

Religions – a Janus-Faced Phenomenon in Local Politics: A Swedish Interreligious Council and Participants' Views on Religions as a Possible Asset for Societal Cohesion in the Local Community

TOMAS AXELSON AND JONAS STIER

DALARNA UNIVERSITY; MÄLARDALEN UNIVERSITY

tax@du.se

ABSTRACT

Religions can facilitate cohesion, belonging and feelings of safety or can underpin tensions, separatism or terrorism. This has led local, national and international policymakers to use inter-religious councils to overcome local conflicts by facilitating dialogue. Sweden has a growing number of inter-religious councils around the country. This article focuses on the inter-religious council in Midtown. The aim is (1) to describe how politicians, civil servants and religious leaders as participants in the council express their expectations on the Midtown inter-religious council, and (2) to analyse these accounts in the light of ongoing research and European examples of inter-religious dialogue. Data have been collected via interviews and participant observation, and analysed through two critical lenses, one focusing on social cohesion, the other on fears of militant religious extremism. Results show that members of the Midtown council view religions as constituting possible obstacles but mainly as an important asset in a process of developing a cohesive society.

Keywords

Religion, inter-religious councils, Sweden, conflict, cohesion, violent extremism, conviviality

Introduction

The new millennium's migration movements have created increasingly pluralistic European societies, displaying a high level of both religious and ethnic diversity (Furseth *et al.* 2019, Illman, Martikainen and Nynäs 2018; Körs 2018; Axelson, Hansson and Sedelius 2018). In France, Germany, Great Britain, and Spain this has given religions a new public and political role. Religion has received increasing interest on different levels in the secular public space in multicultural nation-states,

as Paul Hedges outlines (2019). Already a decade ago, the European Union Councils report, *Gods in the city – Intercultural and inter-religious dialogue at local level* (2007), focused on the setting-up of inter-religious councils and the development of new relations between secular public offices and religious faith-based institutions in cities around Europe. A conclusion of the report was that local political authorities must balance two objectives which are in tension in their intercultural efforts: on the one hand, to allow minorities to develop a clear group identity and cultural self-confidence as resources which can facilitate belongingness and feelings of safety in a multicultural diverse society, thus promoting processes of societal cohesion; and on the other hand, to avoid religious traditions to fuel in-group tendencies which can evoke increased conflicts between people, separatism or even violent extremism.

During the last decade, research has tried to catch up. It has been claimed that scholars need to deal more seriously with the consequences of growing multi-ethnicity and religious diversity (Illman *et al.* 2018). The relationship between religion and politics is today “extremely complex and delicate” as Haapalainen, Opas and Räsänen (2019, 4) put it. Scholars from intercultural studies, religious studies, political science and sociology are involved in trying to understand the ambivalent perception of religion in contemporary society post-9/11 (Hedges 2019, Halafoff *et al.* 2019; Lundby 2018). Public discourse depicts religions as assets in local society in times of turmoil and crisis, but also as something potentially problematic, connected to different forms of extremism, which threatens secular liberal democratic society (Juergensmeyer 2018; Pratt 2018).

Aim of the article

This article focuses on one local example of the formation of an inter-religious council in a mid-size Swedish city (from now on called Midtown). This is done in two ways. First, through the eyes of participant politicians, civil servants and religious leaders, we describe and analyse how they express their views on inter-religious dialogue in the inter-religious council in Midtown. Second, relating these accounts as illustrations, we discuss other examples of inter-religious dialogue in Europe and ongoing research on inter-religious councils. This will be done through two critical lenses, one dealing with ideas about social cohesion, the other dealing with expressed fears of religious extremism and how to deal with geopolitics in local settings.

Given these aims, the article wants to contribute to the understanding

of *if*, and if so, *how*, the people involved look at inter-religious councils and inter-religious dialogue as vehicles for constructive discussions on local community matters. By the same token, we hope to add new knowledge to the research field of inter-religious dialogue and shed light on the specific challenges with inter-religious councils in a multi-religious urban context with the help of a local case study.

The context

During the twentieth century, Sweden has developed into a religiously diverse society (Willander 2019). As of 1976, 94% of the population were members of the Church of Sweden. Out of today's ten million population, close to six million Swedes (60%) are members of the Church of Sweden. Around 300 000 are members of free churches such as Pentecostals, Baptists and other evangelicals (3%), 154,000 are members of different Muslim groups (1,5%); 140,000 are members of the orthodox family (1,4%); and 100,000 are Catholics (1%). Among other significant religions, there are relatively few members in Sweden; 9,000 Buddhists and 8,000 Jews (Willander 2019, 34).

By involving a variety of faith communities present in society, local politicians in Sweden have set up local inter-religious councils, inviting religions to be possible bridge-builders and important resources to overcome local tensions and conflicts, and to facilitate social cohesion (Nordin 2017, Kristianssen 2017; Axelson, Hansson and Sedelius 2018). The first inter-religious council in Sweden was established in Örebro in 2006, and a growing number of councils have been established around the country, with politicians in a leading role. Most of the councils around Sweden today are headed and run by an elected politician, gathering local Muslim communities, both Shi'a and Sunni, local Christian communities, Catholic, Lutheran, and Orthodox groups or other city representatives. In some of the cities, religions meet without city representatives or other political presence.¹

Midtown

Midtown's history is intertwined with twentieth century industrial development. The city is changing into a modern, multi-diverse city, with not only big industrial companies but also government administrative authorities and a large-scale commercial sector. In the new millennium, Midtown has welcomed a great share of migrants and

1. "Inter-religious councils" will be used to label councils where politicians and civil servants from the secular sphere take a role. "Inter-faith councils" will here be used about councils where only religions gather.

