

Anne Løvland and Pål Repstad

RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS IN PUBLIC SPACES

Asking people in and out of context

Abstract

Religious symbols in public spaces are discussed vividly in Norway, as indeed elsewhere. In this article, social semiotist Anne Løvland and sociologist Pål Repstad tries to find theoretical and methodological support for a hypotheses that people will be more positive to symbols of minority religions in public places when the interview takes place while actually looking at the symbol or sign than when they are asked in the abstract, for instance in a survey. The hypothesis is discussed in the light of Barthes' theory of connotations, recent material and sensual perspectives in the social sciences, and Allport's contact hypothesis, which still seems to hold water. More as an empirical illustration than as a full-fledged study, the authors conducted 48 interviews with people passing by in the street. This pilot study strengthened the hypothesis, but the authors recommend further and more ambitious studies. Looking at the symbol while being interviewed also resulted in more positive answers than in a recent quantitative survey.

Keywords: Interviewing, methodology, religious symbols, public space

Introduction

The increasing diversity of religions and world-views in the Western world has led to many controversies over religious buildings and other religious symbols, not least in Europe. Media reports and surveys tell tales of confrontations and a general scepticism, especially to manifestations of immigrant-based religious minorities. In this article, our main research question is how people express opinions on certain religious visual traces in the public space, when they are actually looking at them. Our main hypothesis is that people will be more positive or nuanced when they are asked in such a context, compared to when they are asked in a more abstract situation. We must underline that we consider the main aim of our article to give an overview over relevant theories and existing research, with some empirical illustrations from a small interview study that we have conducted. Our own empirical contribution, then, is more a pilot study than a full-fledged investigation. We have gathered 48 spontaneous, brief interviews in two towns in the south of Norway—Kristiansand and Mandal. We hope that our theoretical

work, our methodological reflections, and our exploratory study in sum will inspire further research.

Our definition of a public space is not very original. For us, a public space is an area that is, in principle, open and accessible for all. Streets, walkways, public squares, parks and beaches are typical public spaces. Libraries and certain other public buildings may also be public spaces in some instances, but in this project, we will stick to outdoor areas. Symbols visible on the outside of buildings are also parts of a public space.

Religious visibility—opinions and regulations

In our opinion, our reflections on people's attitudes towards religious symbols in public places are not without practical policy implications. We will return briefly to that point at the end of the article. Here we will sketch a general background, with Norway as the main example of how religious symbols can create disagreement and even controversy. Norway is not among Europe's most polarized countries when it comes to religion. The debate has been harsher a little further south—in Denmark (Christensen 2010; Niemelä and Christensen 2013). However, even in Norway, the issue of visible and audible religious symbols in the public sphere has been an issue over the last ten years or so. Like many other European countries, Norway has moved from a Christian majority church dominance to a gradually more diverse situation. As early as the 19th century, a degree of Christian diversity emerged, and in the 20th century, a secular element was first introduced into the plurality, followed by several other religions outside Christianity, mainly because of immigration.

There are restrictions on religious visibility in public spaces in Norway, although the pattern is not completely consistent. The police are not allowed to wear religious dress or symbols when in uniform. In the military, turbans and hijabs are allowed, as long as the dress does not conflict with health, security and operative ability. Hence, religious clothing hiding the face or the uniform is forbidden, such as niqabs and burkas. As for judges, there are no regulations, allegedly because the question has not yet been raised. There is no general regulation of teachers' right to wear religious dress and symbols. This issue is left to local school authorities, if the question arises. Finally, there are no national regulations pertaining to student rights in schools and universities either. Local schools seem to be oriented towards finding pragmatic solutions, although there have been one or two cases where women in niqabs have not been allowed access to exams (Schmidt 2015: 127).

Among the general public, the majority seems to be rather sceptical towards people in official contexts wearing religious dress or symbols. In a survey carried out in 2012, more than 70 percent disagreed with allowing uniformed police and judges to wear clearly visible religious clothing or symbols. As for teachers in state schools, 60 percent disagreed (Botvar and Holberg 2015).

