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## **Covid-19 and The Islamic Council of Norway: The Social Role of Religious Organizations**

### *Abstract:*

The new coronavirus came to Norway along with vacationers returning from Italy and Austria in February 2020. In less than a month, the demographic profile of the individuals infected by the virus changed from the privileged to the less privileged and from people born in Norway to immigrants from certain mostly Muslim-majority countries. This article presents how The Islamic Council of Norway (ICN) produced and distributed information material about the coronavirus in the early phase of the pandemic in Norway. Further, it examines how the ICN's informational material reflects particular ideas about the social role of religious organizations. The empirical material analyzed in the article stems from media reports, government press releases, and information material published online; the analysis is inspired by Niklas Luhmann's theory of society. The results show dedifferentiation occurring as the ICN linked religion to politics and health as well as how the ICN links the Norwegian national public with a transnational Muslim public. Thus, this article shows how different ideas of the religious and the secular as well as of the national and the transnational coexist in Norway. The discussion relates this to theories about the social role of religion and religious organizations, focusing particularly on the concept of religious organizations as public spaces. The article contributes to a metatheoretical reflection on religious social practice. It also employs and tests alternative theoretical understandings of integration and social cohesion. The results are relevant for practitioners and analysts of religious social practice in modern, secular, and diverse social contexts.

### *Keywords:*

religious organizations, Islam, the secular, dedifferentiation, integration, The Islamic Council of Norway (ICN)

### **Acknowledgements**

An early version of the article was presented in the online conference *Responses to the crisis – a transnational view* organised by the University of Applied Sciences

Würzburg-Schweinfurt for the European University Alliance of Inclusion, Integration and Involvement (3IN Alliance) in May 2020. The author is grateful to the organizers for the opportunity to present this work and to the audience for their encouragement and feedback. The author also wishes to acknowledge Annette Leis-Peters' comments to an early draft version of this article and the anonymous peer reviewers' thorough and constructive engagement with the full manuscript.

## Introduction

The new coronavirus and Covid-19, the disease caused by the virus, came to Norway along with vacationers returning from Italy and Austria in late February 2020. The capital city of Oslo soon became the epicenter of the pandemic in Norway. The virus was initially concentrated in the wealthier Western city districts, where many of the vacationers lived. By early April, however, the virus had become more widespread in the less wealthy Eastern city districts (Johansen et al., 2020). Simultaneously, data published by the Norwegian Institute of Public Health (2020a) indicated that by the end of March immigrants – or “foreign-borns” – were overrepresented among the newly confirmed cases of Covid-19 in Norway. People born in Somalia were particularly heavily overrepresented (Table 1).<sup>1</sup> Through April, the virus continued to spread more rapidly among immigrants from certain, mostly Muslim-majority countries than among the overall population. However, the number of new cases declined among immigrants in the second half of the month (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> In less than a month, the demographic profile of the individuals infected by the coronavirus in Norway changed from the privileged to the less privileged and from people born in Norway to immigrants from certain, mostly Muslim-majority countries.<sup>3</sup>

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1 See also Johansen & Egedius, 2020; Egedius et al., 2020.

2 Norwegian Institute of Public Health, 2020b; Johansen & Riaz, 2020. When the social risk factors became apparent, public discussion emerged. Different explanations for the more rapid spread of the virus in Eastern Oslo and among immigrants were suggested. For example, it was pointed out that immigrants from Somalia and the other overrepresented countries more often work in manual and service jobs that require them to interact with people, thus exposing them to the virus (Riaz et al., 2020). Some people also suggested that information from Norwegian authorities was not easily available to immigrants, some of whom do not read Norwegian well, do not follow Norwegian media, and have only a limited knowledge of the welfare state (Bratberg & Sylte, 2020; Egedius et al., 2020; Ministry of Education and Research, 2020a, 2020b). The latter explanation is important as a backdrop to the empirical account in this article.

3 The coronavirus spread disproportionately among immigrants in other countries as well, for example, in Sweden (Kerpner, 2020).

