

Building Peace

South Sudan Council of Churches' Peacebuilding Efforts from 2015 to 2022

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All errors and omissions are my own.

Abstract

The thesis explores religious peacebuilding in South Sudan by examining the opportunities and constraints South Sudan Council of Churches experienced in its peacebuilding efforts from 2015 to 2022. The study contributes to the debate on religion's role in peace and conflict and religious actors' potential to build peace. The thesis argues that religious peacebuilding must be understood by socio-politics and theology in tandem. Religious actors' potential to build peace is largely determined by the civic space allowed by the government, and religious actors' relation to the authorities. In South Sudan, there is a unique bond between religious actors and the government, dating from the independence struggle. The relationship has given religious actors leeway in peacebuilding that other parts of civil society have not had. However, South Sudan Council of Churches balances closeness with independence so as not to be held responsible for the government's actions. In addition to socio-politics, it is crucial to recognize religious actors' motivation and justification for peacebuilding to fully understand the potential of religious peacebuilding. Religious actors in South Sudan justify their peacebuilding efforts with theology and use the Bible to accentuate peace, unity, and harmonious living. The case study was conducted in 2022, using semi-structured interviews and a thematic analysis of South Sudan Council of Churches' written statements.

Abbreviations

APP	The Action Plan for Peace
ARCSS	The Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan
AU	The African Union
CPA	The Comprehensive Peace Agreement
IGAD	The Intergovernmental Authority on Development
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NSD	The Norwegian Centre for Research Data
R-ARCSS	The Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan
SDI	The Stepwise Deductive-Inductive method
SPLA	The Sudan People's Liberation Army
SPLM	The Sudan People's Liberation Movement
SPLM/A	The Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army
SPLM/A-IO	The Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army in Opposition
SSCC	South Sudan Council of Churches
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa
UN	The United Nations

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1 Introduction

South Sudan became the world's youngest state in 2011 when 98.3 percent of the population voted for secession from Sudan (Ashworth & Ryan, 2013, p. 49; Tounsel, 2021, p. 119). The country was soon thrown into civil war. The reasons for the violent conflicts were manifolded, but power politics reinforced by ethnic differences have been a cross-cutting issue throughout different disputes (Agensky, 2019, p. 286; Ashworth & Ryan, 2013, p. 57). The contentions between neighbors in South Sudan have not been grounded in religious quarrels. However, religious actors have been at the forefront of finding solutions to conflicts and trying to build lasting peace (Agensky, 2019, p. 279; Horjen, 2014, p. 195).

Religion is an integral part of the South Sudanese society, present in all major life events (Wilson, 2019, p. 27). Religious actors have provided social services to the population, like education and humanitarian assistance (Agensky, 2019, p. 284; Wilson, 2019, p. 27). Through decades of civil war, first as part of Sudan and then as an independent state, churches have been among a few relatively stable institutions in South Sudan (Ashworth & Ryan, 2013, p. 47; Horjen, 2014, p. 195; Jeffrey, 2018). South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) is one of the most prominent religious organizations in the country. The ecumenical organization represents the major Christian denominations across ethnic groups. SSCC is at the forefront of religious peacebuilding in South Sudan. However, despite long-lasting efforts to promote peace and reconciliation, a peaceful South Sudan seems far away. Religious actors and other parts of civil society has challenging conditions, and the space to engage in civil and political activities is shrinking (Day et al., 2022, p. 19; HRW, 2022a). This thesis explores the potential for religious peacebuilding in South Sudan, by examining the opportunities and constraints SSCC has experienced in its peacebuilding efforts.

1.1 Theories

The thesis examines theories on inclusive peace processes, religion in relation to peace and conflict, and religious peacebuilding. Combining high-level peace negotiations with local-level initiatives has increasingly been recognized in the peace research (Frydenlund, 2014; Harpviken & Røislien, 2008; Maihack & Reuss, 2019; Uesugi et al., 2021). The literature on religion in relation to peace and conflict expanded after the terror attacks on 9/11 in 2001 (Bellin, 2008, p. 315; Harpviken & Røislien, 2008, p. 357). Due to this, the focus has mainly been on religion's

role in conflicts, but the literature on religion and peacebuilding is growing (Agensky, 2019, p. 282; Brewer et al., 2010, p. 1020).

Religious actors can engage in peacebuilding in various ways. They can take part in official peace processes either at the negotiating table or as observers, facilitate shadow processes, or engage in the implementation stage of a peace process (Harpviken & Røislien, 2008, p. 361). Lederach (1997) has proposed a three-part pyramid and argue that religious actors can effectively function at the middle level to link the official peace process with grassroots initiatives. Brewer, Higgins, and Teeney (2010) build on this skill in their framework for examining the potential of religious peacebuilding. They believe religious actors' most important tool is a unique social capital. Religious actors can contribute to "social peacebuilding," i.e., the follow-up and implementation of a peace agreement. Brewer et al. (2010) argue that the opportunities to conduct religious peacebuilding are context-dependent and must be understood by the relationship between the religious actors and the state. Steen-Johnsen (2016, 2020) builds on Brewer et al.'s theories but accentuates that a message of peace, forgiveness, and love is not enough to create lasting peace. The message of compassion must be combined with transitional justice and recognition of grievances to create sustainable peace.

Religious actors' engagement in peacebuilding can take different forms. Harpviken and Røislien (2008, pp. 367–370) define three different peace broker roles religious actors can take on, which will be examined. Religious peacebuilding often centers around reconciliation processes with some form of dialogue. Frydenlund (2014) proposes five types of dialogues in which religious actors can partake, which will be explored.

How one defines religion affects any discussion on religious peacebuilding. The thesis explores a combination of functionalist and essentialist definitions of religion, namely its role in society and its "faith dimension", trying to capture both socio-political and theological aspects of religion (Frydenlund, 2014, p. 5; Haynes, 2013, p. 16).

1.2 Research Context

Despite an increased focus on religion and peace, there is still a need for empirical cases that can contribute to challenging and further developing theories on religious peacebuilding. The thesis aims at contributing to the growing research field of religious peacebuilding by exploring the opportunities and constraints religious peacebuilders experience in South Sudan.

South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) has conducted peacebuilding activities for decades and consists of the largest Christian denominations in South Sudan across ethnic groups. The organization's societal position and legitimacy in both the population and in relation to the government, makes it captivating to examine. SSCC is an example of one of the few cross-ethnic organizations in an ethnically divided country.

SSCC is accentuated as an essential actor in the religious peacebuilding environment in South Sudan by several researchers and practitioners (e.g., Agensky, 2019; Ashworth & Ryan, 2013; Horjen, 2014). It is also included in comprehensive studies like Wilson's from 2019, on religious peacebuilding in South Sudan. However, a single-case study with in-depth analysis of SSCC's work and status in society has not been conducted.¹ South Sudan does not have a broad and open civic and political space flourishing with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Ashworth & Ryan, 2013, p. 47). Conducting a single-case study of one of South Sudan's most prominent organizations in the civil society, which has been working with peacebuilding in an institutionalized manner over many years, will hopefully contribute to an understanding of the potential for religious peacebuilding in South Sudan.

1.3 Research Design

The thesis is guided by the research question: *What opportunities and constraints did South Sudan Council of Churches experience in its peacebuilding efforts from 2015 to 2022?*

The thesis does a single-case study of South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC). The data was collected through semi-structured interviews and a thematic analysis of SSCC's written statements between March and August 2022. The informants were SSCC representatives and civil society representatives collaborating with SSCC.

The analysis uses an abductive approach, starting from an empirical perspective, like inductive approaches, while relating to existing theories (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 169). To operationalize the abductive approach, the analysis is developed using the Stepwise Deductive-Inductive method (SDI), by generating codes and themes from the empirical material and relating to existing theories and literature as the analysis develops (Tjora, 2021, pp. 20–21).

