

*“It’s all about dialogue,  
about humanity...”*

*(Storyteller nr.1)*

## The Dynamics of Dialogue through Narratives

Interreligious Youth performing and developing narratives through dialogue

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*The music from a mosque fills the room, a young man enters the stage, takes of his shoes, starting the traditional washing rituals before his praying, and place himself in a frozen position before next one enter the stage. A Jewish song fills the room when the woman who sings enter the stage. She carries a Jewish candlestick in her hands. She finds her place at stage. Immediately, a young man starts to sing a Christian hymn while he enters the stage with a bible in his hands. Then a Tamil enters the room with a grab of fruits in her hands. She takes of her shoes and place them beside the Muslim’s shoes. The last person to enter the stage is another Muslim, carrying a prayer rug wile looking for the direction to Mecca. In the hall, 250 pupils are responsive.*

### Introduction

The introduction above is the beginning of a performance with five different storytellers that in total introduces us to five religions. The main goal of their project is to present personal stories of beliefs, and show how is it possible to make a dialog between people with different religions. The Young Adults only represents themselves, and not the whole religious traditions. Thus, we approach dialogue on an individual level.

Today, the importance of intercultural communication in both global and domestic contexts is well recognized. Globalization and immigration have made cultural encounters an everyday experience. Interreligious dialogue can be seen as one dimension of intercultural communication (White Paper 2008:24), although this dialogue has been exclusively between religious communities, and rarely included non-religious convictions (Jackson, 2014:75). On the other hand, interreligious dialogue has developed a waste number of methods for cultural

and religious encounters, which can be of interest for intercultural communication (Wielzen & Avest 2017).

Although, interreligious dialogue often claims its beginning in 1893 during the first Parliament of World's Religions in Chicago (Swidler, 2013:6), it is mainly after the Vatican Council II (1962-1965) that is started to blossom fully (Swidler, 2013:7). The importance of interreligious dialogue were further encouraged after the 1989 "Fall of the Wall", and even more after 9/11. Interreligious dialogue was then not only the interest of religious leaders, but became part of conflict resolution theory and the development of the field of religious peacebuilding (Gopin 2000, Sampson & Johnston 1994, Appelby 2000, Smock 2002). In the beginning of this millennium conflict resolution theories were also included in the work of international organizations, such as World Conference of Religions for Peace and Untied Religions (Wang, 2012: 57,59), leading to the development of new methods for interreligious dialogue. By connecting conflict resolution theory to the field of interreligious dialogue, an interest for peacebuilding from below, which became central within conflict resolution theory (Ramsbotham, Miall and Woodhouse, 2005:4) influenced the development of interreligious dialogue. Interreligious dialogue was conducted on all levels of societies – from religious leaders to individual on the grassroots level (Garfinkel 2004, Wang 2012: 58).

In this paper we like to narrow our focus to one specific method from the field of interreligious dialogue, where young adults tell their faith stories to pupils between 13-19 as part of compulsory Religious Education (RE) in Norway. The method has been developed in Sweden, through the interreligious institution: "Together for Sweden" and further in relationship with The Three Faith Forum in London. The project invites youth from different religious or non-religious worldviews, to tell their faith stories through four questions: 1) Their religious background and upbringing, 2) Challenges and reflections in early teenage, 3) choices and turning points in their faith story and 4) what they believe today (Seminar in Stockholm 2016 and Rydinger & Tawalbeh 2014: 174).

This following paper is one of three articles that explores interfaith storytelling among Youths from three different Nordic countries, from different research fields and through different research material. In this paper our focus is on the Norwegian group and the impact on the development of narratives through dialogue among an Interreligious group of five Young

Adults, from 4 World continents and five of the World Religions – Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, during the time span between March 2017 and January 2018. In Bergen, we have constructed new methods that separates from the Swedish dialog module, because we use a director to brads the stories together in a theatrical way.

