

## CHAPTER 7

# Making Meaning of Canonical Scriptures

### A Step toward Gender Justice?

Are Muslim women deprived of gender equality in their religious traditions because of the Islamic scriptures? Are Christian women still regarded—more or less explicitly—as subordinate to men in Christian churches because of what the Bible says? The answer to these questions would depend on who is asked and where the boundaries are drawn for what is judged for what one sees as the significant context that is being inquired into. I sometimes ask myself if religious women in dominantly secular societies where gender equality is also a highly esteemed value are more or less openly regarded as backward by the non-religious general public. They are part of traditions that have a heavy patriarchal legacy, so why do they not just leave? Do they not know it is for their own good? Such attitudes may make it difficult for religious women to make themselves heard and convey their own interpretations of their scriptures and their religious traditions.

The values of gender justice and gender fairness and the religious traditions' obstructions of or contribution to them as embedded in religious and social practice is subject to scrutiny and discussion in many ways and in many contexts. Gender justice has been embraced by many Muslim feminists and the international women's activist community alike for providing a more flexible cluster of values than a strict focus on formal gender equality, often seen to be shaped by particular majority Western ideas and interests. But the discussions, even when they include the more flexible notion of gender justice, are neither as broad nor as critical as they could have been. The contemporary debates on gender fairness and gender equality seem to cluster around specific religious traditions and particular cultures. Feminism and gender equality are negotiated with multiculturalism in its many forms in the West and are often in-

terpreted as part of Western cultural imperialism in other parts of the world. The connection between multiculturalism, imperialism, cultural and religious traditions, and gender figures in these discussions in different ways. A general pattern, however, seems to be that the canonical scriptures of the Christian and Islamic traditions are generally presented as representing a problem and an obstacle to gender justice when considered in public discourses at all. To some extent, this is also the case with public evaluations of organized Muslim-Christian dialogues and encounters in Norway and elsewhere, when a scepticism exists that such encounters may be places where religious and cultural values are negotiated over and traded away to adjust to the other cultural and religious traditions present. The suspicion from the side of the majority culture is that the value of gender equality is traded away as a shared value whereas religious minorities often suspect that they are being forced to abandon their religious identity connected to gender roles and gender models in the name of gender equality.

Seen from within the religious traditions of Islam and Christianity—although constructing a complete separation between the inside and the outside of the traditions is rather artificial in practice—there are established feminist-oriented criticisms that the canonical scriptures represent a stumbling block for gender fairness and that organized interreligious encounters and dialogue may confirm and strengthen existing patriarchal structures. The shaping of discourses and social practices is dynamic and in constant movement, just as people's standpoints, references, and positions change geographically, socially, and culturally. One of the possible results of this dynamics is that the existing double blindness observed by Ursula King and others (King 2005: 1) between religious traditions and their theologies on the one hand and gender research/feminist research on cultural encounters and multiculturalism on the other has been revealed. The former often neglect gender/feminist research, and the latter often exclude religious identity and belonging and sometimes religion as a category in their research. If the double blindness was transformed into a double-conscious state where gender and women issues, and cultural and religious identity and practices are viewed together by scholars anal-

yzing gendered power structures, this would represent a significant gain in the scholarly work for gender justice.

This study explored the discourses on gender, gender justice and its relation to Muslim-Christian encounter, and canonical scriptures. The presentation of the discussions of the participants in the previous chapters is focused, however, and almost exegetical in its structure. It can be seen as a micro-study of how a few Muslim and Christian women believers interpret some challenging and difficult texts that have had a reception history of shaping and twisting women's positions in the Christian and Islamic traditions. As stated at the start, the aim of this project was to look for shared strategies of interpretation and meaning making across religious boundaries and to look for shared agency for achieving gender justice among Muslim and Christian women. The question now is: What did the "exegesis" of what the women said and the analysis of their discussions regarding the texts and the issues derived from the texts reveal? We also need to discuss the findings in a broader perspective. What are the issues, the agencies, and the strategies this study could generate? What new questions arise? How can it contribute in a broad sense to the field of joint Muslim-Christian hermeneutical efforts, dialogue, and feminist perspectives on texts and contexts? In this final chapter, I will explore these fields a bit further and identify some further challenges.

*The Crucial Focus Point in Gender Justice:  
The Texts or the Readers?*

Throughout the process of reading and interpreting the texts, and in the reflection after the process, this study has focused on the *readers*. More precisely, it has shown how the encounter between the texts happens through the encounter of the readers. In the emerging field of interreligious hermeneutics, as well as in the established work of comparative theology, which developed out of theology of religions and missiology done by Christian theologians (particularly among scholars affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church), studies of what are called "the texts of the other" are primarily concerned with written texts. These studies usually take place without considering "the other as reader" to be an important resource in the interpretative efforts of the scholars. The explanation, of course, is

that these studies are often done as historical, textual studies, and “the other as reader” is considered a resource, but primarily through his or her writings on the texts—as secondary textual sources. Francis X. Clooney establishes a firm distance between the knowledge emerging from the textual studies of comparative theology on the one hand and interreligious dialogue, which he considers to be a less valuable (more random, less stable) resource of knowledge about different traditions’ texts (Clooney 2013: 60) on the other. But the social life of the canonical texts within their own communities is often lost in textual studies, so the more subtle or intimate knowledge about how the texts affect or are related to the life of their religious readers is often not included in this perspective.

