

The Church of Sweden as a (Contested) Actor in a Multi-religious Society: A Case Study of the Imam Debate in Public and Church Media

Johan Liljestrand

Sweden can be characterised as a multi-cultural and multi-religious society. One of the most prominent actors in interreligious relations is the Church of Sweden. However, such involvement is also open to criticism, both within the church and in public debate. Different expectations concerning cooperation with the Swedish Muslim community became visible in the public media and in the national church media when a congregation in Stockholm engaged an imam for a multi-religious youth project. This paper examines the arguments relating to the mission of the church as a church for Swedish people in a pluralistic society, and discusses some of the consequences of these arguments for interreligious relations and dialogue. The material is based on articles published in Swedish public media and Swedish church media between March and September, 2011. The debate, analysed through five sub-themes, focuses on the borders of what should be included and excluded by a national church in a multi-religious society and the national church's responsibility for caring for religious minorities. The paper concludes with a discussion about issues of power regarding the church as an initiator of dialogue, and how different actors are represented in the media.

Keywords: National Church, the Church of Sweden, the Media Debate, Arguments, Muslims, Young

Introduction

Like most other European countries Sweden can be characterised as a multi-cultural and multi-religious society. This is a relatively new phenomenon, however, and does not reflect the country's religious history as a whole. The transition from a somewhat homogenous Christian culture to a (partly secularised) multi-religious society, mainly through immigration, into a heterogeneous one is, as might be expected, not without social tensions.¹ A prominent actor that promotes tolerance and the inclusion of religious minorities is the Church of Sweden, which once

Dr Johan Liljestrand is senior lecturer in education at the University of Gävle, Sweden. He is a member in the research group "Religion and dialogue in modern societies" (ReDi).

1 Although Swedes are generally positive towards immigrants, about 5% have extremely negative attitudes. In particular, the nationalist party 'The Sweden Democrats' seem to have a firm position in the Swedish Parliament. Attitudes to religion are more complicated, however; as many as 20% of all respondents show a strong resistance to wearing any kind of veil (Mella et al. 2011).

represented a homogenous Lutheran society. This new role of the national church is replicated in other countries too (Pratt & Göb 2013; von der Lippe 2012; Amos 2010). For example, in a publication concerning church ceremonies in a multi-religious context, bishops in the Church of Sweden wrote: 'Being a national church means living in dialogue with people, regardless of whether they are members of the church or not. The mission is to serve those who live in the parish.' (2012, 18)

In its official documents, the national church of Sweden describes itself as an evangelical Lutheran church for people in Sweden. Defining itself as a Swedish Lutheran community also implies a potential tension within the Church of Sweden. Here, the assignment is to work in the interest of its members, 66% of the population, *and* to support and cooperate with religious minorities in the neighbourhood. The interreligious involvement of the church is also subject to criticism and debate, both within the church and from the greater public. When the issue of cooperation with the Swedish Muslim community became visible in the national church, and subsequently in the public (secular) media, different expectations were expressed, and especially so when Sofia Church in Stockholm decided to engage an imam for a multi-religious youth project. The idea was that the imam would support the Muslim youth involved in the project and give an example of interreligious cooperation with the parish priest, the other leader of the project. As the dialogue project was aimed at interreligious cooperation and community building at the grassroots level, it can theoretically be labelled as diapraxis (Rasmussen 1988), or as working together side-by-side (Sacks 2007). Involving the imam was motivated with reference to the practical work that was organised as a church sponsored project. Interreligious discussions between religious community leaders, arranged on special demarcated occasions, thus reflected the daily work arranged in the neighbourhood by the church of Sweden.

The 'imam debate' was triggered when Sofia Church announced on their website the news that an imam was being employed for the first time in the Church of Sweden's history. This imam debate can be seen as a critical incident that made the internal and external tensions around the role of the church in an interreligious society visible. The debate also highlights the presence of 'internal' religious issues in the public space as a topic of national public concern. As the majority of Swedes are members of the Church of Sweden, public media incidents like this one illustrate how the Church of Sweden becomes part of the public debate, and that it is not possible to maintain a sharp division between the religious and the secular public sphere (Casanova 1994; Axner 2013).

This paper's purpose is to examine the arguments relating to the mission of the church as a church for Swedish people in a pluralistic society, and to discuss some of the consequences of these arguments for interreligious relations and dialogue.

After a brief introduction of Western European churches, Islam and the role of the media, I then describe the data and methods used in this study. The results are presented under five separate headings and are followed by a discussion section.

