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SECULAR AUTHORITIES AND MUSLIM COMMUNITIES UNDER COVID-19:

Oslo as a case study of post-secularity

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Declaration

I, Demba Sabally, declare that this thesis is a result of my research investigations and findings. Sources of information other than my own have been acknowledged and a reference list has been appended. This work has not been previously submitted to any other university for award of any type of academic degree.

Signature…………………………....

Date…………………………………

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ABSTRACT

Despite processes of secularization of the cultural and political realms of societies, religious traditions and practices continue to suffuse in the life of many people around the world. In Norway increased international mobility and migration is believed to be among factors for the presence of various cultures and religions. Recently the issue of collaboration between Muslim communities and public authorities has received a great deal of attention among scholars and policy makers alike. This paper contributes to this debate through discussion of the nature of the interaction between secular authorities and Muslim communities in Oslo under the Covid-19 crisis.

The paper presents a literature review of studies related to the relationship between religions and a secular society, focusing on interactions at a local level. To generate my own empirical data, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 research participants.

Using different understandings of post-secularity as the theoretical framework, the study has revealed that there is a combined effort in Oslo, even though only to some extent, to bring Muslim communities and secular authority together to address the Covid-19 crisis.

Contents

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

In this project I use the concept of post-secularity to investigate the interaction between secular authorities and Muslim communities in Oslo as part of the collective efforts in Norway to combat the outbreak of 2019 coronavirus (Covid-19). The study finds such an interaction – in terms of combined efforts - to be an important dynamic of modern societies. Muslim communities in this research project are understood to include religious organizations, mosques, and individual members of Muslim communities irrespective of their affiliation to any religious organisation or entity; meanwhile, secular authorities are categorised as the institutions and administrators that are officially responsible for public services and facilities in Oslo (Lillevik, 2020; Holte, 2020).

Furthermore, this research project uses a combination of primary and secondary sources of data to approach, and hopefully to answer, the research questions it raises. Participants in the study include Imams, leaders of religious organizations, public administrators who have experience working with Muslim communities in Oslo. Additionally, individual members of the Muslim community were invited to take part in the research because of the importance the study has given to their lived experiences and to look for representation of different perspectives on the topic. The project seeks to complement existing works that promote religion-state interaction that is guided by inclusivity and religious equality as such (Pasha, 2012).

1.2 Problem Statemen

Despite processes of secularization of the cultural and political realms of modern societies, religious traditions and practices continue to suffuse in the life of many people around the world. In the West, for instance, increased international mobility and migration is believed to be among crucial factors for the presence of various cultures and religions. Norway is not different, where the religious groups include Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Norse religion, Sámi religion, and Baha'is. Recently, due to factors such as value conflicts and terrorist attacks (Lillevik, 2020), the issue of collaboration between Muslim communities and public authorities has received a great deal of attention among scholars and policy makers alike. Yet, research in the field of infectious diseases and religion, particularly Islamic religion, in modern secular societies is in its initial stage. The current study, therefore, considers the interaction between secular authorities and Muslim communities in Oslo under the Covid-19 crisis. The aim is to explore the combined efforts between public authorities and

Muslim communities to stop the spread of the Covid-19, especially among Muslim minority groups.

1.3 Previous Research

Since the early 20th Century, the premises and predictions of several powerful intellectual and political figures have driven a proposition that as our civilization and its modern technologies become complex, religious beliefs and practices would decline in all aspects of social life and governance. Sociologists such as Peter Berger (1968) and Steve Bruce (2002) argued that the march of science and socio-economic developments were leading to where neither would religion be needed for supernatural answers to the big questions, nor would it maintain its strong link with the political currents of societies. In 1968, Berger predicted that by 'the twenty-first century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture' (Berger, 1968). This prediction, however, did not hold. Now, for many years, scholars and politicians are confronted with the global resurgence of religion that which undermines the secularization thesis. In his 'Clash of Civilizations', Huntington (2002) presented religion as a key element in the presumed clash of various cultures. Similarly, Fox (2014) has investigated the patterns of religious discrimination and religious support from 1990 to 2008, finding that 'the 21st century will more likely host a battle between religious and secular forces, each seeking advantage in the political arena' (Fox, 2014:23). Empirically, sociological research on the revival of religion investigates, among other issues, the rapid settlement of Muslim communities in Western societies. With this respect, scholars have discussed different aspects of the interaction between secular authorities and religious communities, but also the role of faith organizations in society. For instance, Farnell et al. (2003) provide a crucial reflection on the role of religious organisations in urban regeneration processes. The authors have studied the politics of engaging religious communities in urban regeneration by looking at the effectiveness of value-based impetus for faith communities' participation in urban regeneration; and presenting some examples of practices of collaboration with faith communities. In the Norwegian context, Holte (2020) uses Niklas Luhmann's theory of society to investigate the social integration of religious communities in society, revealing that 'the needs of an increasingly diverse population can be and are met by promoting, rather than restricting, the public engagement of religious organisations' (Holte, 2020:465). Specifically focusing on 'Muslim civil society organisations', Lillevik (2020) considers dynamics of local arrangements for implementation of integration policy, including local administrators' perspective of potentials and problems of Islamic religious entities. Lillevik

found that 'the implementation of the grant scheme aims at promoting an inclusive local identity that celebrates the ethnic and religious difference of its inhabitants' (p.1956). The current study does not focus on Islam as a threat or Muslims' integration into the European version of secularity. Instead, it presents the Covid-19 as a case and uses critical approach to post-secularity to problematize the secular tradition and its 'hegemonic self-image' (Mavelli and Petito, 2012; Pasha, 2012). In other words, my premise is that, as it will become clear throughout this study, agreeing with Mavelli and Petito, religious insights deserve to be considered on an equal footing with secular reasons. For my purpose, this can be exemplified by religious organizations' participation in public discourse and provision of welfare services in cooperation with public authorities.

1.4 An Overview of Norway's Muslim Communities and Religious Organizations

Despite the ever-increasing secularization of the cultural and political realms, religion continues to grow and in the life of billions of people around the world. In the Western world, including Norway, international migration and mobility is believed to be a prominent factor for the presence of various cultures and religions. Norway's religious groups include Christianity, the largest, and Non-Christian religions, such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Norse religion, Sámi religion, and Baha'i.

With respect to Islam, scholars and historians point out that there are two major factors that could explain the growing presence of Islam and Muslims in Norway. The first factor is related to labour immigration from the 1970s. The second factor is associated with an increase in the number of refugees and asylum seekers from the late 1980s onwards (Leirvik, 2014). In Norway, Islam is the second largest religion, after Christianity, whereas Muslims comprise 3.3% (175,500 individuals) of the total population (SSB, 2020b). As of 2020, 37 percent of registered Muslims in Norway live in Oslo (SSB, 2020b).

Post-secular theorists whose approach are considered in this project are fully aware of the conflictive relations within the social fabrics of modern societies, including critical relations between the immigrants and natives, and religion and secular (Dallmayr, 2012). However, the focus of this thesis in general is on exploring the interaction between Muslim communities and secular authorities as well as challenges faced by these communities in their work to foster trust and enable administrative sectors of the State and communities to effectively address more acute issues such as the Covid-19.

In search for the potential of the Muslim communities in Oslo, I draw on 1) organizational and discursive structures of the communities themselves and 2) the activities they carry out and the perspectives of regular members of Muslim communities of these activities. As I will show in this section, my position is that these aspects of the Muslim communities in Norway, particularly in Oslo, have a visible degree of influence on the agenda setting for policy responses. One possible explanation for this influence may have to do with the view 'that Islam is not seen as a static phenomenon, but as a tradition that is open for change and [competing] interpretations and because of this flexibility Muslims have shown great capacity to adapt to different societies and cultures (Brekke et al., 2019).

By organizational structure I mean mosques and Islamic religious organizations. Several studies about Muslim communities already exist. Among them, I can mention Kari Vogt's research on mosques and Islamic organizations in Norway (Vogt, 2002); Bangstad and Elgvin's overview of Islamic organizations (Bangstad & Elgvin, 2016); and the news agency, Utrop's investigation on mosques in Oslo and their activities (Utrop 2016). Previously, because of their ability to build social capital, several studies have identified mosques and Muslim organizations as often among the strongest elements in society for developing the necessary channels and capabilities for engagement in social and political issues (Leirvik, 2014). Researchers such as Vogt (2002) operationalized 'mosque' as 'public prayer rooms' and 'Muslim organisation' as Muslim civil society organisations that aspire to lobbying and coordinating cooperation among Muslims and strengthening interaction with mainstream society. Other researchers use religious organizations to 'refer to any organisation formed for religious purposes' (Holte, 2018:3). For my purposes, like Vogt, I also refer to mosques as public prayer rooms, but only in terms of their primary function. In other words, for theoretical reasons embodied in this study that Islam is not static, mosques and organizations assume the same role except that not all Islamic religious organizations provide public prayer rooms.

According to Leirvik (2014), there were 58 Islamic religious congregations in Oslo in 2018. He further notes that there are two different categories of Mosques and prayer houses in the city. Accordingly, the most congregations are found in converted flats, factories, or office premises. The second category, which is less common, are purpose-built mosques. As of 2020, there are three of such mosques in central Oslo and two outside of the city centre; these mosques are publicly visible because they have the minaret - the tower that is traditionally used in Muslim countries to call to prayer; however, in Oslo, Muslims do not call to prayer from the minarets five times a day as practiced in Muslim countries (Oslo Byleksikon, 2020). The first mosque in Norway was opened in the early 1970s (Borchgrevink, 2017), even though it was dominated by

Pakistanis, it gathered Muslims of various ethnic backgrounds (Leirvik, 2014). Normally, programs at mosques are overseen by religious leaders - Imams. In addition to prayers – Friday (Jumu'a), funeral, and five daily prayers – it is common in Norway that Muslims use these congregations - mosques and premises - for other purposes such as seminars and meetings for both Norwegians and Muslims to accommodate dialogue and understanding; sport activities; coordination of Hajj and umrah; and Quran lessons for children.

Another influential characteristic of Muslim communities – as many other communities – is the organizations. Building on the concept that religious organization is any organization established for religious purposes, I advance the scope of this definition by looking at an organization's relation to the State, on one hand, and the roles of religion within the organization, on the other hand. This combination results in the definition of Islamic religious organization in this thesis as any organization established for religious purposes, irrespective of whether it is publicly funded or not, where religion plays 'explicit' or 'implicit' roles. The role of religion is considered explicit in 'cases where engagement is expressed and given meaning primarily in religious terms, using religious language, symbols and authority'; on the other hand, its role is regarded implicit in relation to 'cases where engagement is primarily expressed [in terms of interaction], but where faith plays a secondary role in motivating, mobilising and giving direction to what is done and when it takes place' (Borchgrevink , 2017:144). This approach allows for the inclusion of organizations that might be described religious but deploy different kinds of strategies for engaging with secular authorities, as well as with other civil organizations. Moreover, as Borchgrevink (2017:144) have noted: 'Whether the role of religion is implicit or explicit may be conscious or unconscious and depends on context'. She also explains that 'an organization may use a 'development frame' – using the language, symbols and authority from development - when seeking support from a mainstream development donor, and a 'religious frame' when raising funds in a mosque, or a church'. However, the theoretical underpinning in my thesis postulates that in the context of crisis, such as the Covid-19, it is not necessary for an organization to pursue a binary framework where it uses secular reason when seeking support from the authorities and uses religious language when approaching members of Muslim communities. In other words, religious principles and teachings might be transferred to social and human life and made accessible to both religious communities and secular authorities. By pursuing an inclusive approach, organizations may aim at bridging the division between the secular reason and religious revelation as such.

Islamic religious based organisations, as described above, are a key and long-term community resource. For instance, they offer space for women, especially young ones, who may not always be able to attend mosques (Perry & El-Hassan, 2008). Despite this opportunity, Muslim women,

like women worldwide in different spheres, are underrepresented in decision-making positions within these organizations (Leirvik, 2014). Leirvik writes that: 'examples of female leadership in Muslim organizations are still episodes and the overwhelming majority of board members in Muslim organizations remain male' (Leirvik, 2014:148). Furthermore, in Norway, under the umbrella of national integration policies and support for religious freedom, such registered faith-based organizations have been actively funded by the government to provide religious, welfare, and cultural services; but also, to play active role in political representation for their respective community (Lillevik, 2020).

Even though most Muslim organizations are connected to mosques in one way or another, several of them are independent, increasingly systemic, and active outside the more longstanding mosques. In many cases, such organizations comprise many different Muslim congregations and communicate with entities beyond local districts. Several researchers have noted the emergence of more diverse Muslim congregations in Norway, starting from 1990s. For instance, Vogt (2002) and Mårtensson's (2014) list include organizations such as the Islamic Council Norway (IRN), Islamnet, the Muslim Student Association (Muslimsk Studentsamfunn, MSS), and the Muslim Youth of Norway (Ung Muslim NMU). MSS and NMU are examples of spaces where young Norwegian Muslim communicate and reason changes of traditional authority structures within the Islamic tradition (Jacobsen 2011). Some of these organizations – IRN, Minhaj ul-Quran, the Minhaj Women's Forum, and Jamaat-e-Islami, for instance – even have connections abroad. In Norway, the Minhaj Women's Forum deploys women as 'resource persons' to address challenges that particularly affect minority women and children. These organization contribute at different levels as well. IRN and MDN, for instance, act as umbrella organizations, providing resources and often an identity to the smaller organizations.

1.5 Research Questions

Focus on different perspectives of the concept of post-secularity forms the basis of different ways of understanding religious communities in modern societies. Debates about alternative accounts for religion and its role in society, which has been going on for several decades now, subjects the concept of post-secularity to changes in meaning. These different meanings of post-secularity generate interesting insights about the religious and secular relations in contemporary societies in which modernity is perceived as failing. Using various viewpoints of post-secularity, this study is aimed at contributing to the research on interaction between secular authorities and religious institutions during the COVID-19 outbreak. In other words, the project

seeks to highlight what an effective cooperation in response to a national crisis might look like at a local level. It asks, therefore, what insights we can gain from different conceptions of post-secularity toward understanding the interaction between secular authorities and Muslim communities under the Covid-19 in Oslo.

