

Interreligious Dialogue in the Squeeze between Diplomacy and Contextual Practices

Anne Hege Grung

Can interreligious dialogue evaluated as significant and successful at one level provide obstacles for interreligious dialogues at other levels? The Saudi initiated KAICIID center in Vienna, Austria is successful in gathering high-profile religious leaders from around the globe, including the Middle East, in order to establish regional platforms of dialogue. There are signs, however, that the Saudi representation of KAICIID in Austria creates challenges in the local context, particularly for Austrian Muslims who want to represent themselves without being affiliated with Saudi politics. Interreligious dialogues between religious leaders are also reproducing male ownership of the dialogues and patriarchal structures of religion because men are the overwhelming majority among them. Is there a need to develop a language for different kinds of interreligious dialogue beyond what is present in the discourse in the field? Can we talk about shared markers for all interreligious dialogues, or do we need to distinguish further between dialogue as a political and diplomatic tool and dialogue as community-building and emancipatory processes?

keywords: interreligious dialogue, KAICIID, diplomacy, Austria, Saudi-Arabia, institutionalizing dialogue

Interreligious Dialogues as Contested Spaces

What do we really mean when we talk about interreligious dialogue? Being a Norwegian theologian educated under heavy influence of the art of exegesis and German theology, I was always drawn to working linguistically and semantically with the notions in play. What do the words really mean? When confronted with contextual theology including feminist theology, this question changed into what do the words really mean and for whom, and who has the power to decide what they mean? Later, when working on cross-disciplinary scholarly settings, the question changed again, into: what do the words really mean, for whom, who has the power to decide what they mean, and what are the dynamics of the discourses the words are engaged in?

Some years ago, I was eager to communicate that the notion of interreligious dialogue should be qualified when used. All dialogue including interreligious dialogue should be defined as a human encounter, in real life, between equal partners, without hidden agendas, and the aim of the dialogue should be a possible mutual transformation of the people engaged in the dialogue, not that one party should try to convince or influence the other according to its own perspectives or convictions.¹ This working definition of interreligious dialogue aims at a transforming process where a space of shared ownership among the participants and an experience of shared humanity are established. It communicates well with many philosophy-of-religion-people and with religious idealists who are ready to perform self-criticism and work for community and power-sharing through interreligious dialogue.

¹ Anne Hege Grung, *Gender Justice in Muslim-Christian Readings: Christian and Muslim Women in Norway Making Meaning of Texts from the Bible, the Koran, and the Hadith* (Amsterdam: Brill Rodopi, 2015), 68.

The spaces of interreligious dialogue are, however, contested spaces, and the activities that are labeled interreligious dialogue are various, not only in form and method, but also in content. Some voices are talking about an ongoing institutionalization of the interfaith movement.² Institutionalization would imply a greater agreement among the participating parties in dialogues or multi-religious representations concerning focus and goals, for instance in academia and with establishing institutions such as KAICIID (the King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, named after the late Saudi King who initiated and financed the center, usually referred to as the KAICIID dialogue center). This will have an impact on the discourses as well as on the various actual inter- and trans-religious dialogues. In this article, I want to make a contribution towards the discourses of interfaith and interreligious dialogue by discussing two interrelated questions.

The first question starts with a critical evaluation of how studying the image and the structural profile of the KAICIID center in Vienna may challenge our concepts of interreligious dialogue and generate new questions we need to explore further. Some question if everyday encounters between people belonging to different faith traditions should not automatically qualify for the label of “interreligious dialogue.” The question now is how we should name organized activities in the intersection between top religious leaders, top politicians, and top diplomats. This is not only happening connected to the KAICIID center, but several other places as well. Examples are Kosovo through the Kosovo interfaith initiative and earlier Iranian initiatives, to mention a few. Is this interreligious dialogue? Is this interreligious dialogue used as a political and diplomatic tool at a top international level or is it political and diplomatic interests using the label of interreligious dialogue as a protective or legitimizing shield? This leads to my second question: Can we talk about shared markers for all interreligious dialogues or do we need to distinguish further between interfaith and interreligious dialogue as a political tool and dialogue as community-building and emancipatory processes?

The KAICIID Center: Dialogue or Diplomacy?

