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# IDEAS DO MATTER: POLITICS AND THE ISLAMIC TRADITION AMONG MUSLIM RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN NORWAY

## *Abstract*

How do Muslim religious leaders in the West theologically and ideologically approach a liberal and democratic political system? This question was investigated through a case study on 14 leaders in the largest mosques of Norway, comprised of both imams and administrative or civil mosque leaders. They all regarded the Norwegian political system as a good system, and viewed the current situation in most of the Muslim world as bad. Nevertheless, they related to the Norwegian political system in different ways. All the imams claimed that Islam has an irreducible legal and political aspect, and that Islam in principle does not support secularity as a political ideal. Many of the administrative mosque leaders, on the other hand, supported secularity as a political ideal, or claimed that the societal aspect of Islam is more about fundamental values than about legal or political rules. The difference between the imams and the administrative leaders is interpreted as resulting in part from the embeddedness of the imams in the Islamic legal tradition.

Keywords: religion and immigration, Islam, secularity, political ideology

## Introduction

Do Muslims who live in the West support liberal and democratic forms of governance?<sup>1</sup> Following 9/11 and the general politicization of notions such as «Muslims» and «Islam» that followed, this has become a question of concern for both governments and publics in European countries. In the years that followed 9/11 large segments of the European publics came to believe that European Muslims could constitute a threat to security, cultural values or social and political cohesion (Lean and Esposito 2012; Malm 2009; Morgan and Poynting 2012). In the academic world this politicization of Muslims manifested itself in several quantitative research projects, many of them funded by European governments, that polled the opinions of «Muslims» on securitized issues such as support for terror or democracy (for a critical review, see Johansen

and Spielhaus 2012). The use of quotation marks here is deliberate, as this category of knowledge – «Muslims» – to a large degree became an important analytical tool in social science research following 9/11, whereas people previously were often studied through the lens of ethnicity, migrant status or class. These polls have shown that majorities of Muslim publics worldwide are supportive of democratic forms of government, favor free speech and do not want the temporal and the religious powers to mix (Esposito and Mogahed 2007; Fish 2011; Inglehart 2003; Pew Research Center 2005, 2006, 2010). At the same time, majorities in many Muslim countries want to see shari'a as a source of legislation, and in some countries the majority favors implementing illiberal laws inspired by certain interpretations of Islam, such as capital punishment for apostasy or stoning adulterers (Pew Research Center 2010). The polls conducted on Muslims living in Europe and the U.S. have shown a somewhat different picture. Most polls show that only a minority of European Muslims want shari'a to be incorporated into the law (Le Figaro 2008; TNS Gallup and TV2 2006; The Telegraph 2006; Pew Research Center 2008). More detailed surveys indicate that Muslims who constitute the minority who want shari'a incorporated into the law only want this to apply to Muslims, and mostly related to family law, and not, for example, criminal law (The Guardian 2004).

The quantitative polls that have followed 9/11 thus seem to indicate that most Muslims who live in the West support liberal and democratic forms of governance. But these polls only show *that* many Muslims in the West support liberal and democratic forms of governance, not *how* they do it. This quantitative research does not delve deeply into the political or theological reasoning that may lie behind the support that most Western Muslims give to liberal democracy.

## Previous research

Is there something to be explained here? Raising this question – that one has to *explain* why Muslims support liberal democracy – may be interpreted as accusatory towards Muslim populations in the West, for example given the fact that the inhabitants of the former Soviet Union (who largely belong to the orthodox Christian faith) globally are the ones who think the least of democracy as a political principle, while the global Muslim population actually hold democracy in high regard (Norris and Inglehart 2011). Furthermore, «Muslims» should not be regarded a group of people, that is – it is not what sociologists may call a social group (Bilgrami 1992; Turner et al. 1987). «Muslims» should rather be seen as a categorization that is imposed on a diverse global population, a categorization that is undertaken by both Muslims and non-Muslims. But even though there is no essential core in the category of «Muslims», the Islamic legal theological tradition(s) may nevertheless be approached with a certain degree of essentialism. In spite of the huge variation in Islamic legal opinion, there have been some hegemonic interpretations (Asad 1986; Gule 2006; Ismail 2003). Some of these hegemonic interpretations are in tension with core traits of liberal and secular democratic political systems. There are several areas of possible tension:

- *Democracy*: Should the law emanate from the will of the people, or from divine revelation? Should the law be determined by doctrinal authorities or by the whole populace?
- *Liberalism*: Should the state interfere in areas currently regarded as «private» in the West, such as sexual relations outside of marriage or apostasy from religion?
- *Equality before the law*: Do the same rights and duties apply to Muslims and non-Muslims, and to men and women?

