

UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG
School of Global Studies



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“We Forgive, But We Do Not Forget”

An Ethnographic Account of Assyrian Christians’ Trails of Trauma and the
Making of ‘the Muslim’

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	iii
Abstract	iv
Introduction.....	1
Purpose and Research Questions.....	2
Disembedding and Re-embedding: Relevance to Global Studies	2
Background and Previous Research	3
The Assyrians/Syriacs	3
The Syriac Diaspora in Sweden.....	4
The Turmoil in Turkey, the Islamic State’s Caliphate and the Contemporary Migration to Europe.....	5
Theoretical Framework	6
The Diasporic Field	6
Collective Memory	8
Researching Religion and Diasporas.....	9
Community Relations and Reconciliation	9
The Contact Hypothesis.....	10
Reconciliation and Social Healing.....	11
Defining Islamophobia and Tracing the Anti-Muslim Rhetoric in Europe.....	12
Methodology	13
Messy Methods: An Anthropologic Standpoint	14
Participant Observation.....	14
Semi-structured Interviews	16
Process of Analysis	17
Ethical Considerations and the Role of the Researcher	18
Delimitations	19
Validity and Reliability	20
Results and Analysis	21
Diasporic Sentiments and the Endurance of History	21
The Ottoman Empire and the Oppression	23
Seyfo – the Sword of Islam	25
Polarisation and Boundaries	26
Present Day Conflicts and the Anti-Muslim Discourse in Europe	28
The Violence Continues.....	28

Islamophobic Tendencies 30

Ambivalence 32

F(r)riendship 34

 Love Thy Neighbour..... 34

 Combating Sin in the City of Nineveh..... 36

 Turn the Other Cheek, But Do Not Forget..... 38

Conclusion and Future Research 41

References..... 45

Appendix 1: Interview Guide..... 54

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Abstract

This thesis highlights the multiple layers of how an Assyrian Christian minority group in Sweden constructs the image of ‘the Muslim’. The thesis contributes to a larger debate about diaspora, reconciliation, and local manifestations of Islamophobia by following the view of ‘the Muslim’ in a Syriac Orthodox Church in Gothenburg. The ethnographic study analyses how the congregational members tell of diasporic, collective memories of oppression and genocide committed by Muslims, and frames ‘the Muslim’ as a violent figure throughout history. Their narratives are also influenced by the Islamophobic discourse in Europe. The interlocutors draw on present day conflicts in their old homelands such as the civil war in Syria and Iraq, and the turmoil in Turkey. This amplifies their view of ‘the Muslim’ as static and radical, and thus ‘incompatible’ in Western society. When discussing individual Muslim friends, however, the interlocutors’ narratives are ambivalent and reflect an insight of Muslims as being children of their common God. Lastly, Christianity plays a vital and multifaceted role in the narratives of the Assyrian Christians; Christianity is in this study both the foundation of conflict and dichotomisation between Christians and Muslims, as well as the most potent source of reconciliation between these groups.

Introduction

The indiscriminate narrative about ‘the radical Muslim’ has become a global Islamophobic discourse that has turned Muslims in Europe and North America into the scapegoats of the 21st century (Dunn 2001; Klug 2012; Werbner 2013). This development can be traced back to the Rushdie Affair of 1989, as well as the Madrid and London bombings, and of course to the 9/11 terror attacks (Borell 2012). Evidently, Islamophobic attitudes seem to be event-driven, which means that negative attitudes towards Muslims increase in the aftermath of dramatic, global events (Borell 2015). Therefore, it can be argued that Islamophobia may also increase due to the terrorist movement the Islamic State’s fierce persecution of both Muslims and of Christian minority groups in the Middle East.

In Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State’s killing of minority Christian groups such as Chaldeans, Assyrians/Syriacs and Armenians, has been termed genocide by the European Parliament (Landén 2016). The current killing of Christians occurs almost exactly 100 years after the Ottoman Empire’s genocide of Armenians, Greeks and Assyrians/Syriacs in 1915 (Seyfo Center 2014). The continued violence towards Christian minorities in the Middle East, along with the collective memory of the genocide in 1915, increase Islamophobia among Christian diasporas from the Middle East (Mutlu-Numasen and Ossewaarde 2015, 430, 440).

This ethnographic study explores how one such diaspora, namely a community of first generation Assyrian Christians in Sweden, constructs the image of ‘the Muslim’. The study at hand is investigating an unexplored field of inquiry and it adheres to many different layers in the interlocutors’ image of Muslims and Islam. Through interviews and participant observation in a Syriac Orthodox Church in Gothenburg, the study recognises complexity and holism in the Assyrian Christians narration about ‘the Muslim Other’.

Previous research that have been conducted in the field of Islamophobia have directed its focus almost completely on Western majority groups’ attitudes towards Muslims, but have not paid attention to the view on Muslims and Islam among diasporic minority groups. The narratives by the Assyrian Christian diaspora may be of interest to explore since they have been interlocked in intractable conflict with Muslims in their homelands for centuries (Assyriska Distriktet Göteborg 2009).

The Assyrian Christian diaspora in this ethnographic study is spatially located in the West, where ‘the Muslim’ is the scapegoat of the last few decades. However, because of the Assyrian Christians’ history of being persecuted by Islamic governments as well as by individual Muslims in their countries of origin, it is intriguing to investigate how they construct their narratives around this paradoxical situation. The thesis will contribute to a larger debate about the role of collective memories in the narratives of a diasporic community. In addition, the thesis discusses the dynamic of religion in interreligious contact and reconciliation between minority groups in a multicultural society, as well as the local manifestations of Islamophobia in narratives about Muslims.

Purpose and Research Questions

The aim of this study is to explore how first generation migrants of Assyrian Christian origin who are active in a Syriac Orthodox Church in Gothenburg construct the image of Muslims and Islam. In order to understand the congregational members’ perception of ‘the Muslim,’ the study will explore their narratives through different dimensions, represented in the research questions below:

- How do collective memory, diasporic belonging and the past influence the narration of Islam and its adherents among the Assyrian Christians?
- How do the present day conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Turkey, as well as the anti-Muslim discourse in Europe, contribute to the view of ‘the Muslim’ and Islam in Sweden among the Assyrian Christians?
- How do negative as well as positive encounters with individual Muslims influence reconciliation with, and attitudes towards, Islam and Muslims among the Assyrian Christians?
- How are the Syriac Orthodox congregational members’ narratives about Christianity and its virtues of forgiveness and compassion connected to their relation with, and attitude towards, Muslims and Islam?

Disembedding and Re-embedding: Relevance to Global Studies

This study investigates how deterritorialised social life (such as diaspora), the globalised mass media and its rhetoric, social interactions and faith, influence the view of Muslims among Assyrian Christians. The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1996, 52, 54) argues that it is crucial for ethnographers to study the present deterritorialised world through social imagination. His argument is that ethnographers can no longer be content with studying merely local happenings and how

people make meaning of these events, because people are more and more influenced by global events and by the events mass media suggest are available (Appadurai 1996, 55). This is an appropriate approach when exploring the view of ‘the Muslim’ among Assyrian Christians in Sweden, who are influenced not only by events taking place near their community in Gothenburg, Sweden, but also by what happens in their diasporic community in faraway places, as well as by the global phenomenon of Islamophobia.

This study will take into account the disembedding of community relations and collective memory. Disembedding, which is connected to modernity, is the ‘lifting-out’ of a phenomenon from a local context to an abstract context (Hylland Eriksen 2014, 19). This relates to the study’s exploration of how Assyrian Christian migrants still accommodate a solidarity with their diasporic community and the Assyrian Christians residing in their ancestral homeland of Assyria. It also relates to how the Syriac Orthodox identity is connected to shared collective memories. Because of tense interreligious relations between Assyrian Christians and Muslims in the old homelands of the interlocutors, the imagined social life of the diaspora may impact how the Assyrian Christians relate to Muslims in Gothenburg, Sweden. Thus, the study is also tied to the concept of re-embedding – the act of re-creating important social ties and affiliations in one’s local community (Hylland Eriksen 2014, 154).

Another important aspect of this study is that it places emphasis on religion, more specifically Christianity, which goes beyond nation-state borders. According to Levitt (2003, 848-849, 869), religious communities can be simultaneously disembedded (by drawing on a global, universal belonging) and re-embedded (by re-centering the community in religious practices and rituals).

Background and Previous Research

In this section, I will present a short historical overview of the Assyrians/Syriacs and discuss previous research on the Syriac Orthodox community in Sweden. Lastly, I will briefly account for the Islamic State’s rampaging in Syria and Iraq and the escalating conflict in Turkey.

The Assyrians/Syriacs

The Assyrians/Syriacs originate from the Assyrian Empire, which was the greatest of all the empires in Mesopotamia. Assyria embraced parts of present day Turkey and the whole of Syria and Iraq, among other present day nation states, and its capital was the city of Nineveh (Mark 2014). The interlocutors in this study are first generation migrants from Iraq, Syria and Turkey and some of them claim that their homeland is in fact Assyria. The Assyrians/Syriacs were one of the first people

to convert to Christianity and designate themselves as Syriac Orthodox Christians (SOR 2002; SOR 2004). In the wake of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE, the Assyrian/Syriac Christians formed a community of their own which is now dispersed across the globe due to continued persecution and genocide (Romeny 2005).

In the beginning of the 20th century, most Syriac Orthodox lived under oppression in Tur Abdin in eastern Turkey, but would soon be dispersed from that land in the year of the sword, Seyfo. Seyfo is in Syriac the term for the genocide of 1915 by the Muslim Ottoman Turks and the Muslim Kurds (Lundgren 2014). The name Seyfo came to represent the Sword of Islam (Kino and Beth Turo 2011). In addition to Assyrians/Syriacs, the genocide was also perpetrated against Christian Armenians and Christian Greeks in order to ethnically and religiously cleanse the nation, the motto of the Ottoman Turks being “One Nation, One Religion” (Seyfo Center 2014).

The Syriac Diaspora in Sweden

Sweden holds approximately 60 000 Assyrians/Syriacs. The immigration began in the late 1960's and intensified during the coming years due to persecution in Turkey and Lebanon, as well as Iraq, Syria and Iran. Swedish authorities refer to the group as a stateless Christian minority group (Assyriska Distriktet Göteborg 2009).

The sociologist Önver Cetrez studies primarily the Assyrian/Syriac community's acculturation in the Swedish society. He has noted a recent change towards a more conservative religiosity in the community (Cetrez 2010), but, paradoxically, also a decline in religiosity among community members. He concludes that Assyrians/Syriacs feel a strong affiliation to their own community, but that the youths' religious practices in Syriac Orthodox churches seem to decrease (Cetrez 2005). First generation migrants continue to have a strong affiliation with the church throughout their life (Cetrez 2011).

Mutlu-Numasen and Ossewaarde (2015) have studied the narrations of Arameans, Chaldeans and Assyrians/Syriacs about their female relatives who were subjected to sexual violence, abduction, bodily mutilations and forced marriage in relation to the genocide Seyfo in 1915. Those stories affect the interlocutors' identities in present day Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands. The narratives of genocide are interpreted in a religious manner by the relatives of the victims, who frame their ancestors as heroines and martyrs. The horrendous stories are used to remind the whole community of their history and what values they should defend in the Western society, as well as what they

should repel – namely Islam (Mutlu-Numasen and Ossewaarde 2015, 430, 440). The authors of the article accentuate the Islamophobic beliefs that underpin these narratives. Correspondingly, the thesis at hand will pay attention to how narratives of the past, as well as collective memories of violence affect the view of Muslims and Islam today, but it will also connect this with Islamophobic currents in Europe, individual social relations and belief in Christian virtues. This is a holistic endeavour that has been absent in the study of the Assyrian/Syriac community in Sweden.

Thus far, the Syriac Orthodox community has been referred to as Assyrians/Syriacs due to the naming controversy¹. This study will onwards refer to the interlocutors as Assyrian Christians. According to the priest of the congregation, the naming controversy does not play a big part in the congregational life. This does not mean that all the congregational members in this study consider themselves Assyrian.

The Turmoil in Turkey, the Islamic State's Caliphate and the Contemporary Migration to Europe

At the time of writing this thesis, the cease-fire between the Turkish government and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has ceased to be. Several cities are subjected to what could be described as collective punishments, such as the withholding of water and food for over 200 000 people, in combination with curfews (Andersson 2016). The conflict in Turkey is affecting the relations between Kurds and Turks in Sweden (Rydhagen 2016), and the conflict may also affect the Assyrian Christians in this study who originates from Turkey. Presumably, the interlocutors who originate from Syria and Iraq may also be heavily influenced by what takes place in their old homelands.

