

UPPSALA UNIVERSITY

Department of Theology

Master Programme in Religion in Peace and Conflict

Master thesis, 30 credits

Spring, 2020

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How do religion and a religious dialogue foster social cohesion?

A study of the Inter-religious Council of Stockholm

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Abstract

Europe has in recent years recognized the need of the inclusion of religions in the dialogue on social cohesion and building of its future. Analysts of the interreligious dialogue suggest that understanding the process of it may be helpful to both the initiators of such conversations as well as all the participants. The idea of different religions working together raises some questions. One of the first questions asked is whether interreligious dialogue really works. How can diverse religions dialogue when there are disputes even within the same religions and within their branches? The understanding of the process offers a better chance of such dialogue being successful and useful for the building of the world we live in.

This thesis explores interreligious dialogue by looking into the interreligious council of Stockholm, which currently includes eighteen different religions, representing some of the city's diversity, its thoughts and culture. For the analysis, we will use Orton's discussion and recommendations. In his "Interfaith dialogue: seven key questions for theory, policy and practice" (2016), Orton considers many of the nuances involved in such dialogue. Questioning and reflections allow for the observations and insight into the complexities of interreligious dialogue which provides for better understanding of the process included. Theories and angles consider social and psychological elements, as well as religious concerns.

Using qualitative research, coming from the interpretive paradigm, this thesis analyses how interreligious dialogue works within a local interreligious council. Analysing the reflections and answers of the respondents, we find the answers to some of the questions given by Orton and reflect over the practical understanding of the theories we looked at.

Key Words

Interreligious dialogue, interreligious interaction and dynamics, peace and community building, interreligious Stockholm

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Acknowledgements

I wish to express my gratitude to the following persons for their support:

Håkan Bengtsson, who mentored this project and gave valuable advice, gentle guidance and whose presence was the calm voice in the midst of many questions and issues along the way.

Members of the Interreligious Council of Stockholm: Helene Egnell for the welcoming of the project and help with contacting other members, Bahman Tofighian for kind words and assistance as the chairman of the organisation, Kamala Priya for the initial contact and hours given to assist the project, Emma Hernejärvi and Daniel Janse, all of whom kindly took time to answer my questions generously and kindly.

Teachers and students of the Program Religion in Peace and Conflict of which this project is part, for their inspirational and engaging work, their sharing and the attitude of building up and lifting up all involved.

My earlier teachers of the BA program for Theology and Religion, especially dr. Kenneth R. Valpey for his introduction to the likhana yoga (writing discipline) as the art of practice and detachment. Yadunandana Swami for the encouragement and inspiration in my studies.

To my elders: John Doherty for giving me a push to pursue these studies and checking in with me regularly to keep me on track with the thesis and Inger Ek, as my mother in law and the priest in the Church of Sweden for her unwavering faith in me which is still felt despite her leaving.

And finally to my closest family and friends for their support, encouragement, tolerance and patience through my work.

Thank you all

List of Abbreviations

IRiS - Interreligiösa råd i Stockholm (Interreligious Council in Stockholm)

IRD - Interreligious dialogue

IFD - Interfaith dialogue

SIR - Sveriges Interreligiösa Råd (Swedish interreligious council)

1. Introduction

During my studies within the Religion in Peace and Conflict Programme my attention was drawn to several global and local organisations formed as a cooperation of different religions aiming to work together for peace and a better earth, globally or locally.

While the idea appealed to me and its goals seem lofty, worthy of respect and support, some questions emerged. Does this really work? How can peace and better earth be there when the values and cultures reflected in their religions are not always in tune? Who are the people working in these organisations? Is their work anchored in their religious scriptures and practices? Is it supported in the congregation? Are those individuals simply by nature more inclined to tolerance and drawn to a bridge preaching? How much of their work is brought back into their communities? How would my own religious/philosophical background argue for or against it?

Reading about the European Council of Religious Leaders, I came across an article about their Annual Conference of 2018. I discovered that it was held at the same place, an ecological village project, that my sons, within the Erasmus Plus project, visited a few months after that conference. One of the many things that stood out for my children was that men and women had separate entrances to the worship hall. They sat on its separate sides. In the pictures from the event of the Annual Conference mentioned above however, one can see men and women, from various denominations, sitting next to each other and talking together at the same table. Those pictures were the starting point of this thesis as they awakened further questions. What is the vision of Europe, a religiously understood and envisioned Europe, that those leaders have? How do they handle, in front of others and within their own walls, the difference in values, a dichotomy of the values between each other and the secularized world around them?

My BA thesis looked into how the imagined idea of a Vaishnava philosophy (recognized within the Hindu traditions) known as simultaneous oneness and difference, the unity in diversity, is intended to be applied and executed in practice. Expanding on those lines, I wished to know

how, and if, the cooperation of religions can be not only imagined but also executed in practice in terms of the unity in diversity.

In the studies of religion in peace and conflict, a question of religion's possible positive effects, as well as the potential for the conflict and negative impact seem a valid thing to examine. In the secular countries boards and councils endeavouring to foster peace building, social cohesion, understanding, inclusion and religious cooperation are growing in numbers and establishing themselves locally. This makes them a subject of interest. The state of religion in the world at large varies; from the countries in which religion is still prominent and is closely working with the political order, through the countries in which some secularization has taken place, to the countries which give religion little or no concern in their political set-up.

We will here put aside following countries; a) those which either have a defined religious outlook wherein one religion is prominent and considered ruling, or b) the countries which outlaw religion or give it no concern, wherein the social cohesion would be differently examined. This study is primarily interested in the countries and the worldviews that do recognize a right of humans to practice religion side by side with others of different religions and faith; the secular countries which respect and/or include this human right in their political program. A particular interest here is given to the European perspective and the attitude of the European Union. Examining the council of Stockholm, in the capital of Sweden, makes European context relevant. Europe is relevant due to its many diverse ways of approaching religions. Within the European continent we can find the ideas of secularization alongside some renewed interest in partnering with or including religious understanding in its running. (European Commission, 2009) Migration into and within Europe has brought to the surface a possible conflict of cultures and religious outlooks. (Boswell, 2000) Thus, the question of working with the idea of unity in diversity becomes an interesting subject to examine. Those engaged in such work are of interest to the subject of religion and to its possible impact upon the peace or conflict locally and globally.

In *Rabbis Without Borders*, Laura Duhan Kaplan writes in her article “Does Interfaith Dialogue Work?” (2014) : ‘A business leader exclaimed: “How can groups of different religions dialogue, when denominations within the same religion won’t talk to each other!”’

Some people are skeptical toward the idea of cooperation and the goals of social cohesion, others see it as a process justified during the changing times and yet others are very positive of it. Our focus here is not confined to the theoretical, but extends to the practical. We aim to understand how such endeavour is executed and what can be learned from it.

The focus of this thesis is on the local council of interreligious dialogue in Stockholm. The Council has a diverse number of members, currently eighteen representing religious worldviews of the faiths in the country and Stockholm area. That made it interesting from the theological perspective; the possibility of getting broader insight into varied elements of religions and traditions that are part of the city. A further reason for choosing this particular council was the fact that I live in Stockholm county, which provided a possibility of a closer examination. Having some experience of the city, the county and its people, it also offered some potential to reflect upon the complexities of the interreligious endeavour of dialogue in a somewhat familiar setting. Finally, my own religious path and a congregation is a member of the council which made the subject relevant to me personally.

2. A Research Question and The Thesis Outline

Reflecting the title, the research question of this thesis is - How can religion and religious dialogue foster social cohesion? The aim of the thesis is to explore and deepen the understanding of how, and if, the cooperation of religions can be imagined and executed in practice, fostering social cohesion.

More specifically, this research looks into how values of religious community representatives in an inter-religious council are viewed, explained, affected or changed in the work of a local council. This should facilitate insight into and analyses of the practice of interreligious dialogue and peace building within the given council.

This thesis examines the complexities of interreligious dialogue. For this purpose, thoughts and theories useful for the analysis are presented. The concepts include the dynamics of group work, values, the approaches to interreligious work as well as the recognition of the political elements and the backgrounds to the inter-religious relations. The thesis then looks into the council itself, its statutes, its member religions and some of the answers on its work provided by the religions' representatives in the council. The understanding that work that includes social interactions is multifaceted and layered, progressive and changing is further used to guide our hearing from the religion and the religious representatives. It assists our concluding analysis of the data collected.

While forming the questions for the interviews and reflecting upon the data, aside from the above mentioned concepts, theoretical guidance is taken from Orton's "Interfaith dialogue: seven key questions for theory, policy and practice" (2016) with some references from his earlier works. In that work, Orton summarises different theories and ideas using critical analysis, and proposes seven key questions to be used in the defining of the work of interreligious dialogue. These questions are used in our study for further analysis and the discussion about the data collected.

The thesis uses qualitative research. A primary data is collected by looking into how the council itself and its member religions present themselves on their respective webpages. This introduces the religions involved in the council work. The semi-structured interviews conducted with the representatives of member religions provide further data. The content of these is then examined through the thematic and narrative analysis, as we search for themes, patterns and stories that can tell something of how those involved in the interreligious dialogue in Stockholm within the council foster social cohesion.

Interpretive and constructivist paradigm is used as the approach to this thesis. This allows flexibility in treating the respondents as persons and the subject examined to be looked through a subjective experience. (Ahmed et al., 2016) The aim is to understand people and social constructs.

3. The Theory and A Literature Review

Orton's above mentioned discussion on interfaith dialogue had inspired the research of theoretical concepts relevant to this thesis presented in this chapter. Based on his cumulative research in Europe on the subject of interfaith dialogue, Orton argues for the importance of a nuanced approach toward it. While there is a potential for such work to bring forth good results and aid the cohesive endeavours, he says, there are also some potential hurdles and pitfalls. Thus, the better understanding of those issues, and the improvement of interreligious communication is an important step in aiding work of building cohesive society. In his "Interfaith dialogue: seven key questions for theory, policy and practice" (2016) he presents some of the important elements to consider, based on varied theories and analysis. Orton is concerned with things such as circumstances, identity, spaces, processes, relationships that one needs to take into account when looking at the work of interreligious dialogue.

Building this type of deeper dialogue involves recognising how social, psychological and structural dimensions interact. It also involves recognising how interactions can affect feelings of belonging and how identities can evolve over time, as well as how the patterns of relationships established through interactions over time can affect social cohesion.
(Orton, 2016, p.358)

He notes that European governments had started to recognize the importance of the interfaith dialogue for the development of cohesive communities. Orton mentions Cattle's idea of "parallel lives" in which people sharing the same space may be living next to each other without really touching. The migrational issues add a further dimension to it, with a potential for conflict. (Orton, 2016, p.349)

He says "Creating structures for interfaith engagement which implicitly assume that all faith groups operate in the same way and with the same values will inevitably create barriers to engagement." (Orton, 2016, p.353)

The engagement in such dialogues is one of the important elements to consider. Understanding those involved in the dialogue and how they engage is the objective of our research, as it affects the complexity of the work involved in the interreligious relationships and conversations.

...those involved were recognised as already being interested for some reason in such dialogue. These did not necessarily include those who carried authority or leadership roles within their own particular cultures or communities (Orton, 2016, p.354)

Furthermore, there is a risk that many interfaith dialogue initiatives only involve those already convinced of the merit of this dialogue and/or who already have some degree of awareness of different faiths. This means that these initiatives do

not necessarily reach those who might have most to learn from them (Orton, 2016, p.355)

It is our basic assumption that understanding the complexity and elements of interfaith dialogue should be helpful in improving it, assisting the work of social cohesion and work for a peaceful world.

We will here look into varied concepts and theories that can help us recognize the complexities involved in the interreligious dialogue. They will form the theoretical framework of this research. They were used as a background to forming the interview questions and analysing of the data.

They set the scene for our work of examining how religion within the process of religious dialogue and the interreligious dialogue itself foster social cohesion.

In addition, this chapter tries to tease out some of the thoughts and reflections on the subject in order to help us work in the manner of the qualitative inductive approach, being open and flexible to what is presented, allowing for the subjective interpretations and insights from those who speak and those who hear it.

3.1 Social cohesion

We will start by defining some of the terms this research works with. While social cohesion may be understood in different ways and is a subject of discussion and research of its own, in the context of this thesis social cohesion refers to the idea of a group of people sharing the same space working (well) together and doing so in agreement, in support of each other and their shared space.