Christian-Muslim Relations in Churches and the Media Churches often assume roles as both partner and host in interreligious encounters. The Church of Sweden is not unique in its engagement with interreligious dialogue with Muslim communities (e.g., Leirvik 2003; Pratt 2013; Pratt & Göb 2013; Sudworth 2009; 2013). Pratt & Göb describe the situation in Germany in terms of the churches 'keeping up a stronger position in dialogue' due to their infrastructural resources and their assumed role in being a mediator between Islamic communities and the secular society (Pratt & Göb 2013, 53). The self-understanding of both the Anglican Church and the Church of Sweden is their assignment to both be present and to engage with all who live in the neighbourhood (Amos 2010, 187; Ippgrave 2014; Anglican Community Network 2008, 10; Porvoo Communion 2003, 3). The Swedish church's role in taking responsibility for organised encounters was documented by Halvarsson (2012) in field studies that were undertaken in the Stockholm area.

Egnell (2008), a scholar of theology and the head of the Stockholm Centre for Interfaith Dialogue, affirms the view that the Church of Sweden has a responsibility for all of the people residing in the country and addresses the issue of paternalism. According to Egnell, taking responsibility for religious minorities is not without its complexities. A prerequisite for avoiding paternalism is that religious minorities take the initiative for cooperation themselves. In a field study, Roald (2002) shows that dialogue initiatives from the majority church risk hegemonising the encounters, e.g., by highlighting certain issues at the cost of others.

The notion of responsibility that is connected to neighbourhood is a complex issue that can also have an impact on public and national church media. The involvement of the Church of England in inter-Muslim and Christian relations has been addressed by e.g., Amos (2010). Archbishop Rowan Williams' attempt to recognise Sharia as a legitimate legal practice in multi-religious England led to strong media reactions. Such reactions, described in terms of 'sensational responses' (Amos 2010, 184), can be understood in terms of the Anglican Church being seen as part of the national consciousness of the British people. Connections between a national church and the national consciousness are also prevalent in other Western European countries (Pratt & Göb 2013; Leirvik 2003), and the media play a role in enacting such issues. The visibility of religion in the public sphere seems to be connected to critical incidents, where, according to some prominent groups, national churches do not live up to expectations concerning the role of the church in a pluralistic society.

The media representation of Christian-Muslim relations not only means talking about these relations, but should thus also be seen as part of the actual relations (Iskander 2012). However, the space for media participation does not always seem to be equally distributed. Generally, the debate about religion in the Swedish media is dominated by the national church.² One dimension of such national concern is the potential for the Church of Sweden to become the subject of public debate (Axner 2013, p. 122). The relationships between the national church and different views of nationality and national responsibility and the Church of Sweden's links with the most prominent media, provide a background to the imam debate.

Data and Methods

The material used in the study is based on articles published in Swedish public media and in the Swedish Church newspaper between March and September, 2011. The articles were found using 'Retriver', a database that is designed to search the Swedish media. The criteria for selection are explicit or implicit references to the youth project that was initiated by Sofia Church in Stockholm. Blogs and commentary spots on the Internet are not included, however. All the articles are written by members of the clergy of the Church of Sweden, except for the editorials and one article in the Swedish Church newspaper.

The debate was initiated by Annika Borg, a priest with a Ph.D. in systematic theology who is a member of the 'Christian Opinion' think-tank on Newsmill, eight days before the first indications appeared in the public media. The debate in the public media is represented by six contributions, three of which emanate from the 'Christian Opinion' think-tank. All the contributions, including the three editorials, were published in the provincial press in the area known as the Swedish Bible Belt. The material used in this paper is presented below and is categorised as follows:

2 Axner shows that when religious issues are debated in the Swedish public media, operationalised by the three largest national newspapers, representatives of the Church of Sweden dominate the number of contributions (42%), while Muslim contributors contribute significantly less (16%; Axner 2013, p. 82). However, one might add that this figure is not necessarily low in relation to the number of Muslims in Sweden.