asylum seekers, and 18% of its population today was born abroad (SCB 2020). The city is diverse with minority groups from Somalia, Syria, Finland, Iraq, Turkey, Eritrea, Thailand, the former Yugoslavia, Iran and Afghanistan, to mention the ten largest groups (Midtown 2016; Fjellström 2018). Apart from Christian churches, Midtown houses a significant Muslim community. The location of a new mosque has led to political campaigns and conflicts in the local community over the years, including demands for a local referendum on the matter (Midtown Courier 2017). In 2016, Midtown decided on an intercultural strategy to promote democracy and an inclusive intercultural development. The strategy is part of a larger framework to safeguard democracy. In the framework, one strategic action has been the initiation of an inter-religious council: “experiences from other cities show that an inter-religious council is a crucial part of an inter-cultural strategy opening for meetings between leaders from different religious traditions (Midtown 2016). Behind the initiative of a meeting place for encounters with religious leaders is an imperative policy of dealing with the risks of violent extremism. Inter-religious dialogue has been viewed by the city as a sub-strategy in a larger strategy, to promote democracy against anti-democratic sentiments, which means that from the outset, Midtowns’ inter-religious council has been framed by a double-sided role which religions play in local society, moving between being an asset for coherence or as something potentially separatist. But, first and foremost, the strategy is to promote *social cohesion*, which in Sweden has been established as a much used, yet vague concept in local policy documents.

Previous research

Already in the 1960s, Canada defined social cohesion, referring to the process of developing a community based on shared values, common challenges and equal opportunities within the country, established on a sense of trust, hope and reciprocity for all Canadians. With five pillars, Canada pinpoints normative guidelines which are important for developing a multicultural society where minorities and majorities seek fruitful ways of conviviality:

- (1) Belonging as opposed to isolation, which refers to the notion of common values, identity and a sense of commitment; (2) inclusion, as opposed to exclusion, which refers to equality of opportunity; (3) participation, as opposed to non-commitment; (4) recognition, as opposed to refection, which refers to respect and tolerance in pluralistic societies; (5) legitimacy, as opposed to illegitimacy, which refers to institutions. (Canadian Government 1999, 22)

Today, half a century later, local political strategies of trust, inclusive communities and social cohesion are being developed across Europe.

When talking about social cohesion, a recurrent discursive figure among policy makers is an idea of shared common values to secure pluralism, where separate groups and minorities find a haven within an overarching structure. The sociologist Tina Goldschmidt understands cohesion as the capacity of sticking together and is achieved if three criteria are met: (1) People trust others within society; (2) people share a common identity; and (3) people's subjective feelings of trust and shared identity are manifested in objective behaviour, e.g. cooperation or at least peaceful coexistence (Goldschmidt 2017, 9). Whether this could be accomplished by inter-religious cooperation is a matter of both theoretical and policy considerations. What does religious group belongingness mean, and what kind of social capital is activated? Is it a predominantly inward in-group perspective, enhancing “bonding’ social capital (ties to people who are *like* you in some important way)” or do meetings across confessional boarders entail “bridging’ social capital (ties to people who are *unlike* you in some important way)” (Putnam 2007, 143). Theories of social capital suggest that both processes are detectable in societies with high levels of cultural diversity. Recent research on social capital also highlights the important differentiation between processes where in-group processes in ethnic diverse societies could promote group trust on a *meso-level*, while at the same time they lead to withdrawal and “hunkering down” processes on a *macro-level* (Goldschmidt 2017).

The *city* has been the place to study these processes. In 2018, researchers presented local case studies from Hamburg, Duisburg, London, Oslo and Stockholm in *Religion and Dialogue in the City*. The Religion and Dialogue in Modern Societies (ReDi-project)² investigates how European cities have undergone rapid changes towards an elevated religious and cultural diversity and have created new conditions for inter-religious dialogue:

whether a city is or can become a venue for interreligious encounter and dialogue, or if urban spaces are merely a place where various religions and worldviews exist side by side, is a central question for the continuing social cohesion of modern societies. (Ipgrave *et al.* 2018, 9)

One question is whether institutionalized religion contributes to common values or fuels separatist tendencies in European

2. The project focuses on case studies about Interreligious Encounter in Urban Community and Education. It is funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research in Germany.

cities. It depends.³ The Swedish sociologist of religion, Magdalena Nordin notices growing inter-religious cooperation in Sweden and distinguishes different attitudes among inter-religious dialogue participants; e.g., exclusivism, inclusivism or pluralism (Nordin 2017, 399). Douglas Pratt develops this idea. As the word implies, exclusivism regards only one religion as true or valid, and others as incorrect. Inclusivism implies a softer approach, where other religions are partly correct but subordinated within or beneath a superior truth. In its ideal form, pluralism accepts and embraces religious diversity, affirms commitment, and neither reduces nor relativizes; instead pluralism embraces dialogue as both a means and a goal for the process (Pratt 2018; Nordin 2016).

Pratt underlines the need for approaches facilitating authentic dialogue. “it must necessarily involve dialogical partners committed to their own religion *and* to the cause of dialogue” (Pratt 2018, 18). The approach affects inter-religious dialogue. People of different religious allegiances are neighbours in the city who, with various degrees of necessity, must talk with each other and together address common concerns. For Pratt (2018), the need for cross-religious communication is increasingly urgent.

Social Compass (2018) devoted a special issue to this topic, concluding that inter-religious initiatives in Europe and dialogue is an under-researched topic (Griera and Nagel, 2018). “Religion has entered the political agenda, and in this context, religious groups do not stand as passive players, but claim – and acquire – an active role in the public domain” (Griera and Nagel 2018, 303).

