

*The impact of the recent forced migration crisis on
Christian-Muslim relations in Europe*

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The history of European approaches to refugees goes back to the early 20th century driven above all by the population movements caused by the First World War.¹ The early developments were especially associated with the name of Fridtjof Nansen, the Norwegian polar explorer who became a leading campaigner for the rights of refugees. He gave his name to the ‘Nansen passport’, an identity and travel document for refugees in due course recognised by up to fifty states, and was the first High Commissioner for Refugees of the League of Nations. However, the international legislation required to back up these developments was only developed after the Second World War in the Geneva Convention on the Protection of Refugees, adopted in 1951. Based on Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, it came into force after the necessary number of ratifications in 1954. Initially the Convention applied only to refugees in Europe fleeing events before 1 January 1951, but in 1967 a protocol was adopted which gave the Convention universal coverage.² Its definition of a refugee still stands:

A person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.³

For several decades this was the regime which was understood as applying across

Europe, although application was very uneven. For one thing each of the countries of western Europe had its own variations on how it interpreted and implemented the regime, and for another the countries of the east European Soviet bloc basically ignored it. Refugee flows within Europe after 1950 were primarily from the Soviet bloc to the West and experienced peaks whenever there was a particular crisis in one of the eastern countries, notably after the failed uprisings in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1967. The German Democratic Republic (GDR, ‘East Germany’) was a frequent destination for refugees from outside Europe. It was widely known that the East German authorities would routinely expel such

¹ I am not in this paper abiding strictly by definitions that distinguish between migrants who are fleeing persecution and seeking a safe haven (asylum seekers), those who have been granted asylum (refugees), and migrants seeking a materially better life (economic migrants). Such distinctions require placing people in sharply defined categories which often do not correspond to individual realities. The first two groups are both refugees in any common sense usage, and all three groups are migrants, a term which presumes nothing about their reasons for moving or whether they are intending to remain in their new countries or not.

² See the Introductory Note to the Convention at <http://www.unhcr.org/protect/PROTECTION/3b66c2aa10.pdf>, accessed 17 April 2017.

³ Article 1 of the Convention and Article 1 of the Protocol at <http://www.unhcr.org/protect/PROTECTION/3b66c2aa10.pdf>, accessed 17 April 2017.

refugees to West Berlin, where they could remain, as they were not allowed to travel to West Germany proper.

Before the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989-91 non-European sources of refugees had appeared, in particular Latin America, Lebanon (including large numbers of Palestinians from the refugee camps there), Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Sri Lanka. After the Soviet collapse Bosnia and then Kosovo were added to the list – and the list goes on. In 1990 the European Union, by now doubled in size from the original six members with several more to be added during the following decade, took the first step towards a common refugee policy in the so-called Dublin Convention. The principle here was that a refugee should apply for asylum in the first of the signatory countries entered. This was linked to a project to introduce a shared finger print database to counter multiple applications. The Convention was revised to establish the Dublin II and Dublin III Regulations in 2008 and 2013 respectively. This gave the member countries more flexibility in how they would deal with refugees, and it gave refugees a degree of flexibility as to where to apply for asylum.

The major crisis arose in 2015 when the flow of refugees peaked at hundreds of thousands entering Europe across the Mediterranean, especially from Libya, and across the Aegean from Turkey. The refugees came mainly from Eritrea, Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, supplemented by economic migrants from sub-Saharan Africa and Albania.

The Muslim factor

As the events of 2015 and 2016 indicated, the issue of refugees almost immediately merged into questions around Islam and Muslims. This was, of course, in part because such a large proportion of the refugees were Muslims from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan as well as parts of sub-Saharan Africa (although their adherence to Islam was less remarked on in public debate). But it was also because the events happened at a time when Islam anyway had become a high profile public issue, developed by politicians and media at least since the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US.