Siv Kristin Sællmann is a news presenter for Norway's major broadcasting channel, *Norsk rikskringkasting (NRK)*. She is seen regularly presenting the evening news in

Norway's southern region—Sørlandet. In the autumn of 2013, she was asked by the head of her department to stop wearing a cross on her necklace when presenting the news. The cross was small—14 millimetres long. The background was told to be repeated protests from one single viewer (Sandberg 2013). When the story was reported in several newspapers in early November 2013, a vivid discussion started in public and social media. A Facebook page was established, named "Yes to carrying the cross whenever and however I want". It got 123.000 likes in November 2013. The person who created the page later told the media that he was disappointed that many hateful statements about Muslims were posted on the page, and that he had to delete statements of this kind almost daily (Molnes 2013). The story about the cross shows that the appearance of religious symbols in public settings is a hot issue in Norway, as indeed elsewhere.

An interesting recent national representative survey included some questions about people's attitudes towards religious symbols in the public space. The survey was conducted in April 2015 by TNS Gallup, Norway, as part of the research project CoMRel (Engaging with Conflicts in Mediatized Religious Environments).¹ From this survey we have been allowed to present here some so far unpublished results. Respondents were asked whether "the following religious symbols ought to be visible in public places, for instance on buildings". Here is the distribution of positive and negative responses for the different alternatives mentioned:

Table 1. Attitudes towards visible religious symbols in public places. In percent. N=1079

	Church tower	Cross	Mosque sign	Minaret
Yes	86	77	75	66
No	7	13	15	21

The middle positions in table 1 have been taken out, as these respondents either did not know how to answer or would not answer. A clear majority is positive to the visibility of religious symbols on buildings and in other public places, but a growing scepticism is noted as we move to Muslim symbols, and especially when the whole building is perceived to have a Muslim style, as with a minaret. We conducted our own study in southern Norway. Southern and western Norway are traditionally known as strongholds of Christianity, so we checked whether the figures in these regions were different. In all cells in the table, they differed from the national results by only one or two percent.

It should be added that there are no general restrictions in Norwegian law against religious symbols on religious buildings, or for that matter against religious sounds. In other words, there is no parallel to the Swiss constitutional ban on the construction of minarets, following a referendum in November 2009 in which a majority of 58 percent was in favour of the ban (Langer 2010). Nevertheless, it seems like Muslim leaders in Norway have kept a very low profile and have carefully avoided any practice that could provoke people, such as religious messages from minarets. Our own research process

provides a good example of this restraint. A new mosque was opened in Kristiansand in April 2014 in an existing ordinary brick building in the town centre. The building had formerly housed a store. It has no minarets or other external traits informing people passing by that this is a mosque. Actually, there are no informative signs at all at the time of writing (September 2015). We had to go to Mandal to find a small sign outside a house used as a mosque.

Before going further into our pilot study, we will present a review of literature which we find relevant as support for our hypothesis, claiming that people will be more tolerant and nuanced towards religious symbols in public places when they are asked while actually looking at the symbols. We will review theories and research from a wide field, including Grace Davie's notion of vicarious religion, Roland Barthes' theory of pictures and the contact hypothesis originally described by Gordon Allport. We also back up our hypothesis with a more general comment about the increasing significance given to sensual and material factors in recent social science.

Theoretical resources

Christian symbols—part of vicarious religion

For many Europeans, Christian symbols and buildings in public places form an important part of their so-called vicarious religion. This concept was coined by sociologist of religion Grace Davie (2000, 2007). She states that in many European countries, not least in the Nordic countries, organized religion (in practice especially Christianity) is performed by an active minority on behalf of a much larger number who, implicitly at least, not only understand and tolerate but even approve of what the minority is doing. They may not use the symbols or pay much attention to them, but they like them being there, and they certainly want to maintain the right to have them there, in public spaces. So, in European countries there are reasons to expect that Christian symbols will be less controversial and more taken for granted than the symbols of minority religions.