Debate articles in the public media	Editorials	The Swedish Church newspaper: The identity of the church
13-03-2011, Svenska Dagbladet	09-03-2011, Västervikstidningen	23-08-2011
16-03-2011, Aftonbladet	15-03-2011, Smålandsposten	31-08-2011
18-03-2011, Göteborgsposten	16-03-2011, Oskarshamnstidningen	07-09-2011a
18-03-2011, Svenska Dagbladet		07-09-2011b
18-03-2011, Svenska Dagbladet		21-09-2011
		28-09-2011

The media articles were printed and key sentences were identified, noted and commented on using analytic memos. Inter-textual links, such as debate-threads/references, were noted in order to locate the interjections in the context of other interjections. As the arguments presented support a certain position (Kroon 2001), the focus is on the analysis of these arguments. A total of five main themes were discerned in the analysis.

The Imam Debate

In the debate, the tensions within the Church of Sweden as a 'host' for dialogue with religious minorities, and with Muslims in particular, become increasingly visible. The debate is presented according to the following themes: leaders vs. ordinary people, the significance of modern values, the responsibilities of other religions, ambiguities in the identity of the church, and the depiction of young people in the church. All the sections conclude with a short analytical comment.

Leaders vs. Ordinary People

One of the major themes raised by critics concerns the legitimacy of church leaders and their relations with ordinary church members. In their opening article, published in Svenska Dagbladet (SvD), Borg and Andersson state that the decision to hire an imam to work with the interreligious youth project is not just a local matter for the Sofia Church in Stockholm, but one for all of the members of the Church of Sweden. 'The decision has been strongly criticised by the members of the church. However, this contestation has been regarded as an expression of Islamophobia.' (SvD 18-03-2011)

Ola Mårtensson, in *Västervikstidningen*, claims that its size and special status makes the church's decision relevant for 'the rest of us'; the subscriptions paid by its members should not be used to finance Muslim missionary activity. In addition to the SvD debate, Borg initiated a second debate five months later in the Swedish Church newspaper. This contribution was published as a direct response to a critical article (17-08-2011) by Helena Eklund, a priest who points to the Church of Sweden being too heavily focused on the positive sides of the Muslim presence in Sweden. Although Borg and Hugo, the latter another member of the think tank, do not explicitly subscribe to this argument, they view Eklund's contribution as an 'important opinion piece'. Hugo and Borg write that there is a tension between church members and those in power in the church concerning Christian identity and support for western values. 'When the Church of Sweden is perceived as putting another religion at the forefront, many wonder what the church stands for. It is a relevant question.' (KT 23-08-2011)

However, the ways in which contributions from ordinary people are depicted differ among the defenders of the decision. In his response to the first interjection in *Svenska Dagbladet*, Bo Larsson, the Diocesan Dean in Stockholm, comments on the Islamophobic contributions that followed Borg and Andersson's article.

Their article was published in SvD.se on 13/3 and when this was written over 1,100 comments were published, many of which are Islamophobic. (...) their sweeping manner of writing has instead opened up all the floodgates of intolerance and started a verbal web-war. (SvD 18-03-2011)

Here, Larson reads Borg and Andersson's article as being a critique of the church being 'populist', in the sense that the faith of the church is unimportant to the leadership that is responsible for the decision (SvD 18-03-2011). This is a critique that he rejects. In their final retort, Borg and Andersson state that Larsson dismisses the entire debate found in the web-comments and blogs. Members of the think-tank thus position themselves as the representatives of the ordinary church people, and they take issue with the opinions of its leaders. Likewise, the editorial also opposes the leadership policy of the church and sides with the interests of ordinary church members ('the rest of us').

In the first and the final responses, the web-commentaries are depicted in two contrasting ways: as a manifestation of the will of ordinary people and church members, and as an expression of more or less xenophobic reactions to Borg and Andersson's article. The critics' references to the voices of common church people (cf. Leirvik 2003) can be compared with those who defend the church's promotion of the integration of the Muslim minority, despite the intolerant voices resisting integration as being one of the assignments of the Church of Sweden. The Church

of Sweden, as a church 'of the people', thus seems to mean different things to the critics and the defenders: a church that embraces and supports different 'peoples' living in Sweden, rather than a church that relies on the liberal and Christian values that are seemingly confirmed by the grassroots. Notions of dialogue corresponding to diapraxis, or dialogue as being side-by-side, may thus potentially highlight controversies in the public space, because the church's engagement may require arguments that relate to the religious minorities in its neighbourhood, and whether or not the national church should embrace the perspectives of these minorities. Interestingly, the reactions in the social media are referred to by the critics as being the voice of the people, which could be seen as a strategy to bring the public media into touch with the everyday opinions of those ordinary people who are unable to participate in the public debate, thus legitimising a position that represents the 'ordinary' people as being against the élite of the church.