Table 1 *Confirmed Corona Cases by 5 April 2020 and Population by Country of Birth in 2020*

Country of birth	Confirmed corona cases	Foreign born population	Corona cases per 100,000
Somalia	304	28,581	1,064
Pakistan	64	21,329	300
Iraq	55	23,294	236
Sweden	55	47,714	115
Iran	47	18,560	253
Philippines	46	25,149	183
Denmark	37	24,434	151

Sources: Norwegian Institute of Public Health (2020a); Statistics Norway (2020); author's calculation.

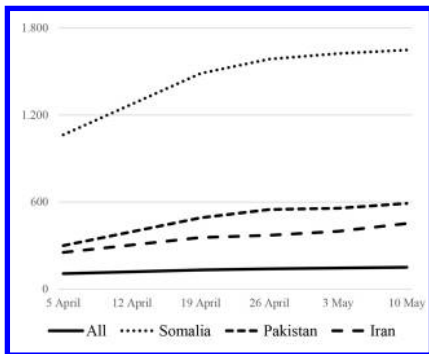


Figure 1 Confirmed Corona Cases in Norway pr. 100,000 People by Country of Birth  
 Source: Norwegian Institute of Public Health's weekly reports; Statistics Norway (2020); author's calculation.

This article reports on how the Islamic Council of Norway (ICN) produced and distributed information material about the coronavirus to mosques and “Norwegian Muslims”<sup>4</sup> in March and April 2020.<sup>5</sup> ICN is an umbrella organization for Norwegian mosques and Muslim organizations. It received public funding between 2007 and 2017, after which the funding was withdrawn, and ten organizations resigned from the Council following long-standing conflicts.<sup>6</sup> Yet, the ICN remains a significant religious actor in Norway. According to its website, it serves 33

4 This term is used by the ICN.

5 ICN, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c.

6 Vogt, 2018.

mosques and Muslim organizations, with a total of 65,000 members (ICN, n.d.).<sup>7</sup> Since its founding in 1993, the ICN has engaged in coordination among Muslim organizations and Muslims living in Norway, lobbying for their shared interests and conducting a dialogue with religious and secular actors. Among other activities, the ICN advises Muslims on how to interpret the Islamic calendar in Norway and certifies Halal meat.<sup>8</sup> In this article, the ICN is approached as a religious organization, that is, an organization formed for religious purposes. The article examines how the ICN's coronavirus information material reflects particular ideas about the social role of religious organizations. The analysis and discussion relate to theories about the social role of religion in general and religious organizations in particular, contributing to a metatheoretical reflection on religious social practice. The article also employs and tests alternative theoretical understandings of integration and social cohesion. Thus, the results are relevant for practitioners and analysts of religious social practice not only in Norway and the Nordic countries, but also more generally in modern, secular, and diverse social contexts.

## Methods

The empirical account in this article builds on media reports, government press releases, and information material published online by the ICN. The data were obtained through online searches and browsing the Council's website entries from April and May 2020. All data used in the article are publicly available and referenced in the reference list at the end of the article. The analysis and discussion depart from the conceptualization of social cohesion as "communicational permeability"<sup>9</sup> and the related concept of religious organizations as "public spaces."<sup>10</sup> They employ theories about the social role of religion in general and religious organizations in particular.<sup>11</sup>

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7 In comparison, all Norwegian Islamic faith communities had a total of 175,507 members at last count, making Islam the second most popular religion in Norway by number of adherents, after Christianity (Statistics Norway, 2019).

8 Vogt, 2018.

9 Holte, 2018, pp. 50-54.

10 Holte, 2018, p. 83, 2020.

11 Esp. Beyer, 1994; Casanova, 1994; Luhmann, 2013b.

## Theoretical Concepts

This section introduces the conceptualization of social cohesion as communicational permeability and the concept of religious organizations as public spaces – both of which are based on the work of the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann<sup>12</sup> and elaborated on in my PhD thesis.<sup>13</sup>

### Social Cohesion as Communicational Permeability

The basic idea of conceptualizing social cohesion as communicational permeability is that social cohesion can be defined in terms of people's ability to participate in social systems and the extent to which communication flows across relevant social systems. In other words, communicational permeability denotes the synthesis of people's ability to participate in different social systems and the flow of information across those social systems.<sup>14</sup>