The civil war in Syria started as a movement for democracy and human rights and against the Assad-regime in the beginning of 2011. It has yet no end in sight (Adams 2012). In its wake, the Islamic State conquered vast territories in their attempt to establish a nation state ruled by Sharia Law. The group claims to be a caliphate and with its cruel executions and violent ideology, it has struck terror in the hearts of many people. Because of the poor treatment of Sunni Muslims by the Shia government in Iraq, the Islamic State has since 2003 also gained influence in parts of Iraq (Globalis 2016). Christians in both Iraq and Syria thus face persecution by the Islamic State. Assyrian Christians have been forced to pay taxes to the Islamic State or forced to convert to Islam. Some

¹ The naming controversy among Assyrians/Syriacs concerns the identification with the Arameans and the Christian faith (Syriacs), or the identification with the Assyrians from ancient Assyria and a resistance to merge religion and politics/nationality (Assyrians). In Sweden, the official term is 'Assyrier/Syrianer' (Assyriska Distriktet Göteborg 2009).

have been evicted from their ancestral homeland of Assyria, and many of their churches have been burnt down (Shaheen 2015; Zaimov 2014).

Clearly, the raging war has forced millions of people to flee, Muslims and Christians alike (Forsberg 2016). Many of these refugees have turned to Europe for asylum and the European debate about migration has been heated during the last couple of years. In the Swedish context, the closing of the nation-state's borders has been proposed and to a certain extent, implemented (BBC 2016; Regeringskansliet 2015). Together with the debate about migration, concern has been voiced about recruits of the Islamic State coming into Europe in order to execute terrorist attacks by pretending to be refugees. This line of thought is especially common in radical right wing movements (see for example Avpixlat 2016; Fria Tider 2015).

Theoretical Framework

I will use several concepts and disciplines in order to frame how 'the Muslim' is constructed among Assyrian Christians in a Syriac Orthodox Church in Gothenburg. In this section, I will define and problematize concepts, and present how they will be used throughout the thesis. I will start by defining diaspora and then critically discuss collective memory, followed by a discussion on what role religion will play in this thesis. Thereafter I discuss the contact hypothesis (with its roots in sociology and psychology), and complement it with a discussion on reconciliation in order to accentuate the complexity of inter-group relations. Lastly, previous research concerning the different manifestations of the anti-Muslim currents in Europe will be presented together with a definition of Islamophobia.

The Diasporic Field

The term 'diaspora' is used to define a national or ethnic population that is scattered from their homeland and now resides in several different locales across the globe or in the immediate region. What is perhaps most vital in the definition of a diaspora is that the scattered group accommodates a continued solidarity with the own community and a shared nostalgia and home orientation to their common place of origin. The definition of diaspora has been widely debated among scholars for the last decades.

A diaspora refers to a community which has been dispersed from an original 'centre' and who preserves a collective vision, or myth about that centre. Furthermore, William Safran notes in his classical definition (1991) that diasporic communities are also committed to returning to the very centre that they, or their ancestors, originate from. The Jews are often seen as an 'ideal type' of a

diasporic community. But Safran also mentions the Greeks and the Armenians as examples of diasporas (Safran 1991, 83-84). Due to the Ottoman Empire's oppression and genocide of Christian Greeks, Armenians and Assyrians alike, the Assyrian Christians who are the subjects of this thesis have a historical connection with the Greeks and the Armenians (Jones 2011). Since the Assyrian Christians are to a large extent dispersed, I would argue that the Assyrian Christians could be defined as a diaspora.

Some scholars have countered Safran's rigid criteria for a diaspora by extending its definition so that it includes several different kinds of communities. In contrast to this, Brubaker argues (2005) that the concept has been stretched to the point that it itself has become dispersed and of little use as an analytical tool. He offers three core-criteria, namely dispersion, home orientation, and boundary maintenance (Brubaker 2005, 4-6). In this thesis the Assyrian Christians will be treated as a community that does embody these criteria. Community boundaries will be further discussed in the section Community Relations and Reconciliation, while the criterion of home orientation will be discussed below.

A homeland orientation and a myth of return among migrants are not the same thing as actual plans of return. The dispersed Assyrian Christians have to a certain extent maintained a narrative of the ancient homeland Assyria (Mark 2014), as well as to their places of origin such as Iraq, Syria and Turkey. Violent and forceful loss of home can play an important part for the reluctance of actually returning (Wahlbeck 2002, 233). This reluctance also has a vital temporal dimension; a migrant's place of origin is not merely lost geographically but also lost in time (Jansen and Löfving 2007, 9-10). But the nostalgic 'myth of home' lingers and it solidifies identity and solidarity with the diaspora (Safran 1991, 84, 91).

Pnina Werbner (2002, 121) has stressed that diaspora is a historical location as well as an abstract location in peoples' minds, and that diasporic communities need to be understood as communities with a common identity through a collective past and future. The community "fills their hearts and minds" (Werbner 2002, 125) and when the local community that resides in the homeland suffers, the diaspora is hurt as well. Violence and war that have involved parts or the whole of the diasporic community can persist as violent memories when those who endured violence are long gone. The memories can still inflict pain upon those in the diaspora who are still alive (Jansen and Löfving 2007, 6). The Assyrian Christians in this study may suffer together with the Assyrian Christians who

reside in the homelands, and this suffering might influence how the interlocutors in this study speak about Muslims, both when referring to present day events, but also historical ones.

Collective Memory

The study of migration has been increasingly attentive to the role that memories play in life stories and narratives of migrants. The diasporic experience and identity are heavily influenced by memories of those left behind, the homeland and sometimes, violence (Chamberlain and Leydesdorf 2004, 227-228). Often these memories are not merely individual ones. Memories can also be social memories, or collective memories, accommodated by whole communities.

There is a distinction between individual and collective memories though researchers argue that this distinction is blurred. Nevertheless, it can be said that individual memories are recollections of individual experiences, while collective memories are shared by several people and integrate information and facts that goes beyond the individual's experience. One thereby internalises the external life world (Gavriely-Nuri 2014, 46-49; Tonkin 1992). Collective memories help individuals and groups to make sense of the world and can also promote certain behaviour, common identities and shared goals. Collective memories are not static and always coherent in their repertoire, but context-driven (Gavriely-Nuri 2014).

When researching collective memory, it is the interlocutors' narratives of these collective memories that are researched. These narratives are translations of the collective memories and may also transform the memories to a certain extent, depending on what context the interlocutor and the researcher are situated in, or, as Elizabeth Tonkin (1992) suggests, what genre that the narrative is presented through. Rhetorical devices and narratives are important when making meaning of one's place in the world, because common history and collective memories can be used to invoke identity and agency (Åkesson 2016, 60). Thus memory is an important resource, for example for minorities such as various diasporas (Jasiewicz 2015, 1576).

Researchers emphasise that the re-assertion of community is done in the present, but with the help of the past where past traumas are transferred through generations and seem to leave traces on community members in the present (Cohen 1985, 99; Lederach and Lederach 2010, 2). In turn, this also means that the recollections of the past impacts the view of identity and of relations to other communities (Connerton 1989). In this study, I will explore how narratives about collective

memories are told by the Syriac Orthodox congregation and how the memories are used when they depict their view of Muslims.

Researching Religion and Diasporas

The field research in this study took place in the Syriac Orthodox Church. The study is therefore closely tied to religion and diaspora. In this study, I do not focus on religion as an individual experience, but instead I highlight religion as a collective function, partly as to what religion represents when it comes to diaspora, but also when it comes to reactions and attitudes to other communities (Bowie 2000, 17; Grenholm 2006, 118).

The study also explores context and rituals within the Syriac Orthodox congregation, and focuses on the function of religious rituals and traditions. In anthropology, it is common to view rituals as ‘vehicles’ of meaning making and they are often seen as the interlocutors’ ways of expressing identity and respond to what happens in the world around them (Bradley 2009, 265). It is vital for the study to pay attention to what context rituals provide in relation to present day conflicts, social relations to Muslims, diaspora and collective memories.

Peggy Levitt discusses how religion can serve as a chain of memory, linking people together across both time and space (Levitt 2008, 768). Religion may act as an important tool to reassure ethnic and diasporic identity, which means that it can include particularistic elements and thus maintain boundaries (Levitt 2008, 785). Furthermore, Levitt underlines that religion can also be a universalist stance in that religious people can see themselves as global citizens. Religious leaders such as pastors can see it as their duty to inform their congregation to show empathy beyond their own community. She criticises what she identifies as a resistance in academia towards viewing religion as a facilitator for humanist stances. She argues that we need to take into account the complex dual power that religion possesses – a devastating and dividing source of conflict, but also a catalyst for change and reconciliation between communities (Levitt 2008).

Community Relations and Reconciliation

A community is always relational to *another* community. Members of an ethnic, religious, or a diasporic community have something in common, and that something has to distinguish them from other groups. A community is enclosed by boundaries. The boundaries that encapsulates the community’s identity from another community can be varied, and can be seen, according to Anthony Cohen, as symbolic in nature. Symbolic boundaries between communities are not static, and a

community's vitality lies in the meaning given to the boundaries by community members (Cohen 1985, 12, 109). How these boundaries are presented, transformed and accentuated is necessary to investigate when researching the view of 'the Muslim' among Assyrian Christians.

Boundaries can, and do, transform due to context and through the course of time. But change can be depicted by the community as a threat to its cohesion, consequently, integration with other communities is sometimes perceived as a risk (Brubaker 2005, 4-6; Cohen 1985, 51). For example, Marita Eastmond (1998) shows in her study of Bosnian Muslims in Sweden that trespassing boundaries by for example marrying a Serb or a Croat is shunned. The Bosnian Muslims tell of abstaining from engaging inter-ethnically as much as possible when they share common spaces, such as workplaces and classrooms. The Bosnian Muslims were clearly maintaining a distance to Serbs and Croats in Sweden, because of the war in former Yugoslavia. Eastmond explains that the prejudice among her interlocutors was due to diasporic boundary maintenance that draws on events and discourses that stem from another context than the Swedish one.

In accordance with Eastmond, this thesis will explore to what extent boundaries between Christians and Muslims are maintained due to events and attitudes from the interlocutors' homelands. In Eastmond's study, she highlights the Bosnian Muslims' strong accentuation of their identity as Muslims, especially in contrast to Christian Croats and Serbs, thereby creating a dichotomy between their own Muslim 'in-group' and the Christian 'out-group'.

Dichotomisation and prejudice can expand chasms between communities. Ulrich Beck (2014, 140) points out that there is a certain logic in depicting one's own community as a polar opposite to a feared community when suspecting that there is a potential risk in interaction. Polarisation and fear of interaction are two dimensions that will be explored in this study concerning Assyrian Christians and their view of Muslims. But although prejudice exists, there is also a possibility of blurred boundaries, or even boundary-erosion, between Assyrian Christians and Muslims in Sweden, and that is the concept that will be explored in the section below.

The Contact Hypothesis

If a member of a community has contact with a member of another community, the prejudice towards the other's whole community decreases, this is the idea of the contact hypothesis. According to a research review by Pettigrew (2008) it is a general finding in sociology and psychology that intergroup contact, or even mere exposure, improves intergroup attitudes. Although, how

'favourable' the conditions are in that contact is fundamental in how communities perceive each other. If the individual contact is negative, then prejudice between groups may even intensify (Amir 1969, 319).

A decrease in prejudice towards 'the Other' can also occur through indirect contact. That is to say, one's prejudice could be diminished by simply having an 'in-group' friend who has an 'out-group' friend (Pettigrew 2008, 189). Meaningful friendships are of great importance in order to decrease intergroup tensions (Pratsinakis et al 2015, 1), but the contact hypothesis has also had its fair share of critique.

In a world with perfect preconditions, individual contact between communities may be enough to erase borders, but the contact hypothesis is, as some scholars note, "...far less convincing, however, as a depiction of the actual nature of ethnic and racial contact [...]" (Dixon; Durrheim and Tredoux 2005, 709). Mere individual contact between groups who have been enfolded in intractable conflict is seen as naively insufficient (Brewer 1996, 301). In an anthropological study such as this thesis, the contact hypothesis will not be tested, but it will be used in order to discuss Assyrian Christians attitudes towards Muslims in the light of the social relations they have with individual Muslims in Sweden.

Reconciliation and Social Healing

Social healing takes time, sometimes it takes generations. In the wake of intractable conflict, people often live in a collective memory infiltrated by violence. To achieve reconciliation, one has to recognize that conflict remains, and that dialogue needs to be permanent. John Paul Lederach suggests that communities that have experienced war and violence need to be able to imagine themselves in relationships that include 'the Other,' and to be able to move away from polarisations, while accepting the risk that comes with interacting with members of 'the enemy' (Lederach 2005, 5, 49, 54, 63). It can be argued that healing is a circular motion, not a linear one. Past events, the present and the anticipation of future events is intermingled and reality is lived in all of these three temporal dimensions at once (Lederach and Lederach 2010, 3-5, 9).