The Significance of Modern Values

The critics also highlight the strong connection between modern liberal values and the Church of Sweden, as opposed to non-liberal values. Borg and Andersson state that liberal values in regard to women's rights and homosexuals must be safeguarded. 'Are Christianity and Islam the same thing? Does the Imam bless homosexuals? Does he [i.e., the Imam] affirm women priests?' (SvD 18-03-2011)

In an article published in *Göteborgsposten*, Andersson, who is represented as an equality coordinator, refers to an incident where women were excluded from Muslim prayers. In the article, Andersson positions herself as part of the 'we' who have questioned this decision, and comments on the expected allegations of Islamophobia. Bo Larsson, in his retort, claims that the project aims to promote social integration and to counteract racism.

An assembly in the Church of Sweden has employed an imam part-time for nine months in order to work together with a priest in the Church of Sweden and, on equal terms, to work on a project (...) [that] intends to resist xenophobia and racism and also to show how religion can be a tool for integration. (SvD 18-03-2011)

Through connecting with values like tolerance and integration, Larsson relies on modern liberal plural values that are based on equality, but also stresses the need to include people, regardless of their possible views on women's rights and gay rights. A similar vindication was formulated by the vicar and the chairman of the local church council, Ulfvenbrand & Forsell, who write that: 'The church should express a faith that does not violate others' beliefs, that respects the equal value of everyone and that God does not differentiate between people.' (Aftonbladet 16-03-2011)

The defenders thus do not refer to the rights of gay people and women in particular, but rely on another (liberal) discourse, that is, the inclusion of believers who do not share the values that were mentioned by Borg and Andersson. Furthermore, arguments claiming that the national church should not compromise its own western values and the basic values of equality seems to presuppose that modern values are juxtaposed against traditional, non-modern values that are represented by Islam. The hesitation of the domestic church in relation to Muslim readiness to accept western values was noted by Pratt & Göb (2013, p. 53). When common work (diapraxis) is arranged in a long-term project, concerns about the lack of a common base for (modern) values are triggered. On the other hand, the notion that the church is a church for the people, including its minorities, who reside within geographical Sweden seems to correspond with a pluralistic notion of liberalism that is connected to the freedom of religion. One may add that the defenders do not stop at that point, but also hold the view that the national church has a responsibility to promote social cohesion.

Responsibility for Other Religions

The defenders of the decision to engage the imam claim that the Church of Sweden, as a national church, has a responsibility to support religious minorities and to promote their integration into society. As Pratt & Göb (2013) note in the German context, churches are often expected to be a bridge between Muslim communities and the state. In *Aftonbladet*, Ulfvenbrand & Forsell write that, as the largest religious community in Sweden, the church has a responsibility to contribute to organised encounters between people of different faiths:

By being the largest community in the country, the Church of Sweden has a responsibility not only for its own activities but also to support the possibilities for other believing people to be heard, to exercise their religion and to gain access to such venues that promote understanding and respect for the Other. (*Aftonbladet* 16-03-2011)

The reason for the employment of the imam, which was presented as being project-based and temporary, was to support young Muslims in such encounters. Ulfvenbrand & Forsell also state that decisions like this are allowed for in the church regulations, even though the imam does not belong to the Lutheran faith. As employers, they have therefore made a legitimate decision. The role of the Church of Sweden in being responsible for religious minorities is strongly supported by Öhagen, a member of the Church of Sweden clergy, who refers to the concept of residence (Chapter 2§1). She quotes: 'The assembly has a responsibility for church activities concerning everyone residing in the parish.' Öhagen adds: 'Besides safeguarding the four main undertakings of church services, education, welfare and

mission, every assembly should ask itself how it can support those who live, reside and appear in it .' (Kyrkans tidning 07-09-2011)

According to Öhagen, this concept applies to people who live in the same geographical space (cf. the bishops' statement mentioned above), i.e., the territory connected to the local church. In this case, the Church of Sweden has both the possibility and the responsibility to arrange encounters between Muslim and Christian youth, because Fryshuset – an organisation that aims to empower different groups of youths and to offer them a meeting place, and where the project was taking place, in the Sofia Church area, the organisation employed the imam.