We like to explore the development of narrating from the first development of one's first story, through its dialogical composition and public performance on four schools during 10 months. Our research questions are:

**1) How does interreligious dialogue affect the identity of Young Adults?**

**2) How does different technics from dramaturgy promote further development of the stories in dialogue?**

**3) How does the response from an audience influence the stories and identifications of the Young Adults? This study is qualitative.**

We will start by giving some background information about the Interreligious Youth group and our role as researchers in this context. Secondly, we will present the theoretical framework of this study. This study draws on theories from narrative research and dramaturgy. Thirdly, we will present the methodological approach of this study, and the qualitative and quantitative inquires conducted. In this section, we will also discuss the reliability and validity of this study, and our own position as both researchers and insiders. In the next part of this paper, we will present the material and findings. The findings are analysed according to the theoretical framework of this paper. Finally, we will give a conclusion and highlights the findings and fruitfulness of this study and its limits.

## **Background**

The Interreligious Youth group in this study is part of larger Nordic Interreligious Youth organizations, led by the Swedish interreligious organization "Together for Sweden" (TFS). In May 2016, the Swedish organization gained support for capacity building by the Nordic Culture Point<sup>i</sup>, to develop storytelling as a method among Interreligious Youth organizations in Finland and Norway. The Youth group of this study was one of them.

TFS is a project from Stockholm, developed in 2007 by a Lutheran Priest Maria Kjellsdotter-Rydinger. It soon developed into an interreligious Youth organization, through cooperation between religious leaders from different religions in Stockholm. It further expanded its work to other cities in Sweden (Wang 2015). In 2014, TFS started to develop storytelling as a method among Interreligious Youth, under influence of the English Three Faith Forums. According to St Ethelburga in London, they followed their guide to narrative and story-based approach to community building (2011):

The Three Faiths Forum is a UK-based organisation that seeks to promote dialogue between Jewish, Muslim and Christian faith groups. Much of their work is directed toward young people. They recruit young adult volunteers from different religious backgrounds to visit schools and youth clubs. The volunteers are trained to use various dialogue tools to stimulate discussion around faith, identity and citizenship. Inspired by narrative work at the Interfaith Youth Core and also St Ethelburga's, the Forum recently switched the focus of its approach from delivering presentations about faith traditions to telling personal stories<sup>1</sup>.

Thus, a great number of interfaith organisations in Europe conducts using a story-based approach to promote community building. In May 2017, the director of TFS was invited to participate at a UN Conference called: "Building partnerships to promote inclusion and counter anti-migrant narratives"<sup>ii</sup>.<sup>2</sup>

Even though interreligious storytelling as an approach in community building has grown the last decade, little research have been conducted within the field of narrative research or dramaturgy. A few studies have been conducted on Interreligious Youth and storytelling (Elmèn 2014, Wang 2015, Meier 2012), but not how faith stories among Young Adults are developed and constructed through dialogue and performance over a period of time. Thus, this paper seeks to fill that vacuum.

## Theory

The theoretical framework of this study is based on two fields of studies. Firstly, we like to present narrative research based on Marianne Horsdal's studies. Secondly, will bring forth some perspectives for our dramaturgical work.

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<sup>1</sup> St Ethelburga's Guide to narrative and story-based approaches to community building, 2011: online: <https://stethelburgas.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/STE-Narrative-Guide-28-2-11.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Rydinger:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10155370958343658&set=a.42653363657.51205.599238657&type=3&theater>

In the following we will like to present some of the theoretical framework of Marianne Horsdal's, based on her PhD *Telling Lives: Exploring dimensions of narratives* 2012. As pointed out by Horsdal, temporality is a central term to describe a story, with a beginning, middle and an end, a selection of events within the limits of time and space. The events are selected and connected, to give meaning to the main theme in the story. We seek to understand each part as a vital for the wholeness of the story, and the wholeness of the story as consisting of these parts (Horsdal 2017: 22). Stories tend to create a unity, a continuity based on disruption (Horsdal 2017:24) A story is also given through someone's perception (Horsdal 2017:25).

Ricoeur writes about what he calls a triple mimesis. Mimesis 1 is the first response to an event given by the protagonist. Mimesis 2 is the story someone tells to other, and is called a symbolic representation; an event is retold though a story which has been configured according to the individual, time and space – and even meaning. Mimesis 3 occurs when others listen to a story, or the symbolic representation, and then interpret and understand the story based on different conditions (Horsdal 2017: 28).

