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Interreligious dialogue
Moving between compartmentalization and complexity

Interreligious dialogues as organized activities establish religious difference among its participants as a premise. This article discusses how various ways of signifying religious difference in interreligious dialogues can impact culturally by looking at the dynamics between the dialogues' 'insides' and 'outsides', especially regarding the ways in which differences are conceptualized. The current criticism of interreligious dialogue and the current perspectives on the dialogues' alleged effects on conceptualizing differences are examined in the examples presented in this article. Finally, two models of interreligious dialogue are suggested. First, a model where religious differences are apprehended as 'constitutive', and second, a model where religious differences are viewed as 'challenge'. The first relates to a multicultural view of differences, and the second to a perspective of cultural complexity. Lastly, the two models are discussed in relation to the notion of strategic essentialism.

Introduction

Organized, religiously-based encounters between people from different religious traditions are found in most European countries, Norway included. One of the most commonly expressed aims for these encounters is to increase understanding and decrease tensions across religious differences at local, national and global levels. Religious difference, represented by the participants, is a significant marker for an activity to be called interreligious. This specific difference is expected, welcomed and seen as crucial. But interreligious dialogue is not only an activity relating to religion and religious diversity. To discuss the conceptualization and practice connected to interreligious dialogue intersects not only with the field of religion, but also with social and political fields. This

means that it may be useful to examine how other differences between people (that is, other than religious belongings) are negotiated in the practice of interreligious dialogue.

I suggest that interreligious dialogue, defined as 'organized encounters between people belonging to different religious traditions', has become a distinctive field in the Bourdieuian sense, where political, social and religious interests are played out and negotiated.[1] As a field, it has strong connections with various fields of religion, but it is not entirely overlapping them. Other contextual discourses and fields are also connected to the field of interreligious dialogue in European contexts, such as discourses on immigration and management of plurality, gender, as well as secularism and secularity.

Among the questions debated and negotiated within the field of interreligious dialogue are the premises for and the content of such organized encounters—the philosophical, ethical and religious/theological reasonings that frame this activity. This may be called the 'inside' of the interreligious dialogue, where the philosophy of dialogue, various theological reflections on the meaning of dialogue, and practical/political needs defined by the participating religious communities, construct a shared practice. But the dialogue also has an 'outside', where the religious, political and social implications and effects of the dialogues may be explored. In this article I will be less focused on what interreligious dialogue means (the 'inside' of the dialogue) and more on the dynamics between the 'inside' and the 'outside'.

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1 Pierre Bourdieu (1975: 19) uses the term 'field' of a defined area where there are different positions negotiating and struggling over the power of definition.

Differences and dialogue

Let me first explore the meaning of difference for dialogue a bit further. Religious differences as a premise for interreligious dialogues is a rather obvious statement. Acknowledging human difference in a broader meaning, however, can be seen as the basic premise for any human dialogue in a philosophical sense. If the expression of human difference between dialoguing parties is denied, the dialogue collapses into a monologue, and what happens then is that the persons involved are not part of an encounter where their own truths and standards are challenged, but each participant stays trapped within his or her own universe (Gressgård 2005: 10). Dialoguing, understood as qualified communication, is not about mirroring or confirming oneself, and it does not allow one to instrumentalize the communication or to reduce the other party to a negative (or positive) projection of one's own images (Leirvik 2006: 298). These observations may challenge interreligious dialogue in at least two ways. Firstly, how does a fixed premise of religious difference introduce and apply religion as a category, and how does this affect the 'inside' and the 'outside' of interreligious dialogue? And, secondly, if one supposes that a use of fixed categories itself reduces the significance of differences within these categories, how does this signification of religious categories influence the signification of other differences? In the following I will exemplify how these two challenges are reformulated in some critical perspectives on interreligious dialogue in contemporary Europe.

Critical perspectives on interreligious dialogue and the conceptualization of differences

The positions that will be introduced in the following are situated in the religious field—in the socio-political field, and in the field of interreligious dialogue. There has not been that much qualitative research on interreligious dialogues. Research on the social and political impact of interreligious dialogues is also scarce. The material I draw on in the following is thus a combination of research sources, discussions published in the media, and my own experience.

As the earlier observations about difference and the profound necessity for dialogue suggest, dialogue always implies a possibility for change or transformation. The primary transformation is to escape being trapped in one's own worldview. A broader reflection on the power dynamics in the development of the 'inside' and the 'outside' of interreligious dialogue poses the question of power balance and transformation. Who and what is the object of transformation, and what does the transformation consist of?