A central issue of this chapter considers work toward social cohesion and questions that surround it. How is social cohesion formed? What elements should one consider in a group working together? What are the obstacles? What defines a group and how do varied identities and values of members of a society affect this cohesion? Should social cohesion be something to strive for and in which ways? This chapter will offer some thoughts on those issues.

3.2. The dialogue defined

- religious dialogue, interreligious dialogue, interfaith dialogue, dyspraxia

As said, the focus of this research centers around terms related to the concept of a dialogue. There are many definitions of a dialogue and many angles to it, several of them relevant to and used in the course of this work. As the council that is the object of the research in this paper uses in its name the word interreligious in reference to a dialogue, we will adopt it as relevant to refer to in regard to our subject. However, for the purpose of the analyses and to situate the research within the academic space of work, we will look into the concept of a dialogue, its definitions, and the angles and layers connected to it. Rather than claiming one concept or a definition superior to the other(s), we will here try to present the complexities of it, in order to observe and examine the field of our own dialogue with the subject at hand.

People are members of different religious communities wherein they converse on the subject of religious issues, questions and possible conflicts they face. They also engage in a dialogue as an exchange of ideas and opinions within those communities. They further do so within a larger community, in our case that of Stockholm city/county, Sweden and a larger international community that shares their religious values. They are also representatives of different religious groups in a council which is at the centre of this paper, the Interreligious Council of Stockholm.

With that in mind, dialogue reflected upon in this research can be described as multi layered and branched. This research does touch upon, includes but does not stop with a dialogue between

people of varied religious orientations. It relates to religious issues in the community. It also touches upon a conversation regarding theological elements of those religions involved in the research. It reflects on the cooperation with other religions in the context of sharing socio-geographical living space. We aim to look into the question of what each religion says about such work, as well as at the individual's take on it.

A relevant definition for the interreligious dialogue is given by Sallie B. King who says: "Interreligious dialogue is best defined as intentional encounter and interaction among members of different religions as members of different religions." (King, 2010) She lists many varied forms of such dialogue, such as the dialogue of the elite, parliamentary, spiritual, practical and so on. A closer look at the many mentions of it in the academic and religious circles does show that many approach this subject in a similar way, offering their definitions and focusing on their favoured aims and practices. King's definition is applicable to the object of our research, the Interreligious Council of Stockholm.

However, it is worth noting that the term 'interreligious dialogue' is in some academic circles used interchangeably with the 'interfaith dialogue', such as in the case of Abu-Nimer (Abu-Nimer, 1999) where "or" between them signifies they may be seen as similar terms. The others make a distinction between the two terms and the further meanings, uses and results of the two.

Sarah E. Bernstein in her paper "Is 'interreligious' synonymous with 'interfaith'? the roles of dialogue in peacebuilding" (Bernstein, 2012) says that an interfaith dialogue is a dialogue between the faiths, which "focuses on theology, and its aim is to influence the belief system of the other religion", while the interreligious dialogue "aims to build relationships in order to improve inter-communal relations and work together for social change and justice". She writes: "I propose that religion engages people at their deepest level of emotion and intuition, as well as providing a worldview that dictates how people understand the world in which they live." (Bernstein, 2012) In her analyses between the two there are several distinctions. Presented in the

table 7.1 of her paper she argues that interreligious dialogue (henceforth referred to as IRD for this presentation) focuses on the conflict transformation, whilst interfaith dialogue (henceforth referred to as IFD) focuses on conflict prevention. IRD, she further says happens between the people of different religions, being about inter-communal relations whilst IFD happens between the faiths and discusses theology. IRD mitigates truth claims while IFD examines them. IFD is based on joint study and learning but IRD involves varied activities. IRD has, according to Bernstein, social change for its goal and is seen as a work on grassroot levels. IFD on the other hand, being resistant to change and focused on global ethics or celebration of diversity is also seen as a work of leadership groups. (Bernstein, 2012) We will return to these issues and definitions while examining the work of the Interreligious Council of Stockholm.

Lissi Rasmussen has in her work “From Diapraxis to Dialogue, Christian-Muslim Relations” (Rasmussen, 1988) presented a theory of dyspraxia. Considering the interplay of elements such as dialoguing, meeting and theologically analyzing that can be involved in the process she has proposed the focus on dyspraxia, or dialogue as action. This term can be found in many contemporary presentations of interreligious dialogue.

Rasmussen says “Dialogue only becomes meaningful when rooted in a common praxis” (Rasmussen, 1988). Her attitude reflects reformist understanding as it implies that people in a dialogue should not only be meeting to talk but also to “reveal and transform the reality they share” (Rasmussen, 1988), not waiting for prejudice and misunderstandings between them to disappear but to work actively on removing the social differences that create or support those misunderstandings. She mentions the words of the World Council of Churches saying “Dialogue begins where people live together”(Rasmussen, 1988). Her conclusion is that one should work from below - the communities, rather than from above - through conferences. (Rasmussen, 1988)

The idea of dyspraxia is relevant to our theory about the importance of understanding the interreligious dialogue in order to work on it and with it to bring improvement and results that such dialogue endeavours for.

3.3. A dialogue in layers

From the above given definition of the dialogues involved in these analyses we do see it entails a layered approach and variety of angles, from a talk to the possible resolute action with an aim, such as the resolve of a conflict.

We will here analyse some definitions included and referred to when talking about the interreligious dialogues. Marbaniang mentions that the concept of a dialogue between different religions is recognized and talked about in a variety of terms such as ‘interreligious’, ‘intercultural’, ‘interfaith’ and even ‘the peacebuilding’. While they may in essence refer to, or are intended to do so, to the same or similar work and dialogue, there are some nuances in what each of them stresses and in how such dialogues are conducted. (Marbaniang, 2018) It is helpful to bear this in mind, as we work with analysis of the interreligious dialogue.

Marbaniang makes a distinction between the interpersonal and the interdoctrinal dialogues, dividing the former further into the formal and informal. The informal, everyday dialogue happens in the informal circumstances that arise at many of our everyday moments while the formal ones are usually prearranged. The latter may be the dialogues aiming toward action, resolve of a conflict, toward finding a solution, having an experience, or for a purpose of sharing, or providing and receiving education. (Marbaniang, 2018)

Interdoctrinal dialogue is an individual’s engagement with the religious writings and teachings. Through them, the person themselves and those who may read their writings or hear their presentations, have an opportunity to understand the other, oneself in the light of the other, as well as address varied issues relevant to the religion. (Marbaniang, 2018)

While this thesis is aiming to look into the work of a council in Stockholm, it will touch upon the understanding of religious writings and teachings of the faiths included in it and engage in some interdoctrinal dialogue.

In relation to this, from my Internet readings of the varied religious organisations worldwide I will mention that the subject of interreligious dialogue seems to be taken up and addressed in the majority of the world religions by the date. This is often so in the context of relevance locally and nationally, but also as a general idea.

3.4. The approaches to the interreligious interaction

Marbaniang lists four approaches to interreligious interaction that are helpful to remember when preparing our analyses. The four are: fundamentalist, syncretist, inclusivist and pluralist approaches.

A fundamentalist approach assumes theological conservatism and rejects the commonalities among religions as valid for accepting the common values and the shared understandings. As with many other terms we use, fundamentalism is also layered and manifested in many varieties. A fundamentalist attitude may be found in the majority of world religions, supporting their advocates' attitudes and actions. (Marbaniang, 2018)

A syncretist approach can be seen as accepting of the similarities. Such an approach is open to and works with the combining and blending of different elements. It allows and asserts the underlying unity of at least some religions and traditions, often those that came in touch with each other. An example of this is given in modern Baha'i tradition. (Marbaniang, 2018) Since this is one of the traditions involved in the council, we will look closer into it during the presentation of this faith and our interdoctrinal dialogue with it.

An inclusivist approach maintains that other religions may be partially true, allowing for the other religions to be recognized in the light of their own. (Marbaniang, 2018) Marbaniang gives the example of Srila Prabhupada recognizing Jesus as a form of Krishna. Having myself studied the life of Srila Prabhupada, I will add here a few lines about it for the purpose of the analysis and a reflection on the inclusivist approach. Srila Prabhupada, as well as his immediate spiritual predecessors, grew up under colonial time in India. He studied at English College, during the time when the work of finding a balance between the Christianity of the colonials and varied Hindu understandings was prominent among the intellectual youth, *bhadralok*. Some theologians argue that Hinduism at large, with its pan-inclusivism, is in fact in its core an inclusivist religion, allowing for the accommodation of other faiths and traditions and their incorporation into the religious lore and practice. Analysts pose a question of how karmic and abrahamic faith handle the interreligious dialogue, is there a difference? We hope to touch upon it in the analyses of the council.

A pluralist approach can be divided into a theological one and a humanistic one. The understanding of a humanistic pluralism focuses on the themes of a mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, and a dialogue working toward the goals of peace and humanitarianism. Theological pluralist approach sees all religions as equally valid and fundamentally true. Its weakness, its critics claim, is the fact that religious studies point out that there are fundamental differences between the religions. (Marbaniang, 2018)

To add a further depth and a layer to the analysis of the interreligious dialogue, reflecting upon the varied elements mentioned by Orton, we will look into the idea of social interaction depending on the attitudes of those involved. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, engagement is an important element in the assessment of a dialogue. That engagement is a reflection of values we bring with us as well as the attitude we have toward the process of dialogue we are involved in.

As several of the analysts of the dialogue mention importance of the conflict resolution as focus and/or means of the dialogue, I found the Thomas-Kilman model for conflict resolution (1974), which Marbaniang presents in his analysis (Marbaniang, 2018, p. 108.), of interest to help gain the insight of the issues that may be involved. Following is the summary of Marbaniang's presentation of the Thomas-Kilman model.

The axes of this model represent the amount of assertiveness involved (vertically) and cooperativeness (horizontally). Closest to the zero point, with least assertiveness and least cooperation is the attitude of avoidance. Even when agreeing to a dialogue or interreligious interaction, those with little desire for or need for assertiveness or cooperation spirit will simply take to avoiding the dialogue and interaction by not coming to the meeting, not answering the mail, or, if being present they will not engage, have nothing to say, give no contribution and may even engage in something else while physically present. Needless to say this will bring little to the table and may even be counterproductive and undermining the work a team or a group endeavours to accomplish.

Where there is a large amount of assertiveness with little cooperation, a competitive situation will arise. While this competitiveness may be more or less prominent, and we recognize that some healthy competition could at times be helpful, in this particular case fundamentalist approach is likely to manifest itself in an interreligious dialogue. The supremacy of one's own wisdom and way is asserted, stressing the need to guard it, and protect its purity and form. There is little interest in hearing others. This dictates the work progress, and is likely to bring little or no results toward working together in any way.

On the other hand, when the members in the group are motivated to cooperate and have little or no interest in assertion, the dominating spirit of the work will be that of accommodation. While this is a more pleasant atmosphere to work in than either that in which avoidance or competition dominate, the accommodation may not meaningfully move the work forward. Although the

members of a dialogue may find some comfort and support in the spirit of niceties, without them being able to fully express and positively assert themselves, there will still be a lack of progress.

With a balanced amount of assertiveness and cooperation an atmosphere of compromise arises. This is a partial way to move forward; people involved are somewhat engaged, they have expressed some assertion and demands and they have settled to some accommodation and shown openness toward another. It is likely that this is not an ideal situation for the majority of those involved as some desires or needs are not well-satisfied and may lurk under the surface.

Where the high assertiveness and cooperativeness are involved in the dialogue process, the Thomas-Kilman model recognises it as a space of a collaboration. Here is a bigger chance for everyone to be who they are, to be able to express their needs and to facilitate the same for others. This, in the model, is seen as the best facilitation for the conflict resolution. (Marbaniang, 2018)

These attitudes and ways of thinking or associating with others are not restricted to political or religious dialogues or conflict resolutions, they are part of our everyday interactions with people we meet and live with. Different circumstances call for different responses and we all may, and are likely to, react in some of the above mentioned ways in different situations. In itself, they are neither bad nor good responses.

When it comes to a work on interreligious dialogue in an organised set-up such as the interreligious council, it may be helpful though to be aware of what attitudes and responses are predominant in the group and what possible differences are there among the individuals in that group. The Thomas-Kilman model can give us some idea of where the group stands and what possible results can be expected in a given constellation.

