

Lene Kühle

Temasektion

Danish Muslims during COVID-19

Religion and pandemics in a postsecular society

Keywords

COVID-19, Muslims in Denmark, mosques, postsecular society,

Abstract How have Danish Muslims communicated on social media about COVID-19, and how have religious communities been included in the handling of the pandemic? Religion has become part of the public debate in new ways, because religious gathering places have been closed, owing to this crisis. Muslim leaders, and ministries and municipalities, have established religion-sensitive guidelines for how people should behave during the crisis caused by the pandemic. This article investigates the reactions of official mosque social media profiles to the pandemic, based on their public communication on social media platforms. This material is analyzed in relation to Habermas's concept of the postsecular society. I conclude that this crisis has contributed to negotiations concerning the position of minority religions, particularly with regard to Islam in Danish society.

On June 25, 2020, the London School of Economics hosted a webinar titled "Religious Communities under COVID-19: the first pandemic of the postsecular age?" The context of the webinar was explained as the identification of religious gatherings as major sites of virus transmission, and that in many countries, this had heightened tensions between the religiously observant and the secular authorities who attempt to regulate their activities.¹ The first speaker, Dr. James Walters, a Senior Lecturer in Practice in the Department of International Relations, London School of Economics, and an affiliated faculty member at the Department for International Development, was tasked with explaining the webinar's title. He did this by emphasizing that COV-

Lene Kühle is Professor with special responsibilities in Sociology of Religion at the Department of the Study of Religion, School of Culture and Society, Aarhus University. Her research deals with religious diversity, the relationship between religion, politics, law and the state. In 2019, she (together with Malik Larsen) published the book [Mosques of Denmark] (Aarhus University Press).

ID-19 was the first pandemic that authorities and governments worldwide perceived as secular; that is, the pandemic was not widely considered as a sign of God's wrath or punishment. Religious leaders were not invited to advise to governments, and as the cause and cure were understood in scientific terms, medical experts took the lead as key advisors. Nonetheless, religion played a role in the pandemic. Religious communities were noticed, for better or for worse. Thus, a 2020 Editor's Note in the journal *Sociology of Religion* included religious gatherings and rituals with regard to social distancing², and conflicts involving religion, politics, and law, in the range of topics that COVID-19 has prompted sociology to address (Baker et al. 2020). Similarly, a brief at the ISA (International Sociological Association) platform made suggestions for a post-COVID-19 sociology that specifically included a call to focus on the features of postsecular societies amidst the societal challenges created by the pandemic (Hanafi 2020: 2). In this article, I will take up these challenges, and discuss the concept of a postsecular society with regard to pandemic-related public announcements made by official social media (SoMe) profiles of Danish mosque associations, and the Danish authorities' and media reactions to these. The data is drawn primarily from a study of online reactions to Denmark's lockdown in March 2020. This study (Larsen, Mauritsen, Kühle, et al. 2020) was carried out by a group of academics at the Center of Contemporary Studies of Religion, Aarhus University. We collected SoMe material (mainly from Facebook, but in some case also from websites, Instagram, YouTube) from the official profiles of the so-called 'recognized religious communities'³ in Denmark during the period from March 11, 2020, when the Danish government imposed a lockdown of public institutions and all non-vital shops, to May 18, 2020, when Denmark reopened (Kühle and Vinding 2020). 'Recognized religious communities' have a privileged position with respect to tax exemption and the right to perform marriages (Nielsen and Kühle 2011). In this article the SoMe material from the Muslim 'recognized religious communities' is supplemented with SoMe material from larger mosque associations, which are not officially recognized. Material from 25 SoMe profiles of Danish Muslim organizations, representing over 80 mosque associations, provides the background for the analysis in this article. The material is public and represents official communications, therefore referencing this material is unproblematic from a research ethics perspective (Willis 2019, Legewie and Nassauer 2018).

1 <http://www.lse.ac.uk/lse-player?category=public+lectures+and+events>

2 Some prefer to talk about 'physical distancing' instead because "it is feared that in the long term, forgetting this concept [social distancing] will lead to human error and social isolation" (Aminnejad and Alikhani 2020). I use 'social distancing' because it is the social isolation associated with being unable to meet for religious gatherings which is the key element addressed in this article.

I also include material from the study, *Religiøs forandring i en krisetid* (Larsen, Mauritsen, Sothilingam, et al. 2020). This study included interviews with 60 representatives of religious bodies in Aarhus, Denmark's second largest city. Of the 60 religious organizations that agreed to participate, thirteen were Muslim. The survey study, with assistance from YouGov, collected responses from over 1500 respondents during May 2020 (Andersen et al 2021), when Denmark was beginning to reopen after the spring 2020 lockdown. The survey is a general population survey, and as such it establishes the general response of the Danish population to the pandemic. This was useful for establishing Danes' generally secular outlook on the pandemic. Respondents with a Muslim background were few (34 of 1538), but even if this small number does not allow for investigations of how the Danish Muslim population may or may not differ significantly from the general population on the questions involved, it does indicate diversity in the responses of Muslim respondents. (Beckford 2015)

Examples of comments on official statements that health authorities published on social media are also included in this study. This material has not been systematically collected, and serves only to provide examples of reactions to official communications from the Danish Health Authority regarding advice to be considered during Ramadan. The SoMe communication I analyze were published in Danish, but for the purpose of this article I have translated the statements I quote into English.

