

## **Mosques, Muslims, Methods: the Role of Mosques in Research about Muslims in Europe**

### **Abstract:**

Previous research has questioned the use of mosques as points of entry for research about Muslims in Europe. Part of the background has been a new emphasis on lived religion and a critique of a one-sided focus on religious institutions. We argue that some of this criticism is theoretically ill-founded and we also point out that some trends may make mosques more important in research about Muslims. In section 1, we go through the most important literature addressing the methodological problems posed by using mosques in research about Muslims in the West. In section 2, we look at some of the fundamental problems of definitions in some of this critical methodological literature. In section 3, we discuss how the choice of methods, not least sampling modes, will be of significance for meaningful discussion about the appropriateness of using mosques in research, and in section 4, we present what we see as important advantages of using mosques as a point of entry to study Muslims. In section 5, we conclude with a brief summary and discussion.

**Keywords:** mosques, Muslims in Europe, research methods, sampling modes, mosque membership, lived religion

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This article is about mosques as points of entry for research about Muslims in the Nordic countries. The background is a research project called *Financial exclusion, Islamic finance and housing in the Nordic countries* (FINEX), which deals with the financial exclusion and inclusion of Muslims in Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland. The authors of this article are involved in FINEX and this text presents our shared reflections on our decision to cooperate closely with mosques for data collection.

The structure of the article is as follows. In section 1, we go through the most important literature addressing the methodological problems that arise in using mosques when doing research about Muslims in the West. In section 2, we look at some of the fundamental and often overlooked problems of definitions in much of this critical methodological literature. In particular, we show that some of the criticism is imprecise about the highly heterogeneous nature of membership and affiliation with mosques in Western societies. In section 3, we discuss how the choice of methods, not least sampling modes, will be of great significance for any meaningful discussion about the appropriateness of using mosques in research, and, in section 4, we present what we see as the important advantages of using mosques as a point of entry for research. Finally, in section 5, we conclude with a brief summary and discussion.

## **1. Methodological problems in using mosques for research**

Since the 1990s, there has been a distinct turn in the study of religion towards *lived religion* embedded in everyday life.<sup>1</sup> This has been a reaction against what many researchers in the social sciences and humanities have seen as a tendency in research to privilege organized and institutionalized religion. In the study of Islam and Muslims, this turn towards the everyday and the ordinary has in part been a reaction to what some have seen as a reductionist tendency to study modern Islam mainly as pious revivalism focused on texts and the great tradition of ethics and law.<sup>2</sup> Critical research has pointed out that placing the emphasis on official, organized, ‘normative’ religion overlooks how Islam is practised in everyday life. One sign of this concern was the publication in 2011 (Volume 34) of a special issue of the international journal *Ethnic and Racial Studies* devoted to methods in the study of non-organized Muslim minorities. In their introduction to this special issue, the editors noted that the very definition of ‘organized’ across European countries is one of the problems

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy T. Ammerman, “Lived Religion as an Emerging Field: An Assessment of its Contours and Frontiers”, *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 29/2 (2016): 83–99.

<sup>2</sup> Nadia Fadil & Mayanthi Fernando, “Rediscovering the ‘Everyday’ Muslim: Notes on an Anthropological Divide”, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5/2 (2015): 59–88.

associated with understanding non-organized Muslims and their religious practices.<sup>3</sup> The critical approach, which often uses the term ‘lived religion’ or ‘lived Islam’, claims that research “overprivileges the most committed practitioners” and assumes that everything that Muslims do is about Islam.<sup>4</sup> Instead, according to this approach, research should take care to include non-organized Muslims as well as so-called ‘cultural Muslims’ and it should look at how inconsistencies and ambiguities are negotiated and embodied.<sup>5</sup>

As an aspect of these important debates about methods and perspectives, scholars of Islam and Muslims have also noted that much research about Muslims in the West has tended to suffer from bias in the sense that mosques have been used – sometimes in an uncritical way – as a recruiting-ground for informants without sufficient attention to the fact that a considerable number of Muslims are non-organized. For example, in 2003, Karen Leonard discussed the limitations in research on Muslims in the United States that resulted from the extensive use of mosques as the primary point of entry for research.<sup>6</sup> The same criticism has been aimed of research in Europe.