Depending on what our approach is, some of these attitudes may be more prominent than others. A fundamentalist may go as far as to see a compromise or collaboration as lowering of the

principles, standards and morals or even as a helping an enemy. Fundamentalists would consider compromise or collaboration in such context as a weakness, a negative influence to their endeavours. A pluralist would, on the other hand, see compromise and collaboration as strengths. (Marbaniang, 2018)

3.5. The dynamics of a group work

We have recognized some of the differences in the approach to a dialogue and the interreligious work that those involved in it may have. There is a further variable to consider, that of dynamics involved in a group relationship.

There are theories regarding the relationship between the members of a group and the stages a group goes through in its work. Thuckman and his four (or additional fifth) stages of development are often mentioned in this regard, citing those as forming, storming, norming and performing. (Thuckman and Jensen, 1977). Depending on the group in question and the approaches to the analyses, different elements are being considered and brought to the light. A first stage is usually characterized by a need for some leadership and structure, and the polite and curious attitudes. The second stage is called storming as it is marked with the emergence of varied challenges, such as questions, possible conflicts, defining of positions, space, aims, rules etc. The interdependence and a cohesion of the group are achieved and smooth work attained in the stage of performing. These stages can vary in the length of time and cycles may be repeated when some new variable is introduced. (Thuckman and Jensen, 1977) What is here relevant to this thesis is to note that a work of a created group is likely to go through certain stages and that an awareness of those stages may help in dealing with it and moving the work forth.

Abu-Nimer (Abu-Nimer, 2004), in his paper on the cooperative work between the Muslim and Jewish folks in Israel, identifies similar stages. In his analyses he observes the four stages that can be summed as those of excitement/idealization, tension/learning, frustration/reinforcement of

difference and empowerment/collaboration. The first two roughly correspond to the Dependence phase identified by Bennis and Shepard (1956.)

The security seeking, anxiety reducing behaviour presented by Bennis and Shepard is mentioned in Abu-Nimer's observations. Adapting Bennis and Shepard's ideas to the more contemporary wording and situation, Abu Nimer speaks of careful and hesitant approach among the group members with the exaggerated politeness. He identified this as a personal acquaintance stage from which the group moves to the cultural interaction where members reveal their stereotypes, fears and possible mistrust. This may then cause struggle, frustration and disagreement. Depending on the facilitator of the group and general identification of the group's work and goal, such as cultural and personal development vs. endeavour to recognize conflicts and differences, the process moved either by ignoring and neglecting fears in favor of supporting a safe interaction, positive experiences or professional discussion or it moved on to discuss differences and analyse conflicts as a learning strategy and process. These analyses bring our attention upon the specific roles within the group, such as the influence of a facilitator. (Abu-Nimer, 2004) The attitudes, values and understandings of those that run the group should be notified and taken into consideration.

3.6. A "Theory of the Rainbow"

At the end of her presentation about dyspraxia, Rasmussen introduces a rainbow allegory.

All colours are contained in the rainbow. No colour has a favour or an advantage. The rainbow is the sign of hope in God's future. We see God's peace in the rainbow, and at the same time we see our sisters and brothers in the world. We are all in this brother/sisterhood although we are different. We are there each with her/his colour. We are kept together in the same bow. Where the rainbow ends, a new situation develops, and there will be no difference between people. (Rasmussen, L. 1988.)

Ending his paper on the Buddhist-Catholic Dialogue of Life in Japan, Busquet writes:

Interreligious dialogue is ultimately not about exchanging information and knowledge, but about communion of hearts in the deepest layer of human existence. It is a shared experience that transforms us into brothers and sisters living together for the common good for the common well-being of all humankind and the natural world. (Busquet, 2012.)

The issue I have here given a title “the theory of the rainbow” is the reflection of the pluralist understanding. To remind us, a pluralist approach to an interreligious interaction is seen theologically as all religions being equally valid and fundamentally true. This is disputable due to fundamental differences within religions themselves, which makes the ideas beautifully reflected in a vision of a rainbow-like harmony or brotherhood and sisterhood of humankind come in question. In the humanistic expression of this pluralist approach there is a focus on mutual respect, peaceful coexistence and the dialogue is aiming toward peace and humanitarianism. Peacebuilding dialogue with religious backgrounds is juxtaposed to secularization in which religion loses its relevance in the social, cultural and political context.

Oddbjörn Leirvik (Leirvik, 2011.) mentions that Norwegian inter religious council initiative, which started in 1996, The Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities is created by an initiative of faith communities without involvement from the political authorities. As such, he recognizes it as a grassroot initiative. Bernstein brought the grassroot initiative up in her differentiation between the interreligious and inter-faith dialogue, characterizing it as IRD. (Bernstein, 2012) The idea of the grassroots generally refers to the ordinary people belonging to a society or an organisation. Majority of the religions included in an interreligious dialogue are organizations and the majority of people involved in the work are in some authority position and possibly clergy within those organizations. However, in the secular world, they are identified as the grassroots, rather than the authoritative leadership. The issue of the role of (their) religion in the society and desire to influence the world around them moves them toward the creation of the grassroot organization such as an interfaith or the interreligious council. To a degree, their work

for peace and humanitarian endeavours is seen through the glasses of a secular judgment of religious worldviews.

The Interreligious Council of Stockholm recognizes themselves as a grassroots organization. Its aims seem to reflect humanistic pluralism. Thus, questions of a possible cooperation with the political authorities, of influence upon their world and of the ideas about how the varied religions and non-religions coexist or what world are they to create together to share should be kept in mind while looking into its work.

3.7. The European Union's religion and politics

In its paper Religion and EU's external policies (2020), the European Parliamentary Research Service reflects over the original secular outlook on the importance of religion, expecting its role to be decreasing, to in the recent past open up toward the inclusion and dialogue with religious representatives and the awareness of European religious roots. In 2005, The Treaty of Lisbon institutionalized such dialogue and in 2013 EU published guidelines for the protection and promotion of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB).

Bases of the European Union's stand point are outlined in the Lisbon Treaty and include the values of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and human rights. While the treaty and further work had opened the possibility for the work involving or concerning religion, the field of that work within the EU is still young and developing.

Article 10 of the Freedom of thought, conscience and religion states:

- 1. Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right includes freedom to change religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or in private, to manifest religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.*

2. *The right to conscientious objection is recognised, in accordance with the national laws governing the exercise of this right.* (Perchoc, Ph. for EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service, Religion and the EU's external policies, Increasing engagement, In-depth analysis, 2020)

The way these rights and freedoms in relation to religion are applied differs between the countries of European Union. In some, such as Denmark, and England (identifying as a part of Europe, although not anymore a part of the European Union) the queen is also a head of Church, while in France seculararity is part of the constitution, giving the state and church mutual independence. These arrangements affect the political dialogue with religion inside and outside of the countries, EU and its foreign policies. (Perchoc, Ph. for EPRS, 2020)

For this thesis, it suffices to recognize that while working on protection of the right to religion or belief, the Research Service paper states the EU “supports neither a specific confession nor non-religious attitudes”. (Perchoc, Ph. for EPRS, 2020)

3.8. The European values and attitudes

However, as countries consist of people, subjects like prejudice, discrimination and other issues in regard to religion do arise and are not always easily solved by paperwork, dialogues and resolutions on the political level. As a part of the background work for this study, I had looked into the European values and migration crisis, wondering of the impacts of cultural and religious differences between the migrants and local populations. In the concept of a dialogue between different religions, was religion an obstacle?

In the latest quarterly bulletin published by the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) of the European Union, entitled Migration: Key Fundamental Rights Concerns (April-June 2019, FRA) there are reports of the cases from seventeen countries, mentioning many of the incidents that

were shared in the local news, provoking debates and disagreements. Following statement can be found on page 36 of this publication:

More than 110 civil society organisations in Greece and other European countries signed a public statement in March, expressing deep concern about the rise of racism and xenophobia across Europe and demanding a firm response from European leaders in the context of the European Parliament elections.

The approach of Law No. 132 of 1 December 2018 to treat migration as a threat to public and social security fuels racism and stigma against third-country nationals In Italy, according to the Italian Psychology Association (Associazione Italiana di Psicologia). (FRA, 2019)

In the paper “European Values and the Asylum Crisis” Boswell outlined her concerns and possible outcomes of the tensions between the European Values and the rise of the two prominent arguments against liberal universalism of the European Union in regard to refugee policies established in 1951 Geneva Convention. Boswell defined these two arguments as the welfare-based and the ethno-centric arguments. (Boswell, C., 2000)

Since the year 2000, European Union has faced a further influx of refugees, labeling it in 2015 a migration crisis. It has met with varied responses as it may be read in the Quarterly Bulletin rapport cited above, disagreements in handling it, desire to exit the Union or ignore its guidelines. Those developments correspond with Boswell’s two predictions on possible developments; the centre-left restriction on welfare grounds and the far right ethno-centric restrictions versus her third prediction of salvaging a more generous universalist approach.

Several theories are of interest here. Social Identity Theory (SIT) bases its discourse on the ideas that persons’ self concept is affected by its perceived social belonging (McKeown, 2016). Human Needs Theory assumes that all humans have needs and when those aren’t met the

conflict is likely to occur (H. B. Danesh, 2011). The Conflict Theory lists competition, structural inequality, revolution and war as symptoms of humanity, assuming that conflict is inherently human. A Theory of Peace believes that a unity, not conflict is a primary law operating human conditions (Danesh, 2011). The latter recognises that our understanding is shaped by our worldviews. The Atlas of European Values works with the premises that “identity is multiple, layered and always context dependent.” (atlasofeuropeanvalues.eu)

In the context of interreligious dialogue council, while identifying as members of a particular religion or faith, members of the religious communities will also identify as the inhabitants of Stockholm, as Swedes or something similar. Further on they will identify as men, women, mothers, fathers, workers of different groupings. The ability to self-realize their needs and dreams will also affect their attitudes and actions.

Some of the religions that are members in the council are more at home in Sweden and Stockholm than others. There are minority religions and groupings in the city that face different circumstances. They may at times feel alienated on the account of their language, their culture differences and a lesser recognition of their traditions. They may lack an official recognition of their religion as a part of the social pattern of the city. The climate of Europe, Sweden and Stockholm municipality in regard to religions and what may be seen as a foreign culture may affect them but may also affect the relationships and work of a group striving to work together for envisioned shared goals. It is for this reason we reflect and include these thoughts and theories on the subject of the European values.

European Journal of Geography, volume 3, Issue 2.54-71, by Uwe Krause, entitled Mapping the Values of Europeans for Educational Purposes interprets some of the findings from the Atlas of European Values.

It suggests that People of Europe differentiate between the tolerance toward people who are different and those they perceive might cause trouble. At some point the concepts of generosity,

acceptance and tolerance toward another in need can become counterbalanced by some of our own needs. Those needs may be simple basic physical needs such as safety of our own, which then outweighs other elements of our identity. That 'own' may be our economic well-being, security of a job or standards we are used to. If in danger, they may challenge our generosity, acceptance and tolerance and make them secondary to our own needs. When generosity demands too high a sacrifice of that well-being it moves from valuing of the generosity and wanting to pursue it to it being perceived as an imposed request, a demand and ultimately as something to be disregarded.

In the analyses of the interreligious council of Stockholm, the above mentioned theories would seem to imply the possibility of a) united identity of sharing geographical space and facing similar challenges b) some competitive and conflicting attitudes that may arise when personal needs of individuals and groupings are not met, and, that if theory of peace is relevant, c) the shared ideas and aims toward unity and peace may prevail.

3.9. The Moral Foundations Theory

Given that the council that is the object of this research does aim to bring change and betterment in the society and wishes to work with the municipality authorities, it is useful to consider the political elements of actions and religious elements related to it.

As I have previously looked into the analysis based on the theory of moral foundations, I found it interesting primarily as it brings forth the angle of political life. The critics of the theory argue that the author oversimplifies the moral issues as well as the idea of liberal and conservative understanding and that Haidt's methodology is weak. It is for this very reason that I am including it in the theoretical background, to provide a reflection on the ways people handle political themes.

Moral is a debated issue in both politics and religion. The theory assumes that moral judgment is primarily intuitive, rather than a rational process. In the abstract to his article “Moral Psychology for the Twenty-First Century” (2013) Haidt writes that: “(1) Intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second, (2) There’s more to morality than harm and fairness and (3) Morality binds and blinds” (Haidt, 2013). Haidt in his theory presents and identifies six moral foundations of political life. He defines moral foundations in opposite pairs as: care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, sanctity/degradation, liberty/oppression. He roughly attributes one part of the pairs to identify them with either liberal or conservative stands. (Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 2012)

From the majority of the theories presented above, we can conclude that human thought and social interactions are complex, involve intuition and reasoning and there is depth to understanding it. We can also notice that polarizing ideas and understandings are part of a communication. There is a certain scale of ideas even in the realm of the religious, ranging from liberal to orthodox that comes with its own set of thoughts and reasonings, as well as the emotional complexity.