For the churches the issue was not new. The relationship of European Christianity with Islam had developed over centuries, mostly one of tension, if not confrontation, although there were exceptions.⁴ Until the mid-20th century European churches, Protestant and Catholic,⁵ encounter with Islam was generally outside Europe, often as an element in Europe's commercial and political expansion since the 16th century. Islam was a missionary issue and that was where it was located in the church structures. So far as Europe was concerned, therefore, it was quite appropriate that it was the global initiatives of the various declarations of the Second Vatican Council which set the tone in the late 1960s, followed by the World Council of Churches in the early 1970s. But already at this time the immigration and settlement in Western Europe of people from Muslim-majority countries was beginning to be noticed.

Initially it was the various social care sections of the churches which mobilised, but by the late 1970s it could no longer be ignored that the majority were Muslims: there was a

⁴ See Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000).

⁵ For most of the period that I shall be dealing with here, the Orthodox churches of Eastern Europe were essentially absent from this arena, much to the chagrin of the Arab Orthodox patriarchate of Antioch.

challenge to faith. In the Roman Catholic Church the Second Vatican Council had challenged the national European bishops' councils. They found a willing and experienced response among the order of the White Fathers. During the 1970s various types of structures were created in Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, and Spain – all staffed by White Fathers – to provide the national church with resources and training on issues to do with Islam and Muslims in the local neighbourhood. Among the Protestants in the mid-1970s the then British Council of Churches set up a Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths – although the initiative started with Islam in mind, it could not remain thus restricted since immigration had also included substantial numbers of Hindus and Sikhs to add to the significant number of Jews among the 'people of other faiths'. Soon after, the German Protestant Church (EKD) appointed a federal Islam resource person while regional churches gradually appointed their own, as did the various dioceses of the Catholic church. By the end of the 1980s such positions were to be found throughout the country. The Dutch Protestant churches had very quickly followed the opening of a Catholic office for Islam in the country and were among the first to establish a very close coordination between the two traditions.

In other countries developments were slower. In Scandinavia it was not till the late 1990s that the national Lutheran churches had caught up, although the missionary societies were active earlier with an increasingly dialogical approach taking over from a traditional missionary approach. The delay can probably be attributed to the peculiarly Scandinavian state church tradition. Italy was also among the slowest to move. The delay can partly be attributed to the relatively late arrival of Muslim immigrants but also to the overwhelming role of the Vatican which often appeared to act as the national Catholic church structure for the country. So the initiatives that the Vatican had taken since the Second Vatican Council seemed to serve also the church in Italy.

The international church initiatives indicated earlier gave the impetus to the European churches to start working together across the national borders. In February 1978 a conference on Islam in Europe took place in Salzburg, Austria. It had arisen out of a challenge from the Islam in Africa Project⁶ to its European liaison group: we have been trying to come to terms with our relations with Islam for more than a decade, when are you going to look at your own region? As a result of the Salzburg conference the Conference of European Churches (CEC) established an Islam committee, including Catholic observers, which, among other activities, arranged two further Europe-wide meetings, in Frankfurt in December 1982 and in St. Pölten, Austria, in March 1984. On the Catholic side, soon after the Vatican Council, the Dominicans had started a series of four-yearly global gatherings, the Journées Romaines, usually in Rome, where members of the Dominican order and others working in Muslim contexts would meet. Out of that arose in 1979 the first meeting of the Journées d'Arras bringing together people from churches across Europe working in Muslim environments. From the beginning this ecumenical group – Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox - remained deliberately informal and determined its own agendas. In those days the number of persons actively involved were limited, usually no more than about two dozen. The outcome was that the people involved in

⁶ Today called the Project for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA). A report on the conference was published by the Conference of European Churches, *The Church and the Muslims in Europe – Matters for Reflection* (Geneva, 1978).

the core of the CEC committee, in the European network around the Council of European (Catholic) Bishops' Conferences (the CCEE), and in the Arras group were the same. This integration meant that the Arras group effectively became the informal point of coordination of the work of the more formal groups that were always restricted by their accountability to their terms of reference.⁷