Furthermore, authorities have welfare responsibilities to the public. In a diverse city such as Oslo, different groups might have different needs. Yet, these needs are expected to be addressed. From this perspective, public authority sector may look for opportunities elsewhere, for instance, through civil society organizations - including religious institutions - to complement its efforts. Equally, religious organizations might use this window of opportunity to increase their visibility. My project, in this regard, is intended to understand how secular authorities and religious organizations, in terms of their roles during the Covid-19 outbreak, engage Muslim communities. I ask therefore what roles Islamic religious organizations and public authorities do play for Muslim communities in Oslo in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Also, in relation to this question, the researcher asks representatives of Muslim organizations and individuals who participated in the study of their experiences of the government's response to the Covid-19.

1.6 Justification for the research topic

This study focuses on Oslo and Muslim communities under the Covid-19 for several reasons. Islam, on one hand, is reported to have changed the political and religious landscape of Norway due to new waves of immigration (Engelstad at el, 2017). In other words, while membership in the state church is declining, other religions in the country – including non-established Christian religions – are increasing due to international mobility and migration. One of such religions that are growing is Islam (Engelstad at el, 2017). Also, Islamic burial rites, the exposure of pilgrims and worshipers in congregations to infectious diseases, for instance, deserve a study in contexts such as the Covid-19. Oslo, on the other hand, is chosen because urban areas are more likely to be strongly affected by immigration since most newcomers live in the capital cities (IOM, 2018). It is estimated, as of 2020, that Oslo – the largest urban settlement in the country - had a population of over one million (SSB, 2020a). The city also had the highest percentage of immigrants and Norwegian-born to immigrant parents per population among Norwegian cities, both in 'relative terms and absolute figures' (SSB, 2019). Correspondently, as of 2020, 37 percent of registered Muslims in Norway live in Oslo (SSB, 2020b). From the Covid-19 perspective, Oslo is pointed out as the pandemic's epicentre and some initial reports indicate that some groups who make a significant portion of Muslims in the city, were affected to an

extent that is too large in comparison to other groups (Indseth et al., 2021; Telle et al., 2021). Linking the experiences of Muslim communities and initiatives by local authorities in Oslo can add nuance to our understanding of why some attempts to deal with issues such as Covid-19 might be effective, whereas some other measures might not be. The Covid-19 itself is worth exploring since it is the most recent experience, at least at the time of the writing of this thesis, that challenges the way in which we deal with critical issues that might reveal the level of social cohesion and equity within a particular society. In general, this project is useful because it contributes to answering the question of whether religion, through Muslim communities in this case, has any significant role in Norwegian society; it is also hoped to provide empirical data and a greater understanding on state-religion interactions.

1.7 Thesis Outline

To answer the research questions in this project, after the introduction in the First Chapter, I explain the methodological and ethical issues in the Second Chapter. In the Third Chapter, I illustrate the theoretical perspective that guides the study. In the Fourth Chapter, I explore the politics of Norway's response to the Covid-19 and the interaction with Muslim communities in Oslo. In the Fifth Chapter, I examine some of the roles and limitations of Islamic religious organizations during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the Sixth Chapter, I discuss the opinions of public administrators about and the experiences of Muslim communities of government's response. In the Seventh Chapter, I summarize my concluding remarks.

2. RESEARCH DESIGN AND EXECUTION

This chapter gives an overview of my approach to (1) sample selection, (2) data collection, (3) data analysis, and (4) ethical considerations. Specifically, I discuss and justify some of the choices made in relation to answering the research questions.

2.1 Sample selection approach

Under the sampling selection, I describe the use of different sampling strategies; provide information about, and justification for, my choice of units of analysis; and explanation for my selection criteria and method.

Sampling in this research project was primarily guided by purposive sampling. Purposive sampling, also known as selective or subjective sampling, is a non-probability form of sampling where researchers do not seek to include participants on a random basis, but on their own judgement in a strategic way (Bryman, 2012). Bryman (2012:418) states that by using

purposive sampling: 'Very often, the researcher will want to sample in order to ensure that there is a good deal of variety in the resulting sample, so that sample members differ from each other in terms of key characteristics relevant to the research question'. I chose this approach because I was interested in gaining 'access to as wide a range of individuals relevant to [my] research questions as possible, so that many different perspectives and ranges of activity are the focus of attention' (Bryman, 2012:416). The researcher in the current study initially, purposively identified and sampled key stakeholders. However, the process of recruitment developed to include other approaches within purposive sampling framework. A key aspect of purposive sampling that I use in this project is snowball sampling: where existing participants link researchers to other participants who will also recruit others and son on (Bryman, 2012:424). There are other examples of purposive sampling that could be used in this study, such as theoretical saturation: 'carry on sampling theoretically until a category has been saturated with data (Bryman, 2012:421). However, I considered snowball sampling because it is simple, cost-efficient, as well as it allowed me to involve participants that I would otherwise not reach (Bryman, 2012).

With respect to units of analysis, this study examines interactions between secular authorities and Muslim communities in Oslo during the Covid-19 outbreak. In this context, the units, rather than the population, is defined by different characteristics of the interaction in question. These include "who", "what", ''when'', and ''where'' that I wanted to be able to say something about at the end of the study. For instance, regarding ''who'', the persons interviewed in this project were public administrators, leaders within Islamic religious organizations, and individual members of Muslim communities; while with ''what'' and ''where'', the purpose of the study suggests looking at organizations, events, influence, or communication that were relevant for the interaction between secular authorities and Muslim communities in Oslo. The choice of these units of analysis as such was partly based on my previous interaction in the field of inter-religious activities with leaders from different religious communities and with local authorities in Oslo. From methodological perspective, the selection criteria regarding Islamic religious organizations and mosques in this study proves challenging. My focus has been on the most active organizations and mosques that take part in meetings and activities I mentioned above. Through my participation in these gatherings, I get chance to list organizations that often take part and their representatives. I also use publicly available material from government websites. By comparing the official material with my own list, I found that even though most of the largest Muslim denominations participated in the meetings, some smaller organizations were

also regularly active. However, with respect to my analysis of the online documents and texts, I focus on the two largest umbrella organizations – IRN and MDN. In chapter five, I have explained why.

This study comprises 16 qualitative interviews. The interviews were conducted with four public administrators, five Islamic religious leaders, and seven individual members of Muslim communities. For my purpose, inclusion criteria include geographic characteristics and religious affiliations. As illustrated in what follows, I explain these issues on a case-by-case basis.

The informants from the secular authority sector include two women and two men. The project invited public administrators on the basis that the participant is (a) employed within the local government sector in Oslo and is (2) involved in the processes of the Covid-19 guidelines or funding schemes or, alternatively, have experience of working with minority groups in the municipality. Civil servants who took part in this study had worked within the local government sector for at least one year prior to the Covid-19 outbreak. Minimum of one year experience was not set as a condition for participation, however, admittedly, it has helped the research to get insights into participants' experiences, before and during the crisis, of the interaction between the local administration and religious organizations. Moreover, I was not interested in gender, ethnic or religious backgrounds, with respect to local administrators. I had exchanged several emails with some of the interviewees to help build rapport. Some of these email addresses were obtained from the internet. I made use of the internet to 1) identify and invite participants who can best inform the research question - appropriateness; and 2) ensure that enough data is collected to produce detailed, rich descriptions of the phenomenon under study - adequacy. Appropriateness and adequacy are guiding principles of sampling in qualitative research (Berg & Lune, 2012). Not everyone that I initially contacted, nevertheless, was appropriate. For instance, one of the emails I received reads as: ''Your project is very interesting. But I am neither a Muslim nor live in Oslo. Is it other reason for your request?''. However, after a few email exchanges, the person connected me to several potential participants who could best inform the project.

 Leaders within the Muslim community who participated in this study comprise one woman – chairperson of the board of a female section within a religious organization - and four men – two Imams and two chairpersons of the board. Throughout the thesis a distinction is made between Imams and chairpersons because of their separate roles within Islamic religious organizational structure, which is also discussed in this study. For inclusion into the sample, the

organizations within which the participant works were required to be in Oslo and established by Muslims. It was not explicitly required that the religious institution be founded by an immigrant group. However, mosques and organizations that were contacted were established by Muslim immigrants. The selection of participants was based upon my own previous contacts and then as a snowball from one person to the next, asking the participants for new informants (Bryman, 2012).

Regular members of the Muslim community who were interviewed in this project include four females and three males. Again, the inclusion criteria do not indicate that a participant should have an immigrant background or a specific sex; rather, it focuses on individual Muslims. This strategy was pursued to avoid risks of not to have enough participants or data. But also, because the project was interested in learning about different social, cultural, and religious needs of this group under the pandemic. To gain access to individual Muslims several mosques and Islamic religious centres were approached and invited to join the study. It was made clear that the project is aimed at both leaders and individuals. In some instances, before a complete lockdown in Oslo, several mosques invited the researcher to attend their weekend classes at mosques, which are conducted on Sundays and Saturdays. All students who had agreed to participate in the study were informed about the study. Moreover, some of participants in the study provided a referral to recruit other samples outside the Mosque premises.

2.2   Data collection

Findings in this study are built on (a) interview data that the researcher collected, and (b) the analysis of online documents, texts, and news media. Content analysis is used in the study as an approach to identify 'specified characteristics of messages' and objectively examine patterns in the 'content of communication' in a replicable and systematic manner (Bryman, 2012:290). I use online search engines to obtain relevant information. The sources of all documents and pages of websites that were used in the study were included in the text as well as in the reference list.

I use interviewing, on the other hand, as a mean of generating my own data. Interviewing has been the most central method as such. To ensure that the project generates data that are appropriate for my purpose, semi-structured interviewing was deployed. Semi-structured interviewing is one of the most dominant and common methods of data collection in qualitative research in social sciences (Bryman, 2012; Crang & Cook, 2007). Semi-structured interview is associated with 'a context in which the interviewer has a series of questions that are in the

general form of an interview schedule but is able to vary the sequence of questions' (Bryman, 2012:212). According to Crang and Cook (2007), semi-structure interview is useful in sense that it is not used merely to collect information, but also to provide a supporting structure and environment within which respondents will be able to disclose their feelings, thoughts, and understandings in their own terms. There are various methods of data collection within the qualitative research, including ethnography, which also 'usually involves a substantial amount of interviewing, and this factor undoubtedly contributes to the widespread use of the interview by qualitative researchers' (Bryman, 2012:469). However, I chose semi-structured interviewing because it allows a two-way communication, encouraging the researcher to ask further questions and the participant to talk openly (Bryman, 2012). In other words, semi-structured interview is flexible, particularly compared to structured interviews, allowing both participants and researchers to discover crucial information that may not have been previously mentioned by the project.

The interviewing in this project, as defined above, involved series of steps. These steps include framing an interview schedule that was used to address a defined topic in a way that would allow the respondents to answer in their own terms and to be open about issues and topics pertinent to them (Bryman, 2012). The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. Moreover, it is important to note that my interviews involve both zoom and face-to-face interviews. Prior to and throughout the initial stages of the lockdown in Oslo, nine in-person interviews were conducted (local administrator=2, Imam=2, individual Muslim=4, leader of an organization=1). The remaining seven interviews were arranged through zoom. Given the exceptional nature of disruption caused by the pandemic for both the participants and the researcher, the procedure includes a series of emails. In some of the emails, the participants and I discussed alternatives to face-to-face or in-person interviews that have been originally scheduled. I considered the zoom option because it means less pressure and because it minimizes the risk of spreading the Covid-19. Previously, in a study (Gray et al., 2020), zoom was found to be a useful method for conducting qualitative interviews.

2.3 **Analysis**

In this study, I utilize thematic analysis as an approach to make sense of the interview materials. Thematic analysis is the process of identifying patterns, themes, and categories within the data (Bryman, 2012). Thematic analysis is useful for this study because it enables me to assess, from a post-modernist perspective, the meanings that respondents associate with religious-secular interaction and their interpretation of it. In this study, I use Framework Method (Bryman,

2012:579) as a strategy for facilitating the thematic analysis of my data. Framework Method within thematic analysis is about identifying commonalities and differences derived from the interview transcripts, which are then constructed to themes and subthemes (Bryman, 2012).

Framework Method involves several activities and various procedures. First, it requires familiarization with the data, a through reading and rereading of all the data. Then the researcher may need to highlight specific phrases and sentences within the transcripts and produce shorthand labels or codes that describe the content of these sentences. Coding maybe inductive by considering anything that might be relevant from various perspectives, or deductive by focusing on a predefined idea or an existing theory. After the coding of the transcripts, the researcher creates a set of categories from the codes in a form of a working analytical framework that is then applied to the data to identify themes and subthemes. The researcher charts the data further into a framework matrix. In this study, I use a table of coding to facilitate this task as such, which begins at an early stage of data collection and continues throughout the process of transcribing, reading, analysing, and interpreting the data. I started the interpretation of the data at a relatively early stage. Ryan (2006:96) states that quite often, 'student researchers devote a great deal of time to collecting data, and not enough to analysing it, and this leaves a weakness in the thesis'. He suggests, therefore, to start the analysis early. I benefited from this strategy. It allowed me a good time to make good use of my date, but also it encourages me to present my findings in a balanced manner in a number of chapters.

There are several other approaches to qualitative data analysis, including those that deal with language and its usage in social interaction - discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010) and ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1996); those that are focuses on experience and meaning - phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) and narrative methods (Riessman, 2008); and those that are intended to develop emerging theories, categories or concepts derived from data - Grounded Theory (Bryman, 2012:567). The advantage of the Framework Method is that it is independent from any epistemological, philosophical, or theoretical approach. In contrast, the approaches I mentioned above are underpinned by specific disciplines and philosophical ideas that inform the process of analysis.

Regarding the topic of this research project, thematic analysis techniques, including Framework Method, aided me in identifying patterns and themes that had arisen based on the different perspectives expressed by participants. I pursued Bryman's suggestion in ordering and synthesising the data. That is 'to construct an index of central themes and subthemes […] to

reflect on the initial codes that have been generated and to gain a sense of the continuities and linkages between them' (Bryman,2012:579-580).

2.4   Ethical Aspects and Epistemological Positioning

2.4.1 Ethical aspects

According to the Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH [NESH, 2016]), 'research ethics refers to a wide variety of values, norms, and institutional arrangements that help constitute and regulate scientific activities' (NESH, 2016:5). Failure to observe guidelines for research ethics may constitute scientific misconduct (NESH, 2016). Misconduct in this context concerns 'serious breach of good scientific practice associated with the collective commitment to the pursuit for truth'. Plagiarism, fabrication and falsification of data are some examples of a serious scientific misconduct (NESH, 2016).