These tensions of opinions and values are part of our human interactions and form the ways in which we attempt to dialogue and form the goals for which we strive. As such, it may be helpful if a group shares similar values, or it may present a challenge if these foundations are in stark contrast among those involved in the dialogue. Further on, if the majority of the group values similar things, there may be imbalance in political interpretations.

3.10. The interreligious work - organisations, aims, visions and principles

The Interreligious Council of Stockholm, which is the subject of this thesis, is one of the Swedish organisations working for promotion of dialogue between the religions and for their support in the Stockholm area. We are here placing the Interreligious Council of Stockholm in

the context of other such organisations in the world. We look into some of their defined goals before we will look at how the council defines itself.

There is a large number of religious and interreligious organisations listed on the UNICEF webpage. Some of the interreligious organisations are focused upon specific issues, such as handling poverty, or disease, children or women issues, while others work for a better world or cooperation between the religions. (unicef.org) Such a number of organisations, the diversity of them and their varied focus are being mentioned here in the context of concepts to work with to remind us that humans seek unity and they reach outside of their own borders in various ways and for various reasons. At the same time, the branching and the numbers of similar organisations also speaks of human ways that, rather than only working in one way and all together, may need diversity and more than one channel to manifest or express itself.

The United Religions Initiative unites “to bridge differences between people of all beliefs, to create community, and to solve local and global challenges.” (uri.org) The Parliament of World's Religions says in its vision that theirs is a vision “of a just, peaceful and sustainable world in which religious and spiritual communities live in harmony and contribute to a better world from their riches of wisdom and compassion...” (parliament of religions.org)

The Religions for Peace, which celebrates its fifty years, has several principles mentioned, some of which are: to show respect to religious differences, leverage assets of religious communities, act on shared values, and forge partnerships with other sectors of society. (rfp.org)

The European Council of Religious Leaders is a European branch of this organisation, currently having its contacts in nineteen countries of Europe. Their priorities are peaceful, just and inclusive societies, advancement of gender equality, nurturing of a sustainable environment, promotion of the freedom of thought and religion, strengthening of interreligious education and global partnerships. (rfp-europe.eu)

Equipped with these theories and definitions we will move to present the method for this research

4. Method

While there is a significant number of books and papers written on the subject of interreligious work, there is a suggestion that more observational and experiential work needs to be done for the theories to be formed. (Lind/ Lövheim/ Zackariasson, 2016) Leirvik says that he writes in search of a theory and for a theory. (Leirvik, 2011)

4.1 The Seven Questions

Given the limited literature exploring the effectiveness of interfaith dialogue in practice, there is a significant need to develop new research approaches to exploring these processes and promoting further reflection between practitioners on them. (Orton, 2016)

In this endeavour, and forming a theoretical background for my research, Orton proposed seven key questions to consider in regard to the interreligious dialogue.

Summing some of the theories, ideas and discussions on the subject, and using critical analysis he proposed the following aspects to be taken into consideration when analysing the interreligious work and the organisations based on it:

- 1: Who is involved?
- 2: Who is missing?
- 3: What is the dialogue for?
- 4: How is the complexity of diversity understood to affect interfaith dialogue?
- 5: What conditions enable effective interfaith dialogue?

6: How are the dynamics of participation and representation by different individuals and groups handled?

7: What dilemmas may arise within interfaith dialogue, and how might these be handled by those involved?

4.2. The Methodology

These questions form the basis of the questions presented to the council members and the background to the analysis of the work of IRiS. They were included at the bottom of the letter, explaining the background of the research, which was sent to each potential participant.

The thesis question wishes to acquire a deeper understanding of the work of The Interreligious council of Stockholm. The focus is on the process and the meaning, wanting to capture the experiences and the perceptions of the participants, as well as to interpret their varied meanings. This work also wishes to understand if and how religious concepts influence the interreligious work and the people involved. For this reason, qualitative research was chosen as a method to approach this work. A qualitative research focuses on depth and detail, on the better understanding of a topic and it recognizes and engages with the complexities of the matter. (Ahmed et al., 2016)

The thesis uses the approach which is subjective, open and flexible. Closeness with the respondents and their situations is welcome. (Ahmed et al., 2016) The research does not aim to be representative of all interreligious work or a council, while allowing theoretical ideas on the subject to be formed.

Applying a constructivist approach, emphasis is on hearing what people say and how they do so. (Ahmed et al., 2016) Main focus is on the council itself, religions and the representatives of these communities engaged in the council. First part of the data collection was a background

research about the council and the religions members of the council. This was at desk work, executed through the Internet search following the links and the information provided on the webpage of the IRiS. Then, through the semi-structured interviews, the members discussed their experience and understanding of the interreligious dialogue and the council. Data was collected partly through personal interviews and partly through written answers sent by the email, the latter becoming early the main choice due to COVID-19, during the period between January and April of 2020.

While all the representatives of the varied religious organisations that are listed as the member religions of the council were sent the questions for the interviews, a random selection of respondents was produced as only five of them chose to answer in the given period of ten weeks.

For analysing those semi-structured interviews in a qualitative research and with inductive, interpretive approach, I used thematic analysis used for explorative studies, wherein I looked for patterns and themes. Additionally I considered narrative analysis, looking for stories that may be emerging through the content provided. (Ahmed et al., 2016)

My primary sources for reflection and discussion were documents from the organisation and the religious communities, firstly their webpage information, as well as their scriptures or similar texts. Data and insights from existing academic works on the subject and issues regarding the dialogue and interreligious questions aided the process. These together would be the bases for qualitative analysis, reflection and discussion of the research results and their interpretation.

Given the style of this research I worked with trans-disciplinary elements and theories; religion, sociology and psychology being prominent ones.

4.3 The work process

After the initial interviews with key persons in the Council and the research on the Council itself, the religions and the congregations represented, I have formulated questions sent to all the members by the email. I had an intention of meeting them all but a long influenza I succumbed to during February/March made my work and especially meeting people difficult. By the time I was out of it, COVID-19 became an issue in the Stockholm area and we (members of the Board and myself) decided to continue working online. The interviews, talks and questions were all in Swedish as it seemed to be the language majority preferred. Some exchanges in English also took place. Email contained a short presentation of myself and the research as well as the seven questions on which this is based.

Here are, translated, the questions all members received in March 2020.

Questions about religion, society and the work of the Council

1. Each religion member of the Council may help in the fostering of social cohesion. What wisdom does your religion offer (or can offer) in this endeavour in the context of contemporary Stockholm (Sweden, Europe and world if you so wish)?
I would be grateful for the religious input of your scriptures and faith, as well as your own practical opinions on here and now.
2. How do you, as a representative of one of the religions in the Council, perceive the cooperation within the Council itself in regard to:
 - a) Relationships between the individuals in the Council
 - b) How one handles differences between the religions, ideas and opinions in the course of Council's work
 - c) All religions being seen and heard and having equal possibilities for support within the Council or through its work

- d) Having learned about other cultures and religions
- e) Sharing what you have learned and experienced with your own congregation (what reactions did you encounter, if this is however not happening - why not)
- f) Your congregation/religion receiving support through work of the Council

3. What questions do you consider important in regard to society and religion and their cooperation? Please elaborate.

4. Do you feel that your (and that of your congregation) voice is heard in the Council? Is there something that could improve (in the group work, individually, from your own side...)?

5. Do you feel that the voice of your religious community is heard in the municipality? Could that be improved and how?

6. Is there some program in your religious community that works with fostering your work within the Council?

7. How does your community/religion handle questions in regard to living in the modern secular world? Majority of our religions have some statements that are not easy to balance with the secular world. Individually and collectively we may be faced with questions, negative elements and difficulty to find the balance in our own living. Is there some sort of a program, work or advice within your community/religion that discusses such issues or fosters discussion and knowledge in regard to human rights, values and questions of importance in regard to work of your religion and society at large, municipality and even other religions? Do you think that is of importance?

8. Anything else you think is important and valuable to add and present from your experience and work with the Council?

To chose to work with religious cooperation

1. How did your congregation/religion become a part of IRiS?
2. How did you become a representative for it?
3. Is it you driving that work? Have you gotten (do you get) support from your congregation in regard to this work? Do you find a bigger support in it among the members of IRiS itself?

I have exchanged several emails with the three main contact persons during the time of this research, majority of them related to the practicalities of the communication. All three of them, plus one more person, had also answered in full the questions posted above. These arrived during March. An additional answer came in April, after a second email request was sent to all. Others had not answered or said they would look at it but did not complete the survey.

It is unclear why I was unsuccessful in gathering information from a larger number of the representatives. My questions may have appeared to be too demanding and required too much time and focus. The request may have coincided with varied religious dates that may have required much work from them. While the situation caused by COVID-19 may have left many working from home, the initial thought that this will provide them with some more time and possibility to work on questions may have been the opposite of the reality. The council itself has published two articles informing of the work of their members during the March/April period which may have taken priority, along with other work on websites and attending to their communities. The language may for some have been something of a barrier. The council, from what I have gathered, does not put demands on its members and all activities and involvement are mainly voluntary and do not, for the majority of the members, constitute a big or important portion of their work and life, as yet. Some have to the date put little or no work or attendance. These reflections are provided as a further data to the work of the council.

5. The Ethical Considerations

Discussing religion and values alongside people's private and very sacred beliefs may be a sensitive matter. All the representatives of each religion in the council are listed and their pictures provided on the website of the organisation. Considering this may affect their willingness to answer certain questions the option of not answering any such questions if they so wish was clearly formulated in this regard. Names were excluded from the data presentation and the discussion. Personal answers were treated anonymously. Where religion was presented or discussed mention of religion was included.

6. The Interreligious Council of Stockholm

Sweden has in the year 2010, on the initiative of the Archbishop Anders Wejryd, created SIR - Sveriges interreligiösa råd (Swedish Interreligious Council), whose aim was to gather religions in Sweden to a more active position in order to create and bring forth the prerequisites for the inter-religious cooperation. (Axelsson, 2018, p.12). In the August of 2017, a local council in Stockholm, IRiS, was created with the aim to strengthen the understanding and the cooperation between religious communities as well as to foster a connection between the municipal and the religious representatives. (IRiS webpage)

6.1 IRiS - its background and purpose

As stated earlier, IRiS is a central to this thesis. This organisation was created on the initiative of a few members of the current council and was open to include all interested religions in Stockholm county. Please note that this is a relatively new group.

Helene Egnell was the creative initiator of the Interreligious Council of Stockholm. She is a priest and the lecturer working for “Centrum för religions dialog” (The centre for a religious dialogue) in Stockholm, which is an organisation created by and belonging to the Church of Sweden. In this function, she says, it was for the regional Church of Sweden in Stockholm, that she worked on creating IRiS. Initially, she explained, representatives of Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism were invited to talk and later, in cooperation, created IRiS. It was then further expanded, inviting all interested religious organisations in the Stockholm area. She now adds administrative duties within IRiS to her other work.

In the statutes of the organisation, that I was given in a printout, the purpose of it is described as follows (herein translated by me):

Paragraph 1: Purpose

Stockholm’s interreligious council wishes to care for religious freedom and the human worth and dignity.

Stockholm’s interreligious council has as its purpose to, in Stockholm and its surroundings,

- Further dialogue and cooperation between different religious representatives
- Work for the respect and understanding of religious life
- Counteract representation of conflicts in an undifferentiated manner in religious terms, and in this way avoid polarising of the society
- Be a party in a dialogue with the representatives of the municipality of Stockholm regarding varied social issues (Statutes for IRiS)

Members of the council (paragraph 2) are representatives of the various religious communities, churches, mosques, temples and orientations in and around Stockholm that agree with the council's values cited in the first paragraph.

The Board of the council has between seven and nine members. This means that not all religions are represented in the board itself but paragraph three, discussing the board, calls for a broad

representation of the members of the council and an even number of male and female representatives.

The purpose of the Council explains its vision and its aims of furthering the social cohesion. How this is done will be analysed further on. Its meetings and activities will be addressed in the processing of the data collected.