The relationship between canonical texts and their readers is often held to be an authoritative hierarchy where the readers are expected to orientate themselves via the texts as understood in a broad sense. As a general principle, the canonical texts are seen to be more authoritative than their apprehension by “ordinary” readers in the religious traditions of both Islam and Christianity.

Canonical texts are often seen by outsiders to represent a religious tradition. This study provides examples of how far an outside view can be from the readers’ own grasp of how the texts from their religious canon need to be understood and related to. Some of the obvious examples would be the discussions showing how the Christian participants were unable to imagine how their Muslim companions would interpret Sura 4:34 and how surprised the Muslim readers were when reading the contents of the text from 1 Timothy. The Muslim readers were also unable to anticipate their Christian co-readers calling the text “unchristian,” a “stumbling block,” and as a result reject its content as part of a Christian tradition they identify with. The discussion and interpretations of the disputed texts from 1 Timothy and Sura 4:34 in particular show how crucial the encounter between the texts’ readers is for an adequate contextual understanding of these verses from the New Testament and the Koran.

To enter into the meaning of canonical texts through their readers and to focus on the readers when exploring the textual encounter between Christian and Islamic canonical texts opens

up new and challenging insights and possibilities. It is a source for knowledge about the social life of the texts and the hermeneutics that may surface when readers of Muslim and Christian canonical texts meet in real life. So, rather than encountering the "text of the Other" or focusing on "the Other as text" as in Martha Frederik's description of interreligious hermeneutics (Frederiks 2005: 105), this encounter focuses on the interpreting Other, or the *Other as reader*.

One of the obvious imbalances in this study is the different statuses of the Christian and Islamic canonical texts. The authoritative religious doctrines on the status of the texts as divine revelation concerning the Bible, the Koran, and the *hadith* and how this is different in the two traditions is one thing. How this influences the interpretative process in the group is another. The general importance of the scriptures in the daily life of the believers, and the importance ascribed to the texts by the general public as well as by the political and social culture is also important. Imbalances between the Muslim and the Christian participants concerning the importance of their respective canonical scriptures in their daily lives as well as the level of factual knowledge about the scriptures clearly exist between the two groups. For the Muslim participants, the texts themselves are more important and the level of knowledge about the texts generally higher. The challenge this represents in the study sometimes becomes obvious in the discussions about the texts, such as when one of the Christian participants assumes that the text from 1 Timothy is an Old Testament text or when complains that she does not remember what Jesus actually said about women. If the Muslim participants are surprised by this, they do not show it in the group's interpretative process. This is perhaps because the Christian participants do not let their own weaknesses regarding factual knowledge interfere with their courage to question the texts, wrestle with them, embrace them, or abandon them. This is grounded in their understanding of themselves as authoritative readers, and in a reasoning that the texts become significant only through the significance given to them by being read and interpreted. This is again grounded in a different knowledge than a purely religious and historical knowledge about the texts. It is a knowledge about the ethical and political effects of Christian canonical texts and Christian

beliefs in their own contexts, as well as experience-based practical knowledge they use in analogical reasoning about the texts' content. The Christian readers in this study are skilled in the critical analysis of their own religious tradition, and they are not hesitant to share their often feminist-based critique with their Muslim companions.

The Muslim readers, on the other hand, show an urge to understand and interpret their own texts more cumulatively, based on formal knowledge and traditional interpretations within the Islamic tradition. But they select their sources for knowledge and the interpretative trajectories they want to follow very carefully, and they are concerned with contextual and practical knowledge that they feel is necessary in addition to more formal knowledge. This is clearly shown when they discuss how they see Sura 4:34 as being interpreted and misinterpreted in Muslim communities. Their concern with maintaining the significance of the texts is usually extended to the biblical texts, although the Koran remains the reference point when it comes to disagreements and differences between the two textual traditions. Their criticisms are always directed towards other interpreters and readers of the texts, not toward the texts themselves. They are more demanding than the Christian participants regarding textual and historical knowledge about the texts but at the same time no less demanding regarding their requirements of contextual and practical knowledge about the text's contemporary life and social use.

Another imbalance in the study is one with respect to *attention*. The texts from the Islamic tradition generally receive more attention than the biblical ones do—from all the participants throughout the process. Also, the contextual challenges identified by the Muslim participants are discussed more. What does this mean? Does it entail a lack of interest by the Muslim participants in the Christian tradition and paradoxically a lack of interest by the Christian participants themselves? The Muslim participants may be better informed about the Norwegian majority discourses than the Christian participants (including the ones with a pluralist cultural background) are about Muslim discourses, which are minority discourses. But the majority discourse does not necessarily provide knowledge about the Christian tradition as such. The Christian participants, as part

of the religious majority in Norway, may be expected by the Muslim participants to be well informed about the Christian tradition, and the Muslim participants view themselves as knowing the Christian tradition through their knowledge of the Norwegian majority discourse. This could explain a certain lack of curiosity from the side of the Muslim participants about the Christian tradition, to which the curiosity the Christians express in the Islamic tradition stands in contrast. The Muslim participants are probably, due to the current political climate in the West, used to having to explain their faith and their tradition, which also makes them seek knowledge to equip themselves for this task. The Christian participants are not faced with these requirements to the same degree. This, however, may not be the entire explanation. It could also be that the current intrareligious debate in Islam focuses a great deal precisely on matters of textual interpretation and women's situations. In Norway, the intensity of the debate on biblical interpretation and women's issues in the Lutheran church is, generally speaking, rather low at present. For the encounter between the Christian and the Muslim women in this project, this means they are probably influenced by the debates—or lack of them—in their respective religious communities. Their stake in this project is therefore different.