There is an ongoing change in the relationship between religions, whatever the denomination, and the secular political domain. Former principles about religious faith as mainly a private matter with only marginal manifestations in secular politics is no longer a hegemonic route map. Through inter-religious councils around Europe, religious traditions are granted a more explicit role in public spaces. “In a Swedish context, inter-religious cooperation could potentially lead to the previously existing religion, Christianity, as well as the religions that are newcomers, such as Islam, being reintroduced into society”, as Nordin puts it (2017, 400). This is one intriguing aspect in the scholarly debate about the new visibility of religions in Western societies, provocatively phrased *La Revanche de Dieu* by French scholar Gilles

3. See for example the Gods House case in Stockholm suburb Fisksätra analyzed by Johan Liljestrand (2018).

Kepel (1991). Old truths about a separation of religion and politics are under revision. Local secular authorities need to try to understand why some citizens orient themselves towards religious beliefs and anchor their identity in religious affiliation, instead of in a mainly secular one, in their quest for meaning and purpose in life (Palard 2007, 15).

Furthermore, scholars try to capture a new reality in contemporary societies. Nordic sociologists of religion have adopted the concept of “religious complexity” as a meta-theoretical notion denoting the presence of contradictory and co-existing trends at different levels in society (Furseth *et al.* 2019, 73). Through this concept, the co-existence of *decline*, *growth* and *change* of religion is also identified, in the analysis of inter-faith bodies engaged in local settings. National-level arrangements do not automatically reflect local-level situations. While states are becoming more secular, “they are increasingly involved in the area of religion” (Furseth *et al.* 2019, 86). This is of relevance for this study when the increasing set-up of inter-religious councils in local municipalities shows an on-going principle change in the boundaries between politics and religion, aptly phrased as an “openness to religion” in the secular sphere as Paul Hedges puts it (2019, 13). Hedges underscores that this openness to religion in the secular sphere specifically pertains to an acceptance of religions embracing openness to *other* religions, and is typically manifested by religious actors committed to inter-religious dialogue. Taking this a step further, new concepts such as “cosmopolitan peacebuilding” are suggested by scholars as a tool to deal constructively with challenges in increasingly religiously diverse societies (Halafoff *et al.* 2019, 382). Case studies presented in the ReDi-programme, where social cohesion processes are analysed in urban settings such as Hamburg, London, Oslo and Stockholm, add further nuances. Apart from ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ functions, Geir Skeie argues for a ‘linking’ social capital function where people involved in inter-religious dialogue create networks of trusting relationships across explicit institutional and formal gradients in society, giving religious representatives engaged in dialogue activities “access to arenas of power” (Skeie 2019, 24). This “linking” function is also relevant in this Midtown local case study.

Design, methods, data, and ethical considerations

In 2016, the Midtown municipality assigned the authors of this text to follow and study the establishment of the Midtown inter-religious council. Eventually, this study led to the completion and presentation of a report to Midtown politicians, civil servants and religions. This

article is based on empirical data from this study. In the role of participant observer (Burgess 1991), one of the researchers attended thirteen board meetings from the start in August 2016 until September

Date	Interviewed
2016-11-30	Civil servant, Midtown municipality
2016-11-30	Imam, Islamic Association, Midtown
2016-11-30	Priest, Church of Sweden, Midtown
2016-11-30	2 nd Municipal commissioner, Midtown
2016-12-12	2 nd Municipal commissioner, Midtown
2017-01-26	Priests, Church of Sweden
2017-02-15	Imam, Islamic Association Midtown
2017-06-21	Bishop, Church of Sweden
2017-06-21	Archbishop, Church of Sweden
2017-09-25	Free church representative, Ecumenical board, Midtown
2017-09-25	Civil servant, Midtown municipality
2017-11-14	Mayor, Midtown
2018-02-09	Chairman, Buddhist association, Midtown
2018-05-22	Oppositional municipal commissioner, Midtown

Table 1. Conducted interviews with participants in the inter-religious council in Midtown, 2016–2018.

2018. Loosely structured interviews were conducted with council members as set out in Table 1, that is, with politicians, civil servants, and religious leaders, including additional key people supporting the establishment of the council.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and translated verbatim by the authors. Interview extracts that were deemed to fulfil the aim of this text were selected. Field notes were also taken, and included contextual description, methodological and analytical reflections (Plummer 2001). Interview extracts were read and re-read several times. During these readings, we have been looking for whether the respondents primarily depict religion as a marker of community and in-group dynamics, and how respondents perceive religious traditions as assets for social cohesion or a source of conflict. A selection of these accounts is presented in the following. The study is guided by the Swedish Research Council's ethical rules and guidelines for research (Codex). Access to the inter-religious council was granted by the

Midtown municipality. In the first meeting, all council members were asked if they were willing to be interviewed and if they agreed that one of the researchers would attend their meetings. All of them agreed to this. When presenting the results, the names of people and places have been altered to ensure confidentiality.

Findings

The findings section is structured in such a way that first the accounts of politicians are presented, followed by those of the civil servants, and finally those by the religious leaders.

Leading politicians and their hopes

The mayor of Midtown appreciates the value of creating interactive city spaces for people of different cultural backgrounds. For him, it is important that local religious leaders meet local politicians, that newcomers get to know representatives for a relatively secularized Sweden, and that politicians deal with issues where a secularized Swedish society does not really understand or reach out. He is concerned about cultural misunderstandings:

there is the risk for cultural blackouts, and then to have a dialogue where we can meet and discuss values and society issues and religious questions, I believe that is very important.

The benefit in his eyes is to build long-term community relations with all groups, which makes the community more resilient should turmoil or riots occur. Apart from politicians, imams and priests would be key leaders to calm down such situations. Their ability to collaborate would be imperative and relationships built up within the council would be of great value. Through his choice of words, we track the linking-function as noticeable. The second leading politician describes the council as a place where diverse opinions and mutual prejudices can be bridged and through dialogue remove fears and bring about “a democratic discussion between different groups. Above all, the religious groups.” He believes the council provides opportunities for political dialogue where those not accustomed to political fora can voice their views. Many years of meetings with religious representatives of Muslims in Midtown led him to appreciate the need for better understanding his dialogue partners: “how one thinks in a different way, how one think about social issues, thinking about politics. It differs little from the usual native Swede.” He underlines how an inter-religious council is a constructive response to the growing cultural diversity in Midtown: “how do we build society so that we also include the new groups

that will be larger in Midtown? How do you manage this community building together?” He also hopes that other religions as council members, not least those from the Swedish churches, could assist in expressing solidarity with the Muslims in the controversy surrounding the Midtown mosque project, displaying what Liljestrand describes as religions coming together as a “non-secular ‘we’” underlining similarities between religions in a surrounding secular context (2019, 35).