6.2. The Religions And The Organisations Members Of The Council (IRiS)

For the purpose of understanding the field, I will here specify that members, listed on the webpage of the Council, include: representatives of Bahá'í tradition, several Islam organisations (Bosnian community, Shia community and Stockholm mosque), Jewish community, Buddhist congregation, Sikhs (Gurudwara), two groupings identifying as Hindu (Hindu Mandir Society and ISKCON), Orthodox churches (Georgian and Finish), Nordic Nature Faith (Forn Sed), Catholic Church (Katolska Kyrkan), Church of Sweden (Protestant church, as Svenska Kyrkan, but also in the representative for Centrum för Religionsdialog) and variety of other churches with a Christian background (Evangeliska Stiftelsen, Equmeniakyrkan, Pingstkyrkan). Out of eighteen organisations represented, eight are Christian.

I have chosen to present here, in a summed form, some of the theology and practice of these organisations, with added focus on the relationships with others. This in order to give a basic understanding of those religions and provide a background to the analysis. I have chosen to look at the individual webpages of each organisation and work from there in creating this summary. I aimed to gather diversified information that would provide some of the angles and issues one may meet in the dialogue and the cooperative endeavour of those organisations. Further on, I tried to highlight some possible practical differences, such as language, culture, safety concerns, or other issues that may be there between the organisations included. Information that follows is primarily gathered, and quoted, from the webpage for the respective religious organisation.

Majority of the pages were in Swedish, few were in English or had bilingual options and one was in the native language of the organisation. Links to all the pages that I used for the summary presented here for each organisation are provided in the Appendix I.

Bahá'í community in Stockholm (Bahá'í samfundet i Stockholm)

Its starting point is that all religions come from the same source. The core of all religions is thus the same, but changes occur as maturity develops. Social circumstances are changeable. Some of its principles are harmony between religion and science, equality of men and women, removal of extreme poverty or riches. Grassroot activities are of importance as is engagement in the community building with others.

The Bosnian Islamic Assembly (Bosniska Islamiska Församlingen)

This page is in the Bosnian language, which I can read and was thus able to write this summary.

The Statute in the pdf format from the year 2003, says that the Assembly is politically neutral, based on Quran, Swedish law and the guidelines from the statute. The Assembly aims to work democratically to promote humanitarian and religious principles as well as Bosnian culture. It should also aid the dialogue, mutual respect and tolerance among its members and other nations that live in Sweden.

The representative of the organisation in IRiS is listed as a member of the board of the Assembly, as the first imam.

The ladies in the picture presented all wear a headscarf which I noted as something that would not have been as usual in Bosnia some thirty years ago. The updates from the year 2017 are said to be worked on. Some parts of the webpage can only be accessed by the members.

The Center for Religious Dialogue in Stockholm (Centrum för Religionsdialog i Stockholm Stift)

As presented above, working under the Church of Sweden, The Center for Religious dialogue is the actor in religious issues, working for understanding, cooperation, and good relationships among the people of different faiths. It states on its webpage that in a multireligious Sweden, knowledge, understanding and shared work are necessary in order for the people of different faiths to live together. They offer courses, group work, library access and other educational and supportive services.

The main contact for this center is the person who initiated the work of IRiS.

The Evangelical Motherland Foundation (Evangeliska Fosterlands Stiftelsen)

This is a Church that sees itself as Evangelical, in its spirit of the good word of Jesus and as Lutheran, in its following of the tradition of the Church of Sweden. Its understanding is that although we, people, have turned away from God and are engaged in other activities, Jesus still loves us and wants us to turn back to him. Its focus is thus on the missionary work of the message of the Bible.

There is no specific or easily available information regarding the interreligious dialogue. As they are regarded as a part of the Church of Sweden, more can possibly be found there.

The Uniting Church of Sweden (Equmeniakyrkan)

While this is a Protestant Church, it is separated and slightly different from the Church of Sweden. They explain the reason and need for difference as something that unites those who

have similar opinions in the specific issues in their own groupings, while they are largely still being united in the Christian faith.

On their page of questions and answers, in regard to the issue of other religions as possibly being equally valid, an answer is given that there are different opinions about it but a general understanding is that it is only through Jesus that one attains God. However, they do allow, this does not necessarily mean that God does not work through other religions.

Human rights are well addressed, largely focused on world issues. When it comes to religious freedom, much focused is given to the religious freedoms of Christian practice. However, there is also a statement that together with the Swedish Christian Council (Sveriges Kristna Råd) they work to strengthen the cooperation among various religious groups and inspire a dialogue and meeting between the representatives and practitioners of religion. They provide a link to “The Freedom of Religion and Belief” learning platform.

The Finish Orthodox Church in Sweden (Finsk-Ortodoxa Kyrkan)

This is a Church of Orthodox faith with Finish roots. Its webpage has both Swedish and Finish language available. The Church shares Christian faith, although it has some differences in rituals and other elements, based on the seven councils, from other Christian churches in the area.

The page itself does not address the issues of religious dialogue or human rights in particular.

The Customs of The Old - Forn Sed - Stockholms Blotlag

The Aim of this community, presented on the English part of the page, is to make the “forn sed a living spiritual alternative for people in current society.” It relates to the Asa Faith built around

the idea that gods are our friends and companions and focus on the “nature spirituality”. Its organisation is democratic, has no religious dogma and on the page is described as follows: “we have a strongly expressed value system that has a basis in humanitarian and democratic view on life and that acknowledges all humans as equals regardless of gender, origin or sexual preference. The Community and her members shall also uphold religious tolerance in a multicultural society.”

The Georgian Orthodox Church (Georgiska Ortodoxa Kyrkan)

This organisation does not seem to currently have a website or a steady address. I have found that some rituals were performed in the Serbian Orthodox Church place in Stockholm.

The Gurdwara Sangat Sahib Tullinge

Following a Sikh tradition, the webpage lists that all people are alike in front of God, no matter the gender, caste, background or religious belonging. Ritualism, asceticism, caste system and worship of idols is rejected. There are no priests in this tradition where all are invited to learn and worship and a social life in service is advised. Certain standards are involved in the procedures, such as cleanliness or specific clothing and one endeavours to avoid anger, lust, greed, pride and attachment to the worldly things. The goal of life is to break the cycle of life and death and become one with God (the latter being an impersonal view that not all organisations in this circle with Hindu backgrounds share). Equal status of women is specified.

Sikh, it is explained, means a student. A teacher - guru transforms students' darkness into the light. The purpose for this transformation, it is told, is that all the people, women and men from different cultures and religions will live side by side in harmony. There are no specific explanations for how this harmony is to be achieved but one gets the impression that the practice and the endeavour in following its path creates a character that facilitates such a situation.

The Hindu Mandir Society

On their webpage they write: “Hindu Mandir has protected and furthered the interests of Swedish Hindus in multiple ways. Hindu Mandir safeguards the Hindu tradition and lifestyle in Sweden and helps Swedish Hindus integrate into Swedish society. “ They add that everyone is welcome. Beyond some basic information, there is little that can be read on the page itself of their practices or philosophy, nor are there links to further information, or the national or international branches.

ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness)

There are three locations of ISKCON that are represented in the council by the same member, which thus provides us with three separate web pages.

1. Stockholm - basement temple

Its page explains that temples are there for people to come and learn the science of God. Vaishnavism is presented as an ideal social system governed by the royal and learned. There are some interesting statements in the Q&A section. There is some approval given to women being teachers (guides) and explanation that one is more concerned with the spiritual qualifications in this regard. On the question “is your the only way”, the answer seems to first differentiate between those who believe and those who do not, giving right to the latter, to conclude that you can, of course, serve God through other religions. Further explanation is given on what a bonafide religion is and a comment follows to say that following the path of such religion a character is developed which tends to respect other religions and ways rather than engage in disapproval of them. In this section it is also stated that they, this particular author of the answer at least, do not see their organisation as Hinduism although they recognize some similarities. They are not, the

answer is given, against humanitarian help but without it being strengthened with the spiritual knowledge, it is seen as worthless. Political action is of little interest.

2. Printing centre

Their mission statement offers that “Korsnäs Gård have made it their mission to present the culture of Krishna consciousness in its many facets” and “In Krishna consciousness you can learn the art of living and dying“. This center focuses on the production of Vedic and Vaishnava literature. Here the Q&A offers that Krishna consciousness is at the heart of Hinduism and that everyone is welcome.

3. Farm

Almviks Gård is described as a community of mature devouts who try to practice peaceful spiritual village life. The farming and the cow protection are promoted. In the “About us” section, they explain how their’s is not a sectarian view but a practical science about spiritual values. Vaishnavism is said to be the one of the important traditions among the Vedic or Hindu spiritual cultures. Their emphasis is on the personal (rather than becoming one with God - the impersonal).

I have here on purpose included all three locations to note that within an organisation in the same county, there are some differences in focus and presentation.

The Islamic Shia Association (Islamiska Shiasamfundet)

An umbrella organisation for the Shia Muslim traditions in Sweden, Islamic Shia Association is defined on the page as an non-profit, religious, democratic faith association, as much as that can be applied, compatible with the Swedish law about faith associations. They count about sixty

member associations that their work serves. Their work is defined ethically and morally within the framework of the Shia accepted scriptures and traditions.

Their statement declares that their work is based on the equality, involvement of everyone and the positive social development, where they actively work toward dialogue, integration, respect and tolerance. They strive to uphold and strengthen the fundamental values of the society they live in.

They act as the representatives of Shia Muslims in Sweden and serve their members in assisting their contacts and needs in the society. Being an active element in the political issues, particularly where it regards Shia Muslims, is part of their vision, to communicate and inform. Work to counteract Islamophobia is included in its aims, as is strengthening of the brotherhood and the solidarity between the muslims of different schools of thought.

The page provides a link to the Swedish authority for the support of faith associations, “Myndigheten för stöd till trossamfund”.

The Jewish Community (Judiska Församlingen)

This is, as described, a non-profit, democratic organisation. It is run by a board which includes representatives of the four political parties presented as Judisk Enhet (The Jewish Union) whose focus is on the openness and dialogue, Judisk Mångfald (The Jewish Diversity) which see themselves as the liberal and promote egalitarian attitudes, Judisk Samling (The Jewish Assembly) which stands for strengthening of the Jewish identity, safety and rights as well as links with Israel, and Judisk Framtid (The Jewish Future) which focuses on children, youth and education along the lines of openness, inclusivity (of diverse forms of Judaism but also those who have partners of other religious traditions) and presence in life of its people.

In the question section some social and political issues are addressed, bringing into light the spectrum of liberal vs orthodox understandings of the Jewish population. When explaining the understandings around the homosexuality, the layered answers given inform that orthodox priests cannot perform a marriage of the members of the same gender while liberal may do so. Answer also acknowledges that struggle in this regard is an issue but that, nevertheless, a Jewish person belongs to its community despite its struggles. The same spectrum of opinions is presented in other issues, such as the position of a woman in practice. Although their value is always equal, where her place is and how she is dressed will vary between the liberal and orthodox understandings. Importance and worth of a rabbi's (spiritual leader) opinion comes forth in the formulation of answers on varied issues mentioned on the page.

The Roman Catholic Church (Katolska kyrkan)

In the answers on the various questions, Catholic Church here expresses disappointment over the split of the Christian church and wishes to pray for its unity in which it is strengthened. When it comes to other religions, this Catholic Church answers that the cause for them is humanities' search for the answers, a meaning and the understanding about life, death and the suffering. There is, they say, a trace of truth in all religions. However, in their understanding, for the time and place, it is through Jesus that one attains God. They find themselves close to the Jewish tradition through Jesus' life and history but they also see with respect upon the piety of the practitioners of other religions.

They are active in the religious dialogue, a goal of which is to live in peace with others even while holding different things true about God.

When it comes to homosexuality, the struggle is resolved in disapproving of a sin, while being benign toward a sinner who is to be met with respect, sympathy and tact. Women and men are seen as equal, to be respected, their exploitation or oppression to be worked against. Women

were and can be spiritually wise and of importance and influence but cannot take a priestly position.

Among the news are several notes and articles referring to the Pope sending messages to practitioners of other religions and about the united prayer for the world, such as in the struggle with COVID-19.

The Pentecostal Church (Pingstkyrkan)

They express that all people are created with a divine purpose, goal and meaning. The secret of life lies with Jesus and the purpose of this church is to help people unfold it. There is some more information on its missionary work and helping others but not much, at least easily found, on the relations with other religions. They identify with being Christians in a positive and missionary way.

