WHEN BELIEVERS MEET

A study guide on interreligious dialogue

CHURCH OF NORWAY
Council on Ecumenical and International Relations

WHEN BELIEVERS MEET

A STUDY GUIDE ON INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Theological Commission
Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International Relations

"Where have you come from, and where are you going?"

By Rev. Dr. Olav Fykse Tveit, General Secretary, Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International Relations

There is nothing new about believers meeting believers, nor believers meeting people who believe differently. In our own tradition, we can find many examples of such encounters. I think that one of the earliest and best examples is in Genesis 16:8. When the angel of the Lord meets Abraham's slave-girl Hagar in the desert, he asks her, "Hagar, where have you come from and where are you going?"

The question to Hagar and the interest that the angel shows are good examples of how we can meet those of other faiths in a positive way, openly and honestly. The angel is interested in hearing Hagar's life history – not just simple words about what she feels, but words that reveal who she is. That makes the conversation more demanding, but at the same time more informative, more exciting and full of possibilities.

When Believers Meet is a study guide written by the Theological Commission of the Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International Relations. The Commission has chosen to approach interreligious dialogue with an open mind, instead of jumping to dogmatic and unequivocal conclusions. With concrete examples as a starting point, readers are invited to reflect on what meeting people with different beliefs can mean for their own and the others' theology and praxis. Using this approach, the Commission also indicates which direction interreligious activity in the Church of Norway can take.

Interreligious dialogue makes us reflect on our own faith and tradition. When we are subject to impulses from outside and our position as a religious majority is challenged, it can lead to humility, soul-searching and new insights. In this way, interreligious dialogue can also provide us with an opportunity to learn more about our own faith and tradition. Meeting people who are confident and well-founded in their faith can increase our own awareness of what we hold to be true and significant.

I hope that this study guide can give us the self-confidence to meet people of other faiths with Hagar's words, "You-Are-the-God-Who-Sees" – “Have I also here seen Him who sees me?”

Oslo, September 2007
Olav Fykse Tveit

Contents

Foreword

In 1987 the Theological Commission, under the auspices of the Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International Relations, began a comprehensive examination of the relationship of Christianity to other religions. The result was the book *Tro møter tro* (Faith meets faith), published by Verbum press in 1990. This is the most thorough treatment of the theme from official sources in the Church of Norway.

Much has changed since 1990. The presence of other religions in Norwegian society has expanded and the importance of religion in international politics has increased considerably. There are therefore good reasons for Norwegian church bodies to take a new look at the issues surrounding the theology of religion, and it is natural that experiences from the past years should be the starting point for theological reflection.

This study guide is a result of a process within the Theological Commission. Three main chapters consider three central issues: mixed marriages, prayer and religious symbols. Each chapter begins with a characteristic story and ends with questions for further reflection and discussion. On the basis of the story, light is shed on both practical and theological issues that are worth thinking about. The intention is that discussion of specific cases can throw light on more general issues. An introductory chapter considers basic questions as to why and how religions meet. It emphasises the need to be aware of the relationship between majority and minority in a Norwegian context, and of the position of power that the Church of Norway often has. A final chapter gathers up the threads in a general discussion of how the church can meet the theological challenges presented by the encounter between Christianity and other religions.

In Norwegian society today, religion is a very complex phenomenon. In working on *When Believers Meet*, the main focus has been on encounters between Christians and representatives of the other so-called world religions. Religion in Norway also includes various new age movements, folk religion and mixtures of religious ideas taken from different traditions. These phenomena also need to be examined theologically, but that task is outside the scope of this study.

The study guide is theological in the sense that it is based on the Bible and on Christian tradition, and seeks to contribute to further reflection on the church's terms. It is intended for readers who are active in the Church of Norway, but it is to be hoped that Christians of other traditions in other parts of the world also will be inspired by some of the arguments.

In November 2006 the General Synod adopted *Guidance for Religion Encounter*. Work on the guidance and *When Believers Meet* has taken place for the most part concurrently. This study guide will complement and present the reasoning behind the guidance. And the study guide should be discussed with the guidance in mind.

Most of the work on *When Believers Meet* has been done by a working party consisting of members of the Theological Commission: Prof. Bård Mæland, Prof. Paul Leer-

Salvesen and Ass. Prof. Gerd Marie Ådna. Vebjørn L. Horsfjord at the secretariat for the Council on Ecumenical and International Relations has acted partly as secretary and partly as member of the group. The leader of the Theological Commission, Prof. Trond Skard Dokka, has also contributed to some of the text. Sven Thore Kloster from the Council's secretariat has been the secretary in the final phase of the work. Ivan Chetwynd has translated the document to English.

Chapter 1
Introduction

In many parts of the world, religion is of increasing significance and is often an important part of a person's identity. Christianity, especially Pentecostalism, is expanding in Latin-America, Africa and Asia. The Orthodox churches in the former Communist countries of Eastern Europe have been given a new lease of life. Islam is growing in many places, and Hinduism and Buddhism are both experiencing a renaissance. Many Norwegians feel that it is easier to talk about religion today than it was a generation ago.

One consequence of the increased attention to religion in our part of the world is that religious labels are used more than they were before. Turkish immigrants in Germany, for example, have changed from being "guest workers", via "aliens" and "Turks" to "Muslims". In Norway, a Muslim woman with a Pakistani background will find that while she 15 years ago was regarded first and foremost as a "Pakistani", she is today regarded first and foremost as a "Muslim". Sometimes she will have changed her way of introducing herself correspondingly. We cannot always avoid using labels, but which labels we become used to using for ourselves, can subconsciously form the expectations with which we meet other people.

Immigration and increased contact across national boundaries have changed the religious landscape in Norway. Religions that once were regarded as exotic, are not so exotic any more. They have become attached to names and faces, to neighbours, colleagues and members of the family. In some local communities this is highly visible, but even in places where the number of immigrants is low, we are now forced to take account of the fact that Norway is a multireligious society. In addition, the multireligious element is not restricted to immigrant communities, but in an increasing degree includes "ethnic" Norwegians.

This situation makes new practical and theological demands on the Church of Norway. Almost 83 percent of the population are members of the Church of Norway. It is a constant challenge for a national church to be as inclusive as possible and to treat all who are baptised – the majority in almost all local communities – as fully qualified members. At the same time, the church must respect those who adhere to other faiths and who do not wish to be included in the church's fellowship. This makes demands as to how the church should act both locally and nationally. Although the church must not act as though everyone in Norway is a member, we can assert without hesitation that the church is *concerned* about everyone. And we must then work out what that means in praxis.

Sometimes we are forced to co-operate with other faith communities, in the event of catastrophes and crises, or when special events are celebrated in families where more than one religion is represented. But it can be just as important to establish good and respectful relationships to other religions in periods where the need is not so acute. In many places it can be appropriate for a local church to take the initiative for making contact or to respond favourably if others take the initiative.

The winter of 2006 demonstrated how challenging the encounter between religions can be and how valuable it is to have trusting relations between believers. The conflict after the publication of the controversial cartoons of the prophet Mohammed showed that religion can spark off powerful processes and that it can be difficult to understand other people's thoughts and feelings. The violent reactions in many parts of the world frightened many. Feelings ran high in Norway too, but we saw how fifteen years of contact between Muslim and Christian leaders had prepared the ground for balanced and fruitful talks, even when the conflict raged at its worst. For those who took part in the talks, it was clear that the conflict was not about two religions opposing each other.

The most important reason that people of different faiths must talk together and work together is that we share the same planet and must learn to live together on it. War and violence destroy the basis of existence for many people. Over-consumption in some parts of the world and the unfair distribution of resources inhibit the development of people in other parts of the world, while destruction of the environment has unforseeable consequences. The situation is so precarious that no-one can afford to provoke conflicts. We must together seek solutions that can secure a safe environment for present and future generations, and ensure that the earth's resources can be distributed fairly.

The practical challenges also raise theological questions: What do we think of those who have a different faith – and what is a different faith? Do we believe in the same God? What does the church teach about salvation for those who have another faith? And what is truth? These questions have been asked in the church through the centuries. But their significance is always new. The way we answer is formed by the specific situation we are in, and as we have already pointed out, the religious context in our society is changing rapidly. Even though this document does not give clear and unambiguous answers to these questions, they are nevertheless just below the surface when we begin to reflect theologically about concrete situations in Norway at the beginning of the third millennium.

When believers meet

When religions meet, we never encounter religion as an abstract reality. We always meet other religions in a concrete form: an object, a room, a text or another person. The most challenging – and often the most stimulating – encounters are when we stand face to face with someone who has another faith, when believers meet believers.

People are different, both Christian people and non-Christian people. We must therefore be on our guard, not to imagine that religion is something that can be placed under a microscope and described precisely and objectively in all its details. The encounter between Islam and Christianity is not something that we can make a universal statement about. It is rather something that happens, all the time and in many places. Each time a believer meets another believer, the meeting turns out to be slightly different. We must

therefore be careful about generalising and laying down absolute rules as to what we can and cannot say or do.

