to the other as present in person, or because of insecurity about which position to take – or all three at the same time. If one does not know the position of the others toward the text of their tradition, criticism of their text may also influence further mutual communication.

Inger states that both texts make her “angry” (Inger29), but Sura 4:34 from the Koran also makes her “sad” (Inger60).

Eva113: This is one of the most notorious *suras*, isn’t it?

Shirin78: What?

Eva114: The most notorious, the one Christians react to most strongly.

Shirin79: Yes. Muslims too.

Eva reveals a certain pre-knowledge of the existence of Sura 4:34, stated in the way one would report hearing a bad rumor. To call a *sura* in the Koran “notorious” is a strong judgmental act, but she poses it as a question, rather than as a statement about the text, and thus invites the others into a discussion. Eva generalizes her view to include “Christians” (Eva114). She used this way of argumentation earlier in the project, making general claims on behalf of all Christian believers (Eva3, p. 123; Eva20, p. 125). Shirin, in particular, reacted to this, and expressed a wish to avoid such general claims on behalf of traditions, advising everyone to limit herself to speaking for herself as an individual (Shirin5-7, p. 127). In this section, however, Shirin does not

stop Eva from making a general claim on behalf of Christians. Instead, Shirin expresses her unconditional agreement with Eva – on behalf of all Muslims.

The dynamics between Eva and Shirin on the first critical evaluation of Sura 4:34 shows a different kind of interaction than previously. From a more apologetic mode of communication in earlier discussions, they now seem to agree on categorizing this *sura* as “notorious.” This agreement could be caused by either a shift in their attitude toward each other’s stances in general or a spontaneous and shared response to Sura 4:34. The following discussion on Sura 4:34 will make it possible to see if the interpretative community occurring here between Eva and Shirin will manifest itself in other ways as well.

Eva115:           And it is ... if you take the worst part here, that about beating, put them to bed and beat them,<sup>160</sup> it is illegal.

Eva116:           It is against Norwegian law. It is completely prohibited in Norway.

Eva’s reference to Norwegian law introduces a possible conflict: What happens if a koranic text conflicts with Norwegian law? Eva’s underlying view seems to be that Norwegian law would automatically overrule the authority of the Koran if they conflict. Eva did not, however, refer to Norwegian law when she dealt with the text from the New Testament, even if the content of 1 Timothy 2:8-15 could be said to conflict with Norwegian law as well – the law on gender equality, for instance.

Eva’s different ways of talking about the two texts with regard to Norwegian law might be caused by judging physical violence against women to be a worse violation of Norwegian law than having them keep silent in a congregation. But it may also be that Eva regards the New Testament text as peripheral to the Norwegian Christian tradition, allegedly stripped of its previous authority through many years of the adaptation of the Christian tradition (as represented in Norway) to the emerging value of gender equality as a dominating social norm. Possible conflicts between the Koran and Norwegian law, on the other hand, are extensively debated in the Norwegian public, mostly by critics of Islam but also by Muslims in Norway themselves.<sup>161</sup> This could be the contextual reason why Eva introduces Norwegian law in making meaning of the koranic text. Eva does not really explore the relation between Norwegian law and the koranic text hermeneutically and contextually; she simply states that if a man beats his wife in real life in Norway, he would be violating Norwegian law. She could have referred to human rights

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<sup>160</sup> Eva is paraphrasing the Norwegian version of Sura 4:34: “send dem til sengs, og gi dem stryk.”

<sup>161</sup> Cf. for instance the website islam.no on this issue: “The Koran or the Norwegian legislation?” by Basim Ghozlan, <http://www.islam.no/page1101312882.aspx>. [accessed 23 June 2010].

discourses more generally, but her focus on Norwegian law might serve to underline that her perspective of the primary context of making meaning is Norwegian society.

Eva117: That men have authority over women because God has given some more than others, and their expenses, then God has kind of equipped them with something<sup>162</sup> ... then I almost start thinking about genitals. And I think ....

Inger61: It's not all; it is just some of them, remember?

Eva118: I was thinking in relation to humans in general; perhaps I was wrong, then.

Inger62: I thought about men and differences between men.

Aira106: No, not exactly. We can ....

Eva119: I thought, I mean, as humans, some of you ... those humans being men, that they ....

Aira107: It's about humans in general; it's on humans in general.

The reference to a physical gender distinction in Eva34, where Eva tries to figure out what the different “equipment” of the genders is in reference to Sura 4:34, is a way to talk about gender as *body* that has been almost absent from the discussions throughout the process. Previous discussions contain reflections on human situations where physical needs are addressed as crucial (Discussion 2 related to the Hagar/Hajar narratives), references to motherhood, and giving birth. But in general, talk about gender and gendered differences relates to gendered bodies only to a small extent.<sup>163</sup> According to Aira, however, Sura 4:34 does not refer to physical gender differences (Aira106).

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<sup>162</sup> Eva is referring to the Norwegian version of the Koran (Berg 1980): “det Han har utstyrt noen av dere med fremfor andre”, which translated directly into English would be “what He has equipped some of you with before others.”

<sup>163</sup> The discussion in this sequence between Eva, Inger, and Aira is based on how Sura 4:34 is phrased in the Norwegian version of the Koran that was read at the meetings.



- Eva120: I think ... I think that men have authority over women because of what they have been equipped with,<sup>164</sup> then I believe that is about men in general.
- Eva121: It is a mystery and really strange, isn't it? And because of their expenses ... this is not the case anymore because women in Norway bear as much of the expense as men do.
- Eva122: So, we can say that this belongs to a different time; this is not ... it is not of any use in Norway, it is not ... it cannot work in our world.
- Eva123: Because we would rather tell women this ... many women make more money than men, lots of women support their families financially, and would this mean that we should say that it was the women that have authority over men? Because of the expenses they have?
- Eva124: But we don't want that, we don't want women to rule over others. Nobody should be ruled over; every adult human being has to, has to follow his or her own free will.
- Eva125: And that is why ... yes. So the good women should be obedient and guard what is secretive. Yes. I am starting to think about sexuality again. Well, I don't know. "Because God wants the secrets to be kept."<sup>165</sup>
- Eva126: If you fear disobedience you should admonish them .... Well. A man should admonish a woman .... We react negatively to that attitude. You can admonish children but not another adult.
- Eva127: And, put them to bed? That is, what can I say, foolish parents can send their children to bed as a punishment, but ... yes.
- Eva128: "If they obey you, seek not a way against them"... Oh, really! They should not pursue the case if they obey!
- Eva129: "Allah is ever high exalted, great." Yes. No. Yes, this is bad.

Eva does not respond further to Aira's remarks that the divine "equipping" in Sura 4:34 is not physical gender (Aira107). She continues to base her reflection on the divine equipment of men over women so as to grant males authority (Eva120). Eva strongly denies that a gendered pattern of expenses that she infers from the koranic text is consistent with how covering a

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<sup>164</sup> In the Norwegian version of the Koran which was read in the group (Berg 1980) the phrase "equipped with" ("utstyrt med") is used for "given to" in the English version printed in the dissertation (Thomas Cleary 2004).

<sup>165</sup> This paraphrases the Norwegian version (Berg 1980), where it says: "Derfor skal rettskafne kvinner være lydige og bevare det som er hemmelig, fordi Gud ønsker det bevart." In English translation: "This is why righteous women should be obedient and protect what is secretive, because God wants it to be protected."

family's expenses in today's Norway is organized (Eva123). The argumentation in Eva123-124 tests the logical reasoning in the text, and perhaps considers Aira's suggestion: If authority is linked to earning money and having expenses, will the wife have the authority in the marriage if she is the breadwinner? Is authority a matter of money and one's role as provider, and not gender? Eva poses this as a question without trying to answer it. In Eva124, however, she addresses the entire concept of authority in marriage. Eva suggests equal authority between men and women in marriage as the ideal, based on the premise of individual autonomy among adults. According to her, it would not be any improvement at all if women were to rule over men in a family. In Eva126-127 Eva suggests an analogy between how Sura 4:34 views adult women and her own perception of the difference in authority between adults and children. On this basis she claims that the text makes an attempt to infantilize women.

Eva suggests that the term "secretiveness" in the koranic text refers to sexuality. Here, too, Eva raises this as a question, and not as a statement. In the meaning-making situation with the prescriptive texts, the need for knowledge when Eva and Inger seek to understand the koranic text is addressed more explicitly than is the case with the Hagar/Hajar narratives. Both Inger and Eva have raised questions about Sura 4:34 that may be interpreted both as questions of clarification and as substantial criticism of the text. Eva is articulating a thorough criticism of the text, without being more careful when commenting on a text from a religious tradition other than her own.

When making meaning of 1 Timothy 2, Eva uses her knowledge to situate the text in a historical frame. With respect to the koranic text, Eva's reference is mainly current Norwegian society. She does not make any attempt to situate the koranic text in the way she did the New Testament text. Eva uses temporal categories to create distance from Sura 4:34: she situates it in a "different time" (Eva122), and the implications for her are that this text is "not of any use in Norway" and "it cannot work in our world." The reference to Norway is explicit, but the notion "our world" is more open. Eva does not exemplify other contextual perspectives than the Norwegian one even though she opens the way for it. But the "our" does refer to a "we," and is thus more inclusive. This means that Eva uses temporal metaphors to situate the text and to stamp it as irrelevant but uses spatial references to situate herself and the "we." "Then" is opposed to "here", not to "now." Temporal and spatial interpretations interact to situate the text, the reader, and the context.

Shirin80: Yes, it is. Can I say ....

Aira108: Yes, if you have any questions or explanations.

- Shirin81: No, I only want to say what I found out. The first verse, you can interpret it. But like she said, in general one can ... one has to realize what historical time, what kind of society, what kind of societal structures one has in mind.
- Shirin82: This is not the time to say, but at that time ...
- Shirin83: I read a book by Fatima Mernissi; she's a Moroccan writer, and exactly these verses that you say are notorious, it is ... it is really difficult to understand.
- Shirin84: The matter of *hijab* as well. When she starts to do historical research, we can see how situational it was ... I'll say something general about it.
- Shirin85: Because the prophet was so kind, and what is it ... tender to the women, other followers came and asked him why he treated his wives in that way. Because they lived in the mosque, and their family life was part public and part private, in a mix. And they said to him that the way you treat your women will make our women rebel against us ....
- Shirin86: I do not intend to say ... I am just referring to what the researcher was thinking.

Shirin refers to the researcher Fatima Mernissi and her work on the history and tradition of the prophet Muhammad and his social context.<sup>166</sup> She makes an explicit reference to the term “interpret” (Shirin81) and uses Mernissi’s findings as a possible aid in explaining and interpreting Sura 4:34. Thus, one premise in Shirin’s interpretation is how a certain understanding of the historical context (“then”) influences interpreting and making meaning of the text in the present (“now”). The *hijab* is mentioned as an example of a symbol that has to be contextualized and situated, in order to be correctly interpreted. Shirin situates the text historically, just as Eva did earlier with 1 Timothy 2:8-15 (Shirin81). While using historical knowledge to interpret the text and referring to scholars, she also refers to Eva’s statement about the *sura* as “notorious.” For her part, she states that she finds the text “really difficult to understand.” This indicates that she has not given up on her own struggles with the text. Her referring to Eva’s statement might show that she recognizes Eva’s reaction but prefers to articulate her own view of the text in a more moderate way.

In Shirin85 the example of Muhammad is used to make meaning of Sura 4:34. In the Islamic tradition the example of Muhammad is a resource for koranic interpretation through the use of the *sunna* and analogical reasoning, *qiyas* (Waines 2003: 68-69). What Shirin narrates offers both an explanation of why Muhammad transmitted a message like Sura 4:34 – and a

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<sup>166</sup> Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan sociologist and feminist, has written extensively on gender, feminism, and Islamic societies since the mid-1970s. Her book *Beyond the Veil* (1975) has become a classic and may be the book to which Shirin is referring. Mernissi’s later publications include *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (Mernissi 1987) and *Scheherazade goes West* (2001).

reference to the way the prophet himself practiced his own authority in his marriages. Shirin keeps emphasizing that she is referring to Mernissi and how Mernissi uses the example of Muhammad. The reference to Mernissi's historical research functions primarily as a preparation for Shirin's own interpretation. Shirin86 may express a certain hesitation in revealing her own view, at least at this point in her reasoning.

- Shirin87: When it was said that women should put on more clothing, it was because it was very hot in Mecca. The clothes were transparent; in a way, the Prophet was forced in the matter of *hijab*... the matter of clothing, how to distinguish the free women from the slave women, so they would not be raped by those people in Mecca.
- Shirin88: So how the society was at that time, that one should ... perhaps you should .... I just want to say that it was such that sexuality was totally free and shameless, and if a woman had many lovers, nobody cared.
- Shirin89: When a child was born, it was a kind of task: one had to come and see and judge the looks of the baby, the men who had slept with her, and say who the father was. And then they called the child the son of one of them. This was their culture in those times.
- Shirin90: But then they started to organize the society differently. The researcher I mentioned said that in a way he was forced to state exactly how women should dress in order to distinguish them from the slave women.
- Shirin91: But when you read the whole of the Koran, it does not fit in. Because in the Koran, it is not like anyone should be any better than others.
- Shirin92: Many, many verses say that what distinguishes people are their deeds, their good deeds.
- Shirin93: But now I remember. My husband knows Arabic, so I got some help from him in understanding what it is. And it is a little bit difficult to explain, but I will do my best.
- Shirin94: In the verse, it is a word in Arabic that does not mean authority [in Norwegian: *bestyrelsesautoritet*]. The word means some kind of support.

When discussing the issue of women's dress in the Islamic tradition, Shirin keeps referring to Mernissi's explanations about the historical context of the first Muslims and Muhammad. The issue of dress is not explicitly addressed in Sura 4:34, so one may ask why Shirin includes it as a theme, as she did in the preceding section when she mentioned the *hijab*. The text from 1 Timothy 2, however, does address women's dress and appearance. Could the

content of the New Testament text be flowing over into the meaning-making process of the koranic text, like a textual osmosis, where the texts merge in the reader to some extent? Another probable answer, which does not exclude textual osmosis, may be that she finds the theme of women's dress in Islam connected to the question of a gendered hierarchy in marriage. In contemporary Norwegian discourses on Islamic women, the issue of authority over wives (or presumably a lack of authority) in a marriage and the issue of wearing a *hijab* or "Islamic" clothing for women are often interrelated.

In any case, an underlying narrative in her reasoning is that Islam improved the position of women in Mecca when it was established as a religious and legal practice. Shirin suggests that this is important to keep in mind when engaging with the text. In a mainstream Islamic interpretation of history, the pre-Islamic period in Mecca is often construed as the negative background for the positive shift the new religion brought about, with the improvement of women's conditions through Islam being an important part of this interpretation of history.<sup>167</sup> An analogy is found in the Christian tradition among some Christian feminist theologians who claim that Jesus practiced gender equality, improving respect for women before the Christian tradition was again co-opted by patriarchy.<sup>168</sup> The interest in emphasizing that both Muhammad and Jesus worked to improve women's social rights coincides with a growing Christian and Islamic feminism that wants to look at history in a different way, to reconstruct certain constructions of the past, to obtain new perspectives on the present and fuel from deep within the traditions to fight for change in the future.

In Shirin91, however, Shirin questions her own use of the historical reasoning she has taken from Mernissi. She challenges the dominant narrative of general improvement through Islam when she asks: How does the frame narrative of Islam as a tradition provide social improvement for women, consistent with the egalitarian ideals found in the Koran that are extended to all humans – when the alleged improvement does not seem to include slave women? This criticism is based on how she finds koranic texts treat the issue of slavery, an issue Shirin addressed before, as a blind spot in the early Islamic tradition that ought to be criticized (Shirin47-50, p. 181-182).

In Shirin93 and 94 Shirin is finally ready to address Sura 4:34 with her own textual reflections. Her husband is introduced as her discussion partner. Her preparation for the discussion and her meaning-making process is thus part of her private life, within her own marriage. She refers to him as a person who knows Arabic, and he helped her with the linguistic interpretation of the word *qiwama*, which she identifies as a central concept in the text. *Qiwama*

<sup>167</sup> The Muslim feminist scholar Leila Ahmed challenges this view and argues that Islamic early practices concerning women is closely related to surrounding, non-Islamic customs and practices (Ahmed 1992: 5).

<sup>168</sup> This view is represented among what Roald (based on Osiek) would call *reformists*, see p. 74.

is translated as “in charge” in the English version of the Koran (cited on p. 229-230) and translated by the word *bestyrelsesautoritet* (“executive authority”) in the Norwegian version of the Koran read at the meetings.

To examine central linguistic and semantic notions in a canonical text is a classical exegetical tool in both the Christian and Islamic traditions. The motivation for doing linguistic exegetical work, particularly as a layperson that is not expected to have such intimate knowledge of the texts in their original languages, is based on the presupposition that the text has something to offer and that the effort is rewarded. It may also rest on the view that it is an option for finding the original meaning of the text and that it is necessary to search for this meaning in order to relate to it properly as a reader.

Working linguistically and etymologically with a concept from a canonical text often (but not always) has a contextual aspect. The meaning of words change, and exegetical work may provide the reader with the necessary knowledge for distinguishing between how words are perceived today and the changes that could have happened in the perception of a notion, a concept, or a term over time.

The first attempt to explain the meaning of the Arabic word *qiwama* is given by Shirin in Shirin<sup>94</sup>. She states the meaning of *qiwama* is closer to the notion of “support” than it is to the word “authority.” This immediately evokes curious comments from Eva and Inger, and the intense questioning, where at a certain point I myself forget that I am to be withdrawn and engage in the questioning, comes from a sudden atmosphere of expectation brought about by Shirin’s comment in Shirin<sup>94</sup>:

Eva<sup>130</sup>: Support?

Shirin<sup>95</sup>: Support. The woman shall ... stay with him, I kind of ... what is it ....

Inger<sup>63</sup>: Take responsibility for?

Shirin<sup>96</sup>: Yes, how shall I ... the woman should be supported ....

AHG: Protected?

Shirin<sup>97</sup>: Protected ... more than that. The word is ....

Aira<sup>109</sup>: The word is ....

- Shirin98: The word is like something that can hold ....
- Eva131: A pillar? A kind of stone?
- Shirin99: Yes, to keep up in some way.
- Eva132: But then this turns into something quite nice .... if the man should be a support for the woman.
- Shirin100: Well, it is not exactly that, the word does not say that.
- Eva133: The word does not say support?
- Shirin101: Well, it is a kind of pillar that keeps it up.

Trying to understand the notion of *qiwama* in the koranic text becomes a shared communicative task where the two Christian Norwegian participants question Shirin further, suggesting different words to express *qiwama* in their common language, Norwegian. Referring to her husband, Shirin states that *qiwama* means something that holds another person up, like a human pillar. Eva132 states that if the word in the Norwegian version of the Koran “executive authority”<sup>169</sup> could be transformed into the meaning “support of” rather than “authority over” by going back to the original Arabic term, it would change the text’s meaning for her from “bad” (Eva129) to nice (Eva132). The – to her - new insights provided by Shirin have a direct impact on her evaluation of the text.

This particular section is interesting in several ways: The participants struggle together to find the meaning of *qiwama*, and they all seem to share the supposition that defining the content of this term is crucial for understanding Sura 4:34. Shirin provides the basic analysis for suggesting this and the knowledge for reframing the meaning. Eva and Inger not only listen to Shirin’s premises and knowledge; they also accept her contributions as premises for the conversation and become engaged. Inger’s earlier wish that someone interpret Sura 4:34 differently from what she did seems to come true. The interpretation and knowledge of the other proves to be required to understand the other’s text in a way different from the immediate encounter of a reader who is an outsider.

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<sup>169</sup> Eva uses the Norwegian word *bestyrelsesautoritet* found in the Norwegian translation of the Koran (Berg 1980)

Shirin's insights, however, are not something she simply possesses automatically as a Muslim believer, since she has shared how she obtained her knowledge. Shirin's quest for knowledge to interpret Sura 4:34 may well have started with the same question that Inger posed, caused by a resistance to the text in its immediate interpretation – a resistance forcing the reader to become engaged.

- Shirin102: But the other part is a bit general. It says something about human beings in general. About both women and men. What God has equipped some of you with ... but as you say, that I can understand, even today.
- Shirin103: Think about the present, that today Norwegian society has a kind of arrangement for those in need of social security. They are told that “we will support you economically if you start to make a plan on how you can become self-supportive and take on responsibility for yourself.” That part of the verse is possible to understand, for both men and women.
- Shirin104: If you have the strength, you can take care of yourself, and nobody can decide over your life. This is the reality, not that somebody owns your person. If you are dependent in any way, economically or ... if you cannot take care of yourself, the other is stronger than you.
- Shirin105: It's like ... think about the USA today. Think about the power of other nations ... but they have the power to do so. But they have the power to do it. It's not justice in this mindset, I don't know if you understand ....

The conceptualizing of the meaning of *qiwama* into a broader context than just marriage and family, into a general concept of ethical obligation for the stronger party to support the weaker from a social and political perspective, opens the way for Sura 4:34 to provide an ethical tool for a general criticism of power. Not only does Shirin argue that the text in her understanding might limit the power of a husband, it can even be used to argue against the influence of the USA in the world. Defining strength as the ability to be self-reliant and autonomous, and weakness as being dependent on the strong (Shirin104), Shirin avoids her elaboration on *support* from being turned into a question of charity rather than power. When she connects the question of *qiwama* to both the private sphere of a marriage and the global political arena, she simultaneously connects a gender-based criticism of power that seems to approximate feminist analysis and a criticism of political power that seems close to postcolonial analysis.

- Eva134: I see what you mean. Don't you?



Inger64: Yes, that ... but this is a different meaning, if you ... instead of the man automatically have the authority ....

Aira110: No, that's not the case ....

Inger65: ... he has a function, that he should support something ... be something that the woman can lean on.

The implication of the new proposed understanding of *qiwama* is discussed a bit further. Inger elaborates that the concept of support is linked to a function, rather than a given position (Inger65). She links the function of support only to the man, however. Aira finally gets a chance to say something in this discussion after having tried to enter it without succeeding (see Aira109), denying that men are supposed to have an "automatic authority" over the wife in an Islamic marriage (Aira110).

Shirin106: At the beginning of the verse, you say ... yes, that word in Arabic says that if one is something like that .... Think about it, many women are stronger than their husbands. And then the man should have ... what is it ... should decide over that woman who is stronger than him, that is not legal, not in those times and not today.

Shirin107: Then I think about what resources one has. If one is strong enough, regarding yourself and your own interests, or if one needs someone to help. Then one loses some authority.

Shirin108: I don't know how to explain it. I believe that today it's like that. If you are strong intellectually and economically, you can't ... no one can,... If your husband is like that, then the woman can't violate his rights. That might happen only if one of them is the weaker, intellectually or economically, I think. I can understand that.

Shirin109: But the one bearing the expenses... let me give an example. If for instance the social security office is going to help someone, they will make some demands. So if the man has the economic power of decision that will mean a lot. It is only his income that will count.

Shirin106 dissolves entirely a given connection between being the supportive party in a marriage and maleness. She retains, however, the nexus between a supportive function in marriage and authority and a connection between economic strength and the supportive role

(Shirin109). But these statements come across as descriptive rather than normative. Shirin does, however, include other elements in defining a supportive role, such as intellectual capacity and the capacity to fight for one's own interests. She emphasizes that a woman in a marriage may be stronger than a man (Shirin106), but she does not use this to argue for a supportive role for wives but to argue against male authority, calling it illegal.

Inger66: But then you have in a way a completely different sentence from the first one, in fact. It is a very beautiful ....

Shirin110: Yes, it is. I am totally sure that this is the way it is.

Inger67: Because then it means, if I understand you right, that there is no difference between men and women.

Shirin111: No.

Inger68: It all depends on who has the capacity to support the other.

Shirin112: Yes, that is completely right.

Inger69: So, if the man is the stronger part, he should support the woman. And if the woman is stronger, she should support the man. And if one makes money, then one can make decisions on how the money is spent. That seems fine.

Eva135: Yes, it does.

Shirin113: But ... the others.

Inger70: Is this the way you interpret this too?

Aira111: I will make my comments in a moment.

Inger checks with Shirin if she has understood her interpretation of *qiwama* correctly, and Shirin confirms Inger's interpretations of her explanations. The importance of avoiding misunderstandings is reflected in this way of testing the interpretation process and indicates a commitment. The engagement Eva and Inger show in the last sections indicate that making

meaning of the koranic text has become an important issue for them. Both express a positive approval of how the message of Sura 4:34 is transformed for them through Shirin's interpretative move. The text's message shifts from being a text about securing male authority in a marriage to a text calling for mutual support between the parties and a resource for the criticism of power. Why are they so heavily engaged in a way that seems quite different from the discussions on the Hagar/Hajar narratives?

One explanation could be the group process itself. The mutual trust may have increased, creating more engagement with the text of the other tradition. But there are other possible interpretations that do not exclude the first: The prescriptive texts from 1 Timothy and Sura 4 challenge them seriously in their making of meaning because of the discrepancy between their own ideals of gender equality and their immediate interpretation of the texts. The Christian participants had the hermeneutical tools, knowledge, and ability to criticize and situate the New Testament text, but in the encounter with the koranic text they have to rely on their Muslim co-participants. Shirin's interpretative work with the notion of *qiwama* changes their attitude toward Sura 4:34. But what difference does the new interpretation of *qiwama* make for Eva and Inger as Norwegian Christians?

The new interpretation of *qiwama* makes the content of the koranic text much more consistent with Inger's and Eva's own ideals of gender equality. Are their positive reactions based on enjoying the Islamic text presumably to share their own ideals or based on an expression of solidarity with Muslims who relate to the Koran as a normative scripture? It may well be that both the confirmation of one's values and the identification with what this interpretation means for Muslims plays a role in their excitement. Shirin is sharing her acquired knowledge, and by that also indicating her own position. The possibility of sharing an agency emerges more clearly, since so far they all seem to agree on the aim of improving women's positions and possibilities – with or without the texts. Inger now ask for Aira's views (Inger70). First, however, Shirin completes her contribution:

Shirin114: But, in addition, one of you asked about the secretive part. What is the secret? It has something to do with private matters. For instance, everyone had something private, and one has ... this has to do with respect. It should be kept here, between these four walls, and not go beyond them. The discussions, everything that happens in private, should be kept private.

Shirin115: This was – what is it? – this was ... one can perhaps say that women are more ... are more talkative than men. I don't totally agree with that, I think some men are like that too. They sit and talk ... when they get together.

Shirin116: But perhaps women need it more, because we need ... we need to talk a lot.

- Shirin117: But in order to keep respect, it was said that “you shouldn’t gossip about your husband in public,” to strangers who don’t know what happens. That was what I found out about the secretive. I found, in the *hadith*, that it had to be interpreted like that.
- Shirin118: They say like this, “from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them.” That alone I cannot justify. It was like that in those times – that is the only way I can understand it.
- Shirin119: Today, for instance, concerning whipping. If you have an extramarital affair, how can you think ... this happens today. Because the punishment is supposed to prevent it from happening again.
- Shirin120: But humans have developed so that some people ... they get insulted. And there are lots of discussions on how to treat criminals and how to overcome crime.

The *hadith* is introduced as another of the sources Shirin has consulted to interpret the text.<sup>170</sup> The introduction to the theme of secretiveness, however, is also based on Shirin’s own experiences. Shirin115-116 suggests a gender divisive behavior when it comes to talking: women talk more than men. Nevertheless, Shirin wonders if her own image of women as more talkative than men is correct, according to her own experience. This confuses any suggestion by her of a natural difference between the genders in this respect. However, she does suggest that women need to talk more than men, but not necessarily that they actually do so. The reasons behind this need are not explored. Shirin adds that in the text secretiveness has to do with the relationship between public and private, and the Koranic text aims at keeping what is defined as private in the private sphere. Her findings from the *hadith* suggest that a restriction on gossiping about one’s husband in public is the real issue in the text.

A short reflection on public, physical punishment for extramarital affairs is included, but Shirin’s conclusive remarks on this is just that “there are lots of discussions” on the theme of “crime.” Public punishment is, according to Shirin, generally motivated by an attempt to prevent crime. Does this mean that Shirin regards extramarital sexual relations as a crime or is she referring to countries that do so? Her statements fuse the descriptive and normative at some points. In Shirin118 she nonetheless distances herself from the appeal in Sura 4:34 to admonish wives on the suspicion of disobedience, by placing the text in the past (“then”).

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<sup>170</sup> She has already mentioned Mernissi’s research, conversations with her husband, the example of the Muhammad (the *summah*), and the use of other koranic texts as resources in making meaning of Sura 4: 34.

- Shirin121: What is happening in practice is that the Prophet never did it, or what is said in the *hadith*, even there, I do disagree ... if one beats with a ....
- Eva136: Twig?
- Shirin122: Yes. But I told my husband, it is not what causes pain to the body, it's one's soul .... That is the worst part of being beaten: to be humiliated and subjugated.
- Shirin123: But if you think about the time one is talking about ... if you go through history and take a look at what happens to human beings, in those days it was not like the Prophet and the others close to the Prophet had it in this way. They were people with a good reputation.
- Shirin124: Jesus Christ, for instance ... that is a well-known incident in history, and perhaps you have heard about Ashura .... there was a battle, and the grandson of the Prophet and then his relative died. Both men and women, and the one who took power to show that they were innocent when they were accused of infidelity, that is why they were killed at the battle of Kerbala.<sup>171</sup> It was the granddaughter of the Prophet who took the lead and started to talk to the people and made them understand why they were killed. And there were other men in the family, but they did not assume power.
- Shirin125: And women were well esteemed. The obedience is impossible to understand, because one was negotiating all the time. If two people are intelligent, they will negotiate.

Her reference to the *hadith* and to the example of Muhammad in Shirin121 may suggest that she feels that there is an interpreted inconsistency between the two. Shirin's presentation of the example of Muhammad is that he never hit women or his wives, but in referring to the *hadith*, Shirin states that she disagrees with the content. What Shirin is referring to are the practical elaborations found in some texts, containing prescriptions about how such a beating should happen.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> After reading through the final transcriptions, Shirin pointed out that she wanted to give examples of people who sacrificed their lives to save others and to bring about justice, like Jesus and the human sacrifices at the battle of Karbala (680) (Waines 2003: 160). Shirin emphasized that the act of sacrificing one's own life is only meant for prominent religious leaders and should be viewed as an attempt to ground still young and unsettled religious traditions, and not an example ordinary people should follow. *Ashura* is the name of the ten days of mourning in the Shira calendar of martyrs when the Shia Muslims commemorate this battle (Waines 2003: 160).

<sup>172</sup> Roald provides the textual sources in her book *Women in Islam: A Western Experience*. She mentions early koranic commentaries and later elaborations by the Islamic *ulama* as the sources for these prescriptions, and not the *hadith* directly (Roald 2001: 167-171).

Eva's suggestion about a twig as a prescribed tool to use in a physical action directed at a wife shows that she most likely has some knowledge about the Islamic interpretative discourse on this particular text. One of the understandings in the Islamic tradition is that the husband's physical action should be limited to slapping her on the cheek with a small twig with a softened end, something used as a toothbrush in some cultural contexts (Roald 2001: 169-170).

Shirin addresses the *mental* aspect of being physically abused, however. She regards the humiliation and the subjugation implied in the act to be the worst part in an experience of being hit by one's husband (Shirin122). From this perspective, the lack of bodily pain or harm in the allegedly symbolic act of striking the cheek with the soft end of a twig does not make it acceptable.

Shirin's reference to the Shia tradition, to Jesus Christ, and to the time of Muhammad refers to the past as a place where negotiation was more highly esteemed than violence, and she thus rejects or at least nuances a notion of the past and the historical context of Sura 4:34 as a time when subjugation and violence toward women/wives were commonly *accepted*. The inclusion of Jesus Christ is not explicitly motivated, but it may be done as an inclusive gesture toward the Christian tradition – including Jesus in the company of people with a good reputation (mentioned in Shirin124).

Now, Aira makes her contribution:

Aira12: Yes. first, I want to say that I agree with all of you ....

Aira13: But I find that these texts are very much misused and misinterpreted and interpreted in many ways.

