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To cite this article: Margaretha A. van Es (2021) Norwegian Muslims denouncing terrorism: beyond 'moderate' versus 'radical'?, *Religion*, 51:2, 169-189, DOI: [10.1080/0048721X.2021.1865600](https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2021.1865600)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2021.1865600>



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Published online: 21 Jan 2021.



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## Norwegian Muslims denouncing terrorism: beyond 'moderate' versus 'radical'?

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### ABSTRACT

In contemporary European societies, Muslims are often viewed through a binary frame of 'moderate' versus 'radical'. This article aims to deconstruct the dichotomy of 'moderate' versus 'radical', and to explore how Muslims uphold, appropriate or subvert this binary frame. It takes up three case studies of public events organized in the city center of Oslo, Norway, by Muslims who wanted to make explicit statements against violence committed in the name of Islam. Based on participant observation, qualitative interviews with the organizers and a large collection of news reports and opinion pieces, the author demonstrates that these statements can be seen as a 'multiple critique': against terrorism, against stereotypical representations of Muslims and Islam, and (in some cases) also against the 'moderate/radical' dichotomy. This article critically addresses the pressure on Muslims to prove that they are peaceful and loyal citizens, and examines the relationship between the 'Muslim Question' and contestations about 'true' Islam.

### KEYWORDS

Muslims in Norway; Islamophobia; the Muslim Question; violent extremism; 'moderate' and 'radical' Islam; conditional belonging; multiple critique

They act like Pablo  
making me choose between  
plata o plomo, silver or lead?<sup>1</sup>  
Are you a conservative Muslim?  
Moderate Muslim?  
Secular Muslim?  
Never just a Muslim.  
Show us how extreme you are.  
The terrorist is the yardstick.  
I am lost  
because this is not a breath test  
where I can make the light go green. (Untitled poem by Sumaya Jirde Ali 2017)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>'Pablo' refers to the infamous Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar. *Plata o plomo* means 'silver or lead' (i.e., money or a bullet). The slang phrase was used by Escobar to tell police officers and government officials to either accept a bribe or lose their life.

<sup>2</sup>The poem was translated from Norwegian to English by the author of this article, and presented with permission from the poet.

This article was originally published with errors, which have now been corrected in the online and print versions. Please see Correction (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2021.1901839>)

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## Introduction

On the evening of Monday 25 August 2014, Muslims organized the largest protest in Norwegian history against acts of terrorism and other human rights violations committed in the name of Islam.<sup>3</sup> More than 5000 people – Muslims and non-Muslims – marched through the streets of Oslo, holding placards saying ‘#No2ISIS’, ‘Together Against Terrorism’ and ‘Not in My Name’. The event was widely covered in Norwegian and international news media. The Norwegian press called the protest march a ‘historical turning point’ where ‘Norwegians Muslims clearly distanced themselves from brutal extremists’ (cf. VG, 25 August 2014; *Vårt Land*, 25 August 2014; *Dagsavisen*, 9 September 2014).

In this article, I analyze this protest (and two similar events in Norway) in light of the ‘Muslim Question’: i.e., ‘the concerns and anxieties about the presence of the Muslim “Other” in Europe’ (Bracke 2013, 209). One of the most important political questions in Norway, and in Western and Northern Europe more generally, seems to be ‘how much space can be made for Muslim minorities and their religion’. Muslims are made hyper-visible in public debates about a wide variety of topics: from immigrant integration to freedom of speech, and from women’s emancipation to terrorism. Those who foster strong anti-Muslim sentiments tend to present Muslims as fundamentally different from the majority population, failing or even refusing to integrate into Western societies, and hence posing a serious cultural and political threat to these societies and their secular, liberal values. Not everyone agrees with these views. Participants in these debates (Muslims as well as non-Muslims) express a wide variety of views on Islam and the possibility for Muslims to fully belong in European nation-states. However, a core feature of these debates is that the very presence of Muslim minorities is being made into a political problem (Parekh 2008; Norton 2013; Göle 2017).

Within these debates, there is a strong tendency to distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Muslims, with the ‘good’ Muslims commonly being labeled ‘moderate’ and the ‘bad’ Muslims commonly being labeled ‘radical’.<sup>4</sup> ‘Moderate’ Muslims are supposedly open-minded, tolerant and non-violent, while ‘radical’ Muslims are construed as dogmatic, intolerant and prone to violence. Only ‘moderate’ Muslims are considered worthy of being embraced as loyal citizens of European nation-states. This binary frame of ‘moderate’ versus ‘radical’ not only features prominently in public debates about Islam in Europe, but is also an important conceptual underpinning of the U.S.-led Global War on Terror.<sup>5</sup>

The binary frame of ‘moderate’ versus ‘radical’ has been critically addressed by a growing number of scholars (cf. Kundnani 2014; Fadil, de Koning, and Ragazzi 2019). It flattens out the complex, multiple differences between Muslims, and effectively reduces diversity among Muslims to the extent to which they pose a threat to Western societies. More recently, some scholars have also started to pay attention to

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<sup>3</sup>Words such as ‘jihadist violence’, ‘violent extremism’ and ‘terrorism’ are not neutral analytical terms, but political concepts with a particular history and particular consequences. As such, these terms deserve a critical analysis in themselves. However, I use these terms now and then for the sake of readability, and in the absence of better terms.

<sup>4</sup>This notion of ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ Muslims competes with many other ideas about what it means to be a ‘good’ or a ‘bad’ Muslim, especially those prevailing among Muslims themselves.

<sup>5</sup>See the introduction to this thematic issue by Van Es, ter Laan and Meinema for a more elaborate discussion on the Global War on Terror.

the pressure that many Muslims experience in Western societies to prove that they are peaceful and loyal citizens, and the various ways in which they uphold, appropriate and/or subvert the binary frame of ‘moderate’ versus ‘radical’ (Corbett 2017; Morsi 2017; Qureshi 2020).

This article aims to contribute to this new research field by means of an in-depth analysis of the motivations and self-representations<sup>6</sup> of Norwegian Muslims who make explicit statements in the public sphere against violence committed in the name of Islam.<sup>7</sup> In focusing on Norway, I draw attention to a geographical area that has received comparatively little attention in critical studies of the ‘Muslim Question’. I analyze how the binary frame of ‘moderate’ versus ‘radical’ plays out in the Norwegian context, and examine the active role of Muslims in upholding, appropriating or subverting this binary frame. I do this by means of three case studies of public events organized in the city center of Oslo, by Muslims who wanted to make statements against violence committed in the name of Islam:

- A torchlight march on 4 December 2004 to commemorate the murder of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh;
- A protest march against ISIS on 25 August 2014;
- A human ‘Ring of Peace’ around the Oslo synagogue on 21 February 2015, in response to terrorist attacks targeting Jewish minorities in Paris and Copenhagen.

What motivated the organizers to make these statements? How did they present themselves and their religion through these events? How did they position themselves in relation to the binary frame of ‘moderate’ versus ‘radical’? What were the consequences of their positioning in terms of the responses they received from other Muslims and in wider Norwegian society? And, on a broader level, what does this tell us about the complex situation in which Muslims find themselves in Western societies?

