

OLAV HAMMER

Conflict and Concord on the Internet: selvet.dk

The Internet as Medium

The Internet epitomizes globalization. Spanning most of the globe, yet leaving out the most marginalized populations, it reproduces the power structures and inequalities of the world at large. Nevertheless, as technologies become more widely available and more user-friendly, there is the potential to interact on an unprecedented scale with people of other nationalities, backgrounds and religious affiliations. Interaction may, of course, foster dialogue, but can also lead to polemics and aggressive behaviour. In discussion groups, Internet forums where opinions are exchanged, the potential for disagreement is evident. In a sensitive area such as religion, the risk of conflict is obviously present. People in different localities, who may well never meet face-to-face, and who do not even need to present themselves on-line under their real names, might in fact find it particularly tempting to handle conflict situations by using verbal invective. This risk is recognized by Internet users, who have adopted the militant metaphor 'flame war' to denote such excessive verbal aggression.

Most research on religion on the Internet has focused on the use of this medium within one particular religious tradition, usually Christian or Muslim. Considerably less attention has been devoted to the question of what happens when members of different traditions interact and confront the opinions of others. To quote a recent article by sociologist of religion Christopher Helland: 'Because of the structure of the Internet itself people are exposed to a variety of traditions when they begin searching for religion or spiritual information. How that will affect the perspective of the web traveler still needs to be determined.' (Helland 2002: 301.) The present article looks at some of the ways in which potential conflicts in this confrontation between various traditions are managed. The empirical material analysed has been chosen with one main objective in mind: the need to find a discussion group where people of sufficiently divergent opinions meet. Literally thousands of groups exist on the Internet, many catering for the needs and interests of very specific segments of the population (users of particular computers, aficionados of one sport or another, mem-

bers of specific religious communities, etc.). In such single-focus discussion groups, common interests may lead to discourses in the Foucaultian sense: participants share an implicit understanding of what constitutes the acceptable range of opinions; outsiders with radically different views will not be represented. The Danish site *selvet.dk*, by contrast, is a forum where people of quite different persuasions meet, and thus need to work out a *modus vivendi* when sharp divergences become manifest.

Introducing *selvet.dk*

Selvet.dk – Danish for ‘the self’ – is a very large site consisting of paid advertisements, chat rooms and discussion groups. The vast majority of participants write in Danish and most of them presumably live in Denmark, but the occasional message in Norwegian is also posted. Debates are moderated, which means that strong verbal hostility will not be tolerated by those who administer the site. Beyond that, the most diverse opinions are found, and participants can represent any religious group or none at all.

Messages are archived, and the total number of messages is very large: at the time of writing there were 25,832.¹ The considerable traffic on the site is made manageable by dividing debates into 111 different topics. The difficulties in neatly sorting various discussions into distinct categories are obvious from the fact that the two topics with the largest number of posted messages are simply called ‘Aktuelt’ (Current Events) and ‘Generelt’ (General). Of the remaining 109 categories, there is a spectrum ranging from those with considerable traffic to a few that are in effect empty, set up by the moderators to accommodate any messages that may eventually be posted. Only eleven categories contain more than 350 messages. In descending order they are ‘Vegetar m. m.’ (Vegetarian, etc; 1,610 messages), ‘Etik og forretning’ (Ethics and Business; 973), ‘Kristendom og Folkekirken’ (Christianity and the Danish Lutheran Church; 634), ‘Liv i rummet’ (Life in Space; 624), ‘Gud, religion & tro’ (God, Religion and Belief; 592), ‘Humor’ (Humour; 411), ‘Film’ (Movies; 397), ‘Digte’ (Poems; 387), ‘Dagbog’ (Diary; 386), ‘Healing’ (Healing; 378) and ‘Familjen, parforhold, børn’ (The Family, Relationships, Children; 374). A strong tendency towards inner-worldly concerns can be seen from the fact that topics such as food, business life,

1 All figures in this and the following paragraph were checked on September 5, 2005.

family and cinema, which might as well be construed as private or secular, constitute major topics. Considering selvet.dk defines itself as a site devoted to the spiritual (however defined), it is significant that there are nearly three times as many messages concerned with food than with God.