Aira was challenged to state her position some moments ago and now joins the others in their criticism of and comments on the texts. Aira13 shows concern about the “misuse and misinterpretations” of the texts, addressing the interpretations of the texts rather than the texts themselves. She talks about the texts in plural, includes both of them in her comments, and comments not only on “misinterpretation” but also on “interpretation.” Aira does not yet address the distinction she makes between interpretation and misinterpretation or suggest what her interpretation of the texts would be. Nor does she identify where the interpretative power should be situated among all the different interpreters producing the various interpretations. The way she articulates herself may, however, signal that she believes that a right way of interpretation does exist, just as misinterpretation exists, or at least that some interpretations are to be preferred to others. She might be signaling a pluralistic attitude to indicate that she believes that there is more than one correct interpretation. But Aira's mention of “misinterpretation” as a possibility also indicates that there are some interpretations that are not correct or unacceptable to her.

- Aira114: There is one way to interpret, and like she said, the word *qiwama* means to stand or support. It is one word, if you say we have *qayam* when you say the verb, this means to stand firm for someone.
- Aira115: And it means support or trust, and many Muslims take the meanings expressed here literally – that they should decide everything.
- Aira116: Actually, it means that men should protect women and be responsible, and then they should support them in all situations.
- Aira117: Women can earn their own money, but in many situations it is difficult for women to be ... to take full responsibility for everything in life....
- Aira118: In that way it is a situation that requires ... if they do earn money and support the family, then they should take part ... in negotiations on how to use money in a sensible way and do things properly.

Aira turns to the word *qiwama* in Sura 4:34, just as Shirin did earlier, and seems to join in her identification of the word *qiwama* as the crucial point from which to crack the nut of this *ayat*. The common identification by both Shirin and Aira of *qiwama* as such a central notion in in Sura 4:34 has a comprehensive reference in current literature on this text within what may be categorized as Islamic reformist literature addressing women's rights in Islam. Two examples are Asma Barlas (Barlas 2002: 186-187) and Amina Wadud (Wadud 1999: 70-74).

Aira's discussion on interpretation in Aira115-118 shows her awareness of the possibility that a Muslim reader of Sura 4:34 "takes the meanings expressed here literally." What does she mean by the term "literally"?<sup>173</sup> In Aira115 this kind of reading is said to read a hierarchy of authority into the concept *qiwama*. She does not explicitly categorize this hierarchy as gendered at this point. The Muslims addressed by Aira as the ones reading the text literally could be both men and women. She distinguishes between *authority* and *responsibility* and seems more reluctant than Shirin to reduce the prescribed responsibility of husbands, apparently to avoid placing too heavy a workload on women. Aira brings in practical considerations (Aira117) and concentrates on the issue of one's financial contribution to the family. She suggests negotiations between wife and husband as a way of sharing authority over the financial resources (Aira118).

Aira's first step in making meaning is to contrast her own view with what she calls "literal interpretation." This kind of interpretation would, according to her, lead to a situation

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<sup>173</sup> A literal understanding of a text may entail excluding linguistic, semantic, and historical knowledge relevant to grasping the meaning of a text. It might also include the reader's ignorance of the dynamics between textual interpretation and context. This way of explaining a literal understanding of Sura 4:34 would match Aira's analysis of the interpretative situation of Sura 4:34 among many Muslims, as will be shown later in her contributions.

where “they decide everything” (Aira115). “They” may refer to Muslim men, perhaps men with a religious authority to interpret the Koran who use this authority to read the text as a legitimization of men’s rule over women. But Aira’s comments do not address either men or women in particular. The division she makes is between literal interpretation and a more skilled interpretation of the text.

- Aira119: Concerning the other part, that what God has equipped some of you with before others, that is meant generally; it is not just men who are better equipped. I can give you an example.
- Aira120: People are born into different families. Some are very well off and some are barely capable of supporting themselves. Being born into a royal family will give you many advantages and privileges that make you better equipped than a poor person.
- Aira121: Then there are some personal qualities, perhaps some are strong, some are more emotional, some can protect, some are weak, some have ADHD, some are weak in mental situations – this is very general. It is not only that men were given genitals and that becomes something that make them stand above women.
- Aira122: So, there are some things that are given by birth, and some bad things given by birth, so I can’t... complain about the royal family or complain about that.

What is Aira’s description of qualifications for allowing one to be regarded as the strong party in a relationship? The qualifications or advantages she lists are all gender neutral in the sense that they fit both men and women. Instead, Aira introduces a distinction other than gender, i.e. that between innate advantages and acquired advantages – exemplifying them as a fortunate personality, mental health, and a high social/economic status. There seems to be a certain element of fatalism in Aira’s view of the distribution of these advantages, but no fatalism can be detected in her interpretation of what it means to be born as a girl or a boy. In fact, it seems to be important for Aira to show that most important advantages are not linked to gender in the first place. She rejects male gender as being the only decisive factor for qualifying anyone as the strong party in a relationship (Aira120). Through this way of reasoning she seems to reject any idea of male authority over women as a general rule.

- Aira123: Generally, we say that men are responsible for the maintenance of their family.
- Aira124: But this is not what things are like. In the whole world lots of women are earning money, and there are men taking their money, and they maintain the family, but they don’t have the same rights or status.



- Aira125: And the men who abuse power also abuse women and control them by saying they should be obedient and keep secrets in all cases.
- Aira126: This means two things. Women should be obedient – to what? These are two different matters.
- Aira127: About secrets, it is like you said, we have private businesses, we don't want to go out and discuss in public ... things that are very important to keep in the home.
- Aira128: So one should be ... one should be loyal to the family and faithful to one's husband. And the husband should be faithful to his wife. So this refers to the many personal matters in the family.
- Aira129: But then, this depends on many things. It has to do with the private space one has at home.

The statement in Aira123 is presented as the common view in the Islamic tradition about a husband's role: the economic support of the family. Yet, in Aira124 Aira claims that this is not consistent with reality for many Muslim families "in the whole world." It is not only men who provide for their families, lots of women do too. Aira states that when women are the breadwinners, the authority that would adhere to a male breadwinner is not given to them because they are women. Aira does not suggest any solution or formulate a concrete challenge. She simply states this as a fact that contradicts her understanding of Sura 4:34.

Aira points to men directly as responsible for abuse of power (Aira125). She suggests that it is the personal intention of the (male) reader to make a significant difference between interpretation and what she characterizes as misinterpretation. The latter is connected to the abuse of power, but, as she describes it, the intention of control and abuse of power is present in the reader before he or she encounters Sura 4:34 rather than the other way around.

The commandment to keep the secretiveness is separated from the prescription about obedience. Thus, Aira breaks up the potentially powerful and authoritarian link between being told to *obey* and being restricted to keeping *silent*. For Aira, just as Shirin explained earlier, it seems like the meaning of secretiveness in the text is connected to what is considered to be private. Aira suggests sexual intimacy or private financial issues as examples of such private matters. She proposes that the aim behind guarding the secretiveness is the protection of the family's reputation.

Who or what should women in a marriage obey? Aira asks the question but does not really answer it. In the discussion on obedience in connection with the Hagar/Hajar narratives, Aira limits human obedience to God alone (Aira92, p. 208; Aira97, p. 221). If this includes obedience to the Koran as the word of God and the Koran is interpreted as claiming a gendered

hierarchy in a marriage, there may nevertheless be a claim on a wife to obey her husband, as part of her obedience to God. Aira, however, has not drawn this conclusion.

Aira128 shows that Aira want to put the same requirement of faithfulness on both husband and wife. It is somewhat unclear if she views loyalty in the same way, but it seems likely that she means this to apply to both genders as well. Aira seem to follow up on Inger's earlier eagerness to implement gender inclusive commandments in a moral enrichment of the texts.

- Shirin126: Excuse me. Most of it has to do with respect, that one should not lose respect for one's family and go out in public and say something.
- Shirin127: And I tell my husband: What about the problems that need public assistance to be solved, those cannot be kept secret.
- Shirin128: There are private matters that are not about hurting anyone.... For instance, my husband is like this and that ... that is not of anyone's business. This is the issue here, not things that have to do with laws and regulations, the way one talks today. Right?
- Shirin129: That if you are beaten, you have to go out and report it.
- Shirin130: And if the rights of the children are... that must be reported. These are laws and regulations that have to be kept.
- Shirin131: But what is private, what kind of ... sex, that is between ourselves.
- Shirin132: If it's ... OK, you can go to professionals to solve it, that is OK, but you can't just go out and talk about it. I do agree that it may harm oneself and others if one talks about those things, because ordinary people can't solve it if it is only talk. One should turn to professionals to get help.

Shirin's interruption is motivated by a concern: What if something considered to be a private matter in a marriage includes incidents where one of the parties is harmed? Should this be kept a secret or even be defined as a private matter in the first place? Shirin denounces that, for instance, cases of domestic violence should be kept secret (Shirin129). Nor should violation of children's rights be kept secret. Shirin argues that these issues cannot be regarded as private matters because domestic violence and the mistreatment of children are acts transgressing "laws and regulations" (Shirin128-120). Shirin seems thus to link up with Eva's use of Norwegian law to evaluate Sura 4:34 (Eva115-116), presenting a contextual interpretation of what the text says about secrecy by bringing Norwegian law into her making of meaning. Shirin55 includes another aspect of the Norwegian context, the welfare system, as an argument for seeking help when

needed for family matters. Shirin tells all of this to the group as a reflection of what she has discussed with her husband.

- Aira130: As far as “if you fear disobedience, you should admonish ...” is concerned, I have talked to several people about this issue, and they say it refers to being unfaithful in the married relationship. Marriage – that should be a faithful relationship. They should be loyal to each other. If one fears extramarital relationships, that hurts the family.
- Aira131: If a woman has an affair, for instance, and gets pregnant by a man other than her husband, this abuses the husband’s status because his property should not be inherited by someone who is not his daughter, for instance.
- Aira132: One should be loyal and faithful and not abuse the marriage to meet needs one might have.
- Aira133: And if one should be devastated because the women ... or one of them has [an affair with] another man or woman ... then the marriage is abused.

Like Shirin, Aira has discussed this text with others (Aira130). Aira refers to her discussion partners without naming them. In this section she restricts the meaning of obedience to sexual fidelity for both husband and wife. She addresses the right of a husband to know the fatherhood of the wife’s children, based on an argument regarding the protection of property and inheritance, which is to proceed in an orderly way (Aira131-132). Aira addresses the emotional side of extramarital relationships as well (Aira130, 133). Control over woman’s reproductive capacity is a central point in this section, but the infidelity in itself is also addressed, extended to both genders.

- Aira134: And it says that one should talk; to admonish is a word that can be interpreted in different ways, the Arabic word. Then it is that you discuss, you tell, you just say don’t do this and that, and you should keep to the boundaries and not be unfaithful to your husband.
- Aira135: And if this works out, then you shouldn’t pursue the case. If they are obedient, if they understand the importance of the matter ....
- Aira136: If the woman thinks that the situation will be OK, they should not pursue the case. But if it gets difficult, and they say ... there are a lot of interpretations of this verse.
- Aira137: And if there is a mental condition where the wife is afraid of being beaten by the husband, they should be separated in a proper way.

Aira138: But if you do it, you should not hurt them.<sup>174</sup>

Aira134 turns back to the issue of translating the Arabic text, and questions the word “admonish” as a comprehensive translation. She suggests that the translation may just as well be “discuss.” Aira137 and 138 refer to the part in the koranic text about scourging. She highlights the mental part of being physically threatened. In Aira136 she emphasizes once again that there is a plurality of different interpretations of this particular koranic text. She does not specify them further.

Aira138 does not dismiss the “scourging” described in the Koranic text entirely, although Aira disclaims any right to hurt someone *if* in doing it. This means that she does not understand the koranic text to be *prescribing* “scourging” for disobedient female spouses (referring to sexual infidelity, in her interpretation) and that a possibility to do so that may be inferred from the text should not result in any harm.

Her statement in Aira138 may, however, be taken as a statement of negotiation with certain interpretations of the text that she knows about, rather than representing her own interpretation of the text. It may be that Aira does not want to reject any part of the koranic text directly, so that she has to find ways other than open rejection in order to come to terms with the meaning. If the opening for “scourging” in the text needs to stand as authoritative, according to Aira’s view, this does not prevent her from bringing up her own interpretations and addressing possible practical implications of the text. What she has made clear, however, is that she finds it wrong to use Sura 4:34 to legitimize abuse of power and harmful actions against women/wives.

Aira’s meaning-making activity with Sura 4:34 at this point may express an act of balancing: maintaining the required respect for the Koran while still upholding her view that it is wrong to hurt anyone. Aira has displayed a view of marriage as a place where the strong should support the weak, where children should be properly taken care of, and where nobody should get hurt. These views are, however, *also* based on her interpretation of the Koran and the Islamic tradition. The act of balancing that Aira possibly exercises, then, is a balancing between different parts of the Koran and the Islamic tradition and between different interpretations of Sura 4:34.

Aira140: We read elsewhere in the Koran that, when there is a conflict between a woman and a man, then one has to talk about it in the family, both in the woman’s family

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<sup>174</sup> In a comment on the final transcription Aira has the following comment on her own statement: “In the cases where physical punishment becomes an option, it should be in a way that is not harmful and should be very slight. Having said this, the Prophet (pbuh) always emphasized that ‘the best among you is the one who is best to his wife’ and never recommended or practiced physical punishment.”

and in the man's family. And if they understand another, if they reconcile, then you can put things right.

Aira141: But if you can't, they can leave each other, you can get a divorce.

Aira142: So, it is no solution to ... this is not a general advice to beat women.

Aira143: As far as I understand it, we interpret it like this here, but many interpret it quite differently, and as you have seen in these texts, they have provided room for the abuse of women and for the subjugation of women.

Aira140-141 suggests ways of dealing with a marital conflict based on talk and discussion and on the involvement of the extended family. She mentions divorce as a possibility if all attempts to resolve a conflict fail. The basis for these suggestions is found in the Koran and the *fiqh*. Aira142 may suggest that these means, including divorce, are to be preferred before acceptance or use of physical violence.

Aira repeats that there is a multitude of different interpretations of this text, and some of them are described as versions that "have provided room for the abuse of women and for the subjugation of women" (Aira143). Aira's critique of the interpretations she finds that represent the abuse of power surfaces through employment of the notions "abuse" and "subjugation." The use of these strongly negative terms shows Aira's engagement in the matter. She addresses both texts here for the first time, and thus includes 1 Timothy 2:8-15 in her concern: we agree about how these texts should be understood, but what about those who interpret them to legitimize their power and abuse of women?

Aira144: And it is easy for men to say the Koran says so. So, they don't want to go into depth and really see what it means to do what they are supposed to, no.

Aira145: They just want to take the word "executive authority" and I know many who will use the verse in this way.

Aira146: But really, it means what she said: Support. And it is the word *qiwama* itself that says so.

Aira147: There are many who ... perhaps not that many, but quite a number of people who interpret it like it says. Then it creates difficulties.

Aira148: This misunderstanding could occur in this verse, and I feel that it is important that you can compare it to the broader message of the Koran, that you should behave properly and decent, and that goes for men as well. And there is another

verse in the Koran that says that both of them are told to behave decently when they meet.<sup>175</sup>

Aira144-145 launches into a severe criticism of Muslim men for neglecting what Aira claims to be their duty regarding interpretational work on the Koran. According to Aira, the reader of Sura 4:34 is obligated to see “what the text really means” and not only “what it says.” Aira finds that reading and interpreting the Koran might not be enough if it is done without “going into depth” (Aira144). She raises the issue of the reader’s obligation, and the present role of many readers is criticized morally. According to Aira’s analysis, the problems to which Sura 4:34 may give rise emerge because of male readers who do not assume the responsibility they ought to bear. She thus presupposes that the interpreter has a large and important task before him/herself. Actually, she expresses herself in a way that shows that she finds the whole responsibility of the impact of this *aya* to rest upon the *readers*.<sup>176</sup>

What is Aira asking for when she requests Muslim male readers to assume a more thorough interpretative responsibility in connection with Sura 4:34? She may be suggesting that contextual needs should be taken more seriously and/or that they should be more aware of the possibilities to misuse this text. Both issues are addressed in her contributions. But it seems that what she is really asking for is a deeper understanding of the term *qiwama*. Again, the focus is on the understanding of the notion of *qiwama* (Aira146-147). Aira turns back to the formerly explored meaning of the word, as presented by Shirin and herself, as an argument against both the Norwegian translation of the term (“executive authority”/*bestyrelsesautoritet*) and perhaps against related ways of framing the meaning of the Arabic term as well. Aira is using other parts of the Koran to shed light on the general prescriptions for the relationship between men and women (Aira148). On the basis of this larger view she finds support for her position that demands are made of both genders, and she explicitly mentioned that a koranic requirement to behave “properly and decent” applies to men as well as to women.

The interpretative situation Aira describes concerning Sura 4:34 is that (Muslim) women are left to do all the work with coming to terms with this text, whereas the men “don’t want to go into depth”. According to Aira’s analysis, the attitude toward the text and its contextual implications and the motivation for taking the trouble to explore this text to a sufficient degree is gender-divided in practice. This is a situation she wants to change.

If Aira seems reluctant to criticize the text from the Koran as a text, she does not at all hesitate in criticizing Muslim men and what she claims to be their lack of adequate interpretative

<sup>175</sup> Aira is probably referring to Sura 24:30-31.

<sup>176</sup> Cf. the phrase “moral enrichment of the text” and Khaled Abou El Fadl (Abou El Fadl, Cohen, and Lague 2002: 15), discussed in Chapter 2, p. 49.

work. It may seem that a proper interpretative task for Aira would mean reaching conclusions about Sura 4:34 that are close to her own. What she obviously states, however, is that any interpretation of this text that gives carte blanche to subjugate and abuse women is simply a shallow and problematic piece of interpretation.

Aira then addresses the text from 1 Timothy 2:8-15:

Aira149: So, their jewelry and beauty should be good deeds, and that goes for both men and women.

Aira150: But there is a lot of ... I feel that this is personal, too, that it could be a general admonishment that women listen to the teaching of the men, perhaps it was only in church that women were busy with children or something, and perhaps started to talk a little, and the sermon and other things were disturbed. Perhaps it was a way to say that only about then and there, and then it became a part of this text.

Aira151: Otherwise, we do not view this differently. I very much see this together, that it can be compared to the message of the Koran, which states how a man should act and how a woman should act.

Aira152: And, for instance, that "he should lift his hands without anger and argument." When we do *haji*, it is said that after you pick up those clothes, you should not involve yourself in a conflict and you should control your anger.

Aira153: But I believe that it is not only for a certain time that you should control your anger, I think one should control anger all the time and behave properly.

Aira154: And concerning that part of the text that women will be saved through childbirth, we don't have references to that in the Koran .... Women, we have the same ....

Commenting on 1 Timothy 2:8-15, Aira relates her interpretation to the Koran and Islamic religious practice, exemplified through *haji*. Aira says that she generally finds the gender roles prescribed in the New Testament text consistent with the Koran. To prescribe specific roles to men and women in the first place is presented as familiar to her because of her knowledge of koranic texts. The example of *haji* to which she turns, however, is a practice involving both men and women, and Aira underlines that anger control should not be a gender-specific requirement, nor should it be a requirement limited to the performance of *haji*.

Aira's way of relating to the New Testament text is to evaluate its content on the basis of her own tradition, more specifically by relating it to her own interpretation of the koranic tradition and texts. Probably inspired by Eva, she suggests situating parts of the New Testament text in a specific context. Aira states that there is only one point in the New Testament text that is

clearly strange for her: the statement on women's salvation through childbirth in 1 Timothy 2:15 (Aira154).

Aira155: [I]t wasn't Eve who transgressed the commandment, both of them did. So it was not the woman, it was both.

Inger71: Does the Koran say that?

Aira156: Yes, it does. So it wasn't the woman, it was both. So, I don't know. Otherwise I fully agree with you, that these two texts are very ... they open up the way for abuse and subjugation, and a lot of this has actually happened.

Inger72: Now, I think that both of you should become imams and give this understanding of the text ....

On the basis of the reference in 1 Timothy 2 to one of the narratives of the Fall of Humankind recorded in Genesis, Aira explains the difference she finds between the two traditions' narratives. The narrative of the Fall exists in both, but in the Christian version, as rephrased in 1 Timothy 2:8-15, the gendered roles are played out in a specific way. Eve is presented as the first transgressor of the divine commandment against eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. She is put in a double role as both tempted (by the snake) and temptress (of Adam). In 1 Timothy she is held mainly responsible, and the consequences are severe. She is made a representative of all women in this text, and thus all women have to endure the same consequences. In the Islamic tradition both Adam and Hawwa (Eve) bear equal blame, and the consequences of the Fall are less grave.

Aira155 does not reflect on the differences between the two traditions' narratives of the Fall of humankind as *differences*. Aira presents the Islamic version of the narrative, and makes correcting comments on the version represented in 1 Timothy, based on the Islamic version. The two narratives seem to merge into one for Aira, the version from 1 Timothy assimilating into the Islamic version. In Aira's (merged) narrative, both man and woman were transgressors, and subsequently were equally to blame.<sup>177</sup> Aira's comments on the New Testament text's reference

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<sup>177</sup> Some Islamic feminists, like Riffat Hassan, claim that the representation of these diverging narratives of the Fall of Humankind makes the Christian tradition appear more systematically oppressive toward women than the Islamic tradition. Hassan finds that the Judeo-Christian tradition has had a negative impact on the Islamic tradition through the transmission of patriarchal structures, originally Judeo-Christian, with its roots in, for instance, the narrative of the Fall of Humankind as it is presented in the Old Testament (Hassan 1987). Kari Børresen, in her exploration of Christian and Islamic gender models and gender roles, explores Augustine's construction of female subordination,



to the Fall (and thus the implication for women as forced to bear the consequences described in this text) declare its content to be incorrect, according to the Koran.

That the traditions and narratives within the Christian and Islamic traditions appear to be related but not the same raises an issue in a Christian-Muslim encounter. There are different ways to relate to this, and some of these were displayed in the discussions about the Hagar/Hajar narratives. Aira chooses the narrative from her own tradition as the authoritative reference for making meaning, as she did in the discussions about Hagar/Hajar (see p. 186).

Inger becomes engaged and shows this through her request to get confirmation of what Aira just said (Inger71). Aira confirms the difference between the koranic and biblical versions of the narrative of the Fall without blaming the Christian tradition or the New Testament text as such for being oppressive to women (Aira156). Instead, she focuses on what she finds the narratives have in common: Both illustrate human disobedience toward God. The common problem connected to the texts of Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15, as she sees it, is not the texts themselves but the fact that both of them may “open up the way for [the] abuse and subjugation” of women (Aira156). To Aira, this is not a hypothetical but a real problem: “a lot of this has actually happened” (Aira156).

Aira chooses to focus on shared challenges in real life in both the Islamic and Christian traditions. She comments on the differences she finds between the texts but does not actually pay them much attention. It is the way in which the texts *function* in the lives of people that really matters for Aira, and this makes the interpretative task crucial for her. It is not her strategy of change to criticize the texts. She aims instead at criticizing the *interpreters* of the texts for not doing a thorough enough job.

The appreciation Inger expresses for the contributions by Shirin and Aira also shares a concern for how Sura 4:34 may be understood by other Muslims. Her concern is shown through her wish that Aira’s and Shirin’s interpretations of this text might be widely shared by others (Inger72). For Inger, an imam seems to represent the necessary authority for interpreting and reinterpreting koranic texts in an influential way. Subsequently, she wants Shirin and Aira to become imams. Neither Shirin nor Aira made any immediate response to Inger’s wish for them; the discussion just continues.

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which is based on his interpretation of the narrative of the Fall of Humankind in Genesis and its implications for *imago Dei*. A gendered hierarchy is thus connected to the relation between humans and God, according to Børresen, who claims that the Islamic tradition’s gendered hierarchy limits itself to organized relations among humans (Børresen 2004: 8).

### *A Turning Point in the Group's Meaning-Making Process?*

In many ways this discussion represents a different mode of communication and shows, in comparison with the discussions on the Hagar/Hajar narratives, other strategies in making meaning of the texts. In the discussions on the narratives most of the Christian participants often concentrated on identifying differences between Islam and Christianity. The Muslim participants often engaged in defensive arguments of the Hagar/Hajar narratives, particularly the narrative from the *hadith*, but they did so for the narrative from the Old Testament as well. The Muslim participants generally focused on *similarities* rather than differences between the two religions.

Now communication has changed into a mode where mutual understandings and attempts to understand one another's thinking has become more dominant. This development is exactly the opposite of what I had expected beforehand, since I thought the Hagar/Hajar narratives would be more likely to contribute to be more of a shared interpretative communication than the prescriptive texts. This was why I had decided to start with the Hagar/Hajar narratives in the first place. I regarded Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15 to be more "difficult" texts that would possibly also generate conflicts. This discussion proved me wrong. It seems that, for the participants, the prescriptive texts generated a change in the interpretative situation where their respective objectives seemed much more concordant. The texts seem to create a greater consensus rather than discord. But what does the consensus consist of? Is it connected to the texts, the strategies of making meaning, the group process, or reflections on the context(s)?

What the participants seem to agree on most of all is that both texts have caused sufferings and injustices for women, in the past as well as in the present. These effects are not accurately located geographically, but the locations in which they are claimed to occur are situated so as to transcend the family sphere, and for some of the participants seemingly covering the entire areas of Christian and Muslim religious and cultural influence. The agreement is based on a common understanding of *context(s)* and of contextual challenges in the past and present, and the interpreters of the texts are themselves part of this/these context(s). There seems to be a difference between the Christian and the Muslim participants, however, regarding how to situate the *time* of oppression. Inger and Eva relate more to the problem of female subjugation as being part of the past, whereas the Muslim participants do not distinguish clearly between the past and the present in this respect. The question of analyzing the issue of female subjugation and situating it in time and place will be developed further in the following discussions.

The subjugation of women is addressed as a problem not only because it causes human suffering. When such subjugation is done in the name of Islam or Christianity, it is also seen as a misrepresentation of the Christian and Islamic traditions. The Muslim participants see it as a misrepresentation of the koranic text. For them, the text itself is not the most urgent problem

(even if it poses some challenges, for instance, for Shirin with respect to the interpretation of “scourging”). It is rather the *interpretations* that pose the challenges. The Christian participants, however, consider the text in 1 Timothy to be a substantial part of the problem, but only historically speaking. The conversation related to Sura 4:34 is given more space than 1 Timothy 2:8-15. Aira and Shirin present the contextual challenges of this text extensively and also engage in detailed discussions about their interpretation of Sura 4:34. The impression is that this koranic text represents a contemporary challenge for the Muslim participants. The text from 1 Timothy is presented differently and mostly as belonging to the past, without any significant contemporary influence and thus not connected to a contemporary contextual challenge for Eva and Inger.

The question of *how* the texts have caused the subjugation of women is related mainly to how male Christians and Muslims with interpretative authority have interpreted the texts and how they have propagated a common understanding and practice of female subjugation within the traditions. The interpretations and the interpreters are thus the targets of the participants’ critique – that by the Muslim participants in particular but also that by the Christians.

Among the Christian participants is also a thorough critique of Paul as the alleged author of the text from 1 Timothy. He may be regarded as a prominent male interpreter of Jesus’ message within the Christian tradition, even though he is not explicitly placed in this role in the discussion. He is criticized as *author* and only indirectly as an interpreter of Jesus, since both Inger and Eva prefer to move beyond this text and search for what they consider to be the message of Jesus, not trusting Paul’s interpretation.

Does this discussion represent a turning point in the process of making meaning in the group? The conversations are marked by a high degree of consensus: common definition of contextual challenges, critique of the interpretation of canonical texts or the canonical texts themselves, and a shared engagement in preventing the texts from contributing to female subjugation. All of these represent a new form of interaction where the participants seem to define themselves as players on the same team. One significant change in the communication mode is present throughout the discussion but became particularly visible among the Christian participants after Shirin began with her interpretation of the concept of *qiwama*: There are more questions and fewer expressions shaped as statements than in the previous discussions on the Hagar/Hajar narratives. The questions seem to express a more open way of relating, whereas posing questions to the participants of the other religion has replaced the earlier occasions of framing the other, a way that is taken for granted or defining her without further investigation. Questions are open for answers, making knowledge accessible. But it also represents a new turn by allowing the participants to define themselves and their knowledge in the conversation, and by acknowledging a need for more knowledge. Since the text from Sura 4:34 becomes the main focus, it is the Christian participants who ask most of the questions. The knowledge the Muslim

participants have in their activity of making meaning of this text is accessible to the Christian participants only through the Muslim participants' sharing of knowledge and reflection. This may result in a turning point where the Muslim participants are more clearly approached as a *resource* for the others, rather than primarily as representations of something *different*.

### ***Resources in the Activity of Making Meaning***

One of the obvious resources in the activity of making meaning throughout this discussion is what is suggested by the term "internal library" (Ford 2006: 4).<sup>178</sup> The "internal library" of each participant, i.e. their respective knowledge, experience, reflection, and narratives, becomes apparent. The impact of the "internal libraries" becomes obvious in the encounter with a canonical text with which the reader has to struggle in order to make meaning of it. This becomes particularly obvious when the texts in their immediate interpretation represent ethical values different from those of the reader. In this respect Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15 are texts that require extensive use of these readers "internal libraries," and the interdependence of the respective resources and knowledge of all participants is made visible.

One element of the "internal library" is *contextual knowledge*. This kind of knowledge is less available than literal knowledge for anyone outside a tradition, but it appears to be essential for understanding a canonical text as *situated*. The Muslim participants are clearly the most important resource for the Christian participants in making meaning of Sura 4:34, because of the combination of their contextual and more formal knowledge. It seems that the Christian participants are a resource for Aira and Shirin, too. But Aira at least seems to have read the New Testament text primarily by evaluating its content on the basis of the Koran and Islamic religious practices such as the *hajj*.

The Christian participants struggle to make meaning of 1 Timothy 2:8-15. Using hermeneutical tools that first and foremost make them able to argue for relativizing or abandoning the text, they construct an interpretative position for themselves where this act is plausible. Inger professes a hermeneutics where the Jesus narratives constitute the hermeneutical key and dismisses both text and author on that basis. Eva uses her Christian theological knowledge to situate the text historically, claiming that it does not carry a universal message and is not representative of the Pauline texts in the New Testament. Both include a use of their own responses to the text as a resource in their making of meaning, and their positioning of

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<sup>178</sup> The expression "internal library" was used, according to Ford, by Aref Ali Nayed in a panel discussion at a Scriptural Reasoning conference at Cambridge in 2003. Ford explains this as "all they [the participants in SR] have learnt not only through tradition-specific activity in study, prayer, worship and experience but also what they have learnt through whatever academic disciplines they have studied – and also, of course, elements from a range of cultures, arts, economic, cultural and social contexts" (Ford 2006: 4-5).

themselves as autonomous readers opens up the way to do this without necessarily creating a dilemma in relation to the text itself.

Their reasoning links up well with that of Anne-Louise Eriksson who claims that, in order to apply the biblical text as an authority, particular texts should be tested as to whether their interpretation contributes to liberation or not (Eriksson 1999: 96). 1 Timothy 2:8-15 does not pass this test for Eva and Inger, and the result is a denial of the text's authority. Their testing of the text, however, concentrates more on the value of gender equality in particular than it does on a broader concept of liberation, as Eriksson suggests.

The Muslim participants turn to traditional and contextual resources in their interpretation of Sura 4:34, represented by the *hadith* and the *sunna*, the example of Muhammad, koranic exegesis, and contemporary scholars. Conversations with other Muslims are listed among the resources as well. To abandon the koranic text is not posed as an option for Aira and Shirin. They concentrate on testing the interpretations against the perceived broader message of human equality in the Koran.

Both the Christian and the Muslim representatives, then, engage with resources within their own traditions in their interpretation. Only the Muslims state explicitly that they discussed their text with others. This is another indication that Sura 4:34 is seen as a more relevant text for Muslims in Norway than 1 Timothy 2: 8-15 is for Norwegian Christians. The difference, however, is that the Christian participants put the text from the Christian canon on trial, whereas the Muslim participants dispute other *interpretations* of Sura 4:34. Based on the former discussions on the status of the Koran *versus* the Bible in the group, one may well have imagined that the different approaches to the two scriptures from the Christian and Muslim participants respectively could have merged into a discussion here too on the authority and status of the texts. Instead, there is a common attempt to discuss the two texts on different premises. One of the Christian and one of the Muslim participants discuss Sura 4:34 in relation to Norwegian law. This shows an awareness of the Norwegian context as a *juridical* context. Norwegian law is not consulted in the interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:8-15. The move to include Norwegian law in the discussions of Sura 4:34, however, indicates that solving contextual problems of female oppression related to the texts seems to overrule a potential conflict between different views of the participants' canonical scriptures. The contextual problems the participants are addressing are primarily situated among Muslims and possible challenges in *Christian* contexts are not discussed.