Ethical considerations regarding qualitative research are currently topics of great concern (NESH, 2016). For example, respect for privacy, establishment of honest and open interactions, and avoiding misrepresentations can raise numerous ethical concerns. In this project, I endeavour to ensure that the study is carried out in line with relevant national and international standards. In this regard, the project considers the guidelines provided by NESH as its point of departure. NESH suggests that research projects should aim at recognizing and assessing both internal ethical norms - linked to the self-regulation of the research community – and external norms, linked to the relationship between research and society. External ethical norms include the researchers' relationship to study participants in terms of respect for their privacy, dignity, confidentiality, and informed consent. Respect for privacy, for instance, 'aims at protecting individuals against unwanted interference and exposure. This applies not only to emotional issues but also to questions that involve sickness and health' (NESH, 2016:22). In this project, recruitment and interview procedures takes place within a safe and secure environment. All prospective interviewees were allowed to make informed, free decisions on their participation by giving them detailed information about the research and guaranteeing that there is no explicit or implicit coercion. The project did not access any health registries, nor did it collect any personal information. Furthermore, all identifiable characteristics were removed, as well as publication and dissemination of the research material are anonymised to ensure that individual's privacy is kept secret (section 2 of the Norwegian Health Registry Act).

I obtained informed consent from all participants. This means that people who participated in this study were given information about the purpose of the study and agreed to be part of the study before the data collection started. I give participants the option to withdraw at any time for any reason if they wish to do so, without any consequences. Most of the interviews were conducted in English language. However, three participants preferred Arabic, and two interviewees used Mandinka – a language spoken mostly in West Africa. The researcher translates the data produced in Arabic and Mandinka languages to English by himself without any significant challenge since he speaks and understands these languages.

2.4.2 Ontological and epistemological implications

As much as ethics are about participants, which I have discussed above, they are also about the position of researchers in relation to what is studied. In what follows I explain how the researcher and the current study are positioned in terms of ***ontology*** and ***epistemology***. In other words, how my study is influenced by a particular set of assumptions about social reality - ontology - and how it can be known - epistemology.

The use of critical approaches in this study has implications for my analysis. For instance, taking ontological and epistemological positions of constructivism and interpretivism, respectively, has an impact on my results. These positions predict that we process information based on several factors, including our conceptions and preconceived notions. To break this down, I look at the meanings of these terminologies and relate them to my project with some examples.

Ontology is about the social world and nature of knowledge (Banks & Scheyvens, 2014; Bryman, 2012). According to Bryman there are two major positions regarding ontology in social science, namely, objectivism and constructivism. He states that the first assumes that social phenomena and meanings exist independent of social actors, but also, independently of the actors' interpretation of them; the second holds, in contrast, that phenomena and their meanings are developed by social actors, and that objects in society do not just exist, but are rather socially constructed. The implication of this is that the specific interpretation of social phenomena, such as the understanding of who have the right to access funding in support for their projects during the Covid-19, affects empirical outcomes. Generally, in this project, the researcher's notion on the nature of reality, society, and people is that structures are produced and reproduced by people through their interactions. However, considering the world as, at least

partly, discursively constructed may limit my chance to produce equally objective and unbiased results.

Epistemology concerns knowledge: How we know what we know, but also, the validity and scope of what we know about the social world (Bryman, 2012). This project considers two positions within the epistemological camp, namely, positivism and interpretivism. Positivism focuses on 'the application of the methods of the natural sciences to the study of social reality and beyond' (Bryman, 2012:28); systematic verification of laws against collected data; and objectivity of science. Interpretivism, attends to interpretations of social phenomena and reflexivity; but also, the connection between theory and data (Bryman, 2012). This project intends to analyse the subjective interpretations of study participants to produce findings that reflect their respective views.

Regarding my position in relation to what is studied in this project, coming from a Muslim majority country - Gambia, my past experiences and expectations entail that in the time of crises religion, especially Islamic religious discourse, plays a significant role, not only for individuals, but also for the state. It is not unusual to see clergies on TV screens giving verdicts and fatwas regarding a new situation. Currently, I dwell in Norway - a country characterised by a completely different religion-state relationship in which religion plays a minimal role in public spheres, at least from a comparative perspective between Gambia and Norway. The difference between my past experiences while in Gambia and my new reality in Norway is remarkable. This difference, the choice of theory - critical approach, and the ontological and epistemological positions of constructivism and interpretivism, respectively, challenge me as a researcher in terms of ensuring that I carefully assess to what extent my understanding of the phenomenon actually does correspond to the complete reality of that phenomenon. One of the strategies I deployed in this study to reduce such biases, was to avoid focusing only on what is in line with my expectations. In other words, I invite different people to obtain different perspectives not only to achieve triangulation, but also to challenge my own assumptions. This strategy allows reflection on possible biases. I also engaged with open questions as part of the qualitative research, which allows a discovery of my own assumptions, but also to be surprised and having study participants to give me information about things that I would not have sought to ask about.

Within the epistemological debates, the issues discussed above are linked to my interest in subjective perception: Our personal opinions and beliefs. It is about if green, for instance, is more beautiful than blue. The answer is subject to person's beliefs and experiences. According to interpretivists, neutrality and objectivity, especially in social realities, is impossible as such.

In this project, I endeavour to include as many subjective perceptions of different participants as possible and to understand them in order to produce a reliable version of the social reality that I study – the interaction between Muslim communities and secular authorities in Oslo during the Covid-19 outbreak.

2.5 Assessment of Study Limitations and Trustworthiness

2.5.1 Trustworthiness

There has been some discussion among qualitative researchers regarding establishing and assessing the quality of research for the qualitative researchers (Bryman, 2012; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Quality criteria that quantitative researchers use – such as internal validity, generalizability, reliability, and objectivity – are not appropriate in qualitative research (Bryman, 2012). Several stances regarding assessment of a qualitative study exist. One such position is the examination of trustworthiness of a study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Trustworthiness revolves around the question of 'how good a qualitative study is' that its findings can be trusted (Bryman, 2012:49). Moreover, trustworthiness is best-known to comprise four criteria: credibility; transferability; dependability; and confirmability (Bryman, 2012:390; Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Credibility, the equivalent of internal validity in quantitative research, is concerned with the establishment of the credibility, validity of the findings (Bryman, 2012; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Techniques available to establish credibility involve ensuring that researchers pursue good research practice and share their findings with research participants – member checking - for clarification purposes (Bryman, 2012). In this project, for the purpose of verifying plausibility, I continually provide participants with my own interpretations and asks whether I understand the narrative in the same way participants meant it.

Transferability, which corresponds to external validity in quantitative research, is concerned with whether the findings are applicable in other contexts with other respondents (Bryman, 2012). In other words, transferability entails researcher's ability to provide 'thick description' of both the participants and research process, providing others with rich details to be able to decide whether the findings are transferable to their specific context. In this project, the researcher provided a detailed information about description data, including the context of the research, sample and sample size, variety of sampling strategy, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and interview procedures.

Dependability, similar to reliability in quantitative research, 'refers to the consistency and reliability of the research findings and the degree to which research procedures are documented, allowing someone outside the research to follow, audit, and critique the research process' (Korstjens & Moser, 2018:122). In this project, the researcher provides rich accounts of the study methods, data collection process, and coding strategy.

Confirmability, which parallels objectivity, ensures that the findings from a research project represent participants' narratives rather than researchers' personal values or theoretical inclination (Bryman, 2012:390; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Available techniques that I use in this study include reflexivity - as 'sensitivity to the researcher's cultural, political, and social context' (Bryman, 2012:393) - and triangulation. Besides reflexive journals, the researcher in this study applies several triangulation techniques. For instance, multiple theoretical perspectives – normative and post-modernist approaches to post-secularity - were used to guide the study and discussion. Moreover, to achieve data source triangulation, I invited several groups – administrators, religious leaders, and ordinary members of Muslim community – to take part in the study. This strategy has enabled a broad source of data that contribute to gain a valuable understanding of the interaction between secular authorities and Muslim communities in Oslo.

2.5.2 Limitation

Not all interviews in this study were recorded. The researcher, therefore, had to write notes in some instances instead of recording. To take notes while listening was not an easy task. The findings could have been more reliable had all the interviews been recorded because recording could allow the researcher to review the interview material at a later stage or date.

Because it is qualitative, rather than quantitative, the scope of the study is restricted, and the researcher cannot generalize the findings to other settings. In other words, I cannot really treat individuals who take part in this study as representative of all members of Muslim communities.

Moreover, I have discussed that this study uses purposive sampling, including snowball sampling. While such a recruitment strategy is useful because it allows researchers to involve participants that they would otherwise not reach, it has its limitations. First, the researcher depends on participants who are already in the study to recruit other interviewees, indicating that the researcher may loss control over sampling method. It can also mean that the project lacks diversity among research participants. This is because it is highly likely, not necessarily though, that previous participants recommend persons they know, leading to interviews with a

group of people who share the same experiences, traits, and characteristics. This, again, can be linked with impeding the researcher's ability to generalize study results.

Despite these clear limitations, there are some good reasons to believe that the current study contributes to our understanding of the interaction between Muslim communities and secular authorities under the Covid-19, and the experiences of individual Muslims of this interaction. First, even though writing notes during interview poses a challenge, it has been useful in this study because it requires concentration, which allows the researcher to identify important and seemingly inconsistent statements. This provided me with opportunity for follow up questions on new areas and issues that were not included on the initial interview guide. Second, while the sample in the study cannot offer representativeness because of the nature of the investigation as qualitative and the sampling method it uses, I argue that variation between the situations, social roles, and experiences of the respondents presents a good opportunity to gain insights into the subject matter.

3   THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1   Introduction

Theoretical discussion forms an integral part of this thesis. The discussion focuses on 1) secularity and 2) Habermasian and post-modernist approaches to post-secularity. Secularity is reviewed to help connect the researcher to his main theoretical framework – post-secularity. On the other hand, drawing on Habermasian and post-modernist interpretations, post-secularity is used to fulfil the ambitious goal of the project of explaining the interaction between secular authorities and Muslim communities in Oslo during the Covid-19 outbreak. I chose these approaches because, first, Habermas's debate frames secularization in its specific institutional settings and complementary learning process 'where the self-reflexive stance of religious traditions within the conditions of secular modernity and the openness of secular society to the cognitive and moral potential of religion are implicated with each other and mutually reinforced' (Kaltsas, 2019:3). Second, post-modern genealogy, promises fairness and honesty regarding the complexities of controversial, political, and ethical issues such as economic justice, patriarchy, and abortion (Caputo, 2001).

 This chapter begins by illustrating the secularization thesis and the concept of secularity in order to set down a foundation for the explanation of the post-secularity framework. Then the thesis provides some of the fundamental elements of the of post-secularity. Finally, it draws on

a specific issue of the relationship between the government and religious citizens and communities as understood differently by Habermasian and post-modernist approaches.

3.2   Secularization thesis and Secularity

3.2.1 Secularization

Secularization theory, which dominated the sociology of religion for most of the 20th century, comes in multi variants (Casanova, 1994). In its classical forms, secularization thesis holds 'that religion would gradually fade in importance and cease to be significant with the advent of industrial society' (Norris, P. & Inglehart 2004). Casanova states that the traditional secularization theory can be divided into three differing, and contested meanings. According to the first strand - "differentiation" – modernity and advancement in science entail differentiation and separation of religious and secular spheres. In line with the second view - "decline" - the religion will gradually disappear because of the differentiation mentioned above. Pursuant to the third definition – ''privatization'' – religion will be normativized and privatized in society. Scholars espouse a wide array of views regarding the nature of the decline of religion embodied in the secularization theory. These range from religion's complete disappearance to its diminishing influence in public square (Fox, 2014:5). Casanova argues that only the understanding of secularization as a "differentiation" of institutional spheres remains significantly uncontested. Moreover, a justification for the secularization theory could be found in the relative unimportance of traditional churches. For example, numerous surveys across Western countries, including Norway, have shown a decline in membership in established churches (Engelstad at el, 2017).

3.2.2 Secularity

Secularity, as I use the term in this project, is the outcome of the general process of secularization. In other words, secularity denotes 'a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace' (Taylor, 2007:3). My discussion about secularity focuses on its forms of 1) power and 2) neutrality. I am interested in highlighting the characteristics of these two elements as understood by different scholars, but also in examining whether secularity simultaneously maintains these two mutually exclusive concepts. On the issue of power, Pasha (2012), notes that secularity is characterized by a manifestation of distinctive conceptions of authority and practices of power, implying ''standard of civilisation'', both for separating ''insiders'' from ''outsiders'' […] as well as for producing

the hierarchicalisation of political community' (Pash, 2012:1046). Within this paradigm, power is placed at the heart of secularity. Against the negative effects of religion, the emerging secular principle alienated ultimate political power to the sovereign state (Salvatore, 2006). In doing so, it undermines multitudes, including communities where religion thrives (Fox, 2014). Under such a condition, alternatives are silenced; religious identity, in particular, is privatized in order to keep the general public loyal to the state (Salvatore, 2006). The continued relevance of the decisive effect of secularity in its forms of power is visible in modernity's attempts to contain religious identity to its ''right place''. Ban on "conspicuous religion symbols" in French public schools in 2003 (Salvatore, 2006) illustrates this point. Thusly, growing failure of secular political forms 'to provide a sustainable mediation between unity and difference under conditions of late modernity' constitutes a great deal of its current crisis (Habermas, 2006).

The other distinctive feature of secularity that I discuss is the concept of neutrality. In what follows, I look at what happens to secularity's promise of inclusivity and neutrality with respect to religion. Because of the context of my thesis, which focuses on the interaction between secular authorities and religious communities, I understand neutrality as 'the duty of state officials to behave impartially, that is, without judging between the merits of different religions and in a non-discriminatory way' (Ahdar, 2013:412). Moreover, secularism discourses claim that it is entrenched in secularity that:

> all religions are equal or at least are worthy of equal respect and may participate in the public sphere; none, not even the oldest, most culturally-embedded or numerically large ones, are to be privileged; the unity of society does not require unity of faith and religion; governments are ill-suited to identify religious truth and error; laws must have a non-religious justification; any form of state coercion of religious practice is wrong; the state is to be concerned with citizens' temporal needs not their souls; (Ahdar, 2013:418).