The Stockholm Mosque (Stockholmsmoské)

On its website, Stockholm Mosque states that it works to support Swedish Muslims in practice of their religious duties and maintenance of their religious and cultural identity. Further, it strives to increase the participation, the influence and the representation of Muslims in the official institutions as well as strengthen contact among other Muslim actors in Sweden. It also actively works for fundamental human rights and freedoms and for a world free of oppression and injustice.

Islam is described as a free relationship between a person and his Creator. And although Jews, Christians and Muslims share the belief of the same God, we are told that there is a significant difference between them. One of the main differences being that Muslims do not accept any

personal form of God to be worshiped. We are also told that, uniquely Islam is named for its purpose, the attainment of inner and outer peace through the surrender to God. Beside the Qur'an, this mosque follows sunnah, or Prophet's, peace be upon him, teachings. The law of Sharia is of importance, giving the guidance of moral way of life (such as honesty, justice, respect for others, compassion...) and about the social and political issues. Some of its principles are tolerance toward other religions and the openness for dialogue and cooperation in the creation of a better world. Human rights are declared a part of its principles, primarily the idea that all people are equal in front of God. In this regard, the author brings to the light the fact that some of the countries which proclaim following the law of Islam are engaged in oppression and disrespect of others. Examples are given of times in history where other religions, Christians and Jews, lived well under the rule of the Muslims. The rights of women are explained in a positive light, as being given much freedom and support, long before women of the West had it, and their clothing referred to as a religious expression.

The Church of Sweden (Svenska Kyrkan)

This is a main Protestant Church in Sweden. Under the title of diversity and inclusivity, the Church of Sweden in Stockholm writes that Christian message is that of all people's equal worth and God's all inclusive love. To disrespect another human is to disrespect God. Therefore it is the work of the Church to uphold and uplift all peoples' unquestioning worth. This includes the gender and the sexual orientation rights.

The page itself does not speak too much about the religion but has a link to the general page for the Church of Sweden and a link to the centre for religious dialogue, which has been mentioned above.

On the page of the Church of Sweden, its values are listed as human rights, equality, children rights, sustainable word and work against sexual harassment, abuse and discrimination. They

state that to work for world peace is one of its most important missions. As is the ecumenical work and the religious dialogue with representatives of other religions in the country and the world at large.

Explaining its theological background it refers to Lutheran history and tradition. It states that its democratic structure allows adjustments and changes of faith and theology for the world that it lives in.

**A Swedish Buddhist Cooperation Council (Sveriges Buddhistiska Samarbetsråd)
now having a new name Swedish Buddhist Community (Sveriges Buddhistiska
Gemenskap)**

Sveriges Buddhistiska Gemenskap is now officially registered as a religious community since the beginning of the year 2020. They include three major Buddhist orientations: Theravada (ten links), Mahayana (five links) and Vajrayana (four links). Both men and women lead those communities. These orientations of Buddhism are connected to the different countries of origin and practice. Due to the influence of the cultures where they were developed and practiced, outwardly there are differences between them, but they, we are told, share some similarities. Most prominent are the three jewels, the ethical training rules, four noble truths and the eightfold path. The principles help the practitioner. The eightfold path consists of the right understanding, right intention, right speech, right action, right provisions, right endeavour, right focus and right concentration.

The link to Swedish Interreligious Council is provided toward the bottom of the page “About us” under Cooperation work.

7. The Results and The Analysis

The thesis, the forming of the questions for the interviews, as well as the process of the analysis stem from the following thought expressed by one of my former teachers, Yadunandana Swami, in his book “The lives and Challenges of Vaishnava Sannyasis in Modernity”, which was the extended publication of his earlier Master dissertation from the year 2011. In it, he writes:

“I purposefully chose, however, to primarily focus on the thorny issues because it is the human nature to avoid or to deny painful topics instead of looking at them in a constructive self-critical manner. The Sri Isopanisad explains that the paths of knowledge and ignorance should be understood and cultivated in parallel lines.” (Yadunandana Swami, 2019)

The thought that I believe a majority of religions share in some way, that an honest look at that which is less comfortable could be a way that provides one with a bigger chance for self-development and a better world at large. Alongside that which we often focus on, that which is moving, positive and shared in values with others. It is my belief, which sparked and to a degree guided this research, that by not addressing the shadows, at least in our own space, we remain on the surface of the process, choosing either the negative or the positive to guide us in our endeavours and in the worldview we embrace. A thorough look and work through both may however offer a more mature and stable situation which may cultivate deeper roots for work one has tasked oneself with, such as the interreligious dialogue. Firstly, in our own space, both individually and within our own religion. Then further in the work that crosses the borders, and moves into the collective humanity, somewhat similar to the idea that the “theory of the rainbow” may be envisioning. These ideas are reflected through the theories presented in the respective chapter and will be here used for analysis and reflection over data gathered.

7.1 The interviews

Five persons answered the semi-structured interview questions given to them. Four of them answered them in a written form, one spoke to me in person. Two of the persons were at the time of the interviews sitting on the board of the Council. Typed, their answers provided over twenty pages of material. Additionally, I had some notes and reflections from our short exchanges, observations and a meeting. One of the persons interviewed is a founding member and chose to only partly answer on the behalf of her religious organisation. Thus, while Protestant Church of Sweden is represented, some questions are not answered in full as she hoped the representative would do that. Other religions/faiths whose representatives answered are Baha'i, Forn Sed, Judiska Församlingen and ISKCON.

I have analysed data with two main approaches, thematic and narrative analysis. I have read and re-read the transcripts and the written answers and have searched for the patterns, themes and possible narratives, the stories that can be found.

We will start by examining the interviews and then move on to analyse and tie all the data with the earlier theories presented. My starting point in the analysis were the theories and concepts mentioned in the respective chapters of this research work. I looked for the closeness and engagement with the subjects and the object at hand, rather than for the objectivity. I looked for the insights, meanings, defined patterns and themes and compared and contrasted them to deepen the understanding of the interreligious dialogue that IRiS works with.

I will herein present the themes and narratives defined in my analysis, strengthened by the quotes from the interviews, translated by me to English. For the original statements in Swedish, please see the List of Interview Quotes in the Appendix II.

Except for the reflections on the specific religion, all other quotes lack the direct personal reference. I have chosen this option because the members of the council wish to read this paper

and the intent of it is not to create disharmony but rather to lift the possible elements that one can improve and to look deeper into its work.

7.1.1 A personal engagement, an inclination toward the subject

Out of the five persons that answered, four have specified that they were personally interested in the subject and were to a degree involved, on bases of this interest, into their organisation/group becoming a member of the Council. All have recognized that it was on the account of their personality, other work they were doing and their interests that they were asked to, by their organisation, become its representatives. One of the respondents explains: “I was interested in those issues. Our board thought that I could do good with it. I was also responsible for the religious questions in the liberal part of the assembly.” *(I)*

All respondents were involved in other religious related engagements on the behalf of their religious congregations and several of them are involved in other representative boards and councils in the county or even in other parts of Sweden and the world. Some of them are thus meeting each other in different groupings. Some work toward similar goals in their other engagements. In their reporting, they mention that these may at times overlap. The initiator is also a member of the Church of Sweden’s Center for interreligious dialogue. The representative of ISKCON is also involved in the work of Hindu organization and its work for religious recognition and the interreligious dialogue. In their answers, these activities and the issues related to it would occasionally come up, as they are part of their persona.

7.1.2 IRD in the core of religion and practice

Exactly why and how, philosophically and theologically, the understanding of interreligious dialogue is presented varies somewhat, but all representatives state that humanity shares the

world and should work together for the benefit of all. These reflections can be found on most of the webpages of the member religions.

Church of Sweden: “We belong together as one humanity and have gotten a task from God to together use and maintain it. “ (2)

Baha’i: ““Earth is but one land and humanity its nationals”. Unity in diversity, used by bahá’í followers means working with others, wherein taking part in the interreligious context.” ‘(3)

Forn Sed: “Acceptance of diversity... is built in the religion. Normal to see things from several angles.” (4)

Judaism: “Modern Judaism has a long tradition of interreligious dialogue... we lived as a minority... there was a need for whether forced or free interreligious dialogue ... we see whole humanity as coming from B’nai Noah.” (5)

ISKCON: “Unity in diversity is part of our tradition and philosophy - acintya-bheda-abheda tattva.”(6)

7.1.3 Why is the Interreligious Dialogue Council in Stockholm of interest?

The initiator of the Council work says: “Interreligious council is a new organisation form, there are no ready models to follow. A need to get together and share our experiences with other boards nationally, regionally and locally is big.”(7)

When it comes to why the council is of interest to those engaged in it there are some differences of focus. Those working in the board and being part of the organisational beginnings speak more of the theological reasons and the elements of need, while others include some personal issues of their own or their religious communities.

Summed from their comments; there is a need for communication, cooperation, learning to know about others as there is lots of knowledge lacking among different religious groupings and those working politically. While there may be a long way to go and much that still needs to be done,

everyone without exception takes care to notify that this is a new endeavour and it will take time. Even just meeting, talking, getting in touch with each other and establishing the ways to cooperate and possibly become an actor in a political and social dialogue, those are seen as positive steps forward.

But the need for the council's work is recognized on several levels. One respondent sums it saying: "Lack of knowledge is visible both with the authorities, the politicians and private persons, especially when it comes to smaller religions." (8)

Larger organisations that are members of the Council recognize a bigger need of establishing political relationships with the municipality and its representatives, while smaller groupings show more interest in elements such as the environmental care and varied human rights. They all mention importance of working against discrimination, racism, and for the acceptance of another. Further on, supporting religions so their voice can be heard and integrated in the society is mentioned by all of them as important.

That we become an influential part in the society, municipality and county, so they can see our potential to assist in creating good relationships. That in regard to emergency preparedness, schooling, environment, institutional counseling... (9)

IRiS can spread knowledge. I also hope it will lift up spirituality as a voice in the environmental issues and care for nature. (10)

This question seems to be of different importance in the religious communities of the representatives that partook in the interview. Smaller groups that are of no need for support are less affected and find these issues less important. Larger religious groups that depend on various economical support or find themselves not properly recognized, lacking interest from the municipality in their existence or that have faced some sort of discrimination and lack of support or protection, find it important.

All have said that it is their impression that there is little or no interest in cooperation with the Council from the municipality's side. One respondent mentioned that Stockholm municipality seems to be finding it enough to deal with religious representatives individually and does not consider it an important part of their work. She said that she used to live and work in other municipalities or happens to know others who do so, where interreligious councils were welcome and received both interest and support from the municipality.

Several respondents communicate their understanding that "The idea behind the Interreligious Council in Stockholm (IRiS) was to create a way to be of assistance to the municipality and support the understanding among people." (11)

7.1.4 The secularized and the globalized world

There is also an alternative thought expressed on the relationship between the religion and political powers as well as a question of a secularized world and religion. This was not overly discussed. Some pointed, rather indirectly and through a philosophical thought, that a secularized world and globalization do have some negative effects. This was mainly mentioned as the lack of the ethical understanding and positive influence on the human character, social cohesion and prosperity. But others do see some positive in it.

Religious freedom is best protected by a secular state and authority (so that no religion gets unfair advantage), but where all have good knowledge of the religions that form the society. (12)

Religious society should be a natural part of civil society. In Sweden, that is not fully developed and there is some tension between the public and the religious perspective. That religious groupings should be seen as legitimate actors in the society's moral issues

is hardly a discussion even taken up, especially not in the context of the mass media. Usually it is but the negative aspects of the religious communities that are brought up in the media, rather than the positive aspects. (13)

7.1.5 Thriving with the others in the council group

All respondents have answered that they really like the group and working with it. They have told of the practice to hear about one of the religions' representatives at each meeting and how that inspires them, brings them closer and helps them learn, hear and be heard. They say how work brings them closer together giving examples of how they cooperate, drive each other and visit each other at different events they are invited to through the Council.

I thrive in the association of IRiS members. I have experienced nice connections and have gotten to know them on a more personal level, having many great memories. They are a little bit like an interreligious family. (14)

It works very well with rich discussions and constructive ideas. Our differences are respected and we actively share our traditions and perspectives. (15)

All in all, those I have met connected with IRiS all seem to be very pleasant. (16)

As time goes on we get to know each other on the human level and that creates relationships that make work easier and more fun. (17)

We have taken a decision that we will dedicate ten minutes of the board time for one of the members to present their religion. That was a positive experience. (18)

Differences among their religious understandings and practices are not being taken up and are not intended focus which is generally seen as positive. They instead create a focus on the shared work and interests, understanding, cooperation and working together for better society. This was a conscious decision taken by the board.

