Multi-Religious Milieus

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Tensta-Rinkeby and Skärholmen are two suburbs of Stockholm which are characterized of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious population created by immigration during the last decades. Many of those living in Tensta-Rinkeby and Skärholmen are Muslims, and others are Christians-native Protestants or Catholic and Orthodox immigrants. This article presents data from interviews with Muslim and Christian informants, leaders as well as lay persons, on how they look upon each other across religious borders. The information is classified and interpreted according to models used by scholars in theology of religion. Some informants give vague answers due to the fact that issues of assessing beliefs of others are seldom treated in their churches and mosques. Articulated opinions can be classified from a replacement to an acceptance-model with a bulk of proponents for a fulfillment-model in the middle. Finally the article discusses the importance of how religious actors teach and act in multi-religious milieus.

Keywords: multi-religions Milieus, Muslims and Christians, religion theological models

Introduction

The following article is based on a recently published book in Swedish *Kanske alla har rätt eller fel* (Maybe everyone is right or wrong). The title is a quotation from an informant on how to assess beliefs in other religions. His empirical data consists of 41 interviews carried out with 51 informants: Muslims and Christians, leaders and active lay persons in two suburban areas of Stockholm — Tensta-Rinkeby and Skärholmen. These two milieus are distinctly multi-ethnic and multi-religious. They are the places where religion has a strong presence, but not very effective in bringing people together. As a whole, contacts between religious groups are not close. They are not hostile either.

The book is about proximity and distance in intra- and inter-religious relations, but it also focuses on the view on beliefs of “the others”. The latter is what this article discusses. “The others” means here Christians and Muslims. How do religious people look upon each other across religious borders and how do they regard the faith of others? They have been working with several schemes of categorizations in dealing with different Christian positions in theology of religion. The most common typology is Alan Race’s classical trisection exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism (Race, 1983). It is a classification still often referred to. A recent example is the book *Sann mot sig själv — öppen mot andra* (True to yourself — open towards others) from the Church of Sweden (2011).

If they concentrate on soteriology, it can be seen that Christian exclusivism is the position that Jesus is the only path to God and his salvation. “No one goes to the Father except by me” is often quoted. Exclusivists hold

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differing views when it comes to the possibility of salvation for those who do not confess Jesus because they have never heard of him. Inclusivism says that God saves the world through Jesus, but we humans cannot fully grasp what that means. Perhaps there are other options besides consciously accepting Jesus as one's saviour. Some inclusivists stress the universal revelation and believe that other religions can be preparing roads to God because people all over the world have somehow been addressed by God, the Creator of Life. Other inclusivists go further and think that this universal revelation corresponds to God's universal will full of salvation. At least they do not exclude that other roads might take people all the way. But even then Christ is involved and hidden.

Pluralism says that the Christian perception of the crucial role of Jesus in God's work with this world, including salvation, is one perspective among others. Christians must accept that there are experiences of other paths than the Jesus-way to grasp and reach God. Race himself is a pluralist. So is Paul Knitter. In an early book he presents a system similar to Race's, but uses more ecclesiastical terminology and separates between four types (Knitter, 1985). They will not be discussed in this article but are hinted at.

In a later book, *Introducing Theologies of Religion*, Knitter (2002) uses other models. The replacement model states that nothing good can be achieved within non-Christian religions. They must be replaced by a living relationship to Jesus. The fulfillment model is what came out of the second Vatican Council in the 1960's, and is the dominant view in the Roman Catholic Church's approach to these issues from that time on. Previously the device was "no salvation outside the Church". After Vatican Council II the view is that other religions can be ways towards a correct understanding of God's intention with mankind. As preparations for a meeting with Christ they may be effective, but fulfillment lies in the gospel and/or the Church.