I selected the protest march against ISIS and the ‘Ring of Peace’ around the Oslo synagogue as case studies, because both events attracted significant numbers of participants, received broad coverage in Norwegian and international news media, and were welcomed as ‘turning points’ in history where Muslims ‘finally’ made a clear statement against violent extremism. Being a Dutch Muslim woman, I lived and worked in Oslo from 2008 to 2016. I participated in the two events because at that time, I felt a need to make a statement against particular acts of violence committed in the name of Islam. While participating, however, I became more and more intrigued by the ways in which these events had been organized, and how the organizers presented themselves as Muslims with a strong commitment to their religion. I was even more intrigued by the enthusiastic participation of large and highly diverse groups of people, and, above all, the overwhelmingly positive responses in the media. After all, Norwegian Muslims had

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<sup>6</sup>By ‘self-representations’, I mean any explicit or implicit statement that people make about themselves and/or the group they claim belonging to – whether in the form of texts, images, or embodied practices (van Es 2016).

<sup>7</sup>Research shows that many Muslims in Norway engage in various forms of ‘everyday resistance’ against violent extremism in their interactions with friends and family members, whether by making statements about what is ‘Islamic’, expressing their feelings about violent crimes committed in the name of Islam, or making fun of Muslim individuals and organizations considered ‘extremist’ (Sandberg 2018). However, such forms of ‘everyday resistance’ lie beyond the scope of this article.

already spoken up against violent extremism on many occasions.<sup>8</sup> In my view, the two events deserved a critical analysis. After a search in Norwegian media archives, I also decided to include a third case study from the recent past that had *not* gone down in history as a positive ‘turning point’: the torchlight march in 2004.

Studying public events instead of written statements makes it possible to analyze not only the verbal, but also the visual and material aspects of Muslim self-representations. My interdisciplinary research lies at the interface of religious studies, oral history, sociology and anthropology. The research material consisted of: (1) semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the organizers of the three events,<sup>9</sup> (2) my own observations from the latest two events, and (3) a collection of news reports and opinion pieces about these events that were published in Norwegian newspapers. Additionally, I have analyzed a large collection of Norwegian newspaper articles dating from the period 2001–2015 that use the term ‘moderate’ (*moderat*) or ‘radical’ (*radikal*) in relation to Muslims, as well as newspaper articles that call on Muslims to ‘distance themselves from’ (*ta avstand fra*) terrorism.<sup>10</sup>

Theoretically, I am interested in the relationship between the ‘Muslim Question’ and contestations about ‘true’ Islam, assuming that notions of a ‘true’ Islam are social constructs that emerge within a particular context and compete with other claims about ‘true’ Islam. I show how my interlocutors’ attempts to raise their voices against acts of terrorism (and other gross human rights violations committed in the name of Islam) intersect with their attempts to tell the world what Islam ‘really’ is about, and with their attempts to counter mistrust and resist their marginalization in Norwegian society.

I argue that each of the three events can be analyzed as a ‘multiple critique’. The term ‘multiple critique’ was coined by Cooke (2000) in her analysis of Islamic feminism, to describe a multi-layered critique that is rooted in a religious discourse and targets different audiences simultaneously.<sup>11</sup> Taking inspiration from their Islamic beliefs, my interlocutors wanted to make a stand against terrorism *and* against Western stereotypes of an ‘inherently violent’ Islam at the same time. Additionally, the organizers of the 2014 protest against ISIS and the 2015 ‘Ring of Peace’ tried to subvert the binary frame of ‘moderate’ versus ‘radical’.

In the following sections, I will first address the emergence of public debates about Islam in Norway and explain how the binary frame of ‘moderate’ versus ‘radical’ plays out specifically in this context. I will then discuss the three case studies one by one, before I analyze a few general patterns in greater depth.

## Anti-Muslim sentiments in Norway

In Norway, religious diversity is a fairly recent phenomenon. From the sixteenth century until 2012, Evangelical Lutheranism was the official state religion. Today, about three

<sup>8</sup>Since the 9/11 attacks in 2001, the Islamic Council of Norway for example has made numerous statements against terrorism and many other crimes that have become associated with Islam.

<sup>9</sup>All interviews were conducted in Norwegian. Quotations were translated by the author. As full anonymization is not possible in this context, all interview respondents are presented with their own name. All of them have been given the opportunity for a citation control.

<sup>10</sup>I collected these articles by means of a keyword search in the online database Atekst Retriever.

<sup>11</sup>Islamic feminism is a form of feminism that takes its inspiration from the Qur’an and hadith. It aims to simultaneously counter gender-discriminatory practices among Muslims, sexist interpretations of sacred texts, and Western stereotypes of an ‘inherently patriarchal’ Islam (Cooke 2000).

quarters of the Norwegian population is registered as a baptized member of the Church of Norway, despite secularization and growing religious diversity resulting from immigration and globalization (Church of Norway 2015). Muslims began to arrive in significant numbers during the late 1960s and early 1970s, when migrants (mostly men) came from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Turkey, Morocco, and Yugoslavia looking for work in the unskilled labor market. Since then, the number of Muslims has increased as a result of family-reunification, marriage migration, and the arrival of refugees from Iran, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Iraq. Most of them settled in the capital of Oslo (Brochmann and Kjeldstadli 2008). At present, about five percent of the Norwegian population has his or her origins in a country with a Muslim majority population. Among them, Pakistani-Norwegians and Somali-Norwegians form the largest groups. However, it is unknown how many of them believe in Islam and/or self-identify as Muslims. Meanwhile, it is estimated that a few thousand Norwegians (with and without a family history of migration) have converted to Islam (Østby and Dalgard 2017).

In public debate, this super-diverse population is often reduced to a more or less homogeneous category of ‘Muslims’, whose belonging in Norwegian society is continually questioned. The public focus on Muslim minorities as a potential threat began in Norway in 1987 during the local elections, when the right-wing populist Progress Party (FrP) decided to capitalize on the growing popular resentment against the arrival of refugees. Until then, the Progress Party had merely focused on lowering taxes and minimizing the role of the government. Now, it turned migration control and immigrant assimilation into key issues in its party program. Building on a centuries-old register of Western stereotypes and prejudices against Muslims, party leader Carl I. Hagen presented a fake letter that was supposedly written by an immigrant called Mustafa. The letter warned that Muslims would soon take over Norway by entering the country in great masses and getting many more children than the Norwegian average. Although the letter soon turned out to be a forgery, the Progress Party had its best election results ever (Bangstad 2014).

During the following decades, the anxiety around the threat of the Muslim ‘other’ was reinforced by a number of transnational events, most notably the Rushdie affair in 1989, the 9/11 attacks in 2001, a series of attacks in Europe by so-called ‘home-grown terrorists’ starting from 2004, and the Danish cartoon crisis in 2006–2007. The terrorist attacks in Oslo and Utøya by the right-wing extremist and self-proclaimed Christian nationalist Anders Behring Breivik on 22 July 2011 heightened the public awareness of right-wing extremism and the potentially dangerous effects of anti-Muslim sentiments in Norwegian society. Nevertheless, with the emergence of the so-called ‘Islamic State’ in Syria and Iraq in 2014, and the subsequent series of attacks across the world by ISIS-affiliated terrorists, anti-Muslim rhetoric gained greater currency again in Norwegian politics and mainstream media (Bangstad 2014; Bangstad and Helland 2019). Perhaps more than anywhere else, gender plays an important role in the othering of Muslims in Norway. Stereotypical images of oppressed Muslim women and girls are frequently used to demonstrate the alleged cultural inferiority of Muslims and the incompatibility of Islam with Norwegian values (van Es 2016).