A postsecular society

The concept of the postsecular first emerged in social theology in the 1960s. It was used to identify the hope for the emergence of a new era in which religious ideas challenged and repaired the pathology of secularity (Parmaksız 2018: 99). The concept

³ The concept if a recognized religious community is translated from the concept 'anerkendt trossamfund', which is a legal concept regulated by Law no 1533 of 19/12/2017. The concept of an 'anerkendt trossamfund' does not have an official translation. The Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs uses the translation 'religious communities' and this is also the term used in

for instance the United States Department of State International Religious Freedom Report for 2018 (<https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/DENMARK-2018-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>). The translation faith community is also widely used (Lassen 2020). The usage of the concepts of religious or faith community has been critically

assessed by British sociologist Jim Beckford who warns "urges sociologists of religion "to avoid uncritically reproducing official discourses about faith communities" (Beckford 2015). I have highlighted the status of the concept as an official legal concept by placing the concept within citation marks.

migrated to political studies in the 1990s, where it enjoyed a significant revival following 9/11 attack. Thus, this concept is anchored in two fields—in social theology and the study of politics (Parmaksız 2018: 101)—and covers a variety of researcher positions, from secularization-deniers to scholars who investigate, or even encourage, the re-enchantment of culture (Beckford 2012). The success of this concept is said to be due to its two-sided nature: It is “vague enough to attract interest, but also contained the right amount of polemic, ensuring that the concept would attract a wave of proponents and critics” (Fordahl 2017: 558). Although many scholars speak of the postsecular, the honor of popularizing the concept belongs to German philosopher and sociologist, Jürgen Habermas (Fordahl 2017). Habermas is responsible for using the specific amalgamation of “postsecular” and “society” (Habermas 2012, 2008) to describe a society in which belief in secularization theories has waned. The concept, both in general and Habermas’s particular version, has certainly sparked controversy. According to one scholar, there is “still no uniform understanding of the meaning of the concept and there are serious doubts whether it has any intellectual power, import or utility” (Parmaksız 2018: 98). An interesting proposal, which I adopt is to distinguish between the hyphenated “post-secular,” which indicates a break with the secular condition, and the unhyphenated “postsecular,” which describes an ongoing secular condition (Dora 2018). In this article, I take my point of departure in Habermas’ approach, described as “the center of the highest-profile cluster of ideas about postsecularity” (Beckford 2012: 8). I will use the unhyphenated version, “postsecular,” because Habermas does clearly limit his use of the term to what he defines as the secular and secularized societies of Europe and countries such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. In these countries, “religion maintains a public influence and relevance, while the secularistic certainty that religion will disappear worldwide in the course of modernization is losing ground” (Habermas 2008: 21).

Surprisingly few scholars have paid attention to the details of how Habermas outlined the concept of the postsecular society, and how he developed it in his writing. Originally, he presented the concept as having two dimensions. The first, the sociological, describes postsecular societies as societies in which the population has not—at least to any noticeable extent—become more religious. The postsecular refers to “a change in consciousness”

(Habermas 2008: 19), which includes the realization that religious communities continue to exist even in an increasingly secularized environment. The second dimension is the normative, which for Habermas entails the necessity of taking the existence of religious voices seriously, and finding ways to include them in societal debates. For Habermas, this dimension calls for post-metaphysical philosophers to treat religious perspectives as resources, which are also available and potentially useful for secular thought. Some scholars may consider these two dimensions to be so entangled that it is impossible to pursue the former without engaging with the latter. But generally, in Habermas's writing, and most clearly in his recent publication, *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie* (Habermas 2019), he appears adamant about distinguishing the sociological diagnosis from its possible consequences for philosophical thought.⁴ Therefore, my approach follows Habermas's sociological diagnosis, but parts company with the normative implication of Habermas as well as that of many of his interlocutors. I do not regard my use of the concept of a postsecular society as advocating a new paradigm but simply interpret the postsecular as an autonomous concept that should not be conflated with a 'return of religion' (cf. Parmaksız 2018). Therefore, the concept of a postsecular society that underlies the analysis in this article is neither a suggestion that the world has become more religious, nor a call to bring in religious voices. It is simply a question of how the concept of a postsecular society, understood as a society with a diminished confidence in strong theories of secularization—that is, without a belief in the inevitable disappearance of religion from the list of public concerns—may contribute to our understanding of the nexus between Danish Muslim organizations and public communication (Cf. Blumler and Coleman 2013) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic as a postsecular pandemic

4 For instance, this is clear from the way the concept of a postsecular society is discussed only in the chapter that addresses the sociological interpretation of the current religious situation.

The processes of functional differentiation are commonly construed as constituting the core of theories of secularization. Therefore, in modern secularized societies, the reduced authority of religious institutions and the subsequent assumption of

their functions by science and technology are believed to influence how a pandemic is regarded today.

We have plenty of disasters, floods, famines, plagues, but we no longer consider them caused by sin. Sacred contagion and the lightning-conductor role of expiatory rituals have withered. There is a common self-congratulatory idea that the decline of superstition is due to the growth of science, literacy and technology (Douglas and Wildavsky 1983: xviii).

From this perspective, the official, profoundly secular Danish response to the COVID-19 pandemic is unsurprising. The pandemic was not described in religious terms in official documents, and religious leaders were not called in to help determine strategy. Also, according to the survey study, very few Danes assigned any direct religious significance to the pandemic. Less than 10 percent of the respondents considered religion or God a significant aspect of their understanding of the causes or recommended reactions to the pandemic (Table 1). The support for a religious view of the pandemic is particularly low if we look at the “strongly agree” responses, which are in the range of 0–1 percent. Among the general population only 2 percent responded in the affirmative. Even among the group of highly religious persons, it was a minority, 13 percent, that responded yes to the question regarding the importance of following God’s plan to combat the pandemic, and most did not reject the other option, which is to rely on advice of the health authorities.

In March 2020, the Danish government imposed a lockdown to curb the transmission of COVID-19. Because Denmark’s Evangelical-Lutheran majority church is a part of the Danish public sector (Kühle et al. 2018), it was unsurprising that buildings belonging to the Evangelical-Lutheran majority church would close, along with schools, universities and libraries (Kühle and Vinding 2020). This contrasts with what occurred during the Spanish flu pandemic of the early 1900s, when churches were kept open to provide comfort and support (Andersen et al 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority church and minority religious organizations were encouraged to provide comfort and assistance through online media or in other ways that comply with policies of social distancing (Larsen, Mauritsen, Kühle, et al. 2020). According to the study of reactions to the lockdown by the ‘recognized religious com-

Table 1. Does religion play a part in the pandemic? Responses in May 2020 (n=1237–1378).