We believe that some of this critical literature has given a necessary corrective to research on Muslims in the West. There are in fact reasons why taking the mosque as the starting point of research may sometimes be problematic. As we see it, the criticism may be presented along three lines. First, selecting informants/interviewees through mosques will suffer from *sampling bias* as not all Muslims attend a mosque. The mosque population does not represent the diversity of the total Muslim population. For instance, a sample of mosque attendees cannot be considered representative of the Muslim population in terms of gender or age. Moreover, the chosen mosque may provide a specific interpretation of Islam and give a poor representation of the diversity of Muslim viewpoints, as certain movements and traditions are overrepresented in a particular mosque community. For instance, if we interview a group of people in a Deobandi-inspired South Asian-dominated mosque we will not understand how more Sufi-oriented people, or Muslims from the Balkans, understand

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<sup>3</sup> Nadia Jeldtoft and Jørgen S. Nielsen, “Introduction: Methods in the Study of ‘Non-Organized’ Muslim Minorities”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34/7 (2011): 1113–1119, p. 1117.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Jennifer A. Selby, “‘Muslimness’ and Multiplicity in Qualitative Research and in Government Reports in Canada”, *Critical Research on Religion* 4/1 (2016): 72–89, p. 72, and Samuli Schielke, “Being Good in Ramadan: Ambivalence, Fragmentation, and the Moral Self in the Lives of Young Egyptians”, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15 (2009): 24–40.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Fadil & Fernando, “Rediscovering the ‘Everyday’ Muslim”, and Jeldtoft & Nielsen, “Introduction”.

<sup>6</sup> Karen Isaksen Leonard, *Muslims in the United States: The State of Research* (New York: Russel Sage, 2003), p. 43.

issues we are researching. Many mosques are organized along ethnic and linguistic lines and this may have an impact on the data that we collect.

It has also been pointed out that persons who often visit the mosque may be more conservative and orthodox in their overall approach to Islam than ‘normal’ or ‘average’ visitors who might visit the mosque primarily for social or cultural reasons and less for ‘purely’ religious reasons. Other articles in this issue of *JOME* show how we miss important insights into mosque life if we only look for religious activities (Munsch; Petersen). However, it is not only a question of the mosque population representing the most religious part of the total Muslim population. In fact, some of the Muslims who, according to their own self-description, are the most religious are not regular mosque-attenders at all.<sup>7</sup>

Second, taking mosques as starting points of research may influence who among mosque attenders is selected to participate in a study if researcher rely on the collaboration of mosque leaderships in identifying and selecting informants. The role of mosque leaders as *gatekeepers* needs to be reflected on in any research using mosques as points of entry, as these leaders may have very different ideas about how to select informants.<sup>8</sup> Mosque leadership may facilitate access to some informants while restricting access to others. In addition, recruitment through the mosque may lead potential informants to think that they should possess a certain amount or type of religious knowledge or hold specific views. Reports about Muslims suggesting that they are not Muslim *enough* to participate in research are well-known.<sup>9</sup> While people with a religious identity can be expected to be the most willing to “articulate about their beliefs and practices, and the most willing to participate in qualitative studies [...] focused on religiosity”,<sup>10</sup> taking the mosque as point of departure may support this feeling, which is not helpful for the researcher.

A third critical aspect of this approach can be addressed under the issue of *ecological validity*, i.e. simply being in the mosque may influence how people will respond to questions. In an article tellingly named “Location, Location, Location...”, Dimitris Xygalatas, for example, compares how the outcomes of experiment testing for economic decision and pro-social behaviour was highly dependent on whether it was conducted in a restaurant or a

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<sup>7</sup> Lene Kühle, “Excuse Me, Which Radical Organization Are You a Member of? Reflections in Methods to Study Highly Religious but Non-Organized Muslims”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34/ (2011): 1186–1200.

<sup>8</sup> Gurchathen S. Sanghera & Suruchi Thapar-Björkert, “Methodological Dilemmas: Gatekeepers and Positionality in Bradford”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31/3 (2008): 543–562, p. 553.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Nadia Jeldtoft, “Lived Islam: Religious Identity with ‘Non-Organized’ Muslims Minorities”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34/7 (2011): 1134–1151; Selby, “Muslimness”.

<sup>10</sup> Selby, “Muslimness”, p. 73.

religious location (a church or a temple).<sup>11</sup> Participants in experiments taking place in religious locations were more likely to show pro-social behaviour. Along these lines, we may expect participants to ‘be their best’ if interviewed in mosque premises. This may include commitment to views that the informant deems to be ‘Islamic’, which that person will not necessarily express in other contexts. This critique resonates with Samuli Schielke’s critique of how research on Muslims, by focusing on the pious ‘in pious situations’, prompts people to present their identity and values in clear and coherent (Islamic) ways, while overlooking how they “routinely shift between conflicting self-representations, and are regularly torn between conflicting self-ideals and aims”.<sup>12</sup>

## 2. Problems of definition

So far, we have tried to represent the most important lines of criticism against using mosques as an entry point for research. However, all the way we have accepted an important assumption found in much of this critical literature. This is the assumption that what we want to study are Muslims in general and that something like the general Muslim population actually exists in real life. In other words, there is an assumption running through the methodological debates about research on Muslims in Europe that there is a population out there in the world that can be labeled ‘Muslims’. If we accept such an assumption, it is obviously relevant to discuss and critique the way researchers approach mosques – or other organizations – to build their sample.