The readers are the primary source of knowledge about the texts in this study, but, for the readers themselves, they have two foci in the process: the texts and their fellow readers. The canonical texts were given an important position in this process by the researcher, and the participants concentrated mostly on discussing the texts in the meetings.

#### *The Canonical Texts: Roles and Functions*

To ask what would have happened in this encountering process *without* the canonical texts may help to clarify what role the texts play in the process. There is reference to only one discussion where the texts are not the starting point. This particular discussion is about the participants' *general* views on the Bible, the Koran, and the *Hadith*, and it turns out to be rather polemical. It is difficult to say if this is because of the absence of texts on which they could focus: there were heated discussions at times about the texts and themes derived from the text as

well—especially the Hagar/Hajar narratives. But the specifically conflict-oriented communication mode in this meta-discussion could be occurring because it is still early in the group process, and some participants may be concerned with positioning themselves and their beliefs in relation to the others. The mode of communicating and the relational aspects in the group were discussed, and these issues would probably have been addressed in the group at some time in any case. But the discussion without having a starting point in texts is less focused and more open to the different and more scattered interests of the participants and has a different character than the following conversations and discussions in its diversity of themes and levels.

If we look at the rather consistent focus among the participants on the texts and topics derived from the texts, their energy and interest was impressive: the participants went on and on through hours of discussions at every meeting. The reasons for this consistency, other than a possible loyalty to the researcher, are likely to be found in the functions the texts were given by the participants when placing the texts in different positions.

The canonical texts were given the functions of being a *refuge*, a *source of inspiration and encouragement* in everyday life as well as in *struggles for justice*. They were, furthermore, given the status of a *sacred material object* (the Koran for the Muslim participants), as important *historical testimonies*, and as the *origin of important rituals* (the Hajar narrative as the origin of *sa'y* for the Muslims). All these functions and representations can be regarded as positive. It is not surprising that it is the Muslim participants who usually give these functions to their canonical texts but to some extent they also include the Bible.

For some Christian participants, however, the texts also seem to represent *annoyance* and *provocation* or even a *danger* to the believers. This applies to the prescriptive texts from both canonical sources. The view of the Bible as a *sacred object* that must be treated with respect physically is not represented among the Christian participants. Some state the contrary while referring to Christian freedom.

The prescriptive texts represent *dilemmas* and *challenges* for both the Christian and Muslim participants. But the Muslim participants do not locate the dilemma in or challenge the kor-



anic text *itself* but only possible interpretations of the text. Faced with 1 Timothy 2:8-15, one of the Christian participants finds support for her criticism of this text in an Islamic tradition one of the Muslim participants referred to in commenting on the same text (on the interpretation of the Fall and its consequences for men and women, pp. 359-60).

One decisive function the canonical texts have in the interpretation process is to induce the participants to introduce *time* and *temporality* as a hermeneutical tool. Because they represent a different time, the texts challenge the participants on the meaning of time in interpretation. The participants' placing of the texts—clearly in the past as “old”—may or may not further imply that the texts are irrelevant since the time factor alone is not made decisive. Whenever a text is said to be irrelevant because it is “old,” other factors are added, such as a *moral critique* of the text, sometimes based on the evolutionary presuppositions that social and religious reasoning and moral knowledge are constantly improving throughout history. The Muslim participants never categorize an Islamic canonical text as irrelevant for either of these reasons, including temporal categorization, but *interpretations* of the texts are sometimes argued to be irrelevant because they are old and not helpful with regard to contemporary challenges.

It is the participants' contextual and analogical reasoning that introduces *spatial* tools of interpretation. But the texts are used as providing premises for including other places and contexts through the participants' analogical reasoning: Mecca, the place of the performance of *sa'y* (Aira), the Middle East (Rima), contemporary contexts in Africa and Iran (Maria and Shirin), together with the Norwegian context that is either mentioned openly or implied.

The differences between the Muslim and Christian participants' view of the Bible, the Koran, and the *Hadith* are not surprising but rather expected, due to the different statuses of the Bible and the Koran in the two traditions. Perhaps surprisingly, there is still much to discuss in making meaning across these differences. The use of analogical reasoning and the participants' way of relating to contemporary issues is the most substantial ground for these discussions.