Despite these promises, I contend that what happens when we seek neutrality is problematic, especially when it constitutes a demand that everyone talks a common, neutral language of the civic sphere. The problem is that the plurality of voices is effectively disabled (Mavelli, 2012). Remarkably, the underlying secular epic is an epic of corrective suspicion, resulting in modern civil liberty, science, and neutrality (Caputo, 2001). Therefore, I posit, it is not generally a good idea to unreservedly oppose secularity. Nevertheless, secularity's inherent tendency of rigid categorization warrants further critical inquiry into the merits of the neutrality it claims. These categorizations include that of what is subjective and what is objective; what is rational and what is irrational; what is an issue of reason and what is an issue of faith; also, what is private

and what is public (Caputo, 2001:47). Amid these categorizations, secularity claims, as does a surface observation, that it is neutral (Caputo, 2001). However, I hold that this claim is biased because secularity situates itself on the top of this rigid dichotomy - objective, and religion on the bottom - subjective. To clarify this, by closely looking at secularity's ambivalent project of the separation of religion and church - exclusion of religion from public sphere - one can see 'something'. 'Whether we see it as an ideology, a worldview, a stance toward religion, a constitutional approach, or simply an aspect of some other project—of science or a philosophical system—secularism is something we need to think through, rather than merely the absence of religion' (Ahdar, 2013:408). Secularity, if one accepts my position, promotes a certain type of tenets, and it does not seem that it is willing to accept its own destruction, which could allow it otherwise to concede that alternatives deserve equal treatment.

The controversial character of the traditional architype of secularity – in its forms of power and objectivity, is refined by the process of secularization itself and by the very theorists who support it, including thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas, Rene´ Descartes, E´ mile Durkheim and, Ju¨rgen Habermas (Mavelli, 2012:1062). Next, in this chapter, I discuss post-secularity as understood differently by Habermas and post-modernist theorists in their effort to challenges the secular – religious binary and the secularity in its forms of power, which I considered above.

3.3   Post-secularity

Following Kaltsas (2019), this study considers post-secularity, with respect to religion and religious communities, as an important corrective to the biases of secularity. Scholars have been trying to tease out the ambiguity and complexity of post-secularity (Habermas, 2010; Mavelli and Petito, 2012; Byrd, 2017). It is important to note that the theory of post-secularity developed by critical thinkers whose works are considered in this section is not a tradition that predicts an attempt to establish a worldwide dominance of religiosity over secularity; rather, it means a condition 'where religion remains a continual and persistent presence within the increasingly secular world' (Byrd, 2017:9). Habermas is one of the prominent scholars who popularize the concept of post-secularity. For him, post-secularity is understood as a normative ideal of inclusion of the moral intuitions of faith geared towards addressing two questions. First, the incapacity of current secular consciousness to rethink the boundaries of the modern public square respectful of diverse philosophical, cultural, and religious orientations. Second, reconstructing secular consciousness's failed attempt to address central ethical and political questions - for instance in the abortion and military intervention debates - based on mutual understanding rather than an exclusive hegemonic discourse (Mavelli and Petito, 2012:936).

From this perspective, Habermas problematizes the exclusion of other voices, especially religious voice, from the formation of public policy and calls for a 'new thinking spaces, both to dispel the hegemony of secular frames of capture, and to generate new vernaculars more responsive to local religious context' (Pasha, 2012:1042). I will come back to Habermas to investigate whether he has advanced his position enough so as to shape the relationship between secular and religion to the expectation of post-secularity.

Post-modern reading of post-secularity, on the other hand, as Mavelli states:

> does not rest on a notion of religion as a normative and disembodied set of cognitive choices, but as a multidimensional concept which encompasses tradition, practice, emotions, lived experience, and embodied modes of subjectivation, and which is constantly reconstituted, contested, struggled over, and resisted by a variety of forces – including, most prominently, sovereign power (Mavelli, 2012:1075).

The post-modern approach, however, does not seek to establish itself as the better alternative to other critical theories; instead, 'the key component of postmodern secularity is reflexivity' (Stoeckl & Uzlaner, 2019:8). In other words, post-modern theorists, like critical thinkers in almost any discipline, 'scrutinize the inbuilt biases in the theories and concepts they are working with' (Stoeckl and Uzlaner, 2019:8).

While both Habermasian and post-modernist interpretations of post-secularity capture the presence of religion, the latter is more useful than the former, at least for my purpose, in explaining the interaction between State administrators and Muslim communities. This is because the post-modernist dimension comprises reflexivity (Caputo, 2001), which ensures a more profound need to be aware of, and response to various dilemmas and biases found in both secularity and post-secularity approaches. In the next section, I advance the theoretical discussion of post-secularity and how it is understood differently by Habermas and post-modernist theorists. I focus on the issue of the way in which religious sentiments appear in relation to secular reasons in contemporary societies.

3.4 Interface between Secular and Religious: Paradigm Shift

Here, from a theoretical perspective, I discuss the relationship between religious insights and secular reasons, focusing on (a) the place of religion, and religious accommodation, in a multi-religious secular society; and (b) the issue of trust or mistrust in interaction.

3.4.1 Religious Accommodation

The post-secular approaches propose a paradigm for dealing with complex issues involving the nexus between conceptions of the religious insights and the worldly human reasons. Moreover, unlike secular theorists, post-secularists present a view of the presence of the religion and its influence on the daily lives of many people across societies. This departure from the secularity, which otherwise focuses on the problematics of religion, caused many scholars to redefine the relationship between religions and secular conscience in a society. Even though post-secular theorists promise to allow the recognition of the religion's role in public affairs, there is still little agreement among them on the processes of the inclusion of the religious voice. In the remaining part of this section, as it follows, I draw on Habermasian and post-modernist theories of post-secularity to discuss the fluid relationship between religious communities and secular arrangements in a public sphere.

There has been much discussion over the nature of the secular – religion relationship, most notably by Habermas. For Habermas (2006), also one of the scholars who popularize the concept of post-secularity, the exclusion of religious voices from the formation of public policy is problematic because it threatens the equality of public deliberation. Habermas considers the continued existence of religion and various religious communities as his point of departure to argue in favour of inclusion of religious and faith communities in public debate (Habermas, 2006). It has been recognized that in contemporary societies public debate commonly takes place at meetings, but also through social media, the mass media, academic publications, and government policy documents (Mavelli, 2012). These mediums and spaces can be related to the 'public sphere' as defined by Habermas: 'a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens' (Habermas et al.,1974:49). Nevertheless, the constitutional separation of state and church, Habermas stresses, has limited the role that which religious traditions, communities and organizations could play in the political public sphere and in the state in general, indicating that modernity treats religion as primitive (Habermas, 2010). Although Habermas advances the post-secular perspective to address the problem of plurality in contemporary societies, he concedes that: 'The cleavage between secular knowledge and revealed knowledge cannot be bridged' (Habermas, 2010:17).

Moreover, to advance his response to the problem of inclusion - religious participation in public discourse - Habermas introduces a normative approach, claiming that religious discourse is mysterious and, therefore, in the context of post-secularity, it needs to adjust; has to match modernization process; and must 'be accessible also to non-believers through the universal language of reason [- secularism]' (Mavelli and Petito, 2012:936). Habermas, thusly, seeks to

preserve the semantic potential of religion via a procedure of translation within a framework of 'complementary learning' and openness to differing comprehensive views. He writes that:

> "The constitutional state must not only act neutrally towards worldviews, but it must also rest on normative foundations which can be justified neutrally towards worldviews—and that means in post-metaphysical terms. The religious communities cannot turn a deaf ear to this normative requirement. This is why those complementary learning processes in which the secular and the religious sides involve one another come into play here" (Habermas, 2010:21).

Within this system of a mutual learning, as Habermas maintains, all citizens, secularist or no, are provided with a freedom to enter public debates if they desire, in a reasonable fashion, to establish the overlapping consensuses.

Post-modern dimension, on the other hand, tells a different story with respect to the nexus between religious groups and society. Recovery of religion's humanistic core - those social principles that made it attractive to the multitude - is important in post-modernist paradigm (Byrd, 2017). Like Habermas, post-modernists relate the contentious issue of religion in public square to the problematic relationship between religion and modernity. However, contrary to the contention of Habermas, post-modernity calls on us to 'insist that we all understand that a free and public debate and the unforced force of pure reason are also fictions and hence that they do not guarantee fairness or a good outcome, not by a long shot' (Caputo, 2001:62). I have mentioned that post-modern ideas are used in this thesis not only to understand the relationship between secular authorities and Muslim communities, but also to reveal and respond to certain dilemmas and biases embodied in secularity and Habermasian normative approaches. In that regard, according to the post-modern concept, the secular dictation that religion must "know its place" – private spaces - is problematic. In the same vein, various post-secular claims advanced by Habermas also have problems, such as that 'the expression of religious beliefs [...] be considered institutionally if they are first translated into acceptable secular language' (Rhodin, 2017:2). In other words, in secular and religion relations, post-modernist strategy is a methodological issue that concerns conditioning our own thoughts and self-awareness of our cultural situatedness and to 'become suspicious of the Enlightenment suspicion of religion (Caputo, 2001:37). Post-modern idea also includes rethinking post-secular society as a reality of coexistence of diverse knowledge, competing beliefs and practices, which are necessary elements of principles of formulating the common good in society. According to this conception, a post-secular society becomes associated with a condition or system in which 'the

differences between cultures, creeds, and customs would not be erased but subordinated to a shared striving for justice and well-being' (Dallmayr, 2012:973). Dallmayr criticizes what he called 'the hermeneutical claim of universality' of secular language as such, arguing that the interpretation of religious discourse and teachings in public square does not concern 'strictly linguistic translation' as much as it involves 'a translation into lived practice'.

3.4.2 Trust - Mistrust

Another area of concern where, however, one can analytically approach the interface between religion and secular is the issue of trust or mistrust between Muslim communities and local government sectors. Concerned with trust in interaction, the Norwegian government declares that diversity and trust are significant elements for building a framework for productive, positive cooperation between the voluntary and public sectors (Regjeringen, 2014). Trust in the context of this thesis refers to the ability of secular authorities and Muslim communities 'to engage in a robust dialogue, discourse, and debate; to subject their deeply held claims – both religious and secular – to democratic scrutiny […] to think in terms of humanistic commonalities as opposed to ethnos and culture' (Byrd, 2017:6).

I have mentioned in the 'problem statement' in this thesis that the renewed interest in investigating the nature of the interaction between Muslim communities and public, secular authorities could be related to factors such as value conflicts and terrorist attacks associated with Muslim communities (Lillevik, 2020). On the part of Muslims in western society, events such as 9/11 and the use of violence in France, among many other incidents, 'are already a source of deep distrust for many westerners' who perceive the presence of Islam in West as an attempt to eradicate the Western culture and values (Byrd, 2017b:251). These attacks also divide the Muslim communities: 'among the suffering, broken, and terrorized against those who create suffering, break the body and spirit, and terrorize the populace' (Byrd, 2017b:280). From the perspective of post-modernist understanding of post secularity, the restoration of a more humane and peaceful future society partially lies in the recovery of Islamic religion's humanistic core principles that make it attractive to the multitude. Also, it has been noted that the West-Islam and Religious/Secular reconciliation, in general, is embodied in the pursuit of the common interest, rather than the interest of a particular that which undermines the interests of all.

Yet, the other party in the discussion of trust and mistrust, post-secular West, is equally problematic. The negative side of the West is particularly noticeable in the rise of islamophobia

and anti-migrant racism in many countries. The 2011 attack on Oslo and Utøyah, by the right-wing miso-Islamist, Anders Behring Breivik, casts a light on the dangers of negative sentiments about Islam and Muslims. For my focus on interaction, the West's implication in the problems of trust or mistrust is also observable at a local level. In his article: ''We Are Against a Multi-ethnic Society': Policies of Exclusion at the Urban Level in Italy'', Ambrosini, (2013) found that excluding policies towards immigrants exist at local government level. He holds that 'policies of exclusion legitimize and fuel other and more widespread forms of discrimination and intolerance, beginning with the conduct of public officials' (Ambrosini, 2013:152). With respect to the interaction, it has been suggested that central to bringing the spirit of reconciliation is to give up on manipulation in communication to win the other over to one's side (Byrd, 2017). Instead, the interaction must be based on binding together rationality and belief in mutually beneficial ways, contributing to increasing trust in society (Byrd, 2017; Dallmayr, 2012). Habermas explicitly mentions Muslims in his discussions about this issue, saying that 'Muslim immigrants cannot be integrated into a western society in defiance of their religion, but only together with it' (Habermas, 2008:25). However, as discussed above in this thesis, post-modernists go outside the box of the procedure of translation of religious language to suggest transformation of religious sentiments into lived practice, geared toward social justice, forbearance, and acceptance (Dallmayr, 2012).

3.5   Conclusion

Secularization predicts that religion will decline or even disappear as societies develop. While it seems that secularists get it right because of the decline in church membership in many Western countries, 'a consensus that religion remains relevant is emerging. Even current arguments supporting secularization theory do not posit that religion will disappear' (Fox, 2014:8). As a result, the critical scholarship, represented by post-modernists and Habermas in this study, questions the capacity of secularity to renew its state-religion configuration according to new challenges, including that of neutrality, pluralism, and religion's growing presence.

With respect to the challenges of neutrality, several critical theorists hold that post-secularity offered to renounce secularity based on the crisis of secular reason as biased as far as its own nature or its own core principles are concerned (Mavelli and Petito, 2012). In other words, according to this position, secularity does not equal neutrality in sense that it subordinates all aspects of sentient life that are said to be holy, sacred to an operative worldview of 'central, sovereign power' (Pabst, 2012:1002). In the view of such scholars, problem solving theories

had confused neutrality – an inclusive concept that requires a pluralist approach – and secularism, an exclusive concept that prefers a particular philosophy over other alternative world views (Ahdar, 2013).

Regarding the issues of religious diversity and multiculturalism, both Habermas and post-modernists have included a worthy attempt to restore harmony between religious and secular sectors. Habermas proposes a society where normative values can be preserved to guarantee trust and equal participation. Habermas was aware of some challenges that have an effect on this goal. According to Habermasian normative approach, consequently, it is not only that the division between secular reason and religious revelation 'cannot be bridged', but also religious idioms and principles must undergo translation to be publicly available. This view assumes that religious revelation, compared to secular reason, is not a standard discourse because its language is odd and not publicly accessible.

According to post-modern reading of post-secularity, on the other hand, plurality is associated with the possible existence of a range of alternative worldviews, each empirically sufficient to the same degree, and none should be privileged or treated as truer, therefore more important, or more legitimate. To be more explicit, even though these two views have somethings in common, my analysis identifies a distinction between Habermas's approach and post-modernist conceptions of post-secularity. For the former, secular reasoning does not only rely on, but also it is on its own rights, a common language and concepts that are available and relevant to any individual. According to the latter, the plurality means opportunities for both secular approaches and religious perspectives for interactions that involves performing the same linguistic task in the public sphere.