The Progress Party has always remained a driving force in Norwegian public debates about Muslims and Islam, with Carl I. Hagen and his successor Siv Jensen regularly warning against the ‘stealthy Islamization’ of Norwegian society. The party has been

among the largest oppositional parties for several decades, until it became included in a center-right government coalition in 2013 (Bangstad 2014). Another major actor in these debates is Hege Storhaug of the state-funded civil society organization *Human Rights Service* (HRS). Storhaug became known in the 1990s as a journalist and activist for women's and LGBT rights, before gradually shifting towards the political far-right (Bangstad and Helland 2019). In her 2015 book 'Islam – the Eleventh Plague', she argues that 'we stand in the middle of a civilizational battle' and that 'Islam is at war with women, Jews, homosexuals, freedom-loving Muslims and anyone unwilling to submit to its doctrines' (Storhaug 2015; in Bangstad and Helland 2019).

Although it is important to note that only a minority of the Norwegian population fully agrees with such views, it seems that a much larger part of the population is at least susceptible to the suspicion that Storhaug and the Progress Party evoke towards Muslims. According to a survey conducted in 2017 by The Norwegian Center for Holocaust and Minority Studies, 28 percent of the Norwegian population feel a certain antipathy towards Muslims. Moreover, 36 percent of the Norwegian population think that Muslims do not fit in a modern Western society, 39 percent hold the view that Muslims pose a threat to Norwegian culture, 30 percent believe that Muslims want to take over Europe, and 29 percent are convinced that Muslims are more violent than others. Last but not least, 47 percent are of the opinion that Muslims largely have themselves to blame for growing anti-Muslim sentiments (Hoffmann and Moe 2017).

### On a scale from one to terrorist, how Muslim are you?

Muslims in Norway are commonly discussed through a binary frame of 'moderate' (*moderat*) versus 'radical' (*radikal*). The latter term is also frequently replaced with 'extremist' (*ekstremist* or *ytterliggående*). Since the 9/11 attacks in 2001, political leaders and opinion makers have frequently urged 'moderate' Muslims to denounce acts of terrorism and other human rights violations committed in the name of Islam, often with the argument that Muslims should take more efforts to show that not all Muslims support such violence. Regardless of the intentions behind these calls, they effectively reinforce the idea that all Muslims are a threat until they have proven the opposite (cf. *Aftenposten* 11 November 2001; *Dagbladet* 27 July 2005; *Vårt Land* 15 August 2014).

Meanwhile, the criteria for being labeled 'moderate' or 'radical' remain somewhat vague, as these terms are very inconsistently used in Norwegian public discourse. The word 'moderate' is sometimes used to label all Muslims who oppose terrorism, without describing any further attributes (cf. *VG*, 6 April 2004; *Trønder Avis*, 28 July 2014). In many other cases, the term 'moderate' refers more specifically to Muslims who support 'Norwegian' values such as gender equality, democracy and/or respect for fundamental human rights (cf. *Adresseavisen*, 10 October 2001, *Stavanger Aftenblad*, 21 February 2004; *Dagen*, 10 December 2010). This suggests that being a 'moderate' Muslim is not only about the willingness to live peacefully with others in a religiously diverse society. It opens up a whole register of qualities associated with 'good citizenship', including loyalty to the nation-state and its core values. Contrariwise, the label 'radical' bears the connotation of 'failed citizenship' (at least in relation to Muslims).

The continuous questioning of the belonging of Muslims in Norwegian society, coupled with the binary frame of 'moderate' versus 'radical', puts Norwegian Muslims



in a liminal position between insider and outsider. Their belonging in Norwegian society is a ‘conditional belonging’ (Aarset 2018; van Es 2019), in the sense that they have to take extraordinary efforts to be acknowledged as equal citizens. Even the belonging of ‘moderate’ Muslims remains precarious, as the boundary between ‘moderate’ and ‘radical’ Muslim keeps shifting depending on who draws the boundary and in which particular context.

Furthermore, the suggestion prevails in Norwegian public discourse that ‘moderate’ Muslims are somewhat less committed to Islam than ‘radical’ Muslims. As in most languages, the word ‘moderate’ in Norwegian means ‘within proper limits’ or ‘of medium amount’. This seems to suggest that a ‘moderate’ Muslim is somewhat religious, but not too much – at least not in the eyes of the dominant majority of white, (post-)Lutheran Norwegians without a recent family history of migration. A ‘radical’ Muslim is dangerous precisely because he (or she) takes Islam too seriously. Also in this respect, there are no clear criteria. Sometimes, the category of ‘moderates’ includes Muslims who go to mosque, read the Qur’an and say the five daily prayers (cf. VG, 27 October 2001; *Aftenposten*, 14 October 2004; *Dagbladet*, 27 December 2010). In many other cases, ‘moderate’ only refers to Muslims who hardly practice their religion (cf. *Nordlys*, 15 October 2001; *Dagbladet*, 22 November 2010; *Romerikes Blad*, 3 December 2010).<sup>12</sup> An extreme example of the latter is the following statement on the HRS website: ‘Those who can genuinely be called “moderate Muslims” are those who do not give a sh\*t about mosques, imams, Qur’ans, fasting, sharia and prayers. They can drink and smoke, and live like assimilated Westerners.’<sup>13</sup>

All in all, the suggestion made in Norwegian public discourse is that ‘moderate’ Muslims take Islam somewhat less seriously than ‘radical’ Muslims, and that Muslims have to modify, if not weaken their faith in order to become accepted in Norwegian society. This puts considerable pressure on Muslims (especially those who feel a strong commitment to Islam) to prove that their religion is not an obstacle to their citizenship. However, the reasons for Muslims to make explicit statements against violence committed in the name of Islam are multiple and cannot be reduced to this pressure from the Norwegian dominant majority population. In the following sections, I discuss my three case studies of public events in Oslo, focusing on how the organizers positioned themselves in relation to the binary frame of ‘moderate’ versus ‘radical’.

## The torchlight march against the murder of Theo van Gogh

On 2 November 2004, the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh was brutally killed on the streets of Amsterdam by Mohammed Bouyeri, a Moroccan-Dutch Muslim, for making the anti-Islam movie ‘Submission’ together with the Somali-Dutch politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali. The killer was ultimately convicted for ‘murder with terrorist intent’. Theo van Gogh became a symbol of free speech, and his assassination reinvigorated public

<sup>12</sup>Here, ‘moderate’ Muslims are almost equated with ‘liberal’ or ‘secular’ Muslims. In Norway, the term ‘liberal Muslims’ (*liberale muslimer*) is sometimes used for Muslims who do not strictly adhere to religious precepts, while the term ‘secular’ Muslims (*sekulære muslimer*) commonly refers to people who were born in a Muslim family, but do not believe in Islam.

<sup>13</sup>This statement was made by Kent Andersen on the HRS website: <https://www.rights.no/2016/04/moderat-islam-ekstremismens-plog/> (last accessed: 30 July 2019).



debates across Europe about the extent to which Muslims pose a threat to Western societies (Eyerman 2008).

One month later, in the late afternoon of Saturday 4 December 2004, a small crowd of about 300 people gathered in front of the Oslo central station to participate in a torchlight march. The idea was to commemorate the murder of Theo van Gogh and to denounce violence committed in the name of Islam. The initiative had been taken by the 30-year-old Pakistani-Norwegian Noman Mubashir, who worked as a TV-host for the Norwegian public broadcasting service NRK. He remembers that he felt a strong need to make a statement. Not only was he horrified by the murder, he was also frustrated about how Muslims appeared in Norwegian media (Noman Mubashir, interviewed on 13 February 2017). His initiative can be seen as a multiple critique, in the sense that he wanted to raise his voice against terrorism *and* against Norwegian stereotypes of Muslims. Put differently, he wanted to say ‘stop this violence’ and ‘this is not who we are’ at the same time.