However, qualitative research into how religious Muslims in Europe ideologically work out their commitment to both Islam and liberal democracy remains scarce. In the case of Norway, for example, much of the social science research on Islam and religiosity among Muslim immigrants has focused on Islam as a lived experience – how religion manifests itself in shifting and diverse ways in the lives of different individuals or groups (Larsen 1995; Østberg 2003a, 2003b; Jacobsen 2002, 2011; Roald 2004, 2009; Roald and Lie 2010).

On the European level, though, there has been some research that explores how elite groups among Muslims envision religious, political and social integration into Europe. The Danish political scientist Jytte Klausen conducted interviews with 300 influential Muslims all across Europe – politicians, policy makers, community leaders and activists, and published the results in the book *The Islamic Challenge* (Klausen 2005). Her finding was that the Muslim leaders, in general, supported integration into existing political frameworks. A potential «Islamic» overhauling of the European political systems was not on the agenda. The tendency in Klausen’s findings has later been confirmed in similar studies – though smaller in scope – by the Canadian political scientist Andrew C. Gould (2009). Two case studies concerning The Muslim Brotherhood’s activities in Europe are also relevant. The Muslim Brotherhood is only one among several Islamic movements in Europe, but has had a large influence on the direction and profile of mosques, religious associations and Islamic umbrella organizations in Europe, in spite of its small membership base (Pargeter 2010: 136–171). Two detailed studies of the movement’s activities in Europe were published in 2010 (Pargeter 2010; Vidino 2010). Both agree on the current pragmatic objectives of the Brotherhood in the West. The Brotherhood wants Muslims in Europe to integrate into the existing political system, and not isolate themselves. The Brotherhood envisions a kind of an «integration without assimilation» approach, in which Muslims keep an Islamic identity and lifestyle, but still take fully part in the surrounding non-Muslim society.

However, none of these studies go into detail concerning the theological and ideological reasoning that lie behind this Islamic support for integration into the secular democracies of Europe. The most thorough treatment of these theological issues has been a string of textual studies undertaken by the political scientist Andrew C. March. In several articles and a book he has looked into how modern Islamic theologians come to terms with being Muslim in a non-Muslim society (March 2006, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2011a, 2011b). He finds that many contemporary theologians no longer look at the minority situation as something that should be avoided – a view that was common in the past (El Fadl 1994). Quite on the contrary, many look at this as a golden oppor-

tunity for *dawa* – evangelizing, or presenting Islam to non-Muslims. According to March, the mainstream view today is that while living in a non-Muslim country, a Muslim must follow the laws of the state that he lives in. The reasoning behind this is that the Muslim implicitly has accepted a contract with the state of residence. He receives goods such as security and safety and the right to exercise his religion, and in turn he promises to respect the laws of the land. Like in classical philosophical contract theory, this contract is not something that has to be spelled out, but a contract that is thought to be implicit in the very act of living in society (March 2007). March also identifies another stream of thought that goes further than the mainstream theologians. Reformers such as Tariq Ramadan – or the «Religious Integralist Model», as March (2011: 31) calls it – have moved towards a stance reminiscent of the political ideology of Christian Democrats: One finds some values in religion, but developing politics based on these values is an open-ended process where context has to be taken into account.

This article adds to the state of research by discussing how Muslim religious leaders in Norway ideologically combine a commitment to Islam and a commitment to the Norwegian political system, and more broadly how they conceive the relation between Islam and politics. It is inspired by previous studies on Muslim elites in Europe by Klausen (2005) and Gould (2009), but attempts to delve deeper into the theological and ideological issues that March (2006, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2011a, 2011b) has written about in his textual studies.