The Corona virus is part of a divine plan	Agree: 8 Strongly agree: 0
The Corona virus is due to divine or spiritual forces reacting to human behavior	Agree: 8 Strongly agree: 1
We can combat the virus If we all follow God's plan	Yes: 2

munities, many (70 percent) used SOME to provide support: Of the Christian and Buddhist group, 75 percent did and almost as many, 67 percent of the Jewish, 64 percent of the Muslim, and 28 percent of the Hindu groups made public announcements on their SoMe profiles that addressed the lockdown of Danish society (Larsen, Mauritsen, Kühle, et al. 2020). These numbers are based on posts on websites, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, but the extent of the outreach attempts may be greater. For instance, it is known that some Hindu organizations and Muslim organizations communicated through other media, including WhatsApp, or on websites or SoMe associated with [specific] ethnic affiliations (Larsen, Mauritsen, Kühle, et al. 2020, Larsen, Mauritsen, Sothilingam, et al. 2020). In fact, almost all religious organization with active SoMe profiles communicated about the lockdown, and the religious organizations indicated a strong sense of obligation to guide their communities safely through the pandemic, regardless of the religion. Although religious activities were seriously circumscribed by the politicians' goal of combating the pandemic by implementing the health-care authorities' advice, the legitimacy of the lockdown was perceived as strong. According to the study, in the Danish population resistance to the lockdown of houses of worship was low, supported by almost 90 percent, and any disapproval was as likely to be political as religious (Andersen et al 2021). Also, very few respondents mentioned religious activities as one of the three things they missed: 5 percent of the respondents missed regular religious meetings, whereas 6 percent missed religious holidays (e.g. Easter and Ramadan). Therefore, the Danish situation presents a case of relatively strong alignment between official policies on the pandemic and the general positions of religious communities. Although Denmark is one of the countries where restrictions on religious activity has been most intense (De La Ferriere 2020), it is also one of the countries where the population's response to government action has been most supportive (Devlin and Connaughton 2020). The Danish pattern differs from that in countries such as the United States. In fact,

25 percent of the respondents to the American Perspective Survey carried out in March 2020 said they believed that the coronavirus outbreak was an act of God (Cox, Bowman, and Clemence 2020). It should be borne in mind that Habermas does not consider the United States one of the postsecular societies. Yet, from the discussion above, I must conclude that if we understand a postsecular society as a secular society in which religion is present and noticed, COVID-19 may be an interesting lens for investigating the dynamics of a postsecular society. In the next section I first present how religion was addressed by the Minister of Ecclesiastical Affairs, and how the Minister of Immigration and Integration identified it as a cause for concern, and second, how Muslim communities reacted to the pandemic and to the attention from the Minister of Immigration and Integration. Last, the results are discussed with regard to what they may tell us about postsecular societies.

Religion was noticed by politicians and media

When Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen determined that it was necessary for Denmark to enter a partial lockdown on March 11, 2020, that is, to send home all those working in non-essential positions in the public sector, and close public institutions, including Denmark's majority church, minority religions did not seem to be the first thing on the agenda. Although attention to minority religions was not prominent at this very early phase of the pandemic, it is worth noting that the Minister of Ecclesiastical Affairs, Joy Mogensen, as one of her first actions to the pandemic produced a video that addressed minority religious organizations, urging with them to also close their houses of worship. The reason, she pleaded and not commanded was that the legal framework to shut down religious buildings of religious was not issued until April 4, 2020 (Law no 370 of 04/04/2020). Restrictions were lifted on May 18, 2020, from which date Danish houses of worship were again open to the public. While they were exempt from the ban on large gatherings on their premises, they were still subject to detailed restrictions on the number of people who could be present on public premises (Guidelines 2020). The state's attention to its religious minorities is remarkable. Religious minorities have often been overlooked in Danish debates, owing to their relatively small

size. Only the Muslim minorities, which constitute about 5 percent of the population (Kühle and Larsen 2019: 68) are occasionally the subject of debate in the public sphere. The state has recently begun to pay more focused and systematic attention to the presence of religious minorities in Denmark. The 2017 Act on (Minority) Religious Communities (Law no 1533 of 19/12/2017) is the clearest example of how the relationship between the ‘recognized religious communities’ and the state is in the process of being formalized. The relationship between the state and the Muslim minority remains very much in the making, and often, mutual expectations seem to be out of sync (Kühle and Larsen 2019). However, the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have reshuffled that relationship. As the pandemic evolved, the Muslim minority increasingly became a focal point. This was related to specific events, for instance two well-attended (outdoor) Muslim burials, which did not break any laws, but which were the subject of heated public discussions. The debates led to restrictions on the attendance of burials, and as of August 19, attendance at outdoor funerals was restricted to 200 people at the same location (Guidelines 2020). In the summer and fall of 2020, local restrictions were occasionally implemented to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus. For instance, this occurred in Aarhus in early August 2020, as discussed below.

Religion as a vector for spreading COVID-19

On April 23, 2020, Mattias Tesfaye, the Danish Minister for Immigration and Integration, warned Danish Muslims that Ramadan “must NOT mean an explosion in corona infected cases” (Naqeeb_Khan 24/04/2020). The warning may have been prompted by global concerns about how religious gatherings were spreading the disease (Quadri 2020), but this was not well-received by Danish Muslim organizations (wakf.dk 24/04/2020). Danish authorities’ focus on Muslims also included the development of specific, Muslim-related advice in nine languages by the Ministry of Immigration and Integration and the Danish Health Authority (FB Sundhedsstyrelsen 23.04.2020).⁵ The advice included general recommendations to stay home, follow the health authority’s recommendations regarding physical distancing, and to use electronic means of communication with family and friends. The recommendations included four more specific pieces of advice:

1. Break the fast with those you live with. Also, *Taraviah* and *Iftikaf* should be performed at home and with those you live with.
2. Do not gather in groups of more than ten people, also when outside, for instance, in parks.
3. Keep a distance of two meters and avoid physical contact such as handshakes, hugs, and kisses.
4. Celebrate Eid with those you live with. (FB Sundhedsstyrelsen 23.04.2020; my translation).