The immediate reason for Mubashir’s initiative was a recent episode of the Norwegian talk show *Holmgang*, in which the spokesman of the Islamic Council of Norway (IRN), Zahid Mukhtar, declared that he ‘had understanding for the murder, although there was no legal ground for it’. Then leader of the Progress Party Carl I. Hagen, who participated in the same talk show, responded with indignation and urged all Norwegian Muslims to take to the streets and clarify their stance (*TV2*, 17 November 2004). Mubashir contacted a journalist working for the Norwegian daily *Aftenposten*, and announced in an interview that he was going to organize a torchlight march through the streets of Oslo:

I want to make moderate Muslims visible in Norway who denounce all sorts of violence and terror in society. It is important for me to show that the vast majority of Muslims in Norway wish to leave in peace and harmony. [...] We are doing ourselves a disservice if we do not make ourselves clear enough. If we remain silent and defensive, this may be taken as if Norwegian Muslims support terror and violence. I don’t want to be guilty of that. I hope that all other 80.000 Muslims in Norway agree with me. [...] I hope and expect for a high number of participants, and I believe that this event will send out positive signals to Norwegian society. [...] This is the only way we can change people’s negative attitudes towards Muslims in the West. (*Aftenposten*, 1 December 2004)

In hindsight, Mubashir was overly optimistic about the number of Muslims that would participate, and also about the effect of such a torchlight march on popular attitudes towards Muslims. Yet, his casual use of the term ‘moderate Muslims’ would have greater consequences than he could foresee.

His initiative was especially well received among Norwegian politicians, both on the center-left and on the center-right. Prime Minister Bondevik announced that he would join the march and give a speech. Carl I. Hagen invited himself via the media, saying that he was happy about Mubashir’s initiative and that he wanted to ‘show his support for moderate Muslims in Norway’ (*Aftenposten*, 2 December 2004; *NTB*, 3 December 2004). Among Norwegian Muslims, Mubashir’s initiative became subject to much debate. Initially, the imams and chairmen of the larger mosque associations in Oslo indicated that they were going to participate and urge their members to do the same (*Aftenposten*, 3 December 2004). Mubashir’s friend Abid Q. Raja, a well-known Pakistani-Norwegian lawyer who tried to help Mubashir in mobilizing large crowds of Muslims, openly remarked that he expected thousands of participants (*NTB*, 3 December 2004).

However, on the very same day that the mosque associations officially announced their participation, *Aftenposten* published an opinion piece by Awais A. Mushtaq, a university student of Pakistani origins who argued that Muslims should not participate in the torchlight march. In his view, Muslims had denounced terrorism often enough, and they should not bow to the pressure from politicians. He also warned Muslims that this march would not be the end: if they took this path, they would have to organize similar demonstrations each time a Muslim commits a violent crime. He then continued:

Noman Mubashir says he wants to gather moderate Muslims in a torchlight march. Does this mean that only moderate Muslims denounce terror, violence and murder? If he invites moderate Muslims, he should at least tell us what a moderate Muslim is? What about other Muslims? Do they not denounce those things? A fundamentalist who believes in the fundamentals of Islam will also denounce such acts, because there is nothing in the Qur'an or the Sunnah that recommends terror, violence or murder. [...] It should be fully clear to the people of Norway that most Muslims in Norway condemn such crimes, and we do not have to prove it time and again. (*Aftenposten*, 3 December 2004)

Mubashir remembers that when he used the word 'moderate', he simply wanted to address all Muslims who were against the murder of Theo van Gogh and who wanted to live a peaceful life in Norway – regardless of how they practiced their faith (Noman Mubashir, interviewed on 13 February 2017). For Mushtaq, the term clearly had different connotations: it referred to a narrower category of Muslims who did not take their religion very seriously and excluded those Muslims who wanted to stick to (what he considered to be) the fundamentals of Islam.

Mushtaq's opinion piece seems to have struck a chord with many mosque leaders at that time. On Friday night, less than 24 hours before the event, several imams announced that they no longer supported the torchlight march (*Aftenposten*, 4 December 2004). On the day of the torchlight march, IRN sent out a press release saying: 'True Muslims are against violence. By now, it should be taken for granted that Muslims in Norway reject all forms of violence and terrorism in the name of religion' (*Dagsavisen*, 5 December 2004). Mushtaq's embracing of the word 'fundamentalist', and IRN's use of the term 'true Muslims' are noteworthy. In both cases, an essentialist notion of a peaceful Islam is employed in response to dominant representations of Islam as a religion that calls for violence. These dynamics are quite common in Europe (van Es 2018), and can also be observed in the other two case studies.

Ultimately, only a small crowd of about 300 people participated in the torchlight march. It was estimated that less than half of them were Muslims. Mubashir and his friend Raja had managed to mobilize politicians, tv-celebrities and representatives of Norwegian civil society organizations, and gain ample attention from Norwegian news media. Yet, only one imam showed up. To Mubashir's dismay, this imam immediately gave a big hug to Carl I. Hagen, which was enthusiastically photographed by the many journalists present. The small group then walked down Oslo's shopping street *Karl Johans gate*, carrying torchlights in the dark winter evening, until the march ended in front of the Parliament (Noman Mubashir, interviewed on 13 February 2017).

Mubashir still remembers his own disillusionment. He had heard rumors before the event that many Muslims resented his use of the term 'moderate', but he had never expected that this would matter so much to people that they refused to participate. He later also heard that some people did not want to team up with him because of his

reputation as a 'liberal' Muslim and his affiliation to the Ahmadiyya community. For some Muslims, Mubashir was apparently 'not Muslim enough' to speak on behalf of them. He still considers such arguments to be very disturbing: 'Who could possibly represent all Muslims in Norway?' (Noman Mubashir, interviewed on 13 February 2017).

After the march, almost all Norwegian media outlets reported about the 'disappointing' number of participants (*Aftenposten*; *Dagbladet*; NRK; *Vårt Land*; VG, 4 December 2004). Hagen, who had skillfully co-opted Mubashir's initiative, now argued that the march was far from convincing because of the low turnout: 'Had there been thousands of people showing up, it would have convinced me. I think it is really sad and surprising that not more imams and Muslims showed up' (*Dagsavisen*, 5 December 2004). Other people openly argued in letters-to-the-editor that Muslims were apparently in favor of violence and terrorism, because 'more Muslims had protested against Salman Rushdie in 1989 than against the murder of Theo van Gogh' (*Aftenposten*, 8 December 2004), and because 'those who had most clearly revealed their stance on violence and terror were the many imams who had stayed away from the torchlight march' (*Sunnmørsposten*, 21 December 2004). What Mubashir had meant to become a statement against terrorism and anti-Muslim sentiments at the same time, was now being held against Muslims. It would take almost ten years before Muslims in Oslo organized a protest march against violent extremism on the large scale that Mubashir had dreamed of.

### Muslims protesting ISIS in Oslo

In the summer of 2014, Thee Yezen Al-Obaide, a young Norwegian Muslim man of Iraqi origins, created a Facebook event for a protest march against jihadism and sectarian violence. The protest was to be held on Monday 25 August 2014. During that summer, more and more news reports had reached Norway about a militant group named ISIS that had conquered parts of Iraq and Syria and committed severe human rights violations. An estimated 50–60 Norwegian Muslims had traveled to the Middle East to join ISIS. Many of them were affiliated to *Profetens Ummah* [The Ummah of the Prophet], which had become infamous during the past few years as a small and local network of 'radicalized' Muslim youth. Not much later, Norwegian media reported about *Profetens Ummah* members who had been driving their car through the culturally diverse neighborhood of Grønland in Oslo while shouting slogans in support of ISIS through a megaphone (TV2, 12 August 2014).