The ecumenical character of this stream of activity was strengthened when in 1986 the two European church organisations, CEC and the CCEE, agreed to merge their Islam work into a joint Islam committee. Through a series of meetings in the following years this joint group increasingly focused on the role of theological education and how it could become more inclusive of dimensions of Islam and the life and circumstances of Muslim communities in Europe.⁸ Parallel to this a joint working group had been set up to deal with the theological and cultural challenges which the new Islamic presence in Europe was setting the churches.⁹ But completely separately, the Churches' Committee for Migrant Workers in Europe, set up to coordinate mainly pastoral work with immigrants of all origins, discovered that Islam was becoming a factor. They set up a small working group which in 1987 published a report on "Islamic Law and its Significance for the Situation of Muslims in Europe".¹⁰

By the 1990s the situation had moved on markedly over a period of less than two decades. The year 1990 itself saw major public debates triggered by the publication in Britain of Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses* and the first 'head scarves affair' in France when three teenage girls were excluded from school for wearing hijab. This was followed almost immediately by the first Gulf War following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and then the collapse of Yugoslavia and the wars in Bosnia and then in Kosovo. Fortunately, religious leaders in Britain had got together in 1987 to establish the Interfaith Network for the UK with the active encouragement of senior church leaders. One consequence was that, at a time when Muslims felt they were being widely harassed for their protests against the Rushdie book and Ayatullah Khomeini's fatwa against the author in 1990, there was a feeling that at least in the churches they had someone who understood their predicament, even if they did not necessarily agree with their cause. In Scandinavia during the 1990s church-related social welfare agencies were beginning to be active in relation to their local Muslim communities, establishing advice and drop-in centres. Similarly in France, where the strict separation between state and religion prevented the state from dealing with religious community groups, a number of social welfare agencies, apparently secular but in reality church-based, were also becoming active. By the 1990s, the various regional Protestant and Catholic churches of Germany all had their own full-time staff member for relations with Islam and Muslims.

⁷ While the terms of reference of the two official committees and their successors have changed, the Arras group has continued to meet annually with a steady change of membership.

⁸ For the history and early development of this initiative see Paul Huot-Pleuroux, "Jan Slomp and the Committee 'Islam in Europe'" in Gé Speelman, Jan van Lin and Dick Mulder (eds.), *Muslims and Christians in Europe: Breaking New Ground* (Kampen: Kok, 1993), pp.69-78.

⁹ The report of this group was originally published in German: Jürgen Micksch and Michael Mildenberg (eds), *Christen und Muslime im Gespräch - eine Handreichung* (Frankfurt/Main: EKD, 1982).

¹⁰ In English in *Research Papers: Muslims in Europe*, no. 35 (September 1987). It was published also in German, French, and Dutch. The working group of six had both Christian and Muslim members.

At a time when interreligious dialogue was coming out of the closet, so to speak, increasingly driven by social and political needs, politicians were also beginning to pay attention. On the background of the talk of ‘Islam, the new enemy’ and ‘clash of civilisations’ governments suddenly discovered that interreligious dialogue, and especially the Christian-Muslim track, might be worth looking at more closely. The Barcelona Accord of November 1995 between the European Union and the southern Mediterranean states included a call for interreligious dialogue within its cultural dialogue programme. Some Muslim states had taken similar initiatives, particularly in response to Huntington’s article “The clash of civilizations”.¹¹ Most consistently and sustained was the series of meetings arranged by the Iranian agency for cultural cooperation. These included partnerships with the Vatican, the World Council of Churches, the Greek Orthodox Church through its diocese in Geneva, the Federation of German Protestant Churches (EKD), and the Theology Department of the University of Birmingham, this last subsequently adopted by the Church of England.

By the beginning of the 21st century, the institutions and local and national experience among the churches were essentially in place to face the challenges of events to come. As the focus of this meeting is the recent refugee crisis I shall pass over the first dozen years or so of the new century and move directly to the crisis of 2015.