Sometimes there are memories (individual or collective) of past events that are violent and which hurt the people who accommodate them. It is also hurtful to be aware of the violence that takes place in the present between one's 'in-group' and 'the Other' in faraway places (Lederach 2005, 136; Lederach and Lederach 2010, 11). Following the continuation of violence, communities often hold a

strong pessimism towards those that are feared, and when living in collective memory and in felt potential risk of repetition, trust does not come easily (Lederach 2005, 149).

Defining Islamophobia and Tracing the Anti-Muslim Rhetoric in Europe

Islamophobia is a global discourse and is enacted locally in different ways. The term was used for the first time in the Runnymede Trust Report of 1997 (Dunn 2001). Since then, the term and its definition have been thoroughly discussed and contested among scholars. This study will adhere to the following definition made by Erik Bleich: “Islamophobia is the indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims” (Bleich 2011, 1585). Islamophobia is, like many other prejudices towards other groups, based on indiscriminate negative stereotypes that, for example, view *all* Muslims as being anti democracy, even though there are numerous Muslims who are in favour of democracy (Borell 2012, 16).

What consequence does Islamophobia have? How does the discourse perform in local settings? This matter has been widely researched in Europe in a number of ways. One finding is that Islamophobia seems to be event-driven, that is to say, Islamophobic attitudes increase in the aftermath of for example Islamic terrorism, but subsides again after a time (Borell 2015). Brian Klug for example discusses how the resulting attitudes can be seen every day in mass media where ‘the Muslim’ has become a stereotyped fantasy figure (Klug 2012, 678), who, through repetition, has been widely accepted as natural (Dunn 2001, 292). It has for example resulted in local oppositions against mosques in many European cities (for an overview, see Cesari 2005), where the mosque is often depicted as a ‘seed of radicalisation and Sharia law’. Among oppositional movements, the mosque is viewed as a representation of all that is ‘wrong’ with Islam and its adherents (Beck 2002; Betz and Meret 2009; Dunn 2001; Falk and Jakobsson 2014; Landman and Wessels 2005).

The view of ‘the Muslim’ that is present in the Islamophobic discourse, can be explained through a social and racist imaginary of “the Grand Inquisitor”. According to Pnina Werbner, “the Grand Inquisitor” is a new racist folk devil. She argues that the Jew has for centuries been depicted as “the Witch,” while black people have been, and are, seen as “the slave”. What the “Grand Inquisitor” entail is the Muslim as a conqueror who does not ask for permission or forgiveness for his demands and he is openly aggressive. He is the atavistic arch enemy of Western rational thought. The West is depicted as ‘weak’ since political leaders do not hinder the Muslims from ‘taking over’ (Fekete 2012; Werbner 2013, 457-458). Muslims are seen as terrorists and as enemies of democracy which enhances their ‘incompatibility’ with the Western world. Thus, Islamophobic attitudes are often joined

by a conviction of oneself and one's own community as defenders of 'Western thought' such as fundamental human rights, including gender equality (Betz and Meret 2009; Fekete 2012; Meer and Noorani 2008; Zúquete 2008).

The issue of Islamophobia will be explored in the context of the Syriac Orthodox Church in Gothenburg. I argue that there is a possibility of Islamophobic tendencies due to generalisations of Muslims in mass media and the growth of radical xenophobic parties in Sweden and Europe. Attitudes and views towards Muslims and Islam may not only be influenced by diasporic memories and social relations, but also by the present day Islamophobic discourse in the Swedish context.

Methodology

The Syriac Orthodox Church is an ethnic church with roots in present day Turkey, Syria and Iraq, namely, the ancestral homeland of the Assyrians (Cetrez 2011, 475-476). I was interested in how this migrant group in Gothenburg was influenced by the conflicts that afflicted parts of their community and how it influenced their view of, and relation to, Muslims in Gothenburg, Sweden. The particular church that I chose to contact will remain anonymous for the security of the congregational members' sake. The priest of the congregation (whom I will from now on call Father Ishaia) agreed to my field research being conducted during one month in 2016. What this field work actually entailed will be described further on.

The Syriac Orthodox congregation consisted of approximately 450 families, including 1700 individuals, according to Father Ishaia. He estimated that 80% of them come from Turkey, 10% from Syria, and 10% from Iraq. On a normal Sunday, the Church was crowded with over 700 people. Weekday activities were attended by 30-50 people, including Father Ishaia and a few staff members. In ethnography, it is essential to build trust with the people in the field. The people whom I continuously spent my days with were the people that formally could be called the sample, or the focus group of the study (Bryman 2012, 201-202).

The focus group consists mainly of women, simply because those who attended the daily activities were mostly women. In addition, members of the congregation often split into groups of male and female (and I identify as a female), which meant I spent most of the time together with the women. The focus group are all first generation migrants from either Turkey or Syria and are active members of the Syriac Orthodox congregation. First and foremost, my focus on first generation migrants was due to (in accordance with Cetrez studies 2005; 2011) the low church attendance by the

Assyrian/Syriac youth It was also due to the first generation's first-hand experience of growing up as a Christian minority in Syria, Iraq or Turkey.

The 11 interlocutors who originated from Turkey (2 middle aged men, 3 middle-aged women, 3 elderly women and 3 young women) were between 35-80 years old, and their places of origin are in Tur Abdin and Midyat in Turkey. The elderly women were illiterate since it was neither very common, nor legal for them to attend school in Turkey as a girl and as a Christian. The middle-aged interlocutors all had a low to middle socioeconomic status in Sweden, the women mainly worked as assistant nurses, and the men worked as janitors, while some of them were unemployed, and some of them had formerly been running their own small scale businesses. The three elderly interlocutors had retired and had never been employed in Sweden. The interlocutors from Syria were first generation migrants as well and had arrived in Sweden since the 1970's up until recently. The 10 interlocutors from Syria (1 middle aged man, 1 middle aged woman, 1 elderly woman and 7 young women), were between 12 and 50 years. They were students, assistant nurses or janitors.

Messy Methods: An Anthropologic Standpoint

One of ethnography's greatest advantages is to open up for the messiness and the complexity of social reality. This makes ethnographic methods suitable for this thesis which primarily concerns identity, attitudes and both positive and negative views towards Muslims among Assyrian Christians (Blommaert and Jie 2010, 11). The exploration of how the view of 'the Muslim' is constructed should not reduce or simplify complexity, on the contrary, overlapping views needs to be allowed and brought to the surface in order to do justice to the interlocutors' attitudes.

The study is inductive to its core, the material almost fully guided the research and thus me as a researcher. By being inductive, the study tries to catch many angles of the interlocutors' views of Muslims. Hence, it does not pick and choose between negative and positive opinions about Muslims. This is vital, since I through this thesis will argue that seemingly contradictory views can be accommodated simultaneously. The 'messy methods' that I speak of are participant observation and open-ended interviews.

Participant Observation

Ethnographic field research typically involves entering a social setting that is unfamiliar to the researcher. By participating in activities and getting to know the people in that social setting, the researcher can study how the daily life is lived in a particular group. While doing this, the researcher

takes notes of what is seen, heard and experienced (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 2011). The activities in the Syriac Orthodox congregation that I participated in included activities for the elderly on Tuesdays and Thursdays, such as physiotherapy, a game of Bingo and the daily worship held by Father Ishaia. Other activities I attended were Sunday mass at eight am which was followed by the congregation sitting together having coffee and sandwiches. I also attended the Sunday mass for young adults at one pm. I sometimes visited the congregation on other days of the week and though there was no specific activity, there were always people present whom I could interact with. In addition, I attended one lecture in the congregation concerning the persecution of Christians in the world.

What this methodology tries to achieve is to ‘get close’ to one’s interlocutors. This does not merely encompass being accepted and trusted in the group, which surely is important and pleasant enough, but it also has a purpose as a data collection strategy, namely, immersion. This includes exploring how people in the group talk about and react upon what happens in their daily lives, but also how one as an ethnographer reacts to those same situations (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 2011). Immersion is also a crucial component to contextualise the data itself. By being ‘inside’ a situation, one can avoid ‘uprooted’ quotations from interlocutors that may have been misinterpreted if one was not familiar with the context in which it was expressed (Blommaert and Jie 2010, 5, 9-10). Admittedly, full-scale ethnography (ranging from one to three years, or more) is even better suited for evading these kinds of misinterpretations. My “micro-ethnography” (Bryman 2012, 433) lasted for one month, but was appropriate for the scope of this master thesis which is strictly delimited to a specific topic.

When it comes to observation at the Syriac Orthodox Church, I followed Kylén’s example (2004, 98-99). I observed everything from the appearance of the chapel and the common room – the photographs, the paintings, the furnishings, the smells and the sounds – to the people in it – how many they were, what they talked about, whom they spoke to, where they sat, what they did and the way they did it. I wrote field notes during the activities in the church, but since these tended to be more of ‘jottings’ than notes, I extended upon them later the same day when ‘leaving the field’ and sitting down by my writing desk (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 2011, 5, 29-41, 48). Yet merely observing would not allow me to ‘get close’. Therefore, I participated in the activities with the congregational members and staff, such as helping out in the kitchen, participating in physiotherapy and the daily worships, as well as participating in meals.

Field notes are not objective descriptions, and it is important to note that I decided on what to actually write down when I was 'in the field'. Even though I tried to write down as much as possible, it was impossible to stay alert to everything that happened. Accordingly, I had to decide on what I was searching for while in the field. As accurately as possible, I wrote down descriptions of places and people, as well as re-constructions of dialogues that I was, or was not, a part of. In describing what I observed, I looked for context that could help me understand the view of 'the Muslim,' and in taking part, or listening to conversations, I wanted to reveal the complexity of my interlocutors' understandings of Islam and Muslims (Lederach 2005, 71).

Semi-structured Interviews

The total number of people interviewed in this study are 21. The interviews ranged from one to two hours and six of them were recorded (and later transcribed), while I took notes during the others. I would categorise both of these interview styles as semi-structured, since I always brought my interview guide with me and would either put it on the table before me, or keep it in my mind during an interview with one, or several, interlocutors. The interview guide is enclosed in Appendix 1.

During my fieldwork, I regularly engaged in conversations with people of the congregation, but I do not categorise all conversation as interviews. Conversations that lasted longer than one hour and where I kept my interview guide in mind, however, are in this study recognised as informal interviews. Some of these informal interviews were held with one interlocutor, whereas others were held with two interlocutors at once, depending on the situation.

One of the planned interviews was a group discussion. The interviewees were four elderly women and since none of them spoke Swedish fluently, and since I cannot speak Syriac, I needed the help of one staff member who could translate the interview back and forth. In order not to demand too much of the translator's time, I decided to carry out the interview with the four elderly women at the same time. The group discussion worked out well and the dynamic spurred questions that would not have arisen otherwise. But each interlocutor did not have much time to speak before being interrupted by another one.

Another problem with the group discussion was the language barrier previously mentioned. In the group discussion, the answers were translated to me which can prove to be a hindrance to a full understanding on my part since the translator may or may not translate exactly what the interlocutor said. Similarly, in other interviews and daily conversations the language barrier would sometimes

prove difficult to get past. Some of my interlocutors were not fluent in Swedish, and had to ask each other for help in order to move forward in a conversation, and some were clearly uncomfortable with having to be interviewed in Swedish, while others spoke the language fluently. Yet others did not speak Swedish at all, especially those who arrived in Sweden recently, as well as elderly people who had never gotten enough practice in the Swedish language.

Process of Analysis

Moving onto the process of analysis, there is one vital point that must first be addressed. In ethnographic research, the process of analysis is not detached from the process of fieldwork. The ethnographic fieldworker is not an empty vial that, as the days go past, fills up with information to the brim and when the field work has come to its end, spills all that objective information onto the table and starts analysing it. Rather, the analysis starts the first day one enters the field. Yet ethnography is still an inductive method as the analysis departs from the material, not the other way around. But I would argue that when taking field notes one is already interpreting and deciding on what is relevant, and thus these notes are already part of the analysis (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 2011, 20).

Nevertheless, after I had finished my field work, I re-read my extended field notes and my transcribed interviews. When re-reading the data, I also colour-coded the text into different categories. I could divide the large amount of data into four major categories, which also became my four research questions: Diasporic Sentiments and the Endurance of History, Present Day Conflicts and the Anti-Muslim Discourse in Europe, F(r)riendship and Turn the Other Cheek, But Do Not Forget. In order to structure the data further, I split the result into several subheadings in each major category. The categories were explored in relation to different theoretical concepts, depending on what theoretical concept that would enhance the analysis and the understanding of the categorised material.