The text on Al-Obaide's event page, titled *Ikke i islams navn* [Not in the Name of Islam], read:

As Muslims, we can no longer stand by and watch. It is time for us to show our disgust and to denounce these crimes, and it is time to show that Islam does not stand for what ISIS stands for! I want to remind my dear brothers and sisters in faith that our Prophet was a just man and never hurt a human being – not even those who persecuted him.<sup>14</sup>

Thee Yezen Al-Obaide had first heard about ISIS in spring 2014, when friends told him about a 'rebel group that fought a successful battle against the Syrian dictator Assad'. He

<sup>14</sup>The event page was deleted short after the event. The text has been retrieved from various news reports (TV2, 19 August 2014).

became appalled when he saw video footage of ISIS fighters slaughtering more than 1500 unarmed Iraqi Air Force cadets at Camp Speicher in Tikrit, singling out Shi'a Muslim and non-Muslim cadets. Al-Obaide then decided to organize a mass protest:

I thought: "This is not OK! I have to stand up and say something!" [...] I am a practicing Sunni Muslim. I do not want to brag, but I have a lot of knowledge about Islam. [...] As a Muslim, it is my duty to tell other Muslims when they do something wrong. We have Quranic verses about this, and hadiths: 'enjoin the good and forbid the evil.' We know what is halal and haram, so we have no excuse not to stand up against this. [...] It is our duty to protect Islam. (Thee Yezen Al-Obaide, interviewed on 15 February 2017)

Short after he created the Facebook event page, he was contacted by several Muslim men and women who wanted to join him.<sup>15</sup> One of them was a young Shi'a Muslim woman named Faten Mahdi Al-Hussaini, who had just spent her summer holiday with her relatives in the city of Karbala in Iraq. Over there, she had seen the coffins of soldiers who had died fighting ISIS being carried into the city. Back home in Oslo, she watched a 45 minutes-long interview on Norwegian television with Ubaydullah Hussain, spokesman of *Profetens Ummah* (Faten Mahdi Al-Hussaini, interviewed on 15 February 2015). He claimed that the human rights violations committed by ISIS were fully in line with the teachings of Islam. He also said that 'every Muslim dreams of living in an Islamic state', and that 'there are only two groups in this world: Muslims, who only submit to Allah and believe that sovereignty only belongs to Allah, and infidels, who believe that sovereignty belongs to people and human-made laws' (VG-TV, 15 August 2014). Faten Mahdi Al-Hussaini was appalled that this man got so much free broadcasting time, and that no-one seemed to counter his statements during the next few days. She wanted to send out a message not only to those who supported ISIS, but also to wider Norwegian society. Whenever she walked outside wearing hijab, she received suspicious looks from strangers:

I wanted Norwegians to understand that we, Muslims in Norway, are not a homogeneous group. [...] They looked at me the same way they looked at Ubaydullah Hussain, while in fact, as a Shi'a Muslim I was on top of ISIS' priority list to become killed! For me, the most important thing was to show other Norwegians: 'Here I am, speaking up. For once and for all. Never tell me again that Muslims don't do anything!'. (Faten Mahdi Al-Hussaini, interviewed on 15 February 2015)

Meanwhile, the number of people who signed up on Facebook rose from a few hundred to several thousands. A dynamic emerged where the growing number of Facebook sign-ups fueled the interest from journalists, and where the resulting news reports about the upcoming event strongly contributed to the rise in participant numbers. Near the end of the week, the initiative received the support of the Islamic Council of Norway (TV2, 21 August 2014), and Prime Minister Erna Solberg also announced her participation (NRK, 22 August 2014).

The organizers did everything they could to mobilize a large and diverse crowd of protesters. They put great efforts into convincing Muslims of different ethnic origins and different denominations to join forces. They also invited people from other religions and politicians from all sides of the political spectrum, trying to create broad

<sup>15</sup>Ultimately, the protest march was organized by a group of five Muslims: Thee Yezen Al-Obaide (then 28 years old), Yousuf Gilani (42), Faten Mahdi Al-Hussaini (19), Sara Al-Jaboury (18) and Hanin Al-Rubaye (22).

solidarity in a shared effort against violent extremism. At the same time, the organizers had to think carefully about whom they wanted to be associated with. For example, Abid Q. Raja, who had helped to organize the torchlight march in 2004, and who had now become a famous politician for the Liberal Party, was initially involved in the organization of the 2014 protest march as an advisor. However, Raja had become controversial among Muslims in Norway. During the past few years, he had started to refer to himself as a ‘modern’, ‘moderate’ and ‘very liberal’ Muslim, and he had made a number of critical remarks about Muslims in the media that many Muslims considered to be stigmatizing, such as that ‘Muslims suckle anti-Semitism with their mother’s milk’ (*Aftenposten*, 30 September 2012). His reputation as a ‘sellout’ threatened to harm the reputation of the group as a whole. Short before the event, the organizers told Raja to leave the group (Thee Yezen Al-Obaide, interviewed on 15 February 2017; Yousuf Gilani, interviewed on 26 February 2018). This shows how a gaze of suspicion towards Muslims from the side of the dominant majority population, and the continuous scrutinizing of Muslims in terms of how ‘radical’ they are, reinforces a form of scrutinizing among Muslims themselves in terms of how committed they are to Islam and the Muslim community.

In the end, the turnout became higher than the organizers had dared to expect. In the late afternoon of Monday 25 August, thousands of people gathered – Muslims as well as non-Muslims – despite the drizzling rain. Instead of taking the usual protest route from Oslo central station to the Parliament, the organizers had decided to start their protest march in Grønland, the same neighborhood where *Profetens Ummah* had expressed its support for ISIS: ‘It had a high symbolic value for us. We wanted to show those guys that the vast majority of Muslims were against them’ (Thee Yezen Al-Obaide, interviewed on 15 February 2017). While the sun broke, more and more people joined the crowd. After listening to short speeches from activists and politicians, they started walking towards the central station and further down towards the Parliament. Many of them were holding placards saying ‘#No2ISIS’, ‘Together Against Terrorism’ and ‘Not in My Name’, and chanting slogans such as ‘No Terrorists in Our Streets’. The imams of the various mosques in Oslo walked in front, headed by the young Faten Mahdi Al-Hussaini. When the crowd arrived at the square in front of the Parliament, about 5000 people stood still to listen to the speech given by Al-Hussaini. Dressed in a black leather jacket and a black headscarf with a white and pink floral pattern, she said in a fierce tone:

It has been my dream to be here and to see so many people – regardless of faith, origins or nationality – standing together against ISIS, Profetens Ummah, and other people with the same nauseating ideology. [...] Finally, we, the ordinary young Muslims, have got the opportunity to come forward and to show what we want, what we stand for, and who we are. [...] Stop having so many prejudices against us! [...] Ubaydullah, you are telling the people of Norway nothing but lies! [...] I am fed up with having to explain to non-Muslims that groups like Profetens Ummah do not represent us. I prefer to call them ‘the Ummah of the Devil!’ [...] It is not enough to call yourself a Muslim. You are Muslim because of how you act. Islam does not teach us anything other than respect, tolerance and peace. If Islam to you means beheading people, destroying churches and mosques, torturing innocent people and raping women, then you have misunderstood Islam. You are not following Islam; you are following the devil!<sup>16</sup>