Participants

Selvet.dk is viewed passively by many. Of the 4,673 registered users, only 1,287 were active, even in the minimal sense of having posted at least one message. Moderators divide participants into new, medium and senior participants, depending on the number of messages they have posted. Relatively few are medium and senior participants, but their traffic on the site is intense. This implies that most of the messages have been written by individuals who have been well socialized into the written and unwritten rules of social interaction that apply on selvet.dk.

A categorization that is not made by the moderators, but is crucial for present purposes, is the religious affiliation of the participants. Some can be classified on the basis of their self-descriptions, whether explicit or apparent through verbal clues. Beside many Christians, there are members of Soka Gakkai, ISKCON, of the Karma Kagyü tradition within Tibetan Buddhism and of other groups. All such identity markers need to be interpreted with some caution, since, for example, Christians can hold widely divergent opinions.

Numerous participants, however, avoid using any particular labels to designate their own religious perspective. In fact, several explicitly repudiate the term 'religion', and describe themselves by means of adjectives that can be translated as 'spiritual'. Many of these individuals express themselves in a terminology that from an outsider's perspective would be perceived as New Age, but that term is rare in the postings, and is in most of the few instances where it occurs not used as a self-designation. Their understanding of their own beliefs and practices as non-religious comes across from quotes such as following:²

Many in the West feel disillusioned to a greater or lesser extent. Many long for something to believe in. They would like to feel a purpose in

2 All quotes from selvet.dk have been translated from the original Danish by the present author. The original messages have been archived by the author.

life. They don't believe in the old religions because they have in a way outlived themselves. Especially the Church. Obviously, the Church can't give answers to what people are looking for. ... I believe like many others that people are slowly but steadily reaching a new consciousness which is more directed towards the spiritual world. (Posted by signature Poul P on August 11, 2004.)

This ostensibly 'post-religious' spirituality can be seen by participants on the site as the latest evolutionary step in human history. Thus, not only is it claimed that 'spirituality' is different from religion, but also that it is better: 'I think the era of religions is coming to an end and that human evolution is reaching a phase called: thinking for oneself' (signature Amy, May 8, 2003).

Contested Issues

As will become clear from the following discussion, the communities of belief present on *selvet.dk* – Christians, New Agers, ISKCON members and others – disagree fundamentally on a number of core issues. One way to bring such differences into focus is to see how participants discuss three central questions: What suprahuman agents do they postulate? How do they suggest that these suprahuman agents intervene in the empirical world? How, according to them, is it possible for humans to gain knowledge about suprahuman agents and their activities?

Suprahuman Agents

Christians are professed monotheists, whose descriptions of the supreme suprahuman agent are clearly coloured by biblical myths, as filtered through mainstream theological notions. Since religious education is part of the public school system in Denmark, this is hardly surprising. This is a fact that sets them apart from the New Agers on the site. In messages posed by the latter, a supreme suprahuman agent, a god, does appear. The god of the New Agers is very vague, and there is remarkably little consensus about his, her or its properties. There are pantheistic notions, references to a divine core within each of us, to god as a force or energy, as an abstraction ('God just IS'), even the contours of a *via negativa*, i.e., the suggestion that all human language is inadequate when it comes to speaking of God.

New Agers are also much less committed monotheists than Christians are. Their pantheistic, abstract or impersonal god is part of a polytheistic suprahuman universe. Spiritually advanced beings from outer space, ascended masters, spirit guides, and other – often very vaguely sketched – transcendent beings are mentioned in quite a few messages.

New Agers can be considerably more specific about what the suprahuman world is not. In particular, the views of the divine expressed in biblical texts can be seen as erroneous. In particular, the mainstream Christian understanding of Jesus as divine is repeatedly branded as mistaken:

I have a great respect for Jesus, he was a great master and an excellent example, from whom we certainly can learn a lot. I just don't think he is a god. Just like Buddha, he was a highly developed being incarnated in a human body, but the person Jesus is dead, just like the person Buddha.
(Posted by signature Peter, May 11, 2003.)