De-dramatization of symbols

We may find support for our hypothesis by going back to the French semiotist Roland Barthes and how he distinguished between the concrete picture, the denotation and the symbolic picture—the connotation (Barthes 1977: 42). Barthes claimed that a picture, for instance a photo, encourages a concrete and literal understanding, coloured by presence. This is the basic understanding of a picture, which then forms the point of departure for an interpretation informed by socio-cultural values and ideologies. It follows from Barthes' line of reasoning that when people interpret signs while looking at them, the denotation will be very much present and balance the associations stimulated by the expression.

Barthes was also a pioneer in conveying that the interplay between signs is important for the total understanding of an expression. He showed for instance how a caption could anchor or change the meaning of a picture (Barthes 1977: 38). It is reasonable to

believe that the context surrounding a religious symbol may anchor the more general meaning a symbol conveys.

A sensual and material turn in the social sciences

Any textbook in social psychology tells the reader that sensual experiences are important over time in building up or changing attitudes. Attitudes have cognitive as well as affective elements, and the affective elements not least are partly shaped by sensual experiences; there is an exposure effect (Hogg and Vaughan 2011: 165–166; Haddock and Mayo 2008: 114–115; Aronson et al. 2010, 212).

Furthermore, there is an increasing interest in material culture and non-verbal symbols in many disciplines, not least in sociology and social anthropology. Sarah Pink (2009), among many others, insists almost programmatically that although ethnographers of course cannot access people's intimate sensations directly, they should try to establish "correspondences" between the researchers' experiences and those of the people studied, because "if ethnographers can come to occupy similar, parallel or related places to those people whose experiences, memories and imaginations they seek to understand, then this can provide a basis for the development of ways of knowing that will promote such understanding" (Pink 2009: 43). An implicit reason for recommending this strategy seems to be that the research results will be more similar to how people will act in real life.

Following up on Pink's recommendations, we would like to mention an interesting study with some direct parallels to our own interview study. In an article about qualitative interviewing, there is a recommendation to carry out interviews while walking (Kuntz and Presnall 2012). This may sound a bit strange, but the example supports our claim that sensual experience can influence the results. Walking around inside a school building while interviewing a teacher, the researchers noted that the interviewed teacher focused a great deal on her colleagues and students, as well as her role as a teacher. In the words of the authors: "the space of the school links to educational discourses and the teacher's own positioning as an institutional subject." Then something happened when they went outside: "Once she exits the building, the teacher gains material distance from the institution, and the tone of her expression changes." Her style became more direct and informal, one comment being: "Well, I think it all sucks". The authors conclude: "Our conceptual system, then, is embodied, interlinked with our experiences within the world in which we live" (Kuntz and Presnall 2012: 739–740).

In a review article, Norwegian social anthropologists Odd Are Berkaak and Anne-Katrine Brun Norbye (2014) introduce the term *anthropology of the senses*, and provide several examples from studies where materiality and sensual perceptions influence cognitive and affective processes. According to them, this sensory reorientation in several disciplines mirror general cultural changes in the world today. It is not only an internal academic shift, but a more comprehensive social and cultural change, making more room for the sensual (Berkaak and Norbye 2014: 139).

This widening of "the empire of the senses" can be found, not least, in the study of religion (Morgan 2005; Arweck and Keenan 2006; Houtman and Meyer 2012). Empir-

ical studies from Norway conclude that dogma, theology and confessionalism seem to be of lesser importance as dimensions of organized religious life, whereas materiality, sensuality, positive emotions, good experiences, in short, a feel-good dimension is becoming more central. Processions are getting longer; sermons are becoming shorter. There are more art exhibitions and Christmas concerts in churches and fewer confessional differences and conflicts (Løvland and Repstad 2014a; Repstad and Trysnes 2013).