Stories can also be understood as communication. According to Horsdal, in order to tell or communicate the content of an experience, it has to be through Mimesis 2, through a symbolic representation (Horsdal 2017:29). At the same time, the symbolic representation plays itself out with the interpretation and reception of the audience, Mimesis 3. Thus, in order to understand stories as communication, we have to consider the interactive relationship between the storyteller and the receiver. In addition, we have to consider whether the relationship between the storyteller and listener is symmetrical or asymmetrical (Horsdal 2017: 31). If the storyteller is conscious of his or her decisive influence, the story might turn out as a rhetorical justification. On the other hand, if the story is to be accepted and acknowledged by the audience, it needs to be recognizable and consistent with the cultural context (Horsdal 2017: 34). If a good listener shall be emotionally affected by the story, the audience needs to identify themselves at some point and feel empathy with the storyteller, which is what Horsdal calls "spejlneuroner" (Horsdal 2017: 37) or mirror neurons.

Horsdal emphasizes how contextual factors, such as cognitive, body and culture – are relevant when stories are told. Stories are not told in a vacuum. The cognitive level of the storyteller

as well as the audience is vital. The ability to experience empathy and mirror neurons are dependent on the bodily context as well. Stories are also told in the limit of a specific cultural context. There is difference between cultures and what is understood as plausible or correct to say. All these factors are the contextual parts of the stories we tell and how we perceive them (Horsdal 2017: 39-50).

Stories are often used to give meaning and sense to a series of event. Thus, they are also dependent on the context in which they are given. Stories may serve as a method to develop a feeling of community among neighbours, families, society or schoolmates. Stories can also aim to give an explanation to why something happened or why certain choices were made. On the other hand, if someone is experiencing a crisis – it can be difficult to frame a story behind the crisis. During a crisis, the world may look fragmented. When a person is able to tell the story behind the crisis, he or she probably is out of the crisis, and is thus capable to explain what happened through a story. In this way, telling a life story can have a therapeutic function (Horsdal, 2017: 187). In life stories or biographies, events from childhood and early teenage years often play a vital role (Horsdal 2017:160).

Listening and sharing personal stories might, according to Gadamer, create a fusion of horizons, where our perspectives are expanded by understanding different perspectives of others and conveying our own perspective to the other as well. In such a context, narratives can have a vital function in cultural encounters (Horsdal 2017: 62-64).

### **Dramaturgy**

Through the whole process of making the first storytelling performance in the group, one of us article writers have been a workshop leader for the verbal dialog, and the other one for leading the group in creative processes making their stories, helping them to present it, and make the performance with the whole group. The director does not have experience with the Swedish dialog methods and felt free to make several differences from that method even if this group was a part of the Nordic project. For instance, the director chose to try out different strategies for improvising. She therefore brought in some symbolic objects that could lift the esthetical part of the performance. The storytellers found these objects themselves, objects that were important for them in their understanding of belief. The

director started to merge the stories, and only allowed the storytellers to tell a part of the story at a time. There were several reasons for that: First, she wanted the performance in total to symbolize the dialog in between the group members, and secondly she was sure that inexperienced storytellers would make better performance if their stories were divided into smaller parts. Some of the storytellers first became a bit worried since they could not see the whole performance clearly. On the other hand they started to worry about the audience, and if they were able to understand the different stories, and connect them to right person.

In the performance, we used some stage modules to build up different levels of the stage. Every storytellers had each their little platform to sit on or stand by. During the performance, they changed places four times. In addition, during these changes we made these movements tell a parallel story to their faith stories. Because the stories of the movements changed from being people that did not know each other, to recognize each other's, and to put a political focus on the performance in the end when they were newspapers vendors selling fake news.

## **Method**

This study uses qualitative research. The purpose of the qualitative study is to gain new understanding of how Young Adults engaged in interfaith-storytelling and school visits, experience this process and the encounters with other young Adults in the interfaith organizations and during school visits. The material was sampled through semantic interviews with five Young Adults engaged in Nordic interreligious dialogue and school visits in RE. The Young Adults were in the age between 19 and 30 years. The interviews were organized by four main questions, which were given to the informants prior to the interviews. These four questions were: 1) Why did you decide to tell your faith story to other? 2) How did you experience the process of conducting your faith story? 3) Were you affected by listening to the stories of others in the interfaith group? 4) How did you experience to visit schools, and telling your story to the pupils? The interviews were conducted in January 2018.