### ***Why Read These Texts? Time, Space, and Reading Positions***

The texts as representing a past and contexts and readers as representing the present is a recurrent feature of the discussion. One position is that a temporal evaluation dismisses the relevance of

the texts in the present. Another is the need to situate the texts historically in order to interpret the text's message, which relates to Mieke Bal's criterion of using a historical text in an informed way, having knowledge both about the past and the present (Bal 2008: 48). The concept of *qiwama*, playing a central role in the discussion on Sura 4:34, is used in a way that may qualify for Bal's request to be a *temporal metaphor* (Bal 2008: 48), when a notion is explored both in its historical and present use. The dispute on the interpretation of *qiwama* is located in the present, however, and the aim is to delve behind the interpretative development in the Islamic tradition from recent decades in order to reconstruct an original meaning that comes closer to the reformist Muslim agency of empowering Muslim women.

Inger's question "Why read?" is motivated by a position in which the texts are hopelessly lost in an irrelevant past and perhaps a wish that this is for the best of all concerned. The present challenges that are presented mainly by the Muslim participants but embraced by all as a common task, however, pull the participants into a position where they need to relate at least to Sura 4:34 as part of the present. One of the questions in analyzing the following discussions would be to see if this return to the present will gradually include making meaning of 1 Timothy 2:8-15 as well.

## **Discussion 2 Related to Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15.**

### **Aira: "The old understandings of old things that perhaps used to be sufficient but is not today"**

The discussion on the interpretation of Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15 continues. Inger comments:

- Inger73: I am just thinking about how we ... in what different ways we read the texts. I have read them very critically and kind of letter by letter, but you have worked very hard to interpret ... to reinterpret the text.
- Inger74: I see it as ... what I experience is that you found out about the expression "in charge of," and found that it means support, and in a way you've worked very actively to understand and interpret the text. It has a completely different meaning in this way.
- Inger75: So, I am curious ... if what you say about the text is the same interpretation you meet when you ... when you talk to other Muslims or if you are kind of pioneers who ....

Inger does not use the term “interpretation” about her own making of meaning. Her comments on the Muslim participants’ activity of making meaning include references to “hard work,” “interpretation,” and “reinterpretation” (Inger73-74). She characterizes her own way of reading, however, as “reading critically and kind of letter by letter.” This may describe a way of reading as *critical* without having any other information beyond the text itself and what her own individual interpretative framework of knowledge and experience gives her. She had not used linguistic or semantic strategies to work with the original Greek of the New Testament text, compared to the preparations of the Muslim participants on the Arabic notion of *qiwama*, giving Sura 4:34 a new meaning.

But Inger asks: To what extent is their interpretation representative of Muslims in general (Inger75)? Even if both Shirin and Aira did refer to others in their explanation of *qiwama* (Fatima Mernissi, Shirin’s husband, “other people”) and made use of an extensive Islamic hermeneutical reasoning (other koranic texts, the *hadith*, and the *sunna*), Inger is curious about the place of their interpretation among other Muslims. Inger’s way of asking shows perhaps that she herself is surprised by the new meaning that their interpretative work has given to Sura4:34. Thus, Inger may have worries that their interpretation, which she judges to be very constructive, is hidden from “other Muslims” (Inger75). What she asks for is their contextual and social knowledge of the interpretative situation and their own positioning in this.

- Aira157: No, it is ... you can find a number of people of the same ... who are able to interpret the text in the same direction that we have talked about here. It is not taken out of the blue.
- Aira158: There are a number of people of the same opinion, particularly in Europe, in England.
- Aira159: It is the word *qiwama* that she mentioned, and I view it ... that means to stand, to support, I heard that interpretation in England for the first time. It was in a course, together with others from Norway. It was at a center that many Muslims attend and are given religious education and are kind of prepared to be a minister, to be an imam. Or to become a leader who knows the art of interpretation and who can work with the texts in the future.
- Aira160: So, there are people thinking in the same way. And it ... you find it in Pakistan too. Not only a few.
- Aira161: But there are many people who take these words literally. They think that the man has some “executive power.” There is a need to educate these people with scholarly knowledge. Contextual information and knowledge about the Prophet’s traditions are essential to understanding these *ayas*.

- Aira162: So, woman and man are like parts ... just like two pairs of wheels on a car. One can ... a car needs all of them to move. They have to stay together; then there is support, right?
- Aira163: And if you don't get support, you could think: Was it only men who supported the family?
- Aira164: In the time of the Prophet many women had small shops and trade caravans .... it was common for women to have businesses or do some work.
- Aira165: The way of interpreting we have talked about today is actually shared by several leading scholars and imams today, but it may not be so common among people with little knowledge.

That the interpretation given by Shirin and Aira is not geographically and culturally limited to Europe or "taken out of the blue" (Aira157) is clarified. Aira does, however, admit that the interpretation she has presented may be seen as valid mostly among educated Muslims (Aira161 and 165). Inger's hunch that Aira and Shirin represent a rather small group of Muslims is thus partly confirmed.

Aira shares her personal narrative about her process of making meaning of Sura 4:34, as well as contextual knowledge. Then she returns to comment directly on the koranic text, first by using an image to illustrate the ideal relationship between man and woman in marriage – they are like wheels on a car. Aira's earlier argument, based on a complementary gender model, does not seem to apply here. Wheels on a car serve the same function, rather than different ones. Aira then includes references to her experience (Aira163) and finally she draws on the example of the prophet Muhammad (Aira164).

Now Aira makes an attempt to explain the status of the interpretation of Sura 4:34 she follows:

- Aira166: But really, why is it like that? Then one has to know about the political conditions in the different countries, the high rate of illiteracy. If one is illiterate, the message is ... you can't read for yourself, you don't understand the words, the context, or the conditions of the sayings, so one cannot judge. You have to believe what is orally stated by someone in the mosque. He might be a good imam, well educated, but it is possible that he does not have enough knowledge to share it with others.
- Aira167: And he can have the usual tendency or the usual understanding that does not have anything to do with the present. Then it is the old understanding of old things that perhaps used to be sufficient but is not today.



- Aira168: For instance, today, when both have jobs, if both husband and wife spend money at home, it doesn't mean that one should share just the way it is prescribed in the Koran. If the husband dies, and the wife gets one fourth of the share, that would be unfair. Because they have both contributed. Then it should be exactly the same however much he has contributed and however much she has contributed.
- Aira169: So, one can think that this would lead to new interpretations.<sup>179</sup> But then, it depends on the political situation in the countries. You find dictatorships, unrest, nobody has the time or the resources to educate themselves or see one's own opinions or understand different interpretations, and then you can understand it quite easy.
- Aira170: And then you're stuck. So there are many factors; it is not one thing that creates the problems; there are many things.

The explanations Aira gives for other interpretations of Sura 4:34 (Aira166 and 169) are all linked to contextual factors: Political and educational circumstances, lack of opportunity and time to prioritize knowledge about the text among people in Muslim communities. Hence she does not see other interpretations as a result of different methodological or theological interpretations of the Koran and the Islamic tradition as such.

Aira's emphasis on education and literacy as tools to implement a more constructive interpretation of Sura 4:34 in a way that does not create problems comes to mind. She highlights the importance of Muslims having enough skills to read and understand the Koran and the *sunna* for themselves (Aira166). Apart from the educational point, this argument leads to the question of authority to interpret. Aira seems to place this authority with the individual Muslim as well as with the institutional authorities within Islam. But rather than discussing a religious institutionalized hierarchy of interpreters, Aira concentrates on the importance of interpretational skills among *all*. The crucial point for Aira is that the interpretation needs to be grounded in education and knowledge, it has to be adequately related to the contemporary context of contemporary times and not represent "old understandings of old things" (Aira167). Furthermore, ordinary Muslims need to have access to it. The notion "old" seems to be used negatively in connection with "understanding," referring to irrelevant and problematic interpretations. The "old things," however, may refer to the Islamic tradition and text, and here "old" may not have negative connotations at all but simply frame a chronology. But the "old

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<sup>179</sup> After reading through the final transcriptions, Aira underlines that, according to Islam, a woman can earn her own money and is not obliged to spend it on the family, since this is the responsibility of the man.

understanding” happening *now* is a problem. What Aira probably wants, if she is talking about her earlier making of meaning, is *new* understandings of “old things.”

Aira pictures a situation of being “stuck” if one does not have access to education or political and social space to exercise relevant interpretational work on the Koran and the *sunna* (Aira169-170). To be “stuck” implies a situation where one is unable to move. Aira places countries with a low level of education and political instability in this “stuck” situation. In other words, one does not need to be stuck in this way in Europe or in Norway.

Aira gives an example in Aira168 of a new interpretation in another field: the Norwegian context influences her view of what is fair in a gendered practice of inheritance distribution. A new interpretation is needed in order not to be stuck in what she evaluates as an unfair outcome in her own situation, although the Islamic traditional ruling would say otherwise.

- Eva137: But it is like this in the Christian world as well. Before ... you say that the imams have power and people in general do not know what is written. The priests and ministers have interpreted, haven't they, as it suited them?
- Eva138: Concerning the subjugation of women, for instance, and other kinds of subjugation, as it fit into the social structures of society.
- Eva139: So, the societal conditions and the interpretations have, kind of, been two sides that have completed each other. So we know this quite well ....

Eva makes a comparison with the “Christian world” (Eva137), based on Aira’s shared analysis of the current interpretative situation in some Muslim majority countries. She compares imams incapable of presenting relevant interpretations of the Koran and *sunna*, drawing on Aira’s example, to Christian ministers who, according to Eva, interpreted the Bible in a way that only benefited themselves. Eva’s “Christian world” is not clearly situated in time and space, but Eva1 could suggest that Eva is talking about “then,” as opposed to “now.” Eva is comparing the Christian “here and then” to the Muslim “there and now.” But there is an element of identification in her comparison with what Aira just shared. Eva has moved from emphasizing differences, as she did earlier in the process, to comparing possible *similarities* between the Christian and Islamic traditions.

Aira’s explanation of what she viewed as a poor interpretative situation was lack of education and knowledge and political circumstances. Eva states that she believes that the Christian clergy’s motivation was ethical, or rather a lack of ethical reflection. This may illustrate the fact that she suspects the Christian clergy of interpreting against better knowledge, deliberately hiding other ways of interpretation from Christian believers because of their own interests. If this is the case, Eva’s mistrust is of a different kind than Aira’s view of the challenge

facing many Muslims: better knowledge and education would improve the situation for Muslims, according to Aira. Eva suggests that this is an ethical or moral question, which turns the question of interpretative authority into a question of power and intention. But it seems that Eva is talking mainly about a Christian past, rather than a present challenge in her own context.

Eva believes that Christian ministers interpreted biblical texts according to the contextual social norms of society (meaning female subjugation in past society) for their own benefit. But when the conventional norms in society shifted from “bad” to “good” in her ethical evaluation, that is, when the social structures of society turned from a normative message of subjugation of women to a normative message of gender equality in the Norwegian context, does Eva find it right to adapt to social conventions when interpreting the Bible?

Eva has explained earlier that she believes that contemporary Norwegian society has moved closer to Christian ideals during recent decades (Eva81, p. 191). The Christian ideals she found to be better implemented in the present are the ideals of human equality. She described how she believed that a more accurate interpretation of the message of Jesus has contributed to this development. In this section, however, she is concerned with a past negative social influence on biblical interpretation and with clergy who, according to her, had an interest in securing their own privileges. Eva’s concern does not seem to be that the church and biblical interpretation should be kept away from discourses in society at large or away from contemporary political movements. Rather, Eva has an ethical measuring stick, an axiomatic value which functions as her reference when she evaluates Biblical interpretation both in the past and in the present. Her criterion for an adequate interpretation of biblical texts is human equality, or inclusive gender equality. She connects this value both to the message of Jesus and to the human struggle (Eva81-84 p.190).

Inger76: And the language is ... Arabic, which no one understands, we had Latin that no one understood.

Inger77: It was part of the liberation, I think it means you get the texts in your own language and are allowed to read for yourself and to interpret and ask questions because, if you do not, you are dependent on authorities in a way that is not liberating.

Shirin133: Those interpretations or, for instance, the fact that they are translated into Farsi or Urdu ... but those people who have a particular interpretation that they perhaps claim is literal, those verses create problems, you see.

Shirin133: They don’t want to.

- Shirin134: In the West it is kind of taboo to talk about religion. I don't know how you think, but ... I think this is something that needs to be worked on, so that it doesn't become a taboo. In Muslim countries, it is taboo to talk about non-religious stuff. Democracy ... the kind of governing system that they have, some of them have ... that is a kind of taboo when you only live with the word democracy. And I believe that for some in the West democracy is ... it needs to be worked on, I think, so that they can see that no one will threaten their religion, their ....
- Shirin135: I think that in the West ... religion is like ... if it is not supposed to be taken seriously, fine. But if it is supposed to be regarded as at the same level as other sciences, then ... I believe that religious studies is like ... it is parallel to other sciences and studies, it is a reason for that.
- Inger78: But, I think ....
- Shirin136: Superficial, yes, but not ... sorry.
- Inger79: I was the one interrupting this time. But I do believe that there is something in what you say, that religion is in many ways a kind of taboo in the West.
- Inger80: But this might have been necessary, because some generations ago, everyone had to baptize their children, everyone had to be confirmed, everyone had to get married in the church, and when I got married ... thirty-something years ago, there was a large movement in Norway on the right to choose marriage or just to live together without marriage. One wanted to be liberated from the forces of religion, as well as from the forces of society and the bourgeoisie. One should be allowed to make free choices.
- Inger81: So, but I think there is a change now, as well, religion is a new topic, but now you choose religion. It is not only part of a tradition; it is something you actually choose.
- Inger82: And I believe that is great: young people can choose to become baptized when they are fourteen years old. They choose it.
- Inger83: At the same time, some things are disappearing, so I believe that it is right what you are saying. And some get embarrassed if you bring up the topic.

Inger compares current challenges in the Islamic tradition to challenges she views as belonging to the past in the Christian tradition. The example she uses is that of the languages of

Arabic and Latin as languages that alienate believers who do not know them.<sup>180</sup> Inger's point is that this alienation makes the believers more dependent on religious authorities for understanding and interpreting the texts (Inger77). The "liberation" Inger mentions in Inger77 is the freedom to read and interpret for oneself because the text is translated into one's own language. It seems as if she is referring to a historical event, perhaps the Reformation and the Lutheran emphasis on access to the Bible for everyone.

The main problem addressed in this sequence, by Inger and later by Shirin, is the impact that individual access to the canonical scriptures may have on the possibility for believers to be their own interpretative authorities or at least be equipped to engage in discussions and evaluations of the texts and their interpretations. To be dependent on, for instance, religious authorities limit the autonomy of the individual believer. Shirin comments that translation of the Koran may not be a solution for improving the interpretative situation among non-Arabic speaking Muslims. She states that Muslims who consider themselves traditional or conservative and interpret texts such as Sura 4:34 "literally" would not accept a translated version of the Koran anyway.<sup>181</sup>

The discussion between Inger and Shirin about challenges in the interpretative situation is extended to include the position and attitude to religion in the West. They agree that religion is a somewhat taboo topic in the West, and Shirin compares this to an alleged taboo against talking about democracy in some Muslim majority societies. Inger80-82 emphasizes how religion has ceased to have a firm grip on "everyone's" life, referring to changes in the Norwegian society. She views this as a positive development: religious participation now is a matter of free choice by the individual rather than a social duty. This change, from religious participation as social obligation to a matter of free individual choice, is located in the Norwegian, and perhaps Western, context.

Shirin argues that religion is a study and research discipline in the West along with other disciplines, and that this is, after all, a sign that religion is taken seriously. For Shirin the issue of democracy in Muslim majority societies is a matter of explaining or interpreting democracy in a way that it is not perceived to "threaten their religion" (Shirin134). That Shirin uses "their" may be a consequence of her viewing this as an outsider, perhaps situating herself in this position to construct a distance between herself and "them" in a multitude of different representations of

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<sup>180</sup> There is a difference between Latin and Arabic as religious languages. Latin was mainly the language of the educated and of the Church. Arabic in its various dialects, on the other hand, is the mother tongue of millions of people and has a different status as the language of the Koran and which the Islamic tradition considers to be a language revealed by God.

<sup>181</sup> In the Islamic tradition, the Koran in its original language has the status of revelation, whereas translations cannot fully represent the original Koran and are preferably called versions and not translations.

Islam that exist. It may also express a *diasporic imagination*, in which she is negotiating between different cultures and representations of Islam.<sup>182</sup>

Shirin and Inger share a perception that people's understanding of both religion and democracy can distinctively shape the environment and context for interpretations of religious canonical scriptures. What they do not address is what might happen with the *skill* of interpreting if religion is regarded as taboo in the public sphere and if the political idea of democracy is seen as a topic for religious interpretation. Aira addressed the question of the political and educational context as crucial to obtaining interpretative skills, as well as room to work with texts, as a practical and political matter. Shirin and Inger discuss biblical and koranic interpretation with regard to larger cultural, religious, and political discourses.

Shirin137: I think it is at the same level as other sciences, and the way I see it, in modern times, there are lots of very positive things. Think about the revolution bringing all that information to the internet. Ok, somebody may misuse it, but think about all the good and free information researchers have the opportunity to provide, they can do research and then share it with humanity, lots of good things. But ok, someone does misuse them. But one can't ....

Shirin138: With religion, it's like this. People need it. Even if someone misuses it, you have to talk about that and solve the problems and move on.

Eva140: No, I think that religion is something completely different from research. I mean, you cannot do research to have religious faith.

Shirin139: Not faith, but religion ... I usually say: What is Islam? Is it a construction of thought, finished once and for all? Or something dynamic? I take a look at it, I do research on it, I think about it, I experience it. Which is it?

There are two parallel discussions in this section, and they do not really meet. Shirin argues that religion needs to be open to the public ("on the internet," Shirin137) for discussions on what religion is. Using the example of Islam, she asks: Is it fixed or negotiable (Shirin139)? Shirin states that the Islamic tradition is a "construction of thought." This reveals her view of Islam as a dynamic tradition. Constructions can be reconstructed, as opposed to viewing something that is fixed. Shirin uses the notion "misuse" twice in the sequence (in Shirin137-

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<sup>182</sup> See Chapter 2, p. 47, for an elaboration of the term "diasporic imagination" in this study in connection with Kwok Pui-Lan's work on the term (Kwok 2005: 47).

138): about information in general and about religion. The misuse is not only mentioned as a possibility but also as deliberately acted out by “someone.” Shirin’s proposed way of dealing with the “misuse” is not to abandon religion; rather, openness and discussions are required to investigate the meaning and impact of religion.

Eva’s concern is to establish a distinction between “religion and research” (Eva140). Her argument is that religious faith is not possible as a result of research. Shirin suggests a distinction between religion and faith and continues to highlight the importance on research on religion. Eva comments:

Eva141: Well, but you are supposed to interpret Islam in your present, just like we need to interpret the Bible based on the present. We must do that, right? But that’s an interpretation, it’s not a science.

Shirin140: It will be, as far as I can see. Not for us, but for the theologians. When you are supposed to think in different ways. Something is written, different elements enter into the picture, and it becomes science. Not the faith itself but how I experience the faith.

Eva142: We think about this differently because you think that there are people who should interpret for you, in a way, these imams should interpret for you, research and so on.

Eva143: But I look at this in the way that I read the Bible, and I read the gospels, and then I interpret them myself, based on who I am and the times I live in. Nobody stands between me and my interpretation.

Shirin141: But this is for those who are able to do so. Think about most Christians. Perhaps they need someone to make them understand. You see?

Shirin142: OK, in our religion, there is still a great need for that.

Shirin143: Perhaps for you this has already happened. There are a lot of good books about those who were theologians, Christian theologians who do research in pedagogical institutions. And you call it science, theology. Perhaps you don’t need it, but we need it.

Shirin144: And this hasn’t happened to us like that. What we have, is, excuse me, there was interpretation at the time of the Prophet Muhammad. But after that, it was fixed. Think about that. Some have worked on it but not enough ... and lots of people stick to the interpretation that happened at that time.

Eva144: But this isn't possible.

Shirin145: This is our challenge.

Eva145: But it isn't possible. One cannot say "our interpretation is fixed." Because we live in a different time, the words mean something different for us; it is a development.

Shirin146: Yes, but for us ....

Eva146: That's why it is a bluff to state that an interpretation is fixed, right?

Shirin147: Yes, this is a challenge for us. We need to renew the interpretation .... we have to start now to work with *sharia* .... That is what we need to start working on.

Shirin and Eva agree on the importance of reinterpreting the canonical scriptures in their respective traditions but disagree on how to reach a situation where this can take place. Their disagreement seems to emerge from their different analysis of the status quo and the role of scholarly skills in renewing interpretation. In addition, Eva claims that the role of the individual interpreter is generally limited in the Islamic tradition (Eva142).

Eva states that the challenge for Christians and Muslims are the same, suggesting a common "we" (Eva141). The expression "your present" (Eva141), however, might suggest that Eva does not automatically see that Christians and Muslims share a common "present." Splitting up the temporal notion "the present" like she does indicates a spatial division within the temporal framing of a "now." The split may suggest that there are different challenges in different contexts: for instance, between the "now" in a Norwegian context and the "now" in a Pakistani or Iranian context. Or, the split could refer to Christian and Muslim contexts respectively within the Norwegian context. If her attempt is to create a general division of one "now" for Christians and another for Muslims, it may still represent a spatial division but in a more metaphorical way, as an establishment of two separate universes. I believe Eva is simply stating that she believes Christians and Muslims face different challenges in the "now," not that they live in different "now's."

Eva and Shirin agree on what Shirin has described as a "dynamic" way of looking at Islam (Shirin139), which Eva applies to the Christian tradition as well. They disagree, however,



on the role of academic knowledge in textual interpretation. Eva states: “Interpretation is not science” (Eva141), whereas Shirin claims that textual interpretation is part of science because it needs research, and she calls for this work to be done by “the theologians” (Shirin140). Keeping the distinction between faith and how faith is experienced, as she suggested earlier, she can exclude the dimension of “faith” from the sphere of research. If Shirin views faith as an individual, subjective experience, this distinction could imply that in theological research on a text she looks for community-oriented interpretations closely connected to knowledge represented by the tradition, contextualized in a skilled way. Shirin seems to be arguing for a view of religious knowledge and science as integrated into the Islamic knowledge system. That she belongs to Shia Islam, a branch of Islam where different religious scholars (like *ayatollahs* and *marja’ al-taqlids*, interpreters to be followed) form schools of followers and occupy an important position in the interpretation of tradition, may explain her statement on the need for religious leaders in the interpretation process (Waines 2003: 168-169). Whereas Aira focused earlier on the need for education for all in order to evaluate the textual interpretation done by Islamic leaders and the necessity to be able to read the Koran for oneself, Shirin addresses the need for access to religious knowledge through theologians (Shirin140), and asks Eva if Christian readers of the Bible do not need someone to provide knowledge for them as well (Shirin141).

Eva’s suggestion that Shirin’s view is motivated by a need to lean on the interpretations and knowledge of others, seems like an indirect criticism of a lack of autonomy. Eva approaches the question of involving research and religious scholars in textual interpretation as a *power struggle* over the interpretative authority, Shirin emphasizes theologians and researchers as *sources of knowledge* to help the individual believer understand better.

Eva’s own uncompromising autonomy in making meaning of biblical texts surfaces once again in the discussion (Eva143). She seems to view biblical interpretation as primarily an individual act and indicates a skeptical or even dismissive attitude toward “professional” interference in the freedom of the individual believer in this respect. She explains her own way of interpretation to be shaped by “who I am and the times I live in” (Eva143). This implies an individual approach to interpreting the texts, but since society and a broader context are part of both the construction of the interpreting “I” and the contextual reference “the times,” which probably has a spatial dimension as well, Eva’s interpretation is still related to a community. It is probably not that she wants to interpret the texts without relating to other people, society, or the church community. What Eva is insisting on is the right to claim her own interpretative authority. Eva used her theological skills when reflecting on 1 Timothy 2:8-15, skills she learned from someone else, based on research and scholarly work. In this discussion, however, she attributes no explicit value to her own achievement of historical and exegetical knowledge about

the Bible. What is at stake for Eva is not access to knowledge but confirmation of interpretative autonomy.

Shirin's comments suggest that she views the current interpretative situation for Muslims and Christians differently. Her reference to something that may have "happened" in the Christian tradition that "hasn't happened to us like that" (Shirin143-144) remains unexplained. It seems to have something to do with Christian theology and interpretative turns in Bible studies such as the use of the historical-critical method (Henriksen 2006: 146-147), and other hermeneutical developments taking place in recent decades. Shirin describes an interpretative situation among Muslims where many stick to an interpretation of the tradition that emerged during the time of Muhammad (Shirin144). The reference is probably to the interpretation of the Koran, but it may include the interpretation of the entire *sunna*. According to Shirin, there is a need for knowledgeable people who can help people interpret the Koran and the tradition in line with the present situation (Shirin142 and 147). On this issue she agrees with Aira: knowledge of the tradition is not enough; skills to interpret it in ways compatible with current needs and contemporary contexts, and knowledge of how to bridge the gap between the "then" and the "now" are crucial.

Shirin's description of the different situations in the Christian tradition over against the Islamic interpretative tradition emerges as a general view of the historical development of religions in accordance with certain historical stages, and that Islam as a younger religion has not yet reached the same level of hermeneutical skills. This indicates that Shirin uses a kind of evolutionary theory of history to interpret the development of the religions. It would, however, be speculative to interpret her in this way, since she is eager to emphasize the fluidity and dynamic aspect of Islam. Shirin obviously finds it hard to believe, too, that most Christians do not need more knowledge about their own texts and how to make meaning of them. What Shirin does not address is the question of interpretative power connected to the position of being the knower, which is Eva's concern.

Eva objects to the way Shirin analyzes the Muslim interpretative situation and claims it is impossible to hold to results that are 1300 years old. This is based on how Eva understands the concept of interpretation. She rejects the possibility of any fixed interpretations, since the meaning of the words is different for people at different times (Eva145). The same texts have different readers who understand the words differently. Shirin does not, however, address the question of interpretation as a philosophical question at this time. Rather, she confronts the interpretational attitude of an alleged fixed interpretation. They speak from two different perspectives: Eva is speaking on the basis of her philosophical and theological view on interpretation and Shirin is speaking from a more praxis-oriented point of view.

Shirin states that the most urgent object of reinterpretation is the *sharia*.<sup>183</sup> Why *sharia* and not the Koran? In Islam *sharia* and the Koran cannot necessarily be said to be two different entities. *Sharia* in the broad sense, as Shirin most probably uses the term, refers to the entire divine law, including all divine guidance for humans to live a good life according to God's will (Waines 2003: 63). Shirin formulates the necessary work of finding new ways of interpretation in Islam as a challenge it is possible to meet. She articulates the need, and assumes an agency: In Shirin147 she includes herself in the "we" that has to assume the task of renewing the interpretation of Islamic tradition.

Aira171: Yes. Yes, excuse me. Well, in reality it is not full stop in the interpretation. Because ... if we look at Islam, there are many sects. All the sects have different interpretations. Shia interprets in one way; it differs from how Sunni Muslims interpret the same verse.

Aira172: So, that is why we are here. ... and within the same group or tradition, there are a lot of different interpretations, as well .... So it never stops.

Aira173: It hasn't happened only once but in several places, and there are different interpretations.

Shirin148: Do you mean Sunni and Shia Islam?

Aira174: Yes, it is ....

Shirin149: Was that a kind of dynamic interpretation? My research does not show that it is.

Aira175: What I mean is that interpretation is not finished. There are different interpretations. Why do we have different sects?

Shirin150: That's the way it's always been.

This is a rare occasion within the group discussions where the difference between Sunni and Shia Islam is explicitly stated. The main focus, however, is the total interpretative situation in the Islamic tradition. Aira states that the interpretative situation among Muslims is marked by pluralism (Aira171-173), not only because of the existence of Sunni and Shia Islam, but also

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<sup>183</sup> See my section on Ziba Mir-Husseini's thinking on this in Chapter 2, where she emphasizes *fiqh* as the important locus for reinterpretation in the Islamic tradition, p. 75.

among Sunni Muslims.<sup>184</sup> Shirin questions whether the mere existence of plurality is enough to grant a dynamic interpretation. Aira states that her point is that the activity of interpretation in Islam is not fixed but fluid, pluralistic, and ongoing (Aira172). There is no evaluation of this as positive or negative. Aira puts her statement in a descriptive way, simply stating it as a fact. Aira spoke earlier of the concept of *ijtihad* as dynamic interpretation required for responding adequately to the current need for reinterpretation (Aira22-23, p.136). Although she does not mention *ijtihad* in this section, when she did so earlier she articulated that independent thinking in the interpretation of *sharia* and *fiqh* (*ijtihad*) is necessary as an ongoing activity (p. 136).

Aira176: I think we are finished with the current cases. Is there anything else we should discuss?

Aira177: This has been very interesting to listen to, and these interpretations are the ones we use to subjugate women or to give them a respectable space to live a dignified life. It is our interpretations deciding this.

Aira178: And I hope we can use our reason in the future, when we sit and listen to each other, and perhaps enrich each other's mindsets.

Aira179: This has been great, and I believe that we might not need another meeting for the same things if we cannot come up with new thoughts.

Aira, in her concluding remarks as moderator, evaluates the making of the meaning of the texts as contextually relevant and acknowledges that the participants' interpretations are significant. This might be interpreted as if she is saying that the group possesses interpretative authority; she is at least stating that the interpretations are decisive (Aira177) – even if the “we” in Aira177 may include the totality of both the Christian and the Muslim community worldwide. Interpretation is thus presented as a collective and possibly transreligious matter. It is not obvious however, that Aira is emphasizing the need for an interrelated, Christian-Muslim interpretation of the texts. Her main focus throughout this discussion was on how Muslims could be equipped to interpret and reinterpret their own tradition.

Aira presents a choice to the “we” of the group, and possibly to a greater “we” as well: since the interpretation of the texts influences the life of women (Christian and Muslim, Aira177), the interpreting “we” decides whether this influence is constructive or destructive. This gives the texts – but first of all the *interpreters* – a crucial role in shaping the lives of women. Aira seems to refer to women in general, without emphasizing particular religious, cultural, or

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<sup>184</sup> An example of different interpretative traditions originating from the same geographical area within Sunni Islam is the *barelwis* and the *deobandis*. Both groups exist in Norway as well as in Pakistan (Vogt 2000: 23-27).

geographical locations. But obviously the importance of the textual interpretation is correlated to how influential the texts are in their respective contexts. It seems that, to Aira, the importance of the texts is more or less given.

Aira179 may suggest that Aira was content with the meeting to such a degree that she doubted if another meeting about the same texts was required. Through this she both takes a position of authority, since another meeting was already scheduled, and shows perhaps an eagerness to be efficient in the sense that the meetings should have a clear aim. If the aim has been fulfilled, then it is time to move on. This remark, together with her expressed satisfaction with how the communication went when discussing the text (Aira179) indicates that Aira's expectations for the discussion were met and her own most important points had been communicated. She suggests that the future meetings should be marked by listening and mutual enrichment in a similar way. An acknowledgement of a common "we," and a possible shared agency, may be suggested by Aira in her concluding remarks.

#### *The Interpretative Situations in Present Contexts*

Both discussions in this meeting spend much more time on Sura 4:34 than on 1 Timothy 2:8-15. It is suggested by one of the Christian participants that present-day Muslims face the same challenges of interpretation as Christians have done in the past. Based on this view, all participants might share the feeling that a discussion of Sura 4:34 is much more urgent.

The interpretative situation among Muslims to which the Muslim participants related reaches beyond the Norwegian context. Their spatial dimension of textual interpretation includes contexts in Muslim majority countries as well as other European countries. A connection is drawn between social and political conditions having an impact on the possibility for the interpretation and reinterpretation of Islamic canonical texts and *sharia*. For Aira and Shirin, the necessary reinterpretation requires political stability and freedom as well as access to knowledge and skilled religious authorities. In this discussion, it seems that Norway – as a stable democracy – might be evaluated as a good place for reinterpretation and new making of meaning regarding the Islamic canonical scriptures. The vulnerable element in the Norwegian context, however, is probably the lack of access to knowledge about the Islamic tradition.

Aira establishes the aim that all Muslims should have enough knowledge and skills to be their own interpretative authority. However ambitious this goal may seem, this is what both Aira and Shirin are displaying in these two discussions. They are able to relate to the text from Sura 4:34 in a way they want all Muslims to be able to do.