## Methods and theory

The goal of the study is to investigate the religio-political worldviews of Muslim religious elites in Norway. Special focus is put on the concepts of democracy and *secularity*, meaning a secular state that allows for practicing religion in the private and civil sphere (Sahin 2011). How do Muslim religious leaders in Norway see the relation between Islam and democracy? Do they see any inherent conflict between Islam and secularity?

The informants were selected based on a criterion of representativity. The ten largest Islamic congregations in Norway were identified using publicly available material from regional state offices, the «fylkesmannen»-offices in Norway. Both shia, sunni and ahmadiyya mosques were included in the search, but it turned out that all the largest mosques were sunni. Both the main imam of the mosque and the civil/administrative chairman of the board of the mosque were asked for an interview. Two mosques declined, and in two other mosques it was only possible to obtain one interview, in one case with the imam and in the other with the chairman. This left a pool of 14 informants, equally divided between imams and board chairmen, all male. The interviews were then conducted during winter and spring 2011 (for more on the methods of the study, see Elgvin 2012).

Theoretically, the study was undertaken with an approach to scientific enquiry that the Norwegian sociologist Lars Mjølset has called «the contextualist approach to social

science methodology» (Mjøset 2006, 2009). The contextualist approach does not seek to uncover fundamental social laws as in the standard positivist approach to social science. Nor is it fundamentally skeptical of the possibility of social explanations, as in the postmodern/hermeneutical/post-structuralist schools. The contextualist approach is concerned with specific cases, and how they can best be explained. An important concept for Mjøset is the «local research frontier», the scientific discourse that arises when several researchers approach a topic with more or less similar research questions. When a local research frontier exists, the theoretical tool box that is available to the researcher is the explanations that «the community of researchers accept as good explanations of relevant cases» (Mjøset 2009: 60). In this study the main theoretical question is about understanding *why* the informants hold the religio-political opinions they hold.

## Putting the informants in context

The condition of anonymity was very important to most of the informants, as they were discussing sensitive topics and eliciting opinions that could lead to hostile reactions from mainstream society or from inside the mosque. To ensure this, all information that might give away the identity of the informants has been removed. They are not referred to by ethnicity, and are not identified with particular Islamic movements. When quotes are being used, the informants are referred to by interchangeable terms such as «an imam» or «a chairman». However, some background information on the context surrounding my informants is necessary.

The most thorough treatment of organized and institutional Islam in Norway remains Kari Vogt's book *Islam på norsk* (Islam in Norwegian) (2008), where Vogt details the development of Islamic congregations and organizations in Norway, up until the early 2000s. The picture that emerges in Vogt's book is that mosques in Norway are largely ethnically homogenous: They were founded by migrants to Norway from Muslim countries – Pakistan, Turkey, Morocco, Bosnia, etc. – in the 70s, 80s and 90s. With a few exceptions, most of the mosques cater to people from their own ethnic group. Some of the mosques are connected to international Islamic movements, while others are completely independent.

The informants in this study were holding two different structural positions in the mosques – imams or board/council leaders. In public debate in Norway one can sometimes hear referrals to «the imams» and their alleged power. But in many mosques the imams are less influential than they are perceived to be by the general public. The imams are hired by the council or board of the mosque, and their residence in Norway is at their mercy (as they often are hired from abroad, and get a permit of residency connected to their work). Actual and formal power in the mosques may reside with either the chairman of the board or the imam, or there might be other constellations of power.