Reinforcement of religion as the significant identity marker

At a public debate in October 2010, in which the benefits of interreligious dialogue for Oslo as a city growingly marked by religious and cultural diversity was discussed, a person from the audience asked why it was important to focus on religion. The motivation behind the question was primarily—the way I interpreted it—to establish a critique of religious leaders and communities for emphasizing the religious representation of difference in a plural society, possibly at the cost of, in this case, cultural differences. The non-religious among both minority groups and the majority may be excluded when the criteria for participation in an interreligious dialogue is religious belonging. This calls for exploring further questions related to representation in interreligious dialogues. The question also entails a critical view on how the focus on and reinforcement of religion as a category influences the 'outside' of interreligious dialogue. If cultural minorities and immigrant communities are represented in the public and in the political system primarily by religious leaders, this may be seen as the result of a growing interest among both politicians and religious communities towards interreligious dialogue. This could entail that cultural differences are addressed as religious differences, and that culture is equated with religion.

The Norwegian sociologist Sharam Algasi underlines that immigrants are marked, just as are the rest of the population, by more than the identities connected to the categories 'religious' or 'non-religious'. If this is not recognized, he claims, the present complexity is simplified into an image of reality which many people are not able to identify with.[2] Thus, at the core of this criticism is the risk that interreligious dialogue introduces a hierarchy of difference, where religion is the most significant identity marker and other identities are neglected, as well as that non-religious people are represented in religious categories.

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2   See Sharam Algasi in an interview with the magazine *Ny Tid* 15.10.2010. https://web.retriever-info.com/services/archive.html?method=displayPDF&documentId=0550992010101507YYRG42TWEC0A7JQY4M9VIE100201011B1K&serviceId=2 (accessed on 4 February 2011).

Interreligious dialogue as a threat to religious integrity

The next critical perspective I will present addresses the alleged processes in the dialogue's 'inside'. It also relates to how religion is signified in interreligious dialogues, but this time it entails a concern for the weakening of religious boundaries. Most participants in interreligious dialogues, who have an aim of including spiritual or theological aspects beyond a shared ethical agenda, are familiar with this criticism. The fear of syncretism is articulated among parts of Christian communities, even when Christians represent a strong religious majority in the society where the dialogue takes place. The former bishop of the Church of Norway, Ole D. Hagesæther, articulated this in a speech in 1997, when he warned against syncretism emerging out of encounters with 'other cultures'.[3] Among Muslims there is a fear of compromising Islamic beliefs and values, and of being theologically put under pressure. Anne Sofie Roald reflects on the practice of a Swedish dialogue group between Muslims and Christians in an article published in 2002. It seems that the participants in this dialogue agreed not to perceive the dialogue process as a threat to their individual religious integrity. Some of the Muslim participants, however, did address a concern that the themes selected for the dialogue represented mostly the interests of the Christian participants. (Roald 2002: 91.) This may be a situation where a fear of compromising over religious values and belief is activated.

Dialogue with Muslims as governmentalization

Another critical perspective on the present practice of dialogue, this time between the German state and representatives of German Muslims, is given by Schirin Amir-Moazami. She has analysed *Deutsche Islam Konferenz* (DIK), a dialogue initiated and led by the German state, labelled 'intercultural dialogue'. She claims that the process is aimed at a transformation of German Muslims into more 'integrated' members of German society from the state's point of view, and that the representatives of the state in the dialogue are not intended to be subject to change. (Amir-Moazami 2010.) In this way, there seems to be little space for actual dialogue between the parties, even though Amir-Moazami acknowledges the pos-

3   The speech was given in Brazil at a conference about Christian mission. See http://kirken.no/index.cfm?event=doLink&famId=5393 (accessed on 4 February 2011).

sibility of dynamic interaction and unforeseen events taking place. The organized dialogue, she writes, is a dialogue where only the Muslims are seen as carriers of difference. This difference is not necessarily welcomed, but, rather, seen as something that ought to be changed. Although the object of her analysis is not interreligious dialogue, but an organized negotiation process called 'intercultural dialogue', the emphasis on minority religion as the signifier of difference, as well as the lack of acknowledgment of the power imbalance in the situation represents a critical perspective towards interreligious dialogue, too. When representatives of majority religions—with or without an implication with the state—encounter minority religions in dialogic contexts, the imbalance of power may affect the 'inside' of the dialogue and move it towards a monologue. This is especially so when differences are not respected, but are subject to governmentalization by the majority.