A third pattern is the mutuality model. It is pluralistic and states that different traditions have found different sides and features of the divine. Therefore they can and should complement each other. These three models can be seen as consequences of an exclusivistic, an inclusivistic and a pluralistic point of view respectively. There is however a fourth model: The acceptance model which is characterized by the device "Many True Religions: So Be It". This signals something new. The other models problematize particularity. Either to emphasize Christian supremacy (as in the first two), or (as in the mutuality model) to stress the universal validity of all the major religions; they can all contribute to the understanding of the divine. The acceptance model transcends particularity by accepting religious pluralism as such. It acknowledges the differences and does not try to overcome them in one way or another. It is no coincidence that this is the newest model, a postmodern theology of religion linked to a post-liberal Christian theology.

Data

Of the 17 religious communities in his inquiry five represent Christian Evangelical denominations: the Evangelical Free Church and the Pentecostal movement. His assumption was that they would show an evangelical approach emphasizing the authority of the Bible and its reliability, the necessity of a personal conversion and zeal for mission and evangelism. Convictions outside of what is perceived to be biblical teaching are in need of correction. This includes non-Christian religions, but equally secular unbelief. He assumed that a correlation between evangelical theology and rejection of other religions as paths to salvation would come up in the interviews.

Representatives of the Evangelical Free Church (EFC) point out that all humans need to find that Jesus is the only way to God. This includes, without specific references to them, Muslims. Because Islam teaches something else about the way to God it must be dismissed as something else than the truth. It is just as untrue as

when the atheist asserts that there is no God at all. Both are in need of conversion. "I am the way, the truth and the life" is quoted by several of the interviewees and interpreted as meaning that no other way to salvation and eternal life is available. This is an exclusive claim of truth.

It is pointed out by these informants that people without Christian faith must be loved because they are human beings, created by God. Dialogue can be meaningful, not as a tool for Christians to find something valuable about God in other religions but as a way of discussing local social issues and common responsibilities.

In the same way informants from Pentecostal Churches say that Jesus is the only path to God. Muslims living in the environs constitute a missionary field more than a dialogue partner. They are a subject for prayers, but informants show that they do not try to reach out to the Muslim community in particular. According to Race's classical typology this would be termed an exclusivistic attitude. It is also in line with Knitter's replacement model. But the impression is that some of them are not as convinced that non-Christians are wrong as the interviewed leaders of the EFC-congregations seem to be.

Pentecostals are not only evangelical, but they are also charismatic, which may be of some significance here. It is not the biblical word in itself that is absolutely crucial, but how the Word manifests itself in a human being. An existential view of the Bible could make them more open to other possibilities than a literal understanding of what is written. The conclusion is that an exclusivistic theology of religion dominates in these five evangelical congregations, but it is not completely predominant.

Two congregations, at the time of the inquiry belonging to the Mission Covenant Church of Sweden, now merged into a new church preliminarily called "Gemensam Framtid" / "Joint Future", have been studied. Hypothesizing those members of this church would be nearer to the center of the scale exclusivism-inclusivism-pluralism due to a theological and a biblical approach where a literal interpretation is confronted with humanistic and liberal ideals in a wider societal discourse, what Knitter refers to as "main line Protestantism". The research also assumed that the views would be diverging and uncertain. Of these three assumptions the last turned out to be most correct. The laypersons don't know what to think about Islam's claims of holding the truth. They haven't thought much about it; it is not an issue in their churches. They have noticed the strong faith in God among Muslims, something they can feel a certain affinity to. Two pastors present differing views on this issue.

Some of the interviewees from the Church of Sweden are, unlike all others, engaged with theology of religion, at least the clergy. They stress that in a multi-religious milieu having respect for others is necessary. This includes a respect for the faith of others. It is an articulated position. The Church of Sweden informants avoids maintaining Christian faith as exceptional. One of them says that "This is my model to think about God but it cannot be imposed on others". Everyone's faith must be respected if it is sincere. At the same time he says that the Jesus-way is for all humans, which places him and his colleagues more in an inclusivistic than a pluralistic model. They seem to mean that as a Christian you cannot have a credo implying that any road is just as good as anyone else.