The variety of people and religions makes dialogue both difficult and necessary. But in spite of the differences we all have something in common: all human beings long to have their basic needs fulfilled: food, security, health and a community to belong to. This means that it is possible to establish relationships even though the differences are great.

Establishing a relationship to another person always makes us vulnerable. We take the risk of letting go of some of our security and letting ourselves be influenced in ways that we cannot predict. The encounter with other religions is somewhat similar to the situation the first Christians experienced when they discussed what kinds of meat they could eat. Meat that was served could have come from animals sacrificed in pagan rites. Could the Christians thus unintentionally come to worship pagan gods when they were together with persons of another faith? To this Saint Paul replied, "For us there is… one Lord, Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 8:6). The Christian enjoys great liberty, but liberty must be exercised with responsibility. "All things are lawful', but not all things are beneficial" (1 Corinthians 10:23).

We cannot assume that all encounters with other religions will be beneficial, but there is no reason to allow fear of putting a foot wrong to make us avoid meeting others. By taking the chance of being open towards people of other faiths, we can reap many benefits. Our knowledge and understanding of other people can increase. Our own faith will often be enriched by getting to know other people's religious experiences and reflections. Perhaps we can even find that God himself meets us through other people who do not share our faith.

Power and powerlessness

In all relationships between human beings there is an element of power. Sometimes it is quite clear where the power lies, at other times it can be difficult to understand the balance of power in a relationship. In itself it is not wrong if power is shared unequally. This is often unavoidable. The inequality will seldom disappear, even though both parties do their best to ensure that the imbalance does not have any practical consequences. This makes it necessary to reflect – also theologically – upon the balance of power in interreligious relationships.

When two believers meet, one will often represent a majority and the other a minority. In Norway, representatives of the Church of Norway will always represent the majority religion. In addition to a long history as the religion of the majority of the population, the Church of Norway has also enjoyed many privileges that have been denied to other religious communities. Even so, some members of the Church of Norway will also feel that they are a minority. Some Christians feel that the values and principles that they regard as important are being challenged by attitudes in the wider society, that is to say,

by the majority. But this experience will be even stronger for almost all representatives of other religions in Norway.

Power is not just a matter of numbers. It is also a matter of who belongs to the home team and who is playing away from home. In Norway, the Norwegian language, Norwegian social customs and the wider Norwegian frame of reference will give Christians, especially members of the Church of Norway, a sense of belonging to the cultural and linguistic home team. This should have the practical consequence, that when Norwegian Christians come together with others, they do whatever they can to ensure equal participation by all.

This imbalance of power also affects theological reflection. The first Christians belonged to a tiny and often persecuted minority. The New Testament writings emerged from this background. The situation today is totally different. A responsible interpretation of the Bible and the traditions of the church presuppose that we take account of changes in this area. Negative statements about other religions will not sound the same when they come from a persecuted minority and are directed against the persecutor's religion, as they do when they come from a majority that enjoys historical privileges.

Our language also contains an element of power. Linguistic power is exercised when, for example, oversimplified descriptions and stereotypes are used about people who think and believe differently. All religions have elements in their traditions that can be exploited and misused to legitimise violence and abuse. This represents an abuse of power that should be met with theological arguments.

Fellowship with God and one another

Conditions in a multireligious society require that we meet people of other faiths with openness. But religious dialogue is not something that is forced on the church from without. Our own Christian tradition requires that we meet others with our eyes open for the things we have in common, and with respect for the differences that we cannot discount. Not least belief in God as both One and Three, the doctrine of the Trinity, indicates the direction our theological thinking about other religions should take.

In the Christian tradition we have learned to speak of God in terms of relationships. God is an eternal relationship and interaction of Father, Son and Holy Spirit – Creator, Liberator and Giver of Life. Relationships imply both distance and contact, similarities and differences. Relationship and fellowship are attributes of God himself, and the purpose of humankind is also described as fellowship, fellowship with God and with other people. Fellowship is not the same as unity. Fellowship abolishes distance, but not differences.

The Christian belief in a Trinitarian God is also the starting point for a Christian approach to other people. Differences are not in themselves in conflict with God's will and plan for

the world, and the encounter with other people should not include attempts to eradicate the differences between us.

When we confess our belief in God the Holy Trinity, we are in fact affirming truths that are important for our encounter with other people. Belief in God the Creator tells us that *all* human beings are created in God's image. This is also true of those who do not themselves believe that they are created by a merciful and loving God. All human beings have therefore the same value. We can recognise something of ourselves in another person, even when we are not united in faith, and at the deepest level we can recognise the image of God in the other person.

In chapter 5 we will return to consider what resources the Christian tradition and faith in God the Holy Trinity provide for Christian believers who meet other believers.

Chapter 2
Mixed marriages

Eva is Aslam's girl friend. She has grown up in Grimstad and is a Christian. Aslam has grown up in Oslo and is a Muslim. His parents come from Pakistan. Eva and Aslam have been together for two years and are very fond of each other. They have much in common, many interests that they can share: music, films, political commitment, a long list of values, training and visits to coffee bars. Her family have welcomed Aslam, and his family have been friendly towards Eva. They are now thinking of getting married. They have had serious discussions about this, and the parents on both sides have made their views known.

"My parents want us to get married in church", Eva says.
"And mine want it to be done in the mosque", Aslam says.

A difficult situation! Neither of them wants to hurt their family. They want to find their own solution. But it isn't easy to find a solution that suits both a Christian girl from Western Norway and a Muslim boy from Oslo. They have many influential advisers who have strong opinions as to what they should do. Should the children be brought up as Christians or Muslims? Should they be baptised? Must Eva adopt the gender roles that apply in Aslam's family, or Aslam those that apply in Eva's? Can Aslam continue to go to the mosque after they are married and Eva continue to go to church? Must both of them tone down their religious convictions in order to preserve their relationship? Must Eva acknowledge that Aslam has the final say in important family affairs because he is a man?

What advice should The Church of Norway give her? Should she for example raise the question of divorce before she marries? Should she try to persuade Aslam and his family to promise to treat her as a free, equal and independent woman? Can she demand in advance that the children they may have should be brought up in her faith and not his? And how should she react to family members and friends who have strong opinions on these questions, and who sometimes reveal their lack of knowledge of or prejudice towards the Muslim community?

When believers fall in love

One of the greatest challenges that contact between religions provides is when two people of different religions develop a sexual relationship. This often occurs in a pluralistic society: a Christian moves in with a humanist or marries a Sikh or a Muslim. A

consequence of a constantly more multireligious society is that religious boundaries are crossed in connection with marriage and cohabitation.

"Mixed marriages" is the traditional term. For Christians, the theme is as old as the history of the church. In the Bible we can read how Christians had to deal with situations where married couples had different faiths. Paul argues sensibly and practically, that it was fully possible to continue in a marriage, even though one partner was a Christian and the other a pagan (1 Corinthians 7:12ff). The problem was probably more sensitive later in church history, not least in relations with Judaism and later with Islam. Orthodox Jews have always required that Jews should find marriage partners who share their faith. In Islam, it is usually accepted that a man can marry a Jew or a Christian, but the children must be brought up as Muslims, and non-Muslim women have usually converted to Islam when they have married a Muslim. Today the situation is more varied, both in the case of marriages between Christian and Jews and between Christians and Muslims.

The Christian church has experienced its own internal problems concerning "mixed marriages". These arise especially in connection with marriages between Catholics and Protestants and Protestants and Orthodox. Right up until recent years it has been controversial in some cultures for a Catholic and a Protestant to marry, for example in Northern Ireland or in some French, German and American communities. Some of the problems are cultural and are a matter of how families bring up children and arrange catechesis, baptism and worship. Other questions concern different theological and ethical views of the nature of marriage. In the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, marriage is a sacrament and therefore cannot be dissolved. In the Protestant, and especially the Lutheran, tradition, marriage is regarded as a secular arrangement. These disagreements have consequences both for the conception of what constitutes a valid marriage and for questions of divorce and remarriage.

Gender and freedom of religion

One dilemma concerns the balance between a religious organisation's right to order its own internal affairs on the one hand, and Norwegian citizens' right and duty to follow the norms laid down in Norwegian law on the other. There are several areas where conflicts can occur, not only between different religious views of life but also between the values found in religious communities and values in the wider, secular Norwegian society.

The principle of freedom of religion is firmly entrenched in the Norwegian constitution. Relations between the genders are not mentioned in the constitution, but in the Norwegian Gender Equality Act and in the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which Norway has ratified without reservation. The Gender Equality Act allows exemption for internal customs within religious communities. This has been interpreted to mean that the authorities do not enforce demands that women should have equal access to appointments and leading positions within religious communities. But it is otherwise forbidden to introduce practices that discriminate against women under the cover of freedom of religion.

Minorities and social norms

In 2003, a change in the Norwegian Marriage Act led to confrontation with a number of religious communities. The original law that was passed in Parliament made it a condition for marriage, that both parties should sign a declaration acknowledging the right of both of them to obtain divorce. The proposal met with sharp protests from several religious leaders, including in the Roman Catholic Church, which traditionally does not accept divorce, because marriage is regarded as a sacrament. The law has subsequently been amended, but this illustrates one of the many dilemmas raised by sexual relations and family law in a pluralistic society. The mutual right of men and women to divorce is regarded as an important principle in Norwegian society, and this right is also acknowledged by Lutheran theologians and ethicists. But the world's largest Christian church, the Roman Catholic Church, does not acknowledge it.

