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Introduction: Operationalizing Power in the Study of Mosques

Journal of Muslims in Europe

Special issue on Mosques in Europe: Theoretical and Methodological Strategies in the study of Mosques in Europe

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Introduction to puzzle of Mosques in Europe

In the project ‘Danish Mosques: Significance, Use and Influence’, we seek to challenge understandings of what constitutes a mosque and how it can be conceptualised in contemporary Denmark. We seek a better understanding of the underlying complex of social and religious structures.

From the outset, we have been discussing a long list of categorical dichotomies and binary conceptual pairs often referred to implicitly or explicitly when analysing and discussing mosques in present-day Europe. Such categories aim at both description and analysis: When we talk about mosques in contemporary Europe, are we talking about local, regional or national levels? How many mosques do we need to study to be able to understand what a mosque is or can be? In studying and conceptualising mosques, do we consider them as single- or multi-purpose buildings and institutions? Are they to be understood as associations or institutions? What about the physical structures and architecture? Are they faith communities or not? Are they to be seen as something foreign, anti-authoritarian, illegitimate or extreme? Or the opposite? Regarding spaces and activities: are these material or immaterial? Religious or cultural? Gendered? Symbolic or practical?

And turning to congregations, do we look for something open or closed? What determines a closed congregation? Do we look for homogeneity or diversity?

While sorting categories and narrowing research questions and fields of interest, we recognise the academic conversation that has long moved beyond such categories. With Talal Asad (1986), we understand Islam as a discursive tradition just as we recognise the importance of ethnographic studies and post-structuralist analyses of mosques and Muslims that have been conducted in past decades. Thus, we are not necessarily interested in answering the questions of what Islam is or what a mosque is, but rather, we are interested in functionality and processes of becoming and maintaining: How do mosques come to be in a European context, what purposes do they serve, how they are perceived – by whom – and what kind of religious minority identity do they facilitate? What does any given mosque do? What do Muslims do when they frequent a mosque? How do they make sense of their religious practice in and around mosques? In sum, what is the significance, use and influence of mosques in Denmark specifically, and in Europe generally.

Focusing on Denmark, as we do in our research project, mosques are at the very core of societal debate about Muslims, ‘parallel societies’ and integration in Denmark, yet surprisingly little is known about Danish mosques, and even less about the dynamics of power, significance and influence inside and around them. As a contemporary religious institution of post-migratory Muslims in Denmark, mosques are not simply Islamic places of worship, but complex social and religious structures. They are the results of state requirements for religious communities, relationships with local authorities, and decades of integration efforts and organisational ambitions, as well as social ingenuity, institution building and infighting within the constituent Muslim communities.

Thus, we understand mosques as simultaneously forming bases for societal conflict and the widening of cultural divides and as well as forming social bridges connecting not just Muslim minority groups but also faith groups across societal strands, and we aim at a better understanding of the underlying dynamics. Simply put, we seek to move beyond binary categories of good versus bad, productive versus counter-productive, and provide space for discussions of all involved and necessary nuances. Nothing and nobody is just one thing. In order to widen our understanding hereof, we seek to contextualise both in terms of historical trajectories, geography and relations to other societal groups defined by faith, ethnicity or power structures.

Mosques in the Muslim world and in Europe

Mosque – or *masjid* in Arabic – is borrowed into the Qur’an and Arabic, and originates from Aramaic or Syriac, where it means literally ‘place of prostration’ and hence ‘place of prayer’, ‘sanctuary’ or merely ‘temple’. In the Qur’an, the word is used mostly about the holy site in Mecca called ‘*al-masjid al-ḥarām*’, understood as the most sacred place or sanctuary. Also, the al-Aqsa mosque – the ‘remotest’ sanctuary – is mentioned with reference to Jerusalem, where it denotes the place on earth which is the closest to heaven and where cosmology is front and centre.

Generally speaking, the masjid is the place where God is invoked and worshipped, and the word has clearly religious connotations and prayer is understood to be a most natural part of the divine order and commandment to mankind, even across religious divides. As such, masjid and even the idea of being ‘Muslim’ is said to go as far back as creation. In the Islamic narratives, just

as Abraham was considered Muslim before Muhammed transmitted his revelations, so David was seen as having a masjid in Jerusalem.