The canonical texts can be said to have both a divisive and unitive function in the communication of the group: the texts are *divisive* when the participants constructively express their own religious faith and *unitive* when the texts are seen to represent a challenge (as texts or through interpretative *representations* of the text), thus requiring a critical perspective from the participants. The discussions on the Hagar/Hajar narrative turned out to divide the Christian and the Muslim participants over against each other more than the discussions on Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15. Making meaning of the Hagar/Hajar narratives became a constructive project for the Muslim participants (less so for the Christians) whereas the prescriptive texts represented a challenge and dilemma for both, creating a unitive critical approach. This observation suggests that the narratives versus the prescriptive texts are given different functions, which again is reflected in the different interpretative strategies involved, particularly when it comes to the extent of shared strategies or not.

With regard to the texts selected to be explored in this study, the participants claimed that while the Hagar/Hajar narratives were texts that could represent their two religious traditions in a satisfactory way, the prescriptive texts were seen as problematic in this respect. Two of the participants, one Christian and one Muslim, argued that they would have picked different texts to represent their traditions if they could have done so. The ethical challenge for the researcher regarding this question is discussed in the chapter on method and methodology, but here the interesting part is that these texts, which are sometimes used in public discourse to give an image of the Christian and in particular the Islamic tradition, are seen as marginal from the believer's point of view with respect to the core of their religious tradition. The struggle for gender justice (and also gender equality to some extent) was, on the other hand, considered by all the participants to be a fundamental struggle born right from the heart of their traditions. Canonical texts from the Bible and the Koran that underlined human equality, if not gender equality, would have represented a much more positive starting point for a Muslim-Christian encounter according to the readers in this study.

What would be the most significant role of the texts in this encountering process? I suggest that the texts, even when they are given different and sometimes contradictory functions by the readers in this study, still represent a shared point of reference, a kind of common frame for the discussions. The texts represent the introduction of thematic material for discussion, they generate positions of agreements and disagreements, which means that the participants may use them both to lean on, to rage against, and to be engaged with as partners for broadening the readers' understanding and perspectives. But these flexible functions of the texts in the encountering process are based on how the participants view themselves as readers. The variety of possible functions and resources I have suggested the texts may represent are dependent on the readers and how they situate themselves related to the text—and their co-readers.

The readers combine a position in which they represent their religious belief with their more individual and personal stances and experiences. This creates a dynamic, situated use of the texts. Because the readers and the group as such do not have an ambition to establish an official or doctrinal and in that sense representative Muslim-Christian encounter, the space for critique and self-critique, their own narratives, or articulated experience is created in the textual discussions and interpretations. If they had taken a more official or representative role, there would most likely be less openness towards exploring the texts and the contexts in a critical or challenging way. At the same time, the participants use their respective traditions actively to make meaning of the texts, and place themselves in the midst of rather than the margins of their faith communities. The encounter itself, as it actually happens over time, with the participants knowing that the outcome will be published by a researcher and giving each other full attention in the group, possibly contributes to this or at least underlines their significance as readers, interpreters, and believers. Related to Hill Fletcher's models of how interreligious dialogues are organized, what is taking place here lies in between the "Storytelling Model" and the "Activist Model," where the individuality of the participants is more significant than it would be in the "Parliamentary Model" based on representation (cf. p. 85).

*The Hermeneutical Strategies and Tools: Shared and Particular*

If we take a closer look at the hermeneutical outcome of the study, it becomes clear that a form of *situated hermeneutics* reveals various strategies and patterns of interpretation in the group. The discussions are marked by the Norwegian context through references and experiences shared by the participants. But they relate to other cultural, social, and geographical contexts as well. The hermeneutical situation is marked by the interpretation of the texts, the interpretation of *other* textual interpretations, and critical engagement with both. The interpreted encounter between readers and texts and between the readers is marked by the fact that the participants are Muslim and Christian believers, individuals with different cultural backgrounds, and women.

It is apparent that there are *internal* differences both among the Muslim and Christian participants in their interpretations of the texts, dissolving any idea of the two religious traditions as fixed and stable entities. The destabilizing term *transreligious* hermeneutics thus emerges as an adequate description.

The *cultural* background of the readers proved to be an influential variable in making meaning through destabilizing the representations of the religious traditions. The effect of this cultural diversity is made most visible by the Christian participants with an additional non-Norwegian background because they openly refer to African or Middle Eastern cultures respectively. The Christians with a Norwegian background identify with the majority Norwegian culture, but these references are often only made in implicit ways except when they refer to how gender equality has become part of the Norwegian culture. The Muslim participants seem, in general, to refer more to their *religious* tradition in the interpretation of the texts and in analyzing contemporary contexts than to culture. They challenge the cultural and political references (Iran and Pakistan) repeatedly with their conception of Islam, contrasting the two. This means that when the Norwegian Christian participants interpret the texts in the project, they engage positively with the culture they are part of and establish a close connection to certain values in their own culture and what they identify as Christian values of human equality and gender justice. The Muslim participants on the other hand, together with the Christian participants with a

mixed background, critically view all cultures, including Norwegian culture, which they claim does not promote human equality adequately at all. The other cultural backgrounds they include in their references—East African, Middle Eastern, Iranian, and Pakistani—are all portrayed as containing traditions that prevent women from inhabiting the space they want and opportunities they desire.