The Activities of Suprahuman Agents

Christians are socialized into a religious culture that conceives of its god as an active being, both on the grandest of scales (creating and upholding the world) and on the smallest and most personal (intervening in the lives of individual people). New Agers tend to give their suprahuman agents a much more limited role. It is affirmed that they exist, and that they play a significant role in communicating spiritual insights to human recipients, either directly through visions, experiences in meditation or channelling, or indirectly through the scriptures these agents are understood to have transmitted. In everyday affairs, however, it is as if religious actions are curiously divorced from the suprahuman agents. In one of the categories on the site, Prayer ('Bøn'), people post prayers for others who are in need. The way these prayers are phrased makes it appear as if they were wishes *for*, for example, the health and well-being of a recipient, but not addressed *to* any god. It is as if New Agers construct cognitively 'natural' forms of religion, in which, following Pascal Boyer (1992), ontology and actions belong to different cognitive modules, whereas Christians are socialized into a belief system which postulates a more direct relationship between suprahuman agents and their acts.

Claims to Knowledge

How can we know anything about the suprahuman world? Here, the opinions of Christians, New Agers, ISKCON members and so forth diverge radically. Christians will, of course, refer to biblical passages. Several active participants will readily supplement the raw text of the Bible with summaries of what various Bible commentaries have to say on a given passage. Similarly, a ISKCON member will refer to the Bhagavadgita in the commented translation prepared by their founder Prabhupada. Common to such members of institutionalized religions is their reliance on a particular canonical text or set of texts together with an exegetical tradition to provide plausible knowledge.

New Agers discuss issues of knowledge from a quite different perspective. They tend to have a rather limited interest in answers supplied by authorities in the traditional religious sector of society: the opinions of the Church as an institution, of priests as sources of knowledge, of academic schooling in theology or philosophy as a means of acquiring credible information. New Age participants on the site who do refer to external authorities, often point to a few well-known canonical texts or genres from different religions. The interpretive traditions that have accumulated around these texts within each religious community are rarely mentioned. In part, this is no doubt because these interpretive traditions are unknown to them, but when one does find references, it is common to dismiss interpretation *per se* as an unwanted accretion to the suprahuman message. Texts, according to this opinion, have a manifest content that can be readily understood. One message appears to regard the concept of textual interpretation with considerable exasperation:

Why do people think everything needs to be explained??? The Bible, the Vedas and Sutras explain themselves, if you will just read them as they are written and with an open mind. (Posted by signature Qualgeist on June 6 2003.)

'Qualgeist's' mention of three different texts from as many different traditions is echoed by other participants. Pluralism reigns in quotes such as 'I ENJOY a large part of the Bible and I ENJOY a large part of the Buddhist faith and I ENJOY "Conversations with God"' (posted by Simona, June 6, 2003).

Nevertheless, different religious texts are by no means seen by all New Agers as equally valid. The Bible is repeatedly met with considerable scepticism. It is contended that the Bible does not represent Jesus's true teach-

ings, perhaps because the text has been corrupted or censored, in order to fit the ideological needs of the Church:

I believe that if Jesus came back as a human being, Christians would be the last to listen to him.

Precisely because what he would say wouldn't fit with what the Bible says or what the Church says:

Unfortunately, the Bible, for some Christians, has become more important than the real, living Jesus. (Posted by Thomas Halskov on July 31, 2003.)

Paramount among the textual references, one finds discussions of books from within the New Age milieu itself. The posts on selvet.dk show how volatile interests in that milieu can be. Books that, at least internationally, dominated the scene a mere decade or two ago (e.g., *A Course in Miracles* or James Redfield's *The Celestine Prophecy*) are marketed on the commercial forums of selvet.dk, but generate practically no interest whatsoever in the discussion groups. In the messages, the previously mentioned topic 'Conversations with God' has a dominant position.