Most religious communities in Norway belong to world-wide organisations or networks. A Roman Catholic parish in Norway cannot change its view of marriage or its practice of divorce in accordance with its own convictions and still remain part of the Roman Catholic Church. Norwegian Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims or members of the Mosaic Religious Community are in a similar situation. This means that religious encounters at the personal level are many-faceted. Religiously active persons in Norway are Norwegians, but they also represent traditions and organisations in the world-wide community.

A Lutheran view of marriage

In the Lutheran tradition, marriage is not regarded as a sacrament, but as a worldly estate. "Worldly" does not mean that marriage has nothing to do with God, because the world belongs to God. Marriage is an estate where one is called by God to live in a good and fruitful sexual relationship.

Martin Luther wrote several tracts on marriage. He argued that married life is not inferior to the celibacy of monks, nuns and priests. On the contrary, marriage is to be understood as a vocation from God on the same level as other vocations for life in the world. On this basis he argued that priests also should be allowed to marry, and he was very critical of the tradition in the church which praised asceticism and celibacy at the expense of sexuality and family life. Martin Luther also argued against regarding marriage as a sacrament. It was its status as a sacrament that determined that marriage should be regulated by canon law. According to Luther, marriage should belong to the earthly kingdom, just like other social institutions that provide good and stable conditions for human beings to live together.

These principles have subsequently been essential features of the Lutheran churches' understanding of marriage. Many related questions have been debated in these churches – for example divorce and remarriage, and in recent years cohabitation and homosexual partnerships. But there has been widespread agreement in the Lutheran tradition on the basic principle that marriage is a worldly estate, not a distinctively religious institution. Marriage is a lasting, binding and stable framework for the best possible family life for two adult persons and the children they may have.

This understanding of marriage has consequences for Lutheran views on mixed marriages. A Lutheran church will for example accept without question any publicly concluded marriage as valid. A couple can enter into matrimony at a registry office or in a church, by a Catholic or Orthodox, Jewish or Muslim ceremony. The Lutheran view is that the marriage is equally valid, precisely because marriage is first and foremost a worldly ordinance. A Lutheran church has therefore no problems with where a marriage takes place, and the Church of Norway does not demand or strongly recommend that its members marry in their own church.

But this does not mean that the Church of Norway is unaware of the problems that arise in mixed relationships and marriages. It can be painful for two persons not to be able to share a so important part of their lives as their religious faith and practice. This applies especially in cases where the divergence is great, not only in theology and ways of thinking, but also in religious customs. This situation can arise, for example, when an active Christian and an active Muslim both want their faith to affect the rhythm of their lives and their religious observances. The problem becomes even more acute if they have children and must make up their minds about baptism, circumcision and religious education.

These considerations mean that the Church of Norway has no *theological* objections to mixed marriages: Christians can marry whoever they want, wherever they want. But Lutheran ethics makes demands on the content of the marriage: *a marriage must create the best possible conditions for those who live in it!* The advice of the church will therefore be that the couple demand respect from each other and do all that they can to further equal status and rights for both of them. In practice this means that the partners in a mixed marriage are advised to make clear and binding agreements as to how they will organise their religious life. The agreement should apply both for the adults themselves and for children they may have, and it should not demand that either of them compromise their religious integrity.

Questions for further discussion and reflection:

The text emphasises that Lutheran ethics does not involve restrictions as to whom one may marry, but makes demands on the content of the marriage – that it should take care of both partners and give them space to develop. What attitudes are necessary in order to create this space? What attitudes do you think would be a threat to it?

In a mixed marriage – as in all marriages – the partners must compromise in order to make the marriage work. In what ways is it probably necessary to compromise more in a mixed marriage than in one that is not mixed? What are the limits for compromise?

If a couple have children, it is natural that they decide the children's religious adherence. What considerations should be taken into account? How can a child be given the opportunity to be introduced to both religions at the same time? In what degree can a child be brought up to adhere equally to two different religions with different values? If, through being brought up primarily within one religion, a child becomes more attached to one of the parents, what consequences does this have for the other parent?

If a child of a mixed marriage is baptised, how should one understand his or her relationship to other Christians? What consequences do you think this will have for his or her religious education?

Chapter 3
Praying together

Muhammad Akhbar is leader of the Religious Council in Stordal, a neighbourhood in one of the larger towns in Norway. The Religious Council consists of representatives of the Church of Norway, three other Christian denominations, two Muslim organisations, a Buddhist society and a representative for the Sikhs. There has been a good deal of unrest in Stordal lately. The police often come and arrest youths who have committed criminal offences after dark. Everyone has the feeling that Stordal is in the process of changing its character for the worse. People have stopped moving into the area, and children are advised to stay indoors in the evenings.

Muhammad Akhbar wants to call in the Religious Council in order to discuss whether religious believers in the neighbourhood can co-operate in doing something about the situation. As a member of Stordal Parish Council, Sigurd is invited to the meeting. There is a fruitful discussion about various measures that could be taken to stop the wave of violence in the neighbourhood. Those who are present feel that they are participating in more effective measures than they could have taken in their individual organisations, measures that the local authority would not have had the resources to fund. Akhbar rounds off the meeting and asks whether they should meet again. A new date is agreed upon.
"Perhaps we also should gather together and pray about the problems that we are facing", he says.
"Perhaps you, Sigurd, could suggest a plan for such a gathering, if you feel comfortable with the idea?"
"I can think about it", Sigurd replies, well knowing that this will be an issue at the next meeting of the Parish Council.
True enough. The minister, Trude, is not very keen on the plan. "You didn't need to bring this up at the Parish Council. You know how we feel about mixing religions."
"Yes, I know", Sigurd replies. "But this is a new situation, isn't it?"
"No. Why should it be? Jesus sent us to baptise and teach, not to pretend we all pray to the same God", Trude says.
"But must we pray to the same God in order to pray together?" Sigurd asks. "Isn't it enough that we feel a need to come together in a difficult situation? It's not as though I've become a Muslim because of this!"
"All right, I can accept all that. I just don't think that taking part in that kind of gathering is something that should be a priority for the parish. If necessary we can meet to talk about what's been happening recently, but our vocation here in Stordal is to spread our faith in Jesus to those who don't know him yet."

New situation – new challenges

This example is fictitious, but probably not far from what Christians can experience in parts of Norway where religious plurality is conspicuous and where the Church of Norway is not in the majority as it is in other parts of the country. The encounter between religions can be a personal meeting over the garden fence, at a PTA meeting at school, at a training studio, at work, in a religious studies class or at morning assembly at the kindergarten. The points of contact draw nearer, and we have to decide where we will draw the line when we experience close encounters, physical, mental and spiritual. This problem was not unknown in biblical times – for example, Jesus' encounter with Samaritans, or Paul's encounter with Roman religion. And our own Christian tradition has deep roots in another religion: Judaism.

The example from Stordal describes a form of human and spiritual contact that many Christians would find very challenging. Of course you can co-operate to create a better neighbourhood for children and young people – but to pray together…? And if you don't do so, have you proved yourself to be a bad neighbour in Stordal? That praying together can be problematic is probably because prayer is a matter of intimacy with the object of our prayers (God). And if you don't believe that you are praying to the same person/entity, then praying together becomes difficult.

On the other hand, prayer will often be a powerful way of expressing the everyday experiences that we share with all other human beings, regardless of religion. In a family where one partner is Christian and the other belongs to another religion, the problem can become acute. Is it possible, for example, to use one of the rooms in the home as a prayer room for the whole family? In what follows, this kind of "bedside situation" and the example from Stordal will be used as examples to illustrate different attitudes to prayer across religious boundaries.

A world in grief

After the tsunami catastrophe on Boxing Day 2004, a joint, inclusive ceremony was held in Oslo Town Hall (16.01.05), with the title "A World in Grief". Speeches were held by members of the Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities, which includes most such communities in Norway. In addition there were readings, prayers and songs from the various traditions. The Church of Norway contributed with the children's hymn "I fold my tiny hands in prayer" (*Jeg folder mine hender små*) by the popular Norwegian author of children's books Torbjørn Egner. Jews and Muslims contributed with readings from the Talmud and the Koran – many of which were familiar also for Christians. Other representatives read texts that were more or less incomprehensible for persons brought up in the Christian faith. But how should we react to this kind of ceremony? Is it acceptable to participate side by side, read from one another's holy books and say prayers from different traditions? Or is this going too far in mixing religions?

Multireligious prayer and interreligious prayer

It can be useful to distinguish between this situation and the situation described at the beginning of the chapter. In Stordal the plan was to hold a prayer meeting where a group of friendly people would gather around a common spiritual reality (God). In Oslo Town Hall each representative was given a short space of time in which to present an item from his or her tradition.