The critics Hugo and Borg ask, rhetorically, whether the debaters regard the Church of Sweden as an umbrella organisation for different religions: 'the kind big brother who has to take care of others' (Kyrkans tidning 07-09-2011). Two days after the publication of Ulfvenbrand & Forsell's article, Borg and Andersson responded to Larsson by commenting on the role of the church vis-à-vis the state. The argument, they write, that the Church of Sweden is a majority denomination seems to be based on the self-definition of a church that belongs to the state (a relationship that ended in 2000), although the function of providing the requirements for the practising of their religion belongs to the state, not to the Church of Sweden. Borg and Andersson also ask whether representatives of other religions are really in favour of being embraced by the Church of Sweden.

The argument that the national church has a responsibility for immigrant religious minorities seem to be based on the assumption that religious groups share the interests of the Church of Sweden and see themselves as being in need of the resources that are provided by the national church. The arguments highlight questions around whether the Church of Sweden should act from a responsibility that is based on territory, i.e., in part acting like the (national) state, or if the assignment of the church should be in accordance with traditional Lutheran doctrines. If the latter alternative is the case, decisions such as the employment of representatives of religions other than the evangelical Lutheran one would probably be unintelligible. When defenders of the project rely on principles like the concept of residence, the role of the national church becomes similar to that of the state, or the public social sector, both of which have geographical territory as their point of departure. As long as people's needs are not defined in terms of their belonging to religious communities other than the Swedish church, this is unlikely to be controversial. However, when both religiosity and non-Christian identities become part of the church's mission and daily work, the borders of what the church is able to do trigger controversy.

The Meaning of Christian Identity

The debate in *Kyrkans tidning* labelled: ‘The identity of the church’, echoes the concept of ‘identity’ that had previously been used by Borg and Andersson in their initial contribution to *Svenska Dagbladet*, five month earlier. In this initial contribution they claimed that:

Freedom of action and different views under the vault of the church are something that most people would affirm, but when the church does not even have enough *identity* to recognise religions with their belief systems, it is confusing for everyone. (SvD 13-03-2011) [italics by the author]

The critique of being unfaithful to its assignment is also visible in the editorials. Signature AT in *Oskarshamnstidningen* claims that the church is becoming more and more ‘politicised’ and that this tendency is connected to its current loss of members. *Smålandsposten* writes that the initiative breaks the law in regard to the management of its mission, and that church fees are used for the wrong purposes. Five month later, a debate addressing the identity of the Church of Sweden started in *Kyrkans tidning*. Hugo and Borg called for a dialogue about the identity of the church by referring to two interreligious church projects in Stockholm, one of which was the one that employed the imam.

The first reply comes from Bäckström, who connects identity to the good examples of Jesus. Bäckström writes that cooperative projects with other religions can be compared with how Jesus acted towards others in the gospels; the initiative to hire the imam for the youth project could therefore count as an expression of a Christian identity (*Kyrkans tidning* 31-08-2011). A student of theology, Lina Tovar, distinguishes between Christian dogmas as a point of departure, and a notion of identity that develops in relation to others (*Kyrkans tidning* 14-09-2011). The two people who are responsible for the youth project, the priest and the imam, argue along the same lines. Identity should not, according to Rydinger and Tawalabe, be seen as something that is fixed, but as being something that is dependent on co-play, and that there is support for this in both the Gospels and the Qur’an. ‘Religious identity is not something that arises from a fixed and completed form (...) Identity is something that is constituted and reconstituted in an ongoing process.’ (*Kyrkans tidning* 21-09-2011)

The concept of ‘identity’ is thus used from different perspectives. The critics take their point of departure from dogma (‘belief systems’), whereas the defenders refer to Christians’ relations with non-Christians as an ongoing process. The idea that identity develops through encounters with different others, and that identity is relational and open (cf. Mead 1913) and can be juxtaposed against a fixed identity, is supported by examples from the Gospels and, according to the imam employed

on the project, from the Qur'an.

The argument that the national church lacks theological identity for its own members seems further to presuppose that (more or less) traditional Christian belief corresponds to the beliefs of the members of the church. Representatives who promote interreligious initiative claim that values like social integration should be promoted by the church, and they seem to rely on the assumption that the mission of the church is not to preach, but to do good things. Connected to this is the reference to Jesus as a model, i.e., Christian dogma is subordinated to the social dimension of the gospels. The aim to do good things and not to preach the Gospel also seems to be well suited to the principle of being present and engaging with everyone who resides in the neighbourhood. As already hinted, the notion of a church with responsibility for neighbourhoods that are located in Swedish territory seems to correspond to a notion of dialogue in terms of diapraxis. If the motive is to provide resources for social work, not teaching, the identity of the church will not be found in a personal faith. On the other hand, the church is expected to be present and to be recognised as a vital part of Swedish society.