Beside written texts, personal experience is treated as the most legitimate source of knowledge. An interesting point is that whereas Wouter Hanegraaff's survey of the New Age literature of the 1970s and 1980s indicated a positive interest in mysticism (Hanegraaff 1996: 180–1, 328 *et passim*), this is a quite marginal concern in selvet.dk. Spiritual experience on this site is to be narrowly understood as the personal insights of every individual seeker. Experience can be seen as so paramount that insights gained by one person cannot really be transmitted to others.

Experience God. You can do that through meditation, kirtan, chanting, dance, prayer, etc. Once you have experienced God, you still won't be able to describe it to others, because they won't be able to understand it. (Posted by signature adeldharma, October 24, 2004.)

This emphasis on individual experience becomes particularly apparent in messages that concern suprahuman agents other than god, since such postings tend to be more specific. The details presented in such messages can thus be traced historically to their sources. Suprahuman agents with a well-documented history can be presented as if they were the trans-historical insights of the individual participants. In one message, a healer presents a pantheon reminiscent both of post-theosophical lore in general

and of the ideas current at Findhorn, the Scottish spiritual community, in particular. He does so, however, in terms strongly suggesting an individual opinion, an insight valid 'for me'.

For me angels are as real as you and I are. They don't descend into matter as we do, but by following their own evolutionary spiral we can work together on many levels of consciousness.

They are in a direct and conscious way connected to the plan for Earth.

Devas are often seen as angels, but they have their own evolution. Whereas angels consciously cooperate, devas create forms. (Posted by signature Erik, May 29, 2003.)

Handling Potential Pluralism

New Agers, Christians and others have incommensurable opinions on a number of topics. All the structural elements we have surveyed are potential sources of disagreement. It should therefore be stressed that the tone of very many posts is civil and accepting of divergences of opinion. Nevertheless, as long as extended *ad hominem* attacks are avoided, negative opinions about the religion of other participants can certainly be posted. The following message voices a not uncommon sentiment about Christianity:

As I have written on several previous occasions, I myself grew up in a Christian environment. I do understand that there can be big differences. However, the angle I could see was one that I didn't like, and that's something I really feel inside me every time Christianity is mentioned. The quote you posted fits completely with the experiences I have of Christianity at its worst. (Posted by Simona, June 6, 2003.)

Conflicts arise about the status and truth of the various religions, whether their scriptures are authentic or even make sense, and so forth. A series of posts that attacked the validity of the Bible, on the grounds that it had been censored and mistranslated over the ages, escalated until an upset respondent finally suggested to another participant that his preferred religious texts were even more dubious: 'the sutras are just an invention by some mad monks and prove absolutely nothing' (signature Qualgeist, May 12, 2003).

There are untold occasions for conflict, and in this case repartees finally

did end in personal attacks. It is a well-known element of Internet communication that levels of aggression can be much higher than in face-to-face interaction, since angry responses can be sent off in a split second, and one rarely sees the reactions of those one has insulted. More specifically for selvet.dk, the level of debate is kept animated by an implicit assumption accepted by many: that in spiritual/religious matters, personal opinion has precedence over evidence, and that evidence can in fact be an irrelevant concept in such matters. A thread on whether Jesus may have visited Tibet and received instruction from Tibetan monks is thus carried on in a considerable number of posts. None of the participants mentioned the possibility of checking whether there could in fact have been any Buddhist monks in Tibet around the first years of the Common Era, or considered the implications of the generally accepted historical fact that Buddhist missions only reached Tibet in the 8th century CE. Since factual checking rarely occurs, such disagreements can run on indefinitely and escalate over time.

There are, however, also several mechanisms that contribute to defusing conflicts before they reach such levels. Probably as a result of the character of the discussion post, especially the brevity of most messages, these mechanisms operate at very simple levels and those who post messages tend to deploy little in-depth argumentation. Although boundaries between different discursive mechanisms are by no means clear-cut, several such mechanisms for reducing conflict can be analytically distinguished:

(1) **Maintaining bounded communities.** Boundaries between various discursive communities are generally maintained throughout discussions. There seems to be a widespread consensus that spiritual matters cannot be solved empirically, and that the point of discussion is to get to know the views of others participants. Differences are often simply stated and restated, and it is rarely argued that the other participants should accept one specific point of view as more valid than any other. When opinions differ too sharply, there is a tendency to keep up discussions primarily within one's own tradition and to avoid too much interaction with others.