This new interest in the sensual and the material provides many theoretical and methodological challenges. Adherents of qualitative methods have for a long time criticized quantitative survey methods for giving superficial, a-contextual and fragmented knowledge (Bryman 2008: 159). However, the same criticism can be directed towards qualitative interviews conducted completely out of context. Hence, it is often recommended to carry out such interviewing in a place where the informant can feel relaxed and at home, provided that the interview can take place without too many distractions. For instance, the researcher can get valuable information by studying pictures, bookshelves and so on. Field-work usually provides more holistic and richer empirical material, but is very time-consuming, so in research, there is often a practical drive towards more brief and structured data collection.

Furthermore, sensual impact is not always easy to verbalize. Symbols are, almost by definition, ambiguous and open to different interpretations. There are many studies about how symbols are interpreted. Often the conclusion is that the interpretation is shaped by the interpreter's framing of the symbol, or his or her intellectual and attitudinal baggage. There are fewer studies of how qualities of the symbols and signs or, more generally, material culture, can influence attitudes. Many of them deal with the persuasive power of commercial advertising (Barthes 1977: 32–51). We think that one option is to develop a closer co-operation between sociologists and social semiotists, especially in the relatively recent field of multimodality studies. Social semiotists focusing on signs, symbols and material objects need sociological concepts and perspectives in order to improve their analyses of contexts, and sociologists often have a rather primitive conceptual apparatus for analyzing and interpreting non-verbal phenomena (Løvland and Repstad 2014b).

The contact hypothesis—transfer potential

We would like to give one more example of how we can use theoretical resources from sociology and social psychology to make sense of our claim that stereotypes can be weakened, at least for some people, when they find themselves face-to-face with concrete material expressions. We suggest that the well-established contact hypothesis from social psychology can be transferred from contact with other people to sensual impact from physical, material objects. The contact hypothesis was introduced by Gordon Allport in his landmark volume *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954/1979). In its original form, it is a very simple hypothesis: Contact between a member of an in-group and a member of an out-group tends to improve the attitudes of the former towards the latter by replacing in-group ignorance with knowledge that disconfirms stereotypes.

The hypothesis has been criticized and modified. Allport himself identified several conditions that he believed would enhance the beneficial effects of contact, such as status equality and institutional support. Despite criticism and reservations, the contact hypothesis seems to survive and be quite robust. This is the conclusion of Pettigrew and Tropp (2006), based on a systematic review of more than 500 studies. According to their analysis, the more methodologically rigorous studies yield larger mean effects. One important mechanism seems to be that direct contact reduces fear and anxiety on the part of the majority, as shown in many studies, for instance a quantitative study from the U.S. about public exposure to homelessness (Lee et al. 2004), and a qualitative study from four European countries about relations between ethnic majority and minority groups (Binder et al. 2009). The latter study shows—not surprisingly—that prejudice reduces contact, but also that contact reduces prejudice, especially when out-group contacts are perceived to be typical of their group, and not an exception. Recently, the contact hypothesis has also been confirmed in Denmark, in a national probability sample. The author concludes that regular intergroup workplace contact can improve ethnic relations in contemporary democracies (Thomsen 2012). Similar conclusions are drawn from the same material in another article. Neighbourhood contact reduces majority members' negative stereotyping, because it reduces anxiety and increases empathy (Rafiqi and Thomsen 2014). There may also be some relevance to a finding in another Danish study. Using data from a representative survey, Lene Aarøe (2012) found that tolerance of religion in the public space depended on the salience of the manifestation of religious group membership. She found that people were less tolerant to judges wearing a Muslim headscarf than to judges wearing a necklace with a Muslim crescent. The least degree of scepticism was directed towards judges wearing a necklace with a Christian cross.