These different understandings of the relationship between secular reasons and religious commitment are found useful for my study. Post-modernist reading, as described above, for instance, allowed me to look at the connection between local authorities and Muslim communities as both complex and non-static. In other words, the theoretical framework deployed in this study, as well as the empirical data that I collected, indicate a discovery of spheres within a society where communication and interaction gaps might be bridged. The premise of this integrated approach, instead of the classical secular-religious dichotomy, is that simple things should not be made complicated but rather efforts should be made to explain complex issues in simple terms.

4 POLITICS OF NORWAY'S RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 AND INTERACTION WITH MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN OSLO

Focusing on the Norwegian context, this chapter deals with Norway's national Covid-19 response mechanisms. The chapter starts with the examination of the Covid-19 regulations, in section one, and then moves on to more detailed discussions of cultural aspects of the response strategy, in section two. In the final section, the study looks at the interaction between secular authorities and Muslim communities in Oslo during the Covid-19 outbreak to explain how the response strategy engage these communities.

4.1 Legal framework

The first aspect of the Covid-19 outbreak response in Norway that I analyse in this project is the national regulations that are related to infection control measures of the pandemic. Since the focus of the thesis is on Muslim communities, this chapter considers regulations that are relevant for religious and life stance communities under which Islam falls in the Norwegian context. Of course, the study also looks at related general control measures of the Covid-19 in Norway, specifically in Oslo.

Between 12 and 18 of March 2020, the Norwegian government announced a series of restrictive infection control measures, responding to a rapid increase in cases and evidence of community transmission (Nilsen & Skarpenes, 2020). These include border control and a travel ban; closure of daycares, schools, universities, and businesses; prohibition of cultural and sports events; and a restriction on mass gatherings (see table 1). During this period, the government also established national quarantine regulations.

Restrictions at events and gatherings. (It must be possible to keep a distance of 1 metre for all types of gatherings)		
Type of gathering / event	**Number**	**Examples**
Private gatherings in own home	Avoid having guests in the home (recommendation)	Children in childcare centres and primary school can invite from their own cohort.
Private gatherings in a public place or in rented or borrowed premises	Up to 5 people	Birthday party, wedding, baptism, funeral, company party etc. Children in the same cohort in childcare centre or primary school can meet with the necessary amount of adults as arrangers.
Indoor events without fixed seats	Up to 10 people Funeral service: up to 50 people	Church, mosque, concert, local performance, conference, parent meetings at school, indoor markets and trade fairs
Indoor events with fixed seats	Up to 200 people	Cinema, opera, concert, theatre, conference etc.
Outdoor events without fixed seats	Up to 200 people	Sports events, outdoor concerts, outdoor markets and trade fairs, switching on Christmas tree lights, pop-up concerts, etc.
Outdoor events with fixed seats	Up to 600 people, in groups of up to 200 people (assumes at least 2 metres distance between the groups)	Sports events, outdoor concerts, etc.

Table 1: Restrictions regarding events, gatherings, and activities

Source: The Norwegian Institute of Public Health (FHI, 2021)

As illustrated in table 1 above, regulations that cover most activities arranged by Muslim communities fall under the ''events, gatherings and activities''. The purposes of gatherings that involve Muslim communities vary, but they mostly include worship and prayer, as well as conferences. These events are normally arranged at mosques and Islamic cultural centres. According to official definitions, activities at mosques are related to 'indoor events' where there are no 'fixed seats' because fixed seats are understood as seats in cinemas, theatres, stadiums etc. Even benches in churches, for instance, are not considered to be fixed seats, as they are not

individual seats, and it is easier to move them closer to each other (Regjeringen, 2021). At mosques, Muslims use prayer carpets or mats. Since mosques lack seats that can be considered as fixed, they can host only a maximum of 10 persons at one time (Regjeringen, 2021). This understanding has been picked up by many Muslim groups even though Islamic terminologies such as mosques, prayer carpets and mats are rarely mentioned in the official documents.

In accordance with the original Act Relating to the Control of Communicable Diseases [In Norwegian – Smittevernloven], negligent violations of any of the regulations set by the government could be made punishable by fines or imprisonment (HOD, 1995). In the case of Muslim migrants, mosques and religious arrangements were closely monitored. For example, in a city outside Oslo, in September 2020, health authorities traced several cases of the Covid-19 infection back to a religious gathering arranged by a Muslim community. The event is connected to Ashura celebration - a major holy occasion in Islam. The municipality reported a possible violations of infection control regulations by the congregation. A month later, the police dropped the case, holding that the event did not constitute a violation of infection control legislation as it was at the time of the celebration (TV2, 2020). However, in December 2020, another possible violation in the same city by a Muslim community was reported by the police on a twitter (Politietost, 2020). The case was related to a Friday congregational prayer where about 22 people gathered in a time when such gatherings are regulated to include no more than 20 people. At the time of writing this paper, the case was still under investigation.

4.2 Social Responsibility

In this thesis, the concept of social responsibility [dugnad] is found to be an important element of the response to the Covid-19 outbreak in the Norwegian context. My focus is on the political use of the concept of dugnad to reinforce the widespread trust between the Norwegian government and national public health authorities, on one hand, and the general population on the other. Etymologically, the word dugnad is of Old Norse origin – dugnaðr, which refers to 'help' and 'support' (Nilsen & Skarpenes, 2020:2). Meanwhile, Simon & Mobekk (2019) note that in Bokmål, the term consists of two elements: the verb duge, which means "to be good enough" or "useful," and the suffix nad that corresponds to the Latin atus that signifies a passive form. In 2004, the Norwegian national broadcasting service (NRK), declared dugnad as "Norway's National word of the year" in its TV series: Typisk norsk (Eng. "Typically Norwegian") (Simon & Mobekk, 2019:818). In Norwegian cultural practices and development works, for instance, dugnad is associated with cooperation where community members work together to achieve a common goal, for the best interest of all members (Simon & Mobekk,

2019; Nilsen & Skarpenes, 2020). According to Lorentzen & Dugstad (2011), dugnad consists of four core elements: 1) unpaid work 2) by people who meet face-to-face to 3) carry out a task that has a definite beginning and end, which is followed by 4) a social gathering such as a meal (Simon & Mobekk, 2019). It is important to note that dugnad is not static in terms of its meaning in practice. Simon & Mobekk (2019:830) cite that the 'use of the term dugnad in Norwegian has, during the last few decades, been extended to include digital cooperation, where the physical and social aspects are different from those in community gatherings.' In the same vein, under the Covid-19, as my analysis will reveal further, social gatherings have been restricted to an extended degree and no precise endpoint has been designated. Yet, the concept plays a significant role in Norway's response to the crisis, as I discuss further.

The notion of national dugnad has been previously examined by scholars in relation to Norway's success and response to stressful situations. These include 2008 and 2015 financial and refugee crises, respectively, but also the politics of climate change. Simon & Mobekk, (2019) have looked at dugnad from a behavioural analytic perspective. They suggest that where crises are blamed on a lack of cooperation between and among societies: 'It is possible that the dugnad tradition can contribute to the search for tools for nurturing environments. Everyone benefits from a well-cared-for community, and participation in dugnad might strengthen bonds, maintain communities, and nurture a nation' (Simon & Mobekk, 2019:31). Moreover, Nilsen & Skarpenes (2020) refer to the political significance of dugnad in relation to the Norwegian economic model that was used to help provide a solution for the financial crisis of 2007–2008 in the country. With dugnad as one of its fundamental elements, the Norwegian economic model promises cooperation and reciprocal trust between employees and employers (Nilsen & Skarpenes, 2020). In his 2009 new year speech to the Norwegian people on 1 January, the then prime minister, Jens Stoltenberg, stressed that: 'The word "dugnad" is particular to the Norwegian language. This ability to cooperate is valuable. And we need it now: between employees and employers, between citizens and the authorities, and between individuals and communities' (as cited in Nilsen & Skarpenes, 2020:7). The reference to dugnad as a social responsibility during crisis is a current strategy that still prevails in Norway.

In the context of the Covid-19, Prime Minister, Erna Solberg, reminds Norwegians around the country of the importance of engaging in voluntary collective work such as dugnad to stop the spread of the virus. On the national television, on 12 March 2020, she stated that:

> The virus spreads when people gather in large numbers and are in close contact with each other. It is therefore absolutely vital that every citizen participate in a dugnad to

slow the virus down. We will do this in solidarity with the elderly, the chronically ill and others who are particularly vulnerable to becoming seriously ill (as cited in Nilsen & Skarpenes, 2020:1).

Under the Covid-19, the definition of dugnad encompasses behaviours such as virtual collaboration, staying indoors at home, following the advice from the authorities, and contributing to making the hardship of the pandemic easier and more pleasant for yourself and others.

Nilsen & Skarpenes (2020:4) point out that the prime minister's political call for everyone in Norway to adhere to Corona containment rules 'might not make sense outside of the Norwegian cultural context'. The researchers have linked "dugnadsånd" - the dugnad spirit - with a deeply enmeshed culture of morality that is found in the Norwegian middle and working classes. Their analysis further indicates that widespread dugnad spirit in Norway is an expression of an egalitarian culture of which the country is characterized. Additionally, Simon & Mobekk (2019:830) mention that: 'Increasing cultural diversity due to globalization and immigration brings multiple challenges, including challenges for dugnad and other kinds of voluntary work'. In my view, such remarks might give an ambiguous impression of the essential nature of dugnad as an exclusively Norwegian phenomenon, risking foreigners to struggle in order to demonstrate that they also have the ability and willingness to comply with Corona rules. Moreover, such perceptions of an immigrant community may give rise to indirect processes of discrimination, for instance, framing them as problematic. These processes may take attention away from the ambivalent intersection between the Covid-19 infection ratio and other issues such as lack of access to information and emerging socio-economic inequalities. As my discussion about the political components of Norway's response to Covid-19 continues, I look at how the response in Oslo engages Islamic religious organizations and Muslim communities.

4.3   Interaction as a dynamic of post-secularity

In this section I look at the nature of the response to a national crisis by focusing on the interaction between secular authorities and Muslim communities in Oslo during the Covid-19 outbreak. Using various viewpoints of post-secularity, the theoretical discussion suggests that interactions between secular authorities and religious sectors is an important aspect of contemporary societies in which modernity is perceived as failing. This integrated framework, rather than the traditional secular-religious dichotomy, promises a nuanced understanding of Muslim civic engagement at both individual and organizational levels. Results in this study show that there has been a combined effort in Oslo to create opportunities for interaction

between Muslim communities and secular authorities under the Covid-19 outbreak, specifically, through Mosques and Islamic religious organizations. However, this effort is not without challenges. In this study, I extracted three themes related to the nature of religious-secular interaction: (1) Recognition of Islamic religious groups; (2) access to funding; and (3) non-static relationship between faith and Covid-19 regulations.

4.3.1   *Recognition of Islamic religious groups*

According to my findings, one of the current themes in Religious-Secular relations in Oslo under the Covid-19 is that of recognition of Muslim communities and their specific roles and needs. My analysis shows that this recognition, however, did not happen from the beginning, but also it is in progress and not yet complete or static.

The Covid-19 has created a space for interaction between civil society organizations and religious organizations, on one hand, and state authorities, on the other hand. According to my analysis, however, the Norwegian government did not use this opportunity sufficiently during the initial phases of the pandemic. This failure includes government's exclusive approach and its reliance solely on its own resources to spread the information about the virus (Lien, 2020). In response to criticism of official risk communication strategies, the government granted Norwegian Kroner 6.6 million to involve voluntary organizations to disseminate health information among Norway's immigrant population (Lien, 2020). While it appeared that the authorities quickly learned from their failure and made better decisions as a result, it has been noted once-again, however, that the government diverted much of its effort into organizations that were not formed by immigrants or their immediate descendants whose issues were at stake (Lien, 2020; Castello, 2020).

Despite these challenges, local authorities in Oslo continued evolving their approaches to improve operational deficiency by noticing and supporting Muslim groups' efforts. A local administrator cites that this recognition is an important step in addressing Muslim communities' practical needs, such as language barriers, allowing them access to information and social services:

> *We [the municipality] want everyone to be included. Muslims form part of the Norwegian society. Now the entire society is under attack [by the Covid-19]. Muslim community organizations are therefore important partners in our effort to stop the spread of the disease.*

This is important for my analysis because, from a post-modernist perspective, the promotion of an inclusive society, which is necessary in a multicultural society, requires particular attention to be paid to issues such as the recognition of minorities' existence. To narrow down the scope of the analysis, I relate this to the specific issue of interaction between Islamic religious organizations and secular authorities in Oslo during the Covid-19 outbreak. To materialize its recognition of, and support for Muslim organizations' initiatives, the government eventually announced a series of a public call for Norwegian Kroner 40 million (IMDI, 2021). Several Islamic religious organizations and mosques received funding in support for their projects that were aimed at their members and the Covid-19. There were several examples of specific roles that the authorities in Oslo handed over to Islamic religious organizations. Such activities, as I discuss in Chapter 5, include information sharing and assisting members to deal with disruptions caused by the Covid-19 crisis.

A better cooperation and interaction are in the interest not only of the local government sectors but of Islamic religious organizations. In other words, by evidence of the interview materials, the efforts between secular authorities and Islamic religious organizations to engage Muslim communities in Oslo could be said to be born partially out of concerns of the community leaders for harmonizing Islamic religion in practice with centralized Covid-19 rules. A leader of an umbrella organization reveals:

> *We applied for a funding to sponsor an information campaign about the virus. We thought like it was dangerous not to adhere to the rules. These are mosques that are publicly funded by the State. What will happen if they don't follow rules that the government sets. They [mosques] may get closed permanently. We needed to think about that.*

The fact that this interaction seems to be in the interest of the authorities and religious organizations does not necessarily mean that it is oriented towards disciplinary measures, telling individual members within Muslim communities what to do and what not to do. Instead, as both my data as well as the theoretical framework I deploy predict, Islam is not to be treated as static, but as a tradition that is able of accommodating changes and different, competing interpretations that which allow Muslims to adapt to evolving circumstances (Brekke et al., 2019).

Moreover, there was a fear on the part of some of the public administrators who participated in this study of criticisms in case of a lack of cooperation with immigrant organizations, including Islamic religious organizations. A participant among this group has said:

I understand that we need to facilitate the works these [Islamic religious] organizations do since they are active like all other organizations. It is not about religions, it's about communities. I think people also need to understand that. It is misleading to say that immigrant organizations are excluded.