The crisis strikes: 2015

To give an impression of what has been happening during the crisis itself I will provide a more detailed survey of events in 2015, the year in which the major refugee crisis hit Europe. For several years, there had been a steady but comparatively low-level movement of people, mostly informal (often called illegal), across the Mediterranean. But the fall from power of Muammar Qadhafi in Libya and the collapse of central government in that country provided the opportunity for people smugglers and migrants of a route more likely to give dividends. Soon the migration routes out of Africa converged through Libya bringing together people from sub-Saharan Africa seeking an income and people fleeing oppression in Eritrea. They proceeded across the narrow waters to southern Italy from where the authorities quietly allowed them to move north across the porous internal EU frontiers to where they could find employment. The traffic on this route peaked in 2015. In the eastern Mediterranean, more specifically the Aegean Sea between Turkey and Greece, that same year was when Syrian refugees especially were giving up on their hopes that the civil war would quieten down so they could return. The traffic from the Turkish mainland to the Greek islands off the coast took off during the summer of 2015 consisting especially of Afghans, Iraqis and, above all, Syrians. Both routes attracted media attention, and images of sinking rubber dinghies, families bring pulled soaked from the sea or wading ashore on beaches, and dead children made refugees the front page issue of the year.

The pressure on the southern states of the European Union came at a time when the Union was, in any case, in a state of some disarray. A significant minority of the elected members of the European Parliament had been elected on anti-EU platforms. The Commission itself was new – it had only been appointed in 2014 – and had hitherto not seen

¹¹ Samuel Huntington, “The clash of civilizations”, *Foreign Affairs*, spring 1993.

a common refugee policy as a major priority. Economic and financial policy had taken most attention, especially in connection with the repeated threat of Greece going bankrupt and having to pull out of the common currency, the Euro. In addition, elections had over the previous few years brought more assertively nationalist governments to power, most notably in Poland and Hungary, and parties with similar nationalist and EU-sceptic ideas were threatening elsewhere, especially in France and the Netherlands..

The idea of implementing the Dublin regulations in a calm and measured fashion in these circumstances was a pipe dream. On 9 September 2015 the European Commission announced that it was

putting forward a comprehensive package of proposals which will help address the refugee crisis that EU Member States and neighbouring countries are facing, including by tackling the root causes making people seek refuge in Europe.

The new set of measures will alleviate pressure from Member States most affected – notably Greece, Italy and Hungary – by proposing to relocate 120,000 people in clear need of international protection to other EU Member States. This number will be on top of the 40,000 that the Commission proposed in May to relocate from Greece and Italy and for which the decision by the Council is still to be adopted.¹²

In the event, the statement was yet another failure of Commission hope in the face of political realities in central Europe.

It was especially the caravan of migrants moving up through south-eastern Europe which put on pressure. People mostly wanted to get to Germany, alternatively to Sweden. Transit countries on the way reacted in differing fashions. By the late summer of 2015 Hungary had already experienced large numbers of Albanians from Kosovo trying to get in or through, 23,000 in January alone.¹³ By the summer the pressure was such that the government decided to build a barbed wire fence all the way along the Croatian border to stop the traffic. By the time the fence was completed in November the flow had increased to 6000 a day. In August the German government announced that it would welcome refugees, especially those from Syria. This significantly increased the flow and annoyed countries along the route, some more than others. The German Chancellor Angela Merkel asserted a German ‘culture of welcome’, widely supported in the population, at least initially. Croatia and Serbia had generally maintained an open attitude to the streams of migrants in the face of growing pressure after Hungary and then, in November, Slovenia closed their borders. Several countries within the open travel area of the Schengen agreement re-imposed border controls, a measure that Schengen allowed in exceptional circumstances. At the beginning of 2016 Sweden, which during the previous year had received some 30,000 Syrians, finally decided that it needed to restrict entry at the most popular point, namely the bridge between

¹² “Refugee Crisis: European Commission takes decisive action”, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-is-new/news/news/2015/20150909_1_en, accessed 26 April 2017.

¹³ Unless otherwise stated individual country information for 2015 in the following is from Oliver Scharbridt, Samim Akgönül, Ahmet Alibašić, Jørgen S. Nielsen and Egdūnas Raciūnas (eds.), *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, vol.8 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), hereafter YME8.