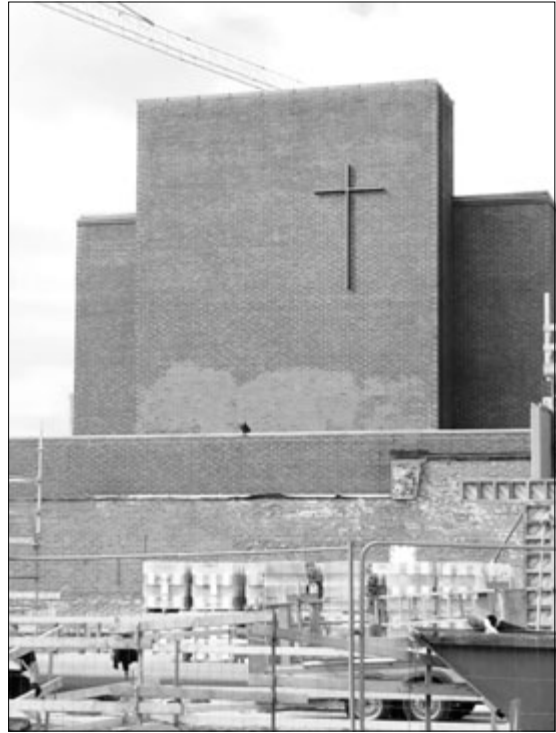
Our pilot study

For our study we chose three physical traces that are commonly recognized as religious, two Christian symbols (crosses) in the town of Kristiansand, and one sign in Mandal, indicating a mosque. All three symbols were situated in the town centres. As indicated, both Kristiansand and Mandal are situated in the southernmost part of Norway, in a coastal region which is sometimes referred to as Norway's Bible belt, as the region has been and is still, to some extent, a region with strong Christian lay movements and minority churches. Churches and other religious events have higher attendance here than elsewhere in Norway, and surveys also show that active Christians in this region, called *Sørlandet*, are generally more conservative than active Christians in other parts of the country (Repstad 2014). Kristiansand has about 85.000 inhabitants; Mandal has about 15.000.

We did our first interviews on the walkway across the street from a cross high up on a brick wall. The cross is easily visible, but you have to look up to see it. The building is the place of worship for the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church in Kristiansand, one of the largest Christian denominations outside the Church of Norway. However, it

is not apparent that the cross is part of this church building from the location where the interviews were conducted, as the entrance is on another side of the building.

Our second set of interviews took place across the street from the entrance to the Advent Church in Kristiansand, a church of a much smaller denomination than the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church. This is where Seventh Day Adventists gather to worship. Even if the cross here is more visible than the letters, there is a closer connection between the symbol and a specific institution than is the case outside the Lutheran Free Church. We wondered whether some of the informants would have a critical attitude to the Adventists in particular, as this denomination traditionally has been criticized from a majority Lutheran point of view. However, nobody raised such confessional issues; everybody talked about the cross in general. This may be due to a general de-confessionalization in Norway, a weakened interest in and knowledge of dogmatic differences (Repstad and Trysnes 2013).



The Evangelical Lutheran Free Church in Kristiansand

The third research site was outside the mosque in Mandal, where only a small sign

(about 60 by 30 cm) at the entrance identifies the location as a mosque.

The house itself is a traditional white-painted house built in wood, quite common in the region. It was previously used as a private residence, so the sign is the only indication that this is a religious building. The mosque in Mandal is situated on a quiet street, but only about 10 meters from a main street with many pedestrians. So, we placed ourselves at the corner of these two streets.



The Seventh Day Adventist Church in Kristiansand



The mosque in Mandal

Most Muslims in Norway are migrants, and the largest proportion of them live in and around Oslo. The two counties of Agder comprising Sørlandet have a proportion of immigrants from Africa and Asia close to the national average. Kristiansand is well above this average, Mandal close to it, and the sparsely populated inland municipalities have a lower proportion (Østby et al. 2013).

Interviewing in the street

We carried out 21 interviews on the street near the Lutheran Free Church, 10 interviews outside the Advent Church, and 17 interviews outside the mosque. We consider this study to be a mixture of a quanti-

tative and a qualitative study. The interviews were semi-standardized, with open questions. Having done some counting, we identified some clear tendencies. We did not pay attention to small quantitative differences, and were as interested in content and nuances as in counting frequencies.