¹ At least not by what the student could find digitally in September 2022.

1.4 Structure

The thesis is divided into six chapters.

The present chapter has briefly introduced the thesis, including an account of the research design and structure.

The second chapter introduces the theories which the analysis and discussion build on, focusing on different levels of peacebuilding where religious actors can operate, what activities they conduct, and what roles they can take, both in official and unofficial peace processes. Different definitions of central concepts, like religion and religious peacebuilding, are discussed. The theory chapter places the thesis in a research context, providing the reader with an overview of some of the most relevant research on religious peacebuilding.

The third chapter gives an overview of history and politics in South Sudan, in addition to religious peacebuilding in the country. The chapter aims to equip the reader with enough context and overview of events to be able to engage in the analysis and discussion.

The fourth chapter presents the methods used to collect and analyze the data and argues why a single-case study is appropriate for researching SSCC's peacebuilding efforts. Semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis of SSCC statements, are presented and discussed. The chapter demonstrates ethical considerations, in addition to the thesis' limitations.

The fifth chapter analyzes the collected data, drawing on existing literature to contextualize the findings.

The sixth chapter discusses the findings in the analysis with the theories presented in the theory chapter, aiming to answer the research question.

2 Theory

“Wars are ended by elites; peace is built and sustained at the grassroots” (McNamee & Muyangwa, 2021, p. 8). As McNamee and Muyangwa indicate, it is necessary to engage the population to secure lasting peace. Scholars from different disciplines and practitioners like the United Nations (UN) and the African Union (AU) emphasize the importance of people-centered approaches to peacebuilding and the necessity to combine high-level negotiations with local-level initiatives (Frydenlund, 2014; Harpviken & Røislien, 2008; Maihack & Reuss, 2019; Nyuykonge & Singo, 2017; Uesugi et al., 2021; United Nations, 2015). Religious actors are often central civil society actors that engage in peacebuilding (Aghensky, 2019, p. 283; Brewer et al., 2010, p. 1023). This chapter discusses theories on inclusive peace processes, religion in relation to peace and conflict, and religious peacebuilding.

2.1 Inclusive Peace Processes

Peace research pioneer Johan Galtung (1996, p. 3) distinguishes between “negative” and “positive” peace. “Negative peace” is the absence of violence and conflict, and “positive peace” is an alternative to a conflicted reality, with sustainable and long-term solutions, justice, equality, and redistribution. Working for “positive peace” allows for a nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of peacebuilding which places people and communities at the center of the process (Uesugi et al., 2021, p. 24). Brewer et al. (2011, pp. 4–5) see two stages in building “positive peace”, distinguishing between what they call “political peacebuilding” and “social peacebuilding”. “Political peacebuilding” is the very peace agreement, which is, in addition to being a first and necessary step to create “positive peace”, also often a prerequisite for “negative peace”, to stop the fighting parties. “Social peacebuilding” is the follow-up and implementation of a peace agreement. Brewer et al. argue that civil society is central in the implementation stage, as popular support and engagement are necessary to make “positive peace”.

“Track One Diplomacy”, “Track Two Diplomacy”, “Multi-Track Diplomacy”, and “1.5 Diplomacy” are common in the conflict resolution vocabulary. Track One is the official negotiating process, and Track Two is the “back channel”, with informal meetings to work for peace from below (Montville, 2006, p. 15). Multi-Track Diplomacy and 1.5 Diplomacy connect the different tracks and draw on a variety of efforts (Diamond & McDonald, 1996). There are different opinions on whether civil society should be included in official negotiating processes. Hilde Frafjord Johnsen (2016, p. 354), former UN Special Representative to South Sudan and,

on behalf of the Norwegian government, part of the peace process in South Sudan leading to the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, calls it the “negotiation paradox”; to facilitate peace processes that are “inclusive enough”. Inclusive so that different stakeholders experience ownership of the process but simultaneously exclusive enough for the parties to reach an agreement that will not end up diluted. Jok (2021, p. 364) argues that peace is often negotiated by those carrying weapons, able and needed to stop the fighting, which often seems to be the most pressing when a peace agreement is brokered. Like Uesugi et al. (2021, p. 24), Maihack and Reuss (2019, p. 5) argue that civil society should be included in official peace processes to secure support for the processes, build trust between communities, and strengthen the population’s trust in the government. They argue that civil society actors must be included in a strategic way, not as mere tokens to secure popular support. However, being part of official negotiations brings responsibility for the outcome, which can strengthen the accountability of the civil society actors involved but also put them in a challenging position. They can lose popular trust and legitimacy if the outcome does not meet the expectations of the people they represent or if they are perceived as political, as Wilson (2019, pp. 22, 36) points out as an issue in South Sudan.

Civil society is central to the notions of “positive peace” and inclusive peace processes. Religious actors are often prominent figures in civil society and conduct peacebuilding in many countries. However, religion also has qualities which are used to legitimize violence. The following section will look at how religion relates to peace and conflict.

2.2 Religion, Peace, and Conflict

Political science and international diplomacy have traditionally been dominated by a secular worldview and understanding of conflict (Bellin, 2008, p. 315; Harpviken & Røislien, 2008, p. 363). Frydenlund (2014, p. 6) argues that the peace and conflict research must recognize “norms, ideology, culture, identity and history” to understand the motives of human actions. Religion is central in this aspect, as it is closely linked to how people choose to live their lives and which normative worldview they possess (Harpviken & Røislien, 2008, p. 353). There is a growing acknowledgement of religion’s role in peace and conflict (Bellin, 2008, p. 315; Harpviken & Røislien, 2008, p. 357). Bellin (2008, pp. 315–316) argues that this is both due to increased interest and methodological understanding of religion in relation to political science theories and because of political events, like the Islamist terror attacks on 9/11 2001 and the

following “war on terror”. These events have arguably contributed to the domination of research on religion in relation to conflict and violence (Harpviken & Røislien, 2008, p. 352). However, an understanding of religion as a positive force in building peace is emerging (Agensky, 2019, p. 282; Brewer et al., 2010, p. 1020).

Galtung (2012, pp. 249, 255) argues that religions possess qualities that enable the use of them for both peaceful and non-peaceful means. Galtung does not separate between peaceful and non-peaceful religions but argues that religions have both “hard” and “soft” qualities. The “hard” qualities divide people and function exclusionary, and the “soft” qualities unite people and promote harmonious living and peace. Religion’s dual role is captured by Appleby (2015, p. 36), who calls it “religious ambivalence,” meaning that religion can both cause conflict and be essential in peacebuilding. The duality is exemplified by Botman, who writes about religion and apartheid in South Africa. Botman (2004, pp. 245, 247) argues that religion was used to both legitimize and oppose apartheid. The segregation system was first developed and institutionalized in the white Dutch Reformed Church, arguing that their religion was threatened by the black South Africans, whom they saw as “atheists and communists”, and that a “separate development” of different races was necessary. On the other hand, religious actors and organizations played essential roles in the anti-apartheid struggle in the United Democratic Front, which included actors from different religious communities and civil society organizations (Botman, 2004, pp. 246–247). This duality exemplifies the importance of recognizing the role religion can play in peace and conflict, both as a positive and negative force.

How one defines religion is central to understanding what role religious actors can take in building peace. Therefore, religion and other central concepts will be examined to lay the foundation for the thesis’ analysis and discussion.