Understanding social cohesion as communicational permeability has many implications. The concept enables a single analysis to concern several social systems where relevant, as it can be when analyzing social practices in diverse social contexts. In another article, I analyze the communication of the religious organizations in a city district of Oslo, in which over half the population consisted of immigrants or children of immigrants.<sup>15</sup> The article builds upon interviews with representatives from most of the religious organizations in the city district and shows how the religious organizations operated on several geographical scales at the same time, being involved in local communities as well as in national and transnational religious structures. In this article, I employ the concept in a similar, albeit simpler analysis of how the ICN's coronavirus information material relates to Norwegian and foreign publics. In line with Luhmann's theory, my analysis focuses on how the communication and boundaries of communication implied in the empirical account reflect different systems of communication.

### Religious Organizations as Public Spaces

In addition to facilitating an analysis of several social systems at the same time, the concept of communicational permeability also draws attention to how the social cohesion of a social unit – a community, a country, or all the adherents to a religion – can increase as a consequence of structural changes as well as the inclusion of

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12 Esp. Luhmann, 2012, 2013a.

13 Holte, 2018.

14 Holte, 2018, pp. 50-54.

15 Holte, 2020.

people in new social arenas. The integration of immigrants in a host country, for example, is not just a matter of their inclusion in relevant social arenas, such as working life; it can also be a matter of structural change, for example, by directing communication through organizations where immigrants are already members. In some cases, religious organizations can serve such a role. In the article analyzing religious organizations' communication in a city district of Oslo mentioned above, I found emerging communication structures, since the religious organizations were effectively "public spaces" where public welfare services and public authorities could engage with members of the organizations.<sup>16</sup> For the public authorities, this provided a way of reaching out to people who would otherwise be hard to reach; for the religious organizations, it was a way of asserting their social relevance. In this article, my analysis and discussion of the social role of religious organizations implied by the ICN's coronavirus information material departs from the concept of religious organizations as public spaces.

## Empirical Account

### Religious Organizations, Immigrants, and the Coronavirus in Norway

The impact of the novel coronavirus on organized religion was profound in Norway, as it was elsewhere. A ban on public events, including religious activities, from 12 March to 7 May necessitated changes in services, worship, and religious education. Although the ban was partially lifted beginning 7 May, some restrictions were still in place at the time of writing. In the Church of Norway and other churches, entrepreneurial priests and ministers began broadcasting services online and organizing drive-in services, among other initiatives. The ICN first recommended that mosques cancel Friday prayers and other gatherings, and then recommended that mosques close altogether, in line with the guidelines from the national health authorities.<sup>17</sup> The coronavirus profoundly impacted religious activities in Norway.

The coronavirus also actualized the social role of religious organizations as part of civil society in Norway. As noted above, it was evident by early April that the virus had spread particularly rapidly among immigrants from certain countries. On 3 April, the Minister of Education and Integration announced public funding to civil society organizations to "reach out to the immigrant population. To do that, we depend on civil society organizations."<sup>18</sup> Somewhat unusually, this implied a

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16 Holte, 2018, p. 83, 2020.

17 ICN 2020a, 2020b.

18 Ministry of Education and Research, 2020a; my translation.

government approach to the integration of “the immigrant population” based on structural change rather than the inclusion of individuals in existing social arenas and communication flows, especially in working life. In the terminology presented above, this bears resemblance to the idea of religious organizations – together with other civil society organizations – as public spaces.