While many European countries have seen significant social conflict connected to the construction of mosques or worship in mosques (see for example Allievi 2009), such conflicts have not been very common in Norway. Still, the informants seemed

well-aware of the Islamophobia that prevails in segments of Norwegian society. Several informants were cautious during our first contact, and seemed to perceive me as a representative of a hostile surrounding society. Some became defensive even on the phone, trying to explain that Islam was about peace (even though I had not mentioned terrorism or anything similar). The first thing I tried to do during the interview situation was therefore to create a friendly atmosphere. In some of the interviews this was facilitated by the fact that I speak basic colloquial Arabic. In addition, at the time of the interviews I had for some time maintained a blog about Muslims in Norway that received positive evaluations from many Muslims. This, and the fact that I identified myself as a Christian and thus was not alien to the whole concept of religion, might have increased the level of trust in me as a researcher. As the interviews progressed, my impression was that most of the informants relaxed. As a result, there were less slogans aimed at me as a non-Muslim with a perceived hostile stance against Islam, and they became more detailed in the explanations of their theological and political world-views.

I started off by asking about what they thought was the ideal society according to Islam. They were then asked about what they would like to change in their Muslim country of origin, or the Muslim country of origin of their parents (for the few that were born here), and then what they would like to change in Norwegian society. Lastly they were confronted with eventual incoherencies in their responses: Were there differences between what they described as the ideal Islamic society, the changes they wished for in their Muslim country of origin, and the changes they wished for in Norway?

## Islam and politics: Four approaches

The fundamental position that emerged among the informants was a deep satisfaction with the political system in Norway, and a corresponding dissatisfaction with the political systems in most of the Muslim world. All the informants – with no exceptions – said that they were happy that they were living in Norway, that Norway was a good country, and that they thought the political system in Norway was good. Even when asked what they would like to change in Norway, if they could, the main result were expressions of identification with Norwegian society and the Norwegian political system. The other position that repeatedly came up in the interviews was a strong disaffection with the present state of the Muslim world and most Muslim majority countries. When asked whether they thought any of today's Muslim countries reflected the ideals of Islam, nobody answered in the affirmative.

But to claim that Norway is a good country and that the Muslim world is in bad shape is compatible with several ways of looking at the world. In the responses of the informants I identified four basic ways of looking at the relation of Islam and politics, and how Muslims should take part in society, in Norway as well as in Muslim countries.<sup>2</sup> These four categories should be regarded as constructed entities. Ontologically, such categories are not essential parts of reality – they are rather constructed conceptions that can make it easier to grasp reality (Mjøset 2009). The important question is

how well empirical reality fits into such typologies. In this case, the responses of the informants fit easily into these categories, without too much conceptual twisting and wiggling. These categories were not pre-conceptions, i.e. they were not analytical categories that I operated with prior to the interviews. They were created in the post-interview analytical phase as a way to make sense of what the informants said.

*First category: The secularists*

One of the striking findings in this study is that several of the respondents identified themselves as secularists. These informants were all board chairmen, and most of them had migrated from comparatively liberal Muslim countries. They explicitly claimed that religion and politics should «belong to separate spheres», et cetera. In his thorough treatment of the concept of secularism, Sindre Bangstad (2009) distinguishes between what could be labeled as *procedural* and *ideological secularism*. Ideological secularism aims at minimizing the magnitude and influence of religion on society. It is a *secularizing* ideology. Procedural secularism, on the other hand, is not anti-religious. It merely states that the state should hold a neutral stance on religion, and leave this aspect of human life to the civil sphere. Thus, adherents of all religions, as well as non-believers, should be treated equally. It is in this sense of the word that some of the board chairmen – but none of the imams – adhered to secularism. One board chairman said:

You have asked me what I see as the ideal society according to Islam... I think that is a difficult question to answer. You see, I think that religion and politics should be kept separate. I have opinions on how a good society looks like. But that is *my* opinions, based on my personal opinions and values.

None of the secularists in the Norwegian mosques tried to legitimize secularity as a political principle from *within* the Islamic tradition. They did not cite any examples from the early Muslim society in Medina, for example, to lend support to their views, and they did not cite any Islamic theological principles – they just said that one shouldn't mix religion and politics.