The distinction between culture and religion, however, is difficult to make on a general basis, and the participants themselves struggle with this distinction. There seems to be no clear answer in the empirical material to the question if the primary identification of the participants is consequently cultural or religious. At times, cultural identification proves important, but more often religious identification seems to be the primary reference. This may well be because of the pre-established structuring of this study. The participants were selected primarily because of their Christian or Muslim background, and the focus on canonical texts may have reinforced the highlighting of the religious traditions. The religious affiliation and identity is marked as the most significant, and this entails a focus on the religious traditions regarding the matters in question, such as gender justice.

The various cultural backgrounds, on the other hand, make it possible to investigate the relation between religion and culture to some extent in the interpretation of the texts. This becomes particularly visible in some of the discussions on representations of Christian and Muslim traditions where the variety regarding cultural backgrounds enables the participants to discuss how Christianity and Islam are intertwined and interact with cultures. Examples are the discussion on the Hagar/Hajar narratives regarding the naming of women and Maria's regular references to an African context, which is also marked by Christianity. The consciousness about cultural variations in the representation of the religious traditions entails that the understanding of the Christian tradition is extended *beyond* its representation in the Norwegian and Western contexts and that the Islamic tradition is not made equal to concepts of Middle Eastern or East Asian cultures. The cross variations regarding cultural background within the group make it possible to challenge stereotypical conceptions about Christianity and Islam

among the participants. The interpretative skill of *diasporic imagination* is crucial in the meaning making for how the texts travel through different contexts and cultures and what this means when they are interpreted in a Norwegian context. The readers in the group who have a mixed cultural background are able to translate the contextual meaning within the various geopolitical contexts they are familiar with. This represents significant contributions to the discussions. It is not only the texts but also the themes derived from the texts and the situation of women in general that are brought up in the group's discussions. The skill of diasporic imagination by some of the readers has at least two significant interpretative results: It extends the geopolitical area that is regarded as the significant context for the readers, and it displays the cultural varieties within Christian and Islamic religious practice and norms. In addition, it transfers knowledge from other contexts and gives the interpretative community a transcultural, transnational perspective both on the texts and contexts and also on the group itself.

That the participants are all *women* impacts the interpretations, not in one general way but in various ways. The experience of what it means to have a Christian or a Muslim faith and to be a woman and its further impact on the hermeneutical approach to the texts is expressed variously by the women. Most of the participants state openly that they regard themselves as feminists, and nobody says she is *not* a feminist. How this is displayed in the discussions and interpretations differs and will be discussed further in the section below on feminisms. For most of the participants, however, this implies that if the canonical scriptures of Christianity or Islam are interpreted in a way they find to be to women's disadvantage—to control women or to promote male superiority or dominance—this is seen as a *misrepresentation* of the tradition and the texts' divine message. For the Muslim participants, this concerns the entire koranic text, which they claim must be interpreted with the necessary historical and *contextual* knowledge and skills, a hermeneutical approach they argue is derived from the Koran itself. For the Christian participants, the hermeneutical key is the story of Jesus, which for them represents an ideal of practiced gender equality overruling other biblical texts that might suggest something different. Even if the participants' ideals about how gen-

der roles should be constructed in social and family life probably differ to some degree and their views on the Bible and the Koran as authoritative scripture differ as well, they nevertheless meet in a critical project to challenge interpretative practices in both traditions that favor men's control over women. Interpretative strategies based on the *ethical critique* and *moral enrichment* of the texts are shared hermeneutical strategies in the group where the Christian readers can basically be seen to engage in the former and the Muslim readers the latter more. While there are important nuances between the two concerning the status of the canonical texts as subject to direct criticism, they are both dependent on the readers' active reflections on their own role, authority, and responsibility for the textual interpretations and the texts' social life. The readers take on an agency not only to represent one's religious tradition in a way that is coherent to one's ethical and moral standards (which in the case of these readers are based on their religious tradition as well) but to confront other readers' misrepresentations. The group becomes a space of mutual education, of sharing knowledge and engaging with the ethical obligation to prevent the texts from producing injustice and instead allowing them to be part of the project of gender justice.

The participants' patterns of interpretation regarding the texts from the *other* tradition follows to a large extent the hermeneutical strategies the participants apply to their own texts. This means that, generally speaking, the Christian participants are as critical of the texts from the Koran and the *Hadith* as they are in their interpretation and questioning of the biblical texts. The respect the Muslim participants, on the other hand, generally show the biblical texts is similar to the respect they show the texts from the Koran and *Hadith*. But at the same time they critically evaluate the biblical texts against the content of the Koran, thus giving the Koran an epistemological preference. This means, on the one hand, that establishment of a shared hermeneutics toward the canonical texts (in the sense of common understandings of the texts as *texts*) does not happen. The participants stay with their religiously developed interpretative strategies in relation to their own canonical texts. On the other hand, a mutual understanding of the textual interpretations does

happen because the readers use one another as resources to understand their respective texts.