The municipality commissioner from the political right-wing opposition emphasizes the importance of strictly secular public spaces: “a secular society is based on the fact that we have a common ground in society with laws and rules that apply to everyone.” Public spaces should be neutral, and beliefs restricted to the private sphere. She emphasizes the principle of respect for everyone’s faith, while she underscores that common social rules must not yield to anyone’s interpretations of God’s rules: “in order for us to live together, everyone must respect the common playing field.” For her, religious affiliation is an important source of community, and shared standards through norm formation have played a key role for building civilization, regulating freedom and individual respect for each other. At the same time, it is important to handle conflicts that arise, considering that many who have grown up in Sweden can feel uneasy in relation to Islam as a religion other than Christianity: “we are not accustomed with Muslim culture and Muslim traditions and we have very little understanding for these thoughts.” She expects religious diversity will cause conflict and tension. In the long term, she believes that the Swedish pragmatic tradition where conflicts are solved through negotiations face to face will overcome this. In this endeavour, politicians need to take a leading role.

In short, these three political voices depict religion as an in-group – out-group marker. Religious traditions are viewed as promoting common values but also as a potential source of conflict. The politicians do welcome inter-religious dialogue as an important asset in the secular sphere, expressing what Hedges captures in his analyses of new boundaries between politics and religion in multicultural nation-states. These local political voices could be seen as expressing the growing principle of acceptance of religions in the secular sphere and most specifically “an openness to interfaith dialogue” (Hedges 2019, 13).

Civil servants’ views

Like many other cities in Sweden, Midtown has a strategy for safeguarding democracy against violent extremism. Two city officials

have been responsible for this and they have been involved in the set-up of the council. The female civil servant sees the council's work as a resource for dealing with controversial political issues, for example the plan for building a new mosque. In her view, the council creates formal and informal links to civil society which facilitates high-level cooperation, moving from "dialogue to diapraxis, when we actually do things together." Religious leaders are unique links to residents who are otherwise hard to reach: "these are actors who have many members who reach out to many people in a way that we as a municipality could never do." The council helps with solving problems and easing tensions between different city groups. For her, the principle of representation is imperative since there are groups without council representation (due to the adopted selection criteria), which she finds problematic: "there is a risk that somebody feels excluded on incorrect grounds and fuels the tensions that may already exist." Her view echoes of the concern for minorities in the European Union strategy where groups need to feel safe and included in society (Woehrling 2007).

The second civil servant stresses religious dialogue as a means to catch up with issues hovering around in the city. The council is part of the municipality's overall strategy for social sustainability. In his view, this is a strategy for preventing young adults from being lost to religious extremism:

how do we get children, young people and adults not to be drawn into these environments and how do we get people who are in these environments to leave. And then we saw that religious dialogue can be a tool for doing so.

Describing himself as a mainstream secular Swede, he has learned that religious identity is more important for young Muslims than he thought. He is also aware of the widespread public scepticism and anxiety towards explicit religious identities (especially Muslim) and appreciates the political leadership's long-lasting contacts and dialogue with the imams in Midtown.

Summing up, the two civil servants view religions as a marker for group dynamics and stress the need for policy actions reaching out to unprivileged groups outside established power structures and to make contact smooth and inclusive. Both are in different ways aware of the fears which are surrounding religions in public discourse, especially Islam, and if not handled well could fuel less acceptable processes jeopardizing principles of inter-religious tolerance (*cf.* Hedges 2019, 7).

Religious leaders and their opinions

The Church of Sweden firmly supports inter-religious dialogue and the positive effects this may have. According to the archbishop, inter-religious councils can help religious leaders get to know each other and become friends, lowering the risk that separatist voices get the upper hand. Bringing aboard religious traditions strengthens local cohesion since religions, in her view, see it as sacred duty to work for the city's best. The Swedish secularized society must re-evaluate the role of religion and look for positive attitudes beyond a neutral position:

religious traditions have a cultural integrity, a spiritual depth, and a moral power needed for facing the challenges of our society and humanity. Here is a social and spiritual capital in society that would be very stupid to let be unused (Jackelén 2017).

The Church's role in finding local community solutions is further stressed by the diocesan bishop. To him, today's challenges necessitate religious leaders' engagement, and this will bring out the best spirits and allow moderate and progressive forces to set the agenda. If not, extreme interpreters in the traditions may take over: "it is crucial to see a priest next to an imam, to speak side by side, when the whole society shakes." By making faith traditions visible, inter-religious councils build trust and cohesion for the diocese, not least in countering violent extremism. The time is gone when one could look the other way and hope that militant religious world-views would vanish by themselves. According to the diocese, honest and authentic dialogue is the ideal for inter-religious councils and a counter-force against separatism and seclusion. It provides space for marginalized voices, especially today's Muslims which are vulnerable and often marginalized. The local Midtown priest in the council is familiar with tensions and confrontations, based on religious inter-group prejudices. To him, a unique historical mission has fallen on the Church of Sweden – ie., to take the lead and try to reach out to everyone in the parish: "it's really about the whole society, I think. The local community, the good society. How to build it."

The Free Church representative underlines the need for working with inter-group conflicts, to prevent prejudices and negative stereotypes: "we really want peace. And then there are extremists, morons, call it what you want, in all traditions. But everyone wants peace, really, and a better world. After all, that is the basis of all religions." To her, the core of all religions is a peace movement.