In addition, we were given access to video tapes of their faith stories during three periods<sup>3</sup>. The first was about their individual faith stories recorded in March 2017, before the dialogue started. The second was during their first performance when the stories of these five Young Adults were composed as a dialogue in April 2017. The third was recorded in January 2018 during their fourth performance for pupils aged 18/19.

Lincoln and Guba (1985:289-331) argue that sustaining the trustworthiness of a research report depends on the issues, quantitatively, discussed as validity and reliability. In qualitative research, the idea of discovering truth through measures of reliability and validity is replaced by the idea trustworthiness, which is defensible and establishes confidence in the findings. The quality of a research is related to generalizability of the result and thereby to the testing and increasing the validity of trustworthiness of the researcher (Stenbacka, 2001). Evaluating the validity of a research calls for a consideration of the components of the research situation (place, time, informant) and the research problem and tools (Kirk et.al 1986).

It is important to emphasize the role we played as researchers and insider. Lyngstad trained the Youths in storytelling and performance during the whole period under investigation. Wang had organized this group and made them get in contact with the Nordic Interreligious dialogue led by TFS. In this way, we did not enter this researcher project as neutral observes. In this way, the material presented here is the result of a dependent and common construction in the interaction with researchers and Young Adults (Kvale1997, Pinnegar & Daynes 2007). This does not mean that objectivity has not been the goal of our conduct, but to be aware of and critically examine how the influence our role as insiders might have affected the dialogue and the development of their faith stories,

## **Material**

Even though the storytelling performance is an interesting part of this research product, we will not analyse all the individual stories in detail in this article. But it is important to give you an impression of the performance. Therefore, we like to start by presenting the main lines in these stories as they were presented through dialogue during the performance. Secondly, we will present extracts from the interviews.

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<sup>3</sup> The qualitative study is reported and accepted by the Norwegian Data Protection Authority, with the project number 52913



### *Introduction to the performance*

«Once upon a time, there was a little village ...» said Lyngstad and told a famous Jewish story “The Worlds most important question”; about a frustrated student, who despite his overwhelming studies could not understand the meaning of life. All the members of the community tried to help the young student, but could not give him a satisfactory answer. Finally, they brought the student to the wise Rabbi, living in the neighbour village – to ask him what the meaning of life is. The Rabbi shake his head, and looked seriously at the student as he announced his disappointment of the student who thought he could find a simple answer to the most important question in the world. – Don`t you know, that it is the questions that unites us, but the answers which divides.

### *Scene 1 Religious Rituals as an introduction*

The story starts by the sound of the Muslim call for prayer. A Young man enter the stage and washes his face and hands as Muslims do before prayer. Then, a Jewish woman enters the stage by singing a song and lightening the candles for Hanukkah. Next, the sound of a hymn fills the rooms, as a Christian Young man enters the room while he carry a bible and sings the hymn. A Hindu melody is than played, as a young woman enters and bows down in prayer. Finally, Muslim recitation plays out in the room, as the second Muslim man enters and look for the direction of Mecca from his compass on his cell phone.

### *Scene 2 Stories from childhood*

The five Young Adults are sitting on different stage modules. They look down thoughtfully, and only lift up their face when it is theirs turn to tell. One of the Young Muslims starts by telling how he was brought up in Eritrea and how he was respected in the community, because his father was an imam. But even though he learnt most about his faith from her. Then, the Jewish women explains how she was blessed by the Rabbi as a child, and how she became Jewish because she was adopted by a Jewish couple in New York. The Christian man tells how he was the child of two priests, and thereby was given the call-name “the son of the priests” at school. The Hindu woman presents how her parents came from Sri Lanka, and wanted their children to learn about their culture through Hinduism and by visiting the Temple in Oslo. The second Muslim man explains his first visit to the Mosque in Yemen, together with his grandfather, and how this visit made him attached to the Mosque.

### *Scene 3 Seeing without seeing*

All the Young Adults walks busy around on the stage, they are passing another, but do not see each other or greets one another. Suddenly they finds a new private place to calm down from the business, a stage module to sit on. Everyone freeze again.

### *Scene 4 Detachment – stories form teenager time*

The first Muslim tells about his meeting with the Norwegian society. He wanted to be part of the community and embrace a society where freedom of speech and freedom of faith where central. He started to study the Norwegian language. However, as he learned the language he also understood the prejudices against Islam through media. It made him sad and anxious.