2.3 Defining Religion and Religious Peacebuilding

Religion can be understood in several ways, and there is not one academic definition commonly agreed upon (Haynes, 2013, p. 16). A distinction is often made between essentialist definitions, which emphasize an “inner faith” dimension and belief in a superhuman entity, and functionalist definitions, focusing on religion’s function and role in society (McCutcheon, 1995, pp. 288, 299; Pals, 2015, p. 105). Haynes’ (2013, p. 16) definition is convenient to try to capture and include both dimensions. Haynes defines religion “by what it *says* and by what it *does*. The

former relates to religion's doctrine or theology, the latter to its importance as a social phenomenon and mark of identity". By including "what religion says," the thesis will explore the faith dimension and theological foundation, in addition to examining "what religion does", namely what role religion has in society, as an identity marker, and its socio-political capacity. Religion can be used both theologically and instrumentally in peacebuilding, as argued by Frydenlund (2014, p. 5), who believes it is necessary to develop a middle ground between the two paths of defining religion in either an essentialist or functionalist way.

Religious actors take center stage in this thesis. Steen-Johnsen (2016, p. 12) uses "religious actor" and "religious leader" interchangeably in her study of religious peacebuilding in Ethiopia. Steen-Johnsen does not focus on religious organizations. She is particularly interested in the relationship between religious peacebuilders and the authorities and argues that political authority figures are more comparable to religious leaders than religious organizations. The thesis avoids this distinction but instead acknowledges that a religious actor is a broad term, often used interchangeably, as by the informants in this thesis, with "religious leader", "faith community," and "the church." The different terms refer both to individuals, organizations, and communities. SSCC is comprised by religious actors who are crucial to the organization's activities and role as a peacebuilder. Hence, SSCC is seen as both an actor and an organization.

Wilson (2019, p. 7) defines a religious actor as "[...] one whose primary activity is religious" (Wilson, 2019, p. 7). This definition necessitates defining what religious activity is, to separate it from non-religious activity. In Wilson's study on religious peacebuilding in South Sudan, she excludes one respondent because his primary goal is "peacemaking, not saving souls". SSCC is an ecumenical organization and can hence be seen as doing religious activities. However, based on SSCC's mandate and activities, one could argue that its primary activity is peacebuilding, not "saving souls" (SSCC, n.d.). In the strictest sense of Wilson's definition, SSCC would consequently not qualify as a religious actor. However, SSCC is recognized as a religious actor in Wilson's study, probably because its members conduct more traditional religious activities like sermons and worship. Nevertheless, Wilson's definition of religious actors becomes deficient when discussing religious peacebuilding, as the *motive* for an activity is not given importance. This thesis will explore whether a theological foundation is essential for SSCC's peacebuilding activities and if peacebuilding is seen as a way to fulfill the gospel. To draw a clear distinction between religious activity and peacebuilding will thus be premature at this stage.

Religious peacebuilding can be understood and defined in different ways, and its conceptualization is closely linked to how one defines religion. Stensvold and Vik (2018, p. 2) argue that religious peacebuilding can be based on theology, with religious values and justification based on religious scriptures, and politics, with a pragmatic approach to religion as an instrument. These distinctions can be related to the essentialist and functionalist definitions of religion. This thesis does not use a clear-cut distinction between essentialist and functionalist definitions of religion, nor when understanding religious peacebuilding. Hence, a definition of religious peacebuilding does not necessarily need to choose only a theological or political perspective.

Peacebuilding is a research field dominated by a secular worldview. To ensure that the value of religious peacebuilding is fully understood, Carter and Smith (2004, p. 281) argue that it is necessary to recognize the role of spiritual and theological perspectives. In other words, a solely functionalist understanding of religion would remove a critical aspect which separates religious peacebuilding from other forms of peacebuilding. A crucial point in this matter is raised by Galtung (2012, p. 255), who states that “[...] one of the most important struggles for peace today is the theological debate within any one of the religions in the world in favour of genuine religion, trying to weed out the distorted or distorting elements”. Galtung argues that the soft aspects in a given theology, which can be used to justify peace, must be brought forward to legitimate peacebuilding rather than conflict. Steen-Johnsen’s (2016, p. 11) definition of religious peacebuilding allows for a combination of essentialist and functionalist understandings of religion, by including peacebuilding’s theological and political aspects.

[Religious peacebuilding is] activities performed by actors who act upon a religious mandate to prevent, transform, or reduce violent or potentially violent conflicts. These actors might draw upon a variety of religious resources while engaging in peacebuilding, including religious norms, religious texts and rituals, positions in religious organizational structures and reference to religious identities.

Steen-Johnsen includes several elements necessary to separate religious peacebuilding from other types of peacebuilding. She points at actions that are religiously motivated, or “mandated”, which is crucial, as the divide between religious and non-religious actors might not always be distinct in all settings, and that religious actors or persons do not necessarily

conduct religious peacebuilding just because they are religious. This point is essential in a country like South Sudan, where religion is all-encompassing in society and not primarily a private affair. Wilson's study (2019, pp. 9–10) exemplifies this. Eighty-two percent of her respondents, including the non-religious ones, state that they “turn to religious leaders when they have a problem”. Steen-Johnsen's definition also includes the “resources”, or tools, used in religious peacebuilding. This is crucial to understanding the link between theology, being the hermeneutics and religious actors' interpretation of the scripture, and their socio-political role. In other words, Steen-Johnsen's definition allows for an understanding of religious peacebuilding as both theologically and politically motivated, including the theological reasoning for action and the tools religious actors use. The following section explores how these tools are applied, by examining various ways religious actors engage in peacebuilding.

2.4 Different Types of Religious Peacebuilding

The research on religious peacebuilding is dominated by religious actors' ability to solve conflicts with a religious dimension. However, much of the research is applicable to non-religious conflicts as the scholars focus on religious actors' role as social actors in society (Brewer et al., 2010, p. 1024; Steen-Johnsen, 2016, p. 1). Harpviken and Røislien (2008, p. 360) argue that religious actors are well suited to engage in peacebuilding when their religious identities do not coincide with the identities defining the conflict. They point toward the churches' role in the aftermath of the apartheid in South Africa. Harpviken and Røislien (2008, p. 364) also believe that “religiosity” can strengthen a companionship between conflicting parties, even if they do not follow the same religion. Frydenlund (2014, p. 15) argues that it is case-dependent whether and how religious actors can contribute to peace. However, she argues that religious actors can legitimize a political process and use their communication methods to spread a peaceful message.

2.4.1 Levels of Engagement

“[...] religion's potential for peacebuilding may be found in its semi-independent position within society” (Frydenlund, 2014, p. 16). Religious actors are often central civil society actors. However, they are often in a closer relationship with the government than other civil society organizations (Frydenlund, 2014, p. 16). Religious actors can hence function as middle-range

actors, as they often enjoy respect from both the government and the population (Frydenlund, 2014, p. 22).

Peacebuilding Nestor John Paul Lederach (1997, p. 39) has proposed a peacebuilding pyramid with three levels. Level one is the top level, where official peace negotiations, with political and military representatives, take place. Level two is where the middle-range actors operate, like national NGOs, with ties to the other two levels. Level three is the local level, where grassroots initiatives and local NGOs engage. Lederach (1997, p. 151) argues that the middle-range leaders are crucial to build sustainable peace. Religious leaders can operate at all three levels but are most often part of the middle level, where they have their niche: the capacity to bond and bridge within and between groups in society and bind local grassroots peace initiatives with the national process and build trust in the official process in local communities (Horjen, 2014, p. 2014; Mairhack & Reuss, 2019, p. 5). Frydenlund (2014, p. 15) raises a point crucial to understanding the role religious peacebuilders can play in peace processes. Though religious actors can function as middle-range actors, as Lederach proposes, it is necessary to recognize hierarchical structures in religious communities. Frydenlund (2014, p. 15) argues that religious leaders in elite positions are often closely linked with political elites and that engaging religious leaders at the mid-level in society is necessary to ensure ties to the grassroots levels.