Turning to the main mosque imam, he has for more than twenty-

five years been a leading Midtown figure. To him, the inter-religious council can facilitate constructive processes between people of Muslim and Swedish backgrounds and facilitate mutual understanding. “And we need this level of cooperation when we come from different cultures and different religions.” He stresses the need to help new generations of Swedes to enter society and to ensure room for difference and diversity:

I want us to focus and work for everyone in society to accept each other, how they are, and not require them to change themselves [to] become acceptable in society. And to look at others who are different, that they are a resource, to enrich society.

Here, religion’s inclusive potential is highlighted. The imam is concerned with how new generations of Muslim youths are met by hostility, which makes them susceptible to extreme voices. If you feel that you are an important citizen and that “you are treated with respect and justice, then you would not listen to this.” In his view, the fundamental problem is the failure of European integration which has created a breeding ground for destructive processes. The council allows for deeper involvement in Swedish society where people with a Muslim background could develop a “loyalty to Swedish society [...] that they feel like a part of society and not excluded. And that they do not feel that they are being treated unfairly.”

Looking back, he describes a mental change after September 11, 2001: “when it comes to being Muslim, it’s always a question mark.” The Imam highlights experiences of growing islamophobia, especially the new generation who search for a place in society. Local secular authorities must cooperate with mosques and Muslim organizations to counteract hostile sentiments against Islam which many young Muslims face today. This can create disappointment and frustration. The council’s work can help to include everyone in Midtown where “different religions have good cooperation.” To him, the council is a tool to achieve and embrace fundamental diversity. As a representative of the largest Muslim congregation, the Imam is pleased with many initiatives and sees himself as part of the inter-religious council right from the start. “I feel like a corner stone in this council.”

Finally, the chair of the recently established Buddhist congregation stresses the potential of doing things together, to cooperate, not only to get to know each other. The Buddhist temple is a resource not only for Buddhists, but for everyone in town; eg., if there is an accident in the middle of the night: “call us. We can arrange and help with food.

Maybe the school is closed, and you don't get there. When people get into trouble [...] the people in the temple can help." The Buddhists in the council look on themselves as helping hands and parties in building peace and local community trust.

In short, the local religious leaders in Midtown acknowledge problems pertaining to religious identities (except for the Buddhists) and recognize the presence of religious fanatics as a problem. But mainly they consider religious traditions as spiritually inspired bodies committed to social cohesion and the promotion of common values, contributing to *bonum commune*, the common good, fostering civic virtues and engagement for wider society (Ipgrave 2019; cf. Juergensmeyer 2018).

Discussion

The accounts of the Midtown inter-religious council participants will be discussed through two lenses. Through the first, we discuss ideas about social cohesion, where inter-religious councils navigate in problematic terrain where majorities and minorities in culturally diverse societies occasionally are in tension and threaten social cohesion, with clashes between minorities living in the city, jeopardizing peaceful co-existence. Through the second, we discuss the fear of violent extremism and especially of militant Islam as threats towards the liberal secular state.

Lens 1: social cohesion in a culturally diverse society

Viewed against the depicted background, inter-religious councils are at the centre of societal tension. Recent research differentiates between a range of religious commitments, from religious liberal, pluralistic and inclusive attitudes, to religious exclusive and fundamentalist, even violent commitments (cf. Maher 2016; Pratt 2018; De Kadt 2018; Hashas 2019). The former is more in tune with principles of liberal democracy and the latter are not. When asked about their expectations on the Midtown inter-religious council, the discourse of ambivalence toward religions is expressed by almost all interviewees. This is consistent with public attitudes in Scandinavian countries according to recent research (Lundby 2018, 40).

When Griera and Nagel (2018) analyse ongoing inter-religious initiatives, two simultaneous processes seem to be at work. In a secularized society, there seems to be (1) a need to 'domesticize' religiously-oriented minorities in local settings. In contrast to this attitude, there seems to be (2) a need to strengthen religiously-oriented

minorities in local communities. These processes are seen in the interviews with the local Midtown politicians given their ambivalent views on what religious traditions represent. These views range from religions harbouring attitudes incompatible with liberal values, to the idea that such traditions carry roots of taking care and cohesive norms of tolerance.⁴

The city is considered the place where inter-group processes and tensions should be handled; e.g., situations where socio-centric group identities become superior to other civic identities (Palard 2007; Haidt 2012; Weiner 2013; Brinkemo 2014). According to the authors of *Gods in the City* (2007), authorities and local politicians appreciate the value of cultural differences. Yet, flexibility is required from both authorities and religious groups. Religious representatives should pay attention to the risk of ending up in an apologetic attitude, defending their faith in substantive and dogmatic terms instead of engaging in inter-religious dialogue. In dialogue, controversial issues can be addressed – e.g., as attitudes in school towards male and female authorities, value conflicts between generations, conflicting views on relationships between girls and boys, women and men and their respective degrees of freedom (Palard 2007).

In order to understand the new complexity of religious actors in a secular society, Lise Paulsen Galal, Loïuse Lund Liebmann and Magdalena Nordin see policies emerging which give religious representatives a new role, through “regulated self-regulation” (2018, 331).

Sweden is experimenting with a combination of a political top-down perspective and local inter-religious initiatives to facilitate the existence of group identities *and* principles of loyalty with society. A concrete example of this process was the idea of the chair in the council, letting each partner host a meeting, thereby visiting one another’s churches, mosques and temples in Midtown, an initiative much appreciated by the religious communities involved.

An example of a successful high-profile inter-religious practice comes from Leicester, Great Britain (Wilson and Riaz 2017). Leicester has been able to act out a multicultural life by which Christian, Muslim, Sikh, Jain, Jewish representatives seem confident in both representing their traditions and be willing to listen respectfully to other traditions. This approach is expressed using phrases like “good disagreement”

4. We understand “religion” conceptually as institutionalised traditions according to a substantial definition of religion. We consequently use the plural form “religions” or “religious traditions” in the text to underline our treatment of institutional forms of religion. (cf. Linda Woodhead 2011; Lövheim and Nordin 2015).

or “disagreeing well” (Wilson and Riaz 2017, 82). By contrast, inter-religious dialogue in Sweden has another point of departure, the smallest common denominator being where everyone can agree. This was obvious during participant observation in the Midtown inter-religious council. According to other case studies, as the study from Hamburg – sometimes called the Capital of inter-religious dialogue – Anna Ohrt and Mehmet Kalender (2018) likewise found that work is often characterized by a spirit of consensus where controversial dimensions of religious belonging are put aside.