It is in making meaning of texts in *context*—in negotiating contexts—and through analogical reasoning (which includes the *moral enrichment* and *moral critique* of the texts), however, that a transcontextual space of interpretation emerges at times throughout the group's interpretative process. The hermeneutics "on the ground" in this study, which could be called trans-religious, thus relates to the *contextual*. The contextual perspectives appear when the situated interpretations of the texts as well as their impact on people's lives are discussed. Diasporic imagination widens perspectives and provides knowledge of other people in other places. The ethical and moral responsibility toward the texts are based on a shared value of gender justice. The analogical reasoning that allows the readers to interact with the texts by bringing in their own narratives, ethical judgements, and knowledge is closely connected to how time and space is used in positioning and interpreting texts, contexts, and the group's own encounter: the texts calls for understanding today, the significant context is broader than just "here," and the encounter between the Muslim and Christian readers is both where the shared and the particular hermeneutical strategies are explored and developed.

#### Interpretative Positioning: Between Fluidity and Fixation

The participants as readers all define themselves as *interpreters*, and through this they take on a *responsibility* in relation to the texts. This is most obvious among the Muslim participants who express this responsibility in order to secure the status of the texts in general (and they include the biblical texts in this to some extent) and to work for what they perceive as a *responsible* interpretation of the Islamic texts within the Islamic communities. The latter includes pedagogical work to make the texts *resources* for fellow Muslims. The Muslim participants have a stable meaning-making position toward the Islamic texts, where the responsibility in the interpretative act is placed with the reader. The final authority, however, is located in the (divine) text of the Koran, thus limiting the subjective freedom of the interpreter. This places a great responsibility on the shoulders of the reader, who has to search for the divine meaning in the text



(this is what the subjectivity consists of). Accessible knowledge from the tradition as well as contextual knowledge is seen as a requirement for interpretation and reinterpretation. This encourages the participants to seek knowledge about the tradition and to discuss textual interpretations with other Muslims as well as to be knowledgeable about society at large and to be aware of other peoples' (Muslims') experiences and needs.

The Christian participants assume a responsibility for the texts in a different way. Generally, they first need to discuss the authority of the text and to situate it in their understanding of the Christian tradition. The responsibility the Christian participants construct for themselves includes the option to *dismiss* the text, as in the case of 1 Timothy 2:8-15. They construct their interpretative position as stable regarding the readers' subjectivity but, unlike their Muslim co-participants, also claim to have the final authority over the texts as readers—"in Jesus' name," so to say. The authoritative instance for them is the narratives of Jesus, which they do not seem to relate to primarily as biblical texts but as narratives of *faith* shared in the church and individualized. For some, Luther's interpretative tools of Law and Gospel also seem to guide their interpretations and support their positioning toward the texts. In their analogical reasoning they relate more to their own experiences and ideological views of gender relations than to other sources in the Christian tradition, including other biblical texts. It may be that some of the Christian participants come close to Chung Hyun Kyung's suggestion "We are the text"—primarily placing the biblical text in its context, as historical or contemporary background material—whereas the interpreters' own stories (which includes religious experiences derived from the Bible, such as the narratives about Jesus) are the authoritative *text*.

The instability in positioning that occurs in the interpretations of the texts is not created through the mere presence of texts from a different religious tradition. This is the case for both the Muslim and the Christian participants since they seem to interpret all texts with the same interpretative tools (texts from their own tradition *and* texts from the tradition of the others). The instability—which is necessary to create a transcontextual space—emerges through the contributions of the participants that tend to crisscross fixed or expected stable boundar-

ies. When this happens, the existing (intrareligious) interpretative communities are expanded to include others.

A cultural variable plays a significant role in many of these crossings where the skill of diasporic imagination is engaged. Rima's clarification of the relation between Middle Eastern cultures and Islam and her ability to relate culturally to the Islamic texts means that she temporarily becomes part of the formerly exclusive intra-Islamic interpretative community in the group by virtue of her Christian Middle Eastern background. Maria's perspective, which clarifies the fact that Christianity is not identical with Norwegian culture (or the Norwegian representation of Christianity), also represents such a crossing. Different cultural and educational backgrounds of the Muslim participants may be reflected in how they communicate their contributions: through narratives, arguments, or both. The narrative presented several times (by Aira) about Muhammad telling his follower to use his head to find the right answers if they were not found in the Koran or in the Islamic law tradition seems to belong to everyone's pre-knowledge. This suggests that religious resources, such as narratives with a general message, may also destabilize the religious boundaries and reveal an interpretative community, this time through a general recognition of the importance of human *rationality*.

The general subjective positioning toward the texts generates interpretative strategies of analogical reasoning that seem to bring the most significant form of fluidity into making meaning. Analogical reasoning requires the reader to establish a sense of coevalness with the *text* where the text is taken seriously enough to engage the reader in this way. This interpretative tool may also be used without an ethical motivation.

Analogical reasoning may introduce a communicative mode marked by coevalness among *co-readers* of the text as well. It makes more sense to discuss moral and ethical challenges, as well as personal reflections and experiences, if they appear to be relevant in the "here" and "now." When the participants engage in discussions on these matters, be it the question of why Hagar/Hajar abandons Ishmael in the desert or the possible problems in interpreting the prescriptive texts (Sura 4:34 and 1 Timothy 2:8-15), making meaning in the group becomes fluid in the sense that the meaning is not fixed before-

hand. Rather, the discussions themselves construct the meaning when the participants reflect as they speak and listen.