2.4.2 The Religion-Civil Society-State Nexus

Brewer et al. (2010, p. 1022) have developed a conceptual framework to study peacebuilding across different contexts. The framework is meant for research on peacebuilding where religion plays a part in the conflict but functions well for conflicts without a religious dimension as well. Brewer et al. (2010, p. 1022) propose that the potential for religious peacebuilding must be understood in a nexus between religion, civil society, and the state, meaning the relationship between civil society, religious actors, and the authorities. Brewer et al. (2010, p. 1022) argue that the conditions for religious peacebuilding depend on 1) the religion's status as a minority or majority religion, and 2) the official or unofficial involvement in a peace process. Representatives of minority religions often engage in peacebuilding as they do not have as much at stake as those from majority religions. The minority representatives are able to take a more independent role than those from a majority religion, which are often closer to the authorities. However, representatives of minority religions might not have as much leverage and legitimacy

as those from majority religions. As they are not representing a large group in society, they often have fewer resources and less political leverage (Brewer et al., 2010, pp. 1030–1031).

Steen-Johnsen (2016, p. 3) builds on Brewer et al.'s framework, highlighting the importance of political context, and adds “the authorities’ strategies for civil society and religious actors”. She argues that religious actors’ peacebuilding opportunities are determined by the state’s regulations of civil society. Based on these limitations, Steen-Johnsen and Vik (2022, pp. 125, 128) propose a rather gloomy prospect of the potential for religious peacebuilding with examples from Ethiopia, and Israel and Palestine. They argue that religious actors are not predisposed to successfully conduct peacebuilding and get support from fellow believers just because they are religious and bring forward a message of peace. Religious actors cannot be detached from the political context and tensions in society as they are part of the political reality, just like secular politicians and civil society actors. Their religious identity and legitimacy are often challenged by political affiliation and ethnic division, which conflict with the idea of religious actors being able to rise above political tensions (Steen-Johnsen & Vik, 2022, pp. 127–128). Østebø and Østebø (2014, p. 84) propose something similar. They argue that religious actors are dependent on some form of collaboration with the government to be able to conduct their activities, which poses the risk of them being perceived as political actors affiliated with the government instead of being independent.

2.4.3 The Peace-Humanitarian-Development Nexus

Agensky (2019, p. 277) argues that peacebuilding in South Sudan must be understood in a “peace-humanitarian-development nexus”, meaning that these components must be seen in relation to one another to be able to work strategically with peacebuilding. Agensky (2019, p. 283) points out that religious actors played essential roles in developing post-colonial states in Africa and exemplifies with religious actors’ role in providing services to the population on behalf of the states. Therefore, there relation between religion, aid and governance must be recognized to fully grasp the potential for religious peacebuilding (Agensky, 2019, p. 289). However, religion, particularly Christianity, has also been seen as enforcing colonialism, which influenced the role of churches in Africa in the periods leading to independence (Horjen, 2014, pp. 73–74).

2.4.4 Social Peacebuilding and Sensitive Issues

Brewer et al. (2010, p. 1024) propose that religious actors' skills to bond and bridge between groups in society, i.e., the social capital religious actors possess, qualify them to do peacebuilding. They argue that religious actors can contribute to "social peacebuilding," i.e., the follow-up and implementation of a peace agreement. Though religious actors can build bonds within and between groups, Brewer et al. (2010, p. 1024) emphasize that the bonding within is often stronger than the bridging between groups. Steen-Johnsen agrees with Brewer et al. that religious actors' added value in the peacebuilding environment is their social capital. However, she argues that a message of peace, forgiveness, and love is not enough to create peace. A message of compassion must be combined with transitional justice and a recognition of past events, loss, and grief experienced by the various parties. Steen-Johnsen (2020, pp. 434, 445) believes that including these aspects is the only way religious actors can contribute to positive peace and not only maintain the status quo and, at worst, contribute to relapse into conflict. However, Steen-Johnsen (2020, p. 444) emphasizes that a message of love and forgiveness may be the only way to approach peacebuilding in countries with authoritarian regimes, as addressing questions of justice and rights might put the religious peacebuilders in danger and risk their opportunities to engage at all. Steen-Johnsen (2020, p. 444) uses her study in Ethiopia as an example. Religious peacebuilders promoted a message of peace rather than justice because raising these issues would involve government critique and the need for structural changes. In other words, religious actors' opportunities to raise sensitive issues depend on the political context and the space the authorities give religious actors to engage critically (Steen-Johnsen, 2016, p. 3).

2.4.5 Context and Identity

To understand religious actors' potential to conduct peacebuilding, Frydenlund (2014, p. 9), and Harpviken and Røislien (2008, p. 352) emphasize the importance of contextual knowledge and recognition of religion's role in society. Frydenlund (2014, p. 9) proposes that the potential for religious peacebuilding can be understood by undertaking a "religion-sensitive analysis," mapping religion's role in the conflict, society, and its relation to the state, in addition to religious actors' authority, and their relationship with the government. In her study on religious peacebuilding in South Sudan, Rapisarda (2020, p. 21) argues that religion and the potential for

religious peacebuilding must be understood by history, culture, social and political structures, and norms, in what she calls a “contextual theology”.

With contextual knowledge as a starting point for understanding religious peacebuilding, the notion of identity emerges. Identity is an essential part of the ability to bond and bridge between and within groups, which Brewer et al. (2010, p. 1024) suggest is religious actors’ strength. Identity is context dependent. Harpviken and Røislien (2008, p. 354) argue that religion has a potential as an identity marker because it is “not just individual; it is also social, offering each believer a sense of belonging to a community of fellow believers”. Harpviken and Røislien (2008, p. 363) argue that identity formation is solid and exclusionary when the religious identity coincides with other forms of identity, like ethnicity. This is the case in South Sudan, where the religious identity had a unifying function before independence but has been tested during wars formed along ethnic and communal divisions (Tounsel, 2021, pp. 9, 15).

2.4.6 Religious Peace Brokers

When religious actors get an opportunity to participate in an official peace process, they take on various roles. Harpviken and Røislien (2008, pp. 367–370) separate religious peace brokers into three different types, based on their identity in relation to the conflicting parties: 1) the liaison, when the broker is a third party with another normative system and identity than the conflicting parties, 2) the coordinator, when the broker shares a normative system and identity with both conflicting parties, and 3) the representative, when the broker shares identity and normative system with one of the parties. Harpviken and Røislien (2008, p. 368) argue that the coordinator is especially suited to facilitate peace processes, as they can provide a “shared framework for understanding” recognized by the different parties.

2.5 Religious Actors in Transitional Justice Processes

With an increased recognition of the humanitarian and civil consequences of conflict, in addition to an increase in ethnoreligious wars fought by neighbors instead of armies, like in South Sudan, reconciliation has become central in approaching how to move on from war and conflict (Botman, 2004, p. 243). Lederach (1997, p. 151) characterizes reconciliation as “[...] building relationships between antagonists”. Justice is a central notion of reconciliation and can be defined in various ways.

Botman (2004, p. 248) separates justice into four categories: Revenge, retribution, redistribution, and restoration. Revenge is based on distrust in the existing systems, where people take matters into their own hands, for example, with street courts. Retributive justice is based on the Western legal system focusing on sanctioning the perpetrator and “separates justice from social healing”. Distributive justice focuses on material compensation to the survivors and redistribution of wealth. Restorative justice is essential in reconciliation processes and puts the victims at the center stage, recognizing trauma in a communal way rather than at the individual level. Dialogue between survivor and abuser is crucial, and the process is oriented toward the future rather than assessing the past (Botman, 2004, pp. 248–249). Restorative justice is closely linked with both Christian and traditional African reconciliation methods. Christian by focusing on memories, confession, guilt, and forgiveness, and traditional African by seeing reconciliation processes as communal rather than individual and including traditional and local methods for reconciliation (Ashworth, 2012; Botman, 2004, pp. 249–250).