The sociologist of religion James Beckford is critical of overly instrumental views of faith communities as partners in social sustainability policy programs (Beckford 2015). Political strategies risk (1) overestimating the unity and cohesion of religious groups, (2) facilitating self-appointed representatives of a religious group to become spokesmen at the expense of others, and (3) underestimating the risk that an emphasis on each religious group’s special rights may collide with individual statutory rights in society (Beckford 2015, 232). He points to the risk with political strategies alternating between two approaches: an implicit view of religious affiliation as a source of problems in a culturally diversified society *and* an implied view of religious affiliation as a source of social harmony.

This last approach to religious affiliation is expressed by practically all the Midtown interviewees as a returning discursive figure. From a theoretical point of view, this perceived ambivalence could be analysed as playing out on two different layers in society, where successful *social* cohesion enforcing in-group bonding processes on a meso-level is a potential obstacle for successful *societal* cohesion on the next overarching macro-level, enabling bridging processes between communities (Skeie 2019). With this in mind, there is a risk that differences *between* communities are overestimated, as for example Halafoff *et al.* highlight (2019) when discussing religious (il)literacy and disproportionate negative sentiments towards Muslims in a multi-religious world. This brings us to the second lens.

***Lens 2: Fear of militant religious extremism
and geopolitics in the local setting***

Ohrt and Kalender note that the attack in New York on September 11 and subsequent attacks in major European cities triggered inter-religious initiatives focusing on “Muslim-Christian dialogue” (2018, 57). Swedish diplomat Ulla Gudmundsson argues that September 11, 2001 was a turning point and the last decade a more complex era for the

global political world order has materialised: “religion has returned as a factor in world politics” (2017, 11). After 9/11, a number of attacks on European soil framed as Islamic actions have darkened public discourse on religion in Europe:

the terrorist attacks in Paris, Nice, and Berlin frighten and add to a fear of radical Islamism that has been present in the West since the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. (Gudmundsson 2017, 6)

Since then, the religious dimension and militant Islamism in particular, but also the appearance of militant Christian extremists (Gardell 2014), have led to uncertainty on how to deal with religious identities in European politics, globally and locally. This issue has evoked interest among social science researchers and troubled politicians at national and European levels. The Council of Europe’s report *Gods in the City* (2007) explicitly warns for the temptation to view the new world order through the problematic frame of *the Clash of Civilization* of Samuel Huntington, in which future battles would be fought along religious identity markers and where the world could be divided into a number of “civilizations” (1993, 25). To view the world in such a simplistic fashion, Chris Chivers and Anjum Anwar argue, fuels the perception that religion is part of the problem, not the solution (2007, 26). Local level inter-religious strategies must account though for global and national level conditions and situations. Geopolitical events have local level repercussions.

These conditions are visible in Midtown. Turmoil in the Middle East is of concern for many citizens and therefore has a political impact locally. Midtown hosts the second largest Yezidi community in Sweden. Many of them came to Sweden in the wake of the refugee crisis in Syria in 2015 and onwards (Sorgenfrei 2017). The Midtown Yezidi minority harbours traumatic experiences from fleeing the Sunni-oriented Islamic state’s/Daesh, causing tense relationships with mainstream Sunni Muslims in Midtown and mutual suspicion between the groups.⁵ Geopolitics was also seen in Leicester, where the mayor underestimated the underlying processes in the city as he dismissed local religious leaders who wanted to discuss Britain’s involvement in the 2002/2003 invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. This caused local religious minorities to distrust Britain as a global actor generating and overall (dis-)trust in British society.⁶ This aspect of global politics,

5. Notes taken during council meeting 17 November, 2017.

6. Notes taken during a reception with mayor of Leicester in 20 March, 2018.

the issue of increased tension between groups in the city, was in part expressed in the Midtown interviews but also detectable through participant observation in the council.

Against this sinister background in world politics, much attention has been devoted to religions as part of conflict and problematic aspects of violent extremism. Fewer studies have focused on the role of religions in societal conflict resolution (Kristianssen 2017; Lööv Roos 2016; Nordin 2016, 2017). Thus, the notion of religions as a source of potential conflict dominates the discourse and obscures its healing and cohesion potential as well as people's ability to transgress religious boundaries, may they be social, cognitive or existential.

Conclusion: conviviality beyond dichotomy

Throughout Europe, inter-religious dialogue has emerged as a tool to take on the burning issues of “community cohesion and the prevention of violent extremism” (Ipgrave *et al.* 2018, 283). In this endeavour, religious organizations have been instrumental.

Analysing the views held by a selected number of politicians, civil servants and representatives of religious communities participating in the Midtown inter-religious council, the following can be said. Religions are perceived as a Janus-faced phenomenon. Religions might be bearers of in-group perspectives generating particularism and exclusivism, but also as traditions with spiritual visions of dialogue, inclusion and social sustainability. A conclusion from Midtown as well as other urban case studies is that inter-religious dialogue seems to foster bridging social capital between groups existing side by side in a diverse society, bringing forth linking processes between communities characterized by mutual respect. A conclusion from Midtown is that creating a local inter-religious council strengthens the presence of religions in the public space and especially religions in favour of pluralism, dialogue and religious diversity, much in line with Paul Hedges' notion about inter-faith dialogue as an accepted norm of religious activity in contemporary society (2019). Julia Ipgrave and the conclusions from the ReDi case studies support this interpretation when giving examples of how inter-religious encounters equip religious participants with social capital creating bonds between religious groups, fostering civic skills and wider community engagement (2019).