We can call the ceremony in Oslo Town Hall *multireligious prayer* (people praying side by side), while the prayer meeting in Stordal can be called *interreligious prayer* (people united in prayer). The advantage of multireligious prayer is that it respects the integrity of each individual who prays, or of the tradition that is making a contribution. The weakness is that participants hardly meet across the religious boundaries that divide them.

The opposite is true of interreligious prayer. Here we draw nearer to those of other faiths. We can listen, learn, see differences and even become aware of new aspects of our own faith. At the same time, the danger is that in meeting others, we may tone down our own convictions, and in the worst case even give up basic elements in our Christian faith because we feel we have so much in common with friends from other religious traditions. But it must be said that meetings that are arranged as a form of multireligious prayer can in fact be experienced as interreligious prayer. In the final analysis, it is only the person who prays who can say what she or he has taken part in.

Multireligious prayer – integrity and reticence

It is possible to imagine various occasions where someone wants to gather believers from different religions for multireligious prayer. It could be an open invitation in connection with everyday needs. On other occasions people can feel a need to come together for prayer and spiritual fellowship when a crisis occurs, whether it is local, national or international. In such situations multireligious prayer will be a possibility, but two important points should be taken into consideration:

One is concerned with *integrity*. It is important that we take part as the people we are: as Christian believers. The other concerns *reticence* about trying to express universal religious sentiments in words. We can be tempted to construct texts that can serve as a common spiritual platform. Such platforms can easily become a kind of lowest common denominator: no-one really feels comfortable with them or bound by them. If this happens, we are crossing the border to interreligious prayer.

Christian faith and interreligious prayer

It is a controversial question, whether Christians can take part in a close-knit interreligious prayer fellowship with a good conscience. Theologians have given different

answers, and we can perhaps say that this can be a risky undertaking for Christians. Is interreligious prayer a form of faithlessness towards God, or is it a case where persons with a secure faith take risks out of love for those who do not share that faith?

Some would say that a Christian should not take part in this kind of prayer, quite simply because it is not possible to be united in the prayers. Those who pray will be praying to different beings, and any fellowship will thus just be a form of make-believe. What has for example the Christian Holy Trinity in common with the Allah of Islam? Or what has Jesus in common with Buddhism's emptiness? Fundamentally, we come from different traditions, and joint prayer cannot paper over that division. Some will also believe that people of other faiths represent evil spiritual powers or idolatry, even though there is only one God and Creator (see Paul's discussions in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10). As a result, it is essential for Christians to avoid all spiritual fellowship with others. We can discuss religious issues together, they might say, but we must put our faith into practice separately from one another.

Others will claim that we can take part in joint prayer if the prayer itself can be integrated in the greater whole that faith in the Holy Trinity represents. This must apply to prayers that are not part of a liturgical act or rite. In this way, a Christian could take part in reciting Sura 1 (the opening prayer) from the Koran together with Muslims, because there is nothing in the sura that cannot be integrated in an exposition of Christian faith. If Christians and Muslims recite the text together, words such as "merciful" or "compassionate" will produce different echoes in the minds of those who participate. All prayers belong in a particular historical and religious context. A Christian can never use such words without understanding them in the light of faith in the life and death of Jesus Christ. Even though nothing is said about it, this interpretation will always be present for the Christian – but it will not disturb a Muslim's appreciation of the same sura within the context of his faith. Something similar could be said of St Francis of Assisi's prayer. This is a prayer that others among the children of Abraham (and perhaps also others?) will be able to pray together with Christians, on the basis of faith in the One God and Creator. In relation to Jews, the Psalms can be a source of joint prayers, and are an integral part of Christian liturgies also within the Church of Norway.

Yet others will claim that the fact that someone wants to pray at all, is a sign that God the Holy Spirit is at work. It is part of human nature to bend down to the ground and call upon God – or whatever name one uses for the object of prayer. Whether the prayer is "correct" according to Christian teaching is not so important. And if we believe that the Holy Spirit can work outside the church, then joint prayer can be an occasion where we can study the work of the Spirit among people of another faith. Prayer is not only to turn to God with our needs, but also to be silent and open before the face of God. With this approach, it is possible to think that the prayers of others are directed to the Holy Trinity, even though the believers themselves would not have put it like that. Perhaps we can say that even though the prayer does not include all the correct phrases that would identify it as a Christian prayer, the way of addressing that which is greater than human beings, and not least the language of the heart, reveal whether it is a prayer addressed to God.

Even though most Christians would refuse to include interreligious prayer in a ritual or liturgical setting, they would be more willing to take part in such prayer if ritual and liturgy were not involved. Free prayer – for example at a bedside – can be a setting where a person's sighing and longing can be expressed, rather than a setting where theological truths are defined, as the case is in a service of worship. With this approach, we can regard Paul's words about the Spirit coming to our aid in our weakness (Romans 8) as saying this: that prayer at its deepest level is our humble openness to receive that which God has to give us. Perhaps joint prayer can show us that God is "Father of all" (Ephesians 4:6) and "sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45)?

Here are 5 questions that are especially controversial in connection with prayer in an interreligious context.

1. Does joint prayer imply that we believe in the same god?

As Christians, we believe that there is only one God and Father of all (Ephesians 4:6). Jesus has taught us to come to God in prayer as a child turns to a parent (as in the Lord's Prayer). There is therefore none other than God to pray to, and as Christians we know of no other way to God than that which Christ has shown us. Our way is therefore to pray in the name of Jesus. Even though prayer in other names cannot superficially be accepted as prayer in the name of Jesus, it is not given for us human beings to judge the validity of such prayer. And it is therefore theologically problematic simply to reject the prayer of other believers as idolatry, or as unavoidably bringing them into contact with evil spiritual powers. It is important to maintain the distinction between genuine faith in God and deliberate contact with spiritual powers that directly oppose faith in God. This distinction makes room for both freedom of conscience and self-restraint, and is conspicuous in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10.

2. Must we pray in the name of Jesus?

The answer is both yes and no. Some Christians always pray in the name of Jesus, but this does not mean that the name Jesus must always be mentioned. The name Jesus is the person Jesus. Prayers from the Psalms and the Lord's Prayer are examples of prayers that Christians pray without mentioning Jesus by name. But Jesus' name, understood as his person, will always reverberate when these prayers are prayed.

3. Who can we pray for?

Non-Christians often ask Christians to pray for them, either because of illness, because they are afraid of something or because they want their homes blessed. Church workers in public sectors such as the armed forces or prisons, or in health care or educational institutions experience this regularly. The same applies to missionaries serving in cultures where other religions are strong. The normal response will be to pray a Christian prayer

for the person concerned, often combined with pastoral counselling. This is what the person is asking for. Whether one should also take part in a multireligious prayer – as discussed previously – is another question.

4. Public or private prayer?

If I decide that it is not right to take part publicly in a gathering for interreligious prayer, does this hinder me in taking part on a private basis? Is it for example possible for two parents of different religions to take part in interreligious prayer at the bedside of their child, if only in the form of a silent prayer placing the child in the care of the creating Power that is greater than ourselves and bears us day by day? Prayer can be said to be the language of the heart, and as such is deeply personal. In prayer we will experience solidarity with all human beings who bring their lives and their longings with them into their prayers. And the closer our fellowship is, the more difficult it will be not to join together in prayer. Even so, Christian prayer will always take place within a collective framework. When you pray, you pray together with the whole Communion of Saints, both those who are alive today (your Christian brothers and sisters) and those who have gone before. This makes it problematic to accept private prayers in cases where to say the same prayers in public would give the impression of mixing religions in an unacceptable way. But other considerations can make it acceptable to take part in prayers across the religious boundaries, without this having to be in public. And in cases where human need weighs more than the function of prayer as defining our religious affiliation, we will be able to go further than we can in a public, ritual setting.

5. Can I lose my faith if I pray with someone of another faith?

Prayer is not a neutral activity that confirms our relationship to God. Prayer is often a struggle, where we neither understand God nor feel that the will of God is what is best for us. Joint prayer can therefore in a special way involve a spiritual risk. We test the limits of what the Christian faith affirms and permits. This exercise requires that we are firmly rooted in our own faith, and that we preferably also are under the guidance of Christian sisters and brothers. The principle applies, that for the Christian everything is permitted, but not everything is beneficial. It is also appropriate to consider what Paul writes about taking responsibility for those who are weak in faith (Romans 14:1; 1 Corinthians 8 and 10). Even though you feel confident enough to take part in interreligious prayer for your own sake, it will not necessarily strengthen the Christian fellowship. But perhaps your local church will reap benefits through your audacity, in the form of deeper faith, increased love for those of other religions or stronger ties with the local community. For parents, the need to pray together or be silent together in the presence of the One they believe in, can seem right and necessary, even though it cannot wipe away their religious differences. For some, it will even strengthen their awareness of the differences. For a Christian partner who is troubled by the problems involved, it can be a good idea to discuss the matter with a third party.

Questions for further discussion and reflection:

What do you think is the greatest hindrance for praying with adherents of another religion? In what degree is this a hindrance that you can do something about?

Why do some maintain that there are significant differences between interreligious prayer in a public, liturgical setting and at a bedside?