When transforming ethnographic material into an analytical text I did not write it in a chronological manner, but in an interpretive manner. That means that the material guided the analysis and thus one single interview or one single day can be re-occurring in several different analysis segments (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 2011, 171ff). For example, the narratives about 'the Muslim' of one interlocutor could point to two completely different examples of how 'the Muslim' behaves and acts, which I then divided into different categories.

Ethical Considerations and the Role of the Researcher

The chosen topic ‘the view of ‘the Muslim’ among first generation Assyrian Christians’ is in itself one of the more prominent ethical dilemmas in the thesis. I was aware of the possibly sensitive character of the topic, and how it could complicate honesty among my interlocutors because of their fear of being depicted as Islamophobic. At the same time, if I was not transparent with my research aim, a heap of ethical dilemmas would pile up before me, such as a lack of informed consent, transparency and deception (Bryman 2012, 135). This made me determined of being transparent with the aim of my research. Moreover, the sensitive chosen topic could not only affect the interlocutors, but it could also affect the interreligious relations between immigrant Christians and immigrant Muslims in Sweden generally if the data was not presented by me in an attentive manner.

While I tried to create a space for my interlocutors to elaborate and steer the data collection, our encounter was never truly equal or a mere conversation, because I had already decided on the frames of our subject and I interpreted the knowledge that was shared. Accordingly, I refer to the conversations that turned out to be longer than one hour as ‘informal interviews’ instead of describing them as conversations. Categorising the informal interviews as conversations would be misleading since I as a researcher did have a purpose for my conversation with that particular interlocutor and that purpose continuously intercepted any chance of an ‘equal dialogue’ (Kvale 2006, 482-485).

Even though the interlocutors were always informed at the beginning of an interview (or informed afterwards in the cases of the interviews that were not planned beforehand) – of their rights as participants, their anonymity and their right to withdraw from the study at any given time – there always existed a power dynamic between me and my interlocutors. This may have affected the research in such a way that the interlocutors may have decided to recount their experiences to me in certain ways. But narratives are always context-driven, and the narratives of this study should be seen for what they are – a representation of reality developed in a certain context between certain individuals (Eastmond 2007, 251, 260-261).

There was no possible way of seeing the field from an objective perspective since social reality is always blurred by our previous experiences and privileges (Denscombe 2009, 99-100). Self-reflexivity was key in this thesis, however, and I actively challenged and questioned myself and my motives. I tried to be aware of my position and how it influenced my interpretations of what I experienced. My immersion as an ethnographer in my research field was not an attempt to become my interlocutors,

but to get close to them and their experience. Yet, though much time was spent on my part on self-reflexivity I had to be aware of the impossible task of interpreting and presenting the view of ‘the Muslim’ among the members of the Syriac Orthodox congregation in a perfectly accurate manner (Rose 1988, 317, 319). In this thesis, I am translator of what was said and not the primary source (Bowie 2000, 11).

Throughout the research, I was observant to the way I was executing my methods and how I analysed my findings. For example, I changed all of the names of the people in this study in order to promote their anonymity. Nonetheless, as Rose (1988, 317, 319) poignantly underlines, we cannot possibly know entirely how our research is going to affect our own as well as our informants’ lives. We must allow our own humanity in our work. Note that this does not renounce the accountability we have for our research and its effects; on the contrary, it is exactly the responsibility for our own faults that we need to embrace. In accepting our humanity, we also accept the complexity of reality where we do not control or know the outcome; we allow messiness in our methods.

Delimitations

I recognise that the view of ‘the Muslim’ among Assyrian Christians is more complex and multi-layered than is presented in this thesis. But again, due to practicalities, as well as in favour for structure, I delimited my study to include only four dimensions of the view of ‘the Muslim’. Moreover, I decided not to research the view of ‘the Muslim woman’ in depth, but the study focuses on ‘the Muslim’ as a masculine figure. This is because the interlocutors in this study were referring to ‘the Muslim’ as a man. When ‘the Muslim woman’ was discussed, she was first and foremost seen as a subordinate counterpart of ‘the Muslim man’ who controlled her. He was viewed as the subject, while she was the object. The view of ‘the oppressed Muslim woman’ would be interesting to further investigate in future research. This thesis, however, focuses mainly on ‘the Muslim’ as a male.

Another delimitation of this study is that I decided not to conduct field research in an Assyrian Christian congregation as well as in a Muslim congregation in Gothenburg. It would be interesting to understand how the view of “the Muslim” might also converge, and/or diverge with the view of ‘the Christian’. This ambition turned out to be improbable due to the time restriction of a Master thesis. The result of such a thesis that explores two groups as if they were polar opposites might also only have consolidated a dichotomy, and could turn out to be unethical.

Validity and Reliability

The ethnographic account is not an objective description of what has taken place, rather, it is a reconstruction of what has happened (Denscombe 2009, 92). The researcher cannot write down exactly how things are. Ethnographers construct a story of what they experience, which is coloured by subjectivities and the researcher's own rhetoric. The ethnographer 'inscribes meaning' into happenings, and though this may interfere with a desired objectivity, I would argue that the study of human meaning making in all its complexities can be done in no other way (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 2011, 12).

There is a risk to ethnography that entails its external validity. It means that there is a possibility that the researcher's lack of perfect objectivity makes it very difficult to generalise the material that is gathered and analysed. The researcher's continued presence in the research field is also an interruption in the interlocutors' daily lives and may cause interlocutors to behave in ways they otherwise would not. Therefore, it is not possible to repeat the same method and data collection again by another researcher or at a different time because ethnography is bound by a specific researcher's subjectivities and by specific interactive situations that arise in the field (Denscombe 2009, 106-107, 379). This is also true when recognising the situational nature of my interlocutors' narratives of their own memories. Representations of memories in narratives are dependent on social identities and the genre that the narratives are produced through. The interlocutor is thus capable of selecting a theme when re-telling memories (or selecting certain parts of memories). This choice may be a product of the occasion and/or the relationship between interlocutor and me (Åkesson 2016, 61; Chamberlain and Leydesdorf 2004, 237, Tonkin 1992).

The validity of this study is although strengthened by the fact that much time has been spent in a specific field, which gives it a more solid ground for conclusions and a deeper understanding of the context that surrounds the interlocutors (Bryman 2009, 380). When it comes to the study's ability to generalise its findings to other populations or situations, there are a few problems that emerge. First of all, I could not gain access to all of the Syriac Orthodox Church's 1700 congregational members, and my focus group of 21 people is a small sample. But by presenting information about the focus group, such as age, socioeconomic status and life stories, the reader of the thesis can determine how comparable the findings might be in similar circumstances (Bryman 2009, 383). An ethnographer can also provide rich and detailed information on how a certain situation is played out and this increases the study's reliability.

In this study, I did not conduct multi-sited research (suggested by Marcus 1998), but the study was situated in one church, which means that the findings in this study are comparable to one site only. This means that potentially, the view of the Muslim in the interlocutors' own homes or in other places could either be different from the one presented in this study. This study does not analyse how the view of 'the Muslim' changes and travels in different environments, but focuses on one site only, where 'the Muslim' might be depicted in a particular way.

Results and Analysis

The section named Diasporic Sentiments and the Endurance of History will adhere to the Syriac Orthodox congregation as a diasporic community and some of the interlocutors will be presented together with a few of the congregation's daily activities. The section Present Day Conflicts and Anti-Muslim Discourses will follow. Subsequently, the focus will be placed on reconciliation and the individual relationships that the members of the Syriac congregation have with Muslims. Lastly, their Christian faith will highlight how they see themselves in relation to Muslims and Islam and how their narrative of 'the Muslim' is influenced by Christian virtues.

Diasporic Sentiments and the Endurance of History

In a light breeze, the topmost branches of birches move. I am heading up a hill towards a Syriac Orthodox Church on a cloudy day in February. It is the first day of my ethnographic research. Inside, nine elderly women and one elderly man form a circle in the chapel. Two younger women approach me in a perplexed manner. They have not been told that I would arrive, but one of them, Nisha, invites me to take a seat in the circle. "We just started with physiotherapy every Tuesday and Thursday. They have some problems with keeping the concentration during the exercises though," Nisha tells me and together we lift our arms and stomp our legs in unison. The elderly women laugh at each other and pull up their skirts a bit. One of them readjusts her head scarf. After the exercise and some relaxation, interrupted by a few giggles, the elderly take their leave to the common room next door. One elderly woman who have dyed her hair in a light red colour breaks free from the others and crosses the room in order to kiss the mural of Holy Mary.

More of the elderly have gathered in the common room by now. The men are seated dispersed around the room, while the women are closely knitted together on a long bench, jabbering away in Syriac, the language spoken by Assyrians. "It's a good thing that you're here, you can help them decipher the Bingo charts," says Nisha. As I run from person to person, pointing out the numbers

that Nisha calls out, I notice the photographs on the walls. They depict places in Midyat, Turkey, where several of the congregational members grew up. A photograph of a city is taken slightly from above, and the buildings have stairs on the outside that leads up to flat roofs. In the distance, some higher buildings can be seen and they are all adorned with crosses. The sky is blue, just as it is in the photograph next to the one of the city. This one depicts a huge, white building with a deep blue door that leads into the Syriac Orthodox monastery Mor Abrohom.

I am in a place of diaspora; it is not merely an abstract space in people's minds. It is a lived location with strong links to another geographical local with great historical prominence. One could argue that this link is the social disembedding which creates a re-embedded community where the dispersed Assyrians still share a collective memory, rituals and a past (Werbner 2002, 121). They are continuously enacting their identity as Assyrian Christians through partaking in the Syriac Orthodox congregational life in Sweden (Wahlbeck 2002, 233).

The enactment of a diasporic identity in the congregation is led by Father Ishaia. He tells me that he often visits 'the homeland,' Tur Abdin. It is an enclave in eastern Turkey, and many of the pictures in the common room are photographs from this specific place. Father Ishaia re-tells his memories of his childhood to me, of how he and his family lived in a stone house, where the crops were fresh and free from pesticides:

I miss it. It was a hard life, but good. [...] But it's not the same anymore. There is electricity and water in the taps. Life is different there now, it's not what it was... But the last time I was there, I fetched water from the well.

Father Ishaia's nostalgic remembrance of his homeland is a clear sign of what Safran (1991) calls home orientation. Father Ishaia does not however seem keen on returning to Tur Abdin. He is aware that the loss of his home is not only spatial, but that his home is also lost in time (Jansen and Löfving 2007, 9-10). This insight might make the attendance to a diasporic church even more significant. The diasporic church has to be seen as an effect of forced migration where return is not an option. In addition, the church is a space where the community can re-create a place of belonging and identity in everyday religious practices (Chamberlain and Leydesdorf 2004, 227-228; Cohen 1985, 99; Levitt 2003, 851).

Outside the windows, the birches surrounding the church continues to sway, they look like bones in the sky. Father Ishaia continues:

When I grew up in Turkey, there was only one church. But in the 20th century, there were Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, and Protestant churches all over. They existed before 1915. But after the genocide, there was only one congregation left: The Syriac Orthodox. The others had expired because of their members being massacred to death.

The diasporic landscape is a vital part of the Assyrians lives. Their past is re-enacted in a different time and space, in this case, in Gothenburg in the 21st century. The oppression and the genocide does affect the worldview of Assyrian Christians as well as how they continue to view Islam (Connerton 1989) – a religion they say that they have suffered under as long as they can remember.

The Ottoman Empire and the Oppression

One Friday, I arrive at the church because I have been informed that there would be a course in Syriac for boys between the ages 7-15. The chapel is however quite empty. “Hello?” I call. A man’s voice answers from inside the common room. He does not know anything about a course in Syriac, but he invites me to sit down. He is alone and he does not meet my eyes. His name is Abdisho and he came to Sweden from Turkey in 1976. He appears to be a taciturn kind of man, or maybe it is just the atmosphere in the room; the silence, my pen scratching against the paper, the coffee in the plastic cups getting cold. But suddenly, Abdisho is talking a lot – about Turkey, about the church in his childhood that had existed since the Byzantine Empire, how the church was destroyed and rebuilt again and again. About how he would love to return to where he grew up, but how he cannot. “There is only hate and death there. You Swedes only laugh at us when we express our fear towards Muslims. But you do not understand. You have never lived under oppression”.

The collective memories of diasporic communities can include memories of the ancestral homeland as well as violence that have taken place there. Many interlocutors tell the story of how the Turks came from the East, how they as intruders persecuted the Assyrian Christian people and still do to this day. Even if there is no one alive today that lived during the Ottoman Empire, the experience of terrible oppression is still felt as a personal offence to the present day Assyrian Christian individual. That means that the stories of the Ottoman Empire’s oppression are internalised by members of the diasporic communities and thus affect them in the present (Gavriely-Nuri 2014, 46-49; Lederach and Lederach 2010, 2; Tonkin 1992).