The Norwegian Red Cross, Caritas Norway, Norske Frivillighetssentraler (the Voluntary Service Center system), the Norwegian Women’s Public Health Association, the Christian Intercultural Association, and Norwegian People’s Aid shared a lump sum of kr. 6.6 million (roughly € 600,000) to engage in “information work.”<sup>19</sup> Caritas Norway and the Christian Intercultural Association have Christian profiles and can be regarded as religious organizations, while the others were secular organizations. All the organizations work with immigrants in Norway, but none were founded by recent immigrants or their immediate descendants. Thus, the leaders of other civil society organizations and the Equality and Anti-Discrimination Ombud reacted to the fact that there were no “immigrant organizations” among the beneficiaries.<sup>20</sup> The ICN, already producing information material about the coronavirus at that time, was one of the organizations whose leaders reacted in public.<sup>21</sup> One commentator noted that the omission of the ICN and other immigrant organizations evoked memories of “the 1980s and 1990s” when the public authorities often “overlooked the minority organizations and gave money to organizations with mostly ethnic Norwegians on their boards.” He remarked, “I had thought one had moved forward since then, but unfortunately that is not correct.”<sup>22</sup> There were also parallels to the 2015 funding scheme for dialogue and “counterradicalization” initiatives, from which the ICN and other “conservative” Muslim organizations received relatively little funding.<sup>23</sup> This kind of differential treatment reflects the different organizations’ levels of public visibility, organizational capacity, and the strength of their ties to the public authorities, but it did not necessarily result from conscious discrimination or a lack of trust.<sup>24</sup>

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19 Ibid.

20 Lien, 2020; Riaz, 2020a, 2020b.

21 Riaz, 2020b; Vivekananthan, 2020.

22 Riaz, 2020a.

23 Bangstad, 2016.

24 The government subsequently announced a public call for kr. 10 million (roughly € 900,000) of new funds on 14 April, a little more than a week after the first funding was announced (Ministry of Education and Research, 2020b). The ICN received kr. 350,000 (roughly € 30,000) in support for a project called “Corona-information to immigrant groups” after this article was finalised (IMDi, 2020). The ICN also participated actively in the public debate on the coronavirus later in the year.

## The ICN and the Coronavirus

As noted, the ICN produced coronavirus information material in the early phase of the pandemic in Norway. The material consisted of different elements, some of which had been published by 3 April, when the Minister of Education and Integration announced the public funding to civil society organizations, and some of which were published in the days that followed.

In mid-March, the Council published guidelines for mosques and a document entitled “3 Hadith/Ayah to protect oneself from the coronavirus.”<sup>25</sup> Both documents were in Norwegian, but they had been produced in collaboration with the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), whose logo they featured alongside that of ICN. The latter document grounded public-health advice in two Hadith and one Ayah:

**Cleanliness is half of faith** (Muslim)

The virus spreads from infected people who sneeze or cough and by physical contact. Stick to the 1-meter social distancing rule.

[...]

**If you hear about a pest in a land, do not go there. If you are in that land, do not flee from it** (Muslim and Bukhari)

If you have been outside of the Nordic countries since 28 February, you are obliged to quarantine at home for 14 days. Stay home!

[...]

**Ask those who know (ahl adh-dhikr) if you do not know** (16:43)

[...]

If you are worried, call your local emergency room or the authorities' information services at 815 55 015.<sup>26</sup>

[...]

The document used the Hadith and Ayah as headings and sorted the authorities' public-health advice under them. For example, the document referred to the social distancing rule under the first Hadith; under the second Hadith, the document contained information about the quarantine for travelers from outside the Nordic countries in force; under the Ayah, the phone number to the Norwegian authorities' information services was provided. The document thus gave the authorities' public-health recommendations a religious framing.

At the beginning of April, the ICN launched online videos in several languages.<sup>27</sup>

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25 ICN, 2020b; my translation. The Hadith, writings about the sayings and doings of the Prophet Muhammad, are an important source of Islamic law. An Ayah is a Quran verse.

26 ICN, 2020b; my translation.

27 The videos were available in Norwegian, Somali, Arabic, Turkish, Urdu, and Dari at the time of writing. My transcription is based on the Norwegian video; I have not verified the contents of the videos in the other languages.



The short videos were addressed to “Norwegian Muslims” and included a Hadith, which was used to justify the authorities’ public-health recommendations. They ended with a religious argument for using “caution”:

Because of the coronavirus outbreak, we have an important announcement for all Norwegian Muslims. The risk of infection is increasing; more people are catching the virus. We know that many of you like to be around people, but just now it is very important to remember a Hadith from the Prophet (pbuh): If you hear about a pest in a land, do not go there. If you are in that land, do not flee from it. So, dear brothers and sisters, we have an important responsibility to our society. We have to listen to and obey the authorities’ recommendations. Adhere to their advice, especially about hygiene [...] Now is the time to use caution. Especially we Muslims will return to Allah (swt), and our actions count right now. May Allah (swt) protect us, our families and our country.  
(my translation)

Like the document “3 Hadith/Ayah to protect oneself from the coronavirus,” the videos thus provided a religious framing for the authorities’ coronavirus information.