*Second category: The democratic Islamists*

As mentioned, none of the imams expressed any support for secularism as a political principle. All the imams maintained that Islam had a societal or political aspect. While some of the secularists felt somewhat uneasy when they were asked to describe an ideal society according to Islam, none of the imams seemed to find this question strange. However, what this entailed – *what* the ideal Islamic society was, and how it could be achieved – was not something they agreed upon. The most common position among the imams was the position I have labeled *democratic Islamism*. A couple of the board chairmen also supported this position. It can be summarized as follows: An ideal Islamic society is based on solidarity and trust between people. In this society there are some laws that cannot be changed democratically, drawn from shari'a or fiqh, the classical Islamic jurisprudence. However, the ruler or rulers must be appointed democrat-

ically. But this ruler must govern according to the limits that are drawn by shari'a as understood in traditional fiqh. The democratic Islamists want this system to be implemented in Muslim countries, but not in non-Muslim countries such as Norway.

A short note on terminology: In public discourse shari'a is sometimes equated with certain laws – stoning, flogging, et cetera. However, this is a simplification. Shari'a can be understood as the will of God for mankind (or Muslims). For religious Muslims living in the West, to give alms, to pray five times or to strive for becoming a good human being can be what shari'a primarily entails. But for most Islamic scholars, the will of God has also entailed certain ways of regulating society by law. When Islamic jurists attempted to interpret the shari'a, the result were concrete rulings – often referred to as *fiqh*. So when I refer to Islamists, what I mean is that they want to implement rulings from traditional fiqh, which means the interpretation of shari'a done by Islamic jurists and theologians. This way the Islamists can be distinguished from Islamic reformists, who might also say that they want society to be ruled in accordance with shari'a, but possibly understand shari'a in a vastly different way.

The interviews did not cover all areas of traditional fiqh, of course. But the informants were asked whether a Muslim in an ideal Islamic society should be allowed to convert to another religion, or whether he must then receive capital punishment – as has been the majority opinion among Muslim scholars in traditional fiqh (Peters 2005: 65). With a couple of exceptions, almost all the democratic Islamists answered that conversion away from Islam was not allowed in an ideal Islamic society.

«When a society is based on Islam, then conversion away from Islam is like treason. And in many countries treason is punishable by death», one imam said.

However, not all of them wanted capital punishment. Some wanted prison, and some said that a Muslim who wanted to convert should emigrate out of the country. But the main position was that apostasy should not be allowed. This means that the ideal Islamic society of the democratic Islamists is far from liberal, since freedom of religion is a basic right of liberal societies. Nevertheless, all the democratic Islamists had a formal commitment to democracy, understood as a procedural principle of decision making (Benhenda 2011). Many legitimized this in the example of the early caliphs (the successors to the prophet Muhammad who ruled the nascent Muslim community in Mecca and beyond), who they claimed were elected by popular vote. But the democratic Islamists also thought that the powers of the elected leader should be limited. He should be obliged to rule within the limits of the shari'a, and cannot change laws that are given by God.

The democratic Islamists were eager to emphasize that they did not want to implement this system in the West – apparently well aware of the fear of an Islamic «takeover» that prevails in certain segments in Norwegian society. In order to understand whether this stance was a genuinely held opinion, I asked several follow-up questions about this issue. Why not shari'a in the West as well? The question is not trivial or accusatory. If one truly believes that God has created a perfect system of laws that are better than any man-made laws, then the reasonable position to hold is that these laws should apply everywhere. There were three main reasons given for why they did not want to implement shari'a laws (or traditional fiqh) in the West. The first had to do with

what Muslims owed to societies in the West. The reasoning in this argument was that since Muslims had been allowed to settle here, and their fundamental rights safeguarded – then it would be unfair and ungrateful to this society to try and implement shari'a laws, as long as this was something people here did not want. The second reason being given was that Norway was already *sufficiently* Islamic. Without knowing it, Norwegians had implemented large and important parts of the shari'a in their society – accountability, transparency, solidarity, et cetera. One imam said that

It is only such a small part of the shari'a that is not already existent here. When people do not want it, there is no reason to have it. Norway already is one of the countries in the world that is closest to Islam, since people here are treated with respect.