One example of this concerns a debate on the meaning of a passage from Psalms 2:11–12 ('Serve the Lord in fear, rejoice in trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little', in the King James Version) which was felt by some participants to be a symptom of the negative sides of Christianity. Christians entered into the debate, suggesting that such quotes need to be read within their context. Some participants proposed that one read commentaries on the passage, in order to gain some perspective on what was intended.

A representative of ISKCON entered the discussion, contributing a very long post (signature Bhakta Ulrich, June 8, 2003) which attempted to place Christian opinions within his own, Hindu Vaishnava context. Nobody addresses his post, which remains an isolated piece of text in the ongoing debate. In the same forum, a participant later suggested that the Bible is a 'placebo' and that there in reality are many gods, who originally came from outer space (signature Løven, July 20, 2004). He too was simply ignored.

Closely related to the relatively low levels of interaction with religious communities that diverge too much from one's own, is the fact that overt disagreements are held in check by the sheer lack of knowledge of the views held by others. A question concerning Buddhism was referred to a representative of the (Hindu) ISKCON movement. A post asked whether Hinduism is derived from Buddhism or the other way around. Somewhat more adequately, questions about Buddhism in general are answered by quoting a specific, Tibetan view as filtered through a Danish representative of the Karma Kagyü lineage. Conflicts will rarely arise with a representative of a religious perspective about which one knows so little.

(2) **Encompassment.** In his survey of New Age concepts of the divine, Hanegraaff (1996: 185) was struck by 'the singular lack of interest in precise formulations'. Of course, verbal vagueness is not a definite indicator of imprecision in one's own mind. Rhetorically, verbal vagueness does, however, allow for true differences of opinion to remain undetected or to be glossed over as unimportant. Discussion group messages are particularly prone to vagueness, since they are usually short, are written on the spur of the moment and lack in-depth argumentation. Threads can be characterized by interchanges where utterly malleable signifiers – God, ego, good and evil, spirituality, love, evolution, Christianity, tolerance – are exchanged. As Andrew Cohen (1985) has remarked, semantic indeterminacy can make various participants feel that they are in considerable agreement, when they are in fact projecting their own meanings onto these vague terms.

Semantic vagueness may gloss over disagreements, but does not necessarily lead to syncretism or genuinely shared views: selvet.dk is emphatically not a cultic milieu as defined by Colin Campbell (1972). Thus, the bricolage of elements floating around in the cultic milieu that Campbell describes is rarely found. Participants in discussions will typically enter debates holding a specific set of opinions, and when others are viewed sympathetically, differences are often just acknowledged as such.

Where syncretism does seem to take place, it is often an example of what Louis Dumont, in the appendix to the Chicago edition of his *Homo Hierarchicus* (1980), called encompassment. One's own view becomes the interpretive model through which other opinions can be interpreted and under which they are subsumed, as if saying: 'your belief is similar to mine, in fact it's a more limited version of my own view'. An example of encompassment is the response to several lengthy messages by ISKCON member Bhakta Ulrich. In a set of posts, he describes his perspective on the concepts of knowledge and ignorance, as coloured by ISKCON theology. The soul, to summarize this perspective, is the eternal spiritual component of a human being. When the soul is incarnated in this world, it is housed in a body and is accompanied by several other components, not least the false ego. The false ego, our everyday personality, mistakenly believes that it is our true identity, but we have the ability gradually to wake up from this condition and gain knowledge of our true identities as souls and our relation to Krishna (posts from March 16–17, 2004). His respondent (signature Erik) replies that he finds reading Bhakta Ulrich's posts fascinating and rewarding (*spændende og lærerigt*). Nevertheless, the scriptures he (Bhakta Ulrich) refers to are thousands of years old, and some things will have evolved over time. Erik's evolutionary view can thus encompass Bhakta Ulrich's understanding as one interesting, albeit limited, expression of a larger truth. In a superbly polite game of one-upmanship, Bhakta Ulrich in turn encompasses Erik's spiritual evolutionism. Bhakta Ulrich responds that Erik's partial disagreement is perfectly understandable; he also has times when he finds it difficult to believe. That is because not all souls are ready to hear about Krishna.