ICN also produced and printed information booklets in nine languages,<sup>28</sup> which were published online and distributed in Oslo in early April in collaboration with other civil society organizations, such as the Imdad Relief Foundation.<sup>29</sup> The booklets contained two Ayah (5:32; 94:6) – in Norwegian translation only – and were “based on the Norwegian Institute of Public Health’s recommendations.”<sup>30</sup> The booklets summarized the authorities’ public-health recommendations, advising people to stay at home, keep a safe distance from other people, and keep up good hygiene routines. They also outlined who were defined as the “risk group” during the pandemic and explained the difference between home quarantine and home isolation. The Ayah and the summary of the public-health advice were not on the same pages of the booklet and, unlike in the videos mentioned above, no explicit connection was made between them.

Unlike the document “3 Hadith/Ayah to protect oneself from the coronavirus,” which featured the phone number to the Norwegian authorities’ information services, the booklets, and the videos did not mention the authorities’ information services or that the authorities were publishing information in some of the same languages.<sup>31</sup> Except in the document “3 Hadith/Ayah to protect oneself from the

28 The booklet contained information in Norwegian, English, Somali, Turkish, Arabic, Urdu, Albanian, Dari, and Kurdish.

29 See ICN, 2020c.

30 Ibid.

31 E.g. Helsenorge.no, 2020; Oslo kommune, 2020.

coronavirus,” ICN thus provided a separate access point to public-health information.<sup>32</sup>

## Analysis and Discussion

The empirical account above raises many questions for sociologists of religion, theologians, and others interested in the social role of religious organizations. In this section of the article, I outline an analysis based on the understanding of social cohesion as communicational permeability and the idea of religious organizations as public spaces. As noted above, these concepts are based on Luhmann’s theory of society. My analysis focuses on how the communication and boundaries of communication implied in the empirical account can reflect different systems of communication.<sup>33</sup>

Luhmann’s description of modern society in terms of “functional differentiation” suggests that the most important boundaries in modern society are those between different types of communication and the systems they make up – not territorial or spatial boundaries, such as those between countries.<sup>34</sup> A major question in this context is whether religion is or will become a separate system of communication on the global level.<sup>35</sup> In the following section, I first analyze the boundary between religious and secular communication and then discuss the implications for the concept of religious organizations as public spaces before addressing the boundary between Norwegian and foreign publics as reflected in the ICN’s coronavirus information material. I then return to the main results in the Conclusion.

### Religious and Secular Communication

My goal of discerning the boundary between religious and secular communication presupposes a particular definition of religion – which vice versa also implies a particular definition of secular.<sup>36</sup> One common and simple sociological definition of

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32 In early May, the ICN (2020d) published guidelines for fasting during the coronavirus outbreak, produced in collaboration with The Norwegian Directorate of Health, which I have not included here. This document was published after I conducted the analysis reported in this article, and the document deals more directly with a religious matter – fasting – than the documents included in this article, which deal with public-health advice.

33 Cf. Holte, 2020.

34 Luhmann, 2013a, p. 87.

35 Ibid.

36 Religion and the secular can be seen as mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive categories. Asad (2003, p. 192) points to how the concept of “the secular” in Latin “was part of a theological discourse.” It referred to “‘the world,’ esp. as opposed to the church” (Oxford University Press, 1971).

religion is that of a communication or practice referring to the transcendent.<sup>37</sup> This definition is also in line with how Luhmann conceptualized religion.<sup>38</sup> It follows from this definition that religious organizations communicate both religiously and nonreligiously. Rituals, services, worship, and religious education are all religious communication; annual budgets, tenders for the upkeep of buildings, and other aspects of running organizations form part of the secular communication. Luhmann put it bluntly, as he often did: “Archives are not sacred objects even in church administrations.”<sup>39</sup>