The core of this argument – even though none of the informants spelled it out in advanced philosophical or theological terms – seems to be that a society should be Islamic to a certain degree, and that there is no need to Islamize it further once this threshold is reached. The last and most common argument was about democracy. In Muslim lands, people wanted shari'a laws. Here, people did not want shari'a laws. Therefore it was right to implement those laws there but not here. I asked one of the democratic Islamists whether he would accept it if people in his home country changed their mind, and did not want to be ruled by shari'a laws anymore? «Of course. Of course. It is people who must decide», he answered.

This makes for a curious result. The fundamental right is the right of people to choose for themselves how they should be ruled, and which laws they should be ruled by. But in principle the people's legislation should be limited by God's law, which is superior to man's law. Most of the democratic Islamists, however, did not seem to see this paradox as very unsettling.

### *Third category: The utopian dreamers*

All the imams claimed that Islam had a societal or political aspect. But a significant minority among the imams did not support the kind of democratic Islamism that the other imams wanted, even though they thought that Islam had a political aspect that went beyond the current Norwegian political system. I have labeled them *the utopian dreamers*. Their Islamic ideal is a utopia that borrows heavily from Western liberalism and democracy, but goes beyond this, towards a kind of society that they are unable to describe in detail, but hope will materialize at some point in the future.

All the informants expressed dissatisfaction with the current state of the Muslim world. But this disillusionment was even more pronounced among the utopian dreamers than among the others. For them, these problems seemed more complicated than for the secularists and the democratic Islamists. The secularists had an answer: The problem was the mixing of religion and politics, and a solution: Secular democracy. The democratic Islamists also had a solution: More of the traditional shari'a. But the utopian dreamers were not prepared to accept any of these solutions. In their actual political positions, the utopian dreamers were close to ideas and values that are commonly held in high regard in Norway: Individual freedom and solidarity. Thus, the

utopian dreamers all emphasized that «there can be no compulsion in religion», as is stated in the Quran (Quran 2:256), and opposed capital punishment for apostasy. But even though they appreciated the individual freedom that secular democracy provided in the West, the utopian dreamers thought that a truly Islamic system required something more. One of them was asked whether there was any contradiction between Islam and democracy:

On a very deep and philosophical level: Yes. Islam says that the laws come from God. While democracy says that the laws come from the people. Obviously there is a contradiction here. Many of the values in Islam can be achieved through democracy. In the West, many of these values have been fulfilled - individual freedom, respect for other faiths, transparency in government, and in the Nordic countries also social solidarity. So I do not mean that Islam is opposed to democracy, or that democracy is bad for Islam. But Islam cannot be equated with democracy.

He couldn't say exactly what his own proposed societal model was. The basis of his thinking was the so called *maqasid al-shari'a*, or the objectives behind Islamic law. This line of thinking was developed by some of the classical Islamic jurists and thinkers, among them al-Ghazali (1058–1111). They claimed that Islamic law was there in order to fulfill certain objectives – to safeguard life, religion, property, intellect and family (Çizakça 2007). This means that Islamic law can be changed if different circumstances require other laws in order to safeguard these objectives or values.

What the utopian dreamers have in common is that they perceive the ideal Islamic society as something that has not yet materialized. This utopia draws inspiration from aspects of contemporary Western societies, and from the Islamic tradition as well. The distinguishing trait of the utopians is that there is no conceivable line of action that will lead from the contemporary state of things to this future society. They do not propose any specific changes that will lead society in this direction, they do not advocate specific causes, and they do not advise Muslims to behave politically in a certain way. When asked what they would like to change in today's society, both in Norway and in their country of origin, the utopian dreamers did not have ready-made answers. Or, rather, their proposed changes were adjustments fully within the framework of secular and liberal democracy. One imam, when asked about what he would like to change in Norway, couldn't come up with anything at all:

To be honest? No. I think Norway is an amazing country. You know, there are small things, the garbage collection does not always function as it should in my neighborhood. But all in all, Norway is about as good as a society can get.

Since the utopian dreamers divorce their perceived utopia from contemporary reality, they are free to think politically on universal and common grounds in the world as it is. So in their practical politics, they are close to the secularists.