Copenhagen and Malmö. Within a few hours Denmark imposed controls at its borders with Germany.¹⁴ In March 2016 the EU and Turkey agreed on a policy to control the number of refugees crossing the Aegean Sea, a policy which remains unstable.¹⁵

Church reactions to this situation were very much determined by their local contexts. Albania was only marginally touched by the Balkan refugee situation, but it was concerned to cement the country's position as a potential applicant for EU membership. An ecumenical delegation of religious leaders, including Catholic and Orthodox as well as Muslim, was sent to Paris to show solidarity after the terrorist attacks in January 2015. This was probably also motivated by a wish to distance the country from its young people who had gone to fight in Syria. In Poland, where the Catholic church for fifteen years had held annual 'Days of Islam', Bishop Krzysztof Zadarko called for a charitable Christian attitude towards Muslims – he was the chair of the Migration, Tourism and Pilgrimage Council of the national bishops' conference. During the national elections of 2015, which led to a right-wing government, attitudes against immigrants and Muslims merged as they did elsewhere. The national religious leadership sought to push back against this trend with an ecumenical service in mid-November at the cathedral in Gdansk. At the end of the month cross-religious demonstrations were organised by a Muslim group in Poznan in protest against the murder of a Syrian refugee who turned out to be Christian. When protesters dumped pigs' heads on the site of a planned mosque in the Romanian capital in August, and others planted hundreds of crosses on the same site a month later, the Orthodox Patriarch denounced such intolerance. Similarly in Slovenia the Catholic Archbishop Zore opposed campaigns against plans to build a mosque in Ljubljana: Muslims are not a threat, he said, and the refugee crisis should not be abused. When the leading imam in Luxembourg in January, in response to reporting of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack in Paris, called for a public charter of respect for all saints and sacred persons, the Catholic Vicar General supported it, although the media and politicians saw it as a potential threat to press freedom. In Germany, churches soon started providing sanctuary for refugees in their premises, a medieval custom which no longer had any standing in law, but which the authorities continued to respect.¹⁶ At a memorial service attended by thousands after a terrorist attack in Copenhagen in February the message from both Lutheran church leaders and political leaders was that this did not express a fight between Islam and the West, and that terrorists and ordinary believers should not be confused – *pas d'amalgame* as the French slogan had it.

At the continental level the Governing Board of the Conference of European Churches in a statement issued at its meeting in Etchmiadzin, Armenia, in mid-November 2015 said:

In the shadow of deadly attacks in Paris and military intervention in Brussels, it is too easy to surrender to a climate of hatred and fear. The churches of Europe must be a voice of peace and hospitality in these difficult times. We reject any attempt to turn Europe into a fortress and condemn all acts of violence, hostility, and exclusion

¹⁴ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-35222015>, accessed 27 April 2017.

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/08/eu-turkey-refugee-deal-qa>, accessed 27 April 2017.

¹⁶ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/11473420/German-churches-open-their-doors-to-refugees-under-protection-of-ancient-custom.html>, accessed 27 April 2017.

toward refugees. The Governing Board is aware, however, that the refugee crisis poses enormous challenges to its membership in terms of their responsibilities concerning integration.¹⁷

On the other side, there were church leaders who joined in and encouraged anti-Muslim voices. In October, Archbishop Antonio Cañizares of Valencia warned against a future in which he saw Islam as a Trojan horse threatening the Spanish way of life. This was a theme which the Moldovan Orthodox Church, which falls under the Moscow Patriarchate, regularly emphasised during the year. In Greece, groups of Orthodox students demonstrated against plans to open a Department of Islamic Studies at the University of Thessaloniki, while a number of Metropolitans of the Greek Orthodox Church expressed their opposition to plans for a mosque in Athens. They saw the increasing public visibility of Islam as a return of the Ottomans.

Merging refugees and terrorism.

The debates and activities that reached a crescendo in the context of the 2015 refugee crisis have continued. The tensions were kept alive by further terrorist incidents through 2016. On 22 March terrorists struck at Brussels airport and at a metro station in the city killing 35 and wounding over twice as many. On Bastille Day, 14 July, a heavy truck was driven along the Nice promenade killing 86 people and wounding nearly 500. Just over a month later a priest was murdered in a village in northern France. In Berlin a stolen truck was driven into a crowd at a Christmas market killing twelve.¹⁸ On 22 March this year a car was driven into people walking across Westminster Bridge in London killing six, and at the beginning of April, 15 people were killed by a suicide bomber on the St. Petersburg metro in Russia.