As the importance and political and religious impact of early Islam grew, so the masjid became a centre of the entire community. Many of the affairs in the mosque and many of the addresses by Muhammad concerned public and political matters as much as religious and spiritual. Many mosques across the young Muslim world would be built, but with a very changing emphasis on the mosque as a social centre or a religious sanctuary. The mosque remains to this day a symbol of Islam – and one that maintains the ambiguities of these very early places of worship.

In the architecture of the Muslim world, very clearly seen, mosques symbolise the social and political glory of Islam. While they are always built to the glory of God, many of them bear the name of a great commander or leader, who built it or in whose honour it was built. Such is the story of the Sultan Ahmed Mosque in Istanbul, the Sultan Hasan Mosque in Cairo, the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque in Oman, or the Mohammad al-Amin Mosque, in Beirut donated by Rafiq Hariri.

This feature of architecture points to a broader paradox of mosque building in the Muslim world. Such mosques look more like an expression of human vanity and come dangerously close to idolatrous worship of the great leader, rather than a humble place of communal prayer – or so orthodox traditionalists would argue. However, even conservative orthodox voices recognise the power of symbols and the glory of Islam and of God invoked in such a prestigious edifice, especially as it brings new and old followers closer to the faith. The greater the building, the greater the popular presence. This paradox is particularly explicit in Islam, when considering the origins of the mosque as a social, political and practical place for the affairs of mankind at the command of Muhammed, and not at the will of God. Adding to this, there is no doctrine ordering prayer in the mosque as opposed to other forms of communal prayer (Frishman and Khan 1994, 30).

With this in mind, it becomes interesting to compare mosques and prayer rooms in Europe. As immigration and family reunification brought the religious life of Muslims to Europe from the beginning of the 1960s onwards, the demand for mosques and prayer rooms increased. These were not purpose-built mosques, but were most often apartments, cellars, backyard houses or industrial buildings equipped with the minimum needed for a mosque interior. As mere prayer rooms, *musalla*, more often than not these included just a crudely made *minbar* and *mihrab*, perhaps carpets or lines on the floor indicating the lines of prostration, a poster or digital screen to indicate the prayer times, a small stack of Qur'ans and Hadith collections and a shelf for shoes at the entrance (Allievi 2010, 16). In aesthetic terms, these 'basement mosques' were as removed from the mosques of the Muslim world as the growing Muslim population were from the Muslim majority countries of origin.

Mosques as an expression of the discursive tradition

Taking a cue from Talal Asad's great discussion about definitions of Islam and the possibility of an anthropology of Islam, we look to mosques as an expression – or perhaps a prism to illustrate wider trends concerning Islam – in the discursive traditions about Islam.

In his seminal paper, 'The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam' (1986), Talal Asad argues that the proper place to begin is to look at Islam as traditions of discourse about what Islam is, about what orthodoxy and orthopraxy are and how Islam should be understood, interpreted and practised.

Important to stress here is that Talal Asad (and others!) put front and centre the two insights that, for one, Islam is not a monolith or essence to be defined and understood once and for all, and second, that the self-expressions and self-identifications of Muslims must be taken into account. The consequence, naturally, is to consider Islam as a discursive tradition. “An Islamic discursive tradition is simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptualisations of the *Islamic* past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present” (Asad 1986, 20).

The important conclusion to draw from this, in the words of Lukens-Bull (1999, 50) is: ‘Discourse is political: the power relations between individuals, or groups of individuals, share the nature of the discourse.’ This link between power politics and Islam amplifies the significance of perceiving Islam as discourse. Asad (1986) exemplifies this in his discussion about orthodoxy when he points to the fact that orthodoxy is not just a question of opinion but very much a relationship of power. The effort of scholars and students of this kind of study of Islam as discursive tradition is to critically investigate the power dynamics that we find in each of the apparent dichotomies or expressions of discourse.

As we explore in this introductory chapter, the interpretation of mosques speaks to the discursive nature of Islam – or Islam as a discursive tradition – and illustrates how, by looking at the apparent dichotomies of mosques, we might see many of the current power struggles to define and control what Islam is and should be; what Muslims are and should be. Not just in mosques and not just in our choice of dichotomies, which are particular to the questions of mosques, but also in the wider society and spheres of interest in Europe in general and in Denmark in particular.