#### *Fourth category: The Muslim democrat*

The smallest contingent among the respondents – in fact only one board chairman – held a position that did not fit easily into any of the other categories. It is still worth

detailing this position, since it connects to certain broader streams within Islamic thought today (March 2007, 2011a, 2011b). This board chairman did not commit himself to the separation of religion and politics, and was no secularist: he claimed that there were fundamental values and «limits» in Islam that should guide society. On the other hand, unlike the democratic Islamists, he did not think that Islam prescribed any specific laws, and was clearly opposed to large parts of traditional fiqh, such as capital punishment for apostasy, harsh punishments for theft or adultery, etc. He did not make any separation between Norway and the Muslim world in terms of what kind of society he wanted, either. And unlike the utopian dreamers, he did not think that an ideal Islamic utopia had yet to materialize. Islam could and should guide politics here and now.

The label I have assigned to him is that of a *Muslim Democrat* – analogous to the Christian Democrats in European politics, who think that Christianity provides fundamental values that should guide politics, but that religion does not provide any fixed blueprint for the ideal society (Lunde 1996):

Islam does not go into details about how a society should be. It sets certain limits you can move within. There are some values that are there, and that one must adhere to. If you follow these values, then you do not have any problem with Islam. Basically, it is about respect for persons. Not to kill, not to steal, to allow people to live decent lives. And in a dream society according to Islam, everybody tolerates each other. You listen to each other. You respect each other. Tolerance and understanding... If you do not believe in God, that's up to you. I do not need to force you or insult you because of that.

Because of this he was clearly opposed to capital punishment for apostasy. Another value that he saw as important in Islam was social solidarity. This led him to view Norway as the country in the world that was closest to the ideals in Islam.

To be totally honest... the country that is closest to an ideal state according to Islam is Norway, and the other Scandinavian countries. None of the Muslim countries can call themselves Islamic states. They use the name, but in practice they are not. I have not lived in other countries except Norway and my home country, but I have visited many countries. All that... the social support people get if they get hardships... that is what Islam says. That the state must be responsible for the welfare of people. That the state should give people the possibility to develop as persons. In Norway we have free education, a free health care system, if you are out of work you get support. That is Islam.

For this man, the role of Islam in politics was to provide values – tolerance, social solidarity, respect for life and persons. That is fairly close to the way religion and politics is understood in current Christian Democratic ideology. The anthropologist Robert Hefner (2011) labels this as an «ethicalization» of shari'a: «a tendency [...] to view shari'a not as an inflexible code to be imposed by rulers, but as a general ethical guide to be implemented by communities of believers in a manner informed by the higher objectives of the law» (Hefner 2011: 31). If this man was asked directly whether he wanted «shari'a» in Norwegian law, he would likely have answered yes. But his con-

ception of shari'a would be very different from the shari'a-concept that is employed by the democratic Islamists.

## Discussion: Ideas do matter

Why do the informants hold the religio-political opinions that they hold? What makes a secularist, a democratic Islamist, or a utopian dreamer? Some striking features were discernible among the informants. The imams and board chairmen differed noticeably from each other: Several of the board chairmen supported secularism, and one board chairman – the Muslim democrat – claimed that the societal aspect of Islam was more about fundamental values than about legal or political rules. In contrast, all the imams thought that Islam in principle had a political aspect. The conceptions of democracy also varied between the informants. For the democratic Islamists, democracy was conceived as something purely procedural or majoritarian: Democracy exists when the ruler is elected by a majority of the people in successive elections. The utopian dreamers, the secularists and the Muslim democrat all conceived of democracy as something more – as a system in which individual and minority rights should be safeguarded.

One interpretation of the divide between imams and administrative and civil mosque leaders could be that it is about different levels of exposure to Norwegian society. The imams and the board chairmen often inhabit different social worlds. Most of the board chairmen held full time jobs that gave them much exposure to Norwegian society and Norwegians, while some of the imams led a more secluded life within the walls of the mosque. However, I will put forth that this interpretation is too simple. Several of the imams who supported democratic Islamism had lived in Norway for many years, and some had kids who went to Norwegian schools, while a couple of the board chairmen had been in Norway for a short period of time. Could it be that some of the difference between the imams and board chairmen was about exposure to ideas? This relates to a broader debate that has been going on in Islamic studies for some time, about how much explanatory power the Islamic tradition should be ascribed, as opposed to social and material factors (for an introduction, see Ismail 2003).