Al-Hussaini's speech, and the protest march as a whole, can be analyzed as a 'multiple critique' (Cooke 2000). Just like Noman Mubashir in 2004, the organizers wanted to speak up against particular acts of violence committed in the name of Islam and against stereotypes of Muslims and Islam at the same time. However, they implicitly also criticized the binary frame of 'moderate' versus 'radical'. They never referred to themselves as 'moderate', but always as *vanlige muslimer* – a term that means 'normal' and 'ordinary' Muslims at the same time (cf. *NRK*, 20 August 2014; *Dagsavisen*, 21 August 2014; *Dagbladet*, 25 August 2014). Moreover, they always presented themselves as Muslims with a strong commitment to their religion. This was visually marked by Al-Hussaini's hijab and by Al-Obaide's long beard and skull cap, but they also clearly legitimized their initiative through a religious discourse. Moreover, they presented Islam as a 'religion of peace' in a way that was almost equally essentialist as the representations of Islam that they tried to counter. They even committed an alternative form of *takfir* by declaring that Ubaydullah Hussain was 'not a proper Muslim' (*NRK*, 20 August 2014 and 23 August 2014). These self-representations were not merely strategic, but resulted directly from the organizers' self-perceptions and their frustration with public debates about Islam. However, in retrospect, their self-representation as committed Muslims seems to have played an important role in mobilizing large numbers of Muslims, and it also seems to have contributed to the welcoming of the event as a 'historical turning point' in Norwegian media (*VG*, 25 August 2014; *Vårt Land*, 25 August 2014; *Dagsavisen*, 9 September 2014).

Predictably, the response from *Profetens Ummah* was not positive at all. Both Al-Obaide and Al-Hussaini received hateful and even threatening messages from *Profetens Ummah* before and after the event, which they deliberately ignored (*VG*, 26 August 2014; Thee Yezen Al-Obaide, interviewed on 15 February 2017; Faten Mahdi Al-Hussaini, interviewed on 15 February 2017). However, short after the event, they were also attacked by people on the far-right, including Hege Storhaug. In an opinion piece in *Dagbladet*, Storhaug argued that Al-Hussaini was not a peaceful Muslim at all, but an extremist Shi'a Muslim engaged in a sectarian struggle against Sunni extremists:

Faten Mahdi Al-Hussaini (19) has become a national hero and a symbol of resistance against extremist Islam. HRS has dug into the social circles of this young woman. Today, we can unfortunately reveal that she (and many others) finds herself among extremist forces who have turned their backs against a secular democracy based on humanism. [...] I don't know whether anyone else immediately reacted to her outfit; the tightly wrapped headscarf – the very symbol, the uniform of Muslim fundamentalists. [...] A quick look into the youth group of the mosque that Faten belongs to shows that Islamist brainwashing also happens here – just that here it is about Shi'ite Islamism, with Iran-sponsored preachers who are being brought to Norway via the UK, just like Sunni extremists [...] When will we finally see the real resistance against this extremist ideology and the brainwashing in Norwegian mosques? (*Dagbladet*, 27 August 2014)

Al-Hussaini found these accusations completely absurd. Neither Al-Hussaini, nor the other Shi'a Muslims among the organizers had emphasized their Shi'ite beliefs during the event. In fact, one could say that the organizers under-communicated sectarian

<sup>16</sup><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n0hsXX-TrQQ&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR2bqOlywBvMRtOnydZ8cyaPY6hJrqYg0cNuZ9TgGIF4N2IFU1yfy5qk2c> (last accessed: 30 May 2019).



differences in their effort to speak on behalf of a very broad category of ‘ordinary’ Muslims. She remembers:

At that time, I didn’t think much about being Sunni or Shi’a. Both groups were victims of ISIS, right? I just thought that it was good that I am visibly Muslim, so that people would understand that Muslims do not support this kind of stuff. (Faten Mahdi Al-Hussaini, interviewed on 15 February 2017)

Storhaug’s response reveals that the protest march had indeed managed to disrupt the idea that a strong and visible commitment to Islam is directly related to violence, intolerance, and a lack of loyalty to Norwegian society and its values. Hence, those who wanted to uphold this idea immediately tried to portray the organizers as crypto-extremists, even if they had to go to great lengths to find evidence.

Although Storhaug’s accusations were heavily criticized in Norwegian media (cf. *Aftenposten*, 28 August 2014), they were brought up time and again in interviews with Al-Hussaini. Journalists asked her countless questions about her religious beliefs and practices and about her political views (cf. *Dagbladet*, 28 August 2014; *Vårt Land*, 30 August 2014). A few months later, when Al-Hussaini received an award for her efforts, she felt compelled to write a long opinion piece in which she explained that she was not an extremist, that she was a strong supporter of democracy and human rights (including freedom of speech, the right to leave Islam and the right to practice homosexuality), and that she did not support the theocratic regime in Iran (VG, 3 November 2014). Thus, the need to scrutinize Al-Hussaini’s ideas and to categorize her in terms of ‘what sort of Muslim she is’ was apparently felt among many more people in Norway.

Interestingly, the same inclination to uphold the binary frame of ‘moderate’ versus ‘radical’ resulted in a growing tendency among the political midfield to classify Al-Hussaini as ‘moderate’, especially after she started a civil society organization against radicalization (cf. *Minerva*, 4 November 2014; *Vårt Land*, 23 November 2016). As the following case study will reveal, the persistence of the ‘moderate/radical’ dichotomy can also be observed regarding the ‘Ring of Peace’ that was formed by Muslims around the Oslo synagogue in 2015.

### The ‘Ring of Peace’ around the Oslo synagogue

On Saturday evening 21 February 2015, the small Jewish community of Oslo held its weekly *Havdalah* ceremony to mark the end of the Sabbath and the return to everyday life. This time however, they did not perform their rituals inside the synagogue, but in the open air just outside the main entrance. They were surrounded by a human chain of young Muslim men and women, who were again surrounded by a much larger crowd of Muslims and other Oslo citizens that filled the whole street. The ‘Ring of Peace’ (*Fredens Ring*), as it was called, had been organized by a group of seven young Muslim men (Ali Chishti, Zeeshan Abdullah, Morad Jarodi, Hassan Raja, Mudassar Khan Mehmood, Atif Jamil and Thomas Holgersen Daher Naustdal), and one Muslim teenage girl (Hajrah Arshad). Together, they wanted to express their solidarity with the Jewish community, make a statement against religious intolerance, and counter prejudices against Muslims and Islam (Hajrah Arshad interviewed on 12 February



2017; Morad Jarodi, interviewed on 5 June 2017; Ali Chishti, interviewed on 2 March 2018).

The immediate reasons for the initiative were the recent terrorist attacks in Paris and Copenhagen. On 7 January 2015, two Al Qaeda-affiliated terrorists fatally shot twelve people and injured eleven others at the offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. On 9 January, a *Hypercacher* kosher supermarket was sieged by an armed young man who claimed to act on behalf of ISIS, and who was in close contact with the *Charlie Hebdo* shooters. He killed four Jewish civilians and held fifteen other hostages, until the police stormed the supermarket and killed the perpetrator. One month later, on Saturday 14 February 2015, a 22-year-old ISIS sympathizer shot and killed one man during a debate about freedom of speech in Copenhagen. Later that night, the same perpetrator killed the 37-year-old Jewish man Dan Uzan, who was on security duty outside the Great Synagogue during a bat mitzvah celebration. A few hours later, the perpetrator was fatally shot by the police. Although these were neither the first terrorist attacks linked to ISIS, nor the first attacks targeting Jewish communities in Europe, the Paris and Copenhagen attacks were widely covered in international media and sent shock waves throughout Europe (Titley 2017).