Church leaders continued to take public stances on the events. During the spring of 2016 the Catholic Archbishop of Cologne, Rainer Maria Woelki, was interviewed in the Vatican by the Catholic broadcaster Dom Radio. He attacked the increase in anti-Muslim statements of the party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD): “The self-appointed saviours of the Christian West who are looking for an absolute antichrist should take a look in the mirror.” In a video at the same time he said:

Anyone who denigrates Muslims as the AfD leadership does should realize prayer rooms and mosques are equally protected by our constitution as our churches and chapels.... Whoever says ‘yes’ to church towers must also say ‘yes’ to minarets.¹⁹

In August a slightly more hesitant statement came from Cardinal Reinhard Marx, Archbishop of Munich and chair of the German Catholic Bishops’ Conference. He basically supported the

¹⁷ <http://us9.campaign-archive2.com/?u=ebf90afe96f5033772b0ec5ea&id=5baf715010&e=649b6586a9>, accessed 27 April 2017.

¹⁸ It is worth remembering that there is a long history of terrorist attacks in Europe, in which Muslims have figured in only the more recent ones. An extensive but not comprehensive list is to be found in the Wikipedia article on “Terrorism in Europe”, accessed 26 April 2017. A similar article on “Terrorism in the United States” lists attacks going back to 1776! But these data pale into insignificance when compared to attacks in the Muslim world where Muslims have been victims.

¹⁹ Rosie Scammell, “German cardinal tarred as ‘Anichrist’ for defending Muslims,” <http://religionnews.com/2016/04/28/german-cardinal-tarred-as-antichrist-for-defending-muslims>, accessed 10 April 2017.

idea of restricting refugee numbers but called for human treatment of those who were admitted.²⁰

After the truck attack at a Christmas market in Berlin last December, the Lutheran priest at the Frederiksberg Palace Church in the Danish capital said to Danish state radio that it's no use getting angry: "There's no point in blaming lots of asylum seekers, who have after all fled the horrors of war to places like Germany, for this kind of thing." Don't react with fear, he said, but face each other with love.²¹ This last April the Protestant Berlin Bishop Markus Dröge called for continuing and strengthening the dialogue with Muslims who wish to dialogue.²² There have been continuing tensions between some local church leaders and the attitude of Pope Francis. So when the bishop of Pisto in March 2016 told priests not to let Muslims pray in churches, it attracted public attention that two of his priests defied him with reference to the practice and call of the pope.²³

The refugees from the Middle East, especially Syria but also Iraq, were not all Muslim, although one might think so if one depended on mainstream media headlines. Syria traditionally had a Christian minority of somewhere around 10%, and in Iraq the activities of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) had been focused in the north-west, a region with a particularly large Christian minority. There were consequently many Christians among the refugees. At a time when Hungary was leading eastern European opposition to the EU's attempts to spread the refugee burden, Prime Minister Victor Orbán had suggested that his country might help by taking Christian refugees, a suggestion that was turned down by the Commission as discriminatory. However, internal tensions among the Muslim and Christian refugees themselves were becoming public, especially in Germany with its many refugees and refugee centres. By the summer of 2016 reports were emerging of Christians in the refugee shelters being harassed in various ways, some reports suggesting that as many as 88% of Christians had had such experiences. The chairman of Open Doors Germany, Markus Rode, talked of an "atmosphere of fear and panic". In response the Catholic bishops' conference said that its survey had indicated that there was a problem that needed to be taken seriously but that it was not common, a view backed up by the Protestant bishop of Berlin.²⁴

Throughout the events from 2015 till today, the position of the United Kingdom has been rather different from the European. The Conservative-led coalition government, which had come into power in 2010, had the reduction of net immigration as one of its main policy planks.²⁵ During its five years in power, the government signally failed to implement this

²⁰ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/german-catholic-bishop-refugees_us_56b8b2a0e4b04f9b57da4d6d?ir=Religion%3Fncid%3Dnewstushpmg00000003 dated 2 August 2016, accessed 10 April 2017.