I what contexts do you think it would be natural to take part in multireligious prayer?

How do you think it is possible to formulate prayers in an open and inclusive way?

Chapter 4
Religious and other symbols

We are in Brattstad, on the outskirts of one of Norway's larger towns. A beloved member of the family, Auntie Jane, has died at a ripe old age. Her extended family, 25 in number, includes a Muslim, two humanists and a number of members of the established Church of Norway, some active, some more passive. All of them want to attend the funeral. But it proves not to be a satisfying experience. The locum minister uses many words that don't get across to the family. He did not know Auntie Jane, and he did not grasp the important nuances in the family's appreciation of her: that she was so genuine in everything, genuinely glad and genuinely grumpy, and that she had become the family symbol of caring and healthy Christian common sense.

But the liveliest discussion at the reception after the funeral was about the Muslim Khalid's and the humanist Lisa's mutual annoyance at all the crosses in the church. Nor did they like the large picture in the church hall where the reception was held. They thought that the picture was repulsive, with its combination of paintings of Jesus and the flats at Brattstad. Khalid objected to painting any pictures of Jesus. He thought that Jesus should be spoken of with respect, but not portrayed in pictures. Some of Khalid's Shia Muslim friends have drawings of the young Mohammed on their bedroom walls, but as a Sunni Muslim, Khalid thinks that drawings of Mohammed and Jesus are almost a form of idolatry, and he wants to avoid that at all costs. He thinks that Arabic calligraphy gives the best impression of the dignity and beauty of the Muslim faith. The passive and active Christians in the family were shocked to discover that the picture of Jesus caused so much antagonism. They agreed that it wasn't exactly a masterpiece, but they thought that the church must be allowed to use Christian symbols such as paintings and crosses.

Symbols – necessary and numerous

Crosses and pictures of Jesus have been part of the life of the church from the beginning. In addition, the Christian church has many other symbols. And this is also the case with other religions and life stances. Everyone uses symbols – and interprets other people's use of symbols. This not only applies to religion and life stances: symbols are used in all areas of life. The philosopher Ernst Cassirer regarded this as such an important aspect of being human, that he dubbed human beings "homo symbolicus".

As the above story shows, there are many different kinds of symbols – for example, words, objects, persons and pictures. Symbols can often differ in their status. Some are unpretentious and represent ordinary things, while others have higher status because they represent something holy, and we treat some of them as though they themselves partake in that holiness. And we find time and again that the same symbol is interpreted in different ways, sometimes with contradictory interpretations.

When we live with people who are different from ourselves, and who think or believe differently, we find that the symbols are also different. Sometimes the differences between groups of people are clearest in their use and interpretation of symbols. And it is on this plane that the differences most easily develop into conflicts. The controversy about the Mohammed cartoons is an example – as is our own reaction when the Norwegian flag was burnt. In many places there are conflicts about wearing *hijab* or crosses or stars of David. The examples are numerous, and almost certainly will become more so. Why does the use and interpretation of symbols create such difficulties across cultural and religious borders? If we are to live together in mutual understanding with people who are different from us, it is crucial to think through our attitude to our own and others' use of symbols. To do this we must first find out what a symbol is.

What is a symbol?

The word "symbol" derives from the Greek words *syn*, which means "together", and *bole*, which means "a throw". This is not very helpful to begin with, and the word symbol has been given many and sometimes contradictory meanings. According to everyday usage, a symbol is an object, action, image etc. that has or indicates a meaning other than that which the object, action, image etc has in itself. We can say that when we use a symbol, two things are "thrown together". We could also say that they are stitched together, as in a seam. We can call the two aspects the *symbol* and the *thing symbolised*. A "flag" is a symbol that symbolises a "nation". A "lamb" can be a symbol symbolising "Christ".

Often, when we use the word symbol as in the examples above, we can see that there is no direct connection between the symbol and the thing symbolised. It has often been said that the relationship between them is *arbitrary*. That the election of a pope is symbolised by smoke ascending from a chimney in the Sistine Chapel is arbitrary. The smoke could symbolise something completely different, while the election of the pope could equally well be symbolised by a banner or a fanfare of trumpets. That a symbol means what it does, is because people have agreed that it should be so, it is a matter of *convention*. This kind of convention can be decided on formally and officially, but it seldom happens that way. Symbols receive and change their meaning in the same way as words in a language.

On reflection it is clear that not all cases involve an arbitrary relationship between the symbol and the thing symbolised. Many factors can influence the choice of a symbol. A turbulent sea can hardly be a symbol of peace, nor can a desert be a symbol of fertility. An oasis, on the other hand, can be a natural symbol of both fertility and peace. In these cases we can speak of a *motivated* symbol, since the symbol in itself has qualities that indicate and motivate the meaning of the symbol. The motivation can also have another source. In religious contexts, narratives from the scriptures can often be the motive for the use of a particular symbol. This is the case for example with the lamb as a symbol of Christ. If it was not for the Book of Revelation, it is almost unthinkable that a lamb should be given such a symbolic significance. But neither when the motivation lies in the symbol itself nor when it lies in a religious text, is all arbitrariness eliminated. There is

nothing to say that an oasis *must* be a symbol of fertility or peace. And all Christians are aware that a lamb can be a symbol of other things than Christ.

Symbols and social communities

Nothing is a symbol "in itself". Things become symbols because someone interprets them as symbols and gives them a meaning. Because the interpretation of symbols is dependent on convention, the use of symbols is a social phenomenon. Conventions arise within a community. Many symbols can only be understood by members of the community. Symbols are therefore often a sign of belonging to a community. This is also well known in a religious context. In antiquity the word symbol could mean "pass" or ticket of admission. It was this definition of the word that led the early church to call the creeds symbols. The creeds were used as passwords, dividing those who were within the community from those who were outside. When Christians were persecuted, services had to be held in secret, and they had to be careful about letting people take part. Those who had the correct symbol, the creed, belonged to the church and could come in.

Much has changed since then. We want our services to be open and have a low threshold. But the fact that symbols create or reveal divisions between people still applies. This is because of the way symbols are given their meaning. Someone who comes to a Lutheran service will find many symbols that are not easy to understand and many that are probably easy to misunderstand – about the same number as we would experience in a service in another denomination. What member of the Church of Norway could avoid feeling lost on his or her first visit to a Quaker meeting or a Roman Catholic mass?

That the interpretation of symbols is dependent on convention constantly leads to disagreement among those who use and interpret symbols. The contestants usually belong to different communities with different sets of conventions. In a pluralistic society there are many communities that have very little contact with one another. Each of them has developed its own internal conventions that the other communities neither share nor understand. One community then finds the symbols that another community uses incomprehensible and provocative, which in its turn provokes the first community – and so on.

It is probably impossible to eradicate all the divisive effects that follow the use of symbols. There is no reason to complain about this, because these differences and divisions are not necessarily a bad thing. Even though they seem exclusionary, they can also be alluring and awaken curiosity. To get to know other people is to partake of more of the riches that belong to the human race. The question is, what do we do when destructive conflicts arise over symbols and their use.

Are religious symbols holy?

To avoid or reduce conflicts is especially difficult and important when they involve religious communities. Religion has been a powerful creator of symbols. This is a result of the fact that much of what religions assert transcends our world and our concepts and cannot be expressed directly. It has to be expressed in pictures and symbols if it is to be expressed at all.

The choice of symbols is often directly determined by the religion, for example in the form of revealed truth. It is typical that religions take something universal and give it a symbolic meaning. This symbolic meaning is often motivated (as explained above) and influenced by the religion's narrative traditions and ideas. In this way, the symbol can easily be incorporated in worship and devotion. Because of this, religious symbols are more stable than others. However, this does not prevent changes, neither in the symbols nor in their meaning. Just think how the crucifix has changed during the history of the church, both in its form and its interpretation. Even so, believers can regard these symbols as more or less unchangeable, sometimes as eternally valid and holy. But even though one does not go to that extreme, it is natural to show a special respect for the religious symbols we encounter.

Believers' attitude to their own religious symbols has nevertheless often been problematic. This is especially the case in those religions that have Abraham as their forefather: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. They all regard God as fundamentally different from the created world. Various words can be used for this, such as *transcendent* or *holy*. This is the reason for the prohibition of images that we are familiar with from the Old Testament and the Koran. The worship of images was regarded as idolatry. God did not allow images to be made of himself. But was it not possible to let other images or objects "represent" God? The answer to this question has varied in the three religions. Today, Judaism and especially Islam are very sceptical to images. In the Christian church, the controversies have been many and intense. Today, there are many Christian churches that are opposed to all use of images in their buildings, while many do have images, in different degrees and with different limitations. All agree on the danger of images, that believers can come to worship them as though they were divine. Those churches that do allow images, for example crucifixes or pictures of Jesus, distinguish between the image and what the image represents. The image is not holy, but it reminds us of and indicates the One who is holy.