(3) **Relativism.** Debates between New Agers and others are at times characterized by a lack of common ground rules. Christians and other members of institutionalized movements will look for quotes in scriptural texts, commentaries and secondary literature, and can attempt to construct arguments based on these. New Agers tend to regard these as derivative sources of information. A thread on whether Christianity and Buddhism are compatible religions generated several posts comparing the two, but also several messages carefully phrased as personal comments and opinions. Rather than presenting purported facts, such messages soften the tone by insisting that what is said is just 'my opinion'. This mild relativism permeates many postings, and defuses potentially heated debates. A post by signature Mark (January 29, 2004) made this point explicitly:

I don't really like the way you mention something quite dubious ... as if it were the truth. ... Out of respect for others, I always talk about these things as if they CAN be true, even if I within myself believe that they are true. That's both because it prevents endless discussions, and because nobody can be 100% SURE that they are right.

A topic that generated considerable animosity was whether the doctrine of reincarnation was part of Christian beliefs in biblical times but had been expurgated from the New Testament at the Council of Constantinople in 553. New Agers insisted this might well be the case, and quoted passages that they felt supported their view. Christians retorted that reincarnation was simply not part of Christianity, and that there was no hard evidence. One participant appears to have felt that emotions were beginning to run too high and posted: 'it's not about being right or proving anything. This is the way I understand things right now ... at least give me the right to have my own belief' (posted by signature Peter, May 12, 2003). Finally, the thread stopped and, rather unsurprisingly, the two camps remained convinced of the opinions they had held when they started the debate. As we will see below, there is indeed considerable scepticism regarding participants who voice very assured opinions.

(4) **Drawing boundaries against outsiders.** There are thus implicit norms that encourage participants to speak modestly of their own opinions, to accept individualism and a plurality of opinions, and to retreat from debates where genuine disagreements become too apparent. Such norms are not without built-in contradictions: as noted by Hanegraaff (2001), adherents of religious positions that put a premium on tolerance will necessarily find it problematic to deal with what they perceive of as intolerant views. Relativists on selvet.dk may find it hard to accept participants who maintain that there are absolute values and definite truths.

Christians may have distinct opinions about what is right or wrong, but they are present on selvet.dk and constitute a sizeable membership, and a basic norm of courteous interaction prevails. Other groups are either very small or conspicuously absent, and harsher comments can readily be found. Three such outsiders can be identified: participants with very distinct and strongly held minority views, atheist sceptics, and Muslims.

Holders of distinct and potentially exclusivist views. Signature Rebuild TheTemple posted a long message (August 23, 2003) stating that Christ had been incarnated as a human being and was living in London. This information was supported by referring to the Scottish prophet Benjamin

Creme and his organization, who were preparing for the Millennium under the guidance of this – as yet hidden – world ruler. The rather ecstatic tone of assured knowledge quite clearly irritated some other participants, who replied in dismissive terms such as these:

does comrade Jesus live in London? Who would have guessed (Shannon, Aug 23, 2003).

How do you know that the 'new' Jesus lives in London ... hoooooow do you know all these things? (Simona, same date).

What do you know, I'm surprised, I talk to God every day and he hasn't told me that his son is in London (martin, same date).

A less radically 'other' opinion, perhaps best characterized as a conservative Christian view, was equally offensive to the respondent:

Working under GOD's will is a far greater blessing than working under the will of the 'EGO'.

When we pray for Jesus Christ to enter our lives, there's no point in doing your own thing [*køre sit eget løb*].

It's hard, and many don't understand that they are just a drop in a vast sea. (Signature Kim Michael, May 3, 2003.)

Well, isn't it neat to always be able to excuse what you are doing by saying that it's God's will ... (signature Qualgeist, same date).

Nobody has a patent on God's will! But many claim to have one! (Qualgeist, later post on the same date.)