The Depiction of Young People in the Church

The initiative to engage the imam was connected to the implementation of a youth project that hosted a number of Christian and Muslim youths. The needs of the youths are recurrently referred to in the debate. The issues presented above are thus projected onto the needs of the young people who participated in the project. Both the critics and the defenders underline that the leaders of the project serve as models, albeit with different consequences. What impact will a 'male' imam, representing patriarchal non-modern values, have on a project incorporated in the Church of Sweden? 'The question about who the male imam in the assembly of Sofia will represent is particularly important because it concerns work among youths. From which value base do we have a conversation with youth?' (Borg and Andersson SvD 18-03-2011)

According to Öhagen, the youth project allows young people to see a priest and an imam working side by side. By using this image of cooperation, she depicts the leaders as being good models for young people. The responsibility of the national church to promote integration in Sweden becomes visible when Ulfvenbrand & Forsell state that young people feel lost and need a space for encounters, conversations and reflection (Aftonbladet 16-03-2011). Larsson says that the motivation for the decision was that the imam would be: '(...) one of two equal parts in a concrete work that wants to address the fact that many youth feel lost, not least in their religious identity.' (SvD 18-03-2011)

The above approaches to the youth in the project can be captured by the notion of the youth as a 'space for projection', which accords to how the Church of Sweden should act in interreligious matters. The young participants in the project are positioned as being subordinate to the policies of the Church of Sweden. Interreligious work with youth seems to be based on the initiatives of the responsible 'adults' in the church and is strongly connected to issues concerning the role of the Church as a national religious institution. However, another perspective is represented by the leaders of the project. Rydinger and Tawalabe write about the lack of natural venues and say that the youth are trained to listen to each other in the youth project: 'In our work at Fryshuset the point of departure is that every young person will have an opportunity to cultivate and formulate their identity in interfaith work with others.' (Kyrkans tidning 21-09-2011)

The depiction of the young people as being dependent on the goals of the project seems to be based on the assumption of the young people as being 'not-yets', i.e., still in need of the guidance of adults (Grannäs 2011). When the youth are seen through the lens of church policy, agency is mainly attributed to the Church of Sweden as a national institution. The perspective highlighting the initiatives of the youth is presented by the leaders themselves, one of whom is the 'object' of the debate. The issue of the role of the Church of Sweden in relation to Islam and religious minorities is thus connected to the way that dialogue projects are depicted in terms of who will count as the main actor(s) embodying this project. When the church's role as a mediator for integration or social cohesion is highlighted, the members of the dialogue project are seen from a top-down perspective. On the one hand, the project is intended as a small-scale (cf. Sacks 2007, p. 181) grassroots project that is based on voluntary membership; on the other, the project was announced on the church's website with a view to making it public. When the project became public and thus mediatised, the perspectives of the youth seemed to vanish, while those of the church, in its role as a national institution, were highlighted.

Discussion

Three themes stand out in the analysis of this debate: dialogue as continuing practical work or diapraxis, the responsibility of the church for religious minorities, and the mediatisation of the interreligious project into a public matter. In this part of the paper I will discuss these themes further. Firstly, interreligious dialogue is not understood as being an activity that is temporal and that only includes the leaders of the religious communities. Instead, interreligious activities are understood in terms of different religious groups living together under equal conditions. For the initiators, equal conditions imply the equal representation of religious leaders. However, in such an arrangement the majority Church of Sweden has access to more resources than the Muslim community does.

As long as dialogue is mainly understood as being made up of temporal theological discussions between religious leaders, controversial issues like this may not be relevant. The notion, also shared by other national churches (e.g., Ipgrave 2014), that the churches have 'national' responsibilities, as majority churches, towards local neighbourhoods, thus becomes an argument for the project's defenders. However, the borders of what should be included *in* the Church of Sweden are also being contested. This tension within the Church of Sweden is connected to its compound role of being both a partner *and* a host for interreligious encounters. As Axner (2013) shows, issues concerning the Church of Sweden are common themes when religion becomes a topic for public debate in Sweden.

The imam debate can be seen as being a critical media incident that highlights the role of the national church as a mediator for religious minorities in general, and for Muslims in particular. This mediating role includes dimensions such as nationality, identity and the public utility of the church. The critics claim that Christian and modern values can be seen as being a claim for national homogeneity, seemingly supported by the voices of 'ordinary people', who express distrust of the Church of Sweden as their 'Swedish' church. Svennungsson (2013) even suggests that many Swedish Lutherans now 'feel more akin to secular humanists and atheists than to religious people of other traditions' (p. 751).