The foregoing guidelines received more than 2200 likes on the Facebook pages of the Danish Health Authority, and more than 900 comments. Many of the comments expressed a desire to share the advice, and indicate that the guidelines were generally well-received, for example, “Thank you, Health Authorities 🇩🇰🌹🌹🌹,” “Thanks, dear Denmark, that you wish us a happy Ramadan. We will of course conform to recommendation under covid19,” “💜💜 Respect to Health Authorities which has concern for us and is paying attention to it 🙏🙏😊😊,” “Thanks, Health Authorities 👍,” “Fantastic Initiative 🙌” and “I never thought they would make a video like that 😂. They think about us after all ✨.” However the focus on Muslims also generated a small number of negative responses: “Is this a joke? Like we don’t already know it (we never watch the news, ah) 🙄😂” and “When general advice has been distributed to the entire population about risks and dangers a long time ago, what is then the idea of making a specific video to Muslims can anyone tell me that? There was also a commenter who reacted to what was perceived as a ‘positive discrimination’ with respect to Muslims: “I must say, that I’m surprised. The Jewish holiday of Pesach is just over. Did I miss recommendations from the Health Authorities, or isn’t the state aware that there are Jews in the country?” (FB Sundhedsstyrelsen 23.04.2020; my translation). There were also a (smaller) number of anti-Muslim comments, followed by aggrieved comments from Muslims. The moderator banned several persons because of this.

Attention was also drawn to Muslims by the public debates following a public call to prayer (*adhan*) made by representatives of a large mosque in Aarhus on April 24, 2020. In Denmark, the call to prayer is not usually done in public (Jacobsen, Daverkosen, and Larsen 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, a local congregation of the Evangelical-Lutheran church, Gel-

5 The material was published at <https://uim.dk/nyheder/2020-04/covid-19-gode-rad-i-forbindelse-med-ramadan> and <https://www.sst.dk/da/nyheder/2020/gode-rad-i-forbindelse-med-ramadan>, where it is no longer available.

lerup Kirke, decided to cooperate with the local mosque, Fredens Moske, on a joint call to pray under conditions of social distancing, by ringing the church bells and making a public call to prayer (Aarhus Stiftstidende 26.04.2020). In Europe, the Muslim call to prayer is often interpreted as an attempt at religious domination (Langer et al. 2011: 93). In this case, the call to prayer was not noticed by the public until attention was drawn to it by an action by members of the identitarian organization, Generation Identity, which raised a banner with the message “Stop the Call to Prayer” by a building in the area.⁶ Generation Identity wanted to attract attention to this public call to prayer because they interpreted it as an instance of (problematic) Islamization (Identitaer.dk 9/05/2020). On the other hand, the cooperative effort was greeted enthusiastically by the interfaith organization, Tro i Harmoni (Interfaith Harmony), which suggested that this action made it possible for Muslims “to feel their religion was reflected in the public sphere.” (Troiharmoni.dk 12/05/2020; my translation).

The media coverage of the debates of the call to prayer did not emphasize the cooperative, interfaith nature of the call to prayer, nor the extraordinary situation (a societal lockdown) to which it referred. The unusual situation was strongly emphasized by one of the applications to make the Muslim public call to prayer under conditions of social distancing.⁶ Thus, the Danish Islamic community (Dansk Islamisk Trossamfund) clearly stated that the call to prayer was an attempt to “show that we jointly demonstrate how Denmark is united at a difficult time, regardless of religious conviction” (ditsamfund.dk 11.05.2020). When the application to make the call in public was rejected, the Muslim organization stated they were disappointed, but accepted the decision.

Political reactions to the debates on the call to prayer were strong, and included two bills (B 174 and B185 2019/20) and three so-called Section 20 parliamentary questions to the government (§20 questions: S1491, S1019, S1131). The initiatives came from politicians from the opposition, and included politicians from parties such as The New Right (Nye Borgerlige), The Danish People’s Party (Dansk Folkeparti), the Liberal Party (Venstre) and the Conservative Party (De Konservative). Therefore, the rejection of the legitimacy of the call to prayer was not limited to populist parties with well-known anti-Islamic stances, but had a broader base. The debates did not mention how the re-

⁶ The identity of one of the applicant has not been disclosed to the public.

quest to perform the public call to prayer was intended to be an initiative not just for Muslims, but for Danish society in general. Debates instead drew on the politics of extremization, that is, a politics eager “to police the boundaries of public participation to the detriment of those subjects who, in the current state of affairs, are articulated as subjects of alterity” (Nilsson 2019: 28). Whether the way the intentions of the Muslim organization were construed in the debates was due to a misunderstanding or to a refusal to accept the allegedly benevolent intent of the initiative is unclear. However, research indicates that some politicians are deliberately invoking the COVID-19 crisis to serve agendas of discrimination and anti-immigrant rhetoric (Devakumar et al. 2020). The political debates in Denmark may indicate that in some cases, the consequences of COVID-19 mean renewing debates about the position and tolerance of minorities. Muslim organization may search for confirmation of their position as equal citizens in the midst of a crisis that calls for mutual solidarity, whereas skeptics worry that Muslim organizations are taking advantage of the situation.