Assyria, the ancestral land that the Assyrians originate from, is commonly referred to in the congregation as “the homeland,” and the fall of that civilization is still regarded as the loss of a golden age. “My dreams are of that land. [...] They took it. It is the Archangel Gabriel’s land. We want to come back and build churches, but we can’t, because of the Muslims,” declared one woman. The story of the homeland, hand in hand with feelings of injustice and the stories about the blood that has been spilt there, constitutes a continued solidarity and identity within the diaspora and the view of the community as joined in past and future (Werbner 2002, 121). The stories are also used to create meaning and cohesion of the community’s collective experiences and is a narration of the injustice done to Christians by Muslims (Jasiewicz 2015, 1576; Tonkin 1992). When Nisha tells me of her father’s torture that took place in the Turkish military service, she concludes that, “We gave them [the Muslims] everything. But we only got oppression, persecution and torture in return”.

The interlocutors’ view of Islam is influenced by ancient and more recent stories of oppression, retold to every new generation. They are also influenced by their own lived experience together with Muslims in mixed villages, both in Turkey and in Syria. The elderly in the Syriac Orthodox congregation who are now between 70 and 80 years old, describe that it was almost impossible for their parents to keep their farmlands from being taken by their neighbours who were Muslims. When they brought the matter up in court, they were always overruled since the judge could see that they were Christians in their identification. “You were always scared of the Muslims,” one woman concludes.

The stories of violence and persecution by Muslims that the congregational members tell are horrifying and sad. Jansen and Löfving (2007, 9-10) conclude that home is not only lost in space when people migrate, but also in time. I would argue that the dramatic spatial and temporal loss presented above is enacted daily in a nostalgic re-creation of religious practice, as well as in the fearful and pessimistic attitudes expressed towards Muslims and Islam in Sweden today. The religious community can serve as a chain of memory (Levitt 2008, 768), and in this case, the memory is hurtful, which in turn affects the way the congregational members narrate about Muslims and Islam.

Father Ishaia clarifies that the congregational members cannot trust Muslims anymore because they feel that “Muslims cannot change. They have seen them; they know them throughout the course of history”. This statement is of interest, since it reveals that the interlocutors view Muslims as unchanging characters. “The Muslim’ is framed as a relentless, violent figure whose appearance is

splattered in blood across the pages of their common history. This view is particularly apparent in the interlocutors' narratives of the genocide, Seyfo.

Seyfo – the Sword of Islam

Istir and I sit in the chapel. Our conversation bounces off the walls in an echo, and the chilliness in the room makes us sit close to the radiator. Istir is one of the elderly, she tells me of her five sons and three daughters who live all over the world – that one of her sons is a jeweller and has made the golden cross she wears around her neck. Her brow furrows as I mention Islam, “Islam is not good. They kill. They have pistols in their pockets and they kill. They will never go to heaven. Christians never kill”. Cohen states (1985, 12, 109) that a community can only exist because of its relational boundaries to another community. Istir's statement does put Muslims and Christians in relation to one another, where the boundaries are polarised and static. I ask Maryam, who comes from Syria and who is a staff member, about how the elderly in the congregation view Islam. She brushes away her blonde hair and says: “These elderly? They do not like Muslims. They have seen far too much from Islam. What is it that it's called...? 1915, Seyfo. They know that incident too well. Maybe they have siblings and cousins who were taken by the Muslims then. The elderly say that the Muslims killed our people”.

The congregational members' view of Muslims and Islam seems to be heavily influenced by the genocide of 1915. It is a diasporic wound (Jansen and Löfving 2007, 6) that has never truly healed and that continues to ache in their hearts and minds to this day. Abdisho and Nuhro, two good friends, finish each other's sentences while talking about the genocide. “It started with them killing the Armenians. ‘We will kill all the Christians’ they said. One Friday in April a great Imam, a Mufti, issued a fatwa on all the non-Muslims,” says Nuhro. Abdisho continues, “Many Christians were hiding in a big church. My grandmother tells me that they fought for 30 scorching hot days inside that church. At last they had to flee through the hidden underground tunnels”.

Father Ishaia also seems to have vivid memories of the genocide which he did not live through, but the stories of his family seems to have etched themselves into his mind. Again, experiences that go far beyond the individual's lifespan or own experiences can leave traces on individual community members, almost as if they had experienced the same violence as their ancestors (Gavriely-Nuri 2014, 46-49).

Father Ishaia has even written a book on the matter that will be published in Turkey, where he writes about the 20th of July 1915, where 1200 people were killed in his village. “Before the genocide, my family comprised of 33 people. After the genocide we were only...” he holds up three fingers and ends the conversation.

The many stories of gross human rights violations that happened during Seyfo, the Year of the Sword, fills my head as I witness one of the holy sacraments of the church, the anointing of the sick. An elderly couple sits in the middle of the nave in the chapel and receive oil on their faces and hands by Father Ishaia while he and the deacons sing. The incense smells of lemongrass and the smoke moves hastily upwards. A woman explains to me that the elderly says thank you to this life and welcomes the next one. They will meet their loved ones, their ancestors, so while moving into the future with the knowledge of oncoming death, it is also a journey backwards through history (Lederach 2005, 9, 142-143). The same can be said about the traumatic stories that the congregational members keep of Seyfo. As Father Ishaia noted, “We have heard the stories so many times, we became afraid of it happening again”. Memory is thus lived in the present, and together with the memories comes the perception of potential risk of repetition of violence. As described by Lederach (2005. 149), the Assyrian Christians feel that there is a risk of history repeating itself, and thus they feel that the hurtful past lies ahead.

Reviving the past by telling stories, a past that is seen as a common experience, is a resource in order to express one’s identity (Åkesson 2016, 60; Jasiewicz 2015, 1576). The Assyrian Christians are continuously enacting their past and maintaining boundaries, because they feel that it is necessary even today in Sweden. Many of the congregational members have trouble trusting Muslims in the Swedish society, because they are afraid that even those Muslims who appear to be ‘good’ will turn out to be ‘evil’. When I asked them, they were quite convinced that this fear and pessimism would also transfer to their children, since collective memory and community boundaries is transferred from generation to generation (Cohen 1985, 99; Connerton 1989). Nisha expressed her community’s position as follows, “Our heritage is that of mental suffering. We suffer under the stories we bring”.

Polarisation and Boundaries

The Assyrian Christians’ past has, in the view of the congregational members, generated a clear dichotomisation between Muslims and Christians. The very definition of a community is as stated, relational; a community exist inside boundaries that encapsulates it from other communities (Cohen 1985, 12, 15, 118). These boundaries are closely tied to a group’s identity, which in the members of

the Syriac Orthodox congregation's case is argued to be an identity in polar opposite with the 'Muslim identity'. In the case study by Eastmond (1998, 166), the Bosnian Muslims see their own identity in opposition with the identity of Christian Serbs and Croats, a finding that can be compared to the Assyrian Christians view of themselves in relation to Muslims. This polarisation concerns both the differences between the Quran and the Bible, as well as the 'inherent' characteristics of Muslims and the characteristics of Christians.

Walita is the name of a woman who brings me into the chapel one morning after the Sunday Mass. She has been in Sweden for 36-37 years, she came after her husband, she was poor and had three small children. She tells me that she sometimes visits the Swedish Church not too far from the Syriac Orthodox Church. One time, the Swedish Church was visited by an author that had written a book about the several wars raging in the Middle East. The author had explained that the wars had nothing to do with religion, and at that, Walita had stood up and said: "No! You lie! You have to know the truth. They killed our priests and patriarchs, they burn our churches. How can you say that it's not about religion? They killed us because of our religion". Walita was very upset, and when an Imam visited the Swedish Church on another occasion, she was furious when he spoke about the similarities in the Quran and the Bible.

The view that the Quran and the Bible are polar opposites is a re-occurring theme among the congregational members. Christianity is portrayed as a peaceful and humble religion, while Islam is seen as violent, untrustworthy and radical. Abdisho and Nuhro bring up the Christian Crusade, but are positive that these violations occurred because of individual power hungry Popes, and that these wars were not inspired by the Bible. "But in the Quran it says that if you kill a Christian – you go to heaven!" exclaims Seruya when we discuss similarities and differences between the two Holy Books. "It's the opposite in the Bible. It says that if someone hits you, you should turn the other cheek".

In this case, Christianity underlines the difference and the boundaries between Christians and Muslims. Thus, Christianity is used here as a tool to both reinforce the Syriac Orthodox community and to accentuate the wrongdoings of the Muslim community. As Levitt argues about the duality of religion and its role as a dividing force between religious communities (2008, 785), some of my interlocutors tell me that Muslims only want to kill, while Christians only hide in their homes to avoid conflict, and that this difference is due to the respective religions and their Holy Books.

When asked about how they know what is written in the Quran, the majority of my interlocutors confess that they have not read the Muslims' Holy Book, but that they have heard rumours about its content. The origin of these very strong opinions about the Quran are thus hard to pinpoint, Abdisho for one says that he has heard that the Quran was written after Muhammed was visited by the Devil, and that it is not the book of God, but the book of the Devil. These perceptions and images of Islam among the Syriac Orthodox congregational members may be influenced by the stories of past abuses, but they may also be reinforced by present happenings and Islamophobic discourses. Stories about the Quran and the 'fanatical Muslim' circulate frequently and becomes "natural" (Dunn 2001, 292). In the next section, I will analyse how these factors impact the perceived endless schism between Muslims and Christians.

Present Day Conflicts and the Anti-Muslim Discourse in Europe

As Borell (2015) notes in his review about Islamophobic hate crimes, anti-Muslim attitudes seem in both the American and European context to be event-driven. The terrorist attacks on 9/11 has for example been pointed out to be one of the incidents that made Islam and its adherents into this century's scapegoats, particularly in the Western world. This means that the increase in anti-Muslim prejudice is possible to link to dramatic world events. This was evident in the Syriac Orthodox congregation as well, as the memories of such recent terrorist attacks as the ones in Paris 2015², together with long withstanding memories of the Rushdie Affair in 1989, was brought up during discussions about Islam and Muslims. The members of the congregation were particularly eager to discuss the advancements of the Islamic State in their countries of origin.

The Violence Continues

During one church service, Father Ishaia and the deacons sing while the women in the room whisper silently all around me. The men step forward to kiss the silver Bible which is adorned with golden circles and is placed on a pedestal. Before our lunch is brought out, Father Ishaia reads a newspaper to a microphone for all to hear and translates the text from Swedish to Syriac. Everyone is silent, some look down into their laps. I hear Father Ishaia saying "Sweden," "Turkey," "Merkel." The elderly mumble and sigh heavily, one lady looks at her friend, shaking her head and says: "Tsk, tsk".

This activity is repeated every Tuesday and Thursday in the Syriac Orthodox congregation. The elderly cannot read the Swedish newspapers by themselves, in some cases due to illiteracy, in others

² Recruits of the Islamic State executed several terrorist attacks in Paris, France on Friday the 13th, November 2015, killing 130 people and hurting hundreds (BBC 2015).

due to the language barrier. Father Ishaia assists them to keep in touch with what happens in their old homelands. Mass media places another dimension onto the community and their disembedded social life, making the Syriac Orthodox solidarity with the Assyrian Christians in the migrants' old homeland strong and ever-present. The boundary maintenance of the community is, due to globalisation, influenced by events in other, and often far-away contexts (Appadurai 1996, 53-55, Eastmond 1998, 162).

One day, the congregation was visited by a woman from the Gothenburg municipality, called Kajsa, who was there to inform about age-related sickness such as dementia. Kajsa ends her speech by cheerfully recommending the elderly to be happy in order to live a good and long life. This simplistic statement does not go well with the elderly. "Where is happiness?" exclaims one elderly woman. The others mumble in agreement. They protest that their experiences and fears, their memories and what happens today in Syria and Iraq is a hindrance to happiness. At last, Kajsa and the group agrees that they will pray to God that the war will end.

The stories and media outlets about the continued oppression and persecution of Christians in the Middle East re-invokes a pessimism towards Muslims among the Assyrian Christian diaspora. The contact hypothesis states that if contact is made with the other group, even if it is indirect contact through a friend or a relative, and that contact is perceived as a negative experience – prejudice towards the whole out-group increases (Amir 1959, 319). As some interlocutors have relatives that are situated in the areas where the Islamic State rules, their prejudice towards all Muslims, also in Sweden, increase. I would argue that those who does not have relatives in Iraq and Syria, are still influenced by what they perceive is happening to 'their people,' especially since their everyday lives at the church is imbued with these discussions. I ask Seruya if the congregation discusses the present day conflict in the Middle East, since I do not understand when they speak in Syriac. "Of course, they talk about it all the time, oh my God! Many of them come from Syria. They talk about Syria every day, every day".