In this special issue – and in the project from which the interest springs – we accept and use the mosques’ own self-understandings and categories. Also, we realise that comparisons between administrative religions are challenged by the fact that the legal framework can be subject to different interpretations of the legal framework and different understandings of activities and organisations, even within small countries.

Furthermore, the definitions of faith societies and congregations tend to differ greatly, depending on religious affiliation. For instance, in Denmark, Christian churches and congregations are more easily recognised formally than Muslim communities and mosques and thereby find themselves more secure in terms of public funding possibilities and legal rights.

Finally, it is important to mention that we have come across phenomena both in the contributions to this issue and in our research on mosques in Denmark that suggest that any and all attempts at using theoretical categories are problematic when analysing empirical examples. We have found activities that we would label ‘mosque activities’ in places that were never referred to as mosques, and individuals and organisations ‘doing mosque’ without any recognition from their surroundings. Rather than give up on categorical and conceptual reflections all together, we wish to emphasise the meaningfulness of continuous reflection and discussion. Only by questioning our normative categories and striving to refine them can we develop the discussion of – and our common understanding of – what a mosque is in Europe today.

A brief view of the state of mosque research

We see an inherently unsatisfying biased ‘shoe-horning’ of mosques into the established theories and models of church and state that mistake mosques for Muslim ‘churches’ (Roy 2004, 201). Even in the twenty-first century, such mismatched structuration perceives mosques as symbols of constructive interreligious relations, pluralism and modular compatibility (‘symbolical mosques’; Maussen 2009, 166). Thus, academics and politicians reproduced only what they thought they knew about mosques (Vinding 2013). This coincided with increasing securitisation and animosity towards Muslims. The last decade has seen a reactionary shift towards perceiving mosques as potentially conflictual (Allievi 2009, 2010), objects of growing resentment (Göle 2011) and even as parallel legal orders and subversive counter-normativity (Bano 2012; Bowen 2016), which in itself produced the counterproductive backlash of furthering Islamic fundamentalism (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010; Zee 2016). This made the constitutive struggle of the mosque even more difficult, resource demanding and, paradoxically, pivotal for the organisational survival of Muslims in Europe.

In turn, the power struggles in and around mosques have intensified, which has polarised divisions within the mosque mirroring the external discourse about Muslims. A few examples from international research demonstrate this intensified ‘powerisation’ of the mosque. Sean McLoughlin (2006) analyses ethnic and religious self-segregation and the need for community cohesion that results in withdrawal from the public space. Marcel Maussen (2009) shows the negative impact of multi-level structuration that has proved to alienate mosques from Muslims. Inside mosques, Nazila Isgandarova (2016) demonstrates the struggle of conservative memory preservation against gender and generational identity formation. Joyce Mushaben (2014) demonstrates that local authorities’ resistance to mosques has spawned conflict and jeopardised stability and cohesion in civil society. Ameera Karimshah, Melinda Chiment and Zlatko Skrbis (2014) show how young Muslims network and socialise around the mosque independently from and in spite of the leadership. Ossama Hegazy (2014), in a more optimistic tone, argues that German mosques could be a step toward reducing segregation, isolation and conflict.

Such international research on mosques stands in a remarkable contrast to the state of Danish research on the subject, where the intensification of power-struggles in and around mosques has largely gone unnoticed. What we do know about mosques in Denmark, we know from a small number of solid studies and research projects from the last decade or so. Lene Kühle from Aarhus University conducted a very important survey of the 114 mosques and prayer rooms in Denmark in 2006, and recently an updated version of the survey showed that there are now approximately 170 mosques in Denmark (Kühle and Larsen 2017). This study significantly updated the state of knowledge on mosques and devised an overall typology of mosques (Kühle 2006). For years, this has been the standard and has been supplemented by additional field studies on mosques in Aarhus, focusing on radicalisation amongst young Muslims (Kühle and Lindekilde, 2010). However, this survey does not consider in qualitative terms the internal workings of the mosque, most importantly power relations, social dynamics, user perspectives and potential internal conflicts. In Copenhagen, Brian Jacobsen and colleagues have made in-depth, case-based studies on the political controversy around mosques and their territoriality in the urban cityscape. Jacobsen views the mosque conflicts as social transformative interaction and accounts for the many stakeholders involved in the construction of mosques (such as Muslim organisations, international donors, local politicians, anti-