The role of religious organizations during a pandemic

It is generally assumed by scholars that religion may play a major role in addressing the consequences of a pandemic, by providing care and comfort, or providing tools for coping (Andersen et al 2021). Research has already indicated how, during the COVID-19 pandemic, religious organization may be considered resources for supporting positive emotions, which may help to combat anxiety and fear (Koenig 2020). The support offered by the religious organizations may be emotional or moral, but may also be of a more practical kind. A study of a Modern Orthodox Jewish community in New York City emphasized how the religious community responded to “tangible needs (i.e., food delivery), social support, virtual religious services, and dissemination of COVID-19-related information” (Weinberger-Litman et al. 2020). The suggestion that religious communities might step up to offer practical assistance was not strong in public debates in Denmark. On their SoMe profiles, some mosques offered to help with shopping and errands (Larsen, Mauritsen, Kühle, et al. 2020). In Aarhus, eight of thirteen mosques indicated that

they offered practical help. This places mosques well beyond the general average of 35 percent of religious and spiritual groups in Aarhus that offered such assistance. However, the principal task of the Muslim communication is sharing information about health authority recommendations:

...we, as an Islamic center, take this seriously, as we are also concerned about the health and security of our fellow citizens. Based on the word of the prophet a diseased person should not mix with healthy people, and should not cause harm or be harmed. Also, there is the Islamic rule that preventing evils is preferable to earning deeds (Wakf Al Massira, FB 11.03.2020; my translation).

This statement, which includes implicit references to hadith compilations such as *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* and *Muwattaʿa*, is followed by the assurance that the mosque board has “built on the recommendation of official authorities and the Danish healthcare system, and consultation with many experts.” This statement was published at 10:32 PM, only a few hours after the press conference with the Prime Minister, who announced the lockdown. As already mentioned, a study of the posts by the ‘recognized religious communities’ following the lockdown in March 2020 showed that all the Muslim communities with active social media accounts reacted quickly to the lockdown (Larsen, Mauritsen, Kühle, et al. 2020). The ‘recognized communities’ comprise less than one-third of the mosque associations, and less than 15 percent of Danish Muslims are members of a ‘recognized Muslim community.’⁷ Yet both recognized and unrecognized Muslim communities shared the documents and communications from the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs; in fact, nothing suggests that the recognized religious communities are more loyal to the state than the unrecognized ones. Those Muslim organizations which have active social media profiles seem to use them to share the information originally published in Danish—but in some cases also other state authorities (for instance Bosnian or Turkish).

7 According to a question answered by the Danish Minister of Ecclesiastical Affairs on March 20, 2020, on January 1, 2019, membership stood at 32,082 adult members. There are about 300,000 Muslims in Denmark <https://www.ft.dk/samling/20191/beslutningsforslag/B77/spm/5/svar/1647758/2172163.pdf>

The mosques also seem to have sometimes been the first institutions to react to indications of surges in the number of COVID-19 infections. The above-mentioned August outbreak in Aarhus is a striking example. Residents with a Somali background were particularly prevalent among those infected. On August 3, before it was publicly known that the COVID-19 virus was re-emerging in Aarhus, three major mosques—the Fre-

dens mosque (Peace mosque), the Salsabil mosque and the Waqf mosque—announced that they were closing. Other mosques closed in the following days (Aarhus Stiftstidende 07/08 2020). Mosques in Aarhus were also active in sharing information, for instance, on where to get a COVID-19 test (Masjed E Tagwa, FB, 7.08.2020). The mosques were by no means the only ones to make efforts to curb the outbreaks. Other organizations, such as Aarhussomali, played a major role, and their efforts were perhaps of greater significance than those of the mosques. Yet the Municipality of Aarhus, which had very publicly indicated their cooperation with ethnic organizations such as Aarhussomali (Aarhus.dk 06.08.2020) contacted me for a list of mosques in Aarhus. This indicates that although the local authorities did not expect to need a list of mosques in Aarhus before the outbreak, this had become a priority. Once the outbreak was under control, the Municipality of Aarhus announced that the outbreak had been handled very successfully owing to this very successful cooperation, among other things (Farah 2020).

Religious change amidst the COVID-19 pandemic

The most noticeable aspect of what happened when mosques and other religious spaces closed in Denmark is how religious observance changed, accommodating quickly to the new situation. The apparently unproblematic and quick changes in rituals were particularly striking. The changes most noticeably affected Friday prayers, burials, Taraviah prayer and Eid prayer. The first and immediate change concerned Friday prayers. The lockdown was announced on a Wednesday night, and though it was not a legal requirement at this point, many mosques and Muslim organizations responded quickly. In fact, one mosque, Dansk Islamisk Center, had already cancelled the Friday prayers the day before the press conference, stating on Facebook,

Today the pervasive virus pandemic has led the Danish authorities to tighten the conditions for public assemblies, and to encourage citizens to show common sense when dealing with their fellow citizens. Based on recent developments, the Danish Islamic Center has decided that the Friday prayer will be canceled on Friday (Dansk

Islamisk Center, FB 11.03.2020; my translation).

Many mosques followed suit in the following days. Other mosques were apparently more hesitant, because they considered Friday prayers to be of the utmost importance. Pressure from the other mosques and the precedent set by several Muslim countries (e.g. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Morocco) where the words of the adhan, “come to prayer,” were changed to “stay at home,” finally convinced them (Hamad bin Khalifa Civilization Center FB 3.04.2020). A reference to the health authorities’ recommendations, as stated by the Muslim organization Islamakademiet.dk, was typical:

As some have approached us and asked questions about Friday prayers and participation in the daily prayers at the mosques during the Corona virus pandemic, we have contacted health experts to better understand the health aspects of the challenge, and made some remarks in connection with Friday prayers and other larger gatherings (also of a religious nature) while the pandemic is still active (Islamakademiet.dk 12.03.2020; my translation).

Islamakademiet.dk suggested that the Friday prayers could be said in the mosques with only three participants, and that other Muslims should not worry about being unable to attend Friday prayers.. It has a precedent in what happens if an individual cannot participate, in which case the *jumu'ah* prayer is replaced by an ordinary noon prayer, the *zuhr* prayer:

We wish to point out that those who do not participate in the prayers at the mosque to avoid infecting others, or out of fear of being infected themselves, are not sinful for their lack of participation in the prayers in the mosque. However, one should of course make sure to say the prayers at home.