In recent decades, there has been a growing awareness that the very category of ‘Muslim’ is unstable and contested as a category of practice and that scholars need to be critical and self-reflective when using ‘Muslim’ as a category of analysis.<sup>13</sup> Still, we believe that some research, and some of the critical methodological literature we have alluded to above, fails to define and delimit the population that is the object of research with sufficient clarity. This is a crucial point and we can illustrate with an example. Say a researcher wants to understand how Muslims feel about a chosen issue and designs a project in which a number of people are approached in a mosque and asked questions. Criticizing the project for its sampling strategy would be meaningless without a prior knowledge of what population the sample is supposed to represent. Any sampling method would by necessity be meaningless as

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<sup>11</sup> Dimitris Xygalatas, “Location, Location, Location: Effects of Cross-Religious Primes on Prosocial Behavior”, *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 26/4 (2016): 304–319, p. 304.

<sup>12</sup> Schielke, “Being”, p. 26.

<sup>13</sup> Rogers Brubaker, “Categories of Analysis and Categories of Practice: A Note on the Study of Muslims in European Countries of Immigration”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36/1 (2013): 1-8.

long as the target population is not defined in a precise way. ‘Muslims in Denmark’, say, or ‘Muslims in Europe’ are imagined populations; they are entities without clear definitions. No meaningful sample can be drawn from such imagined populations, whether we want to do qualitative or quantitative research. Anybody familiar with the deep conceptual issues in any attempt to define a religious population and define a ‘Muslim’ or a ‘Christian’ will know how fuzzy these categories are and how contingent they are on definitions.<sup>14</sup> For these reasons, we want to stress that discussing the pros and cons of using mosques as a point of entry in research is only meaningful after a research project has decided on exactly what population it will target and what kind of research questions will be addressed in the study.

In the preceding section, we have seen that some of the criticism against using mosques as points of entry in research is based on an explicit or implicit assumption that the focus of research tends to be the imagined population of ‘Muslims’. Much of the critique argues that we run the risk of forgetting the ‘non-organized’, the ‘non-members’ and similar categories if we recruit informants through mosques. An implicit assumption, then, in this critical literature is that we know what we mean by such terms. However, in this section we want to show that categories such as “organized versus non-organized” or “member versus non-members” are not stable; they are often imprecise and sometimes misleading. We shall approach this difficult conceptual issue by looking at how membership and affiliation can be defined across the four Nordic countries: Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland.

Surveys of Muslims living in various European countries have emerged in recent decades, either surveys targeting Muslims only or surveys in which Muslims constitute a subgroup of the population targeted, as in the *European Value Survey*. Often, the results from these studies are claimed to be representative of Muslims in the specific country in which the survey is conducted.<sup>15</sup> A main problem for these surveys, however, is that it is very difficult to delimit a population for research. A survey conducted under the EURISLAM project in fact concludes that the responses from four ethnic groups (former Yugoslavs, Moroccans, Pakistanis and Turks) in six European countries (Belgium, France, Germany, The Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Kingdom) differ considerably, but that in all these

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Birgitte Schepelern Johansen & Riem Spielhaus, “Counting Deviance : Revisiting a Decade’s Production of Surveys in Western Europe”, *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 1/1 (2012): 81–112.

<sup>15</sup> Johansen & Spielhaus, “Counting Deviance”.

countries there is only a limited tendency to identify strongly as Muslims, even if the groups are selected because many are assumed to be Muslims.<sup>16</sup>

Overall, it is therefore useful to start by looking at the various ways in which we estimate the total number of Muslims in the society in question, the number of mosques, and the number of members of mosques as a percentage of the total population. Although the ways of estimating the size of Muslim populations are highly contested and politicized and need to be approached with care,<sup>17</sup> there are still several ways to start such an estimation. For instance, one approach to counting Muslims is to look at the numbers of persons who are members of mosques to create a kind of ‘floor’, or a minimum number, while an opposite approach is to count the number of persons with a background in Muslim majority countries. A third option is to ask individuals to self-identify and use their identification as a marker of inclusion or exclusion in the sample. However, issues that have not been taken seriously, as far as we can see, are the fact that the very concept of membership varies between countries and the fact that membership numbers are likely to vary greatly as a function of funding policies. For instance, in Norway mosques receive generous government funding as a function of how many members they have. We think it is likely that this has some relationship to the very high membership rates in Norway compared with other Nordic countries (Table 1 below).