Finally, even if almost every Midtown interviewee occasionally express themselves with the “us-and-them” sentiment, they subscribe to the ideal of a more profound cultural and religious diversity. The idea of living side by side with many *different* groups in respectful

co-existence is the dominant idea in Midtown and that religious traditions can be an important asset in this process of conviviality.

References

- Anwar, Anjum and Chris Chivers. 2007. "Local Authorities and Interreligious Dialogue from a United Kingdom Perspective: A Missed Opportunity." In *Gods in the City: Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue at the Local Level*, edited by Halvdan Skard, Jacques Palard, Jean-Marie Woerling, Jean-Francois Husson, Julie Mahiels, Philippe Gaudin, Flora Burchianti, Xabier Itçaina, Nicola Tietze, Anjum Anwar, Chris Chivers, Brian Pearce, and Agnieszka Moniak-Azzopardi, 147-181. Wasselone, France: Ott.
- Axelson, Tomas, Ulf Hansson, and Thomas Sedelius. 2018. *Från privatsak till politisk kraft? [Elektronisk resurs]*. Falun: Högskolan Dalarna
- "Bakgrund: Ny moské i Midtown." *Midtown Courier* 17-02-17. <https://www.dt.se/artikel/bakgrund-ny-moske-i-borlange>
- Beckford, James. 2015. "'Community' in the sociology of religion: The case of Britain." *Social Compass* 62(2): 225-237. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768615571692>
- Brinkemo, Per. 2014. *Mellan klan och stat: somalier i Sverige*. Stockholm: Timbro.
- Burgess, Robert G. 1991. *In the Field: An Introduction to Field Research*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Canadian Government. 1999. Social Cohesion Network of Policy Research Initiative of the Canadian Government, Policy Research Initiative.
- Fjellström, Jonas. 2018. 2018. Telephone conversation. 24 September.
- Council of Europe. 2007. *Gods in the City: Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue at Local Level*, edited by Halvdan Skard, Jacques Palard, Jean-Marie Woerling, Jean-Francois Husson, Julie Mahiels, Philippe Gaudin, Flora Burchianti, Xabier Itçaina, Nicola Tietze, Anjum Anwar, Chris Chivers, Brian Pearce, and Agnieszka Moniak-Azzopardi. Wasselone, France: Ott.
- De Kadt, Emanuel Jehuda. 2018. *Liberal religion: progressive versions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. Abingdon: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351185639>
- Furseth, Inger, Lene Kühle, Knut Lundby, and Mia Lövheim. 2019. "Religious Complexity in Nordic Public Spheres." *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 32(1): 71-90. <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.1890-7008-2019-01-05>
- Galal, Lise Paulsen, Loïuse Lund Liebmann, and Magdalena Nordin. 2018. "Routes and relations in Scandinavian interfaith forums: Governance or religious diversity by states and majority churches." *Social Compass* 65(3): 329-345. London: Sage. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768618787239>
- Gardell, Mattias. 2014. "Crusader Dreams: Oslo 22/7, Islamophobia, and the Quest for a Monocultural Europe." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26(1): 129-155. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2014.849930>

- Goldschmidt, Tina. 2017. *Immigration, Social Cohesion, and the Welfare State: Studies on Ethnic Diversity in Germany and Sweden*. Doctoral dissertation. Stockholm University.
- Griera, Mar and Alexander Kenneth Nagel, eds. 2018. "Interreligious Relations and Governance of Religion in Europe: Introduction." *Social Compass* 65(3): 301–311. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768618788274>
- Gudmundson, Ulla. 2017. *Västmodell i kris: kampen om idéer i politiken*. Stockholm: Utrikespolitiska institutet.
- Haidt, Jonathan. 2013. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. London: Penguin.
- Halafoff, Anna, Kim Lam, and Gary Bouma. 2019. "Worldviews Education: Cosmopolitan Peacebuilding and Preventing Violent Extremism." *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 40(3): 381–395. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13617672.2019.1600113>
- Happalainen, Anna, Minna Opas, and Marika Räsänen. 2019. "Christianity and politics." *Approaching Religion* 9(1-2): 4–7. <https://doi.org/10.30664/ar.86785>
- Hashas Mohammed. 2019. *The Idea of European Islam: Religion, Ethics, Politics and Perpetual Modernity*. Abingdon: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315106397>
- Hedges, Paul. 2019. "The Secular Realm as Interfaith Space: Discourse and Practice in Contemporary Multicultural Nation-States." *Religions* 10(9): 498. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315106397>
- Huntington, Samuel P. 1993. "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72(2): 22–49. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20045621>
- Illman, Ruth, Martikainen, Tuomas and Peter Nynäs. 2018. "The ethnic and religious future of Europe". *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 28: 7–10. <https://doi.org/10.30674/scripta.70083>
- Ipgrave, Julia, ed. 2019. *Interreligious Engagement in Urban Spaces: Social, Material and Ideological Dimensions*. New York: Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-16796-7>
- Ipgrave, Julia, Torsten Knauth, Anna Körs, Dörthe Vieregge, and Marie von der Lippe, eds. *Religion and Dialogue in the City: Case Studies on Interreligious Encounter in Urban Community and Education*. Münster: Waxmann.
- Jackelén, Antje. 2017. E-mail conversation 3 July.
- Juergensmeyer, Mark. 2018. "The Global Rise of Religious Violence." *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 31(2): 87–97. <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.1890-7008-2018-02-01>
- Kepel, Gilles. 1991. *La revanche de Dieu: chrétiens, juifs et musulmans à la reconquête du monde*. Paris: du Seuil.