### *What Kind of Knowledge is Needed?*

Knowledge is highlighted in discussion 2 as a necessary requirement for improving the skills of interpretation among Muslims. But there are other requirements for knowledge too, and there are some discussions about knowledge and religion. The discussion between Eva and Shirin addresses the role of knowledge in the interpretation of canonical scriptures. Whereas Shirin has confidence that more knowledge is important to the believers, Eva seems to doubt the value of knowledge and establishes a more existential interpretation of the texts as a practice of faith without particular knowledge. Knowledge is constructed by Eva as a possibly unwanted element in her making meaning of the biblical texts, potentially overruling her own experience and analysis of her context. The Muslim participants do not immediately share Eva's hermeneutics of suspicion toward scholarly knowledge. However, they too, evaluate what kind of knowledge they believe is for their and other Muslims' good. It should not fix the tradition but provide room for differences and for dynamics within the tradition. The knowledge requested by *all*, however, is required to relate to contextual needs. Beyond that, they may differ in what emphasis scholarly knowledge and theological research should have. Shirin's question (Shirin141) does, however, ask the Christian participants in turn a question about representativeness after Inger asks Aira and Shirin about *their* representativeness. Perhaps they do not need that scholarly knowledge, but what about the needs of other Christians? Is it really only the individual making of meaning that matters in the Christian tradition, free from influence by scholars?

A tension regarding the role of textual interpreters and their religious identity between the participants may surface at this point. The Muslims' need to interpret a canonical text and stay within the frames of the tradition appears to be different from that of the Christian participants.

The search for knowledge that again becomes visible in discussion 2 is displayed in the discussion itself. This is the Christian participants' need to have access to the contextual knowledge of Aira and Shirin. While the Muslim participants primarily seek knowledge about how to establish a different interpretative situation for Sura 4:34, the Christian participants seek knowledge about Islam and Muslims.

### *Toward a Shared Interpretative "We"?*

The participants all agree about the importance of being able to evaluate and interpret the Koran and the Bible respectively as individual believers and to have authority as readers, although for the Christian participants this authority seems to include autonomy whereas the Muslim participants engage more closely with their religious tradition. But is the meaning-making work done separately by Christians and Muslims in the group, or is the group starting to become an interpretative "we"?

Aira addresses a “we” in the group in her last comment, and she claims that this “we” could improve the living conditions for Christian and Muslim women if the attempts at making meaning in the group could be made available to others. She thus situates the “we” in a powerful interpretative position with a significant responsibility. Her horizon is contexts outside the group, and the common “we” she suggests seems to be constructed on a shared ethical analysis of the texts’ effects on their contexts: these texts should not be used to oppress women. This is Aira’s call for a shared agency.

### **Discussion 3 Related to Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15.**

#### **Inger: “But women as wise as us ... need to get something said!”**

Two participants were present in the fifth meeting who did not take part in the first meeting on Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15: Susanne and Maria, both Christians. Eva did not attend. Aira had suggested at the end of the former meeting that the process of making meaning of these texts was exhausted, asking if there was anything new to be added to what was already said. She did not get much response to her suggestion at the end of the fourth meeting. The fifth meeting, the second to discuss Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15, was held as scheduled.<sup>185</sup> The fifth meeting was the last meeting to discuss the canonical texts in the project. Inger functioned as moderator for the fifth meeting.

Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15 were read aloud to lead in to the discussion to be based on this text. This time Aira read the New Testament text, and Maria later read the text from the Koran. Thus, the practice so far in the group – that a Muslim read the text from the Islamic tradition, and a Christian read the text from the Christian tradition – was changed this final time. Inger suggested this and no one objected.

At the previous fourth meeting, the comments were structured by the participants’ religious affinity: the Christian participants commenting on both texts first, followed by the Muslim participants doing the same. At this meeting, however, Inger suggested that the comments should be structured by the texts: All comments on one of the texts should be presented before the group moved on to the next. In this way, 1 Timothy 2:8-15 was more thoroughly discussed than at the former meeting. Both texts are, however, present throughout the discussion through references and cross-comments by the participants.

Aira180:           When I read it, a lot of it reminds me of similar rules or messages in the Koran.

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<sup>185</sup> See the chapter on method for the account on the participation and absence of the participants and how this might have influenced the process.

- Aira181: Concerning the purity of the men before prayer, this is exactly like our ritual ablution. We wash our hands, our mouth, our face and feet before we pray five times a day.
- Aira182: So, it is almost the same – one is supposed to be totally clean before one can come before God.
- Aira183: And without anger and rage ... that is a message in the Koran too that one should forgive others, and not lose one's temper.
- Aira184: Concerning the women's appearance, this is the same, too, that they should have ... not be too provocative, and the message about wearing a *hijab* or decent clothes is something we regard as a koranic message.
- Aira185: And gold jewelry and pearls ... that too is mentioned in the Koran, that we should not expose our adornments to people who are not very closely related to us.<sup>186</sup>
- Aira186: So, I view it very much this way that this is a message that is intended to create good relations, and distinguish women and men from their attraction for each other which may create problems in the long run. This goes for both women and men.
- Aira187: When it comes to "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission" and "I permit no woman to teach," I feel that these verses are related to a specific situation .... it is possibly not a general message that women should keep silent ....
- Aira188: But when it comes to the restriction that women should not be teachers, I don't understand it, for this is not consistent with the message of the Koran.
- Aira189: The Koran says that both men and women are obliged to learn how to teach. They should study the Koran themselves, and then lecture, share their insights with others. So this is a bit different from the message of the Koran.
- Aira190: And the next thing here ... many who translate the message so that men have "executive authority" would translate or interpret that verse as "she should have authority over the man." As if it is the men who have complete authority.
- Aira191: So there are many similarities here, but they can also be a bit different.

Aira states that she uses her knowledge and perception of koranic texts as her main reference for reflecting on and evaluating the New Testament text. This corresponds with her

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<sup>186</sup> Cf. Sura 24:31f.



way of commenting on this text in the former discussions. This time, however, she is more thorough. Being the one who read the text aloud might increase her engagement with the text.

Her comments are structured mainly along similar patterns: First, she refers to the New Testament text, and then adds a comment that includes a reference and a comparison with what she views as a related message from the Koran. Verse 8 and 9 in 1 Timothy 2:8-15 take on meaning for Aira when she relates their immediate content to Islamic practice as expressed in the prescription to dress modestly and ritual ablution before prayers (*wudu*), (Aira181-186). Her conclusion is that the textual intention of introducing these regulations is to safeguard decency in male-female relations.

Aira's comments on the prohibition against women teaching are, however, far more critical in this second round of commenting than in former discussions. The denouncement of women teachers in 1 Timothy 2 is a prescription that, according to Aira, is not only different from the message of the Koran but directly opposes it, since, in her view, the Koran presents the task of religious education as compulsory for both men and women (Aira189). Aira distinguishes between what she perceives as general and specific messages in the textual meaning of 1 Timothy 2 and suggests (as she did in the former discussion) that the prescription that women should be silent is a specific message to address a local problem. In this way she gives an interpretation similar to that given by Eva earlier, perhaps relating to Eva (Eva100, p. 237).

In Aira190 Aira states that interpreters who prefer to understand the term *qiwama* in Sura 4:34 as *bestyrelsesautoritet* or "executive authority," and thus use the text to legitimize men's authority over women in the Islamic tradition, would be of the same kind as those who interpret 1 Timothy 2:8-15 as legitimizing men's general authority over women in the Christian tradition. Aira thus establishes a direct connection between the two texts by what she perceives to be Christian and Muslim interpreters motivated by the same aim: to establish a gendered hierarchy of power with men in charge of women. Aira seems to suggest that the two texts carry the same interpretative challenges and indirectly suggests a hermeneutics of suspicion – not toward the text, but toward other interpreters and interpretations.

Her statement in Aira190, i.e. "as if it is the men who have complete authority," is a warning against the misuse of both texts. Whereas an obvious result of the misuse may be the subjugation and oppression of women, what Aira addresses here may be male interpreters aiming at possessing an authority that belongs to God only. Her way of putting it – "as if" the men had the "complete authority" – indicates that she regards men's possession of authority to be limited because Aira regards God as the only instance having full authority.

- Aira192: And concerning the part that “Adam was created first and then Eve, and he was not deceived, but the woman was deceived,” this message is different from the Koran too.
- Aira193: Because the Koran states clearly that they both lost the way of God because of Satan’s ... what can you say....
- Inger84: Temptation?
- Aira194: Temptation. Temptations, it says in the Koran, and that word means that they both were, what did you say ... tempted by that Satan, and it wasn’t only that Eve did this and that she had ... so that is different.
- Aira195: So that is not included, that it is only the child that saves her,<sup>187</sup> it is really faith in God, love for God.
- Aira196: We have ... there are two main things that we must have.
- Aira197: That is, our obligations toward God, and our obligations toward fellow human beings.
- Aira198: If we have love for God, we must believe in him, and then we show love to humans too, and when we submit to God’s will, we are saved, and this has nothing to do with childbirth.

The two different narratives of the Fall of Humankind in the group’s discussions, the koranic version and the version from Genesis to which 1 Timothy 2:8-15 refers, are addressed through pointing out the differences. The two differences Aira finds are, first, how the narrative of the Fall in 1 Timothy 2 is used to explain and legitimize the subjugation of women because of the women’s role in the Fall. In the corresponding narrative in the koranic tradition, both the man and the woman are equally responsible for what happened (Sura 7:19-25). The second difference concerns the statement in 1 Timothy 2:15 about women being saved through childbirth. Aira states that, in the Koran, what saves both men and women is faith in God, love for God and fellow humans, and submission to God. Aira made the same points in the former meeting, but she elaborates on them further in this section.

Aira does not, however, evaluate the differences she identifies, nor does she criticize the biblical text. Rather than comparing or evaluating the challenges of the texts, she compares the challenges represented by some of the interpreters. She constructs a common “they” of Christian

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<sup>187</sup> Aira is most likely referring to *childbirth*, as in 1 Timothy 2:15.

and Muslim interpreters alike who interpret the texts in their respective tradition with the intention to legitimize, implement, and uphold the subjugation of women.

Inger85: Yes, it is Paul who says these things, not Jesus. And Paul was restricted by his time, place and history, Jesus wasn't.

Inger86: And the image of women and men sketched in this text is very traditional.

Inger87: If you read the introduction, it is the man who is kind of behind it here, and the premise is that the man is active and aggressive, he must abandon his anger and stop fighting.

Inger88: While the woman is passive and kind of ... she is supposed to become even more passive according to how this text is formulated.

Inger89: So I believe this is a text written two thousand years ago, when they still hadn't grasped the resources, capacity, and possibilities of women. But as you say, it's situational.

Inger90: Yes. So it is provocative for a Norwegian woman of today. I don't know if it is possible to find something uplifting here.

Inger91: I could very well ... I like to be guided in how to live simply and not vainly. But not in this context. It only makes me want to dress up!

*(Laughter among the participants)*

Inger repeats some of the interpretative patterns from her contribution in the previous discussion on 1 Timothy 2:8-15: The distinction in authority between Jesus and Paul, and the historical, contextual view of women as formative for this text, which makes its message irrelevant in contemporary times. Inger remarks that 1 Timothy 2:8-15 both confirms and possibly strengthens what she views as traditional gender roles: men as active and aggressive, women as passive (Inger87-88). But in Inger's portrayal of the gender roles, women are passive because they are forced to behave that way. Her portrayal of the gender roles thus includes an analysis of power and a critique of those power relations that would be the consequence of these roles. Inger suggests that a lack of knowledge about women's capacities have shaped the traditional view of gender reflected in the text, a knowledge that is available in the present and thus should imply a new interpretation based on new knowledge.

Inger emphasizes – again – her own feeling of being provoked by the text (Inger90-91). Even if this is a negative feeling, the provocation indicates engagement with the text, projecting meaning into it, subversive though it may be. Inger discusses intensively with the text, criticizing or morally enriching it. The text is activated as a text to which she relates differently from her first response (in the previous meeting) when she questioned the reason for reading the text at all.

From one perspective one may ask: Is this good or bad? In other words, is the project forcing Inger to relate to a text she believes should simply be put aside and forgotten about?

Inger92: And I don't mind the message here about [not being obsessed by your own appearance].<sup>188</sup> But as I said, in this context it is a way of pushing women down and away, and keeping them quiet.

Inger93: It is ... one thing to gab, but ... women as wise as us, we need to be able to get something said!

Inger94: And then, in addition to ... the man as active and aggressive, the woman as passive, then the woman is blamed for everything, through the fall of man. And this story is in the Koran, as well, the story of creation?

Aira199: Yes, as I said, it is both similar and different, the woman is not blamed. It was Satan who tempted both, at the same time.

Inger95: They played the same role.

Aira200: It was simultaneous, so one can't blame the woman, implying that she was the trespasser and the man had only listened to her. So this is different from the Koran.

Inger96: Then I prefer the Koran on this issue. And then, there is this getting saved through childbirth; that means, in pain you shall give birth to your children, this is a ... we react to that. It can't be right. Paul must have misunderstood. Faith, love, holiness – to live in decency, that's all fine. But here it is linked to her behavior and not to the grace that will set us free. I think I'll stop here.

Inger interprets the prescription for women to dress modestly in 1 Timothy 2:9-10 by taking into account the other messages she finds in the text and claims that the prescriptions in question may be part of an aim to construct a system of female subjugation. In Inger's eyes, to be made to dress in a particular way, in order to make one less visible emphasizes women's *role* as silent, passive, and subjugated.

A distinction between different kinds of talking is introduced in this section (Inger93). Gabbing and the speech of "wise women" are distinguished as being two completely different

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<sup>188</sup> I have edited the discussion at this point to make it more concentrated, merging two of Inger's statements.

modes of communication that could both be framed as “talking.” Inger does not express any support whatsoever for a general silencing of gabbing but rather states that “wise women like us” need to “get something said” (Inger93). Her self-identification on behalf of the group, including herself, in the category of “wise women,” shows both Inger’s self-confidence and her confidence in the other participants. She does not identify the presumed *listeners* to the talk of “wise women,” other than what is implied in identifying the agents as “wise,” which by itself may imply an expected audience as an act of sharing wisdom. A speech act is not fulfilled without listeners who perform the act of listening. The women in the group share their wisdom with one another, as both listeners and talkers. Inger claims that the roles of both listener and talker should be available to wise women generally, as a necessary resource. This perspective includes both fighting for access to speak at the same level as men, but her statement implies more than mere justice. Wisdom is always needed, thus the contributions of the specific women present in the group should be requested because of the quality of their insights and knowledge.

This section shows that both Aira and Inger view the koranic version of the narrative of the Fall as more gender equal than the version in 1 Timothy. Aira insists that there are both similarities and differences between the two narratives (Aira199), whereas Inger addresses only the difference she finds to be most decisive and adds that she “prefers the Koran regarding this issue” (Inger96). How is this statement to be interpreted? What happens to an interaction between people from different religious traditions when they read and interpret interrelated stories and someone finds the “version” of the other tradition more attractive than the one in one’s own tradition? The traditional view would be that the contents of the canonical scriptures are enclosed within the specific tradition that has canonized the same scripture. When texts from different traditions are read in a multireligious context, however, the texts may merge in the minds of the readers. This happened occasionally in the discussions on the Hagar/Hajar narratives (cf. Discussion 2 Related to the Hagar/Hajar Narratives, p.162-178). So, what happens when the reader wants to edit the texts by mixing their contents and deleting what does not measure up in the reader’s comparative evaluation? Is it plausible to pick and choose? If a reader claims sovereign autonomy with respect to a text, the answer must be yes. The question would then be how to view the question of legitimization when doing this with respect to both one’s own religious community and the community that is the “owner” of the text. The question of whether canonical scriptures belong exclusively to the religious tradition from which they originate is touched upon here. As we can see from the above conversation, the texts cannot be controlled once they are accessible to all who want to read.

In any event, Inger finds *inspiration* through the Islamic version of the narrative of the Fall. Inger’s own criticism of 1 Timothy 2:8-15 regarding the text’s use of the story of the Fall of Humankind concurs with Islamic feminist criticism of the Christian tradition, as noted earlier

(Hassan 1987). Aira, however, does not bring up this particular criticism. Even if Inger is not able to “pick and choose” to the extent that she deliberately mixes the two traditions, she seems to experience the Islamic tradition as providing her with a way to deal with an element she perceives as unjust in her own canonical scripture. The crucial point may be how Inger regards the Islamic tradition in general: Is the Islamic tradition a legitimate source of support for her in the activity of making meaning of Christian canonical texts? Even if she does not fully include the Islamic narrative in making her own meaning, the knowledge that other versions of the narrative *exist*, even in another religious tradition, may provide a window giving a new view of one’s own text and open it up for critique. The Koran represents a resource in this respect, at least in this particular situation.

- Susanne42: Is it my turn? I thought about what you said about situational. Now, it’s really been a long time since I graduated from the program in Christian studies, but I think I remember that the congregation this text is addressed to experienced some problems. Isn’t that right, Anne Hege? That there was a problem with so called provocative women, or am I totally wrong? That it is written in a specific situation, not a general text.
- Susanne43: I at least heard this theory, that it was a problem because the message did not come across, and conflicts arose, and that the focus in this congregation was somewhere else than where it was supposed to be. And I believe that this is important background.
- Susanne44: And another thing... Paul isn’t really known to be very women-friendly, is he?
- Susanne45: I agree with you in that specification that it is Paul who is saying this, and that’s why I think one can interpret it differently.
- Susanne46: It is a text that has created an incredible amount of oppression; I am actually totally provoked by the whole text.
- Susanne47: It was interesting to listen to you, Aira, going through the text in that way and saying what is similar to and different from the content of the Koran. And to see how you read it, for instance, when you read that part about men who are supposed to lift clean hands ....
- Susanne48: I did not think about washing, ritual washing, I was thinking more of purity of the soul ....
- Aira201: Yes, I understand that, but in a way that is mental preparation. If you visit me and I wash myself, you don’t come to pray, but I wash my hands to prepare myself for the encounter.

- Susanne49: I know.
- Aira202: It's just like mental preparation, to be clean physically and mentally, and it doesn't matter if one only washes one's hands and forgets about the mental and spiritual aspect. To be at ease in your mind, and the head should be empty of bad deeds, that is an important part of it. But to wash your hands, or to clean oneself is an important preparation for presenting oneself to ....
- Susanne50: I know this is important in Islam, and that's what I mean. It was interesting that you read that into it, because I didn't read the same at all. I read "clean hands" in a more metaphorical way.
- Aira203: I see.
- Susanne51: It's not only that you shouldn't have killed someone, or ... you should be clean in the sense of free from guilt, or ....
- Shirin151: You have that in our tradition as well; that's what I thought about in the same way as you did, clean hands mean that when you are going to face God you should be careful about what you do. The washing itself ... your actions ....
- Aira204: Not to kill anyone, not to harm anyone ....
- Shirin152: Clean hands are part of a symbolic language that...

Susanne states that the text from 1 Timothy has caused oppression (Susanne5). This statement marks the text as significant and blames the text for being responsible for oppression. Clearly, when talking about the effects of a text, such as oppression, the *readers* and *interpreters* of the text are involved. Susanne's focus, however, is only indirectly on them. She does not address the interpretative contexts, which are extratextual sources for legitimizing the subjugation of women. The reason may be that Susanne relates to an interpretation of the text as a message to a specific addressee, rather than a text with a universal message.

She asks me for confirmation of the historical circumstances of the text. I just mention that I believe some researchers claim that this is the case, without going further into the issue.

Susanne seeks shared knowledge in making meaning, and the question posed directly to me reminds me that I am not in any way invisible in the discussion, even if I do not speak.<sup>189</sup>

Susanne's comments on Aira's earlier contribution show a difference between them regarding their respective interpretation of cleanliness and purity. Whereas Aira immediately associates purity with actual washing, as in the Islamic ritual of *wudu*, Susanne interprets purity in a more abstract way, as purity of the mind, with no practical or ritual performance connected to it (Susanne48). Aira clarifies that the ritual ablution also means mental preparation (Aira202), and Shirin calls clean hands "part of a symbolic language" (Shirin152). In many ways this discussion is related to the discussion after Fouzia's narratives when the group discussed their general views on the Bible and the Koran (Chapter 4). Susanne's background as a Lutheran Christian may have equipped her with a framework of interpretation where the symbolic is the first preferred meaning, at least regarding religious rituals. The Protestant Lutheran spirituality in Norway has traditionally, particularly when influenced by pietism, focused on the individual's inner life rather than on outward rituals and practices. We should recall how Eva evaluated rituals in that first discussion as "almost magic" and as representing religious behavior against which she warned Christians at that time (Eva3, p. 123).

- Susanne52: Another thing. It could well be that this interpretation was infused into the text when it was written. I don't know anything about that. But at least as a reader today, I don't read that into it. But besides that, I am just provoked, like you.
- Susanne53: And I agree with you, Inger, that it's OK not to be provocative, but what does that mean? It's something about the context. I get provoked if nice clothes and pearls are prohibited ... but that one should be subordinate is also a point that is incredibly provoking to me.
- Susanne54: But if, of course, if one ... if I am to understand it with a maximum of goodwill, I believe that it could mean that one should not rank oneself higher than another person on purpose, that one should submit in a way in the sense of adapting oneself so that everything runs smoothly for all parties but not to submit in a way that implies that one is not allowed to stand up for one's own opinions or cannot fully be oneself.

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<sup>189</sup> To keep almost completely silent, as I did throughout the process, when the participants knew that I had both knowledge and opinions I could have made accessible to them may be regarded as a position of power bordering on the abuse of power. Still, it remains necessary for me to be sparing in my contributions. The way I had organized the establishment of the empirical material meant that the focus would be on their making meaning, not mixed up with mine. See Chapter 3 p. 110-112 for discussions of these issues.



Susanne55: Then I think about human relations. A human relation where one should always give oneself up ... but ....

What is Susanne's reason for starting a second interpretative round with the text and introducing "the maximum of goodwill" (Susanne54)? She does not state any explicit purpose, but she might be aiming at harmonizing the text's interpreted message with a set of values with which she can identify, i.e. values that are more consistent with her own perception of the Christian tradition. Susanne's hermeneutical positioning to read "with a maximum of goodwill" consists of transforming the message of female subjugation, which generates a gendered hierarchy into a message of *mutual* submission in human relations regardless of gender, as an exercise of piety for both men and women (Susanne54). Susanne55 offers an existential ethical argument for this mutuality, in addition to the more practical argument in Susanne54 that mutual submission would minimize frictions in human relations. The *limit* of mutual subjugation for Susanne is when "one is not allowed to stand for one's own opinions or cannot fully be oneself." Susanne sees a tension between "being oneself" and being subjugated to another person, even if such "subjugation" is mutual and disconnected from gender.

In Susanne's reasoning, there may be traces of the earlier discussions on *qiwama* in connection with Sura 4:34 as a concept of mutual support between men and women where the stronger party has the greater responsibility. Susanne is, however, more concerned with the individual's space for executing her/his autonomy and authenticity.

Inger97: Then this should be advice for both men and women. But here it is a distribution of roles. Because here it is only the woman, and it's the woman who becomes the great sinner, both originally and further on.

Inger98: It's the responsibility of women to take care of the decency. Because if the woman doesn't, the man can't be decent either. And this is kind of provocative to me. And the part that women will be saved through childbirth ... that has created a lot of suffering throughout history.

Inger99: This makes me think about ... when you hear about rape cases in the media, it's often like they say that the woman wanted it to happen or she was part of it or tempted the man somehow, so this is a classic way of placing the responsibility even for the abuse on her. She gets the responsibility and the blame, almost like she invited it to happen. This text invites us in a way to that kind of thinking.

Still interpreting with gender equality as her hermeneutical moral axiom, Inger concludes that the advice of subjugation should be addressed to both men and women – as Susanne

suggested when reading the text with a “maximum of goodwill” (Inger97). Returning to 1 Timothy 2:8-15 *without* Susanne’s goodwill, however, Inger states that this is not the case. Inger accuses the text of making the woman the “great sinner” through the construction of the past in the text (the textual interpretation of the biblical narrative of the Fall, the second version) and that the construction of the present in the text is a continuation of this construction of the past (Inger97).

Inger notes that the text makes women responsible for the decency of both men and women. Inger thus claims that 1 Timothy 2:8-15 provides the possibility of constructing a position for abused women as doubly victimized: first as a victim and then as the one to blame for her own victimization.

Susanne56: And about what you said that you did not understand it ... the part “I permit no woman to teach,” I read that into the context of educating the congregation.

Aira205: OK.

Susanne57: Not necessarily to her children, or... but that she should not be like ....

Aira206: Like an imam perhaps?

Susanne58: Like an imam. That is what I read into the sentence.

Aira207: OK.

Could the restriction on women teaching in 1 Timothy be compared to the restriction of women not being permitted to become imams in the Islamic tradition? Susanne suggests this comparison in an attempt to explain to Aira the possible meaning of prohibition in 1 Timothy against women as teachers. Earlier, Aira stated that teaching was compulsory for all adults in Islam (Aira189). Susanne does not understand 1 Timothy 2:12 against prohibiting women from teaching children, suggesting that the position of a teacher in a religious community may thus be open to women in this text, whereas a position as a religious authority, “as an imam,” is not accessible. Susanne probably knows that Islamic theologians in general do not allow female imams to lead prayers for both men and women.<sup>190</sup> Susanne may be attempting to close a perceived gap between the message in the New Testament text as it has come across so far and

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<sup>190</sup> According to Islamic tradition, women may lead prayers (function like an imam) for other women.

Islamic religious practice on the issue of accessible roles for women. She does so by using an example from the Islamic tradition to explain the New Testament text. The interaction between Susanne and Aira in this sequence is marked by confidence and a joint attempt to find out what the meaning of this text might be. Susanne may have an additional motivation for trying to make the Christian canonical scripture not stand out in too negative a way compared to the representation of the Islamic tradition in the group and in relation to her own axiomatic value of gender equality.

- Shirin153: What they say, how one should behave, was probably consistent with those times. That the woman did not have the possibility of developing the way we see today.
- Shirin154: This is what I think. We know that the men ... in all societies we know of throughout history, we had ... interpreted how society worked. And our religious customs could not be outside of what people could understand and relate to.
- Shirin155: But today, to us it is a totally foreign approach when we ... some women ... how far we have come.
- Shirin156: But I will say something that you will perhaps dislike. I think that for instance, women, if they are going to work, should not get all the attention.
- Shirin157: I don't believe that one has to wear a *hijab* in Norway ... I mean, the Muslims. But to wear something that make others focus on something else than her substance and what she is thinking, for instance, her hair, I personally don't like that.
- Shirin158: I believe that I come to my work to do a job, and the attention should be for the work one is doing, not one's appearance.
- Shirin159: I am not saying that one should not be nice and clean or that one should not look good; everyone likes to look good.
- Shirin160: Every society has its limits. But I do criticize the West, personally, because I believe they have gone very far in their demand that everyone should be very beautiful and look very good all the time.
- Shirin161: I don't like that. I believe it is very tiring and very demanding, and diverting. And when you think about what kind of mental problems this kind of mindset creates ... I don't like that.
- Shirin162: Then I think it's good that one shouldn't be vain, or tempting, when you are about to work for society.
- Shirin163: But in private, yes. At parties and other private places, it's OK.

Here Shirin does something no one has done so far in the discussions: She uses the text from 1 Timothy 2: 8-15 *constructively*, to establish a criticism of what she perceives to be an enormous, destructive pressure on people's appearance in the West. She claims that both men and women are under pressure to look good on all occasions, and that this pressure is so great that it creates mental problems. Even if she does not believe that Muslim women ought to wear the *hijab*, she finds that wearing the *hijab* may be a way of focusing on other things than one's appearance. She introduces a distinction between public and private space for dressing up: it is acceptable to dress up in a private space (Shirin163). A dichotomy of the public *versus* the private sphere has not been addressed much in the discussions so far, unless in the one on secretiveness at the former meeting where the distinction between public and private was seen as problematic when the question was one of keeping problems and abuse in the family private. In this section Shirin suggests one practice in private for women's dress, and another in public. She uses the text from 1 Timothy 2 to argue that wearing the *hijab* may have some advantages, and to criticize the contemporary focus on appearances – the latter located in the West. She shares her reasoning that 1 Timothy 2: 8-15 may be interpreted in a way to support wearing a *hijab*. Shirin thus moves to a reading position of the New Testament text that implies a closer interaction through using it in making meaning of an intra-Islamic reasoning on the use of *hijab*. Hedging her remarks, she seems aware that some may react to this way of using the text (Shirin156). However, Shirin also seems to be inspired by the interpretations of 1 Timothy offered by Inger and Susanne when she takes modesty to include both men and women, thus implementing gender equality in her moral enrichment of the New Testament text. The question of ownership of the text and the right to interpret the text here appears from a different angle: Whereas the Christian participants react to gender-divisive restrictions on dress in 1 Timothy 2:8-15 and claim that it may be motivated by making women invisible, Shirin uses it as a useful correction of excessive focus on appearance.

Shirin164: One should be like you, like Inger. Not dress up too much ....

Shirin165: If one can interpret it like this, I agree, but the other verses about women not being allowed to teach, or submit to the man, that depends on .... Today this is unthinkable.

Shirin166: Some places, for instance in my country, perhaps in her country, it is like this, but everyone knows this is wrong, and it has to change. It is a negative culture, we all know that today.

Shirin167: And the other things you interpreted, I agree.

Shirin presents her Christian co-participant Inger as an example for others through her appearance (Shirin164). The acknowledgement of Inger crosses cultural and religious lines, and this may be a point for Shirin, showing that she does not discriminate when applying her own evaluation of proper appearance.

Shirin then talks about “my country” (Shirin166), and it is quite obvious that she is referring to Iran and not to Norway. She uses Iran as a negative example of a society where women are forced to depend on their husbands and male relatives (Shirin166). The situation she knows in Iran is thus used as an example of an implementation of the gendered hierarchy represented by an immediate reading of 1 Timothy 2:8-15 in a social setting. Through this meaning-making move, Shirin introduces a spatial dimension to oppressive situations for women, but she criticizes it using a *temporal* distinction: “Today this is unthinkable”. (Shirin165). The expression “unthinkable” is not spatially situated. It is unlikely that she is referring to Iran, however, due to the way she just described her country of origin. It may however, be a description of Norway or the West.

In Shirin166 she claims that the subjugation of women is something “everyone knows ... is wrong.” It seems that she fuses time and space in this statement: everyone, everywhere, knows that this is wrong. If “everyone knows this is wrong,” why is it still going on? Shirin does not say anything about why, apart from it being caused by a negative *culture*. The culture, not religion, is viewed as supplying the negative causes. Shirin does not suggest any action or way out at this point nor does she construct a space for her own agency. However, she does claim: *everyone* knows this must change.

Maria36: I think this is a difficult text. I don't really know what we should think. Because when I read it, I didn't understand all of it. Perhaps there was some meaning behind ....

Maria37: But what I think is that this does not fit in with today's society.

Maria38: There are many kinds of women's wisdom, but it has nothing to do with the way they are dressed; it has to do with personality and what is on the inside. That's what's important.

Maria39: Of course, there are many things to talk about, but now I have become old, so ....  
(*Laughter among the participants*)

Maria's first reaction to 1 Timothy 2:8-15 is that it is “difficult” (Maria36), and this makes her try to find “some meaning behind” it. The text thus seems to provide her with subversive stimuli, making her try harder to wrench a meaning from the text. The first difficult encounter with the text does not make her turn away – rather, it initiates a further interpretative

effort. Maria includes a “we” in her reflections on what to think about the text in 1 Timothy, possibly including the entire group or perhaps only the Christian participants. It could also be meant to be an inviting “we,” open to any of the participants who want to include themselves.

Maria’s evaluation of the text in Maria37 suggests that the text does not “fit in” with “today’s society,” without elaborating on which society she is thinking of. Most likely she is thinking of present Norwegian or “Western” society and not the context of her East African origin on which she had reflected earlier when making meaning of the Hagar/Hajar stories and claimed that the situation for women today was not far removed from the reality presented in the Hagar/Hajar narratives. She may well find the text of 1 Timothy unfit in any society, if her statement is taken as normative rather than descriptive.

Maria38 addresses the relation, or rather the lack of it, she finds between women’s appearance and wisdom. Emphasizing the plurality of women’s wisdom, she is possibly linking up with Inger’s earlier statement when identifying the group as “wise women.” Maria insists that personality and looks are separate matters and that only the first is of real significance. Maria seems to join the others who have already stated that the text from 1 Timothy is to be regarded as outdated and misplaced in the here and now. She tacitly opposes, however, Shirin’s arguments on modest appearance, and claims this to be irrelevant (without openly criticizing Shirin).