²¹ <http://www.dr.dk/levnu/psykologi/praester-vi-maa-bekaempe-det-onde-i-verden-med-kaerlighed>, accessed 26 April 2017.

²² <http://cibedo.de/2017/04/10/bischof-droege-kirche-muss-dialogbereite-muslime-unterstuetzen>, accessed 10 April 2017.

²³ Josephine McKenna, "Italian bishop tells priests not to let Muslims pray in churches", <http://religionnews.com/2016/03/21/italian-bishop-tells-priests-not-let-muslims-pray-churches/>, accessed 10 April 2017.

²⁴ <http://religionnews.com/2016/06/03/growing-concern-for-german-churches-muslim-refugees-harassing-christians/>, accessed 27 April 2017.

²⁵ The Home Secretary in that government, responsible for immigration, Theresa May, became prime minister after the referendum on 23 June 2015 which accepted that the UK should leave the EU – "Brexit".

policy, and by 2015 the control of refugees became one of the main symbolic focus points of the policy. After Germany the UK was probably the country that most refugees would like to get to. While most realistically accepted that the obstacles were too great, enough stubbornly continued to try to get through. The most visible expression of this desire was the make-shift camp which had grown up outside the French port of Calais, from where people hoped to be able to smuggle themselves across the Channel, usually stowed away on a truck. The camp, popularly known as the Jungle, at various times housed anything up to 6000 people, including a number of unaccompanied children, mostly teenagers. The camp had first appeared in 1999 and had moved around as the French authorities tried to close it down. In late 2016 much media attention was given to the ‘final’ closing down of the Jungle, but earlier this year it started building up again on a different site.

The government’s response to the refugee crisis was to say that refugees should be helped as near to their home countries as possible, a policy which was reflected in the fact that the UK was one of the largest donors to support programmes in the refugee camps in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. But pressure from public opinion and various NGOs including the churches was such that the government announced that it would arrange the entry of 20,000 refugees through till 2020. They would be identified by the UK authorities and selected from those who had fled to the countries immediately neighbouring Syria, the argument being that selecting from among refugees who had already reached Europe would merely serve to increase the numbers trying the dangerous sea crossings. For the time being the UK authorities have made it their policy to favour ‘vulnerable’ refugees, e.g. those with disabilities and women and children threatened with abuse.²⁶

During 2016 a particular issue was the plight of unaccompanied children. In a House of Lords debate on a revised immigration law, Lord (Alf) Dubs pushed through an amendment which obliged the government to announce that it would exceptionally allow in 2000 unaccompanied children from among the refugees already in Europe. A Jew, he had himself been brought to Britain just before the Second World War in the so-called *Kindertransport*. In pushing his amendment Lord Dubs had the broad active support of the churches. Unsurprisingly, the churches then issued angry statements when the government without warning abandoned the policy in early March 2017, although only a few hundred children had so far benefited.

Conclusion: Tensions and hope

It is in the nature of this enquiry that, when we ask what the churches’ responses to the refugee crisis might be, we find ourselves heading towards the statements and actions of official church agencies and individuals. They are the ones which are most easily accessible under the obvious search terms. They are the Church and as such they speak for Christians. But the question has to be asked: to what extent do their actions and statements represent the views of the ordinary members of the congregations? In reading their statements can we also read the views of their congregations? If one ventures to answer yes, it has to be with

²⁶ At the end of December 2015 the Church of England issued a fact sheet about refugee resettlement: https://www.churchofengland.org/media/2458919/resettlement_fact_sheet.pdf, accessed 27 April 2017. For a list of and links to a number of church statements, British and European, on refugees see <https://ctbi.org.uk/how-the-churches-are-responding-to-the-refugee-crisis/>, accessed 27 April 2017.

significant hesitations and qualifications. Perhaps such statements are not actually intended to represent the views of the women and men in the church pew, rather to represent the considered theological views of the leadership in an effort to influence public opinion and state policy but also, and importantly, to educate those who regularly occupy the pews.