Muslim–Christian dialogue dominated by the Christian party

Some of the Muslims Roald interviewed expressed their appreciation of the dialogue as such, and explained that they viewed it as an opportunity to make their religious practices, and Islam in general, better known among the majority. Still, some of them felt that the Christian participants dominated the group in terms of deciding which themes to discuss, by implementing their own religious discourses into the dialogue. (Roald 2002: 91.) Both Christian and Muslim participants evaluated the dialogue process as a place in which to achieve better knowledge and understanding of the other—and of oneself. They said it was a good place in which to articulate disagreements. However, Roald suggests that her findings show that the underlying values of the dialogue were dominated by the stronger party, in this case the Christian representatives. Her material suggests that Islam is seen as 'the other religion' both by the Christians and the Muslims, and that the Christian tradition and discourses are seen as 'less different'—thus setting the standards for the situated dialogic practice. One of the Muslim participants appreciated the possibility of taking part in a fellowship of believers, and stated that he found it positive that religious people came together to make a joint attempt to re-establish moral and religious values in a secular society. (Roald 2002: 94.)

Several critical perspectives are addressed here. Although the interviewed participants stated that the dialogue provided a space for difference, this seems

to be so only up to a certain limit. This observation shows a connection between the interpretation of difference and the power balance in the dialogue. Difference may be downplayed by the weaker party through not suggesting themes they actually would like to discuss, and by the stronger party, because they are not attentive to their own power. Such situations are breeding grounds for criticism of how the value of power equality is practised and also how a view on differences is implied in such practices. On the other hand, it was articulated that establishing a common religious category for Christians and Muslims in order to reinforce religion in the public sphere, signifies a difference between religious and non-religious people.

Interreligious dialogues negotiating away 'Western values'

Gender issues and women's rights have been seen as crucial issues in discussing the growing religious and cultural plurality of Norwegian public discourse since the organized interreligious dialogues started in Norway in the first half of the 1990s. It seems that lately gender equality is the only crucial value issue that has been modified, as it has been clustered together with other values, such as freedom of speech and equal rights for homosexuals, into a total package labelled 'Western values'.[4] In the discourse on plurality and difference, interreligious dialogue is increasingly interpreted as a place for negotiating 'Western values'—representatives of the religious majority (in Norway the Lutheran state church) are suspected of giving away the majority's power of definition when it comes to shared values. There are, however—both in the Christian and Muslim religious communities—internal discussions and negotiations, as well as different stands on these issues, on how to relate to them

as values. Dialogue and mutual respect for human differences as 'Western values' are often downplayed if the public discourse is polarized. The Norwegian political scientist Jill Loga claims, in an essay in the newspaper *Klassekampen*, which was published in 2009, that 'liberal dialogue' between religious groups in Norway has avoided addressing critical issues connected to the practices of the religious communities regarding human rights, including women's rights.[5] She argues that 'liberal dialogues' have been harmonizing differences in this respect, and are thus dialoguing at 'someone else's expense'.

Feminism as the missing dimension in interreligious dialogue

This critical perspective—feminism as the missing dimension in interreligious dialogue—may be seen as related to the former, but it has a more specific reasoning behind it as it does not emphasize an automatic connection between the formerly mentioned 'Western values' and gender equality / women's rights. Rather, this perspective is established by Christian women theologians concerned with the impact of interreligious dialogue on gender relations—both in the respective religious communities, and in the dialogue itself. Ursula King was the first to address this issue (King 1998), and she has since been followed by others.[6] Women from other religious traditions have not yet to any great extent addressed interreligious dialogue in their feminist[7] critique on religious practices. They have rather concentrated mainly on addressing their own religious traditions in their own socio-political contexts. This may indicate that interreligious dialogue is apprehended as a significant field first and foremost among people from the Christian tradition, or, that the field is dominated—at least at

4   See, e.g., a commentary by Keshvari Mayzar, one of the leaders in Oslo FrP, the right-wing populist party known for its harsh views on immigration and immigrants, and on Islam. See *Aftenposten* 1.3.2010: https://web.retriever-info.com/services/archive.html?method=displayDocument&documentId=055004201003019415&serviceId=2. A contributor in a web debate facilitated by the Norwegian newspaper *Dagsavisen* (the discussion was on values, taking place in 2009) who calls himself 'Bjørn' expresses liberty of speech, gender equality and equal rights for homosexuals as being 'the core of Western values': http://www.info.com/services/archive.html?method=displayPDF&documentId=0550062009050514I6GK45YEXX40ZNNV40JCCI100001010414&serviceId=2.