Maria’s reaction to 1 Timothy 2:8-15 as being outdated and out of place is as assertive as her earlier claim that the Hagar/Hajar stories could have been written “today.” Why this change of interpretative position? It is possible that it is connected to a difference between a narrative text compared to a prescriptive text. A narrative text is not necessarily interpreted as normative and can be received as a story with which one can identify or listen to. It does not make claims on the reader’s way of life directly but could provide space to co-reflect and co-narrate. A prescriptive text may force the reader to take a stance regarding its content and perhaps invite the reader to share primarily *confessions* rather than narratives.<sup>191</sup>

Shirin168: You’re not old.

Maria40: I don’t like to judge people based on what I see immediately. I need to get to know that person in order to say something.

Maria41: Because if you see people dressed in this or that way, you label them, and perhaps he or she turned out to be a completely different person than what you first thought.

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<sup>191</sup> See Chapter 2 for elaborations on the interpretation of narratives *versus* making meaning of prescriptive texts, p. 48-50.

Maria42: And I believe that in societies where ... in Africa, for instance, to take that as an example, women dress almost completely the same way. We all use the same kind of material, so they look very similar in their dress. But they are still very different from each other.

Maria43: And some are good people, some are bad people, even if they are all fully dressed and they hardly wear perfume or makeup or anything. That is not what makes them good or bad.

Maria elaborates on her earlier point of dissolving any connection between a woman's appearance and her qualities as a person. Using her experience from Africa as a reference, she explains that even if women usually dress in very similar ways, this does not mean that they are similar in other ways. Even if a woman dresses in a pious way, it says nothing about her other qualities, or if she is pious in other ways too. Maria highlights the existence of *plurality* and *individuality* in spite of an alleged similar appearance among African women. The meaning of dress as an identity marker is thus questioned altogether.

Maria44: So, I think this is a typical Old Testament ... where women should stay in their place and the men in theirs, and women should be subjugated to men.

Maria45: But I am not ... I think everyone should participate in an equal way. Of course, everyone has their own task, but it doesn't matter to me if men do it better, or if women do it better than men, or the other way around.

Maria's placing of the text from 1 Timothy in the *Old Testament* in Maria44 indicates that Maria finds the gender models and roles of this New Testament text (and perhaps its content in general) to be typical for that part of the Bible. What is behind this if one reads it as a hermeneutical statement? Does it represent an interpretative move for understanding the text or is it a way of dismissing the text and relocating it in a scriptural hierarchy in the Christian tradition, as less significant than a text from the New Testament? Later on it becomes clear that Maria believes that the text from 1 Timothy is actually an Old Testament text (Maria59, p. 333). Still, her "mistake" provides an interesting hermeneutical observation: It opens the way for questioning the distinction between the Old and the New Testament as a hermeneutical tool. The Christian participants have used this distinction as a hermeneutical tool in their meaning making. The question is if the terms "Old Testament" and "New Testament" function primarily as markers for what is seen to be acceptable and/or unacceptable textual messages, not necessarily referring to a textual location in the Bible. In the discussions about the Hagar/Hajar narratives, Maria stated that the temporal gap was not significant, quite the contrary (Maria8, p. 154). This

supports the view that distinguishing between the Old and New Testaments is not a matter of temporality or chronology but of *content*. What is judged to be out of place in contemporary society, mostly with open or tacit spatial reference to Norway or the West, may be stamped “Old Testament” and left behind. In the Christian tradition, the Christ event is the hermeneutical center, and thus the New Testament generally has greater authority than the Old Testament. But what if the texts from the New Testament represent a challenge to the participants in how they view consistency in the Christian tradition when they state that human equality (including gender equality) is part of Jesus’ message?

Maria’s statement in Maria44 clearly shows that the distinction between the Old and New Testaments as a hermeneutical approach does not solve every problem. Inger and Eva suggest a distinction between the alleged sayings of Jesus and narratives about Jesus on the one hand, and Pauline texts on the other. But contextual challenges and contemporary discourses on gender equality and feminism seem to form the ethical basis of evaluation, providing a strong frame of reference for their hermeneutics, as well as criteria for evaluation of the texts.

In Maria45 Maria reveals how she evaluates a gendered role structure: the roles in question should be occupied by those most skilled, regardless of gender. This fits well with Maria’s earlier focus on personality and “inner” qualities rather than people’s appearance and dress. Perhaps Maria regards gender as a category close to her view of different ways of dressing: The differences marked by appearance, including dress, and gender are not significant, when evaluating people’s qualities and skills.

- Inger100: This text would be very different if it was addressing ... if both women and men were addressed at the same time.
- Inger101: And then, today, young men dress up with gold jewelry and have their hair standing straight up ... and they are just as vain as women.
- Inger102: But I think what you say is interesting and important, this pressure on appearance, and, actually, behind that is sexuality and how we express that.
- Inger103: And it is natural to express it and natural to communicate it, in a way, not locking it completely up, but this is taking off totally in the West. I agree with that.
- Inger104: Kids sit and watch TV-programs about, what’s it called ... total makeover ....
- Shirin169: It is tiresome.
- Inger105: Yes.



- Shirin170: Think about it, this is not creating equality.... These verses from both the Bible and the Koran are very oppressive; they are used to oppress women.
- Shirin171: It is men who interpret them, again and again, and then they don't realize it when they read them ... that decent behavior is for both for men and women.
- Shirin172: So, if we don't take this up, and, generally speaking, both texts from the Bible and the Koran have been used to oppress women, then it is really dangerous.
- Shirin173: And I am sure of this, just think about the fact that they beat women because of this koranic text that says ... what does it say? That ... if the woman doesn't obey the man she will be scourged.

Inger repeats her claim for gender equality in the text, stating that if the behavioral prescriptions were addressed to both genders, it would have changed her view of the text. Her problem with 1 Timothy 2:8-15 is the gendered distribution of advice, commandments – and, as she has stated elsewhere, that the blame and responsibility as explained in the text is laid on women alone. She comments that “men are just as vain as women,” as an argument that men need to be admonished about dress just as much as women. Inger is the one who introduces the appearance of contemporary men into the text.

Shirin provides a type of conclusion about how to relate to both Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15. The texts must be confronted and interpreted, because they represent a potential danger to women (Shirin170, 172). Shirin is going beyond the mere *supposition* of danger when she states that, to her knowledge, some men beat women because of Sura 4:34 (Shirin173).

Shirin converts the danger she claims the texts represent into a *responsibility* for the interpreters. She states that the real problem is that the male interpreters do not really *see* the texts or realize their true content. Shirin openly holds these men responsible when the texts are used to oppress women.

What is it that Shirin claims that the interpreting men do not see? The question is if the alleged blindness concerns the texts themselves, the influence of the texts on women's situations in various contexts, or not seeing their own role as interpreters as a collective lack of self-reflexivity. What Shirin mentions, is that they do not see that the texts makes demands on *men* as well as on women (Shirin171). Shirin seems to address both Christian and Muslim men in general, claiming that they have failed to meet their responsibility. This is the same accusation Aira brought up earlier concerning interpreting men who had not done their job properly, by not going into depth in their interpretation of Sura 4:34.

Shirin suggests that “we” – meaning the “we” of the participants, the “we” of women, or the “we” of people with a similar view of interpretation – are obliged to assume the task of reinterpreting these texts in order to avert a dangerous situation. The specific task is to work

against a use of the texts that promotes the oppression of women. Shirin thus formulates an agenda and constructs a collective agency in which she includes herself. People who *see* should interpret the texts.

Shirin's explanation of the capacity to *see* seems to be the ability recognize obligations in the text addressed to both gender, and to be aware of the destructive use of the texts to legitimize oppression and violence against women. It may be that the skills and intention to see the texts and the context matters more to Shirin than the gender of the interpreter.

### ***Muslim-Christian Hermeneutics in the Making?***

In this discussion, the participants engage more directly with the text from the other tradition than their own. Different positions emerge where the text of "the other" moves from the position of being part of the other's context to becoming a text to which the participants relates jointly as "the other." Shirin, for instance, finds that 1 Timothy 2:8-15 provides an ethical reasoning for counteracting what she believes is an extreme pressure on appearance in the West. Inger declares that she prefers the koranic version of the Fall of Humankind, as presented by Aira, to the version presented in 1 Timothy 2:8-15. Aira keeps evaluating 1 Timothy on the basis of koranic texts and Islamic religious practices and compares the prescription of ritual ablution in 1 Timothy to the practice of *wudu*.

All these examples illustrate that the participants are now starting to include the canonical scriptures of the other tradition into their own meaning making of texts and contexts. What remain relatively stable are the positions as reading subjects that the participants have already established for themselves. These positions influence the way they relate to the text of the other, however. Aira's position as a reader of 1 Timothy is marked both by her own positioning as a reader and her inclusion of the Bible as a text she respects highly, but she does this in accordance with Islamic interpretative tradition on biblical material, she relates to the Bible as a scripture that should be corrected by Islam.

The participants relate more actively to the texts from the other tradition than earlier in the process. But what does this imply? Does it mean that the text of the other is regarded as a religiously authoritative text in the participant's meaning making? Or does it reflect a broadening of the participants' meaning-making horizon, the texts representing a resource through addressing relevant questions, providing alternative perspectives on parts of one's own tradition? There are no signs that the Koran has become an authoritative text in any way for the Christian participants, but, on the other hand, most of them have claimed that the biblical texts are not necessarily authoritative for them, either. The Bible is most probably situated in the same position for the Muslim participants as before. I suggest that the new attitude appearing in the

group toward the texts of the other follows the earlier shift of how the Christian participants seemed to change their view of their Muslim co-participants. The texts of the other have shifted from representing difference to providing resources. This move accommodates a new encounter where the texts may be allowed to meet and merge as problematic and resourceful texts in the readers' minds.

### ***Reading with a Maximum of Goodwill***

Susanne uses this expression, introducing a hermeneutics of goodwill toward the text in 1 Timothy 2:8-15. The attempt to *rescue* the biblical texts is represented in parts of Christian feminist theology, particularly in its first decades (Stenström 2009: 137). Susanne is the first Christian participant who applies an alternative interpretation of this text, morally enriched by her own ethical perspective. Mutual subordination between man and woman is what she suggests may be the message of the text in the present. But even this reading is problematic for her: submitting one's self could threaten the autonomy of the self. This interpretation has, however, brought a new element into the process of making meaning. Susanne is also the first of the Christian participants to claim that 1 Timothy 2:8-15 represents a challenge in the present. This may be related to her efforts at finding an alternative interpretation.

### ***Gender and Gendered Hermeneutics***

The Christian participants hold on to their ethical principle of gender equality as a cornerstone in making meaning of 1 Timothy and use this principle to assess the text – in many ways similar to how Aira uses the koranic base to evaluate the same text. The Christian participants' reasoning is based partly on a view of the message of Jesus as promoting human equality and partly on gender equality as a social norm in Norwegian society. In this way, the comparison between Aira's use of the Koran and the Christian participants' use of Jesus makes it clear that these are the fundamentals for how they, respectively, make meaning.

The views of gender roles represented in the group become more articulated in discussion 3. To some extent, this emerges from the discussions on how the text of 1 Timothy represents the narrative of the Fall of Humankind in Genesis, which blames women in general for the Fall. Together with what Inger feels to be prescribed gender roles in 1 Timothy, passive and invisible for women and aggressive and dominant for men, she criticizes the New Testament text for reflecting an unacceptable, provocative, and completely outdated view of gender. The constructive view of gender roles emerges from this background: men and women should have space to speak their wisdom, without being judged by their appearance, and being able to participate equally. The point about equal participation is restricted only in the question of

female imams (for gender-mixed audiences). Otherwise, it seems that the participants share a concern about sharing both power and possibilities equally between women and men.

The reflections concerning the different versions of the narrative of the Fall of Humankind has other implications for making meaning than those mentioned above. To put the blame on the woman when she is victimized by rape is recognized as something that happens in the present, and Inger states that this is an act of injustice toward women that some interpretations of 1 Timothy 2:8-15 may legitimize. The critique Inger constructs toward the use of the Genesis narrative in 1 Timothy is equivalent to a criticism Muslim feminists have raised about the Christian tradition: that the interpretation of this narrative in the Christian tradition represents a legitimization of female oppression that does not exist in Islam in the same way because the version of the narrative of the Fall is different (Sura 7:19-25). Aira may know about this criticism, but she does not articulate it. She only points to the differences between the narratives.

Aira's critique of men who believe that they have authority may be interpreted as accusing these men of acquiring an authority that does not belong to them. This may be a statement that follows up her elaboration of *qiwama*. But if she is saying that these men try to obtain an authority that only belongs to God, this comes close to Amina Wadud's statement about patriarchy as *shirk* (Wadud 2009: 102).

Shirin articulates a possible gendered hermeneutics, ending in a call for a shared agency, as Aira did in the former discussion. For Shirin, the crucial point is that the act of interpreting is to *see*. Accusing men who have the authority to interpret the texts of blindness, more precisely addressed to men who do not interpret Sura 4:34 as making demands on both men and women, she declares: "If we don't take this up, and generally speaking both texts from the Bible and the Koran have been used to oppress women, then it is really dangerous."

#### **Discussion 4 Related to Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15.**

##### **Shirin: "But think about it. This is much better than what happens in real life"**

Getting close to the end of their conversations about the texts of Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15, the participants mostly repeat or elaborate on their earlier reflections and interpretations of texts, contexts, and agency. Some of the elaborations on earlier points include very concrete suggestions or descriptions, so it is significant to include them in the material, although they do not bring in new interpretative aspects of text, context, and agency as such. The hermeneutical circle has now changed into a spiral, where the same turns are taken, but at a different level of understanding, which in this group moves in the direction of the concrete.

- Maria46: I think this text, too, is very difficult. I did not understand everything, but I think they say almost the same thing, that a wife should obey her husband.
- Maria47: But there is something in it ... when it says that women should obey, and guard the secret .... What could that mean? What is that? I thought that it could be something about the woman taking care of what is ... to bring about ... then it was a small positive sign, wasn't it, that we should protect ... and that God wants it protected ....
- Maria48: But this is only my interpretation, because I want to find something positive, and I found it so negative.
- (Laughter among the participants)*

When comparing Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15, Maria's immediate reaction is that the texts are difficult to understand – and that they prescribe female subordination in marriage. Maria's difficulty with the text is not explicated further. Does she mean that the texts are difficult to understand as texts? Or does Maria find the message she perceives from the texts, although clear concerning their content, difficult to understand as biblical and koranic messages consistent with the Christian and Islamic traditions? Both aspects of difficulty could be represented in her statement.

Maria makes an interpretative turn not unlike that of Susanne earlier when she chose a temporal hermeneutical stance, understanding with “the maximum of goodwill” (Susanne54, p. 302). Maria wants to look for something “positive” in the text from Sura 4:34. The reason she gives is that she found the text “so negative” in the first place (Maria48). So, rather than elaborating on what she finds negative, she attempts to search for positive signs, perhaps to be able to make meaning of the text, despite what she finds to be difficult. She does not really explain her motivation for this hermeneutical strategy, nor what she defines as positive. Perhaps she wants to make an attempt to rescue women through rescuing the *texts*, if she is able to interpret the texts as supportive of women in some way or another. Or she may wish to make an attempt at saving her own relationship with the text as part of the canonical scripture in the Islamic tradition.

When Maria states that she wants to look for something positive in the texts, everyone laughs. The laughter seems to follow the earlier pattern: the collective laughter seems to be usually following a saying when the texts are being criticized or commented upon in an unpredictable manner. Is it the remark about searching for the positive in the text that causes the laughter because the statement is unexpected?

Maria ends up identifying one element in the text which she claims may be positive, namely the passage about secretiveness. Her suggestion is that the prescribed restriction implies that whatever is meant to be kept secretive, is something valuable, something in need of protection. The notion of “protection” gives her associations that something valuable could allegedly be trusted to *women’s* protection. This would imply an acknowledgement of women. Maria did not attend the former meeting when the same texts were discussed, so she missed the earlier elaboration of the term secretiveness in Sura 4:34 by Shirin and Aira. Shirin comments further on secretiveness in Sura 4: 34:

Shirin174: About the secretive: I checked it out a little bit, and I found that, if there is a need for professional help, what then? Then one should seek professional help.

Shirin175: But to go out and talk about private things ... to respect ....

Shirin176: But personally, I am unable to keep my mouth shut.

*(Laughter among the participants)*

Shirin177: This is how my heart works. But I don’t think it’s like that in Western culture; one has become used to it. But in our culture, one is looked down upon, unfortunately. One should not talk about private things.

Shirin178: For instance, if one comes and says: “My husband is like this,” or “my daughter does this and that,” it’s like “why does she talk like that about her children or about her husband?” This is our culture, that one shouldn’t do that.

Shirin179: But one does so just to find encouragement, sometimes one has this on one’s mind.

Shirin180: But I think that what one should not do is speak badly of one’s family or others.

Shirin suggests a distinction between different *intentions* behind divulging a “private secret.” Her reasoning appears to be a continuation of the reflections she shared at the former meeting on the same theme (Shirin114-117, p. 257-258). The question she raised last time was how to deal with potentially destructive family matters in light of this text. The crucial point for Shirin is to decide what kind of issues should be regarded as internal family matters. Last time, she suggested that domestic violence and the mistreatment of children were not private but public matters, because they represent violations of Norwegian law. Here, she broadens the category of the (alleged) private sphere by stating that if professional help is needed to solve private matters, any secret could be revealed to the professional helper (Shirin174).

Gossiping about other family members is suggested to be a non-valid reason for divulging private secrets for Shirin. In Shirin4, however, she refers to “our culture,” not the text or the Islamic tradition, in order to explain this restriction. Shirin also shares a private opinion:

she personally regrets this cultural restriction because she views the need to articulate feelings about one's own family to others as legitimate. She does however draw a line for what she believes to be acceptable to share in Shirin7. A comparison is made between what she states to be her own culture and Western culture expressing appreciation for the openness to talk about private matters outside the family that she claims to find in the West.

Shirin's self-confession about having problems "keeping my mouth shut" is met by laughter from the rest of the group. The laughter may express both acceptance and identification: after all, have they not all just heard that women can both gab and talk wisdom, and should not remain silent?

Shirin181: I have a question. What does "rebellion" [*oppsetsighet*]<sup>192</sup> mean?

Aira208: It is to go against your husband, and it is related to fidelity, that you are not faithful to your husband. That one has an affair.

Shirin182: That the woman has an affair?

Aira209: Yes ....

Shirin183: Sexual affair, you mean?

Aira210: Yes.

Shirin184: But there is something interesting here. If you look at how it works today, if you find out that the woman is unfaithful, the woman might be killed.

Shirin185: But in the text it says, talk to her, and after that, beat her, and then, divorce her. There is nothing about killing.

Inger106: But, if it is as you say, it should have been written as "unfaithful" and not "disobedient" [*oppsetsig*]. Because the Norwegian word simply implies that you protest, that you have a different opinion, that you speak out against someone.

Aira211: It is not correct.

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<sup>192</sup> This is a linguistic question about the Norwegian word *oppsetsighet*, which means "disobedience" or "insubordination" in English. The word *oppsetsighet* is used in the Norwegian version of the Koran (Berg 1980). In Pickthall's English version (Pickthall 1996) it is translated as "rebellion."

- Inger107: Is it not correctly translated?
- Aira212: It is a wrong translation. Because I have read in a commentary on the Koran that it is an interpretation, that this is the only reason for being a little hard on women, but then he should not strike so hard that he ....
- Shirin186: It is unacceptable; one cannot think like that. But now I think ... what if a man thinks, and doesn't really see that...
- Shirin187: Not to kill, but if the man goes out and has an affair, that's not a problem, but if he just imagines that the woman has another relationship, and he kills her or hits her ....
- Aira213: I will continue with that verse. What is said is that if the conflict becomes so difficult that you cannot be reconciled, then someone should mediate, through a person from her family and one from his family, persons they themselves trust.<sup>193</sup> This should not be imposed on them, but if ....
- Shirin188: Divorce. First, try to work it out, and if not ....
- Aira214: If it doesn't work out, then just divorce. It is not as if one should stay in a relationship where the woman is beaten.
- Shirin189: But think about it: this is much better than what happens in real life.

Aira, Inger, Shirin, and Maria all take part in this co-reflection, starting with Shirin's question about the meaning of the rather archaic word for rebellion used in the Norwegian version of Sura 4:34 (*oppsetsighet*). Aira claims that the meaning of the Arabic term (*nushuz*) is sexual infidelity (Aira208). This answer is connected to koranic exegesis, and not to Norwegian etymology, which shows that Aira is concerned about the meaning of the Arabic text of the Koran. Inger's exploration of the Norwegian word *oppsetsighet* ("rebellion") suggests that this word has a far broader meaning than just sexual infidelity. Its connotations are closer to general disobedience. Through the previous discussions Inger has become familiar with how Aira and Shirin work with koranic texts, knowing that translation is a complicated matter in their act of interpretation. Now Inger asks about the accuracy of the translation from Arabic concerning

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<sup>193</sup> This may be a reference to Sura 4:35.



“rebellion” (*oppsetsighet*). Aira claims that the translation is inaccurate and states that, according to her understanding, Sura 4:34 was never meant as a general prohibition against wives opposing their husbands but as a prescription regarding sexual fidelity (Aira212). Shirin points out that this should obtain for the husband as well, not only the wife (Shirin187). Nobody comments on this, but the apprehension of gender equality is once again applied as a moral enrichment of the text and as a hermeneutical compass – this time by Shirin.

But it is the further discussion that appears to be the central event in this section. The discussion on the permission to punish a wife physically in Sura 4:34 turns around. From discussing how to prevent this verse from being interpreted as a legitimization of the abuse of male power, Aira and Shirin state that the *ayat* may actually function as a prescribed *limitation* of male violence in a marriage.

Both Shirin and Aira emphasize, for instance, that there is no opening in the text whatsoever for legitimizing the killing of wives, whether or not they are unfaithful. Aira212 states that *if* the text is interpreted as the limited right of a man to strike his wife, it could be only because of sexual infidelity, and not because of disobedience in general. Further, the physical effect should be limited and not harmful. Shirin, on the other hand, opposes any legitimization of physical violation. Both Shirin and Aira, however, refer to “real life” in their discussion about the possible use of Sura 4:34 to limit domestic violence. Shirin in a direct manner (Shirin189), by claiming that the circumstances and physical transgression described in Sura 4:34, even though she finds them inappropriate and does not agree, is much preferable to what Shirin claims actually happens “in real life.”

Aira is careful to situate the above statements in a larger perspective by emphasizing that, for the woman, *divorce* is much preferable to remaining in a violent marriage. In Aira214 she includes both marital partners in her reasoning, possibly implying that men could be victims of marital violence too, or that it would be in the best interests of both the victim and the victimizer to get out of a destructive marriage.

External guidance and involvement if there are problems in a marriage is suggested as a means for resolving marital problems in general (Aira213). Here, Aira seems to relate to the following *ayat*, Sura 4:35, which prescribes the involvement of the extended family in a marital conflict. She states that marital problems should be the concern not only of the married couple but of their larger network as well. Social responsibility of this kind could include intervention in a marriage if one suspects violence or abuse, although Aira does not mention this explicitly.

Aira and Shirin’s reflections on the use and impact of Sura 4:34 seem to be based on their contextual knowledge, not on any ideal reality. Shirin and Aira have interpreted Sura 4:34 by means of knowledge about the text that allows them to relate to the text in ways that *challenge* instead of confirm male authority over the female in a marriage, as their interpretative work on

the concept of *qiwama* has shown. Now they show their contextual knowledge about the existing use and interpretations of Sura 4:34, and this makes them reflect on a potentially life-saving function the text might have by *not* allowing serious violence or killing in any possible interpretation of the text. This is a shift from a *liberative* to a *survivalist* strategy of interpretation, to follow Delores Williams (Williams 1993: 194-197).<sup>194</sup>

Neither Shirin nor Aira disclose the location of the context(s) to which they are referring. Are they speaking of contexts in Norway, Pakistan, Iran, or are they referring to a multitude of contexts? Are they talking about Muslims in general? Whatever context to which they may be referring, they point out that Sura 4:34 could actually provide a strategy for *survival*.

Maria49: But I think this puts a lot of responsibility on the woman.

Maria50: What I want to say is that things haven't changed much since that time, even if the text does represent views different from today's.

Maria51: When you see the current attitude on women and sexuality, we are still like that today, that women are expected to control the situation, not the man.

Maria52: You can say that the girl has been raped ... and (they) ask: Why were you raped?

Maria53: They always make the woman explain what happened, don't they?

Maria54: This is the case with raising children as well, even if there is both a mother and a father in the house, if things go wrong with the child, it is always the mother who gets a little ... who gets the blame ....

Maria55: So, we haven't changed our mindset very much in some areas.

Shirin188: I believe that there has been a change. In the West.

Maria56: Yes, there are changes, but ....

(...)

Maria57: What has changed perhaps, at least a little, is that it has become easier for women. Not easier as such, but it is easier today for a woman to leave a bad marriage.

Aira215: Yes.

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<sup>194</sup> See Chapter 2, p. 77-78.

Maria58: Today we have laws so that women don't have to stay in a violent marriage.

It is not obvious at first what Maria is referring to in Maria50: What or who is placing too much responsibility on women? Is it the texts or the participants through their statements? The following transcription shows that she is referring to social and cultural contexts, represented by certain attitudes that are not specified further. Addressing the distribution of responsibility means moving into an analysis that is more oriented toward gendered power structures. The underlying question seems to be: What about the responsibility of *men* regarding keeping decency and in situations of abuse?

Maria uses the temporal categories of “now” and “then” when navigating in her making of meaning. She claims that the burden of responsibility put on women by the context(s) is disproportionate. She states further that this disproportionate distribution of responsibility has remained unchanged between the “then” and the “now.” She places the texts in a distant “then” but claims nevertheless that peoples’ mindset has not really changed. Does this mean that Maria finds the situation for women in general similar to the immediate prescriptions of women’s behavior and position in Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15?

Shirin challenges Maria’s analysis of the situation “now” and states that a change *has* taken place. Shirin does not define what the change consists of, but she locates the change spatially, referring to the West. Maria does agree that a legal change at least has taken place concerning the possibility for women to leave a “bad marriage,” (Maria57-58). But Maria does not locate her example of legal change.

It seems as if Shirin and Maria are negotiating which context should be more significant as a frame of reference. Both of them include more than one geographical context in their references to real life: Maria refers to Africa, and Shirin to Iran. But in Maria’s limited willingness to state that changes in attitude toward women’s responsibility and blame *have* taken place, she seems to refer to the Norwegian context as well as to a place where there still is a culturally bound disproportion between men’s and women’s responsibilities. She does agree, however, that, legally speaking, women are better off in the Norwegian, Western “now.”

### ***Gendered Hermeneutics: Strategies of Emancipation or Survival?***

Most of this discussion is marked by the suggestion that they look at Sura 4:34 from a quite different angle. So far, the focus in the group’s discussions on this text has been on the interpretation of *qiwama* and how to prevent the text from being used to legitimize male authority in marriage. The Muslim participants’ making meaning of the text has been marked by an attempt to support gender equality as a strategy of women’s emancipation within the framework of the Islamic tradition where the tradition displays patriarchal structures.

In this discussion, however, it is suggested that the text provides a strategy for survival. The text's opening a way for a husband to beat his wife physically has been avoided or regretted in the discussions. But here Shirin and Aira focus attention on the *limits* of the physical abuse they find presented in the text. Killing or hurting is not allowed, and divorce is to be preferred to staying in a violent marriage.

The dilemma Shirin and Aira might be facing is that, on the one hand, they apparently need the authority of Sura 4:34 to restrict violence while at the same time being personally disgusted by the use of violence that the text may be allowing in a marriage. Their contextual knowledge, however, seems to make them aware of the possibility that Sura 4:34 could provide resources for limiting domestic violence. But in order to provide this resource for Sura 4: 34, the authority of the text must be maintained.

The feminist dilemma of liberation or survival has been addressed in many contexts (cf. Delores Williams) and this time it is Shirin and Aira who indicate that they are ready to use both strategies, depending on the needs they identify in their present context. Their context is defined as the "now," but it is located spatially beyond the immediate "here."

### **Concluding Discussion on Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15: Strategies of Making Meaning and Ethical Implications for the Readers**

For the first time in the process, in the last minutes of the time scheduled to discuss Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15, I intervened in the meaning-making process by asking a question.<sup>195</sup> My question was: *How does one relate to texts of this kind?* Some of the participants had addressed this explicitly earlier, so the question did not in itself open up any new perspectives. The same question had already been presented – and answered – by many of them. My intention in asking was to challenge the group to sum up their reflections on strategies regarding how they included – or excluded – the texts of Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15 in making meaning.

AHG: I have a question I would like to ask the whole group. I don't know if the right time is now because I think that ... this has been really interesting to listen to.

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<sup>195</sup> As discussed in Chapter 3, I had made the choice not to take part in the discussions on the text, nor to try to control the conversations, that is, how the participants chose to discuss the texts. My intervention here, despite these decisions, was motivated by the fact that time was running out, and I wanted to open up the space for some general, concluding remarks on how to deal with the texts. There were two reasons for doing this: first, to investigate if the comments already made by the participants were repeated on a more general level and, second, to signal a wish for further general reflections to be added to the empirical material.

My question is: How does one relate to texts of this kind? How? That is my question.

...

Shirin189: I think this has to do with text, and it has to do with women's situation. The text talks about those times, and one has to see how things are now.

Susanne59: ... I almost said something about this a while ago, but I didn't say it then, I will say it now instead. That is ... I think at least for the New Testament text, I am very close to abandoning it totally.

Susanne60: As a historical text ... it is interesting as a historical text, but it has nothing to say to me, and it is not interesting in any way other than describing this historical situation, perhaps the historical situation in general. There is nothing to gain from it for our time.

Susanne61: I can't say the same about the koranic text, because I am not a Muslim.

Susanne62: But I ... with the risk of provoking you all, I am willing to abandon that one too. But that is from my perspective. I think it is a more difficult text, less explicit... The text is very vaguely formulated, and I find it difficult to interpret. I have heard interpretations. But just as I read it, what does it mean? ... The last part of it is easier to understand, I think. But the first part is incomprehensible to me.

Shirin190: Not to me ... to Muslims. It must be interpreted.

Susanne63: In that way, I am ... the New Testament text is more specific, such as the details about not wearing pearls and so on .... I think it's difficult to relate to it. But how does one use them or relate to them, I am kind of in a place where I think these are texts that do not relate to ... which I can ... which I can abandon totally as ... thinking about what you said, or what we have been talking about: violence toward women, rape, vanity, and the current obsession with body and appearance.

Susanne64: But I believe that these themes are interesting to discuss in relation to the texts, but the texts are not crucial to starting a discussion about these topics.

Susanne65: So, for my part, they could be erased. Except as historical documents.

Inger107: Yes, I agree with that. And I feel that as a Christian, I have the right to abandon parts of the Bible. I don't have to find an interpretation or a meaning in every

single paragraph. So this belongs to the past. What was the question again, Anne Hege?

- AHG: How does one relate to the texts?
- Inger108: Then I will cross this one out. But there is another question I think is really important, too, and that is how we as Christian and Muslim women comprehend our role as women, based on our understanding of God.
- Inger109: If we were to describe this, based on our own understanding, and not only based on these pieces of text ... do we have equal status? Or, are we equal to men in everything? Or do we have different roles in some areas of life? Now I have introduced a new question, so perhaps we should take the other question first.
- Aira216: Yes, when I look at the koranic text, I cannot just say that we should abandon parts of the Koran or something like that, but I ... rather on the contrary, I would say that what is needed is better insight into what they really stand for.
- Aira217: Why should we always leave it to the men to interpret these verses, when some misuse them for their own purposes?
- Aira218: We have to inform ourselves better about the understanding of the Koran. We need better knowledge, so that we can interpret by ourselves and stand up for it.
- Aira219: For instance, when it is said that men should rule over women.... The man should stand beside the woman in all matters and support her under all conditions.
- Aira220: And this is not just some opinion coming from me; there are lots of people who believe that this has nothing to do with the authority of men over women; it is rather about their support and backing.
- Shirin191: But they do it like that everywhere ....
- Aira221: But it is misinterpreted! It is a misinterpretation.
- Shirin192: Unconsciously, you see men with education like ourselves – not bad, but nice – they have this attitude.