Differences are not brought up much. We have different thoughts and practice in different ways but the core is the same, love for God and humanity. In my understanding of our scriptures, God is universal. No religion, organisation or individual has a monopoly on God. He can appear to anyone, whenever, wherever as he likes. That shows us his love. God gives us so many ways to approach him in different ways and that is wonderful. (19)

While these sentiments and thoughts are expressed by the majority, there is also an awareness, expressed differently, from a gentle and mild mention or a confirmation when directly asked, to a more pronounced concern when it comes to the thriving with the idea of all sharing similar thoughts and core.

Sometimes, in the interreligious situations there is a desire, which is surely good and well meaning, to generalise for the purpose of creating cohesion. For example “we all believe in one and same God, just with different names”. This can go wrong... one does not have to build cooperation on religious similarity. (20)

Some issues can thus, with all well meaning, at times be an obstacle and should perhaps be brought to light. *“LGBTQ questions are still controversial when people from different religious contexts meet.” (21)*

7.1.6 The support to the individual religious groupings

The Council has on occasion given various statements supporting religious struggles and taking stand against discrimination, racism and religious or political attacks on a religious congregation. Members of the council had answered that the majority of the issues supported are outside the country and most of their communities were not in the need of help locally. However, majority of them shared that the Muslim and the Jewish communities in Stockholm had received support and help through and from the members of the council. ISKCON's representative also said that on occasions when a restaurant needed to vacate and move, they got some practical support in how to handle the move. A mention of the need of supporting children of minorities was brought up, an example given of Hindu children being called Ghandists on account of their religion. Others expressed that they did not need help but if they were in need they felt confident that they would receive it. Recently, some support has been given through the information and cooperation published about the COVID - 19 on the Council webpage.

Knowledge and information are seen as supportive and helpful. One of the respondents expresses this saying: "Special help in the form of increased knowledge. When our congregation was attacked IRiS solidarity was very important and meaningful." (22)

Some information provided by IRiS is more useful to some of the members than others.

It is not that some of us are ignored but some issues are not as relevant to us. For example, when a lecturer from SST was invited, much time was focused upon sharing about the economical support that can be obtained by those who are entitled to it. (23)

In general, support is recognized, appreciated and work of the council is seen as positive, with everyone being open to learning more, developing and growing with it, hearing and improving, coupled with the awareness that not everything is there for everyone.

7.1.7 The interreligious dialogue and one's own community

The interreligious dialogue is, for the majority of the religions represented in the answers I received, not one of the larger issues in their program. There are therefore not many members of their communities that work with those questions. As mentioned previously, some of the representatives work with other issues along the interreligious dialogue while others are more focused on this subject. The Church of Sweden has its own group working on this dialogue and has been the initiator of various councils, such as the Swedish Council for Interreligious Dialogue and IRiS. Some representatives of the religion still find it intrinsically included in their overall work as well as within the ideas of their religious practices.

However, with the exception of one, respondents recognize that there are those within their communities that are supportive, understanding and wanting of the interreligious dialogue and those that are not. Respondents reflected over the thought that the individuals in authority positions do influence how much this work is valued and supported.

There is also some resistance toward the interreligious dialogue in the orthodox part of the community. (24)

Not everyone within my religious community is always welcoming toward this work, I had occasionally heard some unpleasant and less supportive comments. But those are based on the lack of knowledge which is why we need to work more. (25)

While recognizing this side of the congregation and some philosophical disagreements there, answers are still generally more focused on the positives of it. These issues are seen as a confirmation of a need to work on those elements and even an inspiration for it. Respondents find support from the relevant authorities, friends and the community members that do share in

their vision or appreciate their work. They extend this appreciation and the acknowledgment in some of the cases to the worldwide community and the work done globally in this direction.

Respondents share about the positive support they receive and the activities of their communities, as well as their own work. Those focus on the interreligious dialogue and the communication work, such as youth programs, a general understanding of inclusivity and service as well as the focus on unity in diversity.

7.1.8 What do individual religions do and can do more of in terms of values

Reflecting on the work within their own communities, focus on the human rights and issues that can at times present obstacles, the answers and thoughts shared are diverse. This somewhat correlates to the answers about the attitude and a relationship of the religious group with the Swedish political and social system.

Those who see little issue with the Swedish and European system as it is, focus their work upon various questions related to human rights. Such as work on environment, equal gender rights and the LGBTQ+ rights. They both recognize and support the values and the rights often positively presented in the mass media and seen as Swedish values.

All respondents say that human rights are part of their statutes and a part of their philosophy and practice although there is always more that can be done.

Swedish Church works actively with those questions in many ways. (26)

We do not have a program for human rights in itself. But we do have extensive educational and cultural programs where many broad questions about individuals, groups and society are discussed. There is nowadays a strong worry in our congregation about the Swedish democrats and their racist politics against the religious communities and minorities. (27)

The amount of the engagement and the work with human rights issues in practice however may vary and at times somewhat differ from what can be defined as the social norms of the Swedish society.

7.1.9 The differences perceived

There are some tensions between the concepts and ideas relevant to the work of the interreligious dialogue which surface when reading the answers. One of them is whether or not such dialogue does, and needs to, be based on a shared core, interest and understanding. If yes, should differences be tolerated, acceptable and respected?

The rainbow vision earlier mentioned is presented somewhat differently, nonetheless still poetically by one of the interviewees when explaining how one views the general idea of coexistence with others in the world that may be different from us.

One way to look at it is to see each individual like a flower of its own colour, size, look, smell, in a bud or in a full bloom. When those different flowers are gathered in a bouquet, beauty is experienced. (28)

A beautiful and inspirational thought, which then goes on to say: “If one is to follow personal likes of colour, look and things such, holistic thinking is destroyed and focus on the vision lost.”(29)

Another interviewee had pointed out that by the representatives, supported by leaders, showing the way, more can be done in this direction. However, looking through the collected data about the religious communities and looking through some of the thoughts, reflections and facts given in the interviews, to keep with the metaphor here, it is clear that people do see some flowers as

more appealing and others as perhaps not acceptable in the bouquet, or less matching and thus preferably to be put in the background or hidden from the view.

Engaging with the descriptions of the communities and their theological stands, and hearing indications of some more orthodox elements within one's own groups from some of the interviewees, one can find fundamentalist and syncretist thoughts in the background of those communities. A majority of the interviewees that provided answers seem to have awareness of it and see it as something to be improved and worked on. This may be part of the reason they find inspiration to work with the council. Awareness that this happens in one's own community may also be helpful in understanding when such things are observed in those other communities. This can also be a bonding element in the search and the endeavour to bring forth that which is seen as positive in those religions and can be recognized as shared experience, understanding and goal.

There are differences in acceptance of a democratic worldview, secularized understanding and politics, LGBTQ+ inclusion, gender issues and whether or not other religions can be viewed as religions at all. As it was brought up by some respondents, there are different understandings about whether or not there is only one God we all follow as one humanity or are there indeed many Gods we can worship. Further on, whether God has a form, whether the Council is there to promote any religious acceptance and/or its influence in a society, to name a few. This is one of the things Orton points out may exist in such groupings and becoming aware of it, looking deeper into it may be helpful in strengthening its work toward social cohesion.

By agreeing on certain premises, working within the framework of inclusion, acceptance, tolerance and respect, a contact on a more personal level, strengthened by the deepening of knowledge of another has been established in this council. Some support is certainly given to the communities that are the member religions. The visions of the United Religions Initiative to bridge differences, create communities and solve challenges is being worked on here.

To return to the bouquet metaphor, the flowers in a vase do share the same space and notice each other, familiarizing and finding similarities, as well as becoming more open to possible differences, which become less important. The process of a dialogue, talking and meeting itself, as one of the interviewees pointed out, is indeed an important part of the work itself. In this regard, the aims of the council and the representatives in the council that had answered the questions, appear to be along the lines of an inclusivist and pluralist approach.

7.2 Further discussion - Orton's questions

We will engage further with the seven questions listed above, seeing if any patterns and answers can be detected. It is to be acknowledged that this is a small sample of a larger grouping, of a young organisation that did not meet very many times so far and where everyone is freely involved. Some participants may have not met much at all nor have yet done much actively in the work of the Council and the ideas of the interreligious dialogue. Thus, this discussion is limited to a small sample and does not represent a full picture.

7.2.1 In the endeavour to work toward social cohesion, who is missing?

The religious communities members of the council are all those that, upon being contacted for interest, or having started the initiative, had wished to do so. Some of them have more experience and actively work with the interreligious questions, while others are interested and may wish to work with it. We have not included here a full list of all the many religious communities and groupings in the Stockholm city to counterbalance them in numbers with those that decided to be the members.

As an example, there are many groupings following the tradition of the Forn Sed, as it is their practice to have limited numbers in each group. A representative from one such group represents a particular line of this tradition. She points out that, regrettably, there are more racist oriented branches of the tradition which they (she) do not represent and those branches are not part of

IRiS. Similarly, other religious lines have more than one branch of their communities. They are not all part of the Council. There are also orthodox and liberal branches of other organisations. It would appear that liberal branches or liberal representatives are those more actively involved, A further and broader research would be needed to gain more insight into that question. The Buddhist worldviews, which are clarified in their presentation as three main ones, each of them having further diverse communities, is represented by one person in the Council. We are here considering Orton's question on who is missing and how that affects the dialogue. It is a question how much of it is reflected back to the members of some of the communities, providing them with information and making them included in the ideas of interreligious dialogue and shared coexistence. It is also a question how many of those working as representatives have time and possibility to focus on it. The representatives which did answer the questions seem to be those active in the issues of interreligious dialogue and have a positive attitude toward another, are inspired to work with They feel supported both within the IRiS and their own communities to at least some degree.

It would appear that both the Shia and the Sunni Muslims, which have different interpretations of Islam, are represented in the Council but since none of the Muslim representatives had answered, it is not possible to examine how they look upon this work.

7.2.2 What is the dialogue for?

As we have already touched upon the issues of what the dialogue appears to be for, and what are the aims and the purpose of the Council, we will only note here that one of the purposes of it seemed to be to become more prominent, or at least recognized actors in the social and political life, involved as a group in a dialogue with the municipality. This has not yet manifested and several interviewees point out that perhaps more work on the goals, clarity of ways and shared endeavour are needed. They hope to see things come to being as time goes on.

7.2.3 The complexities of the diversity

The specific question about the complexity of the diversity and the differences among them is how it is seen to affect the interfaith dialogue. Here, we could add that majority of the interviewees had pointed out that those are taken out of the equation. While one person mentions that this may be a concern that should eventually be taken up, others focus on the similarities, the unity around their goals that they believe they share. They bring up the development of tolerance, acceptance and compassion as more important to work toward.

While some do recognize that the complexity of the diversity can be and at times is an obstacle for some within their own religious communities, they opt to look at the positives, that which supports the interreligious dialogue in their scriptures and leadership, the good it brings. They look at their own faith and at those that provide them comfort in their work, not the least other members of the Council.

7.2.4 The effective dialogue, the dynamics of participation and the dilemmas

Two of the strongest elements brought up when it comes to effective dialogue, experienced and applied, seem to be setting the premises for the communication and the familiarization through shared information and experiences.

Explaining it by the early years and the fact that everyone in the group is nice to each other, the general information from those who answered questions communicates that there are no real issues among the members, that participation is upon them, and that dilemmas are not being taken up or given much thought as yet. With the exceptions that for some there may be an issue when politeistic views are forgotten in the sayings “God is one” or some discomfort is there around the LGBTQ+ questions among some members, which may in fact be keeping some people away, there was no much rapport on the issues raised in the last two questions by Orton.

7.3 A reflection about the theories

We mentioned in the part on the Moral Foundation Theory and the presentation of the Thomas-Kilman model for conflict that values and tensions between opinions can affect the way and form in which one dialogues. There is always a risk that if tensions are not notified, addressed and worked on, the only active group is the one which shares similar understandings and worldviews, wherein they may thrive and achieve good results, nevertheless. They may, however, miss on the richness that comes from working through tension and disagreements. If the majority of the group values similar things, there may be imbalance in political interpretations. The latter does not seem to be the case, although from the data gathered, there is some disbalance in the political understanding.