The Jewish woman then told us how she became uncertain about her Jewish faith, and started to explore Buddhism. Through Buddhist meditation, she experienced a calm she had never had before.

The Christian man wanted to be cool and independent, and made a great effort in losing the image as «the son of the priests». However, one day he breaks down in tears, and realises that it is only by acknowledging his own vulnerability and his faith, that he can be strong.

The Hindu woman explains how it became difficult for her to visit the Temple in teenager time. She was angry with God, for not ending the war in Sri Lanka. However, as she grew older and the war in Sri Lanka ended, she gradually starts to visit the Temple again, and feels at peace.

The second Muslim continues his story by invited the audience to his first experience, as a refugee in Norway. He tells about loneliness and how he felt as a burden in the Norwegian society. He starts to pray in his room at the refugee camp. Soon he has made several Muslim friends from different countries. He remember how his mother always thought him to pray when he felt lonely. He was not alone anymore. He continues by telling how his room became like a Mosque, gathering several Muslims to prayer. He felt happy and surrounded by friends in Norway. This part of the performance has quiet long stories building up to the turning point. Therefor we made a little session of movement where the Young Adults were walking around

on the stage and greets one another. After that they found another stage module to sit on, and continue to tell their story. .

#### *Scene 5: Daily news*

One of the Muslim men asks if someone needs a Newspaper. The Newspapers are shared. The Youths walk around the stage and pretend to sell Newspapers. The change and swats Newspapers, before they sit down on their bench and start reading up different headlines. – A Muslim Eritrean was found in a Church”, reads one of the Muslim men. The he tells how he made many Christians friends and worked voluntarily in a Church. Gradually, he was engaged in interreligious dialogue. He also tells about an episode in a Restaurant where one of the Guest approached him aggressively because he was an immigrant and Muslim. His Christians friends supported him, and this episode made him even more certain that he would continue his work with dialogue. – What happens when a Jew gain interest for Buddhism? The Jewish woman pretends to read a headline from the Newspaper. Then she explains how she has decided to preserve her Jewish tradition, while still attending Buddhist meditation. She calls herself an agnostic –Jewish-Buddhist. Then, the Christian man reads out from the paper: - A Christian man found strength through his faith! Who cares? In this way, he demonstrates how faith is insignificant for many in a secular society, but means the world to him. – A young woman is washed by her Uncle during a celebration of her periodic. The she tells who people from Sri Lanka, celebrates their daughters first periods, by inviting family, friends and colleagues. The daughter is placed in a Bathtub, where the Guest poured water on her, before she is dressed with a Hindu Sire. Finally, the second Muslim says: - Mosques excludes Muslims from the Society! The he explains how he believe the Mosques should include Muslims into the Norwegian society, to become good neighbours, schoolmates, colleagues and friends, and how this is his hope for the City of Bergen. He shouts – Bergen! In addition, all the Young Adults, shouts the same, as they gather under the same umbrella for Bergen – which is known to be the rainiest city of Norway.

#### The Interviews

*Why did you decided to tell your faith story to others?*

All the Young Adults explained some kind of mixed feelings by entering the group. There were feelings of nervousness for how to tell their stories, but also curiosity and excitement for the project. Three of the participants did not have Norwegian as their mother language, and were anxious for language problem. Others were wondering how to separate the most private part of their faith from what they wanted to tell earnestly about. One was also sceptical to how telling a personal story for others – and withholding certain private parts – might led to a false construction of his/her real story. Later though, he/she clarified that the story was not false.

One the other hand, although all the participants had mixed feelings about entering the group, they all proclaimed how each member of the group had become a close friend. One of the Muslim participants said:

It was a bit difficult in the start, because of language and how to share something private. Because I think religion is a private thing ... but now I think we`re like a family. I really want to be part of this group in the future (I4).

#### *How did you experience the process of conducting your faith story?*

Each member of the group explained how the process of conducting their faith stories had been a thoughtful and deeply reflective process that they experienced as meaningful and positive. One of the participant explained:

To develop my own story, was like a reflection of my past ... I could put my past into a perspective, which made it more understandable for myself and easier to share with others ... I have learned that my childhood will never leave me, it`s always there ... it`s so easy to suppress your childhood . This can lead to a conflict in your personality... but you are still a child ... vulnerable ... (I1).