- Aira222: Yes, there is a need for better attitudes, and to stand up and say it's like this, if you look in dictionaries, and examine the words and the origin of the word, and what meaning it had historically.
- Aira223: And if one is strong in one's faith and rational, the day will come when women have more understanding to view things in a totally new way.
- Aira224: But it will take quite some time before others understand what it means .... A lecturer in England sees it the same way, it [*qiwama*] means support.

The profiling of the participants' hermeneutical standpoint is drawn more sharply. Their statements become more conclusive, probably as a response to the question I formulated. The discussion covers the question of relating to the texts in a comprehensive way, including context and their own agency/position in the meaning-making process. In the foreground are descriptions of the contexts in which women live, how the texts might influence these, and the actual agency of interpretation. Inger develops her answer into a new question, asking about the Christian and Islamic traditions' perspectives on gender roles and gender models in general beyond these particular texts. The participants contextualize the texts and their own understandings, not only of the texts but also of issues of women's situation in general. Placing themselves and the texts in time and space is part of the contextualization of their own making of meaning.

Two different hermeneutical standpoints occur, divided according to religious lines. The Christian participants claim their right to abandon the text in 1 Timothy 2:8-15 in terms of its having any religious authority. The argument they use is that the text is outdated, belongs to a different time, and is irrelevant to what they define as "our time" or "now." They argued earlier that its content is not consistent with Jesus' teaching, which is the center from which they interpret Christian canonical scripture. But in this section it is only their hermeneutical evaluation that the text does not fit the present that leads them to abandon the New Testament text.

The Muslim participant Aira states that her way of relating to Sura 4:34 is through knowledge and interpretation and not through abandonment of the text, which is not presented as an option (Aira216). The crucial interpretation for Aira is the word *qiwama* (Aira224): if interpreted as *support*, not authority, the *aya* could be seen to be a constructive work to strengthen women's role and position. Shirin and Aira appear to differ in their degree of optimism about possible changes in the general interpretation of this text. Shirin does not, however, suggest abandoning or marginalizing Sura 4:34. Rather, she argues that to change the way it is interpreted is an overwhelming task, and that she cannot really see how this can happen. Aira adds one significant argument for not abandoning Sura 4:34: if she, and others who interpret the text in the same way she does, turns away from it – more of the interpretative power will, in her view, be left to male interpreters who argue that the text legitimizes the maintenance of a

patriarchal structure. The responsibility she identifies for herself as being a part of the Islamic tradition is to stay *with* the texts from the Koran and struggle with destructive interpretations through obtaining more knowledge and through taking on the task of transforming the general interpretation of Sura 4:34.

The details in the participants' answers reveal greater nuances than the broad picture I painted above. Shirin starts by suggesting that the texts *and* the context are decisive factors for making meaning (Shirin189). She indicates a division between the two based on chronology: The texts are in the "then," and the contexts (and readers) are in the "now." She may be suggesting that the hermeneutical task is to "bridge the gap." She declares that the text needs to be "interpreted" (Shirin190), which indicates that she believes Sura 4:34 needs exegetical and perhaps contextual reflection; it is not enough to read it and only use the information from the text itself or to rely on any given interpretation.

Susanne's stance is to abandon the New Testament text as an authoritative religious text and states that, to her, it represents nothing else than a "historical document" (Susanne60). She discusses her own inability to see the koranic text in the same way, since she is not a Muslim, and ends up by regarding it in the same way – as a "historical text" (Susanne65). Susanne, then, ends up with the same attitude toward both texts. Her hermeneutical position toward the koranic text, the text of "the other," is similar to her position toward the text from her own tradition. What she does, is to place both texts as parts of the historical *contexts* of the Christian and the Islamic tradition – thus dismissing the texts as bearing any significant meaning for the present to which she could relate as a reader.

Articulating this position toward the text from the Islamic canon, Susanne shows that she might consider relating to other Islamic canonical texts, expecting to seek meaning from them, which is different from viewing the text as part of a context. If she had not regarded the Islamic canonical text as a possible source for the exploration of meaning, it would be meaningless to say that she would abandon a text from a tradition other than her own. Susanne thus presents herself as a reader who may be more concerned with the actual *content* of the canonical texts than their religious status as Christian or Muslim.

Susanne states that the themes addressed in Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15 are contextual matters, independent of the texts. This could mean that she even finds subversive or alternative attempts at interpretation to be valueless. The texts are not even needed as sources for raising important feminist issues. Taking a close look at the social contexts would be enough to suggest the significance of the same issues, she states. Susanne turns away from the texts, both as canonical texts and as texts for which it would not make any sense to spend the effort to relate to them.



Inger states that she feels free, on the basis of her Christian faith, to “abandon parts of the Bible.” (Inger107). Thus she claims that she does not need to struggle to find meaning in “every single paragraph.” (Inger107). She declares that 1 Timothy 2:8-15 is a text she would abandon. Inger, then, uses her hermeneutical stance grounded in her perspective of herself as an acting subject in the reading process provided by the Christian tradition to place this text outside her own frame of reference. This hermeneutical stance implies that the text is regarded as a lost case and it should be left alone; there is thus no need to struggle to interpret the text. The roles of text and reader are approached as separate in the meaning-making process, and the autonomy of the reader is established as a premise. Inger does not comment on Sura 4:34.

Aira, ruling out the possibility of her abandoning texts from the Koran, constructs a strategy representing the *opposite* move. She claims that texts like Sura 4:34 need even more attention, knowledge, and work. The premise for Aira’s stance is that a close dynamics between reader, the koranic text, and available relevant knowledge, including knowledge of the text’s contextual use, is required to make responsible and consistent meaning of Sura 4:34.

Even though these stances of abandonment and close interaction seem contradictory as interpretative positions, they still share a view of the position of the reader as a *subject*. The process of gaining resources of knowledge and evaluating what knowledge to use requires a subject outside of the text. Aira’s subject position of the reader does not, however, grant the reader autonomy to the extent that she could abandon the text. The text’s position is constant, although there is be a dynamics of negotiation between text, reader, and tradition in the production of meaning. It is the position of the *text*, with its implications for the autonomy of the reader that makes the two strategies different, not the view of the reader as such.

Aira, however, shows that there is another difference, too: response and responsibility in relation to a *context*. The hermeneutical strategy of abandonment *versus* the strategy of initiating a critical dynamics between reader, text, tradition, and context, is discussed when Aira addresses what she identifies as a contextual need. A strategy of abandoning Sura 4:34, or even a reluctance to relate to this text, would imply leaving the interpretation to men, whereof “some misuse them for their own purposes” (Aira217). The way Aira sees it, the strategy of abandonment is not an option – not only because of the status of the Koran in the Islamic tradition but also because this strategy would prevent any change from happening in the traditional making of meaning of this text. If Aira and those like her do not involve themselves in interpretational efforts, Sura 4:34 would still produce legitimization of male dominance.

Shirin193: It makes us Muslims careless about whether society is governed in a just way. Think about that. Everywhere in Muslim countries a few possess a lot of resources, while others have nothing.

Aira225: Yes.

Shirin194: And with the claim that God has provided some above others. Don't forget that. You see? They don't move on to the next verse about giving and redistribution in society. You never hear this because that means you have to give. But this verse you can hear everywhere.

AHG: Can I ask something? Is this text used to legitimize political systems?

Shirin195: Yes.

Aira226: That's a misinterpretation....

Shirin196: There are misinterpretations everywhere.

Shirin brings up a new interpretative perspective for Sura 4:34. So far, the interpretation of the text has concentrated on family and marital issues, as well as gender roles in the Islamic tradition more generally. Now the application of the concept of *qiwama* includes a new area: the general distribution of wealth and power in "Muslim countries" (Shirin193-194). The political implication this text may, according to Shirin, suggest a lack of interest in general in making attempts at changing social and political injustice because the text's use of *qiwama* is interpreted as if a different distribution of wealth and power is God-given. I was not aware of this use of Sura 4:34 before Shirin's critical elaboration, which motivates me to ask a follow-up question. In Shirin194 she refers to a "next verse," which may be the *ayat* of Sura 4:36, where the responsibility of "being good" to the orphans and the poor is prescribed.

Both Shirin and Aira state that they regard this use of the text as "misinterpretation." By calling an understanding of a text "misinterpretation," they confirm their own authority to judge which textual interpretations are correct. This self-confidence is necessary in order to construct an agency.

Shirin197: For instance, we have many, many verses saying that whatever religion you have, if you believe in astrology or if you are a Jew, everyone is equal. But some places in the Koran ... particularly because there are two ... one in Mecca and one in Medina that came to the prophet, two different ....

- Inger110: Versions?
- Shirin198: Versions, OK. It is contextual, everything. There was a war, and one had to kill: this was about those Jews who were involved in the war. Then they use it. Look, misinterpretations are everywhere. The main message is that everyone is equal.
- Shirin199: There is only one God, no matter if you are a Christian, a Jew, or you believe in the stars, as long as you have your good deeds and interpret it as you should in keeping rules and regulations, then it's OK.
- Shirin200: But they come and interpret it that way. Then it is misinterpreted.

Bringing in koranic textual support to claim the equality of all people takes Shirin back to one of her main viewpoints that were articulated throughout the project. Although she does not refer to specific texts, she claims that the koranic message is about human equality regardless of one's religious identity.<sup>196</sup> This comment is probably meant to represent a correction from the Islamic canon itself of the misinterpretation mentioned above: Islam is not about maintaining inequality – it is about the implementation of equality. The equality Shirin emphasizes is between people of different faiths, which seem to be a hermeneutical axiomatic stance for her in the same way as gender equality is to Inger, for instance.

Shirin197 brings in a traditional Islamic tool for interpreting the Koran, namely to interpret koranic texts in accordance with the context in which they were revealed, and particularly to separate between revelations given to the prophet Muhammad in Mecca and the later revelations in Medina. What Shirin addresses indirectly is that there are some textual parts revealed in a war situation in Medina that are allegedly shaped by the tense situation where the Jews were no longer considered allies of the prophet Muhammad (Leirvik 2006: 42) These texts refer to Jews as enemies who should be defeated. Shirin argues that these verses must be interpreted as part of a war context in Medina at the time of the revelation and not taken as the general stance on Jews in the Koran. Again, knowledge and historical placing of the text is suggested as crucial for a relevant making of meaning of canonical texts.

- Aira227: ... concerning obedience ... if one is a man one should adhere to the limits set by God. If he doesn't ... honor women, we are not obliged to obey a person who violates the limits.
- Aira228: And keeping what is a secret, just as you said, it can be private matters.

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<sup>196</sup> The examples she gives of different religions include Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The addition of astrology/believing in the stars may refer to Zoroastrianism, a religion originating from ancient Iran and whose adherents are mentioned in the Koran as belonging to the "peoples of the Book" (Roald 2007: 286).

Aira229: It could be that a woman who is pregnant and might want an abortion for various reasons, perhaps because of her health, there is no reason for this to be public. Though God does not allow abortion, if she decides to do so, this is a matter between that woman and God.

The meaning-making process regarding Sura 4:34 is not yet exhausted. Aira returns to the interpretation of Sura 4:34 in a marital context. Her statement in Aira227 on obedience in marriage is somewhat ambiguous: On the one hand, Aira seems to establish the premise that obedience to a husband is regarded as a duty for the wife in the Islamic tradition, when she moves on to qualify the premises for the husband's authority. The necessary qualification of obedience to the husband is that he "honors women" and "adheres to the limits set by God" (Aira227). Otherwise, in Aira's view, there can be no claim for obedience to the man from the wife with support in the Islamic tradition. This suggests that obedience for both husband and wife is ultimately an obligation they have to God, since a wife is not obliged to regard a husband who transgresses the boundaries set by God as an authority. When the question of obedience came up during the discussions on the Hagar/Hajar texts, Aira very clearly stated that human obedience was to God exclusively. Is Aira presenting an interpretation to limit male authority through confirming it with a qualification no Muslim could object – that obedience to God overrules male authority in any case and emphasizing that the female has an independent relation with God? Her aim may be rooted in contextual knowledge, just as when it is suggested that the text be used as a *limitation* of violence (Shirin189, p. 318).

Aira229 introduces a new possible use of the prescription of secretiveness in the text, as an *allowance* and an *option* for an individual private space in a marriage. Using the example of having an abortion – but hedging her statement by stating that she does not believe that abortion is what God would want<sup>197</sup> – Aira interprets the text to give both permission and an option to keep an early pregnancy a secret between the pregnant woman/wife and God. Aira regards this as a positive protection of a private space of reflection and self-determination for a married woman.

Aira230: It is my opinion that these texts provide immense room for oppression of women because they are usually misused and misinterpreted.

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<sup>197</sup> Leila Ahmed in her book *Women and Gender in Islam* (Ahmed 1992) remarks that, according to her sources, medieval Islamic jurisdiction on contraception and termination of pregnancy is "remarkably liberal" regarding the permission of women to decide about their reproduction (Ahmed 1992: 92). There is a distinction within the Islamic sources between terminating a pregnancy before and after the fetus is 120 days old, i.e. when the fetus becomes a person, according to Islamic tradition (Rogers 1999: 123).

Aira231: So, there is a great need .... I will not only say that they are historical texts and should be left behind, we have to study them carefully, we have to work more thoroughly with them, and then stand up and perhaps form groups among Muslims and non-Muslims and work together to improve this situation.

Aira230 is a quite clear analysis of how “these texts” are used today in contexts that are not specified further. In her view they do not just happen to be “misused and misinterpreted;” the misuse is systematic, and more the rule than the exception. But exactly what texts is she referring to when using the plural form? Is it Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15 or she is referring to more than one text from the Islamic tradition? So far, Aira has not presented contextual knowledge about the interpretative situation for 1 Timothy 2:8-15, and the Christian participants have mostly regretted the contextual subjugation this text has caused in the past. The use of 1 Timothy is still somewhat in the shadow, since its contextual use is not exemplified by reference to experience, as is the case for Sura 4:34. But Aira may have a more general perspective: both texts represent a problem, and all canonical texts of similar type cause oppression of women through misuse and misinterpretation.

But Aira’s main statement in this section is Aira231, where she again rejects any possibility for herself of taking the same stance toward the texts as Inger and Susanne have stated, namely to relate to the texts solely as historical, non-authoritative texts or to abandon them. Aira prescribes – again – the opposite move for herself. What is new in Aira231 is that she suggests a concrete plan of action: to create groups for sharing interpretative knowledge and interpreting the texts together, both “among Muslims and non-Muslims” with the aim of “improving this situation” (Aira231). She does not say “Muslims and Christians,” and it is not clear if the groups should be divided along religious lines or if people should be together in the groups. The improvement she refers to would be to spread the message that the texts should not be used as a means of oppression, claiming this on the basis of knowledge and her own interpretative skills in order to obtain a different understanding and interpretation of the texts. She assumes agency: to study, to stand up, and to share knowledge in the community, and she is not only referring to the Muslim communities.

Aira’s argument in this section for not abandoning the difficult texts and not weakening their authoritative status does not seem to be mainly doctrinal. Her argument is rather of a moral kind, based on what she perceives is a great need for a counteractive interpretation of the text(s) because of the “misuse” and “misinterpretation.” So far, none of the Christian participants has reflected in the same way about the text from 1 Timothy 2:8-15, nor have any of them suggested a plan for action.

- Shirin201: Regarding the creation of the Koran, there are two different schools. One says that it is created, and those who say this think it should be interpreted literally. But many scholars say no. It was ... it came gradually, depending on the context  
....
- Shirin202: I am among those who say that it was not created at once. It has come gradually.
- Shirin203: This is why I think that it was the message, what its spirit was.
- Shirin204: If I understand it literally ... personally, I don't interpret it in that way. Not that one should walk away; one needs to relate to something but not literally.
- Inger111: Do I understand you correctly if I say that you think that it is originally a message from God, from Allah, in this text, so what matters is to ... and that this is valid for all Koranic texts; it's important to get to the root and find the original message, since several layers of misunderstandings have been added?
- Aira232: Yes.
- Inger112: So, originally, the whole Koran is an expression of God's will?
- Aira233: Yes. It is. For me it is, and for the believers. I cannot say that it is historical.
- Shirin205: You think it is dependent on time and space?
- Aira234: Yes, but then it is reinterpretation, then you can draw new conclusions from old stuff ... it's not that one should be stuck, that this is the only thing that is there. We should interpret and draw conclusions suitable for the situation today.
- Shirin206: Then it is history. What you say is the same as she says.
- Aira235: No.

How is a Muslim to relate to the Koran – as a Muslim? This is the fundamental question emerging between Shirin and Aira. Even if they express themselves differently, they may not represent significantly different views. Starting with the discussion if the Koran is created or uncreated, Shirin pulls the view of the origins of the Koran into the discussion (Shirin201). She

connects the view of the Koran as uncreated to a literal interpretation of the text.<sup>198</sup> If the Koran is regarded as created, however, this means that the text includes contextual references and needs to be interpreted as a text “dependent on time and space” (Shirin205). Shirin links up to an early debate among Muslim philosophers about the same issue, and she positions herself in support of the Koran as created. She does, however, state that this does *not* indicate any possibility for her to abandon the text. It is a different perspective on the text, not a dismissal of it.

Aira does not position herself in this discussion on the created and uncreated Koran. She claims instead that she and Muslim believers cannot regard the Koran as a historical document only. On the other hand, she claims the need for a contextual interpretation, “to draw conclusions suitable for the situation today.” (Aira234)

Inger checks to see if she had understood Aira’s and Shirin’s perspectives on the Koran and interpretation correctly. Her question also seems to function as providing a basis for Aira and Shirin to clarify their views further, not only to Inger and the other Christian participants present but among themselves as well.

Shirin and Aira seem to disagree on whether they share the same view or not. Aira claims that there is a difference, without elaborating on the matter. The way Inger and Susanne used the concept “historical” earlier in reference to the texts, was clearly a way to deprive the texts of current authoritative status. Aira’s view as presented in Aira233-234 respects the authoritative status of the (koranic) texts, but at the same time she claims that a continuous reinterpretation in the present is needed. This could be motivated by Aira’s standpoint about the text’s authority: the significance of the koranic texts requires the readers to study continually in order to ensure that the receivers of the textual messages are not getting “stuck” but provided with interpretations in line with their experiences and contextual challenges.

Maria59:           How should we relate to the text? As a Christian, I see very much .... This is the Old Testament, isn’t it? Is it the New?

Inger113:          It should have been, but ....

*(Laughter among the participants)*

Inger114:          It’s Paul.

Maria60:           OK. That’s all right, but I read it as... because I couldn’t believe that it ....

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<sup>198</sup> David Waines summarizes the early debate on this issue in his introductory book on Islam (Waines 2003: 70-71).

This rather humorous intermezzo between Maria and Inger reveals that Maria thought until now that the text from 1 Timothy 2:8-15 was from the Old Testament. Now she asks the group if she is right, perhaps reading something from their faces that makes her doubt her first idea. Inger's ambivalent answer (Inger113) shows *her* discomfort with this text as part of the New Testament, but it seems that placing the text among the Pauline scriptures explains something for both Inger and Maria without further elaboration: It is in the New Testament, but it is placed among the Pauline writings.

The intermezzo reveals in brief the formerly mentioned hierarchical-hermeneutical structure the Christian participants apply to the biblical texts: Dividing sharply between the Old and the New Testament and distinguishing between texts in the New Testament that are narratives about Jesus and sayings of Jesus and other texts, including the Pauline texts. The former division functions as a strategy to construct different textual universes, where the New Testament takes preference above the Old Testament, and the narratives about Jesus above the Pauline texts. This hermeneutics implies a center and a periphery in the Bible, the center being the New Testament Gospels containing the Jesus narratives, and all other texts are interpreted from the perspective of this hermeneutical center. This pattern of making meaning of biblical texts is very similar to a Lutheran view of the Bible. One of the differences, however, is the position of the reader, where the Christian participants in the group claim an individually oriented, autonomous position for themselves as readers, without the interpretative control of a community that is required in the Lutheran tradition as well if one claims to have authority to interpret the texts for others, and not only for oneself.<sup>199</sup>

As Maria's "misunderstanding" in this section exemplifies, the categorization may not coincide with locating the text in either the Old or the New Testament. In this case, it functions as a hierarchical classification of texts, regardless of their actual location within the Bible. This "flaw" makes it possible to follow a hermeneutics based on the participants' *expectations* toward the text from the Old versus the New Testament.

- Maria61: OK, but what I wanted to say about ... perhaps about both texts is that they have been used to oppress women, I would say. It's been done in many countries.
- Maria62: Of course people can sit and think this isn't right. But they have been used, and are still used, to oppress women.
- Maria63: Now I'm going to say how I'll relate to the text .... I kind of agree with you that it's sad; I don't think one should learn from them, I don't find anything positive that I can contribute.

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<sup>199</sup> See Chapter 2, p. 41.



- Maria64: I think it's, it's taking us back to the message about Adam as the first one to be created, and what does that mean? It could have been Eve who was created first, right, so this is "who came first" and I don't think ....
- Maria65: And then I think OK, perhaps we who are sitting here, we can think and interpret it as we like, but what is unfortunate, perhaps for the Koran in particular, is that they don't interpret, they practice it as it is.
- Aira236: Many do that.
- Maria66: Yes. And that makes it a bit difficult and dangerous.

Maria dismisses the texts from 1 Timothy 2:8-15 and Sura 4:34 as resources for knowledge (Maria63). In her spatial reference to the effects of the texts, described as oppressive for women (Maria61), she does not refer to specific cultures or religions but suggests a geographical reference to "many countries." She finds "nothing positive" in the texts that she wants to pass on to others (Maria63). The argument in 1 Timothy about Adam being created which was used to legitimize male authority over women is characterized as a childish quarrel. To Maria, the chronology of creation is random and thus cannot be used as a serious argument for a permanent hierarchy between the sexes.

First, Maria does not indicate any wish to engage in interpretation of the texts at all and seems to join Susanne and Inger's strategy of abandonment. Later in the section, however, she states that it is necessary to interpret the texts. In Maria65 she argues that the situation may be more unfortunate for Muslims in this respect. Following Aira and Shirin's earlier descriptions, she suggests that many Muslims supposedly practice the text from Sura 4:34 "as it is," implying that this may lead to oppression of women. She explains this kind of textual use as non-interpretation, which may indicate a situation where the text is not reflected upon; since there is allegedly no distance between text and reader to make room for interpretation. There is probably a connection here to the notion presented earlier by Shirin and Aira of "literal" interpretation that contrasts with the interpretation they request. Regarding the interpretative situation in the Christian tradition, Maria does not explicitly exempt Christians from a situation of non-interpretation of texts. She does not take up the question of the use of 1 Timothy in Christian contexts. Does this perhaps illustrate a lack of contextual knowledge among the Christian participants? Or is this text invisible in the relevant contexts of the Christian communities the participants know?

Referring to people who passively "sit and think this isn't right" (Maria62), and later applying the position of sitting and thinking to the group, including herself, Maria seems to

construct an opposition between a privileged, safe position that allows people to sit and reflect on the texts and an unprivileged, unsafe position without the possibility of “sitting and thinking.” An underlying challenge may be how the sitting and thinking “we” relates to the needs in outside contexts and people (women) in unsafe positions. But Maria’s statement (Maria65) may also be understood as a positive evaluation of the interpretative situation in the group, regarding it as a place where it is possible to communicate whatever is on one’s mind, grounded in and creating confidence. The aspect of challenge, however, rather than of confirmation, seems to be strongest for Maria. It is as if Maria is just about to formulate a shared challenge to the group of doing something together with the interpretative situation of these texts, but she does not actually express a common agency.

Aira responds in a confirming and still modifying way (Aira236) that many Muslims practice the text “as it is” and “don’t interpret” – but not all. Maria views this lack of interpretation as creating a situation that is “a bit difficult and dangerous” (Maria8). The last comment includes both a possible theoretical, doctrinal perspective (difficult) and a practical, existential and physical perspective (dangerous), where both the “difficult” and the “dangerous” may refer to religious teaching and to religious/cultural practices.

- Susanne66: Then I think it’s important what you say: to go in and read what is actually ... what the words actually mean, and what they could have meant.
- Susanne67: And really, even if I said it in a flippant way that I could abandon the text completely, it is important even with the New Testament text ... because it is used in certain places to oppress women.
- Susanne68: It isn’t ... I mean, in sects or in more extreme groups, texts like this are used to oppress women, so it’s important not to just say “I don’t care about it” but to see what it could have meant, in what context it was written, and what the context means, and then you can say it’s not relevant.
- Susanne69: And this is a freedom I believe one has in regard to biblical texts and doesn’t have regarding the koranic texts.
- Susanne70: You said, too, that you can’t just abandon them, you rather have to interpret them and find the original meaning of the words, what they meant, and how to interpret them today.
- Susanne71: While I can read this Pauline text and I can perhaps read it in its original language, also taking a look at the context, and then I can say: I don’t need to interpret it more than this because it has nothing more to say. It is not relevant, and I can overlook it. But I think we have a possibility as Christians that I don’t believe Muslims have in relation to their text.

Susanne presents a self-reflexive comment on her earlier proclamation of abandoning the two texts (Susanne67). She expresses a different perspective relating to the contextual, pragmatic challenges presented by Aira and Shirin, and finally, by Maria. Agreeing that it is necessary for contextual reasons to work on the interpretation and reinterpretation of the texts, she modifies her earlier position of abandonment. As the first participant, she explicitly addresses the text of 1 Timothy 2:8-15, in the context of the practiced Christian tradition as being in need of interpretation. The addressed contexts are, however, restricted by Susanne to being “sects and extreme groups” (Susanne68). It seems as if the participants, including Susanne, do not regard the text in 1 Timothy 2:8-15 as being used extensively to legitimize male superiority and cause oppression of women – in comparison with how the participants view Sura 4:34 and the situation in Muslim contexts.

Susanne also initiates a doctrinal reasoning about the texts, stating that she finds a significant difference between the Christian and the Islamic traditions in this respect. The difference is focused on the autonomy of the reader: she suggests that the freedom for a reader of biblical texts in the Christian tradition includes the freedom to abandon the text, whereas Muslim interpreters simply do not have the possibility of depriving the koranic text of authority or abandoning it altogether. While acknowledging that a certain freedom in the interpretative process is also granted to the Muslim interpreter of the Koran (Susanne70), this freedom is still limited, according to Susanne.

For quite a long period in the discussions, differences between the two traditions were not addressed. The focus was on common challenges and similarities and suggestions of constructing a common agency. Does this shift from a focus on similarities to one on differences have implications for the emergence of a possible shared agency?

Inger115: I actually think that you interpret the Koran in a quite open way, like how I relate to the Bible.

Shirin207: Yes, lots of people in the Muslim world are following this process. It has started, luckily.

Susanne72: My main impression, however, is that the majority of Muslims follow your line, right, that it should not be interpreted literally, that is, be used to oppress, but ....

Inger disputes Susanne’s suggestions about framing a different Christian and Islamic position of the reader by comparing her own way of interpretation to that of Shirin and Aira,

finding that they all interpret in a way she calls “open” (Inger115). Inger’s statement relates to her experience in the group, where she does not categorize her own strategies of making meaning of the biblical text as very different from the Muslim participants’ making meaning of the Koran. Shirin recognizes Inger’s suggestion of a shared, open hermeneutical position and refers to what she sees as an ongoing interpretative process among Muslims in Muslim majority societies, more or less along the same lines. Thus, they both underline the similarities, and Susanne joins in agreeing that the majority of Muslims do not interpret the Koran literally – stating that literal interpretation to her indicates oppressive use of the text. But this was probably not exactly what she tried to address in the former section. What about hermeneutical differences between the two traditions?

- Aira237: Create more knowledge, so that one can stand up and say: No, to use literal ... that’s wrong. So, if one can be that strong ....
- Aira238: It is very important that we read it. Some things are historically and contextually dependent texts that have nothing to do with today, but we should recognize that they exist, and reinterpret.
- Aira239: And this is not against the message of the Koran. God says all the time: Why shouldn’t you think? Why don’t you think and reflect on the Koran.
- Aira240: And if we don’t reflect and if we don’t think and ponder deeply .... that means that we actually oppose the message of the Koran.

Aira’s repeats her confidence in knowledge: If the readers (she is most likely referring to Muslim readers of the Koran at this point, but she might include Christian readers of the Bible as well) acquire sufficient knowledge, they will not only be able to do the necessary interpretative work to prevent the texts from being misinterpreted: having knowledge will also provide the necessary self-confidence and a position from which to articulate one’s views (Aira237). Knowledge thus has at least a double function for Aira.

Claiming that reflection and knowledge is not only needed but *required* in Islam by the Koran itself, Aira states that reinterpretation of the texts is an Islamic *duty* prescribed by the Koran. The authoritative status of the Koran that Aira holds on to is thus her strongest argument for legitimizing the reinterpretation of koranic texts.

- Susanne73: I believe, from my point of view, that this principle is dependent on which text one is talking about. This is a text that doesn’t yield any meaning for me to interpret in the present.

- Susanne74: This is a bit ... it is so specific, and it has a little to do with it being ... it holds values that I can't ... I can't cater to them, and I can't see how they can be interpreted differently.
- ...
- Maria67: There is one thing we must remember, and that is that a lot of people need to have this read to them, because they don't know how to read themselves. So they are very dependent on those who do read and who interpret what's being read and interpreted.
- Maria68: If we as readers want to give a different interpretation, they – what those people do, they say that this is the way it is: the women should be subordinate to the man.
- Maria69: This is what the Bible says, and this is what the Koran says. Sects and religious groups use exactly this Pauline text: that women should stay in their place, they should dress in a specific way, and they should be like this and that.

Susanne repeats an earlier criticism of the text from 1 Timothy – it is too specific and is an outdated text for which Susanne can't find any room in her interpretative frame of reference (Susanne73-74). Susanne does not see any alternative interpretations (Susanne75), and confirms her former wish to distance herself from the text altogether, because of the huge discrepancy she experiences between her own ethical values and the values she sees in the text in 1 Timothy. The challenge to relate to a canonical text from one's own tradition representing ethical values contrary to those of the reader may confront the interpreter morally because of her ethical position. If the reader takes an autonomous position, and the text is evaluated as being marginal within the canon, it may be difficult to find the motivation to struggle with it. The source of motivation may still be found in the *contextual* situation, as Maria does (Maria67-68).

What are the causes for the differences between Susanne and Aira's approach to the readers' position, if one should attempt to summarize them? Susanne regards it as possible to abandon the text and still stay within the boundaries of her own tradition, and a contextual need for a reinterpretation is less urgent for Susanne than for Aira. The different approaches to the Bible and the Koran in the two traditions do influence Susanne and Aira's reasoning, and is best illustrated by the different views on the possibility of abandoning the text and the obligation to reinterpret the text, both argued for from within the Christian and Islamic traditions respectively. In addition, their different stances are contextually motivated. These motivations, however, also interact. The authority – or lack of authority – of the texts does not only influence how the participants in this project relate to the texts but also influences the larger communities of Christian and Muslim believers, too, in their different contexts. This makes the question of the

texts' authoritative status part of the context. The more authority a text possesses the more significant the impact on the believers is, making the interpretation more urgent.

Maria<sup>67</sup> and <sup>68</sup> touch on a contextual problem that had not been addressed earlier, except indirectly by Aira in her earlier call for the improvement of common education (Aira<sup>166</sup>, p. 278): What about those who do not know how to read? As an illiterate person, one is dependent on others to know and explain a written text such as the Bible and the Koran.

Maria, still including a wider contextual reference than the other Christian participants present, now claims that 1 Timothy is still used to legitimize female subjugation. But Maria, too, in Maria<sup>69</sup>, seems to limit the practice of female subjugation based on 1 Timothy to "sects and religious groups." Like Susanne did earlier, Maria, finds that the broad Christian mainstream distances itself from the use of 1 Timothy 2:8-15 to promote female subjugation.

Inger<sup>116</sup>: Can I ask ... do any imams in Norway interpret this text the same way as you do?

Aira<sup>241</sup>: I have only heard one, in England, and he is dead now, he died a short while ago.

Inger<sup>117</sup>: Then you have an important task.

Aira<sup>242</sup>: Yes. And perhaps there is this one in Sweden .... Anne Sofie<sup>200</sup> ... and perhaps Lena Larsen<sup>201</sup>, but I haven't heard her on this.... I have heard Anne Sofie.

Inger asks specifically about the interpretive stances among Islamic religious leaders in Norway, requesting Aira to share her contextual knowledge. Aira does not refer to any Norwegian imams or other Islamic religious leaders but to an imam in England and to a Swedish/Norwegian Muslim researcher on Islam, Anne Sofie Roald. In the background of Aira's shared contextual knowledge, Inger emphasizes the importance of the contributions by Aira and supposedly Shirin also.