- Kristianssen, Ann-Catrin. 2017. "Brobyggare i ett uppdelat samhälle? En kartläggning av framväxten av interreligiösa råd i Sverige." Forskningsansökan till MUCF. Institutionen för Humaniora, Utbildning, och Samhällsvetenskap. Örebro universitet.
- Körs, Anna. 2018. "How Religious Communities Respond to Religious Diversity. From Interreligious Dialogue to Interreligious Relations, Contacts, and Networks." In *Religion and Dialogue in the City: Case Studies on Interreligious Encounter in Urban Community and Education*, edited by Julia Ipgrave, Torsten Knauth, Anna Körs, Dörthe Vieregge, and Marie von der Lippe, 23–54. Münster: Waxmann.
- Liljestrand, Johan. 2019. "Case Study 1: Maintaining and Transforming Bridging Capital in a Swedish Interreligious Youth Project." In *Interreligious Engagement in Urban Spaces: Social, Material and Ideological Dimensions*, edited by Julia Ipgrave, 29–38. New York: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-16796-7_3
- . 2018. "How Interreligious Buildings Influence Interreligious Neighbourhood Relations. The Case of the God's House Project in a Stockholm Suburb." In *Religion and Dialogue in the City: Case Studies on Interreligious Encounter in Urban Community and Education*, edited by Julia Ipgrave, Torsten Knauth, Anna Körs, Dörthe Vieregge, and Marie von der Lippe, 159–180. Münster: Waxmann.
- Lundby, Knut, ed. 2018. *Contesting Religion*. Berlin: De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110502060>
- Lövheim, Mia Magdalena Nordin, eds. 2015. *Sociologiska perspektiv på religion i Sverige*. 1. uppl. Malmö: Gleerups Utbildning.
- Lööv Roos, Peter. 2016. *Svenska kyrkans interreligiösa sammanhang. Översikt och exempel*. Rapport. Kyrkokansliet. Svenska kyrkan. Uppsala: Ineko.
- Maher, Shiraz. 2016. *Salafi-Jihadism. The History of an Idea*. London: Hurst.
- Midtown. 2016. "Lokal handlingsplan för att värna demokratin mot våldsbejakande miljöer i Midtown." *Kommunal handlingsplan*. 24 March.
- Nordin, Magdalena. 2017. "Secularization, religious plurality and position: Local inter-religious cooperation in contemporary Sweden". *Social Compass* 64 (3): 388–403. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768617713659>
- . 2016. *Religionsdialog och interreligiös samverkan i Svenska kyrkans församlingar 2016. En kvantitativ studie*. Svenska kyrkan. Centrum för teologi och religionsvetenskap. Lund: Lunds universitet.
- Ohr, Anna and Mehmet Kalender. 2018. "Interreligious Practice in Hamburg. A Mapping of Motivations, Conditions, Potential Benefits and Limitations from a Participant's Perspective." In *Religion and Dialogue in the City: Case Studies on Interreligious Encounter in Urban Community and Education*, edited by Julia Ipgrave, Torsten Knauth, Anna Körs, Dörthe Vieregge, and Marie von der Lippe, 55–83. Münster: Waxmann.

- Palard, Jacques. 2007. "Introduction." In *Gods in the City: Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue at the Local Level*, edited by Halvdan Skard, Jacques Palard, Jean-Marie Woerling, Jean-Francois Husson, Julie Mahiels, Philippe Gaudin, Flora Burchianti, Xabier Itçaina, Nicola Tietze, Anjum Anwar, Chris Chivers, Brian Pearce, and Agnieszka Moniak-Azzopardi, 13–24. Wasselone: Ott.
- Plummer, Kenneth. 2001. *Documents of life 2: An invitation to a critical humanism*. London: Sage.
- Putnam, Robert. 2007. "E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century The 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture." *Scandinavian Political Studies* 30(2): 137–174. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9477.2007.00176.x>
- Pratt, Douglas. 2018. *Religion and Extremism. Rejecting Diversity*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Skeie, Geir. 2019. "Introduction: Interreligious Dialogue and Social Capital". In *Interreligious engagement in urban spaces: social, material and ideological dimensions*, edited by Julia Ipgrave, 19–28. New York: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-16796-7_2
- Sorgenfrei, Simon. 2017. "Yezidier." In *Religiösa minoriteter från Mellanöstern*, edited by Göran Larsson, Simon Sorgenfrei and Max Stockman, 135–163. Stockholm: Myndigheten för stöd till trossamfund.
- Statistiska centralbyrån (SCB). 2020. "Kommuner i siffror – tabeller och fördjupning". <https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/sverige-i-siffror/kommuner-i-siffror/#?region1=2081®ion2=>
- Swedish Research Council. 2020. Rules and Guidelines for Research. <http://www.codex.vr.se/en/index.shtml>
- Wilson, Tom and Raiz Ravat. 2017. *Learning to Live Well Together. Case Studies in Interfaith Diversity*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Weiner, Mark Stuart. 2013. *The Rule of the Clan: What an Ancient Form of Social Organization Reveals about the Future of Individual Freedom*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- Willander, Erika. 2019. *Sveriges religiösa landskap – samhörighet, tillhörighet och mångfald under 2000-talet*. SST:s skriftserie. Nr 8. Stockholm: Myndigheten för stöd till trossamfund.
- Woerhling, Jean-Marie. 2007. "The Management of Cultural and Religious Diversity and the Promotion of Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue by Local Authorities." In *Gods in the city - Intercultural and inter-religious dialogue at local level*, edited by In *Gods in the City: Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue at the Local Level*, edited by Halvdan Skard, Jacques Palard, Jean-Marie Woerling, Jean-Francois Husson, Julie Mahiels, Philippe Gaudin, Flora Burchianti, Xabier Itçaina, Nicola Tietze, Anjum Anwar,

Chris Chivers, Brian Pearce, and Agnieszka Moniak-Azzopardi, 29–47. Wasselone, France: Ott.

Woodhead, Linda. 2011. “Five concepts of religion.” *International Review of Sociology / Revue Internationale de Sociologie* 21(1): 121–143. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2011.544192>