Stable positions as readers and interpreters of canonical texts may thus create space for fluidity in the interpretations if the stable positions are of a kind where the readers assume responsibility, grounded in the view that there is a distance between the interpreter and the text where subjectivity has room to unfold. Generally, the participants in this study argue for their right to take such a position on the basis of their conception of the Islamic or Christian tradition. The Christian participants argue with their understanding of Christian freedom, and the Muslim participants with their trust in the Koran. Behind both is an understanding of themselves as believers called to be responsible and a freedom as well as an obligation to fulfill a subjective role in taking on agency as an interpreter. Taking on the responsibility as an interpreter entails taking on an *agency*. To what extent is this a shared agency?

*Different Hermeneutical Strategies Used  
in the Narrative and the Prescriptive Texts?*

The Hagar/Hajar narratives stimulate the readers to share their own narratives, as well as elaborating on historical and textual knowledge about the texts—particularly for the Muslim readers who have significant pre-knowledge about the Hajar narrative. The detailed discussions on Hagar/Hajar's actions and motivations and on Abraham/Ibrahim's role concerning her situation in the desert with Ishmael are rather heated, and the figure of Hagar/Hajar becomes disputed. Analogical reasoning and diasporic imagination dominates the discussions. Ethical and moral engagement with the texts does occur, but mostly in connection with themes derived from the texts rather than the texts themselves: The ethical dilemmas concern slavery, sex trafficking, polygamy, care for single mothers, and refugees. The Christian readers see the narratives as an example of how difficult life was for women at the time of the text, and some connect the challenges in the text directly to the life of women today in contexts other than the Norwegian. The narratives generate a multitude of questions, reactions, and positions. They also generate a testimony from one of the readers who had per-

formed *sa'y* on how she feels close to God through following in Hajar's footsteps.

The prescriptive texts of 1 Timothy 2:8-15 and Sura 4:34 call almost exclusively on the readers' ethical and moral engagement and interpretation. The challenges regarding women's situation regarding status and position in the family, in the congregation, in working life, and in the public sphere is addressed. The gender model represented in both texts in which men are accorded a higher rank than women, together with the question of violence against wives by their husbands, fills most of the discussion time, however. The discussions are marked by a great degree of shared focus and agreement and are of a shared understanding of contextual challenges. This is different from the interpretative process on the Hagar/Hajar narratives. Regardless of religious or cultural background, the women in the group agree that domestic violence is unacceptable, that men cannot use these texts to rule over women in the name of God, and that knowledge about this is sorely needed—particularly when it concerns Muslims. But it is not only more knowledge among the Muslims themselves that is addressed as crucial, more knowledge about Islam and Muslims among non-Muslims is seen as equally crucial.

*Religious Differences and How They Are Interpreted:  
Constitutive or Challenging?*

Compared to the two models I suggested earlier, evaluating the function of religious *difference* in the group and investigating if and how other human differences are included in the reflections could shed light on what kind of dialogue is performed.

During the group process religious differences are regarded as both *constitutive* and *challenging* (cf. the titles of the two models). In the discussions on the Hagar/Hajar narratives as well as in the first, more general discussion on the Bible and the Koran, religious differences are highlighted by some of the Christian participants. The Muslim participants show that their view of the narratives is different from the Christian participants' more critical approach to the figures of Abraham/ Ibrahim and Hagar/Hajar—as well as to the narratives themselves. Differences are usually interpreted as constitutive: important to identify and significant to claim. Even some of the attempts to

suggest a common ground for the two traditions (primarily by the Muslim participants) are interpreted within the framework of difference: to minimize the importance of difference was articulated as an unwanted transgression for one of the Christian participants.

The general approach to differences changed in the process of interpreting the prescriptive texts. Confronted with these texts, the challenges perceived by the participants seemed to *force* them into viewing differences in another way. It became obvious that contextual and historical knowledge about the texts was required, and the participants (in particular the Christian participants) began to view the religious differences as a possible *resource* for acquiring this knowledge. This comes closer to viewing difference as a (positive) challenge, as in the second model.

In discussing the prescriptive texts, shared critical views on the subjugation of women in the Christian and Islamic traditions also shifted the focus of the group to be more concerned with *contextual* challenges. Common contextual challenges, identified through the discussions on the texts, overruled the religious differences. The differences were thus transposed from religious ones to contextual ones, and the discussion turned into trying to situate the contexts and negotiate what to view as significant contexts. Gradually, the geographical perspective of the group also became more inclusive through the references to contexts other than Norway, where women face greater difficulties because of the prescriptive texts. This process of enlarging the geographical scope started in the Hagar/Hajar discussions but did not become a shared subject at that stage. The enlarged perspective motivates the participants (in particular the Christian participants) to relate to the biblical texts anew because of the reception of the text in other contemporary *contexts*. This happens as an act of solidarity and is not motivated by the texts themselves.

Both models of dialogue, with respect to how differences are viewed, are thus represented in the group's process. The texts seem to inspire a certain change from seeing religious differences as constitutive to seeing them as a challenge, as a source for knowledge, a possibility to enlarge the scope of what

should be the significant context. But this shift may also be due to a process in the group, regardless of the texts.