Let me present the KAICIID center very briefly, with an emphasis on how it presents itself in the press, through various reports, and in social media, and look at how some evaluate the center from an outside perspective. I will not go deeper into analyzing the center’s educational or peacebuilding local activities that are established in many different contexts, which are extensive and look impressive. These activities would deserve their own evaluation and research. But I believe it is important also to discuss the structure and the image of KAICIID, including a look at its impact on political discourses, the discourse on interreligious dialogue and among faith-based organizations. I believe this is legitimate and also crucial due to the political, religious, diplomatic, financial, social, and intellectual resources that are accumulated around KAICIID. KAICIID as an intergovernmental organization has access to, and collaboration with, the UN (UNDP and UNESCO) and the Vatican (one of the center’s founding Observers); it has established contact with the organization Religions for Peace and the University of Montreal; and it is communicating with the World Council of Churches, the Church of England, and several other influential actors on the political and religious scene.³

² See, for example, Nathan R. Kollar, “The Interfaith Movement in a Liminal Age: The Institutionalization of a Movement,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 51, no. 1 (2016): 7–30.

³ Website of KAICIID, <http://www.kaiciid.org/who-we-are/our-partners>, accessed 15 March 2017.

The center was established in October 2011 as a joint venture between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Republic of Austria, and the Kingdom of Spain as founding states and the Holy See (the Vatican) as a founding Observer.⁴ *The Economist* reported on KAICIID in March 2013 and placed it among other initiatives that gather prominent religious leaders in order to establish mutual trust and conversations, with damage control in crises as the most important aim for these initiatives.⁵ *The Economist* adds that the center has “the glitz of a monarch to monarch affair, with Spain’s King Juan Carlos prominently involved.”⁶ . On its website, it is presented as an intergovernmental organization that aims to “foster dialogue among people of different faiths and cultures that bridges animosities, reduces fear and instills mutual respect” and to bring together religious leaders and governmental representatives “in a sustained dialogue for peace;”⁷ and the keywords selected to present the work of KAICIID are “intergovernmental, multireligious, multilateral, and inclusive.”⁸ KAICIID refers to its work as “Track 1.5 diplomacy”—between ordinary diplomatic work and Track 2 diplomacy, which refers to, for instance, religious leaders and NGOs undertaking diplomatic efforts as a supporting side-track of official negotiations.⁹ KAICIID is located in a beautiful building in Central Vienna, known as the Palais Sturany. The center and its work are efficiently communicated on social media such as Twitter and Facebook—its Facebook page has almost 89,000 likes.¹⁰

The governing structure of the center can be seen as threefold; there is the political leadership, which includes representatives of the Saudi king. The former Austrian minister of justice (2009–2011) Claudia Bandion-Ortner was part of the leadership as a deputy secretary general from 2012–2014. There is a board of directors on which nine religious leaders from Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sunni Islam, and Shi’a Islam are represented. Christian churches in the board represents the Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox Churches. There is also an advisory forum with 100 members from religious communities and cultural institutions, among them a representative belonging to the staff of the Lutheran World Federation. There are women representatives both on the board of directors (one out of nine) and on the advisory forum (nine out of thirty).¹¹

The center was fully financed by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia during the first three years. I have not been able to find indications of changes in the founding structure after this, so the chances are that this is still the case. The economy of the center is not referred to on the website. From the written agreement between the center and the Republic of Austria, it is clear that KACIID and parts of its staff have privileges usually given to missions, property, and staff connected to foreign diplomats and their work and working places, such as the agreement that the building housing the center cannot be approached by the Austrian police without the consent of the center. The agreement states: “The Seat of the Centre shall be inviolable. No officer or official of the Republic of Austria, or other person exercising any public authority within the Republic of Austria, may enter the Seat to perform any duties except with the consent of, and under conditions approved by the Secretary General of the

⁴ Website of KAICIID, <http://www.kaiciid.org/about-us>, accessed 15 March 2017.

⁵ “The Politics of Inter-faith Dialogue: It’s (Usually) Good to Talk, 27 March 2013, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/erasmus/2013/03/politics-inter-faith-dialogue> accessed 14 August 2017.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Website of KAICIID, <http://www.kaiciid.org/about-us>, accessed 15 March 2017.

⁸ Website of KAICIID, <https://www.kaiciid.org/who-we-are> accessed 14 August 2017

⁹ Website of KAICIID, <http://www.kaiciid.org/frequently-asked-questions>, accessed 15 March 2017.

¹⁰ Facebook page of KAICIID, <https://www.facebook.com/kaiciid/>, accessed 15 March 2017.

¹¹ Website of KAICIID, <http://www.kaiciid.org/advisoryforum>, accessed 15 March 2017.