Such images are of course symbols. The train of thought behind them can be explained with the help of our theory of symbols. We can say that the thing symbolised is holy, but not the symbol. This is an important principle. Even so, we feel that there is something special about a symbolic object that for example has stood on an altar. Even though two pieces of wood nailed together to form a cross are only pieces of wood, there is an aura of holiness about them. And not only for believers. Certain objects or figures are generally regarded as "holy" in our culture, also by those who are not themselves believers. This is

what makes it possible to desecrate them. One can desecrate a Bible or a cross, but not a telephone catalogue or a wooden rake. Objects that no-one connects with anything holy can easily be misused, but not desecrated.

Many of the topics we have dealt with here can be found in the story from Brattstad, in the conflict about the use of both religious and non-religious symbols.

For the family, "Auntie Jane" was a clear and familiar symbol. Perhaps all of them thought of her as the incarnation of goodness. The locum minister had no possibility of understanding this. Auntie Jane's funeral was therefore not the fitting tribute to her life that everyone in the family had hoped that it would be. In their attitude to other symbols, the family was divided, partly along the lines of life stance. Images of the cross and Jesus were of course Christian symbols for churchgoers. Those who had grown up with these symbols could not imagine a church without them, and for them the symbols had a stable and reassuring effect. For the agnostics and the Muslim, on the other hand, their effect was provocative and divisive. As members of the family who had grown up in Norway, they were probably also familiar with the conventional Christian interpretations of the symbols. But they interpreted them differently. They probably did not associate anything positive with the Jesus symbols, at least as the church has explained and proclaimed them. The symbols alienated them.

The Christmas tree as a universal and Christian symbol

The Christmas tree is a symbol that can often bring people together. For many, it is at the heart of their experience of Christmas. The whole of Auntie Jane's family could probably accept the tree as part of their celebrations – if they celebrate Christmas at all.

The symbolism surrounding the Christmas tree is complex and spread in all directions. One possibility is that the tree symbolises the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden, another that it represents Christ on the cross. Many people link it to fertility or the universal cycle of life (Yggdrasil in Nordic mythology). The Christmas tree is an example of a symbol that can contain many other symbols. Whatever the significance of the tree itself, it can act as a kind of dumb waiter on which other symbols can be hung – one commercial web-site offers 614 different Christmas tree ornaments, including bells, snowflakes, apples that can remind us of the Garden of Eden, stars that can remind us of the Wise Men, angels that symbolise glad tidings and protection. These are possible interpretations. For some people, this is what the Christmas tree means. Others are aware of some of the symbolism, but not all of it, while many families never think of any of the symbolic significance of *their* Christmas tree. For most Northern Europeans the Christmas tree seems to have become a symbol of light in the darkness, nation building, the happy family and fellowship. But some have established conventions that seem new and alien. A number of Muslim families in Norway have begun to have Christmas trees. This could be as a symbol of their acceptance of something traditionally Norwegian that they like, or perhaps to celebrate the birth of the prophet Jesus?

We have to admit that the Christmas tree has whatever symbolic significance we choose to give it. It is not possible to apply our own interpretation to others. Some Christians maintain that the Christmas tree is *really* a Christian symbol, and that the others water this down or misunderstand it. But as a Christian symbol the Christmas tree is in fact quite new. Some Christian communities reject it outright. Christians who have a Christmas tree, associate it with the Nativity; those who reject it, associate it with paganism. Who can say that the one alternative is correct and the other false? To have a Christmas tree is paganism for those who think it is a pagan symbol, and Christian for those who think it is a Christian symbol.

Symbols divide and unite

Symbols can exclude people. Christians in Egypt always wear a cross, either as a tattoo on their hand or as a piece of jewellery. If Egyptians want to go to church in their own country, they are asked to show a cross. If they are unable to do so, someone else must speak up for them. Some symbols thus distinguish between insiders and outsiders – just as the case was with the use of the creeds in the early church.

Something similar happened in Brattstad. Churchgoers regard the symbols as part of the Christian religion and culture. Khalid and Lisa on the other hand, regard the cross either as a threat or as a symbol of power that is out of place in a room that is used for inclusive social events. This raises the question of the use of symbols in places where people who interpret symbols according to different traditions will meet. Since Brattstad does not have a public hall that can be used for humanist or other non-Christian funerals, the parish church and churches belonging to other denominations have to be used for funerals. Muslims usually hold their funerals in a mosque in the town centre, but humanists usually use the parish church in Brattstad. In the council chapels in Norwegian cemeteries, the symbolism is usually non-religious, so that no-one will be offended or feel themselves excluded.

Who should "own" the use of symbols at a funeral? Auntie Jane was a Christian. She therefore naturally wanted a Christian funeral in a church. Is it respect for her wishes that should determine the use of symbols? Or should her family's wishes be decisive? What if she had not been a Christian, but the funeral had to take place in the church? The room in itself is a symbol. It contains a variety of symbols that are designed to create a sense of belonging and develop a Christian identity. How important is it to take the room itself into consideration when it is used for other purposes? Should one avoid using it (or allowing it to be used) for purposes where its symbolism is not appreciated or taken into consideration, or where it leads to unpleasant experiences?

Symbols and identity

For some of the members of Auntie Jane's family, the cross is a symbol that tells them that they believe in Jesus and that he died for them. The Muslim Khalid has been brought up to regard the cross with scepticism, even as a threat that will be destroyed on the Last Day. For the humanist Lisa, the cross is a meaningless symbol of power, while Auntie Jane's other humanist relative thinks it is quite all right to be surrounded by other people's religious symbols – for him they have aesthetic value.

Many people today wear a cross as a pendant or as earrings, but that does not necessarily mean that they are Christians. In other words, a symbol can cease to be *only* a religious symbol and can perhaps even lose its religious symbolism completely. What about women with hats or headscarves? Headgear is not in itself a religious symbol. In Norway in the 1950s and 1960s, if people saw a woman wearing a hat or headscarf, they assumed that she belonged to a Pentecostal church. The situation is different today. There are two other groups that wear headgear: nuns in the convents that have been established in Norway in recent years and Muslim women who think that they can best express their faith by wearing *hijab*. But we cannot be certain that a woman we see wearing *hijab* regards it first and foremost as a religious symbol. Many Muslim women wear a headscarf because it protects them and gives them freedom in a sexualised Western culture.

Whether we interpret our symbols religiously or not, we use them to show who we are or who we want to be. We express our identity through our symbols, both for ourselves and for others. Identity is a matter of relationships, our relationship to traditions, life stance and attitudes, but also our relationship to groups, social circles, faith communities. Our symbols help us to remember and hold on to the relationships that give us our identity, and they signalise to others who we are.

In a pluralistic society, many communities and life stances live side by side. Religious education in Norwegian schools is intended to teach children to recognise different religious symbols, their religious significance and other ways in which they are used.

Symbols and the public sphere

In the public sector, the authorities must ensure that everyone is treated equally. The conflict in France in 2003-2004 revealed how some Muslims, Jews and Sikhs cling to their symbols, while the state emphasised its traditionally secular nature and banned all use of religious symbols in the public sphere, for example in service professions and in state schools. Some Muslim leaders (including the Egyptian Sheikh al-Tantawi) advised Muslim girls to take off their *hijab* at the school gates, and put it on again after school. Otherwise they would have been turned away from the school. It was more important for girls to complete their education than to hide their hair for other men than their husbands. In a high school in Oslo, some pupils chose to wear a veil covering their whole face. This

provoked a sharp reaction from the Oslo City Council, which ruled that the girls must uncover their faces during lessons, but could otherwise dress as they liked. Reactions to this incident in churches, mosques and society at large varied, but for most people the freedom of expression – also in the case of clothing – is an important principle. However, in this case the veil seemed to hinder teachers and other pupils from communicating adequately with the girls.

In Norway, the flag is an important and unifying symbol, even though it consists of a cross. The flag can be called a key symbol. It is used everywhere and has the struggle for national freedom and Christian culture as its background. After the Norwegian flag was burned in Damascus and Beirut following the publication of the Mohammed cartoons in the Danish newspaper *Jyllandsposten* (30.10.2005) and the Norwegian magazine *Magazinet* (10.01.2006), many Norwegian Muslims said that they felt that this hurt them just as much as it did other Norwegians. Even though the cross is an obviously Christian symbol, it does not necessarily convey a clear Christian significance in all the situations in which it is used. In the flag, the cross has become a national symbol. Some people have found this provocative. "Remove the Christian cross from your flag, and hoist it, pure and red", the poet Arnulf Øverland wrote. For most Norwegians today, the cross in the flag has been dechristianised. Some regard it as a symbol of the role of Christianity in Norwegian history, but not as a symbol of what the nation represents – or ought to represent – today. What is important for them, is what the flag as a whole represents – and that is values and experiences that most people appreciate and associate themselves with.

A symbol can belong to the individual or family sphere, for example a Christmas tree, or a statue of Buddha in the home of a Buddhist family. Other symbols belong in the public sphere. There is no doubt that the flag is a visible, public symbol. But other symbols, such as the *hijab* or the Jewish *kippa*, are signs of religious adherence that are worn in public. These garments will often be regarded as an important and decisive part of a person's attire. They create identity. Other persons can find them preachy and intrusive, but as long as they do no damage to others, there can be no reason to demand that they be forbidden. Quite the reverse, we should regard it as positive that human diversity, in this case adherence to different communities, religions or life stances, is visible in the public arena.