All interviews were conducted during the same week, at the end of September 2014, and each interview lasted from two to four minutes. We approached people passing by, presented ourselves as researchers from the University of Agder and asked if they could spare a couple of minutes for a brief, simple interview. We did not mention the topic when introducing ourselves. A few (less than ten) excused themselves, usually because they were in a hurry, but a large majority responded positively.

The interviews outside the Free Church and the mosque were done before noon, the interviews outside the Advent Church in the afternoon. We did not notice any significant differences between interviews and respondents before or after noon. At all sites, we had a roughly similar representation of age groups from early 20s to 60–75, and men and women were more or less equally represented in the sample. We did not ask about occupation. We asked whether the respondents considered themselves religious, and also whether they were active in organized religion. In the total sample of 48, 20 characterized themselves as religious. 12 of these 20 were active in religious congregations or organizations. Only two in the sample were Muslims. These numbers reflect the comparatively widespread Christian activity in the region.

Results and discussion

Nearly all accepted Christian symbols on buildings

“Is a religious symbol like this acceptable or not acceptable in a place like this?” This was the question we asked after they had looked at the symbol. All informants except

one expressed a positive attitude towards *Christian* symbols in public spaces, when they were looking at a concrete physical symbol. We then asked them why they thought so. Some were not able to provide reasons for their positive attitude, but most did. Some mentioned the argument that all religions, including Christianity, should have the freedom to be visible also in public places. Others, it was found, gave some kind of priority to Christianity, using phrases like "Christianity is 'our religion', we are after all a Christian country", and other statements to the same effect. "These things about religion, they become so dissolved," one said. "We must keep Christianity as the Norwegian religion." We did not notice any *religious* answers claiming that Christianity is the only true religion and should therefore have a monopoly. The arguments presented were in a sense secular and general, often referring to Christianity as a cultural and religious heritage. Only one person in Kristiansand expressed negative feelings towards all religious symbols in public places, including Christian symbols. He stated in clear and strong terms that he was against all religion, because it creates conflicts.

All people outside the mosque in Mandal also supported the right of Christians to have their symbols displayed in public, so Christian symbols seem to have a strong status in Norway, at least in this region. Both in Mandal and in Kristiansand, Christian symbols have been a part of the town landscape for ages, so habit is probably part of the explanation. A quick inventory of downtown Kristiansand showed that almost 30 buildings have clearly visible Christian signs or symbols on the outside (churches, prayer houses, congregation halls, etc.).

It is not surprising that Christian signs are relatively non-controversial. Grace Davie's notion of vicarious religion can be used as an explanation. However, the story about the TV news presenter with the cross shows that even Christian symbols in the public sphere can be controversial for some and in some settings. And if the Christian symbols are too dominant or spectacular, it may be that even the population in Sørlandet, a stronghold of Christianity in Norway, may voice reservations. We have some anecdotal evidence here. In 2007, a local successful businessman suggested in the media that a large statue of Jesus should be erected on a hill-top just outside the town centre. He even had the statue photoshopped, and it was presented in several national media. The similarity to the statue of Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro was striking. The statue dominated the landscape completely in the picture that was published. Most reactions, from politicians, media and the general public, showed that people had great difficulties in taking this seriously. Later it became known in the media that the business entrepreneur, enjoying considerable success in internet trading, had been given the idea from a communications adviser (Repstad 2008: 120).

Divided attitudes towards religious symbols from outside Christianity

In Kristiansand, we asked people whether they would have the same attitude towards signs from religions outside Christianity in the public space. Note that we were standing near a Christian symbol when the question was asked, so this question was more abstract and less context-bound than the one about Christian symbols. The answers

varied notably—12 informants were mainly positive, and 19 were mainly negative. Islam almost always came up in the conversation.