As is well-known, European public opinion has undergone a major shift to the inward-looking right, a direction in which narrow nationalism and ethnic exclusion are significant components. This is reflected in the steady increase since the 1990s of people voting for parties of the nationalist right such as the Danish People's Party in Denmark, the Front National in France, Geert Wilder's Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, and more recently the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany. Then there is the hard and sometimes violent fringe such as the English Defence League, Attaka in Bulgaria, Pegida in Germany, or Jobbik in Hungary. Despite the lengthy period of declining membership in the churches of Europe, we can be pretty certain that there are church members among the followers of such movements – and not just isolated individuals.

During the wars in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s – as also during the Lebanese civil war 1975-1990 – it was not unusual for church leaders, certainly at the level of parish priest, to engage in activities and to make statements which most of us here and now would consider to be contradictory to central tenets of our faith, making a mockery of e.g. the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount. And we can just look at the birth rates in Italy and Spain to wonder at the effect of Vatican teaching on the faithful. Priests, imams and other religious leaders are, of course, also members of their communities. It is therefore not surprising that identification with their community might take precedence over loyalty to abstract principles. Insofar as religious leaders are members of their communities it is to be expected that, in circumstances where religion becomes ethnic or tribal, religious leaders can conceivably follow.

This should be a prescription for pessimism in the present. But if we remind ourselves where we were just a few generations ago there is, in my view, a strong case for optimism. When we look at the history of relations between Islam and Christianity it is not a very cheerful story. This is not the place to exercise the history in any detail but we can just remind ourselves of the conflict which have taken place between Christian and Muslim powers over the centuries, with the Crusades and Turks at gates of Vienna holding iconic places. Our theological histories have given many more times space to wilfully ignorant and condemnatory judgments than to attempts genuinely to understand each other. Granted, there have been times and places where interaction has been more constructive – certain periods in Islamic Spain or under the Ottomans, Elizabethan attempts to establish alliances with Morocco and Istanbul, and, surprisingly, late 18th and 19th century fascination with Islam in Germanic art and literature. But these flashes of light have not been able to derail an accumulative narrative of mistrust and enmity.

Given that history it is, frankly, remarkable that relations in the present are not worse. The series of terrorist attacks in France since 2015 have been exploited by the Front National to boost support, and warnings against Muslims, domestic and foreign, became a central plank in Marine le Pen's recent campaign to become French president. Although her vote in the final round on 7 May was fifty percent higher than her father had achieved in the presidential election in 2002, she was still overwhelmed by her liberal opponent Emmanuel

Macron. Despite all the noises around him, Geerd Wilders' share in the Dutch parliamentary vote in March 2017, although increased, was only 13.3%.²⁷ Understandably the media paid an enormous amount of attention to the dramatic progress of the anti-Islamic AfD in mostly former eastern Germany, which was attributed to opposition to Angela Merkel's open refugee policy over the previous year. Much less attention was given to the marked majority in favour of the refugee policy in the state of Baden-Württemberg in the south-west.

More specifically, we have seen how the churches generally throughout the crisis have taken a stand in favour of refugees and cooperation with Muslims and Islamic groupings. And this in spite of the growing public pressures from the nationalist right which over recent years has dragged the political centre generally in a right-ward direction. I would argue that what we are seeing are the positive effects of decades of international, European, national, and local moves to nurture positive relations with Muslims and Islam, and to encourage a more constructive mutual engagement ranging across the spectrum from the theological to the practical.²⁸ Those of us who have been engaged in Christian-Muslim relations off and on over the years are often asked, what have we achieved? It is sometimes easy for us, especially in recent years, to be tempted by pessimism, even despair. But if we stand back a bit and look at a wider and deeper horizon, I believe that the story is encouraging. The fact that we are still meeting, talking, and working together in the face of the pressures around us today, I would suggest, is a historical breakthrough.

²⁷ <http://www.dutchnews.nl/news/archives/2017/03/vvd-wins-33-seats-but-coalition-partner-labour-is-hammered/>. The election systems in Europe differ significantly from one country to another, so the degree of media attention is often not a reflection of popular opinions.

²⁸ A new analysis of 20th century developments in the theological field can be found in Douglas Pratt, *Christian Engagement with Islam: Ecumenical Journeys since 1910* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).