**Table 1:** Estimated Muslim population, members of mosques and number of mosques in Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland.

Sources: Norway: Statistics Norway (<https://www.ssb.no/befolkning/artikler-og-publikasjoner/4-prosent-muslimmer-i-norge>). Denmark: Kühle & Larsen, *En ny kortlægning*; Kühle & Larsen, “De godkendte muslimske trossamfund-og de nye tendenser” (details in footnote 18). Sweden: Myndigheten för stöd til trossamfund (<https://www.myndighetsst.se>). Finland: Pauha 2018 (details in footnote 18).

<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>
<b>Country</b>	<b>People of Muslim cultural background per 2017, estimate</b>	<b>Muslim population per 2016 estimate by Pew<sup>18</sup></b>	<b>Registered members of mosque organizations 2017</b>	<b>Registered members of mosque organizations as share of Muslim population (i.e.</b>	<b>Number of mosques per 2017, estimate</b>

<sup>16</sup>“Final Report Summary - EURISLAM (Finding a Place for Islam in Europe: Cultural Interactions between Muslim immigrants and Receiving Societies)”; available at: <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/rcn/89092/reporting/en>.

<sup>17</sup> Se, for example, Goran Larsson, “The Fear of Small Numbers: Eurabia Literature and Censuses on Religious Belonging”, *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 1/2 (2012): 142-165.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/11/29/europes-growing-muslim-population/>.

				<b>column D as share of B)</b>	
<b>Sweden</b>	600,000	810,000	160,000	27%	150
<b>Norway</b>	200,000	300,000	150,000	75%	150
<b>Denmark</b>	300,000	310,000	50,000	17%	170
<b>Finland</b>	70,000	150,000	14,000	20%	80
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,170,000</b>	<b>1,570,000</b>	<b>194,000</b>	<b>..</b>	<b>550</b>

It is clear from this table that the estimates based on the best national expertise are lower for all countries than the estimates from Pew. Let us briefly look at the great variety in how the countries register people.

In Sweden, even though there are no official statistics on religion or religious belonging, the best estimate of members of mosques uses numbers registered as eligible for financial grants by the Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Communities (SST). However, the way that the Swedish authorities count members is complex. Only seven national Muslim organizations are eligible for funding from the Swedish government, while each of these national organizations have a number of individual mosques as members. It is the responsibility of the national organizations to make sure the individual mosque authorities count their members as accurately as possible. Several important mosques are not members of any of the national organization and are consequently not counted in statistics and not eligible for any state funding. The Swedish concept of membership is itself complex. All paying members of mosques that are registered with a national organization are counted but so are persons in a category called *registered participants*. The registered participants constitute a loose category of people who use the mosque but are *not* paying members. The two categories of *paying member* and *registered participant* together make up the category *served* (Swedish: *betjänade*) and the number of those served is the basis for state funding.

In Denmark, we count the estimated membership of mosque associations provided by the mosques. This number is highly volatile as few mosque associations operate with strict definitions of membership. Many have family memberships (while leaving it to the individual member to decide who is included). Occasionally, the membership fee is also set by the individual member and multiple memberships in different mosques are generally accepted. Overall, however, the number of estimated members of mosques is a far lower number than the number of people who actually attend mosques on a regular or irregular basis. These non-paying ‘members’ or ‘users’ may perhaps be termed ‘affiliated members’. In Finland, membership is based on reports by registered Muslim organizations that have similar

limitations as mentioned above. However, not all Muslim associations have such formal status as to be able to report their membership to be counted in official statistics collected by the authorities.<sup>19</sup>

What about the number of mosques? This is also going to be a number based on approximations and a function of how we define ‘mosque’. In Norway, 126 mosques were counted in 2010, but the number is certainly higher today. In Denmark, there has been a rise in the number of mosques (and Shi’i Husainiya) from 115 in 2006 to about 170 in 2017.<sup>20</sup> For Sweden, there is no estimate of the number of mosques and most figures are at best more or less accurate estimates.

From this brief discussion about the considerable diversity in membership and affiliation and in funding policies between four countries that on some accounts seem quite similar, it appears that it is far from clear what researchers mean when they use terms such as ‘member of a mosque’ or ‘non-organized Muslim’ or ‘unaffiliated Muslim’. The problem is that research sometimes assumes that we mean the same thing when we use these terms across different contexts. For instance, in a large, quantitative analysis of the origins and consequences of religious non-affiliation, Philip Schwadel uses the terms ‘unaffiliated’, ‘non-affiliated’, ‘no religion’ and ‘apostate’ interchangeably through his article.<sup>21</sup> However, these terms are never defined by the author and, as his research spans 52 different nations and almost 70 000 respondents, it is doubtful whether it is meaningful to claim that these terms refer to concepts and realities that have any stability across nations and religious traditions. Another example: in a 2011 article Schirin Amir-Moazami writes that the analysis is based on “personal interviews with both organized and non-organized Muslims involved in the DIK (Deutsche Islam Konferenz)”.<sup>22</sup> But there is no definition of what ‘organized’, ‘non-organized’ and ‘involved’ actually means.