Islam groups and other critics). The mosques and the politics of construction can thus be seen as microcosms of the discourse on Muslims in Denmark (Jacobsen 2008, 2014). A recurring theme in Danish research is the identification of public policy towards mosques as characterised by resentment and lack of political will, withholding recognition of Islam and resisting the possibility of purpose-built mosques in a distraught attempt to maintain the symbolic power to invalidate Muslim rights to space and expression (Kühle 2006; Østergaard 2006; Vinding 2013). Empirically, we see municipal territorial power structures that work to invalidate the representational power associated with mosques that threaten to redefine the city, architecturally and sociologically (Jacobsen 2015). The power struggles are definitely there, and Danish research is only just catching up.

Theory on and operationalisation of power

We take a multidimensional view of power forms in conceptualising the mosque and maintain a dialectics of power between agency and relationality that, with Michel Foucault, inextricably ties the subject to power (Foucault 1982) offering a sense of double subjection (Foucault 1988). Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu (1985) points to generative structuration in the reciprocal production of, and ‘being-produced-by’, structures in a network of social relations, closely tying habitus to field and vice-versa. Maintaining such power dialectics reflects the state of power research in the twentieth century, which accounts for deliberate decision making in formal power (Mills 1956; Dahl 1957), for non-decisions (Bachrach and Baratz 1962), and for latent, potential and hidden conflicts (Lukes 1974). Potentially, it allows us to view power in and around mosques in terms of capacity and agency within structuration (Giddens 1984) and as processes of mobilising and politicising (Laclau and Mouffe 1985), while maintaining the dialectic required to analyse power as social and religious activism and counter-power (Wiktorowicz 2002), as resistance (Butler 1990; Mahmood 2005), as institutional power (Parsons 1990; DiMaggio and Powell 1991) and as discourse, language and symbolic power (Bourdieu 1991). The twentieth- and twenty-first-studies of power have been well-constructed specific cases that respond to the many different reactions in forms of power strategies within a given setting (Munk Christiansen and Togeby 2004). For instance, Robert Dahl’s seminal *Who Governs?* is much more open, experimental and multifaceted than his own theoretical and methodological prescriptions would suggest. He notes that the nature of power and influence is so multifaceted that we must ‘avoid putting our eggs in one methodological basket’ (Dahl 1961, 330). ‘Who governs?’ remains an excellent question to be put to Danish mosques in the twenty-first century too.

Touching on Dahl’s concept of power, it is important to bear in mind Steven Lukes’ important critique of the pluralist tradition of American democratic theory. This is the one-dimensional view: power is a behavioural attribute that applies to individuals to the extent that they are able to modify the behaviour of other individuals within a decision-making process. The person with the power in a situation is the one who prevails in the decision-making process (Lukes 1974, 18). Lukes added two other dimensions to the analysis of power as well. A second such dimension was the idea put forward by the critics of the pluralist view Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz in their 1962 ‘Two Faces of Power’, where they pointed out that it is possible to influence decisions by shaping the agenda, not merely by weighing in on existing decision points. Lukes added a third dimension of

power, arguing that both pluralists and their critics overlook an important point -- the fact that people sometimes act willingly in ways that appear contrary to their most basic interests. Thus, the third dimension is the set of ways in which the powerful make the powerless comply without coercion or forcible constraint, by creating, for example, a pervasive system of ideology, religion or false consciousness (Lukes 1974, 27–29). From Lukes', perspective the question then will be: how do the powerful, in and around the mosque, secure the compliance of those they dominate and, more specifically, how do they secure their willing compliance? (ibid., 12). This has obvious relations to Foucault's technologies of the self, and to Giddens' understanding of the narratives of the self, as part of the production of subjectivities we seek to explore as well.