While secular communication is a practical requirement for religious organizations, it can also provide a way for them to remain or become socially relevant in the wake of secularization. If secularization is understood as the differentiation of religion as a separate social system, the future of religion as a form of communication and the future of religious organizations become objects of empirical questions. Religious communication can decline or even disappear from society, it can become privatized and invisible; or it can attain new forms of relevance. In the latter vein, Luhmann<sup>40</sup> argued that religious organizations are well placed to provide services to individuals subject to structural problems, while Peter Beyer<sup>41</sup> and José Casanova<sup>42</sup> argued forcefully in their work on “public religion” that since the 1980s religion has attained relevance on a structural level in different parts of the world.<sup>43</sup> Referring to the Iranian revolution, for example, Beyer wrote about the “dedifferentiation” of religion and other social systems.<sup>44</sup> Against this background, it is worthwhile to trace the boundary between religious and secular communication in the ICN’s coronavirus information material to examine what “kind of religion” it represents and what kind of social role it reflects.<sup>45</sup>

The social practices of religious organizations, such as the production of coronavirus information material, are likely to feature secular communication, even if these organizations engage in the practices for religious reasons. The ICN’s document “3 Hadith/Aya to protect oneself from the coronavirus,” their videos, and their booklets described above all contained religious references, but there were also many secular references, such as summaries of the authorities’ public-health

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37 Cf. Köhrsen, 2012, p. 280.

38 Luhmann, 2013b.

39 Luhmann, 2013b, p. 162.

40 Luhmann 2013b.

41 Beyer 1994.

42 Casanova 1994.

43 Cf. Beyer, 1984, p. xxxvi; Holte, 2018, pp. 64-71.

44 Beyer, 1994, p. 93, 176.

45 Asad, 2003, p. 183.

recommendations and the phone number to the Norwegian authorities' information services. In activating the resources and networks of a religious organization for social action – in this case, to spread public-health information – the information material clearly represents “[r]eligious performance.” That is, the application of religion “to problems generated in other systems but not solved there.”<sup>46</sup> The problem in question, of course, was ensuring effective communication between Norwegian authorities, on the one hand, and Norwegian Muslims, immigrants or otherwise, on the other hand. Yet, the document “3 Hadith/Ayah to protect oneself from the coronavirus” and the online videos provided religious framing of the authorities' public-health advice, blurring the boundary between religious and secular communication. In the next subsection, I elaborate on this and examine how the ICN's coronavirus information material reflects particular ideas about the social role of religious organizations. In doing so, I depart from the concept of religious organizations as public spaces.

### Religious Organizations as Public Spaces?

As noted above, the concept of religious organizations as public spaces refers to religious organizations bridging communication gaps by providing space for representatives from public authorities to engage with their members as well as by making information from public authorities and other organizations available to their members via other means. The ICN's coronavirus information material did contribute to the flow of communication in Norway by providing another access point to the public authorities' public-health information. Yet, the ICN's coronavirus information material did not facilitate meetings between representatives from public authorities and individual members and was rather based on the ICN's interpretation of the authorities' public-health recommendations. The ICN went beyond reproducing the recommendations and also provided religious interpretations thereof and lent them religious legitimacy.<sup>47</sup> Overall, the ICN's coronavirus information material nearly fits the model of religious organizations as public spaces – but not quite. This tension provides opportunities both to understand the ICN's coronavirus information material in greater depth and to refine the concept of religious organizations as public spaces. In what follows, I address three different points.

First, by basing their retelling of the public authorities' recommendations on references to religious texts in the document “3 Hadith/Ayah to protect oneself from the

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46 Beyer, 1994. p. 80.