Furthermore, is being organized the same as being affiliated? Are both the same as being a member? For example, a Muslim who visits the mosque a few times a year without being a member and receives a regular newsletter from the mosque: is he or she unaffiliated?

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<sup>19</sup> Teemu Pauha, “Finland”, in Oliver Scharbrodt, Samim Akgönül, Ahmet Alibašić, Jørgen S. Nielsen, and Egdunas Raciūnas (eds), *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, Volume 9 (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2018), pp. 232–247.

<sup>20</sup> Lene Kühle & Malik Larsen, *Moskéer i Danmark II: En ny kortlægning af danske moskéer og muslimske bedesteder* (2017). Available at <http://www.forskningsdatabasen.dk/en/catalog/2395429983>. Lene Kühle, and Malik Christian Reimer Larsen, “De godkendte muslimske trossamfund-og de nye tendenser», *Religion i Danmark* 9/1 (2017): 7-32. Available from <https://tidsskrift.dk/rid/article/viewFile/26385/23192>.

<sup>21</sup> Philip Schwadel, “Cross-National Variation in the Social Origins and Religious Consequences of Religious Non-Affiliation”, *Social Science Research* 70 (2018): 254-270.

<sup>22</sup> Schirin Amir-Moazami, “Pitfalls of Consensus-Oriented Dialogue: The German Islam Conference (Deutsche Islam Konferenz)”, *Approaching Religion* 1/1 (2011): pp. 2-15.

What about a person who is on a local mosque membership list because he registered some years ago but has stopped paying membership fees? And what about family members who are counted as members because one or more members in the family are paying the member fee? Or what about a person of Muslim cultural background who is an atheist but who is still a registered member of a mosque purely in order to support the community? These are questions without easy answers and they point to the messy reality that often needs to be simplified if we want to talk about membership, affiliation, organization, etc. In our view, this is not trivial because much of the methodological discussion takes these terms and their concepts as its point of departure without making necessary clarifications.

### **3. Mosques, methods and modes**

If, as we claim, terms such as ‘organized versus non-organized’, ‘member versus non-member’ and ‘practising versus non-practising’ are in many contexts imprecise or, at worst, misleading, that means that at least some of the criticism against mosques as points of entry to the imagined population of ‘Muslims’ are built on questionable foundations. While it is undoubtedly true that the use of mosques as entry points may in some circumstances be “favouring the complete, the consistent, and the perfect in a way that does not do justice to the complex and often contradictory nature of everyday experience”,<sup>23</sup> we want to foreground the fact that such effects are very dependent on how the researcher approaches potential respondents through the mosque, and specifically what methods and modes the researcher chooses in the approach. To simplify this point: the effects of the mosque environment on the informant will not be the same on a person interviewed face-to-face in the mosque just after Friday prayer as on a person who receives an e-mail with an open invitation to an online survey because he or she happens to appear on a mosque’s e-mail list. We can expect that in the first example that the actual presence of the interviewer will have some effect and we might perhaps expect desirability bias, but this would be completely different for the person responding to the online survey in private, in her own home.

It is well known in research about social science methods that survey modes can have a serious effect on the result in research projects,<sup>24</sup> but there are many uncertainties regarding how different modes, or the combination of different modes, might have effects on

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<sup>23</sup> Schielke, “Being”, p. 26.

<sup>24</sup> Edith de Leeuw & Nejc Berzelak, “Survey Mode or Survey Modes?”, in Christof Wolf, Dominique Joye, Tom W. Smith & Yang-Chih Fu (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Survey Methodology* (London: SAGE, 2016).

measurement in research.<sup>25</sup> Traditional modes in surveys are face-to-face interviews and telephone surveys, but over recent years internet-based surveys have become increasingly popular. There are good reasons for this. Internet surveys are cost-effective and easy to manage and they have great reach. A main challenge with internet surveys has been the uneven coverage in internet access between groups depending on factors such as age and level of education, but with the increasing penetration of the internet, and the increasing exposure in most or all sectors of Western societies, this problem can be expected to decrease.