Centre” (Article 4),¹² and the Secretary General shall be “accorded the privileges and immunities, exemptions and facilities accorded to heads of diplomatic missions” (Article 15).¹³ The guests of the center, including the members of the board of directors and of the advisory board, and participants to conferences and other activities, also seem to be excepted from ordinary legislation concerning immigration, as “[v]isas . . . shall be granted free of charge and as promptly as possible” (Article 13).¹⁴

As shown, the KAICIID center is quite impressive regarding its image and resources, and has a very broad platform—an extensive power base and a wide base of action—religiously and culturally speaking when including the board of directors and the advisory forum, and even broader when including its collaborative partners and organizational network. Its activities, which I will not explore further in this paper, include large and smaller conferences, educational programs, and regional projects in various places in the world, all of which may be put under the broad headline “Dialogue” and which often are identified by the center as peace-building work.

At the same time, the center can be categorized as a diplomatic mission regarding the agreement with the Austrian government, as cited above. This aspect of KAICIID surfaced in 2014, when a diplomatic crisis between Austria and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia emerged because of the center’s reaction—or rather lack of reaction—to the Saudi court sentencing the Saudi blogger on civil rights and atheism, Raif Badawi, to 1,000 lashes for charges including the accusation that he insulted Islam. The Austrian chancellor at the time, Werner Faymann, called on Austria to withdraw from KAICIID, because the center did not want to publically criticize this human rights violation.¹⁵ The argument for not doing this was that the center did not want to “interfere in internal affairs.” Faymann was cited in the press criticizing this decision, saying that “the center did not fulfill the mandate of dialogue because it was silent on basic issues of human rights.” The crisis resulted in former Austrian Justice Minister Claudia Bandion-Ortner stepping down from her position as deputy head of the center. Other prominent politicians including the minister of foreign affairs, and a Roman Catholic bishop, did, however, warn against “rash action.”¹⁶ Rumors reported by right-wing-biased media said that the Saudi ambassador to Vienna threatened to move the headquarters of Vienna-based OPEC if KAICIID was closed due to an Austrian withdrawal. KAICIID was not closed. A report was made, concluding that a closure of the center would not make sense because the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia was the same as when the center was opened.¹⁷

In preparing this paper, I have in my explorations maneuvered in cyberspace between extreme right-wing and anti-Muslim bloggers in Austria and beyond who were fiercely critical of KAICIID on the one hand, and dialogue-oriented websites praising the work of KAICIID and reporting about its significance concerning top-level dialogue and peacebuilding on the

¹² “Agreement Between the Republic of Austria and the King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue Regarding the Seat of the King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue in Austria, available on the website of KAICIID, http://www.kaiciid.org/sites/default/files/02_kaiciid_hq-en_1.pdf, accessed 15 March 2017.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “Austria Mulls Quitting Saudi-Backed Religious Center in Vienna,” 17 January 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-austria-saudi-centre-idUSKBN0K0KA20150117>.

¹⁶ “Austria Mulls Quitting Saudi-Backed Religious Centre in Vienna,” 17 January 2015, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-austria-saudi-centre-idUKKBN0K0Q0JS20150117>.

¹⁷ “Saudi Effort to Promote Open Society Abroad in Tatters,” 22 February 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-2963783/Saudi-effort-promote-open-society-abroad-tatters.html>.

other. Constructively critical voices and research on the center have not been easily found. But I will include some viewpoints and perspectives of the more sober kind below.

In an article on King Abdullah's reform-oriented legacy by Kumaraswamy and Quamar from 2016 (King Abdullah died in 2015), KAICIID is seen as part of a larger project by the late King to reform the Saudi society through dialogue.¹⁸ It was initiated by a meeting between the King and the Vatican in 2007, and prepared for by a national dialogue within the Saudi society in order to contain and restrict extremists and implement reforms concerning the status of women and Shi'a Muslims in the Saudi public. The authors do, however, conclude that these initiatives made only marginal improvements and claim that they "ran out of steam."¹⁹ The interesting point for us is the article's firm placement of KAICIID as an agent primarily within Saudi Arabia, as part of the reform effort aimed at the country's domestic politics.