Until the Copenhagen attacks, the organizers of the ‘Ring of Peace’ had only known each other online as fellow moderators of the Facebook community page ‘Injustice Revealed’ (*Urett Avsløres*), where they shared news reports that they thought were not receiving enough attention in the mainstream media. Some of them had also organized protests together against Israeli state violence in Gaza. The day after the attacks, they contacted each other and decided to form a human ring around the local synagogue to express their solidarity with Norwegian Jews (Hajrah Arshad, interviewed on 12 February 2017; Morad Jarodi, interviewed on 5 June 2017; Ali Chishti, interviewed on 2 March 2018). Hajrah Arshad still remembers the horror and anger that she and the other moderators felt after the attacks. With the violence coming geographically closer and closer to Oslo, they sensed how threatened the small Jewish community must feel at that time. Additionally, they were worried about how the attacks would reflect on Muslims and Islam:

We also felt deeply hurt. Just the idea that our religion was put in such a bad light! [...] I thought it was very important to show that Abid Raja’s remark about “Muslims suckling anti-Semitism with their mother’s milk” was wrong. (Hajrah Arshad, interviewed on 12 February 2017)

In the middle of the night between Sunday the 15th and Monday the 16th of February, Hajrah Arshad created a Facebook event page titled *Fredens Ring*, with the following text:

Islam means to protect our brothers and sisters, no matter what religion they belong to. Islam means to rise above the hatred, and never sink to the same level as the haters. Islam means to defend each other. As Muslims, we want to show that we strongly condemn all forms of anti-Semitism, and that we are here to support Jewish people. Therefore, we will create a human circle around the Synagogue on Saturday 21 February.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup>The event page is no longer available. The text has been retrieved from various news reports (Framtida, 20 February 2015; NA24, 21 February 2015; ABC Nyheter, 21 February 2015).

The next day, hundreds of people had already signed up for the event, and Arshad received the first phone calls from journalists who wanted to make news reports about the initiative. Just like with the 2014 protest against ISIS, the growing number of Facebook sign-ups and the extensive media coverage fueled each other.

Ultimately, more than 1300 people participated despite the winter cold. The event was live broadcasted by different news channels across the world. Everyone in the tightly packed crowd gazed at the synagogue, listening to the *Havdalah* song sung by members of the congregation and the speeches given by representatives of DMT and the organizers. Rabbi Melchior spoke about his meeting with Dan Uzan's father in Copenhagen, who had said to him: 'Tell those young Muslims in Oslo that they have given me hope. They have given me a reason to continue to live. Perhaps my son's death had a meaning after all. Perhaps it will be a source of life in the future'. He also explained that the words *Allahu Akbar* were abused by terrorists. He shouted *Allahu Akbar* as loud as he could, and said: 'God is great! Our common God is everywhere in the world, but most of all God is where rings are formed and bridges are built between people!' While his words echoed through the street, the crowd burst into applause (TV2, 21 February 2015).

Arshad addressed her speech to the Jewish community. She spoke about the importance of standing up for each other, while she also criticized the continuous pressure on Muslims in wider society to denounce violent crimes committed by others:

It is unfair to be held accountable for everything that other Muslims do. We are not here to say sorry for what happened in Copenhagen, but to show that we stand with you. We feel the same fear as you do, and we will take the blows together with you. (NRK, 21 February 2015)

Just like the protest march against ISIS in 2014, the 'Ring of Peace' around the Oslo synagogue can be seen as a 'multiple critique' targeting different audiences at the same time: those who committed such acts of terrorism in the name of Islam, but also those who stereotypically linked Islam with violence and anti-Semitism, and held Muslims collectively accountable for such crimes. And just like the organizers of the 2014 protest, the organizers of the 'Ring of Peace' subverted the binary frame of 'moderate' versus 'radical'. Before, during and after the event, they consistently presented themselves as committed Muslims whose initiative was directly inspired by their faith. Arshad for example mentioned that Islam was an important part of her identity, and that she enjoyed learning about Islam and going to the mosque 'even though she did not wear hijab' (Vårt Land, 21 February 2015). Zeeshan Abdullah recalls: 'We wanted to promote certain values, such as tolerance, love and respect, precisely because we believe that these are Islamic values' (Zeeshan Abdullah, interviewed on 2 March 2018). Similarly, Chishti argues:

The basic values of Islam are universal values. It is about taking care of other people, protecting them and their religions and their houses of worship, respecting each other, and following the golden middle way. We wanted to show that these are the values that we have kept throughout the history of Islam, and that we learned from our parents. [...] I grew up in a very conservative family with Sufi ideals. My father was the first imam in Norway, and my parents always taught me that our Prophet attended a Jewish funeral, and that he allowed Jews and Christians to practice their religion. (Ali Chishi, interviewed on 2 March 2018)<sup>18</sup>

They never referred to themselves as ‘moderate’ Muslims. As far as they used any labels at all, they called themselves ‘normal’, ‘ordinary’, or ‘mainstream’ Muslims (cf. *Framtida*, 20 February 2015). They held to a somewhat essentialist notion of Islam as a religion of peace and interfaith harmony in response to essentialist notions of Islam as a religion of violence and intolerance. However, they did not commit an alternative form of *takfir* by claiming that ‘terrorists are not Muslims’. Instead, they claimed to build on a centuries-old religious tradition that dated back to the early history of Islam, and that had been transferred to them by their parents. The implication was that Islam did not need to be changed to be compatible with Norwegian values, and that Muslims did not have to resort to a ‘light version’ of their religion to fit into Norwegian society.

Overall, the responses were overwhelmingly positive. Already before the event took place, the ‘Ring of Peace’ had received welcoming messages via social media from people across the world, and especially from Jews (*Vårt Land*, 19 February 2015). As DMT director Ervin Kohn said in an interview short after the event: ‘We feel that we are not alone’ (*NRK*, 21 August 2015). The eight young Muslims who organized the event had also received many positive responses from Muslims on social media and in their own social environment, and such responses also kept coming after the event. Arshad remembers that many Muslims expressed their relief to her that ‘finally some people were speaking on behalf of them’ (Hajrah Arshad, interviewed on 12 February 2017).

Arshad thinks that it mattered that the ‘Ring of Peace’ was the spontaneous initiative of a group of young men and women who did not represent any formal organization. Jarodi also thinks that the reputation of the organizers matters, and that he and the other organizers of the ‘Ring of Peace’ had a certain credibility because of their ‘balanced attitude’: they came across as believing and practicing Muslims without being known as religious extremists, and they were openly critical of anti-Muslim sentiments while standing up for another minority group. As Jarodi puts it: ‘people did not see us as a bunch of sellouts’ (Morad Jarodi, interviewed on 5 June 2017).