In the FINEX research project, we spent a lot of time at the beginning of the project trying to delimit and define a population that made sense to our overall goal of understanding how specific ideas and behaviours rooted in religion and culture might contribute to the financial exclusion of Muslims in the Nordic countries. We ended up with several approaches related to the three main methods that we wanted to use in our research, i.e. a large survey, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. We can briefly say that, for the purpose of our large cross-country survey, we defined our sampling frame as people living in the Nordic countries who self-identify as Muslims, are over 20 years of age and have their contact information in a mosque. By defining our sampling frame in this way, we obviously excluded many people of Muslim cultural background without any relation to mosques, but we also included many people with very loose and occasional relations with mosques. There were many deliberations about how to draw samples from this sampling frame and about the necessity for a stratified approach that paid attention to expected divergence between the attitudes and habits of different strata defined according to national background and some other characteristics. For interviews and focus groups, we also went through mosque networks, but we were careful to build samples of very narrowly defined groups that we wanted to understand in depth, and data collection was carried out in settings other than in the mosque environment.

In order to illustrate the importance of sampling modes in surveys among Muslims in the Nordic countries, we would like briefly to present two pilot studies about attitudes to finance carried out in Denmark and Norway. Before choosing research strategies, FINEX did pilot studies in Norway and Denmark. One pilot study included the distribution of questionnaires on Islamic finance online, employing Danish Facebook sites believed to attract Danish Muslims with a wide range in their degree of affiliation or engagement with organized

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<sup>25</sup> Annette Jäckle, Caroline Roberts & Peter Lynn, “Assessing the Effect of Data Collection Mode in Measurement”, *International Statistical Review* 78/1 (2016): 3–20.

religion. The result showed that almost all respondents (78%; 115 of 155 respondents) considered interest to be a concern for Danish Muslims and all but one (154 of 155 respondents) found it to be a problem that loans without interest were not available in Denmark. A large majority (82%; 142 of 174) considered, furthermore, that interest was one of the most important topics in Islamic law. The sample was, however, also a very religiously active sample; 68% (89 of 131) prayed at least five times a day and 62% (81 of 131) attended the mosque at least a couple of times every month. In an allegedly representative survey from 2015, these numbers are 50% and 43%, respectively.<sup>26</sup> It is perhaps unsurprising that respondents who had no interest in Islamic finance would not be willing to spend time filling out a questionnaire on Islamic finance, but this makes for an important point, namely the difficulty of recruiting respondents to engage with topics they are not interested in.

Another pilot survey was carried out in Norway in 2015 and 2016, when 709 respondents completed a simple questionnaire with statements about Islamic and conventional banking and finance.<sup>27</sup> In this study, we used two different methods to contact respondents. First, a research assistant travelled to five cities in Norway and distributed a paper questionnaire to persons in mosques and in Muslim student organizations. Second, the same questionnaire was sent out by e-mail through networks that we had access to through the same organizations. The two methods in effect created two different samples and in Table 2 (adapted from the reference in footnote 26) it is clear that the profile of the people in the two samples was different in terms of gender, age and frequency of visits to the mosque. We saw that the modes used had a substantial effect on the profile of our sample and this made us more aware of the importance of sampling strategies when executing the larger FINEX project in the Nordic countries 2017-2020.

Table 2 here

The point we want to make is that it is too simple to talk about the pros and cons of using mosques for research *in general* without going into the specific research methods and the sampling modes that researchers choose as a function of the research questions they want to pursue. In some circumstances, mosques are the best place to recruit respondents. Say you

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<sup>26</sup> Muslimske Stemmer, Survey done by Wilke for *Jyllands-Posten* 2015. Available from <https://jyllands-posten.dk/premium/indland/ECE8145237/Muslimske-stemmer-Alle-meningsm%C3%A5lingerne>.

<sup>27</sup> Torkel Brekke, "Halal Money: Financial Inclusion and Demand for Islamic Banking in Norway", *Research & Politics* 5/1 (2018): 1-7.

specifically want to target respondents who are retired persons and frequent the mosque often because your research is about the beliefs, attitudes and practices of this group. The results in Table 2 indicate that you may want to look for potential respondents in a mosque. However, this does not mean that you necessarily need to collect responses in the same environment. You may leave respondents with a self-administered questionnaire, you may make an appointment for an interview at a later time and at a different place, and so on. Going through mosque networks in order to contact respondents does not mean that the researcher needs to operate in the same mosque environment when collecting responses. In other words, contacting respondents and getting responses from them are two different processes that may be separated in order to minimize the assumed power of mosques over responses collected from informants.

