

**The Christian-Muslim Dialogue Forum in Denmark.
Working for the common good - Building long-term trust**

By Mogens S. Mogensen

Denmark was up till the end of the 1960's one of the most ethnically, culturally and religiously homogeneous countries in Europe. This situation began to change in the late 1960's when guest workers, among whom were many Muslims, were invited to come to Denmark to help overcome labour shortage. In the 1980's and 90s, even before the guest workers and their families had been effectively integrated, the Danish society experienced a great influx of refugees and asylum seekers from the Middle East, Asia and Africa. The high number of immigrants, whose ethnic, cultural and religious "otherness" attracted the critical attention of many Danes, coupled with the social and economic development in Denmark, laid the ground for the development of an increasing hostility especially towards Muslims who became the symbol of these "others". The immigration and integration issue began to become increasingly politicized through the interventions of new right wing parties who using a heavy populist and nationalistic rhetoric in the following years gained an ever increasing support among the voters. Following the terrorist attacks in the US in 2001, the anti-Muslim sentiments grew even more.

For many years interreligious engagement among Christians had been limited to activities organised by Christian organisations such as the Danish Mission Society (today Danmission), Sudanmissionen (today Mission Africa), Islamisk Kristent Studiecenter (Islamic Christian Study Center) and Information- og Samtaleforum for Kristendom og Nyreligiøsitet, IKON, (Forum for Information and Dialogue about Christianity and New Religious Movements), but around the turn of the century the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (ELCD) began to take the interreligious challenge seriously. In 1998 the bishops of the church set up a committee to study the interreligious challenge and what the church could and should do in this regard. The committee prepared a report, entitled "Samtalen fremmer forståelsen" (Dialogue furthers understanding) in which the ELCD was challenged to develop a department to deal with the interreligious relations in particular the relations with the Muslim community in Denmark.

In 2002 the ELCD then established "Stiftssamarbejdet Folkekirke og Religionsmøde" – in English "Committee for Church and Encounter with other Religions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark". The purpose of this new department of the church was – on the basis of the preaching of the Gospel – to strengthen the encounter of the church with adherents of other religions. The focus of the department was on the relations between Christians and Muslims.

When the Danish Cartoon crisis in the beginning of 2006 flared up, Committee for Church and Encounter with other Religions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark decided to take a special initiative to improve the relations between Christians and Muslims. At the height of the crisis – in February 2006 - it was decided to enter into dialogue with Muslim groups in Denmark through a listening initiative among mosques and Islamic organisations.

The inspiration for this initiative came from England. At a meeting in a working

group under Conference of European Churches, about the relations of the churches with Muslims in Europe, Andrew Wingate, who was the Director of the St Philip's Centre, in Leicester, shared the experiences of using “listening rounds” in England, and the idea was picked up by Berit Schelde Christensen, who was the director of “Committee for Church and Encounter with other Religions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark”.¹

A team of two Christians and one Muslim was set up, and from March to May 2006 this team visited 22 mosques and Muslim organisations representing a wide variety of Muslims in terms of ethnic background and religious orientation all over the country. The team was warmly received by the Muslim leaders who expressed a strong wish to discuss the situation of Muslims in Denmark and the relations between Christians and Muslims. Based on the conversations a report was published that highlighted issues that came up concerning attitudes to the Danish society, identity issues, media and polarization, issues of acceptance and recognition and the need for dialogue and cooperation between the religions.²

The outcome of the “listening initiative” was the establishment of a national “Christian-Muslim Dialogue Forum” for leaders of the two communities. The first dialogue conference took place in September the same year, and since then a dialogue conference has been held every year with participation from bishops, deans, pastors and leaders of Christian organisations representing both the ELCD and other churches and from sheikhs, imams and leaders of Muslim organisations representing most of the major Muslim groups in Denmark.

The purpose of the forum was and is to promote the joint religious dialogue and to protect and contribute to the development of the Denmark as a democratic inclusive society. The specific goals are

- To establish channels of communication, network and relations, characterized by openness and trust between Christian and Muslim leaders
- To identify, analyse and work on tense problems
- To take initiatives where Christians and Muslims together may contribute to the positive development of society³

The dialogue conferences, which are being held alternately in a Christian and a Muslim context, typically in a Church and a Mosque, are opened by a recitation from the Qur'an and a reading from the Bible, and during the conference time is set aside for the Muslims prayers and Christian devotions.