The freedom to use symbols

The public sphere includes all the places where we live and move and have our being, on the streets and in public buildings – everywhere outside the four walls of our homes. Although citizens should be allowed to bear symbols freely, it is not certain that the same should apply to persons who represent public authorities in some way. Should a nurse be allowed to wear *hijab* in a hospital? A Sikh wear his turban in the armed forces? A teacher wear his *kippa* in school? What kind of situations require that religious symbols must give way? Does it help if we distinguish between obtrusive and more discreet

symbols? Is there any principal difference between symbolising religious and political adherence?

While people should be given considerable freedom to bear symbols, they should also be required to use discretion. Religious symbols can be so powerful that misunderstandings or even dangerous situations can arise. This must be avoided through dialogue and agreed practice. Instead of banning symbols, we can appeal to people's ability to adapt and to limit their use of them. In other words, it is necessary to regulate the public use of symbols, but it is best if this can be achieved informally by the community as a whole, rather than through laws and regulations.

If someone reacts to a symbol, is it necessary to remove it? Should the minority or the majority decide? Or is it a question that requires time in order to reach agreement on a solution? Many countries forbid the use of the nazi symbol, the swastika, even though it has a religious origin in Hinduism. Even though the ban can create increased awareness and defiance in some cases, history has shown that it can be necessary to ban extreme symbols that provoke people to violence.

Most people would say that everyone has the right to proclaim their faith by words, actions and symbols. This is also in accord with article 18 in the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights. Christians will be reminded of the fate of martyrs from the third and fourth centuries down to the present day. We cannot accept that people must conceal their faith and risk their lives if they break the prohibition. As a church we resist all such conditions. The freedom that we ourselves have worked for in Norway and internationally commits us to do what we can to secure that adherents of other religions have the same freedom to bear their religious symbols in public.

Symbols that enrich and challenge the community

In many parts of the world, religious symbols are regarded as a natural element in the public arena. But in 2005-2006, we saw that cartoons with a religious content can be perceived in different ways. Limits on the freedom of expression and the perception of what constitutes blasphemy are examples of the need to continue discussing religious and secular symbols in the globalised world. In Norway, the long-standing dialogue between Christians and Jews, and the dialogue between Christians and Muslims that has now lasted for more then fifteen years, make it possible to meet and talk with one another when crises arise. The state and the church must continue to make such dialogue possible. The diversity that religions represent should not be a threat to national unity, but rather a source of strength. We are united in wanting to show that religion and religious symbols are a natural part of life and therefore also of life in the public sphere.

Questions for further discussion and reflection:

What situations or considerations require that religious symbols should not be displayed in public? In what degree do you think it is possible to distinguish between obtrusive symbols and symbols that unobtrusively reflect a person's identity?

Religious symbols are interpreted in different ways, both between religious communities and within those communities. Can you give examples of Christian symbols that are interpreted differently within your local church community? Do you regard this pluralism in interpreting symbols as a strength or a weakness for a Christian community? In what ways?

To what extent do you think that the church can be flexible in its use of religious symbols at funerals?

Do you feel it as a threat when symbols from other religions are displayed in public? Why – or why not?

Chapter 5
A matter of relationships

Religions meet in many other situations than those described in this document. We can for example meet other religions through art and literature. In this way our own faith can be challenged. But the most pressing challenges occur when we meet other religions through other people, when believers meet believers. When that happens, the encounter between religions becomes a meeting between two individual human beings. All the examples of encounters between religions that we have dealt with are in some way or another a matter of relationships.

The question of cohabitation across religious boundaries is a matter of different relationships that cross one another. While the couple enjoys a unique mutual relationship, each of them belongs at the same time to religious communities with divergent ways of thinking and talking about issues involving precisely the relationship the couple have to each other. The relationship between two partners and their possible children is also part of a larger picture: extended families and ethnical groups, where we often let our identity be determined by our physical relationship to the others: mother, daughter, uncle, brother-in-law, friend. Belonging to different religions does not necessarily detract from the intimacy of such relationships, but problems can arise when the religious boundaries are along unfamiliar lines.

The question of joint prayer is also a matter of relationships. What kind of fellowship we have with one another can be decisive in the question of whether we can pray together. Some groups of people are formed because the members decide to come together, in other cases people are thrown together by unexpected events. Some groups are established through a feeling of belonging together as religious believers, such as fora for dialogue between Christians and Jews, while many others have no religious foundation, but arise for example at a workplace or in the family. Different types of prayer can also create different relationships between people.

Prayer is above all a means of relating to God. The question that then becomes crucial is whether we relate to the same God or to different gods. Are we looking in the same direction, or are we standing with our backs to each other?

The chapter on symbols brings up the question of relationships and communities in a different form. Symbols can create and preserve the fellowship in a community, and they can delineate the boundaries of the community. Sometimes it is legitimate to draw boundaries. At other times we can unintentionally draw boundaries, because we are not aware of the meaning that others give to their symbols. Symbols can create fellowship when they are accepted and understood in the same way by many people. They can do so even when there is a variety of interpretations of them. But symbols can also divide a community, when they are understood and interpreted in widely divergent ways. All symbols presuppose a community or a tradition in which they arise and are transmitted from one group to another, or from one generation to the next. Religions can be

conceived as extensive and complex systems of symbols. Every religion therefore presupposes a community.

Who am I – who are the others?

When we are asked who we are, we often answer by saying who we are related to: I am A's son or B's mother. I live with C, belong in D neighbourhood and work at E. When we describe our faith, we also in a way describe a set of relationships that define us: I belong to one particular faith community and conceive of my relationship to God/ultimate reality/the meaning of life in a particular way. When we identify ourselves in this way, it is as though we find our position on the map of existence, with our relationships to God and our neighbours as longitude and latitude.

As human beings with a set of relationships, we are bound to be only in one position on that map at any one given time. As time goes on, we move across the map. We develop, both as human beings and as believers, we establish new relationships and break out of old routines. But at any given time, we can only be in one position.

This picture can help us when we try to understand the relationship between our own and other people's faith. We can only meet others with respect if we are aware of the fact that we see everything from our present position. Others interpret things from their position. No-one can have a bird's eye view and see the whole picture. But even though a bird's eye view is impossible, we must constantly do our best to understand what the world looks like, seen with other people's eyes. This is what it means to have empathy.

When we see things from different positions and come to different conclusions, we cannot say that one point of view is true and another untrue. "Now we see puzzling reflections in a mirror." But the awareness that our own point of view is limited is not a good enough reason to say that all points of view are equally valid. Some perceptions are mutually exclusive. As Christians we dare to say that through meeting Jesus Christ, we participate in the truth, and that one day we "shall see face to face".

Father, Son and Holy Spirit – Creator, Saviour and Giver of Life

Belief in the Holy Trinity is both a stumbling block and the cornerstone in the Christian's encounter with people of other faiths. For other monotheists (for example Jews and Muslims) the Christian doctrine of one God in three persons seems a clear case of polytheism. Others, for example Hindus and Buddhists, reject the categorical distinction between the Creator and the creation. Non-Christians will seldom accept the assertion that in Jesus Christ God has revealed himself in a special way in a specific place at a specific time. In other words, the doctrine of the Trinity is not the best place to begin a conversation aimed at finding common ground with people of different faiths. But even though the conversation does not begin with the Trinity, Christian reflection about the

others' faith can begin with the Creeds that describe God as Creator, Saviour and Giver of Life.

In the first article, God as Creator, we find a reason for seeking fellowship with other human beings in spite of everything that divides us. The Bible says that God created man – and therefore all human beings – in his own image. We can recognise the image of God in another person, whatever she or he believes. With this conviction as a starting-point, it is natural for Christians to concentrate on what unites people, rather than on things that divide them. As a human being we are a body placed in a community. Many of our experiences unite us across religious boundaries. We can rejoice when a child is born, or enjoy the beauty of nature or of a work of art, whatever our religious faith. As Christians we understand this as an experience of God's goodness and grace in creation. And on this basis we can share common human experiences with others.

The Christian belief in God as Creator places responsibility on human beings as stewards of the created world. We are responsible for taking care of the environment around us, and for taking care of one another. From a Christian point of view, this responsibility is the same whether one is a Jew, a Muslim, a Christian or an atheist. In all our relationships with other people God calls us to take care of the other person. This call is the same for everyone and embraces everyone, regardless of their religion. When Christians become familiar with other religions and their teaching about compassion for one's neighbour, we regard it as another interpretation of the same call from God, resounding around the world from the moment of creation.

The Christian teaching about creation emphasises that all human beings are of infinite value, but also that human beings are not God. Our viewpoint is limited. All human beings are bound to their time and their place.

The third article in the creeds express the doctrine of God the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is at work in the church, guiding the faithful. He opens and interprets the word of God for us. The Holy Spirit was present at the creation and works in the world to reconcile and heal. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, according to Paul (Galatians 5:22). The Bible says too that the Spirit appears unannounced and in unexpected places ("The wind blows where it chooses", John 3:8). When we see the fruit of the Spirit among people who do not share our faith, we are looking at traces of the work of the Holy Spirit in the world.