#### **4. Advantages in using mosque networks in research**

Like synagogues in Judaism and churches in Christianity, mosques serve particular functions in Islam. Without going into the classical debate about how to define a mosque or paying attention to the multifunctional site that a mosque is and has been in history, mosques could be classified as places of collective religious expression, namely prayer, and, depending of context, also places of Islamic education, services and other religious and non-religious socializing. Obviously, people express and practise Islam in other places too, but mosques are designated for that purpose, especially for men. In a diasporic context, we should also take into account that mosques often play a central role for creating ethnic, cultural and linguistic solidarity and cohesion. Mosques are also a platform for collective considerations, including how to best adapt Islamic practices to a new social context. In short, there is no doubt that mosques are key social institutions of Islam in both Muslim majority and Muslim minority countries, despite the legitimate concerns raised in the previous section.

A fundamental theoretical underpinning of our research group is that Islam is not seen as a static phenomenon, but as a tradition that is open to change and conflicting interpretations and, because of this flexibility, Muslims have shown great capacity to adapt to different societies and cultures in both past and present times. Thus, it should not come as a surprise that the many migrants of Muslim cultural background and their descendants living in Western countries, including the Nordic states, are currently going through transformations in their religious practice and thought, as has happened many times before in history. However, there is still a need to cover and analyse whether, how, why and in what circumstances the interpretation of the religion changes. For example, what are the possible causes and

preconditions for continuity, change or active preservation? Is it the pressures from non-Muslim society, or is it a general willingness to adapt? Do different cultural backgrounds have an influence on these processes and what about gender, age and class belongings? These and similar questions are at the core of the FINEX project.

Basically, the key issue above all is that ‘Islam’ is recognized as a ‘religion’ and thereby treated in a somewhat similar manner to other ‘religions’ in the new countries of residence. As part of the process, Muslims create organizations, including mosques and other associations, which are subject to national legislation and, as a consequence, create new modalities of Islam and being Muslim. This process is fundamentally based on coercive means, as national laws and administrative practices are imposed on communities.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, we see changes over time and generations among Muslim and other religious communities in different countries, which are adaptations to the new national context. This is a recognized dynamic in the United States, referred to as the ‘de facto congregationalism thesis’.<sup>29</sup>

Niels Vinding has discussed the various meanings of the term ‘churchification’, in which a main point is that the existing environment of churches in Europe, and the national legal and bureaucratic frameworks regulating church-state relations, act as powerful forces shaping the position of Islam, mosques and their representatives in Europe.<sup>30</sup> Vinding warns against the misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims that this often leads to, but we want to stress that, as part of processes of churchification and governmentalization, mosques are to varying degrees legitimized as representatives of Islam. While it is clear that ‘Islam’ cannot and does not become reduced to officially recognized religious organizations and their activities, such organizations nevertheless play a key role in the solidification and the institutionalization of Islam in any given country. Often, mosques also want to emphasize their own position as such

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<sup>28</sup> Tuomas Martikainen, “Reconfiguring the Societal Place of Religion in Finland: Islamic Communities Move from the Margins to Partner in Civil Society”, in Jane Garnett & Sondra L. Hausner, (eds), *Religion in Diaspora: Cultures of Citizenship* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 121–137, and Tuomas Martikainen, “Managing Religious Diversity in Finland: From Church Law to Governance Networks”, in Andrew Dawson (ed.), *The Politics and Practice of Religious Diversity: National Contexts, Global Issues* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 118–132.

<sup>29</sup> R. Warner, “Immigration and Religious Communities in the United States”, in R. Warner & J. Wittner (eds), *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and New Immigration* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1998), pp. 3–34. For a critique, see, for example, W. Cadge, “De Facto Congregationalism and the Religious Organizations of Post-1965 Immigrants to the United States: A Revised Approach”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76/2 (2008): 344–374.

<sup>30</sup> Niels Valdemar Vinding, “Churchification of Islam in Europe”, in N.V. Vinding, E. Racius & J. Thielmann (eds), *Exploring the Multitude of Muslims in Europe: Essays in Honour of Jørgen S. Nielsen*, Muslim Minorities Series 7 (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

and may, for example, display their activities to local residents, visiting school classes and the media.

A different but relevant trend is the rapidly increasing use and reach of mobile and internet technology. Mosques are creative in the use of technology for various purposes and they adopt the internet, including various social media platforms, in order to increase their reach. The same trend can be seen in most or all religious organizations, as religions compete for visibility and attention.<sup>31</sup> In Denmark, a recent study found that at least 43% of 158 mosques had official Facebook pages and more had unofficial pages or closed groups on Facebook, while there has been exponential growth in the activity and the number of ‘likes’ on the mosques’ pages over the past few years.<sup>32</sup> In many countries, authorities demand that all organizations keep updated lists of members, in particular if public funding to organizations is a function of membership, as in Norway and to a lesser extent in Sweden. These trends towards institutionalization and adoption of new technology mean that the reach of mosques in Muslim communities may be growing. In fact, in the era of the internet and social media, we want to argue that one of the main advantages in using mosques as points of entry to a population in research is the reach that mosques actually have among Muslims in many European countries through their active use of the internet. A number of web-based services and applications are generally employed by mosques in order to reach out to the public and many mosques can reach members or affiliates or occasional visitors through e-mail or other communication applications. It is increasingly normal for mosques in the countries we study to use Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and other apps in addition to e-mail and mobile phone numbers to reach people with information. This also means that information sent out by mosques reaches many different *kinds* of people, including many persons who have a very loose connection with the mosques and may use its facilities only for rites of passage, such as burials, much like many Nordic Protestant Christians use the majority churches.