5   This essay is a defence of her previous article, published in *Klassekampen* on 15.10.2009. This essay is partly an answer to Oddbjørn Leirvik and myself, who challenged her about her use of the term 'liberal dialogue' and disputed her view that the interreligious dialogue in Norway had not addressed controversial issues. See https://web.retriever-info.com/services/archive.html?method=displayDocument&documentId=0550102009102428916&serviceId=2 (accessed on 4 February 2011).

6   E.g. Fletcher 2005, Egnell 2006, Grung 2008.

7   I use the term 'feminist' in a broad sense, to include all critical perspectives on gendered power structures that attempt to reveal marginalization and suppression of women and aims at changing the power structures to a more gender-balanced direction.

the moment—by Christian theological theorizing.

The core of this perspective is that interreligious dialogue is always seen as an encounter between representatives of religious traditions deeply marked by patriarchy, as all world religions are regarded as entailing a power balance favouring men over women. If this is not challenged, the dialogue can confirm and strengthen the traditions and respective practices. In Scandinavian and European contexts of interreligious dialogue, different views among the participants on gender and women's roles are likely, but this can be a difficult question to address. It may be that the matter is not regarded as important, and is therefore overlooked, or it is acknowledged as important, but regarded as being too controversial. In addition, the gender balance in interreligious dialogues is often in women's disfavour—particularly so when the representatives are religious leaders, and the relevance of interpreting gender differences is simply out of sight. An experienced contextual urgency to interpret religious differences may be high on the agenda, leaving less space to include a gender perspective.

Summary of the critical perspectives

The examples discussed above establish a critique on how interreligious dialogues negotiate and address differences from at least two main perspectives. Firstly, interreligious dialogue is criticized for failing to adequately acknowledge and respect differences. The negative results of this neglect, it is suggested, is that the stronger party more or less openly gets to dominate the dialogue and that the process may weaken the integrity of the weaker party. Hence, the dialogue becomes instrumental, and there is no real encounter. The critical claim that interreligious dialogue leads to religious or cultural syncretism, seen as a weakening of all parties, is also connected to this criticism. Secondly, there is a criticism of signifying religion as the most important difference through interreligious dialogue. The negative results in the above examples include an exclusion of non-religious people; using religious differences to represent what is conceived as cultural differences; and neglecting gendered differences. In addition, a strong signification of religious differences between the religious traditions on the one hand, and between religious and non-religious (often stated as the 'secular') on the other hand, can entail that differences in the religious traditions themselves are neglected or refused.

Differences in social theory: multiculturalism vs. cultural complexity

The suggested two models of interreligious dialogue that will be presented in the following were inspired by discussions of cultural differences in the field of social theory. I will engage with two different discourses on how to organize cultural differences in a plural society: 1) the multicultural discourse, referred to in this article mostly in its 'strong' form,[8] and 2) the discourse of the more mobile concept of 'cultural complexity' (Eriksen 2009). The latter challenges the first regarding the presupposition of the stability of cultures and their boundaries.

Whereas multiculturalism in its various degrees presupposes a stable view of cultures and cultural belonging, and balances between group rights based on shared cultural backgrounds and individual rights, cultural complexity emphasizes communication and cultural hybridity as elements in the functionality of social groups and thus introduces a disconnection between shared culture and social groups (Eriksen 2009: 15). Where multiculturalism seeks to protect cultural differences from assimilation by the majority, Thomas Hylland Eriksen refers to Ulf Hannerz in stating that cultural complexity means that culture cannot be characterized 'in terms of some single essence' (Hannerz 1992, cited in Eriksen 2009: 15). In the discourse on cultural complexity, cultures are to be regarded as fluid. It is more relevant to compare culture to an electric field than, for instance, to a coral reef, where time adds new layers to the reef, causing it to renew itself but not to change fundamentally (Eriksen 1994: 23). There is an attempt to address cultural hybridity rather than operating with an image of 'pure' cultures, and a resistance to an emphasis on collective rather than individual identity. This makes the individual more emancipated *and* more vulnerable. The criticism of 'cultural complexity' is more fragmented than criticism of multiculturalism in all its forms, as it is a difficult discourse to frame.