We use the term "mainly" positive or negative, as some expressed doubts and did not conclude categorically. Only one informant clearly indicated that he supported a legal ban on religious symbols. He was actually opposed to all kinds of religious symbols in public. As mentioned, several expressed scepticism towards non-Christian symbols. This was the strongest statement: "I see so many people wearing headscarves, and I am so sick and tired of it that I could vomit." The majority was more diplomatic, but voiced different degrees of scepticism. One who explained his positive attitude to Christian symbols with the statement "we live in Norway" answered as follows to the question about symbols from other religions: "No, I would not [be as positive]. We must protect our values. They do not have to advertise it." Another said: "I must admit no, I am quite anchored in Christianity."

Some of those who accepted non-Christian symbols in the public sphere gave no reasons for this. One voiced a kind of inclusive theology, claiming that deep down people connect to the same God. Two kinds of reasons were more common: A principle of equal treatment of religions, and a statement that Norway has become a multi-religious country. Quite a few added some qualifications. A woman outside the Lutheran Free Church said: "There is so much diversity here in Norway now, so we just have to accept it." Then she added: "As long as they behave decently and do not threaten us." Another positively-minded woman said: "We have a democracy, but I do not have a heart-to-heart relationship to this; I do not like it when they scream." We did not follow up on what she meant, but one possibility is that she referred to proclamations from minarets.

Asking about Islam in context

In our opinion, the most interesting finding of our study was that people were much more positive towards signs representing religions other than Christianity when we were actually standing near the mosque, compared to when the question was raised in a more abstract setting. Only one of the 17 informants we met on the street outside the mosque in Mandal clearly stated that signs such as the rather modest one we were looking at should not be allowed. He said: "I would have removed it if it had been beside my own house." All of the others were more positive. Some were clearly in favour of religious pluralism in the public space. One man, engaged in Christian diaconal work, said: "Yes, we must use our wisdom. We have a multicultural society now. Why would we be so insecure about our own identity? We must have equal treatment." Others stressed that they were positive to this specific sign, underlining that it was modest and small. Some of these combined this attitude with voicing scepticism towards more spectacular or dominant religious expressions. One informant said: "This is a small sign. I would have protested if it had been enormous." Another informant said she would not like a minaret in Mandal, but she had nothing against this sign, as it had a function. A third informant said: "I do not react to this, but I am not enthusiastic about islamization." A woman, a refugee who had converted from Islam to

Christianity, expressed strong negative general feelings against fundamentalism, but she said that it is a democratic right to display such signs as the one we were looking at.

Our material is limited, as we have stated several times. However, at least as a working hypothesis for further studies, it seems that manifestations of the alien/the other emerge as more problematic when people think in the abstract than when they are confronted sensually with physical artefacts.

It should be underlined that the sign outside the mosque was rather small and inconspicuous. This means that larger and more eye-catching (as well as ear-catching) symbols might have been met with more negative reactions. As we have indicated, some informants in Mandal who voiced support for the sign distanced themselves from more spectacular signs, minarets and so on. Maybe this is an example of a more general and interesting observation, namely that looking at specific symbols may de-dramatize people's reactions. It is likely that questions asked in more abstract situations facilitate more threatening connotations. When the informants in our study only related to the linguistic phrase "would a symbol from another religion [other than Christianity] be acceptable", they have related to a linguistic expression lacking what Roland Barthes called the illusion of presence. The personal and cultural meaning—often media-shaped—that many Norwegians attach to "other religions" will therefore become more important. Questions about mosques, minarets and Islamic symbols may evoke feelings of being threatened by Islamist movements, perhaps especially among people who have little or no personal connection to Muslims or Muslim symbols, and only know such phenomena from the mass media. Even if there are exceptions, many mass media stories convey negative pictures of ethno-religious minorities and immigrants in general (Døving and Kraft 2013; Figenschou et al. 2015).

To make sense of this finding, we have introduced the possibility of transferring the contact hypothesis from people to material objects. Very briefly put, contact increases understanding. We have also introduced Barthes' theory of signs as a kind of de-dramatizing factor, and we have mentioned Barthes' idea that signs in the surroundings are important for the interpretation of a sign. In our study, the white, old wooden houses (including the mosque building itself), well-known to inhabitants as well as visitors, may have anchored a potential perception of something threatening and dangerous in a more idyllic physical environment, and hence to some extent neutralized that threat.