Representatives of non-religious ideologies, sceptics and atheists. No matter what their differences may be, participants on selvet.dk are united by their deep-seated feeling that there is a suprahuman realm, and that suprahuman forces manifest themselves in the empirical world. Materialistic philosophies and their representatives are *ipso facto* outsiders. Signature Martin (in a message posted September 4, 2003) voices an opinion that one will readily come across off-site, for example, in conversations with individuals from various religious communities:

Science has become a modern quasi-religion. It delivers society's myths regarding the origin and meaning of life. That was traditionally the task of the church.

Priests have been replaced by scientists and doctors.

Universities and other institutions of higher learning are temples for the worship of the new golden calf – human reason.

Muslims. In a relatively short space of time, Islam has become a major presence in Danish society. The Danish scholar of Islam Jørgen Bæk Simonsen estimated that in 2001 there were approximately 170,000 Muslims in Denmark (Simonsen 2001: 169). Any figures, of course, involve one in problems of definition (e.g., how religiously observant must one be in order to be counted as a Muslim?). Nevertheless, Islam has by any account come to represent one of the fastest growing religions in a country which until around 1960 was remarkably homogeneous, and where there were very few Muslims. Islam has also been a highly contested tradition. By focusing on politically activist or culturally very conservative interpretations of Islam, the media as well as public opinion have often lost sight of the broad variety of opinions that can be found in the Muslim community.

Few posts on selvet.dk mention Islam, and hardly any represent a Muslim point of view. These are remarkable facts in themselves, considering the role Islam plays in the media and in Danish society. The opinions on Islam that are presented differ widely. Occasionally, Muslims are presented as underdogs in Danish society: signature 'Martin' (post dated Jan 23, 2005) remarks how unfair it is to judge an entire religious tradition and its members by the activities of its fundamentalist wing. On the other hand, some participants on selvet.dk reflect a wide-spread islamophobia. Signature 'shenpen' (message posted August 4, 2003) associates Islam with Shari'a law, capital punishment and mutilation, and signature 'Martin' (March 15, 2005) mentions female genital mutilation as part of Islamic traditions. The impression of Muslims as invisible Others is reinforced by the remarkably vitriolic tone of some posts. An absent third party can be described in partial, ironic or even insulting terms, that one would surely avoid in a discussion with another person who is actually present on selvet.dk:

Islam has chosen the ultimate solution to prevent the feelings of guilt that can be provoked by the temptations of the flesh: a woman has to be covered up so she doesn't tempt men and place too great demands on them controlling themselves ... Woman is responsible for the preven-

tive measures, since she is the temptress. The man can't help himself, can he ... [ironic Smiley] (Being a woman in a Muslim country where Shari'a law prevails: yesterday one could read about a woman in Dubai who was sentenced to 150 lashes for being pregnant out of wedlock). (Signature Houdini, posted March 16, 2005.)

Muslims who live according to the letter of the Koran have a problem. According to the Koran, they are supposed to hate those who have a different faith (what a sick way of thinking ...)

The Koran doesn't accept democracy. Nothing above and nothing beside the Koran. Koranic conditions in Denmark? No, thank you. (Løven, March 15, 2005.)

References

Boyer, Pascal

1992 Explaining Religious Ideas: Outline of a Cognitive Approach. *Numen* 39: 27–57.

Campbell, Colin

1972 The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization. *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 5: 119–36.

Cohen, Andrew

1985 *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. London: Routledge.

Dumont, Louis

1980 *Homo Hierarchicus*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hanegraaff, Wouter

1996 *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*. Leiden: Brill.

2001 Prospects for the Globalization of New Age: Spiritual Imperialism Versus Cultural Diversity. In: Mikael Rothstein (ed.), *New Age Religion and Globalization*; pp. 15–30. Århus: Aarhus University Press.

Helland, Christopher

2002 Surfing for Salvation. *Religion* 32: 293–302.

Simonsen, Jørgen Bæk

2001 *Det retfærdige samfund. Om islam, muslimer og etik*. København: Samleren.