However, not everyone was equally enthusiastic about the event. Arshad received hateful and even threatening messages from Ubaydullah Hussain and other members of *Profetens Ummah* on social media, who said that she ‘would do anything for a shoulder pat from the infidels’ (Hajrah Arshad, interviewed on 12 February 2017). Meanwhile, people on the far-right tried to present the organizers as crypto-extremists. For example, Max Hermansen, leader of the newly established anti-Islam movement *Pegida Norge*, remarked that ‘this is just trickery’ and accused the organizers of using a ‘solid dose of *taqiya* (dissimulation)’ (*NA24*, 22 February 2015). Hege Storhaug speculated that there were very few Muslims among the participants, and contrasted this with the ‘large crowds’ of Norwegian Muslims protesting the anti-Islam movie ‘Innocence of Muslims’ in 2012. Furthermore, she remarked that Arshad ‘was only after whitewashing Islam instead of rising up against those who legitimize violence’ (*HRS*, 22 February 2015). Later, Arshad wrote in an opinion piece: ‘From the very moment that I created the

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<sup>18</sup>Ali Chishti had acquired a controversial reputation in 2009 himself, when he gave a public lecture titled ‘Why I hate Jews and homosexuals’. However, he strongly denounced this anti-Semitic phase of life in several interviews during the week before the event (cf. *Aftenposten*, 22 February 2015).

Facebook event, it feels as if I have stuck my hand in a wasps' nest. A nest full of wasps that are out to sting me' (*Aftenposten*, 6 March 2015).

Morad Jarodi was repeatedly accused of secretly belonging to extremist Muslim organizations, simply because he followed the Facebook page of *Profetens Ummah*, or because he had signed up on Facebook for an Islamic youth conference that included a speaker who had made controversial remarks about Jews in the past (*HRS*, 14 October 2015). Jarodi remembers feeling disturbed by these accusations: not only because people scrutinized his Facebook behavior, but also because he followed these pages only out of curiosity and not because he endorsed particular views (Morad Jarodi, interviewed on 5 June 2017). This illustrates how the scrutinizing of Muslims tends to follow a logic of contagion. Muslims are not only accused of 'radicalism' based on their own beliefs and actions. They also risk being labeled 'radical' based on their being associated with other groups and individuals who have been labeled as such.

At the same time, in mainstream news media, the organizers were sometimes labeled as 'moderate' Muslims, simply because they opposed terrorism (cf. *Utrop*, 5 March 2015). The organizers would never describe themselves as such. As Ali Chishti says:

I feel provoked when people describe me as a 'moderate' or 'liberal' Muslim. Among religious people, these terms have almost become swearwords – as if you think that everything is allowed in Islam, and as if you have no limits. And then they present those extremely reactionary, super-Salafi groups as 'conservative'. We are the ones who are conservative. That's why I'm always consistent in calling them 'reactionary'. (Ali Chishti, interviewed on 2 March 2018)

## Discussion

In this article, I have shown how the torchlight march in 2004, the protest against ISIS in 2014 and the 'Ring of Peace' in 2015 can be seen as examples of a 'multiple critique'. The Norwegian Muslims who organized these public events felt a strong urge to raise their voices against acts of terrorism and other human rights violations committed in the name of Islam, while they also wanted to change the way members of the non-Muslim Norwegian majority population thought about Muslims and their religion. In all three cases, this urge arose from their strong commitment to, and identification with Islam. Contrary to the famous #NotInMyName campaign by Muslims in the UK, which was propelled by the British government as part of its soft power measures to counter violent extremism (Loukili 2017), the three events discussed in this article were organized upon the initiative of Norwegian Muslims themselves. Nevertheless, they did this while being under enormous pressure – both from the dominant majority population and from other Muslims.

The 'Muslim Question' creates a 'conditional belonging' for Muslims that puts them in a highly complex position. If they try to counter stereotypes by condemning terrorism, they risk reinforcing the idea that there is a need for Muslims to prove their humanity and their loyalty to the nation-state. If they refuse to condemn terrorism, they risk being seen as failed citizens who secretly support such violence. Meanwhile, they also have to relate to a binary frame of 'moderate' versus 'radical', which produces another Catch-22 situation. Being labeled 'radical' means being seen as a threat to society. But if Muslims present themselves as 'moderate', any statement they make against terrorism is easily seen as a result of their presupposed 'relaxed' attitude towards Islam, and not as

evidence against the idea that Islam is an obstacle to their citizenship. Moreover, they risk being seen as ‘sellouts’ – especially in the eyes of other Muslims.

However, my research findings also show that Norwegian Muslims are not passive victims of a problematic discourse, but play an active role in upholding or subverting the binary frame of ‘moderate’ versus ‘radical’. The different ways in which the organizers of the three events positioned themselves in relation to this binary frame had clear consequences for the responses they received from other Muslims and in wider Norwegian society. In the case of the torchlight march in 2004, Noman Mubashir’s use of the word ‘moderate’ became an important reason for many Muslims not to participate. By contrast, the attempts made by the organizers of the protest against ISIS in 2014 and the ‘Ring of Peace’ in 2015 to avoid the label ‘moderate’ seem to have contributed to the high participant numbers and the welcoming of the two events as ‘historical turning points’ in Norwegian media.

The three case studies reveal how the ‘Muslim Question’ feeds into contestations among Muslims about ‘true’ Islam. In all three case studies, Muslims tried to counter representations of Islam as legitimizing violence by offering alternative representations of Islam as a religion that promotes peaceful coexistence. They followed different strategies to legitimize their statements. All of them claimed to speak on behalf of the ‘vast majority of Muslims in Norway’. Additionally, some of them labeled themselves ‘normal’, ‘true’, or ‘conservative’ Muslims, emphasized their personal commitment to their faith, made references to the Qur’an and hadith, and/or claimed to build on a centuries-long tradition that was handed over to them by their parents. In his response to Noman Mubashir in 2004, Awais A. Mushtaq went so far as to label himself a ‘fundamentalist’. All of these can be seen as strategies of claiming (informal) authority regarding Islam, with the purpose of representing a ‘united Islamic ummah against a not-so-Islamic problem’.<sup>19</sup>

Last but not least, this article reveals the persistence of a certain mistrust against Muslims in Norwegian society. As expressed in the poem by Jirde Ali, Muslims face an ongoing test where they cannot simply make the light go green. Sometimes, they indeed succeed in disrupting certain stereotypical ideas about Islam, and manage to shift the boundary between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Muslims a bit. Nevertheless, my findings reveal the difficulty, if not impossibility for Muslims to gain acceptance for themselves and their faith without: (1) confirming the importance of a positive identification with the nation-state; (2) confirming the alleged superiority of the ‘cultural achievements’ of the West; and (3) drawing a line between themselves and ‘bad’ Muslims who pose a threat. This corresponds with the findings of Corbett (2017) in the US and those of Morsi (2017) in Australia. As long as these mechanisms are still in place, the belonging of Muslims in Norwegian society remains a ‘conditional belonging’.

## Acknowledgements

This article is part of a thematic issue titled ‘Beyond ‘Radical’ versus ‘Moderate’? New Perspectives on the Politics of Moderation in Muslim Majority and Muslim Minority Settings’, edited by Margaretha A. van Es, Nina ter Laan and Erik H. Meinema. I wish to thank Nina and Erik, as well as the chief editors of the journal *Religion* for our collaboration, which has been a great pleasure. I also want to express my gratitude to Birgit Meyer and the Religious Matters research team at

<sup>19</sup>I borrow this term from Groeninck (2019).

Utrecht University, as well as the anonymous reviewers for their invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this article. Special thanks go to the interview respondents, without whom my research would not have been possible.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Funding

The research for this article was supported by the H2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (Grant Number 703071), and an NWO Spinoza Prize awarded to Professor Birgit Meyer at Utrecht University.

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