We have compared the results in our pilot study with the results of the national survey made by TNS Gallup in april 2015 about religious symbols in public places, for instance on buildings. Asking people in a survey is definitely asking out of context. Everybody except one accepted the sign outside the mosque in Mandal, while a larger proportion—15 percent—in the national population was negative to such signs. The resistance to minarets was even greater—21 percent. People are more negative when asked in the abstract. It can of course be objected that interviewing anonymously by mail or web can give more honest and less "politically correct" answers than interviews conducted face-to-face, but our experience from the interviews in Kristiansand and Mandal was that people answered spontaneously and straight from the heart.

More scepticism towards "the others" among active Christians?

Theoretically, the connection between people's own religion and their attitude to other religions can be thought about in two different ways. Those who have strong religious convictions may be restrictive to the space given to other religions. However, they may also be more tolerant when religion means something to them, and think that others should have the same opportunity as they have themselves to practice their religion.

As for our study in Kristiansand and Mandal, our material is of course limited, so we cannot conclude strongly here. We see both kinds of reasoning in our empirical material. In the abstract, there was a slight tendency for religious people to be more sceptical to the appearance of other religions in public, when we asked them out of context. On the other hand, during our interviews outside the mosque in Mandal, all the people who considered themselves religious accepted the specific sign outside the mosque.

Sensual impact—stronger for the less categorical?

Obviously the sensual experience of the crosses and the mosque sign was not decisive for all informants. Some had thought about the issue in advance and had fixed attitudes, one way or the other. Both those who talked about equal treatment and multiculturalism as well as the one who claimed that all religion leads to conflict seemed to have talked about the topic in the same way before. However, a majority seemed to be hesitant, many of them also ambivalent, especially when we asked about the mosque sign, and in these cases, our impression was that the material, sensual situation made an impact. It is not surprising that there is ambivalence in these matters. Norwegians live in a comparatively egalitarian culture. It is often illegitimate to clearly voice that some people are better than others (Skarpenes 2007). On the other hand, egalitarianism can lead to a demand for similarity (Gullestad 1991). It is perhaps more than a pure linguistic coincidence that, in Norwegian, there is one single word for equality and similarity—*likhet*.

Further research and policy implications

Despite the limitations of our empirical study, we think that we have found an interesting result here, namely that people with less definite opinions and attitudes in particular are influenced by the interview situation, causing people to have more nuanced and less negative views on minority symbols in the public space when they are actually looking at these symbols. How can we make further sense of this finding by using resources of interpretation from the methodological and theoretical tool boxes?

We have referred to a good many empirical studies about people's attitudes to religious symbols. They were all collected in the abstract, in national surveys. We believe that studying this topic in a more natural context, for instance in conversations with people actually wearing religious symbols, would elicit less intolerance. We mentioned the Swiss ban on building more minarets in the country. The results of the referendum showed that the number of votes cast against minarets was clearly highest in areas with

no minarets and very few Muslims (Langer 2010: 945). Our study is explorative, but the tendency in our admittedly modest sample is very clear: People are more tolerant when they are actually looking at a Muslim sign than when they are asked in the abstract.

It should be remembered that we were looking at a rather unspectacular Muslim sign, but such symbols are, after all, much more common in Norway than spectacular mosques with minarets. It would be interesting to follow up on our study by using larger samples and longer, more in-depth interviews. The context could also be varied, for instance by interviewing outside more spectacular mosques, as well as outside minarets, with or without calls to prayer. In the meantime, we believe it can be safely recommended that the Muslim leaders in the new mosque in Kristiansand put up at least a small sign on the outside wall to inform people that this is a mosque. It is possible that it would evoke negative reactions if a lot of very spectacular symbols of minority religions were introduced overnight in Norwegian local communities. But a relevant policy implication of our study and literature review can be formulated like this: Gradually accustoming people to symbols from religions called "foreign" a generation or two ago can facilitate social and cultural integration.

Notes

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