Forgiveness and recognizing past grievances are essential in restorative justice, but Botman (2004, p. 253) raises the crucial point that “reconciliation is a quest for national unity and concrete embrace of enemies for the sake of future generations”. He argues that the issue of forgiveness must be lifted off the shoulders of the individual up to the community level so as not to put the responsibility solely on the survivors (Botman, 2004, p. 253).

Traditional justice mechanisms like restorative justice were long overlooked but are increasingly recognized as essential in reconciliation processes. Even though restorative aspects are included in reconciliation, the processes often include a retributive dimension with sanctions (Kerr & Mobekk, 2007, pp. 151–152). Kerr and Mobekk (2007, pp. 168–169) argue that traditional reconciliation methods are best suited for restorative processes and must be used in tandem with international mechanisms if used in retributive processes, to adhere to international human rights standards.

Religious actors are often central in reconciliation processes and often use restorative methods. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa in the aftermath of apartheid was the first of its kind, taking a restorative approach to reconciliation (Botman, 2004, p. 255). Shore (2012, p. 289) points out that the TRC’s work was shaped religiously by the appointment of Archbishop Desmond Tutu as leader of the commission, in addition to other high-profile religious actors as commissioners and staff. Tutu provided a Christian narrative and frame for the commission’s work. Christian symbols were essential, and the meetings were

opened with prayer in addition to a focus on Christian values like compassion and forgiveness throughout the process (Shore, 2012, pp. 280, 289). The TRC's Christian angle has been both praised and criticized. Shore (2012, p. 292) believes that the Christian rituals contributed to "bring many South Africans together as a nation". However, Tutu and the commission were criticized for focusing too much on feelings and forgiveness rather than judicial aspects. The TRC has also been criticized for insufficiently including other religions and for only applying Tutu's interpretation of Christianity (Shore, 2012, pp. 289–290).

Botman (2004, p. 249) argues that the TRC succeeded with the restorative parts of the process but lacked a redistributive dimension, as victims were not compensated for their loss. Ashworth (2012) draws a parallel to the church-led People-to-People peace process in South Sudan in the 1990s, which he argues was partly successful, as it focused on restorative justice but lacked a "peace dividend", increased living standards as a result of the negotiated peace. The prospect of increased living standards is crucial to secure popular support for a peace process (Jok, 2021, pp. 366, 373). The TRC is relevant when discussing how to facilitate similar processes elsewhere (Botman, 2004, p. 255). However, as emphasized by among others Kerr and Mobekk (2007, p. 146), understanding a specific context is crucial to facilitating successful reconciliation processes. It is not possible to merely copy the South African mechanisms.

Dialogues are often central in restorative justice processes, and the churches in South Sudan have a long history of facilitating peace dialogues. The following section will present religious dialogues as a peacebuilding method.

2.5.1 Religious Peace Dialogues

A method often associated with religious peacebuilding, reconciliation, and restorative justice is dialogue (Frydenlund, 2014, p. 18; Steen-Johnsen, 2016, p. 1). Rieker and Thune (2015, p. 211) argue that dialogues "aim [at] getting contending parties to accept the idea of a peaceful resolution and to speak with each other, and with the outcome aim of resolving or easing a conflict". Rieker and Thune (2015, p. 211) emphasize that dialogues can take many forms, both religious and non-religious, as part of Track One and Track Two diplomacy and at all stages of conflict resolution. Rieker and Thune argue that there is a need for a greater understanding of feelings in peacebuilding. Dialogues can contribute to this, by bringing people together, aiming at tolerance and an understanding of the other party (Rieker & Thune, 2015, pp. 213, 221).

Frydenlund (2014, p. 19) defines *religious dialogue* as “[...] a deliberate choice by a religious actor to engage in trust-building activities between and within religious communities”. She separates between inter-religious and intra-religious dialogues; dialogues between or within religious groups, and points toward what Brewer et al. (2010, p. 1024) argue is religious actors’ specialty; bonding and bridging between and within groups (Frydenlund, 2014, p. 19). Frydenlund (2014, pp. 21–23) defines five types of religious dialogues: 1) *experimental dialogue*, where the parties pursue an understanding of the religious “other” and share experiences and sufferings, 2) *dialogue for the common good*, to raise specific societal challenges without a particular focus on religion, 3) *politically sensitive dialogue*, raising political issues through a theological lens, as a starting point to discuss sensitive topics, 4) *transformative dialogue*, to convert conflict identities through shared history, religious identity, and theological concepts, and 5) *contentious dialogue*, addressing topics related to religion’s role in society, religious freedom, and discrimination.

Rieker and Thune (2015, pp. 216, 222) argue that dialogues alone in most cases are not enough to end disputes and are generally more effective in preventing rather than solving conflicts. Frydenlund (2014, pp. 20–21) emphasizes that there is a need for more knowledge about the outcome of religious dialogues but that peaceful dialogues function contrary to more confronting types of communication. She also argues that religious dialogues can be a solution if it is impossible to engage through official political channels.

2.6 Chapter Summary

The chapter has examined some research on inclusive peace processes, and religion in relation to peace and conflict, especially religious actors’ role in peacebuilding. How one defines religion affects the discussion of religious actors’ role in building peace. The thesis searches for a middle ground between essentialist and functionalist definitions, to recognize that the potential for religious peacebuilding can be shaped both by socio-politics and theology.

3 Politics and Religion in South Sudan

The chapter provides an overview of the historical and political context in South Sudan and the role religion plays in society. It will provide analysis of previous and current events and SSCC's role in the peace process.

The South Sudanese population is estimated to be around 10,5 million (UN DESA, 2022). South Sudan is comprised of 64 ethnic groups. The Dinka of 35,8 percent is the largest, followed by the Nuer of 15,6 percent (PKSOI, 2020). Religion is an integral part of the South Sudanese society. National data is not available online, but Pew Research Center (2022) estimates that 60,5 percent of the South Sudanese population are Christians, 32,9 percent follows indigenous, animist religions, and 6,2 percent are Muslim. In addition, there are smaller groups of Bahá'í, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism (U.S. Department of State, 2022). Religious organizations, especially Christian churches, have broad networks, local presence and enjoy trust and respect like few others in the South Sudanese society (Horjen, 2014, p. 195). Religion has been seen as a unifying force, and an identity-maker both before and after the country seceded from Sudan in 2011 (Tounsel, 2021, pp. 5, 132–134).

The conflicts in South Sudan are often understood as centered around ethnicity (Day, 2019, p. 38). Nevertheless, as Ashworth and Ryan (2013, p. 57) emphasize: “While ethnic conflict often has its own roots, it is manipulated and exacerbated by political and military interests”. Political factions have been formed along ethnic lines, state officials have promoted members of their own tribes to high-level positions, and violent crimes have been conducted between ethnic groups (Day, 2019, p. 38). However, Ashworth (2015, p. 181) emphasizes that the South Sudanese societal dynamic is as much centered around communities as ethnicities, though ethnicity and communal division to a large extent coincide in South Sudan.

3.1 Before Independence

The Anglo-Egyptian colonial power ruled Sudan from 1899 to 1956. North and South were administered as a single region, though power and resources were centered in the Northern parts around Khartoum in the hands of a small elite, downgrading southern areas (D. Johnson, 2016a, p. 27; Patterson, 2013, p. 5).