47 For a parallel, see Alyanak, 2020.

coronavirus” and in their videos, the ICN referred to religion as an overarching authority with primacy over health and politics. In Beyer’s words, they were “giving the religious system and its values first place among the various functional spheres.”<sup>48</sup> The ICN was thus effectively making an effort toward “dedifferentiation”<sup>49</sup> – in this case, that of religion, health, and politics as independent social systems. The autonomy and independence of the function systems, including politics and health, is a defining characteristic of functional differentiation.<sup>50</sup> Dedifferentiation is characteristic of what Beyer calls the “conservative option” for religious organizations in the wake of secularization.<sup>51</sup> The effort toward dedifferentiation undertaken by the ICN also represents a contrast to the communication of the religious organizations in a city district of Oslo analyzed in the article mentioned earlier, from which the concept of religious organizations as public spaces emerged.<sup>52</sup> This raises the question of whether the concept of religious organizations as public space presupposes religious organizations that recognize and abide by the distinction between religious and secular communication. To some extent, this question is analogous to Asad’s critique<sup>53</sup> of Casanova’s theorizing<sup>54</sup> about “public religions at the level of civil society” as “consistent with modern universalistic principles and with modern differentiated structures,” which underlies much contemporary research on the social role of religious organizations.<sup>55</sup> Asad suggested that Casanova implied that only a certain kind of religion was compatible with modern, functionally differentiated society. Effectively, and paradoxically, this would mean that relegating religion to an autonomous and independent social system presupposes a certain kind of religion compatible with this kind of relegation.<sup>56</sup> Religious organizations and communication that are not compatible can pose analytical as well as political challenges and even threats. In light of how the ICN and other immigrant organizations were omitted from receiving public funding for coronavirus information in early April 2020, this can imply questions about the position of certain kinds of religion (in this case, Islam) in Norway today. It can also imply that the theoretical

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48 Beyer, 1994, pp. 93.

49 Ibid.

50 See Holte, 2018, pp. 52-53.

51 Beyer, 1994, pp. 93.

52 Holte, 2020. I return shortly to how this difference may reflect methodological differences as well as differences in communication that occurred in the two cases.

53 Asad 2003, pp. 182-183.

54 Casanova 1994, p. 219.

55 See also Holte, 2018, p. 69.

56 In Luhman’s theory, systemic interdependencies are not technically paradoxical but analyzed in terms of concepts such as “integration” and “couplings” (e.g. Holte, 2018, pp. 52-54). The interdependencies can be more problematic in relation to normative ideas about the freedom of religion and the equal treatment of religions.

concept of religious organizations as public spaces reflects and reinforces ideals that work to exclude some religious actors and their social practices in Norway, at least if applied uncritically.

Second, the religious organizations that participated in my research in a city district of Oslo were places of worship where members met and interacted, while the ICN is an umbrella organization with less direct contact with individual members. The different activities and purposes of the organizations may go some way toward explaining the differences in their social role. As noted above, the ICN has engaged in coordinating Muslim organizations and Muslims living in Norway, lobbying for their shared interests, and conducting dialogue with religious and secular actors. These activities differ from the activities of individual faith communities, which often focus on worship; but they are in line with the activities of other umbrella organizations in the Nordic countries.<sup>57</sup> In this light, the ICN's coronavirus information material can be seen as an attempt at establishing authoritative religious interpretations relating to the coronavirus in Norway, which will necessarily have a "political nature."<sup>58</sup> This is, then, not a case of a religious organization as public space. Neither is it a case of "public religion" in the sense of politically influential religion,<sup>59</sup> given that the ICN's coronavirus information material was not politically influential (and neither was it meant to be). Thus, this article suggests a need for a more refined theory that allows for different types of religious organizations with different social roles.

Third, the incompatibility of the concept of religious organizations as public spaces to the ICN's coronavirus information material can reflect methodological differences between the research reported in the article from which the concept emerged and this article. The main data of the article from which the concept of religious organizations as public spaces emerged were based on interviews with representatives from the religious organizations, while this article is based on an analysis of the ICN's information material. Thus, the results of this article can imply questions about how the intentions expressed by representatives of religious organizations in the previous research manifested in the practices of those organizations. This is primarily a question of research methodology.

Overall, the ICN's coronavirus information material blurred the boundary between secular and religious communication. Yet, it did further the reach of the Norwegian authorities' public-health advice by providing translations and new distribution channels and contributed in this manner to the flow of information to the Norwegian public. However, in most of its material, the ICN served as a

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57 See Furseth 2017, p. 228.

58 Alyanak, 2020, p. 375.

59 Beyer, 1994; Casanova, 1994; cf. Holte 2018, p. 71.

separate access point for the information, and most of the information material it produced and distributed provided religious interpretations of the public-health information. Thus, the concept of religious organizations as public spaces is not directly applicable to the ICN's coronavirus information material.