It is not only the Islamic State that is discussed, but also the conflict in Turkey between Turks and Kurds. Since there are almost no Assyrian Christians left in Turkey, many in the Syriac Orthodox congregation seem to think that the Kurds now suffer the same fate as the Christians did. Some congregational members express their support to the Kurdish people and the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) which is pro-Kurds and pro-minorities.

Nisha solemnly declares that “They [the ‘Turks] played the Muslim Kurds against us, but now we are gone from that country and the Kurds stands alone.” When discussing the recent happenings in Turkey, the congregational members accentuate the evil done by the Turkish Muslims, while Kurdish Muslims are framed as victims of the same treatment that the Assyrian Christians suffered. It seems that what happens in the homeland today, also result in that the interlocutors reflect over their own history of oppression. Hence, this also results in a more differentiated narration about Muslims, where the Muslim Turks are portrayed as eternal oppressors and that the Muslim Kurds ‘made a mistake’ in pursuing Christians, as they now stand alone.

As stated above, the discussions about the enduring violence towards minorities and the reminiscence of oppression that it invokes is also reflected in how some in the Syriac Orthodox congregation speak about Muslim refugees arriving in Sweden. Maryam, Walita and Seruya thinks that Sweden should send back the Muslim refugees who cause problems. I ask them why and what problems they refer to. They reply that they are worried about Islamic State’s recruits in Gothenburg, and suicide bombings. In combination with the stories of past traumas that has left traces on the members of the Syriac Orthodox congregation, the events of violence that happen to parts of their community in their old homelands today result in an anticipation of repeated violence in Sweden as well. This results in a pessimistic narration of Islam and Muslims, much in accordance with the findings of previous research (Borell 2015; Lederach and Lederach 2010, 11). One of my interlocutors expresses this view clearly by stating “History is repeating itself. Trauma is renewed”.

Islamophobic Tendencies

Nisha introduces me to a few of the choir members on a Sunday afternoon. The girls, who are in their 20’s and a few years younger, are kind and thoughtful. They all came from Syria in 2013-2014 and they are all closely related. They tell me that even before the civil war the Christians were oppressed, but that the persecution intensified in 2011. Aydro laughs many times during our conversation while sitting next to her friend and relative Hano who studies at the university and whose heart-shaped face is framed by curls. The youngest sister’s name is Nashiram and she throws her hair over her shoulder before she speaks: “They [the Muslims] want to take over in Sweden, but they can’t”.

The notion of Muslims wanting to take over the country is especially common among the elderly in the congregation. A woman who is in her late 60’s and who (like the young girls) also originates from Syria, is convinced that the Muslims have come to Sweden in order to banish the Christians yet again

and to marry and “control” Swedish women. Istir, the old woman whom I have grown close to points out that the Muslims want to rule Sweden. She also says that Swedes are “too kind” for their own good. The view of the Muslim as the “Grand Inquisitor” who is unapologetic and who is upon European soil to ravage it, take control over it and to rule it (Werbner 2013), re-emerges during discussions with the congregation, among both young and old people, people who grew up in Syria, as well as those who grew up in Turkey. There is also an element of seeing Sweden and Europe as weak when it comes to the ‘threat’ that Islam supposedly poses. Some congregational members are of the opinion that Muslims must be treated with suspicion in order for Sweden to withstand the pressure from the Muslims.

Many in the congregation view Islam as a religion which is about war and are of the opinion that Muslims kill because their religion tells them to do so. Their indiscriminate negative attitudes and feelings towards Muslims are sometimes quite distinct (Bleich 2011, 1585; Borell 2012, 16). The negative attitudes do, at times, appear in statements such as “Death and war is all they want,” and “They kill to get virgins, it’s their ideology!” One day, when Nisha was to translate what one elderly woman expressed, she laughed anxiously before telling me what the woman had said, “She says that ‘you cannot presume that everyone is equal. The Muslims are bloodthirsty, and Christians are compassionate’”. These negative stereotypes towards all Muslims are prejudices that first of all are Islamophobic. The Islamophobic tendencies are exemplified by statements such as “Death and war is all they want,” where ‘the Muslim’ is depicted as violent and where Muslims’ religion, or “ideology,” is to kill (Betz and Meret 2009). Second of all, these negative stereotypes also result in polarisation and boundary maintenance where Christians are yet again viewed as humble, while Muslims are seen as vicious (Cohen 1985, 12, 109).

What also converges with the Islamophobic discourse among the Syriac Orthodox congregational members’ attitudes is how they view Muslims and Islam as ‘incompatible’ in Swedish and European society (Meer and Noorani 2008). Some of the middle aged women in the congregation claim that when they arrived in Sweden they took off their head-scarfs. They dressed in pants instead of skirts, while Muslim women today insist on wearing hijabs and get special treatment when it comes to bathing attire in public swimming pools. Walita is only one of many with the opinion that Muslim women should change themselves according to Swedish values, that Swedish laws should be obeyed, and that public institutions should stay secular. These opinions are similar to the anti-Muslim discourse where Muslims are seen as the antithesis to democratic, secular, and liberal Western

societies. Among the Assyrian Christians, there is a common view that Muslim women are oppressed by their Muslim husbands and the women are hence incapable of following Swedish laws. The interlocutors see themselves as propagators of women's rights, while Islam is a threat to these very rights (Betz and Meret 2009; Zúquete 2008). At one time Nisha also expresses the view that the building of mosques in Sweden is "like sowing a seed," a notorious thought throughout anti-mosque campaigns all over Europe; building a mosque is seen as a possible beginning of a radical turn of society (Cesari 2005).

Hano, one of the young choir members, her little sister Nashiram and their cousin Aydro agree that they do not feel completely safe in Sweden because of all the Muslim refugees that arrive to Gothenburg, and many other congregational members share their fear. Among others, Seruya explains that "I am also a refugee. But I fled from the Muslims. What are the Muslims fleeing from? They are the ones making the war happen. [...] I am scared of going out in Gothenburg". At a lecture about the persecution of Christians, I overhear an elderly man speaking to the lecturer about how he is worried about the "problems" coming to Sweden together with the Muslim refugees, and that the Swedish state merely helps the perpetrators. He explains that by "perpetrators" he refers to the Muslims. Yet again, the interlocutors are indiscriminate in their attitudes towards Muslims, also when it comes to Muslim refugees in Sweden. The apprehensive attitude towards Muslim refugees has been present in the Islamophobic discourse in both Sweden and Europe for several years (Bleich 2011; Dunn 2001). Seruya's reasoning about that it is 'the Muslims' who makes the war happen is a clear example of an indiscriminate view, where the fact that there are numerous Muslims who are fleeing war is overlooked.

There are many different dimensions of Islamophobia that are present among the Syriac Orthodox congregational members' opinions and thoughts, and these views seem to be influenced by the anti-Muslim discourse in Europe that Brian Klug discusses (2012). It includes the view of the Muslim as a figure which is impossible to assimilate into Swedish society, Islam as inherently violent and degrading towards women, and the indiscriminate view of all Muslims as dangerous and with a secret plan of claiming power.

Ambivalence

Even though the members of the Syriac Orthodox congregation express Islamophobic opinions, there is a complexity that cannot be overlooked concerning the attitudes of Assyrian Christians

toward Muslims. Although their opinions are indiscriminate and negative as shown in the previous section, they are simultaneously able to reflect critically over what narrative they tell.

Seruya and I are sitting alone in the chapel, and with her hands on the table, she explains to me why she is afraid of Muslims in Gothenburg, how she has seen children in hijabs in the streets and how Islam and Christianity are polar opposites. She continuously assures me that she does not really know what it says in the Quran, but that she has heard many foul things about it. I ask if she thinks that there are some similarities between Muslims and Christians. She ponders this for a bit and then answers that “There are different people in each group. There are Christians, like Muslims, who are bad, and also those who are good people. You can never compare people like that. I always say that ‘I cannot judge everyone’”. Nisha expresses a similar view in our interview when we discuss the attitudes her children keep towards Muslims. “They [my children] say, ‘No, no Muslims’. So I have to say that there *are* good Muslims. They agree, but they say, ‘Yes, there are good Muslims, but there are very few of them. How will we find them?’”

Most of the time, the positive statements that the members of the Syriac Orthodox congregation make about Muslims, appear in combination with negative statements about Muslims. It can happen, as in Seruya’s case, when after a long speech about the wrongdoings of Islam, I specifically ask her if she thinks that there are similarities between Muslims and Christians, or if she thinks that there are ‘good Muslims’. In that case, Seruya replied that she indeed thought that people are different, regardless of their religious affiliation. As in Nisha’s case, a positive statement about ‘the Muslim’ can appear on its own accord, but mostly it is accompanied by a negative statement, such as “Yes, there are good Muslims, but there are very few of them [...]”. What I want to emphasise here is that the indiscriminate view of Muslims among the congregational members is ever-present, but is at the same time interrupted by sudden glimpses of reflection and contemplation. Thus, there is an indecisive stance when it comes to attitudes toward Islam and Muslims. But this does not mean that the interlocutors are contradictory in nature, they are merely capable of keeping several different opinions simultaneously. One could argue in relation to Lederach and Lederach’s discussion about reconciliation being a circular motion and not a linear one (2010, 3-5, 9), that the interlocutors are taking collective traumas, present happenings and future wishes into account when painting the picture of ‘the Muslim’.

F(r)riendship

In this section, we will dive into how the Assyrian Christians of the Syriac Orthodox Church develop, enjoy and, sometimes abstain from, relationships with Muslims in Sweden. It is of great importance to investigate the quality of actual social relationships between people belonging to groups who have been, and still are, intertwined in conflict with each other. Social healing and reconciliation cannot be achieved through disdain and chasms, but in the cautiously developed relationship with those people that are feared and suspected (Lederach 2005, 63). This is clearly not an easy endeavour, but it can be achieved, which is portrayed in this first section below by Walita, a woman who struck me as one with the most negative view of Muslims among the interlocutors of the congregation, until she started talking about the Muslims she knew.

Love Thy Neighbour

“I have a neighbour who is Kurdish, she is a Muslim. We are very good friends. All the Muslims are not the same”. Walita’s jewellery jingles as she gesticulates while telling me all about her own journey to Sweden from Turkey. She was poor, she had no food and no clothes. She says that her neighbour, Noor, reminds her of her old self. “She is poor; I have to help her. God says that you should help, so I help. I want to help everyone, even Muslims. Noor calls me her aunt”. Walita’s smile falters suddenly and she becomes earnest. She grabs my hand across the table and says “Me and Noor have the same God. I wish there to be peace for everyone”.

In the research review by Pettigrew (2008, 188-189), we are presented by several key factors that need to be in place if intergroup relations are to improve. Friendship, and not merely superficial contact with a member from another group, decreases prejudice of that said group. In Walita’s case, as well as many other congregational members, friendship with Muslims evokes more positive statements toward Muslims and Islam, shown above as “All Muslims are not the same,” and “I want to help everyone, even Muslims,” or “We have the same God”. Yet, this change in attitude seems to be occurring when that specific Muslim friend is discussed, but that positive attitude does not reach far beyond the subject of friendship. That means that while discussing Islam as a religion and Muslims as a faceless mass, the interlocutors seem apprehensive, but when discussing Muslim individuals, they soften in their approach.

Both Maryam and Nisha tells me that their sons have good friends who are Muslims. Maryam says that she often jokes with her son’s friend that he should convert to Christianity, but that “he really is a nice guy actually.”

She also says that the mother of her son's friend is lovely, "...even though she wears a hijab. She is really nice. I love her. She always kisses me when she sees me". Nisha says that her son has had two friends who were from Iran and who were Muslims. She tells me that they were not very religious because "Muslims are also different, all Muslims are not very religious and faithful. They [the boys] did not go to mosques. They were great guys." This kind of 'extended' contact with individual Muslims seems to have diminished prejudice towards all Muslims. The fact that Maryam's and Nisha's children have had friends with people whose religious affiliation is Islam has made them aware that "Muslims are also different," and I would argue that this is equal to the understanding that 'Muslims are not all the same'.

Even though many interlocutors have suffered personal violence and oppression from Muslims, they are still able to create friendships with individuals from a group that they fear. For example, Nuhro who fled from his country of origin and who still have relatives in the immediate areas which the Islamic State has occupied, exclaimed: "I don't hate Muslims! I had military service in Syria, I slept together with Muslims, I ate the same food as Muslims, we drank the same water. We were friends". Abdisho points directly to Islam as the problem, but not the people: "At Volvo I knew some Muslims. I don't have a problem with them. I have a problem with the Quran, not the humans".

I ask Walita how she would feel if her daughter would want to marry a Muslim. "Good question", she said and continued:

You know of Fadime who became a victim of an honour killing?³ I have a daughter who fell in love with a guy from Iran, I was so mad! [...] I did not want to attend the wedding; I was too sad. I called my relatives, and they advised me to go with my child. So I did. It hurt.