In addition to the unequal distribution of resources and power, the ethnoreligious differences posed challenges, as there was not a strong sense of unity and common identity as Sudanese. The Southerners were of mainly African descent, following indigenous religions or

Christianity, and the Northerners were mainly Arab Muslims (Bahemuka, 2021; Wilson, 2019, pp. 3–4).

The Southern Policy of 1929 gave Christian missionaries access to Southern Sudan. The missionaries were delegated different zones to reduce competition, which contributed to different denominations being tied to specific ethnic groups and areas in the country (Wilson, 2019, p. 6). With the Arabization and Islamization of Sudan, Christianity was constricted, and in 1964, all Christian missionaries in the South were expelled (D. Johnson, 2016a, p. 30).

The Anglo-Egyptians promised to withdraw from Sudan in 1956, and Northern politicians wanted to create a unified, Islamic state, which led to a Southern fear of a central, Islamist state without Southern autonomy (Patterson, 2013, p. 5). Northern officials were employed in the southern parts of the country, which further enhanced the Southerners' fear of losing autonomy (D. Johnson, 2016a, p. 27). In 1955, a year before the Anglo-Egyptians withdrew, secessionists in the South rioted against the Khartoum regime, and a civil war erupted.

The civil war lasted for nearly two decades. In 1971, different rebel movements gathered in the Southern Sudan Liberation Movement (Patterson, 2013, p. 5). The war ended with the Addis Ababa agreement in 1972, giving Southern Sudan status as an autonomous region. The World Council of Churches and the All African Conference of Churches played a crucial role in organizing the peace talks between Northerners and Southerners that led to the signing of the agreement (H. F. Johnson, 2016, p. 39; Patterson, 2013, pp. 6, 9).

In 1983, the second civil war broke out as President Jafaar al-Nimieri declared Sudan an Islamic republic with Sharia law (ICG, 2021, p. 5; Wilson, 2019, pp. 3–4). The political change enforced religion as an essential part of the political struggle because the Islamic policies also applied to the Southerners, and Christians were forced to convert to Islam (Modi et al., 2019, p. 38; Tounsel, 2021, p. 3; Wilson, 2019, pp. 3–4). Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) was established in opposition to the Khartoum government and was led by John Garang, a Dinka (Patterson, 2013, p. 6). There were internal frictions in SPLA and a faction led by Riek Machar, a Nuer, withdrew because they opposed Garang's and SPLA's stance toward Khartoum. Machar's group joined the Khartoum forces and approximately 2000 Dinka civilians were killed by Machar's forces. Machar later rejoined SPLA and became third in line after John Garang and his second in command, Salva Kiir (Modi et al., 2019, p. 38).

In 1994, SPLA established a non-military division, named the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), to manage civil and political issues in the Southern controlled areas (Ashworth & Ryan, 2013, p. 54). SPLM worked closely with the churches and tasked the church council with delivering social services at the community level and conducting peacebuilding (Aghensky, 2019, pp. 289–290; Ashworth & Ryan, 2013, p. 54). The SPLM/A first saw Christianity as a colonial legacy but changed its view when it recognized the role religion could play in the resistance and as a unifying force across ethnic divisions (Horjen, 2014, pp. 73–74).

South Sudan's long struggle for independence became an essential battle for American Evangelicals from the 1990s until South Sudan's independence in 2011. The support for South Sudan became a symbol of U.S. activism for persecuted Christians, and the Khartoum government became an image of the new enemy after the fall of the Soviet Union - Islam, reinforced by the War on Terror preceding the Islamist terror attacks on 9/11 2001. Muslims of Arab descent dominated the government in Khartoum, and the South Sudanese seeking independence were mainly Christian and black. The independence struggle was depicted as the oppressed black Africans against the Muslim Arabs oppressors (McAlister, 2014, pp. 89, 92; Tounsel, 2021, p. 136).

There were several U.S. Christian initiatives in support of the South Sudanese independence struggle. McAlister (2014, pp. 89–90, 97, 99) accentuates slave redemption. Rebel groups supported by the government in Khartoum raided villages, abducted South Sudanese, and sold them as slaves in northern Sudan. Activists, mainly from the United States, redeemed enslaved people by buying and setting them free. These actions were highly effective in getting U.S. Christians' attention to the South Sudanese suffering and drew a compelling parallel to the history of slavery and the African American struggle. The fight against the dominant, "non-African" party to the conflict, which also made widespread use of slavery, was symbolically strong (Tounsel, 2021, p. 6). McAlister (2014, p. 101) draws a parallel between the redemptions and religious freedom: "...Slave redemptions [...] constructed religious freedom as racial freedom, raced slaves as modern Christian martyrs, black bodies as global Christian icons". Slave redemption was a way to combine the ethnic and religious identities of the Southerners as an oppressed people. However, as McAlister (2014, p. 100) points out, abduction was a horrific but relatively small part of the civil war. Most South Sudanese were in more danger due to poverty, famine, and bombings.

The second civil war that erupted in 1983, ended with the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). The CPA was brokered by the regional organization the Intergovernmental Authority of Development (IGAD), supported by international actors, especially the Troika (Norway, the United States, and the United Kingdom) and the UN and the AU. The AU was at the time led by Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, whom himself was invested in resolving the conflict (Day, 2019, pp. 42–43). The United Nations Mission in Sudan was established in 2005 to support the implementation of the CPA and the AU mission in the Darfur region, which had been established the year before (UNSC, 2005).

The CPA was negotiated by a small and exclusive group consisting of the two main fighting parties: the SPLM/A and the Khartoum government's Sudan National Congress Party. Religious actors, civil society, and opposition groups outside SPLM/A were not included (Tounsel, 2021, p. 115). The CPA did not address internal disagreements in the South and the root causes of long-term conflicts between Southerners. However, the agreement unlocked the opportunity for a referendum about secession after a six years interim period (D. Johnson, 2016a, p. 168). The joy of possible independence and the focus on the differences between the North and South overshadowed internal differences and tension among Southerners, which were downplayed and neglected (Ashworth, 2015, p. 180; Jok, 2021, p. 367).

There were attempts at a unified government between the North and the South in the years following the CPA (Bahemuka, 2021, p. 3). John Garang was inaugurated as Sudan's vice president but died in a helicopter crash a month later. Salva Kiir became vice president and the SPLM/A' leader, with Riek Machar as his deputy (Modi et al., 2019, p. 38). After the CPA, the root causes of conflict continued to present core challenges to unity. In addition to the more visible differences in ethnicity and religion, disagreements and challenges centered around center-periphery, with power and distribution concentrated in and around Khartoum, neglecting the country's southern parts. A trigger in this regard was the so-called "Black Book" that was published some years earlier, in 2000 and 2002, by a group oppositional to the government, which showcased how power had been disproportionately distributed since Sudan's independence in 1956, favoring a small and exclusive group of Northerners (Horjen, 2014, p. 36). In addition, corruption was widespread, and there were disagreements on borders, oil, and national debt (Ashworth & Ryan, 2013, p. 66).

Race and religion were core parts of the argument for South Sudan's claim for secession from Sudan (Tounsel, 2021, p. 15). Religious language was used in the struggle against the

Khartoum government and to bind Southerners of different ethnicities together (Tounsel, 2021, pp. 4, 134). A Christian narrative of being a “chosen” people, with reference to Christian symbols and Biblical images and texts, were crucial when legitimizing the struggle for independence (Rapisarda, 2020, p. 334; Tounsel, 2021, p. 17). Religious actors drew parallels to Isaiah 18 in the Old Testament, where some versions use the name “Cush”, understood to be an ancient kingdom in today’s Sudan and Egypt. This notion enhanced the Southerners’ claim for independence, as they believed the Bible verse directly described their struggle for self-determination (Horjen, 2014, p. 50; Tounsel, 2021, p. 2). The idea that the people had to suffer before achieving peace and prosperity and that God would liberate the people were important images for the resistance movement (Horjen, 2014, pp. 51–52; Tounsel, 2021, pp. 16–17). As Tounsel (2021, p. 3) puts it: “Southern Sudanese used the Bible to provide a lexicon for resistance”. The churches encouraged participation in the referendum for self-determination and used religious language to legitimize independence (Tounsel, 2021, pp. 120, 137). Sudanese bishops initiated a “101 Days of Prayer” promoting independence and peace, leading up to the referendum day (Ashworth & Ryan, 2013, p. 53). The referendum was held in 2011, and 98.3 percent of South Sudanese voted for independence, making South Sudan the world’s youngest state (Ashworth & Ryan, 2013, p. 49).