8   Anne Sofie Roald discusses the distinction between 'strong' and 'weak' multiculturalism in her book *Muslimer i nya samhällen* (2009). She describes strong multiculturalism as a model where minority groups are guaranteed a legal position where they can keep their integrity as a group, including their own values and practices. Weak multiculturalism on the other hand is balancing more between group rights and individual rights, expressed in various ways (Roald 2009: 32–3).

Two models of interreligious dialogue

I suggest two models to be used as tools in distinguishing between different ways of relating to differences in contemporary interreligious dialogue: 1) religious difference as constitutive, and 2) religious difference as challenge.[9] Examples of organized dialogue may include elements from both, or switch between them depending, for instance, on the issues discussed. I believe there is a significant difference in regarding religious differences as constitutive, or as a challenge.

Religious differences as constitutive

In this model, keeping and protecting the existing religious boundaries is emphasized throughout the process of an interreligious dialogue. To keep the boundaries stable between the religious traditions entering into a dialogue may be a way to create a safe space and to show respect for the differences between them. However, this can also reflect a static view of one's own, as well as of the other's religious tradition, and to hold the representatives from the various traditions to be representatives of the entire religious tradition to which they belong. Religious difference as the constitutive element in the encounter implies that other differences may be downplayed, among them cultural differences, gender differences and social/class differences.

As an example of this way of conceptualizing interreligious encounters I would like to mention *Scriptural Reasoning* (SR)—an interreligious practice that started in the UK among Jews, Christians and Muslims personally positioned in relation both to the academic body and to their respective faith communities, focusing on reading the canonical scriptures of their traditions together.[10] For instance in the book *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Ford & Pecknold 2006), the practitioners share their respective views on the practice. Steven Kepnes, one of the initiators of SR, articulates that the aim of SR is to find resources within the tradition to 'repair the world' (Kepnes 2006: 34). The religious traditions are thus trusted to contribute to a harmonizing process within the overall society. There is a considerable reluctance to criticize the canonical scriptures and to see religion as intertwined with other systems of meaning production. Rather, the three monotheistic religions present in the SR, are seen by some of the practitioners as having a role of restoring (or re-establishing) religion in the public space, in opposition to secular or non-religious forces.[11] It is argued that secularism and secularity are insufficient in order to 'repair the world', and guilty of neglecting the resources of the monotheistic religions. It may be more coherent to speak about competition rather than opposition.

The proximity to a multicultural view on cultural differences is obvious. The focus on collective rather than individual identity, as well as the focus on the stability of group identity and respect for boundaries, suggests a belief in faith communities as monolithic structures to which loyalty is paid.

The practice of SR aims at transforming society as a whole—the direction of the transformation is to provide more space for and acceptance of religion, and of religious differences. Religions are generally viewed as positive, collective and stable systems of meaning and there is little focus on other differences than the religious ones.

The critical positions on interreligious dialogue presented earlier in this article show that the criticisms related a to lack of respect for differences, and to the majority overruling the religious minorities, are accommodated and integrated in this model. The criticisms of interreligious dialogue reinforcing religion as the most significant identity marker, the exclusion of the non-religious and the quest for a feminist dimension are not met, but would rather be sharpened in this model.

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9   I developed these models in my PhD dissertation *Gender Justice in Muslim–Christian Readings* (Grung 2011) for analyzing Christian–Muslim discussions in texts from the Bible, the Koran and the Hadith.

10   Some of the participants of SR are reluctant to label their practice as interreligious dialogue. They want to go 'beyond much liberal interfaith dialogue' (Kepnes 2006: 28) and much of the interfaith dialogue is seen as dominated by 'conceptual analysis' that is claimed to favour Christianity (Kepnes 2006: 29).

11   Stephen Kepnes presents SR as a practice which 'seeks a "third space" between anti-modern religious fundamentalism and modern liberalism' (Kepnes 2006: 25). But he also, although vaguely, situates SR in a post-liberal position and refers for instance to George Lindbeck, who belongs to a group of Christian theologians calling themselves post-liberal (Kepnes 2006: 25, 28). Kepnes defines 'post-liberal' thus: 'to retain liberal democratic values and the liberal dedication to the alleviation of suffering throughout the world, while recapturing a positive public role for the particular traditions of thought and living that are present in the monotheistic scriptures' (Kepnes 2006: 35).