We discuss the incident further and she tells me how her view of her son-in-law changed, especially after he and her daughter had children. "It's all right now. I admit that I was wrong. He is a good person, really nice". But Walita did not want to meet her son-in-law's parents until 10 years after the wedding, she still suspected them because of their religion. But she discovered that they too were pleasant. "Now I meet my daughter and her husband every Sunday. I don't want to lose them". The tensions between Walita and her daughter is now gone because of Walita's capability of overcoming her fear and pessimism towards Muslims (even if this has taken both time and effort). Her prejudice towards Muslims and her narrative of her traumatic past because of them, though huge in

³ In 2001, a Kurdish Swedish woman named Fadime Sahindal was murdered by her Muslim father because of her refusal to marry a man of her parents' choice. The case resulted in a discussion in Sweden about honour killings and the integration of Muslims (Ambjörnsson and Janke 2008).

proportion, could not surmount her irreplaceable relationship with her daughter. She accepted the perceived risk of interacting with what she first thought about as ‘the enemy,’ and continues to work towards reconciliation and friendship with parts of that feared community.

Combating Sin in the City of Nineveh

On the 23rd of February the sun is shining for the first time in weeks. It is the end of the Fast of Nineveh, the fasting period that lasts for three days in the Syriac Orthodox Church. We bow down 40 times in the chapel, making the sign of the cross between each bow. The Fast of Nineveh commemorates the conversion of the city of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, and also the penance of the prophet Jonah inside the belly of a fish. The people of the old Assyrian capital lived in sin, but were forgiven by God as they fasted for three days. The Ninevites, that is to say the Assyrian Christians, made an effort to become better people, and I would argue the same for the Assyrian Christians in the Syriac Orthodox congregation in Gothenburg. The wish to do God’s will, to respect and love all of God’s children, is strong among the congregational members, but it is not an easy endeavour.

In the previous section we witnessed how prejudice towards Muslims in the interlocutors’ narratives seemed to decrease when discussing friends and acquaintances who were Muslims, all according to the contact hypothesis (Pettigrew 2008). Dixon, Durrheim and Tredoux (2005, 709) does however critique the simplicity of the contact hypothesis, especially when contemplating the deep seated tensions that is sometimes present in intergroup contact. When taking into account the interlocutors’ narratives of personal injustice at the hands of Muslims, that is to say, *when negative contact* is brought up, the prejudice towards Muslims seems gain influence.

The congregational members have several stories about individual Muslims in Sweden acting offensive and mean toward them personally, a behaviour that only seems to agitate them even further in their negative attitudes towards Muslims at large. Several members have told me how Muslims on the streets have pointed at their crosses around their necks, accusing them of being heretics, and have in some instances even spat on their crosses. One young woman from Turkey called Yata said that she was subjected to insults on an everyday basis by a Muslim colleague. The colleague had started with complaining about that seeing crosses made her angry and how going past churches made her feel sick. One time at a bus stop, the fellow co-workers met, and when passing Yata, the Muslim woman mumbled audibly “I hope you die in your sleep and never wake up”. There was a heated argument, and the Muslim woman got transferred to another facility.

Events such as these described above confirms and upholds the negative attitudes Assyrian Christians already have of Muslims – that Muslims are unapologetic and ruthless, and that they want to eradicate Christians from the face of the earth. It also contributes to the boundary maintenance of the diasporic community, as well as polarisation, and results in an unwillingness to interact with Muslims on the whole. One congregational member said that she was ‘way too scared’ to have acquaintances who are Muslim. Just as Eastmond (1998, 165, 172) shows in her study about Bosnian Muslims’ in Sweden – that her interlocutors do not marry inter-ethnically; many in the Syriac Orthodox congregation are hesitant to marrying, or allowing their children to marry, Muslims. Marrying a Muslim, or associating with a Muslim instead of a Christian can be seen as a threat to the community cohesion. It is seen as a transgression that may result in loss of identity as well as loss of the person who transgresses into the other community (Cohen 1985, 109).

Seruya’s working colleagues once asked her what she would say if her children married Muslims. She answered that they never would. When Seruya tells me this, I ask her what if her children were in love, she knocks on the table two times and answers “No! They cannot. You have to tell them that from the beginning”. As I try to dig deeper into her feelings about her children marrying Muslims, Seruya shrinks back in her seat and raises her shoulders towards her chin, she is obviously bothered by my questions “No, I don’t want to,” she says in a small voice. I ask if she thinks that the Muslim man would be mean to her daughter. “No, maybe not mean. You can’t say that ‘everyone is mean’. [...] But I can’t imagine my children marrying Muslims. Absolutely not. I’d rather die than...” her voice trails away. We discuss the matter and Seruya concludes that she does not think that Muslims and Christians can be “bundled together”. She thinks that since the dawn of the first day, this problem existed and that it is difficult to breach the gap between the two groups.

Elishva, one of the elderly women has neighbours who are Muslims, but she does not want anything to do with them. She says that she treats them as any other neighbour, greeting them as they pass, but nothing more. Hano and Aydro, the young women from Syria, also express that they do not discuss religion or the war in Syria and Iraq with their Muslim classmates at the University. This is also true in Seruya’s case, as she has Muslim colleagues that she never discusses Islam and Christianity with. Elishva, Seruya and the young choir members’ abstention from relationships with Muslims can be compared with the Bosnian Muslims’ superficial contact with Christian Serbs and Croats in Eastmond study (1998, 173). When sometimes forced together as neighbours or as colleagues, the Assyrian Christians in this thesis try to keep things civilised with their Muslim

acquaintances through reducing communication to mere greetings or simply not discussing religion because it is seen as a sensitive subject due to past conflicts.

Old memories of personal injustice also affect the congregational members' view of Muslims, one example is that of Nisha who, when she came to Sweden as a young adult, had not finished her elementary schooling in Turkey. In Turkey, she grew up in a small village, but she and her family moved to Istanbul where she was not allowed by the Muslim principal to continue with her studies, "He saw that we were Christians in our identification papers" explains Nisha. She and her family lived with double identities, never telling anyone of their religion if they could help it. In her teenage years, before she moved to Sweden, she worked in a factory where they made plastic trays. All of her co-workers were young girls, such as herself, and they were all Muslim.

I had two Turkish sisters there, and we were the best of friends. We told each other everything. But one thing I did not tell them; I never said that I was a Christian. And we... Even siblings cannot love each other as much as we did. But when there was only six months before I was going to Sweden I thought that 'Now I will come clean, it doesn't matter if I lose them'. So I said: 'Fatima, Aishe, I want to tell you something'. They kissed me and hugged me and said: 'But we know you, Nisha'. I said: 'I am a Christian'.

At this point in the story, Nisha shows me her palms and retreats backwards, while her eyes widen, in order to show me how her best friends had reacted to her confession. "You can't be,' they said. And I... I just went away. I wept. I was 15-16. I loved them for who they were. Why wouldn't they accept me as I was?" This incident, Nisha tells me, has affected her deeply and stayed with her for several years. Even in Sweden, she did not dare to tell people that she was a Christian in fear of being rejected once again. As Brewer states (1996, 301), it is naïve and derisive to ignore the existing tensions between groups that have their beginnings in deep suffering and humiliation. To recognize the hardships, but also to highlight the possibilities of transformation and social healing is what will be brought together in the last section below.

Turn the Other Cheek, But Do Not Forget

At the church service for the youths in the Syriac Orthodox congregation a boy in white dress robes peeks out from behind the red velvet curtains that are drawn before the sacristy and altar. He hushes the young people talking, the worship is about to start. I stand at the back together with one of the sisters from Syria, who is somewhat different from her siblings. While they always attend church in their best clothes and with applied makeup, talking a lot and laughing, Ari Eil is reserved and her straight hair is tied back in a long braid. But when she does speak, she speaks confidently. She is the

only one of her siblings who has stayed to attend the youth service and I get the feeling that she wants to show me how to behave, how one shows devotion. She turns her palms upwards and closes her eyes, then she turns to me to softly touch my hands and then run her hands down her own cheeks. This ritual is repeated at every church service in the Syriac Orthodox Church and touching hands is a way to spread the blessing, or peace onto each other (see Bradley 2009, 265).

The faith in Christ is a chain of unity that links the members of the congregations to other congregations that exist, or have existed in other times in other places (Cohen 198, 51; Levitt 2008, 768). This diasporic belonging, complemented by the anti-Muslim discourse as well as both negative and positive personal experiences, has already been explored in connection to Assyrian Christians' view of Muslims. We have seen how meaning and understanding are not constructed in a linear manner. It is rather that past, present and the fear of future risk is experienced as multiple realities that are lived simultaneously (Lederach and Lederach 2010, 9). The faith in Christianity, and how that faith can serve as a dichotomising strategy towards Islam has also been discussed. One dimension has however been neglected, namely how the interlocutors' Christian faith may also work to emphasise reconciliation with Muslims.

The congregation is strongly influenced by what Christianity teaches them about one specific virtue, namely forgiveness. Combined with the particularistic elements of diasporic community, identity and collective memory however, it is a complex, yet nuanced picture that evolves before us, one that Walita portrays well:

I want to be friends with Muslims, but I can't trust them. I forgive, but I do not forget. Father Ishaia says that we should do as the Bible says: forgive. But me and my generation, we can be friends with Muslims, but we can never trust them. [...] We forgive them [the Muslims] for everything that they have done, but we never forget it. We have been persecuted for a long time, but we forgive them.

When discussing God and Christianity's virtues, many congregational members express that they are not satisfied with merely living beside Muslims in Sweden; they do not wish that boundaries between the two groups should be upheld as they are now. Rather, they think that they have a duty to also befriend and help those Muslims who are in need. Among others, Walita is convinced that:

God says that we should not fight. I cannot read, but my brother reads to me sometimes and he tells me that Jesus says that we should forgive, to turn the other cheek. We follow the love for Jesus. We want to live with God, and we [Christians and Muslims] have the same God. You shall not be mean to each other, but sometimes they [the Muslims] do not listen. We're scared when they don't listen.

Another lady in the congregation said that it is of great importance to help everyone, and that Christians have always helped those in need, “It doesn’t matter if they are Muslim or Roma to me. Those who knock, we help”. Though some congregational members are convinced that Sweden should not allow Muslim refugees into the country, Yata is of the opinion that Sweden should open their borders because “Muslims hate war as much as Christians. They need our help”. Aiding poor people or those who in some way are in need, is a virtue in many religions, and in these cases above, that virtue seems to go beyond politics, national terrain and community boundaries (Levitt 2003, 851). While the Christian virtue of compassion is at some instances seen as a polar opposite to the viciousness of Islam, it is sometimes also seen as a cause to aid Muslims who are in need. As Cohen (1985, 12, 15, 118) underlines, a community’s boundaries are symbolic and are able to transform due to context. The virtue of compassion can thus be transformed from a boundary-maintainer to a boundary-transgressor.

Father Ishaia and I sit in his office. The first time I was here it was cluttered with objects, crosses, pictures of Turkey and the Patriarch. Now it is empty, soon they will start to rebuild his office. His voice echoes as he tells me how deeply he feels about his congregation, that they are his responsibility, his herd in spiritual endeavours. He thinks that the congregational members can experience their roots through the Syriac Orthodox Church and that identity and community is important. At the same time, he is wary of the boundaries it maintains towards other ethnic and religious communities. He sees himself as a part of a religious space that transgresses profane borders.

He proudly brings up his monthly collaboration with other religious congregational representatives, it is called The Nordic Centre for Interreligious Dialogue and he has been involved for a decade. Father Ishaia thinks that it is of great importance to cooperate with other religious congregations in Gothenburg to discuss recent happenings, both globally and locally, and provide the public and their own congregations with mutual statements. He is committed to the cause of having a favourable relationship between Muslims and Christians.

Muslims have a good thing that is called a fatwa. It means dispense. If we have a good relationship with Muslims, they can issue a fatwa that they, as Muslims, should live together with Christians in peace. That is my opinion. That is why I collaborate through dialogue.

In accordance with Father Ishaia's thought, peace is developed through close relationships and faith. He demands of his congregation that they look beyond their own boundaries in order to achieve reconciliation with Muslims.