In this example, it can be seen that there is a link between the current efforts in Oslo to afford religious organizations, including those of Muslim communities, a role, in one hand, and early warnings in the media that the initial attempt to administer Covid-19 related funding was not progressing as it should. The fear might had arisen from well-circulated stories of how immigrant organizations had been side-lined in favour of non-immigrant organizations. Despite these signs of progress and recognition, an individual participant doubts the relative merits of these contacts:

for me, recognition means more than just funding and financial support to advance authorities' interests; it requires acknowledging our communities as individuals with various interests, expertise, needs and aspirations. We must push for a continued engagement and equal participation across the city in terms of empowering disadvantaged groups.

The view of this participant appears to indicate that public authorities only support a minority immigrant organization, including religious organizations founded by Muslims, if their interests align. Beyond this symbolic interaction, which is seemingly based on interest convergence, this participant wishes a form of relationship that allows claims making, trust, and exchange of views more explicitly.

Moreover, the responsibility on Muslim communities to cooperate and comply with rules and regulations set by the authorities did not disappear during the interviews. A local administrator points out that:

Muslim communities also need to make our work easy for us; it is not nice to see a part of society not complying with regulations. Rules are rules, right? Also, Islamic organizations need to think about what gap they can fill for the municipality [Oslo], and work with other organizations instead of working on their own. Partnership is a core value of our society.

This interviewee suggests that Islamic religious organizations should cooperate among themselves, as well as with other organizations in a manner that is as integrated as possible

within the existing structure in Norway. Her perception of Islamic religious organization hints to a lack of cooperation; perhaps because they represent a highly diverse community in terms of religious ideology, ethnic background, and civil society participation. However, as evidence by IRN and MDN's engagements, these groups do cooperate and have networks, although, at the same time – as some participants indicated to in this study, there also exist conflicts within these networks.

4.3.2   Access to funding

It has been noted that the authorities in Norway recognised the communication gaps between local authorities and immigrant communities and quickly moved to communicate the Covid-19 information to various immigrant groups. When the government announced a call for funding (IMDI, 2021), a number of Islamic religious organizations and mosques received financial support for their projects that were aimed at Muslim immigrant groups and Covid-19.

In the interviews, the financial support for projects aimed at Muslim communities has been mentioned by several participants. However, most respondents focus on challenges faced by some Islamic religious organizations when seeking access to funding. For instance, a leader of an organization raised a question, noting that local authorities focus only on Islamic umbrella organisations as a point of contact even though not all Islamic organizations, let alone individual Muslims, are part of these umbrella bodies:

> *We are a small community [a representative of a Mosque in Oslo proclaimed]. We didn't know about any of these funding opportunities. Lately, we proposed a project to engage in an information campaign about Coronavirus, but we dropped it because we did not get any support to proceed. But they [public authorities] gave money to bigger organizations. That is disappointing.*

Also, in this quote lies an indication that for smaller mosques and groups the chance of receiving a good supply of information from the relevant sectors are even smaller with respect to access to financial support.

4.3.3   Link between faith and compliance

In the broader context of interaction between Muslim communities and secular authorities in Oslo, it does not seem that religious obligations are something and mitigation strategies are something else. In other words, the relationship between faith and Covid-19 regulations is found to be a non-static phenomenon. Several Muslim participants' adherence to current social norms and centralized Covid-19 rules is found contingent on their faith and recognition of certain

Islamic religious obligations embodied in major holy texts of Islam. Even though not explicitly, an Imam reveals that quarantine, distancing, and isolation have their roots in Islam:

> *I can tell you; negligent transmission of an infectious disease is a sin in Islam. Coronavirus is a killer. The prophet and his companions used to take precautions to protect themselves and each other from infectious diseases. I know we must put our trust in God, but we must be careful as well.*

Other religious requirements that were connected to central guidelines include hygienic practices:

> *All Muslims must maintain ablution before each formal prayer [...] washing the hands before eating is also recommended.*

The link between some Muslim community members' adherent to Covid-19 rules and central Islamic teachings is interesting for my analysis. This is because it disapproves secularity's long-standing position of rigid categorization of what is subjective and what is objective; what is rational and what is irrational; what is an issue of reason and what is an issue of faith; also, what is private and what is public. Beyond this seemingly biased categorizations, what is revealed here confirms the ambitious project of post-modernist approach to post-secularity, which looks at religion, including Islam, 'as a multidimensional concept which encompasses tradition, practice, emotions, lived experience, and embodied modes of subjectivation, and which is constantly reconstituted, contested, struggled over' (Mavelli, 2012:1075). Having said that, it is important to note that post-secularity, as redefined by post-modernists, has implications not only for secularism, but also for religion if approached in a broad, abstract manner. In other words, postmodernists' argument suggest that religion has to be contextualized, scrutinized, and detached from any 'unilateral practices centred on self-interest and individual entitlements towards more reciprocal arrangements' (Pabst, 2012:1014). The nature of the diversity of organizations and interests within the Muslim community in Norway, despite their explicit monotheistic testimony, makes the discourse around the interaction between secular and religious sectors very relevant to the Muslim community in Oslo. The current study identifies the diverse ethnicity of the Muslim community and how this ethnic makeup influence the way in which a Muslim may adhere to and practice a specific religious orientation. This diversity has implications for also Muslims' varying opinions around issues that are debated in society. This aspect of the Muslim community in Norway, in terms of the Islamic religious organizations, is among the issues that I look at in the following chapter.

5. THE ROLES AND LIMITATIONS OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

In this chapter, I examine some of the activities that Muslim communities in Norway engage with at organizational level under the Covid-19. The aim is to shed light on some specific, emerging roles and limitations of the Islamic religious organizations during the Covid-19 pandemic. The empirical data I present in this chapter were collected from different participants in the study, including leaders and Imams from various Islamic religious organizations. You will note, however, that the online documents and texts that I analyse herein are mainly related to the activities carried out by IRN and MDN. This is not only because IRN and MDN are the largest, umbrella Islamic religious organizations in Norway, but also because of the methodological approach I deploy in the study. In other words, my objective in the project includes examination of the interaction between secular authorities and Muslim communities that which is aimed at fostering a successful implementation of diversity and inclusivity in society. IRN and MDN, for that matter, are interesting because they are more diverse and provide resources for many mosques, in accordance with their status as umbrella organizations. However, while they strive to unite Muslims, IRN and MDN represent many different Muslim groups who have differing views about faith and how significant religion is to their lives. Representing such varied communities can be challenging, especially under pressures to speak with one voice and express a unified opinion on critical issues, such as the Covid-19. Combining these factors together promises a meaningful insight into understanding the activities of organizations within Muslim communities in Norway during the Covid-19 pandemic.

 According to my analysis of documents and online texts, during the outbreak of the COVID-19, Islamic religious organizations that I cover in this study have shown their awareness of their potential role and responsibility in continuing to meet the needs of the thousands of people who rely on them. Moreover, in the interviews, participants were asked about the functions of Islamic religious organizations. Many responses include positive remarks about mosques and Islamic faith-based organizations. However, some limitations to these institutions' functions both within Muslim communities and in relation to secular authorities were also identified as problematic. Some of these challenges and opportunities are considered under each of the following themes: (1) information sharing, (2) religious justification during times of crisis, and (3) spiritual care and consultation.

5.1 Information Sharing

Starting from the initial stage of the Covid-19 outbreak, a large number of Islamic organizations and mosques in Oslo have put restrictions on their religious congregations and gatherings,

including the obligatory Friday prayer. As early as March 2020, the two largest umbrella Islamic religious organizations in Norway - IRN and MDN - issued guidelines for their members, based on the recommendations of the Department of Pathology at Akershus University Hospital (AHUS) and Oslo University Hospital, Ullevål (IRN, 2021). For instance, on March 12, 2020, IRN published a statement in which they recommend closure of places of worship, dissemination of information about the Covid-19 among community members, and provision of help for members of vulnerable groups, such as the elderly and people who are lonely (IRN, 2020). In addition to science, IRN connects its recommendations to Quran and Hadith (the primary sources of the Islamic religion). The statement contains verses such as: 'Ask the people of the Reminder if you do not know' (Quran chapter 16:43; chapter 21:7). IRN interprets this as to ask experts and professionals in a particular field to get help. IRN also refers to several prophetic sayings including that 'if you hear about a plague in a country, do not go into it; similarly, if it hits a country and you're in it, do not leave it' (Bukhari and Muslim). For them, this is exactly what quarantine does mean.

MDN (2020) also followed the same approaches, relying on teachings such as that: 'Verily, along With Every Hardship Is Relief' (Quran 95:5). Based on this, they advised a range of activities to help deal with issues such as stress. For example, they suggest getting more exercise; playing games at home and setting up a regular video call with friends or family. Interestingly, MDN went on incredibly early to explicitly include young people among vulnerable groups that may encounter social and economic challenges under the pandemic. The organization also recommended for its members to follow The Daily Review - the daily evening news programme on NRK and News about the virus on the Norwegian television channel - TV2, which broadcast at 19:00 and 21:00 respectively. MDN's guidelines was also religious in sense that it recommends utilizing Quran recitation to reduce negative emotions and psychological discomfort. Many mosques and congregations in Oslo adhere to guidelines issued by religious organizations and State authorities, changing the way Muslims observe their rituals, including congregational prayers, funerals – washing, shrouding, and prayer.

During my interviews, reflecting on the activities of their respective religious congregations, several participants describe the roles of Islamic religious organizations as to inform their members of the danger of the virus and provide them with opportunities to avoid risking their lives. There has also been emphasis on that the corona situation necessitates new strategies and new ways of thinking. In this regard, a leader of an organization who participated in the study elaborates:

The coronavirus [Covid-19] has dramatically changed the way we communicate. We used to make announcements face-to-face, mostly on Fridays after the congregational prayer. Now that is impossible. We send emails, we share documents on WhatsApp, or arrange virtual meetings.

The online activities also cover lectures and information about Islam. A mother who participated in the study says:

I like what the mosque is doing in moving to online; the online weekend classes are a good option for my kids, especially youngsters. I don't want my kids to lose interest or expose to wrong contents on other internet platforms.

This change, not the Covid-19 crisis, but the switch from in-mosque to online to reach out to members of the congregation has been welcomed by several participants:

I used to get all the information through my husband. He attends most of the Friday prayers. I rarely go to the mosque. But now we get everything on WhatsApp. You can also ask the Imam even if you cannot go to the mosque. For example, once I asked him on our WhatsApp platform about taking the Covid-19 vaccination while fasting [...] I believe many people benefited from his answer (a female individual participant).

However, not everybody is yet satisfied: a male individual participant wishes other preferences on the part of his mosque to keep members informed about Islam and current issues:

I get lot of messages on WhatsApp. I do not know which is which. It is confusing. My call to the executive committee is to give importance to offline activities. A phone call from the Imam or a visit would do the job.

Considering the greater tendency in today's world to conduct classes online and communicate with students and followers virtually, rather than physically, it may sound surprising that this person prefers in-person contacts over virtual communication. However, by closely looking at varying contexts and capabilities, it becomes clear that this preference provokes the necessity to address various needs of different groups in the broader light of the consequences of the closure of mosques during the Covid-19 outbreak. In several other studies in different contexts: for instance, ''teachers' care for newly arrived migrant and refugee learners in Denmark'' (Primdahl, 2020); and ''Mapping Instructional Barriers during COVID-19 Outbreak: Islamic Education Context'' (Habibi, 2021), numerous communication challenges resulting from the Covid-19 crisis have been revealed and classified as urgently in need to be addressed. This

could have some policy implications, for example, home visits, as the interviewee in this study suggests, if mitigating measures are possibly maintained.

5.2 Religious Justification during times of crisis

Obviously, to stop the spread of the Covid-19 requires reassessment of various aspects of our activities. This requirement is not limited to social or economic activities; it includes religious practices. In this context, one of the key elements of the Islamic tradition that has been extracted from my data is the interpretation of the Quranic text and Prophetic sayings to address a wider range of issues, including pandemic. Reassessment of worship practices is important for Muslim communities in Oslo because religious gatherings were reported in Norway to be linked with Covid-19 infection cases. My findings indicate that many leaders recognise the need to reconsider certain Islamic religious practices. According to a leader of an organization:

> *Islam is not restricted to attain our [Muslims] spiritual needs by praying to Allah. It provides us a comprehensive way of life and encourages us to think, evaluate and analyse.*

Going direct to the point, an Imam states that:

> *In my view, Taqlid [unjustified conformity of one person to the teaching of another] undermines the adaptive capacity of Islam and Muslim communities to a new reality. The closure of mosques to the public is nothing new. In fact, it is happening every day, this is particularly true in countries witnessing war.*

This Imam aligns himself with reformers who call for a renewed interest in critique to traditional schools of thought, problematizing precedent-following. For him, Taqlid - unquestioning or unswerving adherence to precedents - might incapacitate a Muslim community's ability to adapt to a new reality such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Nevertheless, not all Muslim participants in this study were convinced that there is a need for a 'modern interpretation' of Islamic religious text, as someone referred to it. For instance, a participant expresses his disapproval of adaptation practices inside Mosques that are thought by some Imams to be religiously acceptable during the Covid-19 outbreak:

> *I don't go to the mosque now. Praying in congregation in the mosque means praying together, side-by-side in rows. It does not seem that it is permissible to perform Salat with gaps between us in the row. I don't buy into such a so-called modern interpretation of our religion [Islam]. It is not right.*

This respondent disagrees with the practice of social distancing during prayers in mosques, which was aimed at mitigating the public health impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is an example of unwillingness to change worship practices, even under circumstances such as the Covid-19.

The competing positions mentioned in this section exemplify emerging fragmentation of religious authority and a deeply seated conflict in Islamic jurisprudence - human understanding of the divine Islamic law of Quran and the Hadeeth (Suyadi et al, 2020). This conflict mainly revolves around taqlid, unjustified conformity of one person to the interpretation and teaching of another – and ijtihad - individual interpretation of Qur'an and sunnah through reasoning. Several studies have examined these opposing positions and their relevance for the reconstruction of Islamic jurisprudence in the face of crisis, including the current Covid-19 outbreak (Suyadi et al., 2020). Suyadi et al. investigate Muhammadiyah Ulamas' approach in addressing the mitigation of Covid-19 from the perspective of 'Disaster Fiqh', that is the jurisprudence of crisis. Established in Indonesia, Muhammadiyah is a socio-religious organization that advocates ijtihad - individual interpretation of Qur'an and sunnah and opposes 'the anti-scientific attitudes and anti-intellectualism' (Suyadi et al., 2020). According to Suyadi et al. (2020), Muhammadiyah's position in the context of Indonesia, contrary to many 'online celebrity clerics', is that Covid-19 is a 'health disaster' therefore provision of health facilities and changes to the procedure for worship has to be prioritized. Muhammadiyah uses numerous Qur'anic verses and prophetic traditions to support their views. Some of the significant theological reconstruction the organization advocated include: Saying (when calling to prayer): pray at your homes – instead of saying come to pray [to the mosque] because mosques should be closed when close contacts undermine mitigation measures. The organization realizes that many other Islamic scholars oppose these changes, especially those clerics who 'hold that the way of worship are considered sacred and fixed […] even though in the midst of Covid-19's emergency conditions' (Suyadi et al, 2020:5).