The themes of the conferences – which reflect the development of the forum - have been the following

- Recognition and cooperation
- Neighbourliness and citizenship
- Religion in freedom and freedom in religion

¹ This methodology, which in Danish was termed ”Lytterunde” was later employed with great success in a

² Mogensen 2008:52ff.; Mogensen 2007

³ <http://www.religionsmoede.dk/index.php/aktiviteter/kristent-muslimsk-samtaleforum> (My translation)

- Together in Denmark – with differences and similarities
- Self-criticism among Christians and Muslims – and relation to external criticism
- Theological education in Denmark (with a main focus on the need for a theological education of imams in Denmark)
- A new law for religions in Denmark? – conditions and framework for the work of faith communities
- Are we to work towards a council for faith communities and communities with a non-religious outlook in Denmark?
- Religion as a resource and challenge in the public space
- The identity development of youth – citizens and anti-citizens (with a focus on radicalization)⁴

It is worth noting – when going through the themes of the ten conferences – that this Christian-Muslim Dialogue Forum for leaders has consistently focused on issues in line with the purpose statement “to promote the joint religious dialogue and to protect and contribute to the development of Denmark as a democratic inclusive society”. Already during the “listening initiative” it became very clear that Christians and Muslims share a common concern for the Danish society. The interviewees expressed a great appreciation for the Danish society. “There is much that one, as an immigrant and a Muslim, may appreciate very much. First of all there is freedom, which is something we lacked in our home countries; and secondly, there are the rights we have in this society; including rights for minorities” And another stated, that in his opinion, “The Danish Welfare society has come a long way in a development which, to a large extent, is in harmony with Islam’s ideals of Shari’a. Shari’a – understood as guidance and principles – is pretty well a reality in the Danish society. We have many aspects of shari’a in the Danish society. In this respect, living in Denmark as a Muslim has been easy”. A young man added “Denmark is our future. We define ourselves as Danish Muslims, we deal with Islam in Danish. We have to take a stand concerning the challenges in the Danish society”. Together with a strong commitment to democracy, there was also a strong dissatisfaction with the prevalent understanding among many Danes that Islam and democracy are irreconcilable concepts.

During the “listening initiative” most of the Muslim interviewees expressed dissatisfaction with the cartoons at the same time as they committed themselves in principle to the freedom of expression. As one stated, “I will never accept the burning of flags of Danish embassies which took place abroad. It is an inhuman and un-Islamic act. But I do not understand that the freedom of expression can legitimize insults and curses of what represent holy values to other people. We need to have mutual respect in society.”⁵

At the second dialogue conference a working group was set up to look into the issue of freedom of expression. The reason for this was that the conference opened the same day as a number of Swedish newspapers had published a cartoon of prophet Muhammad. At the conference the following year the report from the working group

⁴ Reports from all ten dialogue conferences are available – in Danish – her: <http://religionsmoede.dk/kristent-muslimsk-samtaleforum/konferencer-og-rapporter> (my translation)

⁵ Mogensen 2008:54-55.

was presented and adopted. Here Christian and Muslim leaders together agreed on stating, that “Freedom of expression is a basic right in the Danish tradition. The Freedom of religion is fixed by law, but is at the same time – in a legal perspective – not entirely without limits. The freedom of religion is in Denmark limited by a number of other laws – incl. the law of blasphemy- such as is also indicated in the Danish Constitution as well as the European Convention on Human Rights. This does not mean that you cannot also take another political view on the discussion about the right to freedom of expression. On this background we do not see any need for further limitations in the freedom of expression, but there is rather a need for considerate, emphatic and dialogical use of the freedom of expression”.⁶

At the conference in 2011 the need for theological education of imams in Denmark and for all religious leaders in a multi-religious society to have interreligious competences including solid knowledge of the religions of the others was addressed. The participants agreed that there is a need for a Danish theological education in Islamic theology, while at the same time many of the challenges involved in such a project were identified and discussed. It was decided to ask the steering committee of the Christian-Muslim Dialogue Forum to examine the possibilities for developing a theological education in Islam. The following year a report on “Theological education in Islam in Denmark” prepared by dr. Mogens S. Mogensen was presented to the participants and discussed.⁷ Based among other things on this report, the faculty of theology at the University of Copenhagen in cooperation with Muslim scholars developed a MA program in “Islamic Theology and Forms of Practice” beginning in 2016. In the presentation of the program the faculty states that “Islam will be studied both from the outside and from the inside: Islamic theology and practice will be examined on the background of the historical context in which it is developed, but at the same time the students will study the actual interpretation(s) and developments of Islam that are found among Muslims in Europe today”⁸

When surveying the history of the Christian-Muslim Dialogue Forum it becomes evident that it has contributed significantly to the development of long term trust among Christian and Muslim leaders. Over the years the participants have been ready to address more and more sensitive issues. It began with issues of freedom of expression, where Christian and Muslim participants found common ground. It continued with open discussions about freedom of religion, where Muslims expressed the respect for the right of the individual to believe or not to believe in God. At the latest conference, in November 2015, it was even the Muslim members of the steering committee who proposed the theme of radicalisation to be dealt with at the conference. At the end of the conference, a Muslim speaker concluded, that they had been discussing very sensitive issues, but the dialogue had been very constructive. It had been very enriching to be confirmed in the impression, that they all seek the good life for themselves and for their children. They had seen how both Christianity and Islam may contribute to the good of society. The conference for this speaker had underlined how important dialogue between Christians and Muslims is.

⁶ Folkekirke og Religionsmøde 2008: 27-28

⁷ Mogensen 2012a

⁸ http://teol.ku.dk/uddannelser/efter_og_videreuddannelser/islamisk_teologi_og_-praksisformer/ (My translation)

The development of the Christian Muslim Dialogue forum since 2006 reflects the development of the involvement of the ELCD in dialogue with Muslims and the development of the relations between the Muslim community and the church.

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