A final thought on the relevance of a study of the power of mosques follows from thoughts by James Beckford in his 'The Restoration of "Power" to the Sociology of Religion' (1983), where he argues that, in sociology of religion, the notion of power was largely eclipsed for the better part of the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s. The governing idea that the significance of religion was declining and weakening as society marched 'towards progressive secularization, rationalization, bureaucratization, alienation, massification, and depersonalization' (ibid., 12) meant that religion had lost its power in society and the assumption was that religion was 'remote from power struggles' (ibid., 17). A study of power of religion would seem counter to such ideas. Beckford's point is straightforward and echoes the criticism of the theories of secularisation, namely, that religion – and its power – reveals itself and is to be discovered and understood in its empirical realities, not something to be defined or hypothesised away. Furthermore, Beckford argues in a later publication that the 'unequal relations of power between faith communities' (Beckford 2003, 99) in Britain, with 'a one-sided system of patronage and brokerage by concession' (ibid.), create an imbalance between faith communities that cannot be described as pluralism, as researchers have done for decades. This situation also applies to many other European countries, including Denmark. The task for researchers should instead be to pay attention to these power relations and describe their form in detail, giving special consideration to 'systematic variations in the relative access of different faith communities to opportunities for influencing the world around them' (ibid.).

We – as do the five contributions in this issue – follow Beckford's call for the restoration of the study of power in its empirical realities. We operationalise our study of the power of mosques by pinning down the various forms of power at play – institutional, relational, subjectivising and oppositional – in order to demonstrate their different rationales, functions and impacts. Such a four-dimensional view of power resonates with the state of research (Munk Christiansen & Togeby 2004). Different forms of power actualise differently, just as different strategies fit better for different situations (Burt 2005), and analytically this conveys a diagnostic of differential forms of power that goes well beyond simple binaries of control/resistance or oppression/subordination (Abu-Lughod 1990; Mahmood 2005).

Attempts at typologising mosques

Across the academic literature, there have been many attempts at theorising or building typologies of mosques, especially as they are perceived in Europe and America. The contributions to this special issue should be seen in this light, as each of them presents new perspectives on the conceptualisation and typologies of mosques.

One common mosque typology is presented by the English architect Shahed Saleem (2018). He differentiates between three types of mosque in his study of British mosques. The first is the house mosque – one of the earliest types of mosque formed by new Muslim communities as they settled and initiated social infrastructures. It is a distinct architectural type, characteristically transforming a domestic space into religious space.

The second type are the non-domestic conversions and they differ from house mosques in that they can vary in status from the small local centre, which might have been the first mosque that a Muslim community established, to the larger, more established mosque that serves as a socio-religious hub for a wide Muslim community. This type is characterised by adapting and transforming buildings built for other purposes and which have space for larger halls or floor areas considered suitable for conversion into mosques. In Britain, they may be former religious buildings (this is not the case in all European countries), cinemas, public houses, retail premises, offices, industrial buildings and schools.

The third type is the purpose-built mosque. It is often the culmination of a Muslim community's mosque-development trajectory, which generally starts with a house mosque or converted building. Often, the growing Muslim population needs a larger space that can eventually replace the former mosque buildings with a purpose-built mosque. The purpose-built mosque is seldom the first mosque that a community initiates. Another characteristic is the 'overwhelmingly iterative and grass-roots nature' mosque establishment (Saleem 2018, 13). Saleem's typology reflects the importance of an architectural study on the characteristics of more or less visible buildings, both in terms of visible symbols, but in terms of the uses and contents of the buildings.

Another typology of mosques is attempted by Lene Kühle in her study on Danish mosques from 2006. She distinguishes between Sunni and Shia mosque communities. Particularly within the Sunni Muslim community, she applies Max Weber's theory of authority to distinguish between three types of authority within mosques. If a mosque fits within the parameters of rational-legal authority, it would be labelled as an organizational mosque. If it is shown to have a charismatic authority, it would be labelled as a sheikh mosque. Or if it was built on a traditional authority, it would be labelled a lay mosque. This approach represents comparative sociology's way of understanding the phenomena we study, but also shares the disadvantage of reducing their meaning – which is a general critique of most typologies.