5.3 Spiritual care and consultation

My results show that Islamic spiritual functions and consultation through a Muslim clergy play a significant role in many Muslims' lives, also during the Covid-19. A leader of an organization states:

> *Even beyond family members and close friends, it is a duty to visit the sick and care for the needy. It is about bringing a sense of togetherness in our community.*

Moreover, an Imam showed me a text message, which reads:

[Assalaam Alaykum Imam! It is difficult, but I must tell you this. My sister's husband died from coronavirus. She is still grieving and overwhelmed. Could you please call her to offer her your prayer and words of comfort?]

This quote illustrates the importance of spiritual services that the Islamic institutions offer to provide for some of the Muslim participants in this study. However, provision of Islamic spiritual care proved challenging for many of my respondents. Some of these difficulties were directly linked with the Covid-19. For instance, Ruqya - Islamic exorcism – was a major challenge for several participants in this study. An individual participant states:

My parents believe that I am being possessed by a devil. They think that I need Rugya [healing]. But how can we do that now.

This interviewee is concerned about Ruqya because, in some cases, the therapist would place her or his hand on the head of the treated person and spit drily. While this difficulty is clearly due to the Covid-19 crisis where people must maintain distance, other challenges are age old issues that have become more visible during the Covid-19 outbreak. For example, an individual respondent has revealed her concern about what she called ''lack of female scholarship''. She reveals that:

To be honest, I don't know any female scholar [] in my community. Sometimes when I want to know about certain things, I talk to my female friends who know female scholars in Arab countries. I cannot talk with the Imam about every personal issue. Of course, I could ask my husband to talk with him, but you know I prefer direct communication.

This remark turns the interview to gender issues, suggesting a need for the entry of women in the field of Islamic religious scholarship. While focus on the lack of female scholarship sounds secular on surface, its roots could be connected to 'the Quranic notion of equality of all insan (human beings)' (Pruzan-Jørgensen, 2012:34). Different analytical approaches offer different perspectives regarding female education in Islam. In her study which explores different ways in which Muslim women in Oslo understand and practice gender relations in Islam, Nyhagen (2019) has identified four analytical frameworks toward gender relations: Tradition-modern dichotomy; society-oriented view; family-oriented approach; and culture-oriented tradition.

Tradition-modern dichotomy is associated with both challenging the traditional sources of influence, on one hand, and resistance to colonialism and western cultural values and lifestyles

in a context of rapid social and political change. Society-oriented Islamists advocates the equal value of both women and men and encourages participation in home and society for women. Family-oriented approach focuses home and family without a significant role in the public sphere for women. Culture-oriented tradition is also concerned with home and family, however, with stricter view with respect to women's role.

Linking these typologies with education, all of them, except for culture-oriented traditionalism, hold that education is equally important for both women and men. Again, it seems strange that there is a lack of female scholarship in Muslim communities as such, considering the support for education by these approaches. The reason could be explained by scrutinizing the type and the level of education that is offered to women in Oslo, because context also matters. A female participant in a study in Oslo expressed that 'the sermons and lectures in her mosque are repetitive and even uninspiring, as they tend to deal with the same topics (e.g., fasting, prayer, and marriage)' (Nyhagen, 2019:6). The concern here is that since Islam involves 'all aspects of social life and communal affairs' (Nyhagen: 2014:480), female scholarship must be equipped with intellectual capabilities to liberate women and address complex social issues. Until and unless this end is reached, many regular Muslim women, including the participant who raises this issue in my study, will remain concerned.

6. MUSLIM COMMUNITIES' EXPERIENCE OF GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

In the previous two chapters, it was demonstrated that local authorities, in collaboration with Islamic religious organizations, subsequently engaged Muslim communities to contain the spread of the Covid-19. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that there remain challenges, some of which could be resolved through increased understanding of the experiences of members of the local community. This chapter evaluates the experiences of Muslim communities in Oslo of government response to the Covid-19, seeking to contribute to our understanding of this issue. Focus on this topic is appropriate for both the theoretical and methodological frameworks I use in this thesis. Different theoretical understandings of post-secularity, especially post-modernist approach, provoke investigation into the reality of the experiences of religious practitioners that which is perceived to run counter to common sense (Mavelli, 2012). Semi-structured interviewing, on the other hand, promises to provide a deeper insight into exploring personal experiences (Bryman, 2012; Crang & Cook, 2007). Recently, several studies have revealed that the degree to which a person is able to comply with the Covid-

19 regulations, such as quarantine, distancing, and isolation, is a complex matter because it depends on many different factors, including socioeconomic and structural issues (Brekke, 2021; Indseth et al., 2021).

In this study, I have identified two themes that helped us to gain an understanding of participants' experiences of and views about government's response to the Covid-19 outbreak, namely, 1) Access to information and 2) Trust or mistrust in the face of crisis.

6.1   Access to information

Access to relevant, appropriate information during times of health crisis forms significant part of health communication (Brekke, 2019). The initial efforts by the authorities in Oslo was primarily aimed at giving citizens information on the Covid-19: its symptoms, the spread of the disease and prevention strategies (Ursin et al., 2020). In this section I look at the issue of access to health-related information. Two prominent themes emerged from my analysis: (a) language barrier and (b) mixed messages.

6.1.1   language barrier

The initiatives in Oslo to disseminate Covid-19 information aligns with the State's obligation under human rights law to provide accurate and factual information in accessible formats and languages to everyone (OHCHR, 2020). However, whether the information was actually accessible and effective for minority groups, including Muslim immigrants, has to be investigated. In their examination of 'COVID-19 trends in Norway', Ursin et al. (2020:666) illustrates that in an effort to raise awareness about the Covid-19 in Norway, 'links to streamed press conferences, written information and reports [were made] available through government web sites with daily updates'. These researchers also note that in addition to efforts at national level, 'municipalities have been active in adopting a range of communications strategies in order to reach their citizens using daily press conferences, local newspapers, radio and twitter' (p.666).

Despite these efforts, as far as minority groups are concerned, including within Muslim communities, public health officials and researchers, as well as civil society organizations (Castello, 2020) disclose that there was a high level of the Covid-19 infection among immigrants and their families. Groups that were overrepresented among those infected with Covid-19 in Norway include some members of Muslim communities in Oslo (Brekke, 2021). The infection rate disproportionality provokes investigation into what was lacking in government's approach regarding minority groups. The challenge was quickly blamed on 'the

public crisis communication strategies' that which local authorities adopted (Brekke, 2021; Indseth et al., 2021). A major concern has been that many immigrants do not understand the Norwegian language in which most of the information about the virus was initially issued and distributed through national health authorities' websites (Indseth et al., 2021). This constitutes a lack access to information for many immigrant groups, including those who do not follow national or local news because they do not understand Norwegian language (Brekke, 2021). This is relevant for some of the Muslim participants in my study and their family members. A young female respondent that I interviewed reveals: ''my father does not follow news about the Coronavirus. And when I talk with him about it, he would think that I am lying. He even thinks that I'm brainwashed by the ''mainstream media''.'' Such individuals are identified as hard-to-reach segments of a society (Brekke, 2021). The person in question in this example is an immigrant, while his daughter is born in Norway. The difference between their perceptions of and views about news and media indicates that there could be a need to deal with the two generations separately, regarding access to information in a society. Reflecting on this conversation, I keep on asking about the role that which authorities could play for individuals who had little information about the virus had the government empowered appropriate agencies to boost its efforts.

According to previous studies that examined strategies for reaching out to all groups of residents, as it has also been confirmed by my findings in this study in the case of Muslim communities, to overcome the challenge of access to information for immigrant groups it was imperative to put part of national and local efforts, such as information campaign, in the hands of influencers with a certain role and position in a specific community. I associate this with 'ambassador projects' (see Brekke, 2021). In the context of the topic of my study, Islamic religious organizations could play certain interesting roles, while Imams have important positions by the virtues of Islamic religion. There can be situations and times where people are unsure about their responsibilities and rights. In what follows I look at some of the situations where respondents in this study express that they were left feeling confused.

6.1.2 *Mixed messages and information*

Several participants in this study have revealed their concerns about conflicting messages on government websites and confusing advice they receive from their assigned general doctors and health authorities. For example, an individual participant reveals that advice of the authorities regarding vaccination was not straightforward:

My doctor advised me to secure an appointment for the vaccination. However, a couple of days later, I receive a call from the authorities that I must wait at least three weeks before getting any vaccine. The thing is that they didn't tell me why I had to wait.

This experience is like that of several other participants in the project:

I called to ask if I was eligible. Even though I am under 65 but I wanted to get vaccinated before it is stopped to be free [laughter]. But when I called last time, I was kept on hold. No answer.

Other participants wished that guidelines were clearer. It appears that there was a confusion, which causes uncertainty as to comply with government's recommendations. The person reveals:

To me the situation is very confusing. How could you ask someone who is sick to stay at home without any medicine or care?

This is a person who was ill and was informed therefore to stay home and separate himself from others. He wonders how he could get access to over-the-counter medicines, such as ibuprofen. What we see in this section is that the options at the disposal of several Muslim participants in this study during the Covid-19 are hindered by what they describe as a lack of clarity regarding quarantine and isolation rules, and vaccination procedures. For instance, with respect to what to do in case of sickness, the confusion for some of the participants stems from the government recommendations that stipulate varying measures regarding persons with confirmed, suspected, or probable Covid-19. The participant in the question expresses his struggle to understand measures that were needed to be followed in the case of these different conditions. He also recalls: 'even though I was not tested, yet I was ordered to stay home because I was sick'. The challenge for him to follow the rule, however, was that he 'did not have any medications at the time' while he suffered from what he thought to be a 'normal headache'. He thought it could be helpful if he was allowed access to 'anything' that could relief the pain. However, he had to remain home and mange it on his own. According to my analysis, one of the uncomfortable implications of the findings associated with the lack of access to information is that it raises suspicion about whether the people, members of Muslim communities in this case, and institutions trust each other to work for the common good. In the next section, I endeavour to uncover various dynamics of trust, based on the experiences of the study participants of government response to the Covid-19.

6.2 Trust/Mistrust

Findings in this study indicate that trust is one of the issues that need to be assessed and considered when dealing with Muslim communities. According to Brekke (2021), various types of trust have been discussed in trust studies, including (a) vertical trust or trust in institutions; (b) Horizontal or interpersonal trust – trust in others; and (c) intra-group trust - mutual trust between different groups within a society or community.

To examine these issues further, first, at institutional level, I asked several participants in this study about their views about the government's cooperation with civil and religious organizations during the Covid-19 outbreak. My analysis shows that in contrast to the secular authorities' subsequent recognition of the importance of cooperation with Muslim communities, the government's criteria of partnership at the initial stage of the Covid-19 pandemic proved insufficient. The delay to activate effective collaboration has been linked with some negative consequences for some members of Muslim communities, regarding their level of trust in authorities. For instance, an interviewee in this study states that ''it is disappointing. We worked hard to protect our members, which is good for the society as a whole, but the government ignored our work.''. Another interviewee in this study, a leader in an Islamic religious organization, asserts: ''we sought collaboration; we had to navigate the system on our own, which proved difficult. I was expecting that the authorities would contact us''. These remarks are consistent with concerns expressed by the leaders of several other civil society organizations and the Equality and Anti-Discrimination Ombud, as reported by several writers such as Lien (2020) and Castello (2020). These authors have revealed in some of their articles that leaders within a number of civil society associations criticize Norwegian government's limited cooperation with immigrant organizations who felt frustrated with the authorities' lack of trust in them (Lien 2020; Castello, 2020).

Despite their emphasis on the government's awareness of and concern about access to information for immigrants from the very beginning of the pandemic, several local administrators who participated in my study state that the choices of intervention method were lacking in standard and quality. According to an administrator:

The virus was new [at its initial stage]. It was a difficult situation because the information about it kept changing. This meant increased caseloads. Before we could translate everything to different languages, we realized that the infection rate was already high among immigrant groups.

For this participant, the failure to quickly communicate about the virus to immigrant groups was associated with lack of preparedness rather than that of trust.

At an individual level, my findings show that some immigrants might be at risk due to perceived discrimination and sense of guilt when seeking or receiving unemployment benefits. The experience of these individuals was found to be that of sensitivity to what they describe as 'misconceptions', such as that Muslim immigrants are 'economically inactive'. My study otherwise found that not every member of Muslim communities is happy being at home, claiming welfare benefits and taking advantage of the disruptions caused by the Covid-19 crisis. What happens in some cases is that some of them continue to work even when it is not safe because they do not want to be judged. 'You know I am from [a country]. If you go to NAV [Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration] and you are from [a country] they would think that you are lazy and do not want to work' (an individual participant). Other reasons that could explain why some immigrants continue to work during the pandemic include their distrust of the unemployment benefit mechanism in Norway.

> *When I came back from holiday, I applied for temporarily redundancy because the restaurant where I work closes due to Coronavirus. But NAV rejected my application and said that I applied too late. Now I get a new job. I don't mind if NAV doesn't pay me.*

In this story, revealed by an individual interviewee in this project, we can see that not everybody who is struggling to get a job or working under the Covid-19 is doing it so willingly. In some cases, it is because of their experience of inconsistent and sometime inconvenient governmental policy response and practices that have been currently proposed in Oslo to deal with the pandemic. Another participant says ''My Norwegian colleagues have received their first payment from NAV while I am still waiting for the decision whether I qualify for the benefit''. I was not certain, however, if this case is linked to a discrimination or it is simply that the applicant was not familiar with bureaucratic aspects of the system. Nonetheless, it is important that the authorities are aware of the issue of trust/mistrust regarding applications for unemployment benefits and take it seriously, especially when compared with the Norwegian population who exercise significant trust in the state (Ursin et al., 2020).