3.2 After Independence

The joy of independence did not last long. South Sudan had pressing humanitarian and development needs (ICG, 2021, p. 3). In addition, the Southern conflict dynamics, and ethnic and communal differences, had been suppressed during the independence struggle, as the main focus was the conflict and differences with the North (D. Johnson, 2016b, pp. 176–177; Jok, 2021, p. 364). Disputes over resources, land, and cattle were crucial issues that had not been adequately addressed in the CPA (Ashworth & Ryan, 2013, p. 49). State-building, to build institutions and infrastructure, preceded nation-building, and creating a common Southern identity was not the main priority (Ashworth, 2015, p. 180). There were attempts by religious actors to close the gap between ethnic groups by developing a common Christian identity as South Sudanese that was not based on opposing the Arab and Muslim Northerners like before secession (Tounsel, 2021, pp. 5, 132–133, 134). However, Tounsel (2021, p. 9) points out that the idea of a Southern nation is relatively new and that ethnicity was the primary identity marker

in South Sudan. Developing a shared identity as South Sudanese was challenging, even with a collective religion with which most of the population was affiliated.

In South Sudan, ethnicity and politics do not easily separate (Aghsky, 2019; Day, 2019, p. 38). As an attempt at a unified front across ethnic divisions, Dinka President Salva Kiir and Nuer Vice president Riek Machar were meant to lead South Sudan together. However, political factions continued to develop along ethnic and communal lines. Machar openly challenged Kiir, who tightened his grip on power and excluded Machar and other opponents in July 2013 (Bahemuka, 2021, p. 3; D. Johnson, 2016b, p. 176). Owiso (2018, p. 93) argues that ethnicity in itself has not been the reason for war and conflict in South Sudan, but that the imbalanced distribution of power and resources between different ethnic groups led to grievances, and that the positions in SPLM/A have been centered around an elite rather than including different groups.

On 15 December 2013, fighting erupted between the Dinka and Nuer factions of the Presidential Guard, supporting Kiir and Machar, respectively. The Dinka forces killed Nuer civilians, and the Nuer forces fled with Machar to the bush and formed SPLM/A-In-Opposition (SPLM/A-IO) (D. Johnson, 2016b, p. 176). The fighting between the forces was a final provocation of many war-provoking events. The fighting spread rapidly to other parts of the country, and triggered a full-scale civil war (Bahemuka, 2021, p. 3; Tounsel, 2021, p. 115).

In August 2015, IGAD brokered the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS), which was supposed to distribute power and positions (D. Johnson, 2016b, p. 180). The peace agreement lasted until conflict and violence erupted in July 2016 (Bereketeab, 2017, p. 69). In 2017, renewed consultations brokered by IGAD began. South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) participated as observers in the negotiations. It facilitated parts of the discussions when the process was in a stalemate, in the hope that they could function as a unifying force between the parties (Maihack & Reuss, 2019, pp. 2, 4; Tounsel, 2021, p. 129; Wilson, 2019, p. 22). The new peace agreement, named the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), was signed in September 2018, and Kiir and Machar agreed to form a unified government, which was established through a power-sharing agreement in February 2020 (ICG, 2021, p. 9).

The civil wars led to grave human rights violations and a humanitarian disaster. During the civil wars, Dinka militias and civilians killed Nuers and vice versa, villages were destroyed, sexual violence was widespread, and child soldiers were used extensively (HRW, 2015). Food

insecurity was high, and health clinics and other crucial institutions were destroyed (HRW, 2015). In 2018, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine estimated that 383 000 people had died since the start of the civil war in 2013. Around half had been killed, and the other half died because of food insecurity, illness, and other consequences of the war (Checchi et al., 2018, p. 2). As of September 2022, an estimated 2,3 million South Sudanese had sought refuge in neighboring countries, and 2 million persons were internally displaced (UNHCR, 2022).

On 1 September 2022, the R-ARCSS was extended for another three years (Sudan Tribune, 2022). However, the agreement is fragile. Main issues have not been implemented, like security arrangements, including unified forces and transitional justice mechanisms (ICG, 2021, p. 9; UNSC, 2021, p. 2). Corruption and high-level appointments based on ethnicity and communal affiliations are widespread (Day, 2019, p. 39; OHCHR, 2021). Jok (2021, pp. 364, 373) argues that, as with the CPA, the R-ARCSS negotiations lacked recognition for social drivers of conflict, e.g., transitional justice and how to treat societal traumas, and had too great of a focus on the military parties to the conflict, believing that peace was going to “trickle down” to the people, which did not happen (Liaga, 2017).

3.2.1 Political Efforts at Transitional Justice and Reconciliation

The South Sudanese government has made various attempts at reconciliation and justice without substantial outcomes. In 2011, the government launched the South Sudan Peace and Reconciliation Commission, which was meant to “provide a framework for the implementation of reconciliation activities” (Modi et al., 2019, p. 40). The commission was led by Machar but closed the year after and followed by another commission comprised of religious actors appointed by Kiir, called the South Sudan’s Committee for National Healing, Peace, and Reconciliation. The commission lacked funding and popular support and did not have a clear mandate as to what type of conflicts, and on what levels in society, it would address. The commission’s work ended when the civil war erupted in 2013 (Modi et al., 2019, p. 40).

In 2016, president Kiir launched a National Dialogue that conducted consultations from 2017 to 2020, meant to function as a grassroots process giving policy inputs to the government and feedback on how to approach the future. A number of meetings where South Sudanese could raise their voice on issues important to them were held. However, the process lacked real inclusion and representation, and several communities in isolated areas were not consulted. The

dialogue's recommendations had, as of September 2022, not yet been implemented (Mayai, 2020; Mohajer & Deng, 2021).

The R-ARCSS Chapter V addresses transitional justice, accountability, reconciliation, and healing. The mechanisms encompass establishing a hybrid court, a Commission for Truth, Reconciliation, and Healing, and a Compensation and Reparation Authority (R-ARCSS, 2018).

The Commission for Truth, Reconciliation, and Healing is supposed to “inquire into all aspects of human rights violations and abuses, breaches of the rule of law and excessive abuses of power, committed against all persons in South Sudan by State, non-State actors, and or their agents and allies” (R-ARCSS, 2018). In April 2022, the government announced upcoming consultations on the committee's mandate. In his announcement speech, President Kiir stressed that the committee should conduct its work before the establishment of the hybrid court, arguing that “what we need most is reconciliation before the next step of pursuing justice” (UNDP, 2022). The committee is supposed to be established in September 2022 (HRW, 2022b).