In my study, a striking difference that emerged in the interviews was the conceptual frame of reference that the informants used. While the imams – who opposed secularity as a political principle – often invoked principles from the Islamic theological tradition in order to defend their views, the board chairmen who defended secularity or value-based Islamic politics primarily used universal-style arguments that could just as easily have been used by a Christian, an Atheist or a Buddhist. This does not mean, of course, that it is not possible to defend secularity or value-based Islamic politics from within the legal Islamic tradition. The Islamic thinkers who argue for a principal separation of Islam from politics have often done so from within a theoretical Islamic framework – such as the liberal reformist Abdullah an-Naim (an-Na'im 2008), Tariq Ramadan in his most recent works (Ramadan 2009; March 2011b), the sunni Indonesian thinker Nur-cholish Madjid (Bakti 2004), or shia Iranian thinkers such as Abdolkaraim Soroush, Mojtabeh Shabestari and Mohsen Kadivar (Sadri 2001). They start with what they

claim as Islamic theological terms or values or principles - and go on to say that these values or principles are easiest to defend in a functionally secular state.

These interpretations of Islam, however, are far from being hegemonic among Muslim theologians (Vogt et al. 2009). The tendency of the imams to oppose secularism might therefore be interpreted as a result of their exposure to particular ideas – the Islamic legal tradition that is taught at Islamic religious institutions. However, it should also be emphasized that the imams did not agree with each other on politics and theology. Some advocated traditional *fiqh* in Muslim countries, with capital punishment for apostasy, while others advocated individual freedom on most aspects of life. But in spite of this variation, for all of them an outer limit seems to have been a principled, formal separation of religion from politics.

Another important point, though, is that the issues that have been investigated here, religio-political world views and the relation between Islam and politics, do not seem to be important in the daily life of the mosques. In several instances there were substantial differences between the imam and the board chairman within the same mosque. It is not likely that this would have been the case if politics, or Islamic political solutions, played an important role in the teachings and the communal life of the mosques. The answers would then have been more uniform, since members of the mosque would have been socialized into common ways of thinking. This interpretation is in line with a recent study on the role of imams in Norway: Much of the work and their daily life centers on fairly mundane issues (Døving 2012).

A final question is whether these findings can shed light on opinions and ideology among larger groups of religious Muslims in Norway and/or the West. Since the informants in this study are leaders, it is not unlikely that their opinions can be found in larger segments among religious Muslims in Norway. Some caveats must be taken into account, though. Firstly, both quantitative and qualitative research on Muslims in Norway have shown that Norwegian Muslims do not necessarily listen to their religious leaders (Døving and Thorbjørnsrud 2012; TNS Gallup and TV2 2006). Secondly, it is not clear to what degree young religiously devoted Muslims in Norway listen to the leaders in the mosques. Many seem to seek religious guidance both on the internet and from charismatic lay preachers (Linge 2013). Thirdly, the interviews in this study were conducted at a certain point in time, during the winter and spring of 2011, when the Arab spring was in full force. This might have influenced the responses of some of the informants, and they might have given other answers if the interviews were conducted now, two years later. Still, this modest claim can be maintained: It is not unreasonable to believe that the ideological positions that have been described in this study will also be present among larger segments of religious Muslims in Norway. How much support each position has, and from who, is of course impossible to assess based on a single qualitative study. In order to investigate whether the ideological positions of Muslim religious leaders in other countries in Europe differ from the ideological positions described here, further research on a European level would be needed.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I am indebted to an anonymous referee, the editors of this journal, participants at a seminar at the Institute for Labour and Social research (Fafo), and participants at a PLUREL seminar at the University of Oslo for valuable feedback on earlier versions of the article.
- <sup>2</sup> I am not detailing the percentage of informants in each of the categories. The number of respondents is way too small to be statistically significant, so I do not want to create the false impression that the findings reveal tendencies that can be statistically generalized.

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