FINEX invested a lot of time and resources early in the research process in establishing trust-based partnerships with a large number of important mosques across the Nordic region in order to solicit their assistance in the recruitment of informants for research. In practical terms, this process involved the project leader and research assistants in all four countries

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<sup>31</sup> See for instance Torkel Brekke, *Faithonomics: Religion and the Free Market* (London: Hurst, 2016), ch. 2. For a case study from Finland, see Marcus Moberg, “Mediatization and the Technologization of Discourse: Exploring Official Discourse on the Internet and Information and Communications Technology within the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland”, *New Media and Society* 20/2 (2018): 515–531.

<sup>32</sup> Jonas Aahave, “Danske moskéer på Facebook”, *Religion i Danmark* 9/1 (2017): 33–43.

visiting mosques and mosque leaders in order to explain the project and solicit help. Our experience was that the mosque authorities were forthcoming. The positive response was a function of several important factors. First of all, our research topic was one that many Muslims perceived as positive in the sense that it addressed something that is seen to be a challenge in some Muslim communities in Europe, i.e. the lack of financial mechanisms tailored to Muslims and the real or potential financial exclusion and marginalization of Muslims. The financial and economic integration of Muslims is a general policy goal of FINEX – although our primary objective is empirical research – and this is a goal that is easy to share for mosque authorities. In addition, we believe that we achieved a high degree of trust and willingness to assist, because we already had a very extensive network among mosque authorities in all four countries. The authors of this article and our research assistants had years of previous research and active engagement with mosque communities and this made our approach easier.

To be sure, this is potentially dangerous territory that needs an extremely high degree of self-reflection and ethical and legal awareness. Establishing a trust-based relationship with one or several mosques in order to recruit informants through their networks presents the researchers with serious challenges regarding research ethics. Both European and national legislations make strict demands concerning the protection of personal data, but modern universities and professional research institutes generally have the technology and the knowhow to meet these demands.

To sum up, depending on the research questions and given the right level of methodological, legal and ethical awareness and self-reflection, we posit that mosques continue to be potentially very important points of entry for research about Muslims in Europe. In fact, there are trends in the relationship between mosques, the wider society and national governments, and in the adoption of new technology, that could make mosques even more important as points of entry for research about Muslims in Europe in the future.

## **5. Concluding discussion**

There has been criticism of using mosques as points of entry or recruiting grounds for informants when doing research about Muslims in Europe. Part of the background has been the new emphasis on lived religion and a critical view of what has been perceived to be a one-sided academic focus on religious institutions. Our argument started, first, by acknowledging some of this criticism. However, if we claim that mosques may give us a wrong or biased idea

of what Muslims ‘actually’ think and feel because mosque networks only give us informants or respondents who are organized, we need a precise idea of what it means to be organized. But the concepts of membership or being organized in or affiliated with a mosque have no stable cores across state boundaries and they may also be quite unstable within states, especially in countries where there is some regional variation in how religion is managed and organized. They are also unstable over time within the same country because legislation, funding regimes and membership mechanisms change over time, as is demonstrated in the complex development in Sweden regarding bureaucratic terms for categorizing religion.

We warned that any meaningful discussion of method in the study of Muslims in the West must start with a precise definition of the population one wants to study. Only when this has been done can we agree or disagree about the appropriateness of an approach to sampling respondents from the population and to getting data from them through interviews, surveys or other means. We also stressed the simple fact that we need to clearly separate the phase of recruitment and the phase of data collection both conceptually and in practical terms, whether we are talking about quantitative or qualitative research. It is possible to *recruit* informants or respondents through mosques and their networks while collecting *responses* from those respondents at a time and location that is separate from the mosque context so as to minimize desirability bias and related problems. Finally, we argued that there are trends – we can call them institutionalization and technologization – that may make mosques even more attractive as points of entry for research. Mosques are to varying degrees recognized by European societies as in some sense representative of Muslims and of Islam, but more importantly, the adoption of new technology makes mosque authorities ever more able to reach people.