Another minister states that "we teach Christian beliefs, but we do not try to convince others that they are wrong". It is not a necessary consequence of Christian faith to challenge others' faith. The quote "We declare no other Saviour than Jesus, but we set no limits to God's grace" locates the leadership of the Lutheran church in an inclusivistic fold, which according to Knitter is more Catholic than Protestant. Other informants in the church are cautious and uncertain. There is a couple of voices representing Church of Sweden -

non-theologians — that sound pluralistic or theocentric. In their opinion it is the same God they all worship. This God is accessible also in other religions. The same God has different routes. This view is however rare.

When they turn to the first or second generation of Christians with origins in Middle Eastern countries, they return to exclusivism. This was also the hypothesized outcome. It makes no difference if they are Oriental Catholics or Orthodox. No one belonging to this category believes that Islam is saving humans. Islam is seen as a religion that leads wrong. In this group the reason for dismissing Islam is not only, as in the case of Evangelical Protestants; its doctrines are contrary to the Bible's message, especially in denying Jesus' unique position as saviour. Through their experiences of having lived in societies dominated by Islam they have seen, they say, how Islam functions in reality, suppressing Christian minorities.

Finally they pass to observations from interviews with Muslim informants in the same Stockholm suburbs. Concerning the question of how to assess Christianity and the Christians, words like respect (especially) and acceptance are frequently used. It is respectable to be a Christian. He or she belongs to a religion of the Book. They assert that the two religions' understanding of life is so similar that they can and should live in harmony and interact on various issues, especially in a multi-religious place like this. Concerning the possibility that Christianity might be a road to God and his salvation the views vary from maybe to no. But from this sceptical starting point no one they have talked to is interested in converting Christians.

The reverse conversion is a very sensitive matter. To leave Islam and convert to another religion is, for all Muslim informants, a very serious and negative event. Some of them express a certain understanding for the fact that in a secular, democratic and multi-religious society, you have to respect individual rights, including freedom of beliefs. But all have different kinds of aggravating circumstances to bring up. Conversions should not actually take place at all. The Muslim community has always a responsibility here, in reminding that God is the judge and to point out the social implications.

In terms launched in Western context and applied to Christians, Muslim informants generally take an exclusivistic stand. What they have learnt is that the prophet Mohammed gave them the last and most complete message from God, printed in the Koran. It includes the correct version even in matters like the role and status of Jesus. But this view does not necessarily lead them to a replacement model. Some of the informants are open to more inclusivistic attitudes by referring to God's greatness and unlimited knowledge of man and his unlimited discretion towards his creation. Not much different from interviewed Christian's reflections. Also the uncertainty and the somewhat surprising prevalence of unfamiliarity with religious dialogue in these multi-religious settings are similar in the two groups.

Among the Christians they thus find ideas of other's beliefs (i.e. Muslims) which can be grouped within a replacement, a fulfillment or an acceptance model: to find God and reach his salvation, Islam as a religion has to be totally replaced by the true faith. Or it is not completely wrong but must be completed and fulfilled by Christ. Or, as Christians they see it this way, which they can witness to our Muslim neighbours if they want to listen, but in a world of pluralism, they accept as a normal pattern other faiths together with their own. One or two informants express a mutuality model.

Muslims in Sweden have an ethnic and religious minority status, which may well impact on how they answer questions about Christianity and Christians. Conclusions must be made cautiously in interpreting answers and in translating them to external categories.

But the responses within the Muslim group, exemplify more or less the same three main models: Christians have misunderstood or falsified the message of the prophet Jesus, according to the replacement

model. Or, more common, Christians believe in many things recognizable to Muslims but have not taken the last step to accept the revelation given to Mohammed as God's completed message, according to the fulfillment model. The Christian relationship to God is contained within the worldview of Islam, but without recognition of the Prophet, that Jesus according to Muslim thinking predicted, it is insufficient and unfinished.

The most common view expressed is that as Muslims they accept the Christians and their beliefs and are prepared to live together with them here in Sweden without any attempts to convert each other. This acceptance model is probably an approach which is rational in a society marked by religious pluralism and where Muslims are numerically, politically and socio-economically inferior. To secure a future as an accepted and respected minority you had better be accepting and respectful yourself. This may partly explain this approach. But there is no reason to doubt that this answer is just as honest as the other ones. No one in the Muslim group articulate a view according to the mutuality model meaning that each one will be blessed in his own faith.