Religious difference as challenge

In this model, religions are seen as systems of meaning that are always possible objects of change, and interreligious (or, in this model, rather *trans*religious) dialogue may contribute to this change.[12] Thus, the boundaries between religions are not seen as necessarily stable. The focus is more on the individual than on the collective representation in the dialogue, and there is a view that religion has to be interpreted and reinterpreted by its followers. The aim of dialogues in this model is to create a shared space where communication can contribute to a power-critical platform for action. The powers that are possible subjects of criticism are religious and secular authorities and practices alike, not only the secular. Human rights perspectives and the struggle for justice are often referred to in dialogues of this type. But a common platform may also be a wish to explore scriptures together, which is the core practice in SR.

I have elsewhere suggested that both Lissi Rasmussen and Oddbjørn Leirvik, researchers and dialogue activists from Denmark and Norway respectively, at least partially represent this way of conceptualizing interreligious dialogue.[13] The challenge of this model is obvious: If the borders are blurred, and religious traditions and identities are regarded as fluid, does not this model undermine its own premises? If religion is deconstructed as a system, what is left of the interreligious, and even the transreligious?

Transformation in this model is addressed towards society, with religious traditions and the individuals participating in the dialogue. The transformation, or change, may be seen as an aim in itself, capturing a dynamic pulse of a culturally and religiously diverse society in a human encounter. But transformation may also have specific goals, such as working for gender justice in the negotiation over what religious identity means. A crucial question is:

12 The term *inter*-religious dialogue in itself suggests a relation between two stable entities. This poses a challenge if one views religious entities as being more fluid and interwoven with other structures and fields, such as culture, gender and social class. When 'inter' is replaced with 'trans', we get the term 'transreligious dialogue', or 'transreligious encounter', terms which signal a perspective on religious encounters as a more fluid process.

13 See Grung 2011: 63–5. The work of Rasmussen that I primarily refer to is her book *Diapraksis og dialog mellem kristne og muslimer* (1997). Regarding Leirvik, I refer to his books *Religionsdialog på norsk* (2001) and *Islam og kristendom: Konflikt eller dialog* (2006).

who can determine the goals in these kinds of dialogues? Ideally, this is a joint decision, taken together by equal parties in a dialogue. But power structures both on the 'inside' and 'outside' of the dialogues would not be diminished by a joint decision within the dialogue. It is not difficult to integrate feminist perspectives into a dialogue based on this model; the challenge would rather be as to what kind of feminist perspective would be included.

In this model, there is no fixed hierarchy of differences, at least not in theory. Some of the critical perspectives on interreligious dialogue challenge this way of conceptualizing the activity: the power balance between majority and minority religions may stay unaddressed as the focus is more on the individual; also the agenda of the majority's assimilation or domination of the minority might be suspected. This model may also contribute to reintegrating religion as the most significant identity in a society. It is, however, more likely that this model, rather than the former one, encourages engagement with non-religious people or representatives of the secular, because there is no open dichotomy between the religious and non-religious/secular.

Between compartmentalization and complexity

I have used reasoning related to 'cultural complexity' in an attempt to destabilize the boundaries in interreligious dialogues, using the model of religious difference as challenge, presented above. When boundaries are destabilized, there is a need to reflect on how this may influence power relations. Power and influence are distributed according to specific identities such as gender, religious and cultural identification, and social class. Feminist and gender theory provide tools for analyzing the intersection of different identities and its impact on power relations. The discussion of gender essentialism has shown that patriarchy is not done away with through the destabilization of gender. If all essentialist identities are dismissed, persons that experience discrimination based in their identities may need to claim the same identities as a common ground, as the basis of a struggle to change discriminatory practices against them (hooks 1990: 29). In the context of postcolonial feminism Gayatri Spivak (1993) has provided the notion of strategic essentialism. It implies that essentialism is needed as a basis for organization for change, but should never be fixed as stable, as this will only reproduce a hierarchy of categories—and differences. For interreligious dialogue, represented through both models discussed

above, this would entail that participants in an inter-religious dialogue may be accepted and addressed as more than a Muslim, Christian, Jew or Buddhist. He or she should be appreciated also as a political citizen, a woman (or a man), and as a person with a specific cultural and social background.

Interreligious dialogue as a field in the making is moving between compartmentalization and complexity, with the risk of reproducing dichotomies between the religious and non-religious, religious women and religious men, the majority and the minority—and between those who regard religions as stable, and those who regard religions as more fluid. Dialogue as a liminal space, where all kinds of essentialism are challenged, cannot escape power structures that may require strategic essentialism. ■

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