Reflecting on the elements mentioned in Abu-Nimer's paper in the part on Dynamic group work, the four stages of excitement/idealization, tension/learning, frustration/reinforcement of difference and empowerment/collaboration, these have not been mentioned as experienced elements in the work of the Council. Rather, the group seems to be somewhere between the first and the second stage. There is a mention that not everyone always partakes. Not many partook in answering the questions, either, however, many unknown variables may have affected this. Learning has been mentioned by all interviewees as a positive experience, although the amount of it may not have been too large. Excitement and some dose of idealization of the work, which is possibly needed and positive, were present in the answers.

From the limited data collected, it would appear that the general spirit of the Council is that of accommodation. While there was too little data for me to do desired analysis in this regard, it would possibly be useful to the Council to conduct their own small research to find out where within the Thomas-Kilman model their members stand. That would be helpful to define the possibility of their accomplishments as a group, shining the light on the areas that can perhaps be worked on. If they lack assertiveness or resist it, this may be something helpful to embrace. If representatives are used to competitive circumstances in their own communities, this may

present a difficulty in an accommodating group in different ways, one of which may be that such representatives may lack motivation and inspiration or be confused with the lack of certain structures. It would have been an interesting additional insight into the working of the group, but I hope the mention of it may still be of use for some further research or their internal work.

Given the small amount of the respondents to the interview questions and limited ability of meeting them in person, or observing the work of the council in more detail, this research only touches upon the complex elements of the interreligious work in general. It can reflect limitedly on some possible patterns of thought, values, interests and ideals of the persons involved in such a work. The data collected can give some insight into the possible issues and the areas that could be further explored, both for the research in pursuit of theories and for the council itself to further and to enrich its work. It is however not enough to form clarity on the patterns, or to grasp the entirety of the complexities involved in the interreligious work of this council nor to draw conclusions with certainty.

That being said, it is my hope that asking questions will provide some further inspiration for the work of the council members. Helene Egnell has shown kind interest in this study and I will be sharing this thesis research with her. If it can be of any assistance or inspiration, then this thesis has contributed to moving forward both the interreligious dialogue work in Stockholm and the possibility to do further research about it.

8. A summary

We have embarked on this journey to explore the world of the interreligious dialogue in practice of a local council. Starting with a question of does this work, we analysed why this question would arise. To find out in more detail if a dialogue can happen when values and cultures may be out of tune, the question became how does such dialogue move on, what are its objectives, who are those interested in it, is such work supported by the scriptures and a wider body of the religious followers, what goes on, with what motives and tools employed.

Strengthened with the look into the complexity of a dialogue, the varied approaches to it, the stages and ways of a group work, the political and the social background and thoughts around it, we employed the interviews and the background reading about the member religions in the council. We analysed along the lines of the qualitative research and discussed having in mind the seven key questions proposed by Orton to examine the interreligious work.

Does interreligious dialogue work? Within the sphere of Stockholm, interreligious dialogue works to a degree those involved engage in it. Those who do engage find it reasonably justified within their own scriptures to do so and they have a certain support for it within their own network. While their aims and goals may appear to somewhat vary, as well as their ideas of what interreligious dialogue should look like, they are aware of the fact this endeavour is new and possibly fragile so they seem to approach it with care. At this stage, its effects upon the social cohesion are not largely measurable, but the aim to work toward it is there.

Further research that would include the answers from the rest of the representatives of the member religions would provide better clarity on some of the elements considered in the concepts to work with. Understanding in depth where each of the members stand in the approaches to the interreligious dialogue, what the conflict resolution strategy is of their representatives, are they for example mainly in the avoiding space leaving the main actors to be of a similar nature, would provide further insights into how that interreligious dialogue works, what are its obstacles and could define its possible ways to grow and achieve more.

From the amount of information gathered, it does appear that this new organisation is moving forward, touching upon the tensions. There is the willingness of the members to be open and honest with issues they may see in their work together as well as in themselves and their own communities, and they are enjoying a good dose of learning, exchange, support and dialogue.

More can be done, by their own admission, and more will likely also be done, as those who are active and engaged show interest, willingness and character work, in improvement of themselves, their communities, the municipality and the world at large. With some more insight into their members, a further development of strategies, focus, clarity, and above all through the dialogue itself, they may eventually bring more clarity to whether the interreligious dialogue works and how. A further insight through research could be beneficial in understanding the potential of the interreligious dialogue for the betterment of the communities.

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europe.eu

atlasofeuropeanvalues.eu

Unicef.org

Uri.org

parliamentofreligions.org

rfp.org

rfp-europe.eu

Appendix I

List of internet sites referred from for the religion members of IRiS

Bahá'í community in Stockholm (Bahá'í samfundet i Stockholm)

<https://stockholm.bahai.se/>

Bosnian Islamic Assembly (Bosniska Islamiska Församlingen)

<https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/stockholmsstift/centrum-for-religionsdialog>

Catholic Church (Katolska kyrkan)

<https://www.katolskakyrkan.se/>

Center for Religious Dialogue in Stockholm (Centrum för Religionsdialog i Stockholm Stift)

<https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/stockholmsstift/centrum-for-religionsdialog>

Customs of the old - Forn Sed Stockholms Blotlag

<https://www.samfundetfornsed.se/2011/02/11/blotlaget-forn-sed-stockholm-2078552>

Church of Sweden (Svenska Kyrkan)

<https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/stockholmsstift>

The Evangelical Motherland Foundation (Evangeliska Fosterlands Stiftelsen)

<https://www.efs.nu/>

Uniting Church of Sweden (Equmeniakyrkan)

<https://equmeniakyrkan.se>

Finish Orthodox Church in Sweden (Finsk-Ortodoxa Kyrkan)

<http://www.ortodox-finsk.se/>

Georgiska Ortodoxa Kyrkan

Does not seem to currently have a website or a steady address

Gurdwara Sangat Sahib Tullinge

<http://www.sikh.se/english.php>

Hindu Mandir Society

<http://www.mandirstockholm.se/>

ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness)

<http://www.harekrishnastockholm.com/> - city

<http://krishna.se/> - publishing

<http://www.almviksgard.se/index.html> -farm

Islamic Shia Association (Islamiska Shiasamfunden)

<https://shiasamfund.se/>

The Jewish Community (Judiska Församlingen)

<https://jfst.se/>

Pentecostal Church (Pingstkyrkan)

<https://www.filadelfiakyrkan.se/>

Mosque in Stockholm, Stockholmsmoské

<https://www.stockholmsmoske.se/>

Swedish Buddhist Cooperation Council (Sveriges Buddhistiska Samarbetsråd) now having a new name Swedish Buddhist Community (Sveriges Buddhistiska Gemenskap)

<https://www.sverigesbuddhister.se/>

Appendix II

List of Interview Quotes in Swedish

1. Jag hade ett intresse för dessa frågor. Vår styrelse ansåg att jag skulle kunna göra nytta i detta fora. Jag var också då ansvarig för religiös frågor i den liberala delen av församlingen så det föll sig naturligt att jag skulle arbeta med detta.
2. "vi hör ihop i en enda mänsklighet och att vi fått Guds uppdrag att tillsammans "bruka och bevara" den"
3. "Jorden är blott ett land och mänskligheten dess medborgare." Enhet i mångfald" som används av bahá'ier innebär samarbete med andra, varav medverkan i interreligiösa sammanhang...
4. Acceptans av mångfald... inbyggt i religionen. ...normalt att se saker från flera perspektiv
5. Modern judendom har en lång tradition av interreligiös dialog.... har vi levt som minoritet...funnit behov av påtvingad eller frivillig interreligiös dialog
vi ser hela mänskligheten som härstammande från B'nai Noah
6. Unity in diversity is part of our tradition and philosophy - acintya-bheda-abheda tattva.
7. Interreligiösa råd är en ny organisationsform, det finns inga färdiga modeller att utgå från. Behovet av att samlas och dela erfarenheter tillsammans med andra råd på nationell, regional och lokal nivå är stort
8. Kunskapsbristen är tydlig hos både myndigheter, politiker och privatpersoner – speciellt när det gäller mindre religioner.
9. Att vi blir en samverkanspart till samhället, kommunen och regionen, så att de ser vår potential att bidra till sammanhållning. Det gäller t ex krisberedskap, skolverksamhet, miljöarbete, "institutionssjälavård" mm.
10. IRIS kan sprida kunskap. Jag hoppas också på att lyfta andlighet som en röst för miljö- och naturfrågor.

11. idén bakom Interreligösa Rådet i Stockholm (IRiS) var att komma fram till ett sätt att bli bidragande i kommunen och samförstånd mellan individer
12. Att religiösa samfund ska bli en naturlig del av civilsamhället. I Sverige är detta inte fullt utvecklat och ett spänningsförhållande råder mellan offentligheten och ett religiöst perspektiv. Att samfund betraktas som legitima aktörer i samhälls- och moral-frågor är också en diskussion som knappast kommit igång, särskilt inte i en massmedial kontext. Oftast tas de negativa aspekterna av religiösa samfund upp mer än alla positiva aspekter i media.
13. Religionsfriheten bäst bevaras av sekulär stat och myndighetsutövning (så att ingen religion får orättvisa fördelar), men där alla har god kunskap om de olika religioner som finns i samhället.
14. Jag trivs mycket i umgänget med IRiS medlemmar. Har upplevt att vi har fin kontakt och har lärt känna dem mer personligt och har fina minnen. Det är lite som en interreligiös familj.
15. Fungerar utomordentligt bra med rika diskussioner och konstruktiva förslag. våra olikheter bejakas och vi delar aktivt av våra traditioner och perspektiv.
16. på det stora hela verkar alla jag träffat i samband med IRIS vara trevliga.
17. Allteftersom tiden går lär vi känna varandra på det mänskliga planet, och det skapar relationer som gör arbetet roligare och lättare.
18. Ett beslut har tagits , nämligen att ägna tio minuter av styrelsens tid till en av medlemmarna att presentera något om sin religion. Det har upplevts som positivt.
19. Olikheter tas inte så mycket upp. Vi har olika tankar och praktiserar på olika sätt men tanken är att kärnan är samma, kärlek till Gud och medmänniskor. I min förståelse av våra skrifter är Gud universell. Ingen religion, organisation eller individ har monopol på Gud. Han kan uppenbara Sig till vem som helst, när som helst, var som helst och hur som helst Han önskar. Och detta visar Hans kärlek till oss. Gud ger oss många vägar så att vi kan närmar oss Honom på olika sätt. Och det är underbart.

20. Ibland i interreligiösa sammanhang finns det en vilja, som säkert är god och välmenande, att generalisera i syfte att skapa sammanhållning. Till exempel "vi tror ju alla på en och samma gud, bara under olika namn" osv. Det här riskerar att slå fel. ... man behöver inte bygga samarbete på religiös likhet.
21. Hbtq-frågor är fortfarande kontroversiella när människor från många olika religiösa sammanhang ska träffas
22. Särskilt stöd i form av ökad kunskap. Vid attacker mot samfunden har IRiS solidaritet varit mycket viktigt och betydelsefullt.
23. Vi andra ignoreras inte, men en del frågor kan vara irrelevanta för oss. T ex, när en föreläsare från SST bjöds in så lade han mycket tid på att berätta om bidragssystemet och annat stöd som kan ges till redan bidragsberättigade samfund.
24. Finns också ett visst motstånd mot interreligiös dialog i den ortodoxa delen av församlingen
25. Inte alla är alltid välkomnande med det här arbetet inom min religion, jag har ibland hört otrevliga eller mindre stödjande kommentarer. Men dessa är baserade på saknad av kunskap, därför behöver vi jobba mer.
26. Svenska kyrkan arbetar aktivt med dessa frågor på många sätt.
27. Har inget program per se om mänskliga rättigheter. Dock har vi en omfattande utbildnings- och kulturverksamhet där många breda frågor om individ, grupp och samhälle diskuteras. Det finns idag en stark oro i vår församling mot Sverigedemokraterna och deras rasistiska politik mot religiösa samfund och minoriteter.
28. Ett sätt att se är att betrakta varje individ som en blomma med egen färg, storlek, utseende, doft, i knopp eller utslagen. När dessa varierande blommor samlas i en bukett upplevs skönheten.
29. Skulle man gå efter personliga gillande i form av färg, utseende och liknande förstörs helhetstänkandet och visionen tappas ur sikte.