One of the participants in one of KAICIID's conferences (held in 2014), the prominent Islamic feminist Riffat Hassan, writes in an article on her many engagements in interreligious dialogue where she also refers to her experience with, and view on, KAICIID. She openly criticizes the lack of gender awareness and the gender imbalance at the conference, which was overwhelmingly dominated by men. But she adds that this criticism is relevant not only for KAICIID but for most interreligious dialogue initiatives and conferences—she calls it "the chronic issue."²⁰ Her primary response to KAICIID is positive. She states that most interreligious dialogues she has attended have been financed and dominated by Jews and Christians, with the result that the Muslim attendees felt like "poor relatives." With KAICIID and the other initiatives in interreligious dialogues in Muslim-majority countries (the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies in Jordan, and the Doha International Centre for Interfaith Dialogue), Hassan states, "With the emerge of KAICIID and a huge influx of Muslim money a new era has dawned in the world of interreligious dialogue."²¹ She hopes this will change the dialogues so that Muslims will no longer be defined by the others in the dialogues, but can be empowered to define themselves. She adds that "it is too early to predict the outcome of this grand project."²²

KAICIID and the Austrian Context

How has the center influenced Austrian domestic politics? Clearly, the center is seen as a confirmation of Vienna's status as a hosting city for significant international organizations. Going to Austrian domestic politics and the Austrian discourse of interreligious dialogue as well as the discourse of Islam and Muslims, I have been looking for traces of how the establishing and the massive attention of KAICIID have been influencing these. There are some obvious traces, such as liberal Muslims protesting against the center based on the fear of Saudi influence in the country, worried that the already quite anti-Islamic public discourse in Austrian media now would interpret Saudi Arabia as the representative of Muslims, and of

¹⁸ P. R. Kumaraswamy and Md. Muddassir Quamar, "More Effective as Regent than as Monarch: Abdullah's Reform Legacy," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 9, no. 3 (2016): 445–460.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 454.

²⁰ Riffat Hassan, "Engaging in Interreligious Dialogue: Recollections and Reflections of a Muslim Woman," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 49, no. 1 (2014): 134–139 (special issue on "Celebrating 50 Years of Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue").

²¹ *Ibid.*, 139.

²² *Ibid.*

Islam.²³ From the more established Muslim organization IGGÖ, there seems to have been little public criticism, but also not any articulated support.²⁴ Most Muslims in Austria (6% of the population) are not Saudis or Arabs; they are of Turkish, Bosnian, and Chechen origin, and some have origins in Kosovo.²⁵ The Muslims in Austria with Turkish roots have been heavily funded by the Diyanet in regard to money and imams. But the oldest mosque in the country is a Saudi-sponsored mosque in Vienna built in 1979—right when OPEC peaked and the Iranian revolution occurred.

Since the establishment of KAICIID, Austrian legislation on Muslim faith communities and Islam has taken a radical turn. In 2013, both an Alevi faith community and a Shia community were recognized according to Austrian law. Islam had been recognized by law already in 1912, but from 2010 on there was a larger diversity among the recognized Muslim communities with now one Sunni Muslim community, two Alevi communities, and one Shi’a Muslim community. One of the articulated aims for this was to combat extremism.²⁶ In 2015, however, a disputed law passed in the Austrian parliament. According to this law, Islamic organizations and faith communities were not permitted anymore to accept financial support from abroad, and all Muslims were entitled to use a standardized German version of the Koran. The latter was backed by the Austrian Roman Catholic bishops and the IGGÖ—reluctantly. Austria’s foreign minister, Sebastian Kurz, claimed: “We want an Islam of the Austrian kind, and not one that is dominated by other countries.”²⁷ The law, on the other hand, strengthened the rights of Austrian Muslims to be protected against discrimination, gave official status to Muslim holidays, and recognized the status of Muslim graveyards and the right to have Islamic pastoral care in public institutions such as hospitals. An education of imams was established at the University of Vienna. Despite these aspects of the law, the spokeswoman for IGGÖ asserted that the law was “hurtful.” She stated, “This law mirrors an atmosphere of fear that all Muslims feel in Europe, where there is general suspicion toward Muslims.”²⁸ Sebastian Kurtz, on the other side, stated that this law should become “a model for the rest of Europe.”²⁹

There are no records that KAICIID or the Saudis protested against the implementation of the law. KAICIID itself would not be affected by it, as an intergovernmental organization, not being an Islamic faith community, but inhabiting a de facto diplomatic immunity. It is mainly the Turkish and Bosnian Muslims that would be rejected having financial support—and not being allowed to read the Koran in Arabic when they gathered. It seems that this is not evaluated as a basic human rights issue in most of the dominant political discourse in Austria. During the years of the existence of KAICIID, the discourse on Islam in Austria seems to have become more polarized, and the Austrian

²³ “New Vienna Interfaith Centre Opens With Saudi Help,” November 26, 2012, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-11-26/business/sns-rt-religion-interfaithcentre-pixl5e8mqc06-20121126_1_kaiciid-interfaith-dialogue-saudi-arabia.