For another participant this working process helped her to catch her own faith story, that she had not been aware of. Now she felt she was more able to understand more about why she had done several things in her life.

Some emphasized how their stories only represented themselves and not all the members of their faith tradition. One explained why he/she did not feel this as problematic:

... my experience is that this is okay. In each religion, there are many interpretations. I cannot say that you are right or wrong. Because Islam has many interpretations ... but we have to live together no matter what interpretation you have (I4).

Where you affected by listening to the stories of others in the interfaith group?

All delegates were affected, in some way by listening to the stories of others in the interfaith group, although nobody felt that this changed their understanding of their own story. They all explained how listening to the faith stories of others, had given them a new understanding of others. One explained:

It has given me a new understanding of how important religion can be for humans ... I recognize several issues ... like being in a religious room and feeling fascinated ... or being that seriously and religious child ... to feel abandoned, but still being able to pray to God ... but there has also been many new things ... (I1).

Another explained how listening to the stories of others, sometimes made her reflect other episodes in her own life and integrate them into her story:

... when I listen to the story of others, I'm thinking – okay – this person's story contend exactly the same experience I have had, maybe I could change my story and integrate it ... (I3)

One of the participant tells how listening to the stories of others have made him reflect his own religion's view of other faiths;

Every time we have a meeting ... I have so many questions that I ask myself ... This means that before I came to Norway ... I viewed this world from another angle ... but when I joined this group I learned more, firstly about myself but then about others. These things made it possible for me to accept other people no matter faith or ethnicity ... Through the Quran I understand religions from the Principles of the Quran ... but when you meet people physically, face to face, something happens ... (I4)

Another one underlines that this project has open up her view even more, and let her understand their similarities.

It has made me see, whom we really are (I5)

*How did you experience to visit schools, and telling your story to the pupils*

Everyone pointed out how visiting schools and facing pupils had been a great experience.

One explained:

It has been exciting ... when I saw their faces (the pupils), they were curious, they asked many questions ... it was exciting to share my story with them ... they shall become curious and me too (I4).

Another explained how she was nervous at the start, but truly happy in the end:

It affects me, of course, when I come into that vulnerable part, I feel a bit back in time ... In the beginning I was afraid of how people would response, specifically because my story is not only about one religion, but almost two ... but I wanted to show some issues ... and parts of my life ... I feel happy in the end (I3).

The other girl was also talking about how uncomfortable she was in the beginning, because she is not used to talk about herself. But, now she says she has been used to it. She also think she has become better in answering the questions from the students. When we asked why she replied: "I think it is because of the dialog meetings, and our work to put the stories together"(I5).

All the members of the group felt that by constructing their different stories through dialogue, each of the stories were deepened in some way. One of the participant said:

I thought it was quite pleasant, for my part. Especially in two ways. The first is that my story ... was deepened by the other stories, and hopefully the other`s stories were deepened by my. It think that is what happened ... now I have seen similarities and differences between the stories, so I am more aware of what the stories are about, what is universal and what is particular with my story ... there are many people I know who does not know my story, but now almost 500 pupils know ... but then it is good to stand together with someone else (I1).

Another explained similarly:

It lifts up the stories, when we have four or five different stories ... we have different parts .... However, in the end it becomes a rich and common story. From my perspective, whether you are a Muslim, Christian, Jew ... it`s all about dialogue ... about humanity (I3).

One of the participants explained how telling her story to others, had changed her personally:

Generally, (it has made me) more open to show that I am Jewish, more open to show that I have different views then most Jews, and more open to explain people what I like about Buddhism ... more open to listen and talk ... interreligious dialogue ... makes me happy (I3).

One of the participant also reflected on how the different stories could be performed if they got a non-religious member to their group:

The introduction is very important. It sets the tone. Moreover, gives it kind of ... a perspective of wondering. However, I`ve been thinking about when we get our first non-religious into the

group ... what shall they do when they enter? ... Because it is vital that non-religious are included in the same way as religious. Otherwise it will be like – us and them ... (I1).

## Analysis

Here we will continue with analysing the interview, reflect on the findings, set them in a theoretical perspective and discuss the issues for this research.

To the reader: We are still in the process of working with the material and the analysis.

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