Aira and Inger express themselves (without dramatizing) about a situation that may easily be regarded as dramatic. Based on Aira's earlier sayings on the contextual needs and how they should be met, it becomes apparent that she acknowledges the importance her own contribution

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<sup>200</sup> Anne Sofie Roald (1954- ), a Muslim convert of Norwegian origin, has been doing research on Islam and Muslims in Scandinavia and the West as well as in the Middle East since the mid 1990s. In her book *Women in Islam: The Western Experience*, she discusses the interpretation of Sura 4:34 (Roald 2001).

<sup>201</sup> Lena Larsen (1960-) is also a Muslim convert of Norwegian origin. She was the first female leader of the Islamic Council in Norway (2000-2003) and is presently (2010) a Ph.D.-student at the University of Oslo.

and own agency may have in the Norwegian context to reduce the discrepancy between her own ethical engagement and her interpretation of Sura 4:34 on the one hand and the reality in the Norwegian Muslim context as she knows it on the other.

Aira elaborates on the interpretative situation among Muslims in Norway only when she is questioned directly. But when she is asked about this, she communicates her own view without trying to be apologetic on behalf of the Muslim communities in Norway. Instead, she stresses a need to improve the interpretative situation, and she is assuming a position as an agent for change in this situation. Aira's willingness to share her analysis may indicate that she does not view this as an internal Muslim matter only, or at least she is communicating the challenges she identifies in an open manner. But this may also be motivated by a commitment from Aira's side to protect the koranic text from what she finds to be the contextual abuse of the text.

Susanne75: I think this is very interesting, because they are two completely different ways of relating to the text, aren't they: to fight the effect of the text, because the effect is the same, namely that women are oppressed, exposed to violence, to ....

Shirin208: Oppressed?

Susanne76: Yes, when I read these texts, I believe that the effect is oppression, strong or weak, with and without violence .... For me, is the most natural thing is to abandon the entire text, because it is not crucial to the biblical message.

Susanne77: To me, this is a text related to the Law; there is no Gospel in this, nothing pointing to the Gospel of the New Testament, so I can't really ....

Susanne78: So, with Luther, I can say that this text isn't relevant for me, because it's not part of the Gospel, it's part of the Law. But you have a different interpretation as your premise.

Susanne79: But I can't avoid reading it, and I have to try to understand it in the light of my own context.

Susanne still struggles to identify the meaning-making strategies represented in the conversations on Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15, perhaps as a continuation of her former attempt to sort out the differences between a Christian and an Islamic way of interpretation. The two ways of interpreting she mentioned the last time concentrated on a freedom to abandon the text (in the Christian tradition) versus an obligation to relate to the text (in the Islamic tradition). The development of her own position has led her to a stance of fighting the practical effects of a text that she abandons in theory. Thus, her reason to relate to the text is contextually but not

textually motivated. Does this mean that she has changed her mind about the relevance of relating to the text? It seems as if she may feel forced to relate to the text after all, grounded in the moral obligation to fight a possible oppression of others, even if it is said to be at a certain distance from her own situation

Unlike Aira, however, who stated that a widespread legitimization of oppression of women based on Sura 4:34 required increased knowledge, reinterpretation, and common action, Susanne seems to dismiss the possibility of any reinterpretation of 1 Timothy 2:8-15. She instead uses a hermeneutical perspective to marginalize the text from 1 Timothy 2 further: the Lutheran hermeneutical distinction between Law and Gospel in the biblical texts (Ulstein 2006: 107-110). Eva used the same hermeneutical tool in the general discussion about the participants' general view of the Koran and the Bible (Eva9-20, p. 124-125). Based on this hermeneutical concept, Susanne evaluates the text from 1 Timothy as peripheral in the biblical canon, as representing the Law, and thus in the margin.

Aira243: It's important to create more knowledge, and it's important that we, women and men, create some groups where we can take a look at .... I think something like this has started, but it is moving ahead very slowly.

Aira244: And actually, it's a difficult job to do because of most people who understand this literally are also dominating women and oppressing them. That's the easiest for all.

Aira245: And women are oppressed, yes, because they don't have the knowledge that ... the insights they really need to prove it, look here, what is the Koran saying?

Aira246: Not many women can say "No, I will not listen to you if you ...." I never say that I am obedient; I can listen to my husband, but if he chooses to do something against the message of God, there is no reason why I should follow him.

Shirin209: You know that God's message really is that ... what is really the message of God?

Aira reflects on factors she finds *prevent* the change she calls for among Muslims and mentions three: continuing dominating and oppressing women turns out to be "the easiest for all" (Aira244), women don't have the knowledge needed about the Koran (Aira245), and they do not have the courage to stand up for themselves in marriages where their husband violates God's message (Aira246). She repeats her call for groups to assume agency for change, and emphasizes that men should be involved in the work for change, alongside women. Aira246 repeats that, to Aira, God is the final authority, and the only authority a Muslim, male or female, has to obey.



So, Shirin asks, what is really the message of God? Returning to a fundamental question brings the conversation on the specific texts to a more general level. It is difficult to say if the question is meant to be rhetorical, but it nevertheless functions as an invitation to conversation. Is Shirin thinking solely about finding the message of God in the Islamic tradition or does she include the Christian tradition as well? The intention behind this question may be addressed across religious borders, reflecting Shirin's statements of similarities and equality between the religions and her quest for a common ground (Shirin18, p. 130).

Aira247: It is, for instance, that one should be equal, and ....

Aira248: There are two things in the message of Islam: obligations toward God, and obligations toward other people. If we don't fulfill those obligations ....

Shirin210: What are those obligations?

Aira249: If you are after me all the time, if you abuse me all the time, if you hit me all the time and are violent against me, then you don't live up to your obligations. Then I don't want to be maintained or obey him. It is as easy as that.

Aira answers Shirin's question twice: first without reference to a specific religion and then with reference to the Islamic tradition. Aira's second answer (Aira248) on the double obligation of the human being in Islam introduces this principle to clarify the meaning of the specific text of Sura 4:34. This is done by stating that the obligations toward others are limited – so as to avoid legitimizing the abuse of power in the name of Islam. Aira moves between the general and the specific and shows once more that a broader perspective from the Islamic tradition is necessary to interpret this specific text. If the narrative of Jesus Christ in the New Testament is the hermeneutical center for the Christian participants, equality between humans together with obedience to God may be the hermeneutical center for Aira.

Maria70: I just wanted to say that when I read the two ... the koranic text is quite short, but in a way I think ... when trying to explain it, I do find a little bit of a positive message in the way the Koran puts it. Because it elaborates on how women are equipped, whether or not we mean bodily, I don't know, but if we mean that women are equipped for childbearing, that one should take care of them and things like that, it is actually somewhat positive.

Maria71: The Christian text, I think it's very.... It's very concerned about women's appearance and makes women responsible for not dressing in a way that attracts

attention. It talks about not dressing up, not taking care of your hair and hairstyling. Everything about gold jewelry and that ... to me this has nothing to do with the heart or the personality of the person inside.

Maria72: I believe that is a very old ... what should I say, old-fashioned way of thinking here, to say that women are only good enough when they don't look pretty. And I think that's weird.

Inger118: Boring.

Maria does not seem to have given up her search for positive elements in the koranic text and finds a possible positive sign in reading childbearing as a positive quality of women into the text (Maria70). She does not, however, say anything about looking for positive elements in the New Testament text and instead repeats her earlier criticism. 1 Timothy 2:8-15 is indirectly placed in the past again, conveying an old-fashioned view that appears strange and foreign.

Susanne80: But I think ... even if this text is used concretely as the reason behind the oppression of women in certain groups, parts of this text are also used within broader groups. In the entire Catholic Church and with certain ministers in the Lutheran church, it is used as an argument against female ministers.

Susanne81: The... "a woman should receive the teaching in silence ... I don't permit a woman to act as a teacher,"<sup>202</sup> these verses are used to argue against female ministers. And that is ... most of the Christian world uses this text to do exactly that. So even if we can abandon this text for historical reasons, much of it is still used ....

Inger119: Today.

Susanne82: As a very central text today. And I find that problematic.

It seems here that the context where 1 Timothy 2:8-15 represents the legitimization of female subjugation is gradually being extended. The place of the literal implementation of this text was suggested to be "sects and extreme groups" (Susanne68). Susanne relates the text from

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<sup>202</sup> This quote is from the Norwegian translation of the Bible used in the group (Bibelselskapet 1978), where the text in Norwegian is: "En kvinne skal motta læren i taushet. Jeg tillater ikke en kvinne å opptre som lærer."

1 Timothy to a theological resistance to female priests in the Roman Catholic church, and declares it to be “a very central text today” (Susanne82).

Why does Susanne change her perspective on the extent of the text’s influence? The Roman Catholic Church was hardly meant to be included in her earlier reference to “sects and extreme groups.” Perhaps she has been reminded of a larger context throughout the discussion and, while including a global and not only a national context, she realizes it is necessary to extend her own perspective. The challenges have been moved from the past and the periphery to the now and to church communities situated in the Norwegian context, which implies that the location is now getting very close to the “here.”

- Inger120: But what are our opinions, then ... is there any reason why we should have a specific message for women, for me as a woman, different from a man? I don't really think so.
- Inger121: There are certain things linked to childbirth, but it is a very small part, it is 1.8 children per Norwegian woman, and it is a very limited period of life.
- Inger122: This might be relevant for you now, but, generally speaking, in our society, where everyone is educated, and things are organized for us to have children, we are equal.
- Inger123: So why should there be any specific regulations for women at all?
- Inger124: And the way I read the New Testament, how Jesus met women, exalted them, and gave them status and attention, I can't see that there should be any restrictions on what we can do.
- Inger125: We too can preach the word of God, we have been empowered, equal; this is my understanding, my interpretation.
- Inger126: I don't know about more ... do we have any thoughts on this, now at the end? Are there specific messages to women in the Koran, different from the message for men?

Inger portrays a division of gender roles displayed as commandments directed only to women in the biblical material, with 1 Timothy as one example, as absurd. Her argumentation is based on a comparison with contemporary social norms and structures in Norway, Jesus' narrated teachings and actions, and women's actual abilities. To establish a set of norms for women different from those for men does not make any sense for Inger, and she positions herself very clearly in this respect. Her contribution is, however, framed by questions so as to include her Muslim co-participants in a shared reflection on gender roles and gender models in the two traditions.

- Shirin211: The way I read the Bible and the Koran as a whole, no. It is equality, and there is this beautiful verse that I remember: that they complement each other. This means that they live together, and become a whole.
- Shirin212: Not that they are not whole, but ... I don't understand this as oppressive.  
...
- Shirin213: Some say that it is created, and you can't do anything about it. It is created like that. It is supposed to be like that. Some fundamentalists who do terrible things, interpret it in this way.
- Shirin214: But others say, no, it has come gradually, depending on the situation of the Prophet. Then you look at what it was, what the intention was, what happened.
- Shirin215: This is why I say that I am of no less worth, according to what I have understood from the Koran as a whole.

Shirin's claim that human equality is the core message of both the Bible and the Koran is an inclusive statement, but it also opens up the question of how Shirin actually views the relationship between these scriptures. Does she view the Bible as part of the basis for the Koran, only using the Koran as the interpretative key to understanding the Bible? Or does she compare them as separate expressions of their respective traditions?

Shirin's concept of equality (Shirin211), applied to gender relations, suggests a complementary view of the roles of men and women, that only together can they represent a whole (Shirin211). She adds that she does not find this oppressive (Shirin212). However, she hedges her statement by claiming that this does not imply that women and men are "not-whole" in themselves. Shirin's view of gender equality could thus be marked more by a complementary gender model than the view some of the Christian participants seem to hold, i.e. that men and women are equal concerning both status and roles and cannot be placed in fixed categories. Inger and Maria in particular have been explicit about this. Eva argued, however, earlier for the existence of universal experiences of women to which men do not have access (cf. p. 165) and used this standpoint to disqualify the text as a trustworthy narrative about a woman and child because of an alleged male author. But this way of portraying differences between men and women is not identical with a complementary model, which implies that women and men are supposed to fulfill different tasks but nevertheless claims that they have the same status. Defenders of this gender model often replace gender equality with gender equity.<sup>203</sup> Eva's view

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<sup>203</sup> An example of this in the Islamic tradition is the Islamic scholar Jamal Badawi (Egypt/Canada) and his book *Gender Equity in Islam: Basic Principles* (Badawi 1995).

is closer to suggesting a gendered dichotomy. And while Shirin's complementary model is viewed as harmonious, Eva's approach is shaped by a power analytical feminist view of gender differences. Both approaches, however, confirm and legitimize universal differences between men and women in different ways.

- Maria73: ... With those texts ... because I am a child of God in the same way as a man and can practice my faith in the way I understand it, and want to do it ... so personally, this does not affect me, I don't want it to affect me. I don't want that.
- Maria74: I think they are ... I don't want that. But I can't only think about myself. I have to show solidarity to others who are oppressed by this.
- Maria75: And that is why it becomes important and interesting for me how it is used to oppress other women. I am actually lucky, I can make a choice, while many others can't do that, or they have been brainwashed through religious sects, through Islam, through Christianity, and all that.

Maria declares that she shares the strategy of the abandonment of the text(s) for her own part. She legitimizes this choice, and the fact that she *has* a choice, through claiming religious autonomy and identifying herself as a religious believer on the same footing as men (Maria73). Maria applies a contextual understanding of the texts requiring her to relate to them or, rather, to relate to oppressive *interpretations* of them (Maria74-75). She chooses to engage with other women who do not have this choice, viewing this as a moral obligation. This solidarity seems to be presented as an obligation crossing religious boundaries, since Maria can be understood to include in her solidarity Muslim women who suffer because of the koranic text, as well as Christian women who suffer because of the biblical text.

- Shirin216: Just this verse, from the first day I read it: it made me very angry. And I felt ... no, no, with a small twig, do it like that. But what about the mental problems it creates?
- Shirin217: Then you see that OK, at that time, it was perhaps understandable. But to me, it is not understandable.... And look at what men do to their women, just because of this verse.
- Shirin218: And many, many verses say that you should do good deeds, you should create a society without poverty ... nobody ...
- Aira250: ... cares about that.

Why does the koranic text in Sura 4:34 have such great influence among Muslims, whereas other texts in the Koran are overlooked? Both Shirin and Aira seem to agree that this is the case, which they find it difficult to accept. Why is a text that creates suffering for women highlighted in the tradition when texts about abolishing poverty do not seem to have much influence on social practices, cf. Sura 4:36? Shirin's reflections raise an important question concerning power of interpretation: Who decides which texts should be highlighted? In mainstream Islamic religious practice there is no escape from relating to the *entire* Koran. Is a text used extensively to legitimize male superiority in marriage, more important than texts prescribing abolishment of poverty?

Inger127: I just wanted to add that ... I think we should move on, and I believe that nowadays, not many Christians ... now the church is ... people change, and then the texts change too.

Inger128: I think that today, the church is more concerned about its view of women, for women have, at least in the West, come very far. But I believe that the church today is even more concerned about other issues like homosexuality and things like that, which have become more urgent than the problem between women and men.

The expression "People change, and then texts change too" (Inger127) emphasizes the reader/interpreter as the decisive subject in the hermeneutical process. Inger has established herself throughout the process as an autonomous reader of the text, and this statement fits well with this position. The process of change is thus located by the transformation of the *reader*. It happens before the interpretation as such but influences the interpretative situation. There is a temporal aspect in Inger's statement, with a certain optimism reflected in the current situation located among Western Christian women. Inger suggests that the interpretative challenge for the Western churches in the interpretation of biblical texts has moved from gender issues and the view of women to the issue of homosexuality.<sup>204</sup>

Inger reflects on change in the interpretation of canonical scriptures as an unavoidable process, not unlike Eva's earlier statement on the difficulty of imagining any fixated interpretation (Eva144-146, p. 286). Inger, like Susanne, had dismissed the text from 1 Timothy

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<sup>204</sup> In the Church of Norway the debate on homosexuality and how to interpret relevant biblical texts has been the crucial issue for some time. However, the general view of the Bible and biblical interpretation may also be affected by this discussion. This is shown in the statement by the Church of Norway National Council represented by its Doctrinal Committee, which discusses the issue of homosexuality from the broad perspective of Christian Lutheran biblical hermeneutics in a document from 2006 (Kirkerådet 2006).

earlier without trying to reinterpret it. The cause may be that Inger experiences the situation of women to be satisfying within her own religious context, leaving 1 Timothy behind as a mere outdated text. Inger's reflection on interpretation in Inger127, however, does not have any reservations, so she opens the way theoretically for a new interpretation of even 1 Timothy 2:8-15. None of the Christian participants, however, made any attempt at interpretation in this direction throughout the conversations, except for Susanne's attempt to read the text with "a maximum of goodwill". Their activity of making meaning has mainly been to situate the text historically and to situate it on the margins of the Christian canonical tradition.

- Susanne83: Yes, I agree, but at the same time this issue about female ministers is an issue that ... even if one can think that ... this is still a difficult issue in many other churches.
- Susanne84: And a non-existent issue ... or a very problematic issue. But otherwise, I think that ... Eva's presentation of herself in our first meetings "I am a feminist because I am a Christian," kind of, I found very exciting, and yes, it was meaningful.
- Susanne85: Because the message is a liberating message that women are of equal worth and should have the same rights.
- Susanne86: But a different issue is that I think Christianity kind of gives a certain boldness, in the way I interpret it, to demand one's rights as a woman, and ... yes.
- Susanne87: But as far as I understand, that in Islam it is more ... it's not ... oppressive toward women as a religion. Women have another function, I don't know if I am right, but women have another ....
- Shirin219: To subjugate us, they say actually you have other functions. If you have the opportunity, you can test out every area, right? As long as you get support. Right, if one gets support, one can continue ....
- Susanne88: But I have heard both, that it is to keep women down and that it is to exalt women in a way to say that they are of equal value, only that you have different areas.

Consistent with her own broadened perspective, Susanne argues that there are still issues concerning women that should be solved in "many other churches." The challenge is contemporary, in the "now," but in this section it is not located in the "here." Neither Inger nor

Susanne seem to find any significant unequal treatment of women and men within their own church tradition, the Church of Norway.

Why did they not spell out this contextual knowledge earlier in the discussion? It may be partly because they included the Church of Norway when they spoke about Norwegian society, which they have claimed is a gender equal society. They have not, however, been asked to share this knowledge by the Muslim participants either. This may be because the Muslim participants also view the Church of Norway and Norwegian society to be one and the same context. Susanne's earlier statement about some male ministers opposing female ministers in the Church of Norway is now absent from the discussion. Contextual challenges from the Norwegian majority context, including the Church of Norway concerning gender equality, is generally not addressed as a contemporary issue by anyone in the group. Does this mean they regard such challenges as non-existent?

Linking up with Eva's self-presentation at the first meeting: "I am a feminist because I am a Christian" (Susanne84), Susanne presents the Christian Lutheran tradition as a valuable resource for feminism, both doctrinally and practically (Susanne85-86). This statement of the Christian Lutheran tradition as a "perfect" base for feminism, is however, contrasted with a statement on Islam as assigning different roles to men and women. Susanne is careful not to state that she finds "Islam as a religion" oppressive to women (Susanne87). She describes the view of gender relations in the Lutheran Christian tradition as more or less feminist constructivist, and the Islamic view on gender as complementary. Attention is turning back to the challenges connected to gender issues among Muslims, which has generally been given a great deal of focus in the discussions on Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15.

Shirin's reflections on her earlier presentation of a complementary gender model as not being oppressive is, in her response to Susanne's comments, viewed as a model that could be used in an oppressive way (Shirin219). Susanne, for her part, acknowledges that a complementary gender model may have different representations and effects (Susanne88).

Susanne89: Women are chiefly responsible for the home and the children, and that is a task of such importance that it should be lifted up, so that it becomes a positive rather than a negative value.

Susanne90: But in my ears this turns into "women should stay at home." So, for me, this becomes something negative, even if I understand from the discussions I have had with Muslim girls that they view it as something positive, and I can see the positive in it, but for me it's kind of difficult to relate to an interpretation like that.



- Aira251: But if one says that women's only function is to be at home and bring up the children, that would be totally wrong. And it is wrongly understood as well.
- Aira252: Because if we look at it, the Prophet's own wife was a businessman ... woman.
- ...
- Aira253: It depends on how we experience our everyday life. If we can make it ... if my children suffer because I am out all the time and fixated on my career ... and I forget and my husband forgets .... Both of them ought to organize this in a way that doesn't make the children suffer....
- Aira254: It can be a very demanding situation both being at home and still doing a lot of other things. I have worked very much outside the home myself and still had to take care of the kids, so it's not an easy task.

The discussion on the different representations of a complementary gender model between Susanne and Aira do not reveal any great disagreements. Rather, they seem to agree that this model should not be used to limit women's possibility of having access to different areas of life, both private and public. Susanne from outside and Aira from within the Islamic tradition are aware of the challenges the complementary model may represent for Muslim women. Aira, however, has the knowledge to challenge the limitations the model may impose on women without stepping out of the model herself. She addresses another aspect: the limitations inherent in the complementary model may also be a limitation on the total amount of *work* that can sensibly be borne by women. Aira refers to her own experience of having a double task (Aira254) and emphasizes that children should not be sacrificed for a career. But she includes both the mother and the father in the responsibility for raising the children, and the warning not to put their careers above children is thus addressed to both.

- Shirin220: Do you know why? Because our men don't take any responsibility for the situation.
- Aira255: No, it's very important that we talk, and then ...
- Aira256: ... we should not blame Islam. The Prophet himself helped his women in the home. So, then it's their own local traditions or their male chauvinism or dominant attitude toward women, and that is a completely different tradition. We can't mix culture and Islam.
- Shirin221: These attitudes are everywhere.

Aira257: Yes, but then we have to talk about culture, and not about Islam.

Shirin222: Yes ... everyone says that the women have come very far, but they do both jobs, at home and outside the home. You see?

Aira258: And they are expected to contribute everywhere. This is what has to change.

In Shirin's accusation against "our men" in Shirin220, it is not entirely clear who is addressed. Is she referring to Muslim men or simply all men? Shirin221 and 222 may be consistent with both interpretations. Aira's answers, however, are limited to Muslim men, and she suggests a more thorough distinction between Islamic and cultural influences as a possible solution. For Aira, culture and "male chauvinism" (Aira256) is the cause of unjust practices toward Muslim women, not Islam. She suggests that if the example of Muhammad is followed, the problems will be solved. Shirin's statement "These attitudes are everywhere" seems less optimistic and perhaps also more reluctant with regard to the project of distinguishing between religious and cultural influences. What Shirin and Aira both address as the most acute problem for women, however, is not that they are obliged to stay at home, but rather that their responsibilities are endless: in the home and outside the home (Shirin222, Aira258). Shirin222 may, in addition, be a criticism of the notion presented earlier that gender equality has already been achieved. Is the project of gender equality resulting in women working twice as much as men? This is the first time in the project anyone has asked critical questions about the status of gender equality in the Norwegian majority context.

Inger129: This is a crucial point, if the men take responsibility at home or are willing to stay at home, perhaps for some months to take care of the children, only then have we have come so far that women do not bear a double burden.

Shirin223: The function of the women outside the home is very ... what is it, more important. If the women make more money, why don't the men stay at home and take care of the children during the time they can choose to do so? And then the woman can work outside the home.

Shirin224: Do you know what happens if a Muslim man stays at home? It is a complete disaster.

Inger feels included in the description of women's limitless responsibility and suggests that the only way to change this is to balance the gender roles and the accompanying duties in the

private sphere (Inger129). Inger views the gender equality situation in present-day Norway as not perfect after all. Shirin follows up, strongly arguing for women to be able to work outside the home, even if this requires a change of function between men and women within the family (Shirin222).

Then the whole discussion ends with a rather discouraging statement about the ability of the “Muslim man” to fulfill domestic duties. All of the participants have portrayed *women* thoroughly as able to fulfill the role and functions of both women and men, traditionally speaking. The willingness and ability among men to fulfill the traditional role and function of women in the home is, however, questioned. Shirin seems to dismiss male ability completely in this regard. Her statement may be intended to be humorous, but nobody laughs.

### *Negotiating Context: Identifying the Contexts of Significance*

Throughout the discussions on Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15 there has been a gap between the Christian and the Muslim participants regarding their attention to these texts in *context*. The text from 1 Timothy is judged to be stripped of any authority in the religious contexts of the Christian participants who were present when the text was discussed. The Christian participants have gradually, however, come to see the text from 1 Timothy not only as a ghost from a grim past, legitimizing female subjugation, but also as a text still representing a challenge within the Christian tradition. It is only when this particular text moves from being read as a text from a distant past to being read into contexts beyond the Church of Norway that the negotiations on which context to relate to when describing challenges in the present start. Susanne and Maria connect the immediately interpreted message of 1 Timothy to practices of gender injustices in Christian contexts other than their own. They do not necessarily relate these practices directly to the influence of 1 Timothy but rather include 1 Timothy in a broader textual heritage from the Christian canon that may legitimize gendered hierarchies.

The Muslim participants generally relate to a context beyond Norway in making meaning throughout the project. This may have influenced the Christian participants. But it seems as if Maria’s globalized view has influenced them more. The expectation among the Norwegian Christians in the group that the Christian and Islamic traditions have different challenges regarding gender issues may have contributed to a situation where the challenges in contexts defined as “Muslim” are regarded as not comparable with contexts defined as “Christian.” The opening to other significant Christian contexts appears when “Christian” is no longer seen automatically as equivalent to “Norwegian Lutheran Christian.” But do the Muslims see it the same way, that is, do they expect that the challenges for the Christian and Muslim contexts respectively are incompatible?

The Muslim participants distinguish more clearly between the West and places outside of the West, often their countries of origin such as Pakistan and Iran. These distinctions are not linked to religion but to geography, culture, and social and political circumstances. Since the Norwegian Christian participants scarcely address challenges that women face in Christian contexts and in Norway in general, this shapes the image that Christian Norway is a context of gender equality. The Muslim Norway, however, emerges as a context struggling with the reinterpretation of an Islamic tradition that has generally been associated with cultures of discrimination.

The question of framing contexts of significance thus seems to relate to a cultural rather than a religious background: the participants with a plural background include contexts beyond Norway when making meaning of the texts. This has two consequences for the negotiation on context: the Norwegian context becomes visible as a context of its own, not only a given space of automatic reference, and contexts outside Norway are integrated into the group's perspective as contexts of significance.

***Then and Now, Here and There: Situating Texts, Readers, and Contexts***

Navigation through texts and interpretations of texts, contexts, and reading positions is often framed in temporal and spatial expressions. The texts as texts are generally placed in the past, although differently so: they could be contextually situated or not, taking the texts' historical contexts into account in the meaning making. The past in which the texts are placed could represent something the participant wants to distance herself from – as a negative mirror of the present or just representing a different time. The evaluation of the “past” decides if the participant sees a need to bridge the gap between past and present, between the text representing the past and the reader representing the present, or if the gap should be maintained.

Then there is the matter of situating the texts in the present, which is related to the reader's making meaning of the text as well as of other interpretations of the text. Both are connected to a context where the text appears to represent some kind of meaning. As mentioned above, negotiating contexts are part of the meaning-making process in the group. This means that the project is not only about reading texts but clearly about reading contexts as well. The readers situate themselves in a here and now, and all of the participants emphasize the need to keep focusing on the present. But what does this entail? And does this mean that they refer to the same present?

Generally speaking, the Christian participants speak more in terms of temporal framing (of the texts themselves and the contexts) and the Muslim participants more about spatial framing in their interpretation (the West, Iran, Pakistan, or other contexts). The Muslim participants too, however, do include temporal framing in their hermeneutics but seem to assess

the temporal gap between themselves and the koranic text as less problematic. The narratives from the times of Islam's origin are used as corrections of contemporary interpretations of Sura 4:34 that are regarded as oppressive. Thus, they do not place the origin of gendered injustice in the past or paint an image of the past as simply negative. The Christian participants, with Maria as the exception, usually make a distinction between past and present where the past – except that of the biblical narratives about Jesus' actions and sayings – is viewed as negative and the present as positive. Maria, however, claims that the differences between past and present regarding the oppression of women are only established in certain contexts and, generally, she seems to view gender equality as fragile regardless of different contexts.

When the participants formulate challenges for themselves, it is mostly the Muslim participants and Maria who insist on breaking down an image of a perfect “here and now.” Their use of temporal and spatial tools of interpretation seems to blur the total separation between “here” and “there” as well as that between “then” and “now.” This way of situating texts, contexts, and readers in a complicated web of experience, contextual knowledge, and interpretative situations make them suggest concrete action in the imperfect context of the present.

### *Hermeneutics and Interpretative Community = Dialogue?*

The utterances, reflections, and statements in this last discussion reflect a hermeneutical spiral movement in the communicative process, where much of the same reasoning is shared but is expressed more and more precisely. The reasoning often happens in verbal interaction, meaning that the articulation of a thought seems to coincide with the thinking process. At this stage, the participants have learned about the views of the others, and this may have created a communicative space where an interpretative community emerges more clearly, creating a shared “we.”

It seems that the participants are now aware of their different hermeneutical strategies toward Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15. The strategies of the Norwegian Christians are marked by a Christocentric hermeneutics and define their religious and social context as generally satisfactory. The Muslims stay with their commitment to change the interpretation of Sura 4:34, as motivated by their analysis of the contextual needs. But both strategies imply a strong subjective position for themselves as readers and interpreters. In this way, both the abandonment of 1 Timothy and the close textual interaction with Sura 4:34 represent compatible views of their own position. An interpretative community caused by a mutual acknowledgement of the importance of textual interpretation is established. The reference to gender equality as an ethical value in the reading of texts and contexts is commonly agreed upon, although the exact definition of what gender and gendered roles imply differs between the Muslim and the Christian

participants. But everyone dismisses structures of male authority over women, based on gender only.

Susanne is the only one in this discussion who addresses differences between Christian and Islamic hermeneutics, stating that she may abandon the text from 1 Timothy on the basis of her own religious tradition, whereas the Muslims do not have the option of abandoning texts from the Koran. Aira recognizes her description of this hermeneutical difference.

It seems as if the intersubjective communication is encountering differences in meaning-making strategies, thus including different views in what could be called a *dialogical interpretative community* where there is mutual awareness and the acknowledgement that hermeneutical difference constitutes no hindrance to mutual understanding and communication.

The most striking emergence, perhaps, of an interpretative community in this section, however, appears toward the end. This is where the immaculate image of gender equality in Norway starts to crack for the first time. After having discussed how women have access to all areas in Norwegian society, this is suddenly turned around to pose a challenge. Women have a double task struggling to fulfill all the roles they have access to in the society of gender equality. Shirin raises this as a critical question. Participants, regardless of religious and cultural background, seem to agree, and there is a common understanding of what needs to be changed. Men have to be willing to share the women's workload in the home as well as in the religious interpretation of difficult canonical texts. Gender justice is not only about the rights of women – it is also about redefining the responsibilities of men.

#### ***Moral Critique and Moral Enrichment of Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15***

The basis of ethical critique and moral enrichment of canonical texts is that the reader is regarded as a moral subject, with a responsibility toward the context, the text, and her own integrity. When there is a discrepancy between moral messages as viewed in the text and the moral stances of the reader, the reader faces a dilemma. Moral critique and moral enrichment are two terms that basically express the same attitude of the reader toward the text, but they may entail different understandings of the authority of the texts. Moral critique indicates a greater distance from the text, whereas moral enrichment may indicate a closer bond between reader and text.<sup>205</sup>

The Christian participants engage in ethical critique of both the New Testament and the koranic text, based on an ethical principle of gender equality. The Muslim participants relate to Sura 4:34 with their own moral stances, which influence their making of meaning. The New Testament text does not become an object of ethical critique or moral enrichment for the Muslim participants.

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<sup>205</sup> See Chapter 2 for discussions on the terms moral enrichment and moral critique of the texts, p. 48-50.

What dominates communication in the group, however, is the moral critique of textual *interpretations* (misinterpretations, abuse of power, legitimization of male authority over women). This is based on contextual knowledge about the past and the present.

***The Will of God, the Will of the Readers: Taking on a Shared Agency?***

What really, Shirin asks, is the message of God? Aira answers that God's will, as revealed in the Koran, is human equality. The Christian participants believe that gender equality is part of Jesus' message: We have been empowered and are equal to men, Inger states. The Norwegian Christian participants usually refer to gender equality when addressing human equality, whereas the Muslim participants and Maria more often include the question of human equality in a broader perspective (encompassing religious belonging, social class, geographical location.) This intersectional approach to equality did not become a distinct topic in the group.