The different notions of identity mirror the different approaches to the ways that 'national' is understood in the Church of Sweden: as something that is already established, or as something to be further developed through encounter with religious minorities within the territory of the church. It seems as though both the critics of the decision and its defenders rely on modern, liberal values in order to define of what this identity consists. From a theological perspective, we might ask what counts as a liberal, modern theology. Is it plurality and openness towards groups with a non-western heritage? Or, does it mean declaring firm expectations from other ethnic groups with a non-western heritage concerning the rights of women, LGBT persons, etc? The examples given by the critics with regard to non-modern values are not attributed to the imam, as a leader of the project. However, the aim to modernise the Muslim community can also be found among the defenders of the project. The employment of a (certain) imam in the national Church of Sweden could be seen as being an act of normalisation performed by the religious majority, and which can be interpreted as the Church of Sweden aiming to liberalise the Muslim community by acting as a bridge between religious minorities and the majority society. One side of this is that the (proper?) guidance of Muslim youth becomes a matter, and a responsibility, for the Church of Sweden. When diapraxis becomes part of organised and church sponsored work, with the church as the employer, dialogue activities are integrated into the agenda of the church and its policies.

Interreligious projects that are organised and funded by the church will thus always involve power relations, even if the projects are labelled as *interreligious* projects and aim at a symmetrical, equal relationship. It is also about how interreligious projects are depicted in relation to the subjects who participate in them. When the project became public and was announced on the Sofia Church's website, a price was paid. If young people are described as being lost, or as victims of manipulation, they may lose their ability to act and to make a difference in the project, despite it being funded by the church as an institution that has the necessary resources and good intentions. The voices of the youth or of Muslims seem to be more or less absent from the debate, with the exception of the voice of the imam, who was the co-writer of one of the contributions. If the media facilitated social bonding between the majority and minorities, the voices of religious minorities would be an integral part of this public conversation.

Bibliography

- Amos, C. (2010) 'For the Common Good: The Church of England, Christian-Muslim Relations and A Common Word', in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 20: 2, 183-196.
- Anglican Consultative Council (2008) *Generous Love: The Truth of the Gospel and the Call to Dialogue. An Anglican Theology of Interfaith Relations*. London: The Anglican Consultative Council.
- Axner, M. (2013) *Public Religions in Swedish Media. A Study of Religious Actors on Three Newspaper Debate Pages 2001-2011*. Acta Universitatis Uppsaliensis. Studies in Religion and Society: Uppsala.
- Casanova, J. (2006) *Public Religions in the Modern World*. London: University of Chicago press.
- Egnell, H. (2008) 'Folkkyrkan i det mångreligiösa samhället', [The peoples' church in multi-religious society], in *Svensk Kyrkotidning*, no 24.
- 'Ett brev från svenska kyrkans biskopar' (2012) [A letter from the bishops in the Church of Sweden] *De kyrkliga handlingarna i en mångreligiös context*. [Church services in a multi-religious context.] Ineko: Stockholm.
- Grannäs, J. (2011) *Framtidens demokratiska medborgare. Om ungdomar, medborgarskap och demokratifostran i svensk skola*, [Democratic citizens of the future. On youth, citizenship and democracy in Swedish schools], in *Studia Didactica Upsalensia*, 5.
- Halvardsson, S. (2012) *Kanske alla här rätt - eller fel. Religionsmöten och syn på andra i mångreligiösa miljöer*. [Perhaps everyone is right - or wrong. Encounters about religion and views about others in multi-religious milieus] Skefteå: Artos.
- Ippgrave, J. (2014) 'Inter Religious Relations and the English Model of Church Establishment in Nation and Parish', in Weisse, W, Amirpur, K, Körs, A & Vieregge, D (eds.) *Religions and Dialogue. International Approaches*. Münster: Waxmann.
- Iskander, E. (2012) 'The 'Mediation' of Muslim-Christian Relations in Egypt: the Strategies and Discourses of the Official Egyptian Press During Mubarak's Presidency', in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 23: 1, 31-44.
- Kroon, Å. (2001) *Debattens dynamic. Hur budskap och betydelser förvandlas i mediedebatten*, [The dynamics of debate. How message and meaning is transformed in media debate], Linköping Studies in Art and Science: Linköping.
- Leirvik, O. (2003) 'Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations in Norway: Popular realities, political and religious responses, interfaith co-operations', in *Islamochristiana*, vol. 29, 121-140.
- Mead, G. H. (1913) 'The Social Self', in *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 10, 374-380.
- Mella, O., Palm, I. and Bromark, K. (2011) *Mångfalsbarometern*, [The diversity barometer], Sociologiska institutionen. Uppsala Universitet: Uppsala.