²⁴ On the website of Austria’s largest organisation for Muslims, IGGÖ, KAICIID is not explicitly mentioned (<http://www.derislam.at/>, accessed 15 March 2017).

²⁵ Thomas Schmidinger and Alev Cakir, “Austria,” in Jørgen S. Nielsen, ed., *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, volume 6 (Amsterdam: Brill, 2014), 45–66.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁷ “Austria Passes ‘Law on Islam’ Banning Foreign Money for Muslim Groups,” 25 February 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-austria-muslims-idUSKBN0LT28420150225>.

²⁸ “Austria Bans Foreign Funding for Islamic Groups,” 26 February 2015, <http://europe.newsweek.com/controversial-austrian-islam-law-bans-foreign-funding-islamic-groups-309753?rm=eu>.

²⁹ “Austria Defends New Law on Foreign Funding of Mosques,” 8 March 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/08/austria-foreign-minister-islam-funding-law-restricting>.

politicians seem to be more eager to governmentalize Austrian Muslims, although letting more diversity among the recognized Islamic groups be acknowledged. This is, however, not a development we only find in Austria; it is rather a shared tendency in many European countries.

So—where does this place KAICIID? Is it a place for top-end interreligious dialogue among religious leaders and education for dialogue among international youth? Is it a diplomatic asset to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, providing access and legitimization for the Saudis to international organizations, including the UN, under the cover of interreligious dialogue? The answer is probably that KAICIID is a combination of both. The center does not seem to have prioritized the needs of Austrian Muslims, or interreligious dialogue in Austria. Neither does it seem to make any particular effort to negotiate between the discourse of interreligious dialogue and the discourse on certain human rights connected to or conflicting with religious freedom in Europe. If it initially was established to be an asset for reform initiatives within Saudi Arabia, this makes a certain sense.

The Discourses of Interreligious Dialogue and “1.5 Diplomacy”

Jeannine Hill Fletcher has sketched up three models of interreligious dialogue: the Parliament Model, the Activist Model, and the Storytelling Model.³⁰ She has pointed out that the Parliament Model of representation often excludes women and privileges religious leaders. Certainly, parts of KAICIID’s structure can be categorized in this way, such as the board of directors and the advisory board. The Activist Model and Storytelling Model that open up for a more dynamic and inclusive dialogue may be present in some of KAICIID’s projects and education in particular contexts. But the structure of KAICIID, with its intergovernmental, royal, papal, and diplomatic presence and status—how should we speak about this? Is this an extra-parliamentary model of dialogue? Dialogue established by autocrats among diplomats and religious leaders? In times when the boundaries between the religious and the secular are collapsing in international politics in so many ways and interreligious dialogues take different forms and shapes, sometimes even having contradictory or ambiguous aims, we need to find a language for this mixture of interreligious dialogue and international diplomacy in order to address it properly. Diplomatic negotiations between representatives of nation-states and possible transformation processes within interreligious encounters and dialogue are not necessarily mutually exclusive. But if processes of interreligious dialogue are instrumentalized to serve diplomatic interests of particular nation-states, this should not be called dialogue, but rather “1.5 diplomacy,” as KAICIID names its own work in one of its self-presentations on the center’s website.³¹ This may be more transparent and the interests involved could be more open and articulated.

³⁰ Jeannine Hill Fletcher: “Women in Inter-Religious Dialogue,” in Catherine Cornille, ed., *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 168–183.

³¹ In an MA thesis exploring interreligious dialogue connected to peace processes in the Middle East, Tyle Dale Haugerin requests a further discussion of 1.5 diplomacy. “Stalemate in the Holy Land: A Critical Examination of Palestinian-Israeli Interreligious Initiatives as Track-II Diplomacy,” Faculty of Social Sciences, Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Oslo, 2011, p. 88, available at https://www.duo.uio.no/bitstream/handle/10852/13123/Hauger_Thesis_Complete_May_2011.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

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Anne Hege Grung is Associate Professor in Practical Theology and Inter-Religious Studies at the Faculty of Theology, University of Oslo. She has participated in Muslim-Christian dialogues in Norway at a local and a national level as well as internationally since the 1990s. Her scholarly work is on Muslim-Christian dialogue and gender, religious pluralism, and interreligious pastoral care. She was the director of the Church of Norway’s dialogue center for five years before joining the faculty at the University of Oslo.

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