The second article in the creeds says that the man Jesus of Nazareth was and is God. It is this that most clearly divides the Christian image of God from the image of God in other monotheistic religions such as Judaism and Islam. In Christ we see the face of God in the world. His life, death and resurrection in one specific place at one specific time have an absolute significance for all people at all times. This bond to one particular historical person is often the most difficult theological issue when we encounter other people's faith. "Can those who have no relationship to Jesus have a relationship to God that is as valid as mine?" the Christian asks. "Can someone share in salvation in Christ without having a conscious relationship to him?" And can one relate to Christ without having an

active relationship to the man Jesus of Nazareth? These are some of the most difficult theological questions that are discussed in the churches as a result of the encounter with believers in other religions.

As Christians, we believe that the salvation of the world is connected to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our Lutheran tradition teaches us that those who believe in Jesus Christ will be saved. There are also plain words in Scripture that hold forth Christ as the only way to salvation: "No-one comes to the Father except through me."

But there are also passages in the Bible that open up for other interpretations of salvation. The Bible teaches about a loving and righteous God, and for many Christians it is a repugnant thought, that a beloved and respected spouse, relation or friend should be excluded from fellowship with God in all eternity because he or she belongs to a non-Christian faith community. In the stories about how Jesus met all kinds of people, also those who did not share his Jewish faith, we find support for the belief that God's categories are different from those that human beings judge by.

The World Missionary Conference in 1989 in San Antonio in the USA discussed these questions and arrived at a statement that has remained as an ecumenical basis for further consideration of the relationship of Christians to other religions: "We cannot point to any other way to salvation than Jesus Christ. But nor can we set limits for the saving power of God." The task of the Christian is to testify to what we have seen and heard and point to what we know: Christ. The task is not to act as frontier guards on the boundaries with other religions. The salvation of others is in God's hands. And here we come to the most important theological question of all in our encounter with other religions: What is salvation? Is salvation to be found in other religions? What absolute truths are only available through the Christian faith? Do we believe in the same God? Etc… In this document we have assumed that these questions are the most important ones, but they may not be the most urgent ones when believers meet. Or rather: The questions intrude on us in more specific forms, for example in connection with mixed marriages, prayer or the use of symbols. Perhaps the conclusions we draw in those situations are a good enough answer. Since the encounter between religions is always specific, there are good reasons to make the answers as specific as possible in the given situations. In any case, we want to warn against giving simple and clear answers to the big questions, and we refuse to give a fuller answer here.

Evangelism, dialogue, confrontation

In this document the emphasis is on different kinds of dialogue between believers. Sometimes we find that dialogue is presented as in conflict with mission. This is understandable. The aim of dialogue is to understand the other part and establish co-operation across the religious boundaries in order to achieve common goals, for example protection of the environment or of human rights. The aim of mission, on the other hand, is to make people disciples of Jesus Christ. But we are on the wrong track if we regard dialogue and mission as an either/or, basically because dialogue is something that we can

be involved in without ceasing to be a missionary church. It is important to let the situation decide. Worship will, for example, always be a missionary activity. It creates and sustains discipleship. A marriage between partners of different faiths, on the other hand, will be on thin ice if one of the partners wants to convert the other. Between these extremes, there are many situations where evangelical mission and dialogue both have a proper place. The most important thing is always to be aware of your motives when you meet a person of another faith. Openness about your motives, both for yourself and for the others involved, is essential. Dialogue must never be a means of concealing missionary motives. When the purpose of the dialogue is clear, there will naturally be opportunities to share testimonies as to what faith means for those taking part. Meeting other believers can be a challenge, but much can be achieved if we listen with respect and openness, and explain honestly how we feel about issues that are raised. But this is not always the right way to proceed. There are destructive elements in all human contact, and all religions can be used to further dishonest or evil purposes. This can be the case even though the adherents of the religion are not aware of it.

Tolerance, respect and religious liberty do not preclude a critical examination of any religious tradition. Internal debate and criticism have always been a feature of the Christian tradition and have often enriched the faith. Today, liberation theology and feminist theology are examples of this internal criticism. Criticism that develops internally within a religion is often the most effective means of changing unfortunate forms of religious behaviour.

There are also occasions when the faith of other people must be challenged and when it is right to reject and even condemn aspects of it. Even though a dialogue approach is often the best, there are exceptions. The balance of power between the participants can for example make dialogue inappropriate, especially if the stronger part uses the situation to his or her own advantage. As someone once said, a fawn cannot have a dialogue with a wolf.

Religion is powerful because it is often important for how people understand themselves and their identity. Religious teaching or practice that encourages oppression or the destruction of the environment must be met with condemnation, not with indifference disguised as tolerance. But even when this is necessary, it is important to assess each situation individually. It is the teaching and practice concerned that are to be condemned, not the believer. And we must also decide how we can best succeed. We can sometimes achieve more by raising the question in a manner that does not exclude all further discussion. A dialogue approach can be best, also when we want to make it clear that a form of religious practice is unacceptable.

Last but not least, the church must listen to correction from others. History is full of examples of mistakes Christians have made. We must be prepared for God to speak to us through criticism others make of our faith and practice.

Them and us

Ethically speaking, meeting someone with another faith is not like meeting just anyone. Whenever we meet another person, whoever it is, God calls us to show care and love. In every human being we can recognise something of our own humanity and thereby something of God himself.

When we meet someone with another faith, two considerations are especially important. They seem to point in opposite directions. On the one hand, I must look for something that links me to the other person, something common to human beings and God-given. On the other hand, I must respect the fact that the other person is not like me. He or she is different, and has every right to be different. It would be wrong of me to try to make the other person more like me than the facts suggest. That does not only mean refraining from trying to convert the other person to my religion through using underhand methods, it also includes how I think about the other person. In my thoughts I must make room for the idea that the other person thinks and perceives the world from a viewpoint that is different from mine. I can never really see the world with another person's eyes, but I can make an effort to see the other person's world with my own eyes.

The differences between religions are sometimes described as different answers to the same basic questions. Sometimes the differences are even greater: different religions ask different questions. Or put another way: a question that is important in one religion may not be important in another. Many faith communities are for example much less interested in finding the right answers to questions about religious doctrine than is the case in the Lutheran tradition. Some religions have much less clear-cut doctrines than Lutheran Christianity has. For many religious persons, daily religious practice is much more important than clear accounts of for example life after death or liberation from the power of evil in the world. We can sometimes fall short in conversations with persons of another faith because we are not aware of such basic differences in approach.

In one way it is therefore always necessary to draw a line between "them" and "us", with the reservation that these categories are not always homogeneous. The division is important in order to make it clear for ourselves that there is – and always will be – a distinction between those who believe in the same way that we do, and those who do not. One mistake that has often been made in relation to religious minorities in Norway, is that the majority has not always made room for diversity. In well-meaning attempts to include everyone, representatives of the majority have sometimes wanted to remove differences that cannot be eradicated. Sometimes the issue of discrimination has been described as though the majority can decide what is more or less important for those who belong to a minority.

On other occasions we make divisions between "them" and "us" that should not be there. We have already mentioned several times the Christian doctrine that human beings are created in the image of God, and seen how this idea makes it possible to dismantle barriers between people. In considering how to meet other people, we also have a valuable guideline in the ancient commandment to love our neighbour as ourselves. In the

Lutheran tradition we have another doctrine that should be emphasised: as Christians we are at the same time both justified and sinners. In other words, we do not regard an encounter between a Christian and an adherent of another religion as an encounter between a sinner and someone who is free from sin. The Lutheran Church teaches that when it comes to sin, there is no difference between persons of different faiths. Also here, according to Lutheran doctrine, there is more that binds people together than divides Christians from others. Another matter is that many other religions do not understand human beings as sinful, but that may not be so decisive in this context.

Conclusion?

It is not possible to formulate concise general rules for how a Christian should meet people with other beliefs. People are different and situations are different. In this study guide we have given examples of how we can think through various situations, and we have raised a number of questions, in the hope that this will be of help when the reader is confronted with other specific situations.

The situation today, where religions live side by side, makes it necessary to seek out ways to make this coexistence as harmonious as possible. We can find help for this in universal human reflection, in the Bible and in the Christian traditions.

It is a demanding situation that makes many Christians uncertain as to how the new challenges should be met practically and theologically. But there is no reason to concentrate most on the problems. The present day situation is first and foremost an *opportunity* for the church. The variety of religions makes it necessary for churches in a majority position to examine their self-awareness anew. When their majority status is threatened, it can give rise to a humility and self-examination that is essential for the church. This situation can also lead to fresh reflections on key aspects of the church's tradition, as we indicated in our discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity. When Christians meet people who are secure and soundly rooted in their non-Christian faith, it challenges them to learn more about their own faith and tradition. In this way, the encounter between religions can *strengthen* the Christian's commitment to what he or she believes is important.

There is no doubt that God can also be at work in our encounters with persons who have another faith.