- Porvoo communion consultation on inter faith relations. *Guidelines for interfaith encounter in the churches of the Porvoo Communion*. Oslo, 30th November – 3rd December, 2003.
- Pratt, D. & Göb, B. (2007) 'Islam and Christian-Muslim Relation in Germany: Recent Developments and Continuing Issues', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 18:1, 43-65.
- Rasmussen, L. (1988) 'From Diapraxis to Dialogue. Christian-Muslim Relations', In Thunberg, L., LalPandit, M. and Fogh-Hansen, C. H. (eds.) *Dialogue in Action – In Honour of Johannes Aargard*, Prajna Publications: New Dehli.
- Roald, A-F. (2002) 'En fallstudie av en dialoggrupp i södra Sverige', [A case study of a dialogue group in southern Sweden], Stenmark, M. & Westerlund, D. (red). *Polemik eller dialog? Nutida religionsteologiska perspektiv bland kristna och muslimer*. [Polemics or dialogue? Recent perspectives on religion among Christians and Muslims] Nora: Nya Doxa.
- Sacks, J (2007) *The Home We Build Together. Recreating Society*. Wiltshire: Continuum.
- Sudworth, R. (2009) 'The Church of England and Islam: Hospitality and Embassy – Theologies of Religion in Process: Part I Pre-Lambeth 1988', *Fulcrum – renewing the evangelical centre*. September 1.
- Svennungsson, J. (2013) 'Public Faith and the Common Good. A Radical Messianic Proposal', *Political Theology*, vol. 14: 6, 744-757.
- Von der Lippe, M. (2012) *Dialogue in times of Crisis*. Unpublished ReDi-report. University of Hamburg.

Debate Articles

- Aftonbladet 16/03/2011 Därför anställer vi en imam i kyrkan. [This is why we employed an imam in the Church of Sweden] Ulvebrand, H. & Forsell, J.
- Göteborgsposten 18/03/2011 Fel tänkt att anställa en imam [Employing an imam is a mistake] Andersson, J.
- Svenska Dagbladet 13/03/2011 En kyrka i fritt fall [A church in free fall] Borg, A. & Andersson, J.
- Svenska Dagbladet 18/03/2011 Naivt att tro att en anställd imam skapar gränslöshet [Naive to think that an employed imam would eliminate borders] Larsson, B.
- Svenska Dagbladet 18/03/2011 Maktspråk istället för diskussion [The language of force instead of discussion] Borg, A. & Andersson, J.
- Kyrkans tidning 17/03/2011 Kyrkan offras på korrekthetens altare [The identity of the church sacrificed on the altar of correctness] Edlund, H.
- Kyrkans tidning 23/08/2011 Är evangeliet en kränkning för andra? [Is the gospel an insult to others?] Hugo, C. & Borg, A.
- Kyrkans tidning 31/+8/2011 Vanskligt! [Tricky!] Bäckström, P.

- Kyrkans tidning 07/09/2011 Religionsdialog Svenska kyrkans ansvar [Interreligious dialogue: a responsibility for the Church of Sweden] Öhagen, K.
- Kyrkans tidning 07/09/2011 Skarpt läge för kristen tro [Real-life situation for the Christian faith] Hugo, C. & Borg, A.
- Kyrkans tidning 21/09/2011 Vänskap kan utveckla vår religiösa identitet [Friendship can develop our religious identity] Kjellsdotter Rydinger, M. & Tawalbeh, O.
- Kyrkans tidning 28/09/2011 Förakt för medlemmar [Contempt for members] Hugo, C. & Borg, A.
- Västervikstidningen 09/03/2011 Tro på den egna trons kraft [Believe in the power of your own faith] Mårtensson, O.
- Smålandsposten 15/03/2011 Fel att anställa en imam [Employing an imam is a mistake] Anonymous.
- Oskarshamntidningen 16/03/2011 Svenska kyrkan verkar vilsen [The Church of Sweden seems to have gone astray] AT.