Models	Christian informants	Muslim informants
Replacement	Existing	Rare
Fulfillment	Existing	Existing
Mutuality	Rare	Non-existing
Acceptance	Existing	Existing

Figure 1. The empirical data and theological models.

Conclusion

This study is exploratory and inductive. The author has been collecting data about the view on others' beliefs using models to classify and interpret them. Such mapping would be of more sociological relevance if it could be shown that it has some significance for the local contexts and the people living there. The author thinks this may be the case, and the argument will be developed in two steps.

Tensta-Rinkeby and Skärholmen face many problems of unemployment, poor health, segregation and lack of economical, political, cultural and social resources. Political efforts are needed. So is community building and social cohesion, fields where religious actors can make a difference. Tensta-Rinkeby and Skärholmen are religious areas that told by informants. One of their characteristics is that religion is important for many inhabitants. Many Christians, Muslims and others use religious tools for orientation and identity seeking. Many turn to religious leaders and communities for guidance, leadership and social affinity. Religious groups can be seen as important actors in the local community by accumulating and directing cultural and social capital and affecting local societies in different respects. In other words, how they teach and act is of importance even outside churches and mosques. This should not be exaggerated but they can make a difference, especially if they cooperate.

Evangelical Christians tell them that contacts with Muslims, at least on social issues, formal or informal, could be valuable in this shared area, an area which their children will share in the future as well. But Christian evangelicals, or exclusivists, have in fact weak relations with Muslims and the interreligious dialogue, which on a small scale exists in one of the two areas. Theology of religion is not an issue which is reflected on in their churches. There seems to be a connection between a sceptical view of others' beliefs, limited faith in the outcome of theological talks and the absence of contacts. In Church of Sweden, which is far ahead of other churches in engaging in religious dialogue, the leading spokespersons can generally be regarded as inclusivists.

So theology of religion, the view on other faiths, has something to do with the frequency and climate of the relations between people from different religions, and consequently with the welfare of the local community. But this research does not aim at a solution where all Christians and Muslims cease to have doubts about each other's beliefs and practices. Depending on the purpose of dialogue, even Evangelicals should be able to engage in cooperation with Muslims and take part in programs arranged by interreligious councils.

If they, in accordance with Alan Race (2001), separate between three steps in the religious dialogue and name the first step "exchange" they do not find much theological significance there. But on this social level a friendly exchange may be a sufficient platform to reach understanding. It may be an opportunity to learn enough about the other to clear up misunderstandings and reveal stereotypes. It could also establish a basis for cooperation and possible consensus on common pressing societal issues.

Most informants agree that this first step is advantageous, but there are few of them who have accomplished to take it. The author does not think that a special theology should be necessary in seeking forms of cooperation where cooperation is desirable, because that step can easily be justified theologically by both Muslims and Christians in general.

The first step, "negotiation" in order to fully accept the other, needs more theological reflection. It means to see the other as an equal, as a person who has found something which might be as valuable as what they have found and experienced. That has to do with theology of religion. It means that if the dialogue contains theology participants, they have to consider the faith of others with deep respect. It does not mean, however, that theology should always be articulated in the conversations. Some participants say that the best prospects for dialogue exist when theology is kept out of it. This point of view, especially if it is based on experience, deserves respect in my opinion. But the author can also see the importance of finding out what kind of religious beliefs explain, justify and legitimize actions and ideals of the partner in the dialogue. If a theological dialogue is chosen ideas of absolutism and superiority among Christians or Muslims who make the dialogue and encounter more difficult. If the third step is taken — "interaction" in Races terminology with "communion" in sight—they must be entirely abandoned.

Regardless of what steps the religious actors in Tensta-Rinkeby and Skärholmen they are prepared to take most likely the first and the second they can do more. There are people on both sides with no interest in inter-religious cooperation. But as these pluralistic "religious milieus" do have inhabitants of different faiths declaring their wish to live in peaceful and hopefully enriching coexistence with each other they have unique possibilities to develop interesting models of interfaith encounter. There are many other milieus and actors who need examples to learn from.

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