The group process may well be called a transreligious dialogue. Comments about the communicative process itself show awareness, self-reflection, and promote flexibility in the group. How one can communicate in a respectful manner and still be able to speak one's mind is one of the issues addressed in these meta-reflections. This is an important matter to consider in most dialogues so as to prevent a transreligious encounter from turning into either endless mutual confrontations without substantial communicative exchange or a conversation containing nothing but polite phrases—also without substantial communicative exchange. When a self-reflecting perspective is included in a dialogue, it may be possible to avoid both pitfalls.

Self-reflection and even self-critique on behalf of one's own religious or *cultural* tradition seem to fertilize the making of meaning of both texts and contexts. Critique may function in exactly the opposite way if criticism is directed only toward representatives of the other (religion or culture), since such criticism usually encourages defense strategies. In the latter case, differences may become borders, but, in the former, the religious or cultural tradition represented is destabilized through self-reflection and may thus become more open for interpretation, challenges, and interaction.

The concept of *diasporic imagination* (Kwok) and Bal's suggestion regarding the "bold use of anachronisms" as discussed in chapter 2 destabilize the borders between "here" and "there" (Kwok), and "then" and "now" (Bal). This destabilizing may influence the concept of religious traditions as well, suggesting that the interpretation of canonical scriptures is dynamic, rather than static, and that the cultural representation of a religious tradition is fluid rather than fixed. One could ask if these hermeneutical tools would be regarded as valid in the dialogue model where religious differences are seen as constitutive (only).

The Muslim participants present their beliefs and their view of the Koran as a resource for the believers and at the same time underline the common values between different religious traditions (the "peoples of the book"). This might be interpreted as fitting well with a model of dialogue that comes close to the practice of Scriptural Reasoning ("Religious differ-

ence as constitutive"). But the challenge the Muslim participants identify as threats to Muslim women's right to self-determination or to Islam as a religious tradition is not secularism. Rather, the Muslim participants identify the challenges either found *within* the Islamic tradition (lack of knowledge, both historical and contextual), or they identify the threats as *political*. The political challenge they address is related to a lack of social and political stability and democratic rights in some Muslim majority countries and to the lack of access to education for all. They state that these issues have a direct influence on Muslims' possibilities of interpreting the Islamic tradition (including the Koran) in a way that secures women's rights. But they also challenge, although less directly, the Western politicized discourses on Islam where this particular tradition is viewed as inferior (to the Western culture and the Christian tradition) by supporting the subjugation of women. This also poses a threat to the freedom of interpreting and reinterpreting the Koran and *sharia* because Muslims have to use their energy and focus simply on defending their right to be Muslims.

The Christian participants, in particular those with a Norwegian background, defend what they conceive to be their Christian freedom and the concept of gender equality as interpreted in Norwegian society. For the most part, they place the challenges to women's rights in the Christian tradition in the *past*. Only late in the process do they reflect on challenges in the present—although outside of their primary religious and cultural context. In their (perceived) lack of present challenges regarding gender justice in Norwegian society, they focus instead on the challenges discussed by their Muslim co-participants.

Whenever some of the participants try to *frame* the differences between the Christian and Islamic traditions (it is usually some of the Christian participants who try to do this), the discussions following these attempts show that the question of what the differences between the two traditions are is a disputed issue itself (at least in this group). This suggests that framing and articulating religious differences between these two traditions and their implications is a complicated issue if one intends to describe the difference(s) in a way accepted by all parties involved. This may be useful to bear in mind when relating to differences in a transreligious dialogue: the power of

definition regarding differences should ideally be shared (to fulfill the search for equality in a dialogue), and differences could be regarded differently from various positions. Achieving *agreement* at a religious or cultural level was not presented as an aim for any of the participants. It was explicitly expressed by some of the participants that religious and cultural differences were expected and accepted, and this seemed to be the case for the most part—although at times the differences were discussed intensely. To be able to engage in such a discussion through participation in the project may have been a motivation in itself for some of the participants. A moral consensus on aiming at improving the situation of women oppressed by religious or cultural traditions was present in the group from the beginning.

#### *A Dialogically Situated Feminist Hermeneutics*

The fact that the participants agreed on the moral issue of gender justice does not necessarily imply that they understand *feminism* in the same way. The participants share the belief that their respective religious traditions originally aimed at gender justice but have been corrupted by patriarchal cultural influences and/or by men who have been given interpretative authority and use it to subjugate women. This evaluation of the relation between their religion and patriarchy enables them to keep their religious beliefs and their feminist stance together. Some (Christian and Muslim) participants use their religious tradition directly to argue for feminism.

The participants were divided along cultural rather than religious lines in addressing the need for feminist-oriented change in the contexts to which they relate. The Norwegian Christian participants express their satisfaction openly about the status of women in their faith community (The Church of Norway) and in Norwegian society in general. They do not criticize their faith community or Norwegian society in this respect but hold them up as ideals. Some critical remarks about men's lack of engagement in practical family life at the end of the study is the only crack in the Norwegian Christians' portrayal of their immediate religious and cultural surroundings' achievements regarding gender equality. Their feminist criticism is directed toward the canonical texts, the past, and other cultural and/or religious traditions.