With respect to trust between different groups within a particular community, Brekke's (2021) study shows that factors such as religious composition and ethnic diversity relate to and can directly influence the overall trust level in a society or community. Focusing on Somali community, which also represents a significant segment of the Muslim community in Oslo, Brekke found that the issue of intra-group trust matters for designing an effective awareness campaign. In other words, to create a sense of shared responsibility in a community, to fight

misinformation and to encourage compliance with the measures put in place by government to stop the spread of the virus, persons involved in delivering the message 'needed to be trusted by the hard-to-reach groups'. According to Brekke's findings being trusted includes 'having a solid footing in both the minority and the majority communities and having established authority. If those fronting the communication would additionally be educated health personnel, that would be an advantage' (Brekke, 2021:10). In the example illustrated by Brekke, local authorities in Oslo eventually worked together with the Somali community on an ambassador campaign. In this thesis, several participants emphasise the importance of careful assessment of who to involve in the information dissemination in Muslim communities. A public administrator states: 'we worked hard, but not everything ran smoothly. Then we realized that it is an advantage to involve religious staffs who have a certain experience in these communities.' This is an indication of recognizing Imams and religious leaders as resource persons who can act to spread reliable information about the Covid-19. Several Muslim organizations received funding to disseminate information in Oslo. The involvement of influencers and trusted members of the community ultimately proved government's effort more effective, at least at an interaction level. I agree with Brekke, however, on that: 'Systematic evaluation and further research are needed to fully understand the effect and outcomes of individual campaigns, such as the ambassador initiative in Oslo' (Brekke, 2021:19).

7. CONCLUSION

This study uses different conceptions of post-secularity to explore the interaction between secular authorities and Muslim communities in Oslo as part of the collective efforts in Norway to contain the Covid-19. Specifically, the project investigates the politics of Norway's response to the pandemic and how the response strategy engages Muslim communities. Various experiences of the participants of the response strategy, roles and limitations of Islamic religious organizations were also examined as such.

As part of my methodological approach, firstly, I engaged with a process of trying to find out what was going on in Oslo regarding Norway's response to Covid-19 and how local authorities engage Muslim communities, but also what Islamic religious organizations were doing. I draw on online documents, texts, and media reports to gain an insight into these issues. Secondly, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 respondents to generate empirical data to examine the interaction between secular authorities and Islamic religious organizations and the experience of Muslim communities of the response mechanism.

The analysis of the data collected in the study has revealed that there is a combined effort in Oslo to bring Muslim communities and secular authority together to address the Covid-19 crisis, though only to some extent. I have addressed three research questions to reach this conclusion. These questions include (1) what insights we can gain from different conceptions of post-secularity toward understanding the interaction between secular authorities and Muslim communities in Oslo under the Covid-19; (2) what roles Islamic religious organizations and public authorities do play for Muslim communities in Oslo in response to the Covid-19 pandemic; and (3) what the experiences of Muslim communities of the government's response are. The use of post-secularity as a theoretical framework has been helpful for the way in which I approached and answered these research questions. Post-secularists scholars, unlike secularists, present a view of the presence of the religion and its influence on the daily lives of religious communities. One of the advantages of the post-secularity, especially, from a post-modernist perspective, is that it predicts that the interface between secular and religion dimensions is not static. This enables me to see an interconnection between Muslim communities and secular authorities in Oslo during the Covid-19. In this study, I term this interconnection and the way in which it unfolds as interaction. The effect of this interconnection provides secular authorities and Muslim communities with opportunities to cooperate toward achieving a common goal. Post-modernist approach further explains that this interaction has to be characterized by reciprocal arrangements where secular reasons and religious sentiments are empirically sufficient to contribute, and none should be privileged or treated as more legitimate.

In this study three major themes appear, while one theme reveals itself, but I have not collected sufficient data to support it empirically. The three prominent themes that appeared have been discussed in three different chapters: the politics of Norway's response and interaction with Muslim communities in Oslo, in chapter four; the roles of, and challenges faced by Islamic religious organizations, in chapter five; and the experience of Muslim communities of government response, in chapter six.

With respect to the issue of interaction, according to my findings, secular authorities seem to recognise Islamic religious organizations as a segment of the Norwegian society that which benefits the society in general, and Muslim communities in particular. This result is found consistent with the theoretical prediction, as post-modernists maintain, that the presence and visibility of religion within society necessitates interaction between secular and religious sectors (Caputo, 2011; Pasha, 2012; Mavelli and Petito, 2012). However, participants in the study have different views of the motives that justify or form the basis for this interaction.

Several participants confirm that Muslim religious organizations, as mouthpieces for their members, offer opportunities for facilitating social participation; therefore, cooperation between them and the municipality is imperative. Similarly, some Muslim participants hold that their motives to engage with secular authority under the Covid-19 include ensuring that religious practices are harmonized with central guidelines. For them, because Mosques and religious organizations are publicly funded by the state, they need to comply with Covid-19 rules if they do not want to get closed. For some participants, however, there is a need for adapting the interaction to ensure equal participation across the city in terms of empowering the marginalized groups. This final position, interaction to meet the varying needs of the population, is strongly supported by evidence from previous studies. For instance, Holte (2020:465), states that the 'empirical material and analysis [in his study] show that the needs of an increasingly diverse population can be and are met by promoting, rather than restricting, the public engagement of religious organisations'. This is an interesting contribution in my study because it entails that in addition to treating religion and secular on an equal footing, recognition of specific needs of different groups is a core element in interaction.

Regarding the roles and limitations of Islamic religious organizations, my analysis indicates that reassessment of our daily practices, including worship practices, and dissemination of reliable, correct information are among significant areas where religious leaders and organization can contribute in a society. Because they are primarily formed for religious purposes, religious organizations and mosques can facilitate the processes of reassessment of Muslims' worship practices during crises through interpretation or reinterpretation of major Islamic religious texts. Engaging Islamic jurisprudence or human understanding of the divine Islamic sources, through ijtihad, may facilitate this process. Current reforms under the Covid-19 crisis that can be seen in Oslo include social distancing and wearing facemasks during prayer, as well as using alcohol-based hand sanitizer when necessary. Tackling these issues could be perceived controversial in Islam, for instance, considering Halal/Haram or Pure/Impure debates on alcohol in Islam (see Rahim & Abdul, 2013). My findings indicate that while reformed practices such as gaps between people in the prayer rows were challenged, participants who refute such practices prefer to pray at home even when the mosques in Oslo were open with restrictions. Thusly, disagreement with adjusted religious practices does not constitute lack of compliance with Covid-19 rules. Moreover, most Muslims who participated in this study indicate that Covid-19 regulations such as quarantine are consistent with religious duties, including the obligation to protect oneself and others from harm. Furthermore, according

to my results, instead of limiting the general public's access to information through government sectors, authorities in Norway have subsequently used alternative spaces to provide people with information about the Covid-19. Voluntary sector, for instance, is a significant area in this regard. Islamic religious organizations and mosques that are considered in this study are found to be an important source of information for Muslim communities as such.

Concerning the experiences of members of Muslim communities, the study reveals that there are groups among Muslim communities that encounter challenges regarding (a) access to information about Covid-19 and (b) various dimensions of trust or distrust under the Covid-19 crisis. Based on the information I exploit in this study, I hold that these challenges result from government's sometime inconsistent, complex response strategy. For instance, multiple sources in the study, including my interview data about vaccination messages, show that Muslim communities, like immigrant groups in Norway (Indseth et al., 2021) and in Oslo (Søegaard & Kan, 2021), lack access to information about the Covid-19. In my study, in chapter six, a daughter reports that her farther does not have any interest in watching news coverages of the Covid-19. One possible reason for this disinterest is the lack of Norwegian language skills among the older population within the Muslim community (Brekke, 2021). The challenges facing this group in this regard, however, are not confined to the language barrier. The issue of generation gap appears to be relevant. In the farther-daughter interaction that I mentioned above, the farther was reported as saying that his daughter is misled by the mainstream media. I also find it imperative to mention that in the case of Muslim communities, however, the Covid-19 restrictions and the closure of mosques, specifically, intensify the negative aspect of the lack of information because members of congregations were not able to physically connect with their religious leaders as such. The study informs us that the religious bodies in Oslo are moving their services online. However, not all Muslim interviewees were satisfied with this shift due to various reasons, including unfamiliarity with and inability to deal with the excessive quantity of information made available on the online platforms that are commonly used by many mosques. Again, recognition of varying needs of different people, even within a single community, emerges as an important aspect of the inclusive interaction that the theoretical framework I use in this study predict.

Talking about trust or mistrust in interaction, according to my findings in this study, authorities in Oslo recognise Islamic religious organizations as partners in the efforts to reach to the most marginalised within various immigrant groups, including Muslim communities. However, even though Muslim organizations, such as IRN and MDN, proved their early intervention to reach

out to their community members, recognition of and support for their work by local authorities in Oslo came late. The current study highlights that the local government sector in Oslo escalates its cooperation with immigrant organizations, including Islamic organizations, only when various civil society sectors brought to the attention that emerging inequalities in infection rates, for instance, exist in Oslo. The slow pace of government plans to involve immigrant organization, including Islamic religious bodies, causes widespread frustration at the lack of trust (Castello, 2020). The issue of trust-mistrust could be linked with the wider debate on religious-secular binary. For post-modernist thinkers of post-secularity, conceptions of 'the religious' and 'the secular' should be evenly distributed across time and locale. In other words, as Pasha summarises, recognition of the role of religion and religious organizations entails secular authority's ability 'to concede heterogeneity and plasticity of cultural programmes in which 'the religious' intermingles with the 'secular', on the one hand, and to recognise alternative temporalities, on the other' (Pasha, 2012:1049). I will add that this does not mean in any way over-simplifying the complexities and ambiguities often found in religious domains, particularly around contentious issues, but rather, government's appreciation of connected, combined efforts in the making of a caring community. As examined in the light of the Covid-19 in Oslo, if characterised by trust in practice, interaction between Muslim communities and secular authorities at both organizational and individual levels, can create opportunities to respond rapidly and effectively to significant social crisis.

Obviously, in this study, the challenge to address the needs of Muslim immigrants under the Covid-19 is found far beyond the problem of access to information and the problematic level of trust that both organizations and individuals have in the response strategy. From this perspective, I notice that a third theme emerged in the study. Namely, emerging socio-economic inequalities. This means that a link was found between health, the Covid-19 in particular, and economic issues (Ursin et al., 2020). In a recent study, (Indseth et al., 2021) the authors examine current conditions and factors influencing the spread of COVID-19 among ethnic minorities and immigrants in Norway. The authors bring to the attention several important issues for the evaluation of differences among immigrant groups and between immigrants and non-immigrants, with respect to the Covid-19 infection and mortality rate. These issues include:

> (a) differences in exposure, such as travel or living conditions; (b) underlying factors affecting the severity of and mortality from infection, such as age distribution and medical conditions; and (c) factors influencing the chance of getting diagnosed, such as test criteria and access to health services (Indseth et al., 2021:53).

Clearly, these categories embody various cultural, health, and socioeconomic conditions and their link to the spread of the Covid-19 among immigrants. Studies about groups within Muslim communities, such as Somali community (Brekke, 2021), found similar trends. To give us information about what connection might there be between these socioeconomic factors and the spread of the Covid-19 among immigrant groups, several studies show that immigrants, including the Muslim population, tend to be employed in occupations with the highest Covid-19 risk, for example, as healthcare workers, drivers, and cleaners (Brekke, 2021; Indseth et al., 2021).

Beyond the issue of the type of profession a person is engaged with, there also lies the challenge of population and housing density (Indseth et al., 2021). As indicated by the central regulations, physical distancing, for instance, has been proposed as one of the effective solutions to stop the spread of the Covid-19. Even though how far people can maintain distancing is largely a matter of behaviour, population and housing density may undermine the effects of physical distancing (Indseth et al., 2021). Explicit inclusion of population density, and that of individual districts, in prevention measures could be important since vast majority of immigrants live in Oslo, the most populous city in Norway. This is a matter of concern because surveys show that living in crowded conditions is common among immigrants and persons with low income (Indseth et al., 2021). In another recent study, Søegaard & Kan (2021), the researchers have looked at the reasons why there is more Covid-19 cases in some of Oslo's districts than others. They consider explanations in factors other than the language barrier. These factors include, immigration ratio, living conditions, low education, and low income. The findings reveal that most detected Covid-19 cases are found in four districts in Groruddalen and Søndre Nordstrand, which also had the highest percentage of immigrants (44–59%) and persons living in overcrowded households (15–17%). However, while their analysis traced a connection between the proportion of immigrants and the rate of infection in the districts, they did not find a statistically significant connection between the rate of infection and socio-economic status and household density. The authors highlight, nevertheless, that there were several possible methodological and statistical weaknesses in their analysis, but they still believe that it can be useful for the authorities.

Based on the analysis presented above, the risk factor or infection rate of Covid-19, with respect to immigrants both in Norway (Indseth et al., 2021) and in Oslo (Søegaard & Kan, 2021), vary significantly. Therefore, it is important to thoroughly study the relation between the Covid-19 and emerging socioeconomic inequalities in the infection rates. Although I find these emerging issues interesting, the current study has not generated enough data to support the elements of

the theme empirically. Instead, as illustrated below, I posit that more thought and research is needed into these issues.

In conclusion, this study contributes to highlighting that the secular-religion relations are produced and reproduced by people through their interactions. From theoretical perspective, the case of the interaction between Muslim communities and secular authorities during the Covid-19 in Oslo presents a scenario of destabilization of the binary oppositions of secular and religion or rational and irrational. Instead, the study maintains that the interface between religion and secular – certain religious commitments and Covid-19 regulations, for instance – is not a static phenomenon. This flexibility allows the study to reveal an interaction between local authorities and Muslim communities to achieve a common goal: containing the Covid-19.

As we continue to deal with infectious diseases, such as the Covid-19, research on the combine efforts, for instance at local levels, must develop alongside. It emerges from my thesis that it could be interesting to find out current local initiatives and their effects on combating the covid-19, focusing on the communication and interactions between religious communities and secular authorities. Of course, because context matters, I suggest that such a study focuses on a specific initiative.

Furthermore, I suggest that a study about socioeconomic inequalities and their link to the Covid-19 infectious rate in Oslo might be designed to examine a wide range of issues, including profession or detailed discussion on employment and occupation common among Muslim immigrants in Oslo; living or housing conditions; opportunities to work from home; and insecurity/security due to trust or mistrust at varying levels in a society or community.

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