Logically speaking, simply replacing the *jumu'ah* prayer with the *zuhr* prayer would make the sermon redundant, as the *khutbah* (sermon) is regarded as replacing two *rak'ahs*, but some mosques stream or post sermons to supplement prayers at home. However, in some cases these are not called a Friday sermon, but a Friday Reminder (Muslimsk Ungdom, København, FB, different dates).

The book, *Mosques of Denmark*, presents the daily prayers

as a fundamental practice in Danish mosques, but also identifies teaching and funerals as important activities (Kühle and Larsen 2019). COVID-19 has affected both of these, and often, teaching has been moved online. Changes related to burials are enforced with respect to the practice of washing the body of the deceased (*ghusl*). If the deceased was infected with COVID-19, this may risk spreading the virus. Infection with virus may also delay recovery of the body from hospital, and the opportunity to console the family may be restricted because of social distancing requirements (Campbell 2020: 15). Several mosques and Muslim organizations place information about burials high on their agenda. On the Facebook page of the large, purpose-built Hamad bin Khalifa Civilization Center, a Muslim doctor was interviewed about good practices during the pandemic, including how to handle the dead (Hamad bin Khalifa Civilization Center FB 3.04.2020). According to the physician, several Copenhagen-based imams agreed to the recommendation that washing the body of someone who was infected with COVID-19 should be done while it remained in the body bag, to prevent the further spread of the disease. The recommendation was inspired by similar recommendations by Norway's Muslims Dialognetværk and Islamisk Råd Norge, which also included a permanent stop to Muslims being transported abroad for burial (Dansk Islamisk Center, FB, 21.03.2020). Another video features an imam who is in charge of many of the Muslim funerals that take place in Aarhus. The imam was filmed together with the head of the chapel at Aarhus University Hospital. The main message of the video was that next of kin should comply with instructions from the hospital chapel, and that attendance in the chapel is restricted to ten persons, and sessions of 30 minutes (Abu Khaled, FB, 15.04.2020). The video illustrates how the pandemic created a perceived need for health authorities to reach out to Muslim authorities.

The closing of houses of worship created a problem concerning the specific Ramadan prayer, Taravih, which is traditionally said every night in Sunni Muslim mosques. Mosques reacted differently. Some mosques simply cancelled the Taravih, whereas other mosques cancelled this, and also added information about how to say the Taravih prayer at home. Concerning the Eid al Fitr, many mosques cancelled the Eid prayer, some did so

with restrictions, whereas others posted information about how to observe Eid at home (Muslimsk Ungdom, København, FB, different dates).

The reopening of mosques after May 18, 2020 followed the instructions given by the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs (Guidelines 2020), and was well-received by the mosques. One mosque, which is not a ‘recognized religious community’ and thus did not receive the guidelines directly from the ministry, celebrated the opening by announcing, “Good news, The Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs has made recommendations for a responsible reopening of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Denmark and other religious bodies, including mosques. Fredens Moské has decided to open its doors again for the five daily prayers” (Fredens moske, FB 18.05.2020). The reopening did not lead to a return to the pre-COVID-19 situation. Many mosques posted regulations on social media indicating who may attend the mosques, mosque opening hours, how to prepare before attending the mosque, and how to behave while there. Det Islamiske Trossamfund (The Islamic Faith Community), a major mosque in Copenhagen, suggested that elderly and vulnerable people, and children under 13, should stay at home, that wudu should be performed at home, and one’s own prayer mat should be used. Also, the mosque does not open until 15 minutes before prayers (DIT 22.05.2020). Other mosques supply disposable prayer mats to worshippers who do not bring their own, and also suggest that dikr, takbir, and salawat should be avoided, as these activities may help spread the COVID-19 virus (ditsamfund.dk 18.05.2020). Larger events continued to be cancelled. In late August, the large Shi’i mosque, Imam Ali Mosque, cancelled their yearly Ashura parade that commemorates Imam Hussein. The parade has taken place for 25 years, but was cancelled “for the safety of participants and citizens” (Imam Ali Moske, FB, 27.08.2020). It is clearly emphasized that the mosque “encourages everyone to follow the law and the recommendations made by the health authorities in order to protect those in our society who are vulnerable” (ibid).

The expressed desire to bring Denmark safely through the COVID-19 pandemic is widespread among religious communities in Denmark, yet SoMe communications from Danish mosques are plentiful and often take on a particular strong civic character.

Performing the good citizen?

Evidence of COVID-19 transmission linked to houses of worship (e.g. in South Korea, France, India, Iran) emerged early on in global media coverage of the pandemic, and as Danish historian of religion, Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger noted, religions may often encourage behavior that may lead to the spread of the COVID-19 virus:

Here you meet, stand close together, perhaps holding hands, touching the same sacred relics, sharing a sacred space or prayer rug, cleansing yourselves with or in the same water, perhaps drinking from the same sacred vessels, and the like. And this goes against more or less all the health authorities' orders. ((Fibiger 2020), my translation)

Although there was little that indicated that religious activities in Denmark had contributed to the spread of the corona virus when the survey was conducted in October 2020,⁸ the results of the survey show how the global media images mentioned by Fibiger may have had an impact on the attitudes of the Danish population. As many as 70 percent of the survey respondents responded that they to a high degree consider religious groups in Denmark responsible for the spread of the virus (Andersen et al 2021). This dovetails with Fibiger's argument that secular evaluations of religious behavior may overshadow fair concern for responsible behavior by scapegoating the religiously observant through implications that religious people do not care about recommendations from health authorities (Fibiger 2020). When Mattias Tesfaye, Minister of Immigration and Integration, warned Muslims to not ignore the guidelines for social distancing during Ramadan, social media reactions by Danish Muslims indicated that they saw this as an example of scapegoating. Given the backdrop of implicit and explicit accusations that Muslims are more likely to spread the COVID-19 virus, it is unsurprising that Danish Muslim organizations have aimed to demonstrate their compliance with the health recommendations issued by the Danish authorities, emphasizing Muslims' loyalty to the Danish state and their responsible behavior in Danish society. Some mosques almost over-performed, going to unusual lengths to follow the authorities' guidelines (ditsamfund.dk 18.05.2020). Mosques' SoMe communications resem-