Among the participants, Aira and Maria are the ones who most clearly articulate suggestions for shared agency. Their approaches are inclusive across gender and religious belonging, and directed to working with people in their contexts. The task is to change oppressive interpretations of the texts and make room for supportive *qiwama*.

**Part V:****Concluding Remarks**



## Chapter 7: Conclusions

It makes sense in this concluding chapter to organize the most important findings in the analysis around the three key terms in Chapter 2: hermeneutics, dialogue, and feminisms.

### What Kind of Hermeneutics?

Situated hermeneutics, usually called “meaning making” throughout this dissertation, reveal different strategies and patterns of making meaning in the group. The discussions are marked by the Norwegian context through references and experiences shared by the participants. But they relate to other cultural, social, and geographical contexts as well. The hermeneutical situation is marked by the interpretation of the texts, the interpretation of *other* textual interpretations, and critical engagement with both. The interpreted encounter between readers and texts and between the readers is marked by the fact that the participants are Muslim and Christian believers, individuals with different cultural backgrounds, and women.

It is apparent that there are *internal* differences both among the Muslim and the Christian participants in their making meaning of the texts, dissolving any idea of the two religious traditions as fixed and stable entities. The destabilizing term *transreligious* hermeneutics thus emerges as an adequate description.

The *cultural* background of the readers proved to be an influential variable in making meaning through destabilizing the representations of the religious traditions. The effect of this cultural diversity is made most visible by the Christian participants with an additional non-Norwegian background, because they openly refer to African or Middle Eastern cultures respectively. The Christians with a Norwegian background identify with the majority Norwegian culture, but these references are often only made in implicit ways. The Muslim participants seem, generally, to refer more to their *religious* tradition in the interpretation of the texts and in analyzing contemporary contexts than to culture. They challenge the cultural and political references (Iran and Pakistan) repeatedly with their conception of Islam, contrasting the two.

The distinction between culture and religion, however, is difficult to make on a general basis, and the participants themselves struggle with this distinction. There seems to be no clear answer in the empirical material to the question if the primary identification of the participants is cultural or religious. At times cultural identification proves important, but more often religious identification seems to be the primary reference. This may well be because of the pre-established structuring of this study. The participants were selected primarily because of their Christian or Muslim background, and the focus on canonical texts may have reinforced the highlighting of the religious traditions.

The various cultural backgrounds make it possible to investigate the relation between religion and culture in making meaning of the texts. This becomes particularly visible in some of the discussions on representations of Christian and Muslim traditions, where the variety regarding cultural backgrounds enable the participants to discuss how Christianity and Islam are intertwined and interact with cultures. Examples are Discussion 1 on the Hagar/Hajar narratives regarding the naming of women and Maria's regular references to an African context, which is also marked by Christianity. The consciousness about cultural variations in the representation of the religious traditions entails that the understanding of the Christian tradition is extended beyond its representation in the Norwegian and Western contexts and that the Islamic tradition is not made equal to concepts of Middle Eastern or East Asian cultures. The cross variations regarding cultural background within the group make it possible to challenge stereotypical conceptions about Christianity and Islam among the participants.

That the participants are all *women* impacts the making of meaning not in one common way but in various ways. The experience of what it means to have a Christian or a Muslim faith and to be a woman and its further impact on the hermeneutical approach to the texts is expressed differently. Most of the participants state openly that they regard themselves as feminists, and nobody says she is *not* a feminist. How this is displayed in the making of meaning differs, and will be further commented upon in the section below on feminisms. For most of the participants, however, this implies that if the canonical scriptures of Christianity or Islam are interpreted in a way that they find to be women's disadvantage – to control women, or to promote male superiority or dominance – this is seen as a *misrepresentation* of the tradition and the texts' divine message. For the Muslim participants, this concerns the entire koranic text, which they claim must be interpreted with the necessary historical and *contextual* knowledge and skills, a hermeneutical approach they argue is derived from the Koran itself. For the Christian participants, the hermeneutical key is the story of Jesus, representing for them an ideal of practiced gender equality overruling other biblical texts that might suggest something different. Even if the participants' ideals about how gender roles should be constructed in social and family life probably differs to some degree and their views on the Bible and the Koran as authoritative scripture differ as well, they nevertheless meet in a critical project to challenge interpretative practices in both traditions that favor men's control over women.

The participants' making meaning of the text from the *other* tradition follows to a large extent the hermeneutical strategies the participants apply to their own texts. This means that the Christian participants are generally as critical of the texts from the Koran and *hadith* as they are in their interpretation and questioning of the biblical texts. The respect the Muslim participants, on the other hand, generally show to the biblical texts is similar to the respect they show the texts from the Koran and *hadith*. But at the same time they critically evaluate the biblical texts against

the content of the Koran, thus giving the Koran an epistemological preference. Establishing a shared hermeneutics toward the canonical texts (in the sense of common understandings of the texts as *texts*) does not happen, since the participants stay with their developed interpretative strategies in relation to their own canonical texts.

It is in making meaning of texts in *context*, in negotiating contexts, and through analogical reasoning (including moral enrichment and moral critique of the texts), that a transcontextual space of making meaning emerges at times throughout the group's interpretative process. The hermeneutics "on the ground" in this study, which may be called transreligious, thus relates to the *contextual*. The contextual perspectives appear when the situated interpretations of the texts as well as their impact on people's lives are discussed. The role of the canonical texts in this will be addressed later. I will first discuss the positioning of the *readers* in the group process.

#### ***Meaning-Making Positioning: Between Fluidity and Fixation***

The participants as readers all define themselves as *interpreters*, and through this they take on a *responsibility* in relation to the texts. This is most obvious among the Muslim participants, who express this responsibility in order to secure the status of the texts in general (and they include the biblical texts in this to some extent) and to work for what they perceive as a *responsible* interpretation of the Islamic texts within the Islamic communities. The latter includes pedagogical work to make the texts *resources* for fellow Muslims. The Muslim participants have a stable meaning-making position toward the Islamic texts, where the responsibility in the interpretative act is placed with the reader. The final authority, however, is located in the (divine) text of the Koran, thus limiting the subjective freedom of the interpreter. This places a great responsibility on the shoulders of the reader, who has to search for the divine meaning in the text (this is what the subjectivity consists of). Accessible knowledge from the tradition as well as contextual knowledge is seen as a requirement for interpretation and reinterpretation. This encourages the participants to seek knowledge about the tradition and to discuss textual interpretations with other Muslims as well as to be knowledgeable about society at large and to be aware of other peoples' (Muslims') experiences and needs.

The Christian participants assume a responsibility related to the texts in a different way. Generally, they first need to discuss the authority of the text and to situate it in their understanding of the Christian tradition. The responsibility the Christian participants construct for themselves may include the option to *dismiss* the text, as in the case of 1 Timothy 2:8-15. They construct their interpretative position as stable regarding the readers' subjectivity but, unlike their Muslim co-participants, also claim to have the final authority over the texts as readers – "in Jesus' name," so to say. The authoritative instance for them is the narratives of

Jesus, which they do not seem to relate to primarily as biblical texts but as narratives of *faith* shared in the church and individualized. For some, Luther's interpretational tools of Law and Gospel also seem to guide their interpretations and support their positioning toward the texts. In their analogical reasoning they relate more to their own experiences and ideological views of gender relations than to other sources in the Christian tradition, including other biblical texts. It may be that some of the Christian participants come close to Chung Hyun Kyung's suggestion "We are the text" – primarily placing the biblical text in its context, as historical or contemporary background material, whereas the interpreters' own story (which includes religious experiences derived from the Bible, such as the narratives about Jesus) is the authoritative *text*.

The instability in positioning that occurs in making meaning of the texts is not created through the mere presence of texts from a different religious tradition. This is the case for both the Muslim and the Christian participants, since they seem to interpret all texts with the same interpretative tools (texts from their own tradition, *and* texts from the tradition of the others). The instability – which is necessary to create a transcontextual space – emerges through the contributions of the participants that tend to criss-cross fixed or expected stable boundaries. When this happens, the existing (intrareligious) interpretative communities are expanded to include others.

A cultural variable plays a significant role in many of these crossings. Rima's clarification of the relation between Middle Eastern cultures and Islam and her ability to relate culturally to the Islamic texts means that she and temporarily becomes part of the formerly exclusive intra-Islamic interpretative community in the group, by virtue of her Christian Middle Eastern background. Maria's perspective, which clarifies that Christianity is not identical with Norwegian culture (or the Norwegian representation of Christianity), also represents such a crossing. Different cultural and educational backgrounds of the Muslim participants may be reflected in how they communicate their contributions: through narratives, through argument, or both. The narrative presented several times (by Aira) about Muhammad telling his follower to use his common sense in order to find the right answers if they were not found in the Koran or in the Islamic law tradition seems to have communicated with everyone's pre-knowledge. This suggests that religious resources, such as narratives with a general message, may also destabilize the religious boundaries and reveal an interpretative community, this time through a general recognition of the importance of human *rationality*.

The general subjective positioning toward the texts generates interpretative strategies of *analogical reasoning* that seem to bring the most significant form of fluidity into the making of meaning. Analogical reasoning, implying the use of one's own experiences and reflections to relate to the text, requires the reader to establish a sense of coevalness with the *text* where the

text is taken seriously enough to engage the reader in this way. This interpretative tool may also be used without an ethical motivation.

Analogical reasoning may introduce a communicative mode marked by coevalness among *co-readers* of the text. It makes more sense to discuss moral and ethical challenges, as well as personal reflections and experiences, if they appear to be relevant in the “here” and “now.” When the participants engage in discussions on these matters, be it the question of why Hagar/Hajar leaves Ishmael in the desert or the possible problems in interpreting the prescriptive texts (Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15), making meaning in the group becomes fluid in the sense that the meaning is not fixed beforehand, but the discussions themselves construct the meaning when the participants reflect as they speak and listen.

Stable positions as readers and interpreters of canonical texts may thus create space for fluidity in making meaning if the stable positions are of a kind where the readers assume responsibility, grounded in the view that there is a distance between the interpreter and the text where subjectivity has space to unfold. Generally, the participants in this study argue for their right to take such a position on the basis of their conception of the Islamic or Christian tradition. The Christian participants argue with their understanding of Christian freedom; the Muslim participants with their trust in the Koran. Behind both is an understanding of themselves as believers called to be responsible and a freedom as well as an obligation to fulfill a subjective role in taking on agency as a *maker of meaning*. Taking on the responsibility as a meaning-maker entails taking on an *agency*.

### ***What Role do the Canonical Texts Play?***

What would have happened in this encountering process *without* the canonical texts? Chapter 4 mentions only one discussion where the texts are not the starting point of the discussion. This particular discussion (about the participants’ *general* views on the Bible, the Koran, and the *hadith*) turns out to be rather polemic, but it is difficult to say if this is because of the absence of texts on which to focus. The conflict-oriented communication mode in this particular discussion could also be occurring because it is still early in the group process, and some participants may be concerned to position themselves and their beliefs in relation to the others.

The canonical texts were given an important position in this process by the researcher, and the participants concentrated mostly on discussing the texts in the meetings. The rather consistent focus on the texts and topics derived from the texts was impressive: the participants went on and on through hours of discussions.

There may be answers to this consistency, beyond a possible loyalty to the researcher, which is likely to be found in the functions the texts were given by the participants by placing the texts in different positions. The canonical texts were given the functions of being a *refuge*, a

*source of inspiration and encouragement* in everyday life as well as in struggles for justice. They were, furthermore, given status as a *sacred material object* (the Koran for the Muslim participants), as important *historical testimonies*, and as the *origin of important rituals* (the Hajar narrative as the origin of *sa'y* for the Muslims). All these functions and representations can be regarded as positive. It is not surprising that it is the Muslim participants who usually give these functions to their canonical texts but to some extent they also include the Bible.

However, for some Christian participants, the texts seem to represent *annoyance* and *provocation* or even a *danger* to the believers. This applies to the prescriptive texts from both the Bible and the Koran. The view of the Bible as a *sacred object* that has to be related to physically in a particular way is not represented among the Christian participants. Some state the contrary (referring to Christian freedom).

The prescriptive texts represent *dilemmas* and *challenges* for both the Christian and Muslim participants. The Muslim participants do not, however, locate the dilemma in or challenge the koranic text *itself* but only possible interpretations of the text. Faced with 1 Timothy 2:8-15 one of the Christian participants finds support for her criticism of this text in an Islamic tradition that one of the Muslim participants referred to in commenting on the same text (on the interpretation of the Fall and its consequences for men and women, p. 298-299).

One decisive function the canonical texts have in the meaning-making process is to induce the participants to introduce *time* and *temporality* as a hermeneutical tool. As representing a different time, the texts challenge the participants on the meaning of time in interpretation. The participants' placing of the texts – clearly in the past as “old” – may or may not further imply that the texts are irrelevant, as the time factor alone is not made decisive. Whenever a text is said to be irrelevant because it is “old,” other factors are added, such as moral critique of the text, sometimes on the evolutionary presuppositions that social and religious reasoning and moral knowledge are constantly improving throughout history. The Muslim participants never categorize an Islamic canonical text as irrelevant for either of these reasons, including temporal categorization, but *interpretations* of the texts are sometimes argued to be irrelevant because they are old and not helpful with regard to contemporary challenges.

It is the participants' contextual and analogical reasoning that introduces *spatial* tools of making meaning. But the texts are used as providing premises for including other places and contexts through the participants' analogical reasoning: Mecca, the place of the performance of *sa'y* (Aira), the Middle East (Rima), contemporary contexts in Africa and Iran (Maria and Shirin), together with the Norwegian context that is either mentioned openly or implied.

The differences between the Muslim and Christian participants' view of the Bible, the Koran, and the *hadith* are not surprising but rather expected, due to the different statuses of the Bible and the Koran in the two traditions. Perhaps surprisingly, there is still so much to discuss

in making meaning across these differences. The use of analogical reasoning and the participants' way of relating to contemporary issues is the most substantial ground for these discussions.

The canonical texts can be said to have both a divisive and unitive function in the communication of the group: the texts are *divisive* when the participants constructively express their own religious faith and *unitive* when the texts are seen to represent a challenge (as texts, or through interpretative *representations* of the text), thus requiring a critical perspective from the participants. The discussions on the Hagar/Hajar narrative turned out to divide the Christian and the Muslim participants over against each other more than the discussions on Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15. The making of meaning of the Hagar/Hajar narratives became a constructive project for the Muslim participants (less so for the Christians), whereas the prescriptive texts represented a challenge and a dilemma for both, creating a unitive critical approach.

### **Is the Group Process a Dialogue?**

I have refrained so far from naming the group process of making meaning a dialogue. Now the time has come to situate the process in dialogical terms, and I will start doing so by evaluating the function of *difference* in the group and comparing it to the function of difference in the two suggested models of transreligious dialogue given in Chapter 2 (“Difference as Constitutive” and “Difference as Challenge”).

During the group process differences are regarded both as *constitutive* and as *challenging* (cf. the titles of the two models). In the discussions on the Hagar/Hajar narratives as well as in the first, more general discussions on the Bible and the Koran, religious differences were highlighted by some of the Christian participants. The Muslim participants showed that their view of the narratives was different from the Christian participants' more critical approach to the figures of Abraham/Ibrahim and Hagar/Hajar – as well as to the narratives themselves. Differences were usually interpreted as constitutive: important to identify and significant to claim. Even some of the attempts to suggest a common ground for the two traditions (done primarily by the Muslim participants) were interpreted within the framework of difference: to minimize the importance of difference was articulated as an unwanted transgression for one of the Christian participants.

The general approach to differences changed in the process of making meaning of the prescriptive texts. Confronted with these texts, the challenges perceived by the participants seemed to *force* them into viewing differences differently. It became obvious that contextual and historical knowledge about the texts was required for making meaning, and the participants (in particular the Christian participants) started to view the religious differences as a possible

*resource* for acquiring this knowledge. This comes closer to viewing difference as a (positive) challenge, as in the second model.

In discussing the prescriptive texts, shared critical views on the subjugation of women in the Christian and Islamic traditions also shifted the focus of the group to be more concerned with *contextual* challenges. Common contextual challenges, identified through the discussions on the texts, overruled the religious differences. The differences were thus transposed from religious differences to contextual differences, and the discussion turned into trying to situate the contexts and negotiate what to view as significant contexts. Gradually, the geographical perspective of the group also became more inclusive through the references to contexts other than Norway, where women face greater difficulties because of the prescriptive texts. This process of enlarging the geographical scope started in the Hagar/Hajar discussions, but it did not become a shared subject at that stage. The enlarged perspective motivates the participants (in particular the Christian participants) to relate to the biblical texts anew because of the reception of the text in other contemporary *contexts*. This happens as an act of solidarity and is not motivated by the texts themselves.

Both models of dialogue, with respect to how differences are viewed, are thus represented in the group's process. The texts seem to cause the change from seeing differences as constitutive to seeing differences as a challenge, as a source for knowledge, a possibility to enlarge the scope of what should be the significant context. But this shift may also follow a process in the group, regardless of the texts. The numerical attendance of participants had dropped considerably when the shift took place, and a more intimate group (with the most devoted participants?) could perhaps provide different social frames encouraging such a process.

According to both the models, then, the group process may well be called a transreligious dialogue. There are other elements in the communication too, suggesting that dialogical values are present during the meaning-making process. Comments about the communicative process itself show awareness and self-reflection. How to communicate in a respectful manner and still be able to speak one's mind is one of the issues addressed in these meta-reflections. This is an important matter to consider in most dialogues so as to prevent a transreligious encounter from turning into either endless mutual confrontations without substantial communicative exchange or a conversation containing nothing but polite phrases – also without substantial communicative exchange. When a self-reflecting perspective is included in a dialogue, it may be possible to avoid both pitfalls.

Self-reflection and even self-critique on behalf of one's own religious or cultural tradition seems to fertilize the making of meaning of both texts and context. Critique may function in exactly the opposite way if criticism is directed only toward representatives of the other (religion or culture), since it usually encourages defense strategies. In the latter case, differences may



become borders, but in the first case, the religious or cultural tradition represented is destabilized through self-reflection and may thus become more open for interpretation, challenges, and interaction.

Let us return to the two models of transreligious dialogue: the concept of *diasporic imagination* (Kwok) and Bal's suggestion regarding the "bold use of anachronisms" introduced in Chapter 2 were suggested as hermeneutical tools used by the participants in the meaning-making process. Both *diasporic imagination* and the "bold use of anachronisms" destabilize the borders between "here" and "there" (Kwok), and "then" and "now" (Bal). This destabilizing may influence the concept of religious traditions as well, suggesting that the interpretation of canonical scriptures is dynamic, rather than static, and that the cultural representation of a religious tradition is fluid rather than fixed. The question arises if these hermeneutical tools would be regarded as valid in the dialogue model where religious differences are seen as constitutive.

The Muslim participants defend their belief and their view of the Koran as a resource for the believers, and at the same time underline the common values between different religious traditions ("the peoples of the book"). This might be interpreted as fitting well with a model of dialogue that comes close to the practice of Scriptural Reasoning ("Difference as Constitutive"). But the challenge the Muslim participants identify as threats to Muslim women's right to self-determination or to Islam as a religious tradition is not secularism. Rather, the Muslim participants identify the challenges either found *within* the Islamic tradition (lack of knowledge, both historical and contextual), or they identify the threats as *political*. The political challenge they address is related to a lack of social and political stability and democratic rights in some Muslim majority countries and to the lack of access to education for all. They state that these issues have a direct influence on Muslims' possibilities of interpreting the Islamic tradition (including the Koran) in a way that secures women's rights. But they also challenge, although less directly, the Western politicized discourses on Islam where this particular tradition is viewed as inferior (to the Western culture and the Christian tradition) by supporting the subjugation of women. This also poses a threat to the freedom of interpreting and reinterpreting the Koran and *sharia* because Muslims have to use their energy and focus simply to defend their right to be Muslims.

The Christian participants, in particular those with a Norwegian background, defend what they conceive to be their Christian freedom and the concept of gender equality as interpreted in the Norwegian society. For the most part, they place the challenges to women's rights in the Christian tradition in the *past*. Only late in the process do they reflect on challenges in the present – although outside their primary religious and cultural context. In their (perceived) lack

of present challenges regarding gender justice in Norwegian society, they focus instead on the challenges discussed by their Muslim co-participants.

Whenever some of the participants try to *frame* the differences between the Christian and Islamic traditions (it is usually some of the Christian participants who try to do this), the discussions following these attempts show that to agree on what the differences between the two traditions are is a disputed issue itself (at least in this group). This suggests that framing and articulating religious differences between these two traditions and their implications is a complicated issue if one intends to describe the difference(s) in a way acknowledged by all parties involved. This may be useful to bear in mind when relating to differences in a transreligious dialogue: the power of definition regarding differences should ideally be shared (to fulfill the search for equality in a dialogue), and differences could be regarded differently from various positions.

To answer the question in the title: there is no doubt that the meaning-making process of the group can be called a transreligious dialogue according to the two models suggested in Chapter 2 and because of the dialogical qualities appearing in the group's process. The methodology of this study, however, where the researcher decides on which texts to discuss and who should participate, is not consistent with the idea of a dialogue as presented in Chapter 2. The answer is thus both yes and no. The participants make the encounter a dialogue (of different kinds), but the selected frame for this study's empirical research violates the dialogical rule of *mutuality* in deciding topics, access to the conversation and the control over the encounter.

#### ***Lack of Balance in Attention Regarding the Christian and Islamic Texts – A Problem?***

The texts from the Islamic tradition generally receive more attention than the biblical texts – from all of the participants. Equally, the contextual challenges identified by the Muslim participants are discussed more. What does this mean? Does it entail a lack of interest by the Muslim participants in the Christian tradition and (paradoxically) a lack of such interest by the Christian participants themselves? The Muslim participants may be better informed about the Norwegian majority discourses than the Christian participants (including the ones with a plural cultural background) are of Muslim discourses, which are minority discourses. But the majority discourse does not necessarily provide knowledge about the Christian tradition as such. The Christian participants, as part of the religious majority in Norway, may be expected by the Muslim participants to be well informed about the Christian tradition, and the Muslim participants themselves may regard the Christian tradition to be known through their knowledge of the Norwegian majority discourse. This could explain the lack of curiosity from the side of the Muslim participants in the Christian tradition (contrasted by the curiosity in the Islamic tradition expressed by the Christians). The Muslim participants are probably, due to the current political

climate in the West, used to having to explain about their faith and their tradition, which also makes them seek knowledge to equip themselves for this task. The Christian participants do not meet these requirements to the same degree. This, however, may not be the entire explanation. Another way to see it is that the current intrareligious debate in Islam is focusing a great deal precisely on matters of textual interpretation and women's situation. In Norway, the intensity of the debate on biblical interpretation and women issues in the Lutheran church is, generally speaking, rather low at present. For the encounter between the Christian and the Muslim women in this project, this means they are probably influenced by the debates – or lack them – in their respective religious communities. Their stake in this project is thus different.

### *What Is in It – and for Whom?*

What was revealed of the participants' motivations in taking part in this study, and what kept them motivated throughout the process?

The Muslim women generally wanted a broader understanding of Islam and work within the Muslim community on the reinterpretation of koranic texts and *sharia*. The Christian participants shifted from a critically questioning of the Islamic sources and Islam into a listening position where they recognized the contextual knowledge of the Muslim participants as necessary for *their* making meaning of Sura 4:34. The Muslim participants aimed at *sharing* knowledge and experiences. The Christian participants generally aimed at being able to question both traditions (including the texts), and then gradually at *receiving* knowledge. This is the general pattern, although there are several exceptions in the material. The interpretative efforts of the Muslim participants made some of the Christian participants ask for more knowledge about their *own* tradition and the biblical texts. In this respect, the encounter may represent an encouragement for them to study their own history of interpretation.

The Christian participants, however, were also eager to support the attempts of the Muslim participants at reinterpretation, even by suggesting ways to improve the practice of gender justice in Muslim communities.

Achieving *agreement* at a religious or cultural level was not presented as an aim for any of the participants. A moral agreement on aiming at improving the situation of women who were oppressed by religious or cultural traditions was present in the group from the beginning, but most openly articulated in Part IV. If this had not been the case, I believe that, for some of the participants, it would have been an aim to make the group agree on this as a moral issue. During the group process, it was explicitly expressed by some of the participants that religious and cultural differences were expected and accepted, and this seemed to be the case for the most part – although at times the differences were discussed intensely. To be able to engage in such a

discussion through participation in the project may have been a motivation in itself for some of the participants.

### **A Dialogically Situated Feminist Hermeneutics**

The fact that the participants agreed on the moral issue of gender justice does not necessarily imply that they understand *feminism* in the same way. The participants share the belief that their respective religious traditions originally aimed at gender justice but have been corrupted by patriarchal cultural influences and/or by men given the interpretative authority and using it to subjugate women. This evaluation of the relation between their religion and patriarchy enables them to keep their religious beliefs and their feminist stance together. Some (Christian and Muslim) participants use their religious tradition directly to argue for feminism.

The participants were divided along cultural rather than religious lines in addressing the need for feminist-oriented change in the contexts to which they relate. The Norwegian Christian participants express open satisfaction about the status of women in their faith community (The Church of Norway) and in Norwegian society in general. They do not criticize their faith community or Norwegian society in this respect but hold them up as ideals. Some critical remarks about men's lack of engagement in practical family life at the end of the study is the only crack in the Norwegian Christians' portrayal of their immediate religious and cultural surroundings' achievements regarding gender equality. Their feminist criticism is directed toward the canonical texts, toward the past, and toward other cultural and/or religious traditions.

The Muslim participants direct their feminist criticism primarily toward *interpretations* of the Koran and *sharia* in the Muslim communities globally, including Norway. The status of the Koran as above criticism is defended in the name of gender justice, because it is *exactly* this status that is needed to use the Koran as a tool strong enough for change within the Islamic community. To undermine the status of the Koran would mean undermining the most important tool in their struggle.

What the participants do agree about is the use of *gender equality* or *gender justice* as a moral measuring stick to evaluate either the texts themselves or interpretations of the texts. Using the texts to ensure male dominance in the private as well as the public realm is judged as unacceptable for all. One of the Muslim participants comes close to saying that this could be seen as men aiming for the authority and power that belongs to God alone (cf. Amina Wadud's statement about patriarchy as *shirk*). A Christian participant calls the message in 1 Timothy 2:15 on childbirth as the only way to salvation for women completely *unchristian*. Discrimination against women in the name of Christianity and Islam is regarded as a misrepresentation of traditions that ought to change.

The content and understanding of feminism, gender quality, and gender justice is differently constructed in the meaning making. A gendered hermeneutics based on viewing men and women as essentially *different*, based on an understanding of these differences as universal and influencing women and men's textual and contextual interpretation, is represented. A view that gendered categories are less important than social and cultural background and individual experiences are, however, also present. Equally, the ideal for the social and structural positioning regarding gender varies from full equality at all levels to a complementary model where men and women have equal status but different roles. The latter view is indirectly (for the most part) present through some of the Muslim participants' reasoning. Other statements by the Muslim participants suggest that they relate to a model of full equality.

The different views presented are sometimes conflicting, particularly when the Christian participants directly criticize the *texts*. Usually, however, the different views of gender roles and gender models or criticism of male misuse of the religious traditions to obtain control over women do *not* create conflicts and disagreements. But the *perception* of the Islamic tradition as subjugating women *per se*, expressed by some of the Christian participants at the beginning of the project, does create tension. Some attempts by the Christian participants to describe differences between the two traditions according to the requirement of obedience (for women) are argued by the Muslim participants to be a narrowing of *both* traditions.

The Muslim participants *situate* their feminist hermeneutics when they apply both an interpretational strategy of liberation and a strategy of survival to Sura 4:34. In doing so, their contextual knowledge and pragmatic considerations on the basis of this knowledge becomes visible. The Christian participants situate their feminist hermeneutics in the Norwegian context marked by an ideal of gender equality and their experience of this equality. The challenge of gender inequality is transposed to other religious traditions and contexts other than this Norwegian one. The struggle for women's rights is placed mainly by the religious and cultural *other*, whom they are ready to support. In the encounter the Muslims may feel that their feminist stance as a *valid* feminism is questioned at times, whereas the Christians may feel that what is questioned is not their feminism but the quality of their *religiosity*. Keeping feminism and religious belief together may be more complicated when encountering a representative of another religion where the relation between the two may be constructed differently.

### ***Suggesting a Road to Change: A Search for the Involvement of Men***

The Muslim participants point to knowledge and ability to relate in a relevant way to contemporary challenges by religious leaders and Muslim believers in general as the primary tool for the improvement of women's situation. The Christian participants are less optimistic

about knowledge as a tool, but they generally have fewer strategies for change because most of them evaluate their situation to be satisfactory.

The participants seem to agree, however, on the need to have *men* assume responsibility in a struggle for gender justice in private and in public. Although confirming their own right to act and speak, and to encourage other women to do the same is viewed as important, the engagement of men is strongly demanded. But this should *not* be at the expense of women's agency. Women and men should struggle together to fight the difficulties created by what the participants view as a patriarchal misuse of the traditions – sharing the burden and sharing the work.

The status of a *transreligious* (Muslim-Christian) attempt in this respect is not discussed broadly, although the Muslim participants do invite the Christian participants to collaboration. A shared agency is taken on with respect to making meaning of the texts within the frames of the group, but regarding a broader implementation of gender justice, a common *organized* agency is not clearly articulated. To make men responsible agents in a struggle for gender justice, and to struggle for re-interpretation of the Islamic texts in Muslim communities, are the most clearly articulated agencies in the group shared by all.

### **Gender Justice: A Dream Only?**

Discussing the implications and content of gender equality and gender justice is not only about women and men as *gendered* beings. Women and men may also be religious believers – Christians and Muslims – and they are individuals connected to social, cultural, and political groups. Cultural and religious plurality challenges the interpretation of the concepts of equality and justice: Who has the authority to decide what equality and justice *means*? Transreligious dialogue on differences as a *challenge* and as a possible resource acknowledges that change and new perspectives requires instability. Plurality leading to instability is thus a possibility rather than a threat. The space created when different views (religious, cultural, political) encounter one another on unstable ground provides hope for change while continuously discussing what change means.

This study shows that Christian and Muslim women have great hope in their religious traditions, and that they are finding tools in the Christian and Islamic traditions respectively that prove to be useful in their meaning-making struggle for gender justice. The Muslim participants rely on the Koran and aim at improved knowledge among Muslims. The Christians rely on the example of Jesus, on Luther – and in addition, on Norwegian state feminism. When they meet, challenges other than *gender* equality appear: What about equality and justice between Christians and Muslims, and equality and justice between people from different social and cultural

backgrounds? This is the challenge of an intersectional analysis of power: always ask the *other* question.

In most transreligious dialogues the challenge of equality is posed the other way around: acknowledging *religious* equality and obtaining politically just treatment of different religions in a society (to a lesser extent cultural and social equality) is often articulated as an explicit aim, whereas gender equality and gender justice is not addressed.

In the form of a testimony, one of the Christian and one of the Muslim participants – both in their sixties with a long and winding road behind them – described the time and place for a strong personal experience of *human equality*. The Muslim participant described her experience of *sa'y*, where men and women from all over the world were struggling side by side during *hajj* in the footsteps of Hajar. The Christian participant described contemporary Norwegian society where she found that the message of Jesus about human equality was finally converted into social and political practice. I believe that the conversations shared as empirical material in this study are taking place in a fruitful tension between these two, shared images of the experienced implementation of human equality.

The inclusion of some usually implies the exclusion of others, but the possibility of widening the spaces where human equality can be experienced across gender, religious, social, and cultural background emerges as a possible moral commitment to be assumed *together* – across the two poles of Norway and Mecca reflected in the above-mentioned testimonies. These spaces can be derived neither from the concept of Christian Norwegian-ness nor from the concept of Islam alone. At the same time both can contribute substantially to a web of making meaning that may help in producing places of human equality.

My hope for this study is that it may prove to be useful for some when they look for resources and tools to include women's issues – aiming at gender justice in Muslim-Christian dialogue and in studying Muslim-Christian relations. The responsibility toward both text and context and the acknowledged need to meet face to face in order to get knowledge about the other demonstrated in this study is hopefully encouraging others to embark on the challenging and necessary act of reading canonical scriptures together, as Muslims and Christians. The reader should not be afraid: the participants in this study show that it is possible to address the most challenging texts and issues concerning women in the two traditions – and still *keep talking* to each other.

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