### Norwegian and Foreign Publics

Research, policy, and practice focused on integration and social cohesion often departs from the assumption that geographically bounded communities or countries are the most relevant social units.<sup>60</sup> At the same time, Luhmann's description of modern society in terms of functional differentiation suggests that the most important boundaries in modern society are those between different types of communication and the systems they make up.<sup>61</sup> His work on religion raises the question of whether religion is, or will become, a separate system of communication on the global level.<sup>62</sup> In this sense, it is worthwhile to consider which social units – social systems or publics – lay behind the ICN's coronavirus information material.

The empirical account given above refers to communication with Norwegian authorities and the MCB. While it is unclear whether Norwegian authorities were directly involved in the production of the ICN's information material, the material is clearly based on the recommendations of the authorities, as it makes explicit reference to the authorities' public-health recommendations. It is also stated that MCB collaborated with the ICN to produce the document "3 Hadith/Aya to protect oneself from the coronavirus." Thus, the ICN's coronavirus information material – like the communication of other religious organizations<sup>63</sup> – links a geographically bounded public with a transnational and possibly even global religious public.

This may indicate that the ICN is embedded in a transnational Muslim public with which it links its member organizations and, indirectly, their members. The Council also contributed to the flow of information to the Norwegian public by providing summaries and interpretations of the authorities' public-health recommendations, but not by promoting direct contact between the authorities and Norwegian Muslims. Rather than providing member organizations and Norwegian Muslims links to information from the public authorities available online or posting information from public authorities directly on their website, the ICN processed and reworked the information, transforming some of it into religious communication along the way and collaborating with a Muslim organization abroad to do so.

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60 Holte, 2018, p. 39-45.

61 Luhmann, 2013a.

62 Luhmann, 2013b.

63 Holte, 2020.

## Conclusion

The coronavirus and epidemiological patterns of Covid-19 show how social cohesion and integration can be a matter of health and, quite possibly, of life and death.<sup>64</sup> This article has presented how the ICN responded to the pandemic as well as how the Council's coronavirus information material related to the Norwegian government's response. The ICN and the government's responses implied different ideas about the social role of religious organizations (and other civil-society organizations). Rather than taking on a role as public space in which public authorities convey their public-health recommendations, the ICN provided religious interpretations of the authorities' public-health information, some of which they produced in collaboration with the MCB. This shows dedifferentiation in a Norwegian context, with religion being linked to politics and health as well as the Norwegian public being linked with a transnational religious public. Thus, this article shows how different ideas of the religious and the secular – and of the national and the transnational – coexist in Norway.

The religious and social diversity reflected here – which is, by the way, also found in the other Nordic countries and Europe more broadly – means that practitioners and analysts of religious social practice need more refined theoretical concepts. This article employs and tests two such concepts. As noted above, the concept of communicational permeability makes it possible for a single analysis to concern several social systems on different levels, which can be especially useful when analyzing social practices in diverse social contexts. The analysis in this article relates the ICN's communication both to the Norwegian public and to a transnational Muslim public and reflects on how the concept incorporates a critique of “methodological nationalism” – the often implicit assumption that nation-states are the most relevant units of social analysis.<sup>65</sup> At the same time, the article points toward the need to refine the related concept of religious organizations as public spaces. This concept builds on an implicit assumption that religious organizations fulfill their social role through secular communication – which may not be the case. As the analysis in this article shows, the ICN's coronavirus information material contributed to the flow of information in the Norwegian public (thus playing a social role), while also blurring the distinction between religious and secular communication. Thus, the concept of religious organizations as public spaces needs to be understood in light of how “[t]he secular is a normative notion” rather than a neutral domain,<sup>66</sup> lest it reflect and reinforce ideals that contribute to the exclusion of some religious actors

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64 At the time of writing in May 2020, Covid-19 deaths were not being reported by country of birth in Norway.

65 Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2003; cf. Holte, 2020.

66 Dinham, 2017, p. 259; cf. Asad, 2003, p. 192.



and their social practices. Overall, this article demonstrates the utility as well as some limitations of the two concepts.

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