A third typology is presented by Stefano Allievi (2009, 17–18). In his typology, the first is the purpose-built mosque, as discussed above, and so there are partly overlapping ideas in the discussion of mosque typologies. His second category is the 'Islamic centre', which is understood to be a centre of significant size that has a number of social and cultural functions and various forms of gathering in addition to the function of prayer and worship. These may cover schooling and teaching, typically on the Qur'an, introduction to Islam for converts, and so on, including courses and meeting opportunities for adults, women and converts, as well as conferences and other social and cultural activities. This is almost entirely distinct from the functions and facilities for prayer and worship. Allievi argues that Islamic centres also fulfil the function of providing an institutional and symbolic representation of Muslims, and are a small but important part of what Allievi understands as mosques. A third category is the Islamic 'musalla', or prayer room, which in sheer numbers is the most significant across European countries. These are located in industrial buildings, warehouses,

former shops and apartments. They may only serve to host the activity of prayer, but other activities may take place as well. They are often organised according along ethnic lines and are attended mainly by members of one ethnic or language group.

Contributions to the present Special Issue

Each of the five articles in this special issue offers a contribution to the field of research on mosques in Europe, and Muslims in Europe more generally, by examining mosques as complex institutions, unfolding questions of authority and diversity, change and continuity, conceptualisation and categorisation. Collectively, the articles challenge essentialist ideas of Muslim community organisations and reductionist understandings of the role of mosques in European societies. They do so by shedding light upon specific features of mosques and Muslim religious authority in Europe today from different perspectives.

Critically questioning the concept of the ‘mosque’, Abdul Azim Ahmed’s contribution offers a new conceptual model for describing Muslim places of worship with focus on their diverse functions, by presenting a case study built on three different mosques in Cardiff. Ahmed’s model, ‘the interspatial mosque’, is a three-layered dynamic description of how mosques function. Because it facilitates the comparison of mosques through their functions, highlighting their diversity and similarities, it is a useful tool for scholars who engage with the functions and internal dynamics of mosques in Europe.

Chantal Munsch and Kathrin Herz continue the investigation of the various functions of mosques, as they engage with the idea of the multiplicity of Turkish Muslim community centres in Germany. Building on an extensive ethnographic in-depth study of 15 selected mosques that use converted buildings, Munsch and Herz make fruitful use of an architectural as well as social scientific approach in their analysis of mosques as relational spaces. Underlining the complexity and multiplicity of materiality, functions, social practices and experiences of Turkish Muslim community centres, they show that the community centres bring together different functional spaces in multi-functional clusters, and take different material forms that carry multiple meanings.

In the next article, studying the appearance of mosques that do not constitute buildings, Jesper Petersen suggests the use of the concept of the ‘pop-up’ mosque to analytically explain the temporary use of other-purpose buildings as mosque spaces. In doing so, Petersen offers an additional layer to former mosque typologies, such as that suggested by Ahmed. The concept of the pop-up mosque focuses on mosques without spatial permanence, which have been largely overlooked by scholars. On the basis of empirical cases from Denmark, Germany and Switzerland, Petersen argues that the emergence of pop-up mosques is an important factor for change within European Islam. As it allows nonconformist discourses to materialise, such as the making of female imams, it constitutes a challenge to traditional religious authority.

Engaging with questions about limitations and challenges facing mosques Simon Stjernholm explores what he denotes as organic intellectuals or ‘do it yourself’ Muslim preachers. Building his argument on the case of the Swedish Muslim preacher Salih Tufekcioglu, Stjernholm shows how frustration with power structures, lack of relevant youth activities, and lack of knowledge of youth life experience in established mosques motivates a new generation of Muslims to ‘do it themselves’. This new generation of self-taught preachers offers an alternative dissemination of Islamic

discourse – outside the mosques. Stjernholm thus shows how religious authority takes on new forms in new settings as reactions (and in opposition) to the traditional religious authority of the established mosques.

Finally, Torkel Brekke, Lene Kühle, Göran Larsson and Tuomas Martikainen look at mosques from a methodological perspective as they argue that mosques can be useful as points of entry in research about Muslims in Europe. In contrast to much recent scholarship that has stressed the importance of focusing on the non-organised Muslims in Europe, Brekke et al. problematise the categorisation of ‘organised’ and ‘non-organised’ in studies of Muslims in Europe. They do so by showing how affiliation in and membership of mosques are unstable categories, varying in different national and regional contexts, depending on financial and political conditions. Though acknowledging representative biases when scholars use the mosque as a point of entry to members of Muslims communities, Brekke et al. point to the powerful advantage of the mosques’ extensive reach among Muslims in Europe through the adoption of new technologies.

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