Religion can be a maintainer of boundaries and hatred (Cohen 1985, 12, 109), especially when it comes to intractable conflict. But it can, and in some instances it should, be considered as a catalyst for peace and social healing. Father Ishaia specifically highlights that it is his Christian perspective that makes him believe that he and his congregation has to be like Jesus when they meet people who are members of a different group, and that they have to be able to live side by side with these people. He says, "Muslims are not our brothers in faith, but Muslims are fellow human beings, in humanity we are brothers. We cannot forget that. We are brothers". What is most prominent when it comes to a nuanced view towards Muslims among the Syriac Orthodox congregation is not only the positive social relations with individual Muslims, it is the virtues of Christianity – forgiveness and compassion. The paradox is this: Religion is seen as the fundamental boundary between Assyrian Christians and Muslims according to the Syriac Orthodox congregational members. Simultaneously, it is in fact also the crucial factor in the ability to look past that very boundary. In the narratives of the Assyrian Christians, religion acts as both the problem and the solution.

Conclusion and Future Research

This thesis has explored how the members of a Syriac Orthodox congregation in Gothenburg construct the image of Muslims and Islam through their narratives. The perception of 'the Muslim' was in this study divided into different dimensions that were reflected by the four research questions.

The first dimension of the narratives about Islam and Muslims concerned collective memory, diasporic belonging and the past. The study shows that the perception of Muslims among the first generation Assyrian Christian interlocutors is heavily influenced by the collective memories and narratives of their own diasporic community. The narratives of the oppression during the Ottoman Empire and the trauma of the genocide in 1915 did not only include the present suffering of my interlocutors (as Nisha put it, "We suffer under the stories we bring"), but these collective memories were also a source of polarisation between Christians and Muslims, Christianity and Islam. The narratives included diasporic home orientation as well as the hurtful loss of that home. The cause of this loss and violence was placed on Muslims who thus were seen as violent and bloodthirsty. Christians and Christianity, on the other hand, were framed as compassionate and innocent. In this

case, religion acted as a maintainer of boundaries. It was a source of identity and cohesion in the Syriac Orthodox congregation, and since a community is relational, it was in relation to ‘the Muslim’ that the Assyrian Christians’ identity was re-enacted.

The second research question concerned present day conflicts between Christians and Muslims in Syria, Iraq and Turkey where the interlocutors originate from. Since the congregational members discussed the happenings in Syria “every day”, their perception of Muslims was influenced by the deeds of the Islamic State. Dramatic events such as the raging conflict in Syria and Iraq, as well as the turmoil in Turkey, increased and confirmed the negative view of Islam and Muslims among the interlocutors. Since the part of their community that resides in their old homelands suffers, so did they. The second research question also entailed the present day Islamophobic public discourse in Sweden and in Europe. The narratives about Muslims among my interlocutors resembled the anti-Muslim discourse in the West. The stereotypical image of ‘the Muslim’ concurred in many ways with Werbner’s “Grand Inquisitor,” where the Muslim is seen as an unapologetic, radical warrior who is planning to take over the West. However, as indiscriminate as these views were, there were also instances when my interlocutors diverged from such Islamophobic thought, and revised their negative statements with more reflective thoughts on the nature of Muslims. The more reflexive statements often appeared when the interlocutors referred to their Christian faith, or when they talked about friendships with Muslims. This confirms the thought of reconciliation as a circular motion (Lederach and Lederach 2010), since the interlocutors were not contradictory, they were only simultaneous in their negative and reflective attitudes towards Muslims.

Thirdly, the study sought to understand how positive, as well as negative encounters with individual Muslims influenced the reconciliation with, and the view of, Muslims as a group. When bringing up friendships with Muslims, the interlocutors were more nuanced in their statements than they were when discussing Muslims as a mass. Some of the interlocutors had friends who were Muslim, or knew other Assyrian Christians who had friends who were Muslim. This often made their narratives on Muslims more positive, as exemplified by quotations such as “We are very good friends. All Muslims are not the same”. Experience of negative relationships with Muslims (including negative indirect contact) both in the old homeland and in Sweden, did however affirm prejudice, and it was also decisive for the extension of future contact with Muslims in Sweden.

The fourth research question contained the dimension of how the image of ‘the Muslim’ was expressed in relation to Christianity. In the study, Christianity’s function was constantly fluid (Bowie

2001, 17, 22, 28; Grenholm 2006, 118). Sometimes, it took the form of a boundary-maintainer and a tool for the polarisation between Islam and Christianity, Muslims and Christians. At other times, it was the duty of the followers of Christ to forgive past animosities and to be compassionate towards members of other communities, especially if they were in need. Lastly, and most importantly, Christianity seems to have a dual power to both invoke boundaries between Islam and Christianity, while simultaneously being the most powerful force of eroding those boundaries and reaching reconciliation by seeing Muslims and Christians as children of God.

The Syriac Orthodox congregational members' narratives about Muslims and Islam encompassed many dimensions and aspects, and the interlocutors in the study sometimes stated that among Muslims, as among Christians, there exist differences. As Seruya concluded, "There are Christians, like Muslims, who are bad, and also those who are good people". This kind of understanding which challenged the otherwise indiscriminate narrations of Muslims, was influenced by the social relations that the interlocutors had with Swedish Muslims in their everyday lives, when they met them as co-workers, friends, family members and neighbours.

Even though friendship is the heart of reconciliation (Lederach 2005, 63), social ties with individual Muslims were not strong enough to erase collective memory. As we have discovered; trauma trails. The trajectories, the collective wound, caused by the violation of human rights during 1915, the Year of the Sword, could not, and would not, be eradicated through individual social ties. The wound was also re-opened due to the present day conflicts. As Clifford Geertz notes, "History, it has been said, may not repeat itself, but it does rhyme," (Geertz 2005, 10), and in the case of the Assyrian Christians, history does seem to rhyme when Christians in Iraq and Syria are yet again being slaughtered and chased from their homeland. The excruciating collective remembrance of Seyfo and oppression in Turkey, Syria and Iraq, emerged in parallel with the fear and distrust due to the daily slandering of Muslims in European mass media, by political parties, and in what has become a progressively more accepted public discourse in Sweden (Borell 2012; Klug 2012, 678; Zúquete 2008). The diasporic memory of suffering was also tied together with the congregational members' faith in Christianity. They wanted to forgive, but will never forget the stories of what has happened to their community.

This study has contributed to a holistic approach concerning the many dimensions of the view of 'the Muslim' in a Syriac Orthodox Church in Gothenburg. The congregational members told stories of diasporic suffering because of Islam and its adherents. Future research would do well to also

expand this exploration with the help of longitudinal multi-sited fieldwork (Marcus 1998). This could be done with Syriac Orthodox congregational members in Gothenburg, but on other sites than their church. For example, it could be conducted in their own homes and other places of social gathering. One could thus investigate how the narrative of ‘the Muslim’ might transform and shift in accordance to context and time. It would also prove useful to extend the focus group to other congregations in Sweden and Europe. Future research could also explore how the view of ‘the Muslim’ in the society (including the views of Assyrian Christians and other Christian minorities) is felt and accommodated – or resisted – by a Muslim congregation.

An important aspect that this thesis highlighted is that reconciliation is circular and ambiguous. The view of ‘the Other’ encompasses both past events and present discourses. Accordingly, the Syriac Orthodox congregational members were influenced by both the profane and the pious – diasporic memories, human conflict, friendship and faith. Their situation was paradoxical. Firstly, they were spatially located in the West where Christians are in majority and Muslims are a minority whom, at times, are demonised and shunned. But temporally, the interlocutors placed themselves in victimhood. They situated themselves in past injustices enforced by a Muslim majority – a diasporic wound which was profound and stained their view of ‘the Muslim’. Secondly, the paradox of the Assyrian Christians lay in their Christian faith which on the one hand was the source of difference between themselves and ‘the Muslim’; yet on the other hand, their faith was the utmost decisive force of reconciliation.

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Appendix 1: Interview Guide⁴

Background

How old are you?

Education.

Work/School. How long? Worked at other places before?

What country do you/your parents come from?

Family. Siblings. Parents. Children. Who else are in the household? Where do you live in the city (Gothenburg)? Do you like it there?

Diaspora: Family Ties, Congregation and Transnational Bonds

Tell me about your family/Show me pictures of your family.⁵

Tell me about them/show them. Who? How old? What do they do? Work/School?
Where do they live? Sweden, another country? What city?

How often do you speak to them/meet them?

Skype, text message, phone calls, Facebook, visits.

Syriac Orthodox Church

Tell me about the church and the congregation.

Do your family go to church? What activities do they participate in? What other activities do the church accommodate? How often do you come here? For how long have you visited the church (years)? What do you do here? Why do you want to visit the church? Friends? Meaning (why is it meaningful to you)? Religion (what role does Christianity play in your life)? Memories?

⁴ The interview guide that was used when interviewing Father Ishaia resembles the one attached, but diverged from it in the sense that I asked additional factual questions about the Syriac Orthodox congregation, as well as in-depth questions about Father Ishaia's view on his congregation's construction of 'the Muslim'.

⁵ Sometimes I would ask my interlocutors to bring photographs of their families and of the village or city where they grew up in, in order to relate and understand their narratives. This was much appreciated and the interlocutors could sit and discuss their family trees and their homes for a long time, which brought us more tightly together.

Tell me about the church in your country of origin/village (Turkey, Iraq, Syria).

Memory. What activities does the church have there? Are there any differences/similarities between the church there and the church here? Are there any differences/similarities between the congregation there and the congregation here? (If relatives in other countries – do they attend church there?). What role does the church/congregation play there?

Diaspora: History, Memory, Present, Future

Tell me about the country/region/city/village that you/your parents come from/Show pictures/Show me on the map.⁶

What do you feel when thinking about the country/city/village? How would you describe it? How did you live? Small city/big city/house/apartment. Do you/your relatives visit the country?

Home?

How do you like it in Sweden? Colleagues/Classmates. What do you feel when thinking about Sweden/Gothenburg? What do you think about Sweden? What does your family think about Sweden in relation to your/your parents country of origin? Do you always want to stay in Sweden (if not, where do you want to live?) Do you often think about the country you/your parents come from? Politics. Religion. History in the country. Is there anything you would like to change in your/your parent's country of origin/city? Why? Is there something you would like to change in Sweden/Gothenburg? Why? There is a discussion about refugees from Muslim countries right now, what do you think about that?⁷

Diaspora.

What politics would you like to see in your/your parent's country of origin? How do you wish the religious relations would play out in your/your parent's country of origin?

⁶ At all times, I carried three maps with me: one of Turkey, one of Iraq and one of Syria, where my interlocutors could make a cross on the area/village where they grew up. The maps made it easier for me to relate to their stories and often it would also make my interlocutors more relaxed in the interview.

⁷ After a time in the research field, I felt that this question was necessary to remember due to the tendency of my interlocutors of wanting to discuss the refugee situation in Sweden.

Interreligious Relations

How do the religious relations look like in your/your parent's country of origin?

Christianity? Islam? Judaism?

How do the religious relations look like in Sweden between your congregation and other congregations?

What other congregations exist in Gothenburg? Mosques, Synagogues, Churches.
Where are they? Do you have friends/acquaintances there? Have you been there?
How would you describe the other congregations?

Tell me about the Syriac Orthodox Church and their collaboration with other congregations (Christian, Muslim, Jewish).

What other congregations? Do they have something in common? Are there differences? What do you think that they think about you? What do you think about them? Do you have common activities, in that case, what kind of activities?

Are there any differences between the Bible and the Quran (in text, meaning, interpretation)?

What kind of differences? What do you think about respective one? How? Why?

Are there any similarities in the Bible and the Quran (in text, meaning, interpretation)?

What kind of similarities? What do you think about respective one? How? Why?

Are there any differences between Christians and Muslims?

What kind of differences? What do you think about respective one? How? Why?

Are there any similarities between Christians and Muslims?

What kind of similarities? What do you think about respective one? How? Why?

Are there any differences between Churches and Mosques?

What kind of differences? What do you think about respective one? How? Why?

Are there any similarities between Churches and Mosques?

What kind of similarities? What do you think about respective one? How? Why?

Are there any differences between the practice of Christianity and the practice of Islam?

What kind of differences? What do you think about respective one? How? Why?

Are there any similarities between the practice of Christianity and the practice of Islam?

What kind of similarities? What do you think about respective one? How? Why?

How does the relation look like between Christianity and Islam?

History. Present. Do you have friends/acquaintances who are Muslim (in that case, how is that person? Have you spoken about differences/similarities? How was that discussion? Did you agree on something? What do that person think)? Do you know anyone in the Syriac Orthodox congregation who (also) have friends/acquaintances who are Muslim? How does your family feel about Muslims and Islam? What would you think about if you/your children would marry a Muslim? Why? What does the Syriac Orthodox Church think about Muslims and Islam?

If you could wish, how would you want the relation between Christianity and Islam to look like?

Here in Sweden? In your/your parent's country of origin? The world? What needs to be done for your wish to come true? How would you go about doing that? What can the people in your/your parent's country of origin/the people in Sweden/the people of the world do? What can the Syriac Orthodox Church do? What can your congregation do? What can you do? Do you do that? Why/Why not?