8 A small number of examples of mainly within majority church has emerged subsequently.

bled the communications of other minority communities in Denmark, but were also echoed by their actions. For instance, mosques in Aarhus were more likely than other religious organizations to close entirely—eleven of the thirteen mosques that participated in our study of religious organizations in Aarhus did so. This constituted 85 percent of mosques, compared to 57 percent of religious communities that closed their houses of worship entirely (Larsen, Mauritsen, Sothilingam, et al. 2020). Yet Muslims also seem to be more surveilled: The only “invisible” mosque in Aarhus received regular visits from the police to ensure that restrictions were followed (ibid.). Ironically, most mosques’ civic SoMe communications predated the Minister of Immigration and Integration’s suggestion that Muslims would need extra encouragement to follow official health-related advice. Their efforts to be perfect citizens backfired in the case of the public call to prayer. The public call to prayer was presented as a case of Islamization, even if it was intended as a way of symbolizing the coherence of and cooperation of Danish society. Also, the attempt to use the call to prayer as a symbol of societal unity was unsuccessful in terms of changing general conceptions of the role of Muslims communities, with regard to coping with the consequences of the pandemic in Denmark.

The visibility of the Muslim communities was not entirely negative. Danish authorities approached the possible risks of spreading COVID-19 during Ramadan by formulating specific Ramadan advice, which Muslims generally received positively; many felt seen and included by the Danish Health authority’s strategies. Yet the Ramadan advice drew from criticism from some non-Muslims, who criticized the policy as advantaging Muslims vis-à-vis other minorities, such as Jews. This type of resentment may be referred to as “hijab envy.” Hijab envy is the observation by other minorities that Muslims receive attention that they do not receive, due to “a deficit in visibility: their inability to lay claim to a discernible and displayable religious identity” (Macdonald 2018: 54). Hijab envy is obviously an ambivalent feeling. Although during the COVID-19 pandemic, Danish Muslims were “deftly embodying and performing their religious identities in ways that a pluralistic milieu could witness and champion” (ibid), these actions were usually not embraced by the general public, and although they may have been visible, the attention attracted was mostly unfavorable.

To some extent, what may be interpreted as some mosques’

performance of good citizenship did follow the logic of the “dilemma of stigmatized identities” (Bail 2014), that is, the ambivalent situation where attempts to counter prejudices actually support them. Yet most of the civic communications that form the empirical basis of this article were not intended for a non-Muslim audience; they were not part of a “performative performance,” that is, announcements prompted by direct requests from the majority society (van Es 2018). The communications may also be seen as internal communication that aimed to confirm and ensure the compliance of other -Muslims with government regulations. Thus, the communications may correspond to the assertion that “Muslim minorities are not only governed from the outside but also from the inside—that is, by families, friends, and communities—locally as well as trans-locally” (Liebmann and Galal 2020: 264). A transnational dimension should be added to this statement. Some Danish mosques stream religious lectures/post advice from health authorities from countries that include Bosnia, Pakistan, and Turkey. It seems reasonable to suggest that they may follow strategies that align with the policies and religious authorities of these countries, which in most cases support the lockdowns (Riexinger, Thorsen, Fibiger, Borup and Fibiger 2021). Although strategies of being a good citizen are directed at a particular nation state, combating the pandemic also means being a good citizen of the world.

Handling the COVID-19 pandemic

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic presented a major challenge for religious communities worldwide. The collective element, which is the life and soul of religious life, was significantly reduced if not eliminated. Given this, it is amazing how quickly many religious groups reorganized and adapted, and found theological explanations that fit the new situation. According to historian of religion Jørn Borup, this is no surprise: “It is clear from all this that religions are under pressure. But religion is also a phenomenon that is prepared for disaster. Religion has always been prepared for, perhaps even based on, threats to life” (Borup 2020). Following this line of thinking, the COVID-19 pandemic is not the first time an epidemic has challenged collective religious life. The fourth cholera pandemic

(1865–1875) spread through Muslim Haj pilgrims and hit Mecca first, before spreading to Europe (Dasgupta and Crunkhorn 2020: 4). This highlights an important aspect of the reactions to the pandemic: Often, there are resources that allow religious communities to adapt to changing conditions.

Literature concerning the consequences of COVID-19 for religious life is beginning to emerge. According to a study from New Zealand, the literature indicates that the risk of COVID-19 infection presents three primary social challenges for religious communities: 1) the need to reassess practices of worship, 2) the difficulty of mitigating any possibility of community transmission, and 3) the challenge of imposing the norms of social distancing. A fourth social challenge for religious communities was identified as addressing congregations' welfare and pastoral concerns, and those of others in need (Oxholm et al. 2020). Although all four concerns are relevant to this study, at least two others emerge: One is the question of economy, which one mosque presents as a major predicament:

The Corona crisis has left its clear mark on the entire world map. Of course, we are all affected by the seriousness of the situation, not only on the health front, but also on the economic front. No one yet knows the full consequences of the Corona pandemic. Nor does the board of Masjid Iqra. The board is concerned about the consequences of the pandemic on the structure that we all know 🕌 (Masjid Iqra, FB, 4.05.2020; my translation).

The economy of this particular mosque is probably highly dependent on donations, and the mosque board now asks for donations to save the mosque. The financial set-up of a religious community in terms of its dependence on membership fees or donations is a general dividing line among religious communities in Aarhus (Larsen, Mauritsen, Sothilingam, et al. 2020). The crisis obviously hits harder those communities that depend mainly on contingent means. Thus, the pandemic may rearrange the religious field because of this.

The pandemic has also increased the incentive for cooperation among mosques. Seven of the seventeen mosques in Aarhus were behind this joint statement:

It is strongly urged that everyone comply with the Danish Health Authority's guidelines, and particularly the ban on assemblies. We wish all Muslims a happy Eid.

Best wishes, Mosques of Aarhus (Fredens moske, Wakf Moskeen, Masjed Tawfik, Salsabil, Masjed Bilal, Masjed Alnour, Masjed al takwa) (Fredens moske, FB, 22.07.2020; my translation).

Are there any other pandemic-related changes to in evidence? It is worth noting that mosques' responses to the lockdown of houses of worship vary. Some mosques simply stopped all activities, whereas others started to produce, or increased their production of, social media content. In Aarhus more than half of the mosques increased their online activities during the lockdown (Larsen, Mauritsen, Sothilingam, et al. 2020). It remains to be seen whether the strong presence of some online actors will continue—in fact, less than half of the mosques think they will continue their new practices—and if so, what the consequences will be. Social media produces a change in the way the religious bodies interact with their audiences. The production of online material—perhaps for a broader audience—may lead to understandings being contested and challenged (Herbert 2011). In this way, the pandemic may bring about changes to the Muslim landscape in Denmark. Religious change seems to occur at the nexus of religion–state relations, which has a new face in postsecular societies. The visibility of Islam and Muslims is strongly connected to changes in the European “public consciousness” (cf. Habermas 2008), associated with the realization that religion is not going to disappear anytime soon. Therefore, the need to regulate the public appearance of religion emerges. This has clearly been the case during the COVID-19 crisis, with regard to the advice concerning Ramadan, but also with regard to the reopening of houses of worship. The visibility of large Muslim funerals led to restrictions on the number that may attend funerals. The political debates on the Muslim call to prayer display and extend this logic. However, Habermas suggests that negotiating the position of religion in a postsecular society involves reciprocal expectations, “in order to ensure that in firmly entrenched nation states, social relations remain civil despite the growth of a plurality of cultures and religious worldviews...” (Habermas 2008: 21). The request to make the public call to prayer during the pandemic was an (unsuccessful) attempt to carve out and perform a specific role of religion in postsecular society. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic established an arena in which different visions of a postsecular society were presented, and limits were set on the public presence of Islam.

The pandemic led minority religions, particularly Islam, to increase involvement, and even cooperation, with the state. Despite Habermas's expectation that a postsecular society would make religious voices heard in public, "the civic communication ecology" (cf. Friedland 2014) largely evaded the traditional media. Political actors as reported by traditional media focused on setting limits to Muslim presence in the 'pandemic soundscape' in contrast to countries such as Canada that due to the extraordinary situation opened public space for Muslim call to prayer (Riskedahl 2020). Yet the general negotiation of relations between secular and religious authorities was communicated by social media. Examples include the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs' public announcement of the recommendation to close houses of worship, and their instructions for reopening them. The video of the pathologist at Aarhus University Hospital and an imam delivering advice on how to handle deaths that occur under COVID-19 conditions was posted on social media. Social media were also the platforms that published advice from Muslims in the healthcare sector bringing healthcare advice and religious instruction together. Religious practices changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, but so did the backbone of postsecular society, the "secularnormative order" (Parmaksız 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed a new secularnormative order promoted by the Danish state, which,

...creates its own exclusion and control mechanisms over what constitutes legitimate knowledge and thereby privileges certain cognitive structures, ideological and symbolic commitments, along with the practices, habits and reflexes that are attached to these commitments. It attempts to set up an order that devalues certain forms of cultural capital and sources of knowledge (Parmaksız 2018: 109).

In such a society, the secular needs to engage with the religious. I am not sure whether this means that "neither the religious nor the secular are taken to be the natural state of things, the yardstick against which all social and cultural relations are judged and evaluated" (Parmaksız 2018: 109). But it does mean that a secular state will need to respond to religion in new ways, which may grant religious minority communities a new, more formal position in society.

Conclusion: postsecular perspectives on COVID-19 in Denmark

In an interesting historical overview of pandemics, Dasgupta and Crunkhor make the daring statement that “COVID-19 can be called a mixture of all pandemics from ancient times to the present day in terms of its effects on human civilization and natural history of disease. Pandemic dynamics, in our view (sic) has reached its culmination” (Dasgupta and Crunkhorn 2020: 7). Although this may be an overstatement, it does address the complexity of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the reaction of the Danish state is clearly secular, reactions to the pandemic commingle the religious and the secular. This is evident, for instance, when Muslim organizations communicate the messages of secular authorities as though they were their own. Because in some cases theological responses to the pandemic were drafted in consultation with Muslim healthcare personnel, the secular and religious messages may in fact coincide. In Danish debates on COVID-19, religion is certainly noted as something to be addressed. The religious and secular reactions to the pandemic correspond to the concept of a postsecular society in terms of circumstances in which a secular authority adjusts “itself to the continued existence of religious communities in an increasingly secularized environment” (Habermas 2008). The pandemic did not end discussions about how religion is to be regulated and addressed in Danish society. It is too soon to know what the consequences of the crisis will be for mosques and Muslim organizations in Denmark, but it is already clear that they are likely to be substantial.

Danish abstract

Hvordan har danske muslimer kommunikeret om COVID-19, og hvordan er religionssamfund blevet inddraget i håndteringen af COVID-19 pandemien? Religion blev en del af den offentlige debat, da trossamfund lukkede ned. Muslimske ledere såvel som ministerier og kommuner udstak med afsæt i religiøs praksis retningslinjer for, hvordan folk bør opføre sig i den krisesituation. Artiklen undersøger danske moskeerne rolle under krisen på baggrund af deres offentlige kommunikation på sociale medier. Materialet analyseres i forhold til begrebet om

det post-sekulære samfund, og det konkluderes, at krisen bl.a. har bidraget til forhandlinger om minoritetsreligioner, især om islams position i det danske samfund.

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