The hybrid court is meant to “investigate and where necessary prosecute individuals bearing responsibility for violations of international law and/or applicable South Sudanese law” (R-ARCSS, 2018). The R-ARCSS tasked the AU with implementing the court, without any progress so far. In August 2021, several civil society organizations in South Sudan demanded that the AU should prioritize establishing the court. They claimed that the lack of implementing a vital aspect of the peace agreement threatened the AU's role as an accountable actor able and willing to provide “African solutions to African problems” (HRW, 2021). However, some South Sudanese raised their voices against a hybrid court. The court is only supposed to look at crimes and atrocities in the civil war between 2013 and 2017 and not deeper root causes of conflict and crimes committed before the civil war (Akoi, 2021; Owiso, 2019, p. 11). The actors opposing the hybrid court argued that the weak institutions in South Sudan with political leaders that should be held accountable for crimes committed, would not be able or willing to conduct a fair trial. They feared such a process would lead to a new and even more ethnically divided conflict (Akoi, 2021).

3.3 Religious Peacebuilding in South Sudan

Religion is visible in the South Sudanese society and people's lives. Religious actors have provided social services to the population and been at the forefront of conflict resolution and peacebuilding for decades, both at the grassroots level and as part of official negotiations

(Horjen, 2014; Tounsel, 2021). This section will begin with a summary of research on religious peacebuilding in South Sudan that will be drawn into the analysis and the discussion. The section will further present SSCC and some of its peacebuilding activities.

3.3.1 Research on Religious Peacebuilding in South Sudan

The research on religious peacebuilding in South Sudan is limited but with important contributions. The SSCC-facilitated dialogue processes in the 1990s and 2000s, which will be presented below, have been extensively examined. In this matter, the thesis draws especially on the work of John Ashworth (2012, 2013, 2015) and Stein Erik Horjen (2014), who both participated in the dialogue processes and have been working with SSCC and religious peacebuilding in South Sudan for decades.

Jaqueline Wilson's (2019) long-standing work in South Sudan includes a comprehensive study of the religious landscape and potential for religious peacebuilding in South Sudan, which is an essential reference in the thesis. Wilson finds that religious actors in South Sudan need enhanced competence in engaging strategically in peacebuilding. They need to approach peacebuilding with an "apolitical vocabulary", drawing on international human rights standards and humanitarian law (Wilson, 2019, p. 38).

Daniela Rapisarda's (2020) study on religious peacebuilding in Southern Sudan before independence gives an intriguing account of how theology affects peacebuilding, and that theology must be understood in a particular context, in what she calls "contextual theology". Christopher Tounsel (2021) captures something similar in his work on religion in South Sudan, focusing on theology and the interpretation of the Bible to create a shared identity and as a tool for societal action, in which he calls a "religious technology".

Jonathan C. Agensky (2019) argues that religious peacebuilding in South Sudan must be understood in relation to humanitarian aid and development, as introduced in chapter 2.4.3.

Modi, Opongo, and Smith (2019, p. 44) argue that religious leaders are crucial to building peace in South Sudan but that there is no political will for reconciliation. They believe the political and ethnic tension and division in society have made it challenging to conduct religious peacebuilding. A similar topic is addressed by Owiso Owiso (2018, 2019), though without particular focus on religious actors. Owiso examines the challenges with transitional justice mechanisms and in seeking "truth" after conflict. Jok Madut Jok (2021) argues that there

is a pressing need to include the South Sudanese population in peacebuilding and that the peace negotiations have been too focused on the elites.

Most of the research on religious peacebuilding in South Sudan examines the period before South Sudan's independence. Wilson's (2019) study is an exception. The thesis examines the years after SSCC launched its current framework for peacebuilding, the Action plan for Peace (APP), in 2015. Wilson's study captures the APP and SSCC but is a broad account of religious peacebuilding in South Sudan. This thesis does a single-case study of SSCC, focusing on the experiences of the participants themselves, to hopefully contribute with in-depth research on the potential of religious peacebuilding in South Sudan.

3.3.2 South Sudan Council of Churches

South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) originated in 1965 when the Sudan Council of Churches was established by the Catholic, Episcopal, and Presbyterian churches (SSCC, n.d.). In 1989, it separated into two, with the New Sudan Council of Churches operating in the SPLM/A-controlled areas of the country. Following the CPA, the two emerged into Sudan Council of Churches but struggled to find their role. Following the independence, the council separated into two branches. The new council in South Sudan needed time to find its role and the activity level was low (Ashworth & Ryan, 2013, p. 64). In 2013, today's South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) was established (SSCC, n.d.). It consists of the largest Christian denominations in South Sudan, namely the Roman Catholic, the Episcopal, the Presbyterian, the Pentecostal, Sudan Interior Church, the Presbyterian Evangelical, and the African Inland Church (SSCC, n.d.; Wilson, 2019, p. 8). As an ecumenical umbrella organization, SSCC advocates the interests of the member churches and promotes a united, Christian voice across denominations and ethnicities (SSCC, n.d.). Since its inception, the council has been a central partner to various international aid donors and recognized as the "primary Christian authority in South Sudan" (Wilson, 2019, p. 13).

SSCC has a Board of Trustees with representatives from the seven member churches, a Secretary-General, and a secretariat. SSCC operates through inter-church committees at the regional level in Malakal, Wau, and Juba, which are meant to function as a coordinating level between the national and grassroots levels (Wilson, 2019, p. 13).

3.3.2.1 The Action Plan for Peace

SSCC adopted its Action Plan for Peace (APP) at a retreat in Kigali, Rwanda, in 2015. The APP's purpose is to guide SSCC's work and peacebuilding efforts, aiming toward "a peaceful and just South Sudan where citizens coexist, live in harmony, and experience equitable development within a secure environment" (SSCC, 2022). Its goals were "stopping the war & Creating environments for dialogue and reconciliation" and "consolidation of peace, advancing recovery, advocating for institutional reforms and accountability and promoting equitable development" (SSCC, 2022). SSCC's inter-church committees at the regional level were tasked with implementing the APP. The APP is structured along four pillars:

Advocacy (changing the narrative from violence to peace while raising the voice of the voiceless up), Neutral Forums (establishing safe spaces to bring conflicting parties into dialogue on urgent issues), Reconciliation (building a process of repairing broken relationships through trauma healing, training and community conversations) and Organisational Strengthening (building up the Church structures, establishing and enabling transparent and effective processes while providing platforms for building individual knowledge and capacities). (SSCC, 2015, p. 3)

When re-committing to the APP in 2018 and extending the plan to 2023, SSCC stated that

the CHURCH by its very nature is a Peacemaker, it is who we are, not just a project that we do. Peace is more than just the absence of war, and we commit ourselves to this as a long-term process, even lasting for decades. 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.' (Matthew 5:9). (SSCC, 2018)

3.3.3 Dialogue as Peacebuilding

SSCC has played a significant role in facilitating local dialogues and peace conferences, and cooperated with domestic and international actors (Aghensky, 2019, p. 288; Horjen, 2014, p. 90). This section will present the People-to-People peace process in the 1990s and the Entebbe process, which shadowed the IGAD-led CPA negotiations in 2005. SSCC played a significant role in the signing of the R-ARCSS in 2018, which will be presented in the analysis.

3.3.3.1 The People-to-People Peace Process

The church council's flagship in religious peacebuilding was the People-to-People peace process in the late 1990s, which inspired later peace conferences in South Sudan and elsewhere (Horjen, 2014, p. 96). The church council initiated the People-to-people process, which saw communities and individuals as the primary peacebuilding actors (Agwanda & Harris, 2009, p. 43; Ashworth & Ryan, 2013, p. 55). The process incorporated traditional South Sudanese peacebuilding and reconciliation methods in dialogue meetings, where building trust and listening to the counterpart were vital elements (Agwanda & Harris, 2009, pp. 43–44; Ashworth & Ryan, 2013, p. 55).

The Wunlit Peace Conference was the most prominent part of the People-to-People process. The conference brought religious leaders, community leaders, and elders from the Dinka and Nuer tribes together from 27 February to 7 March 1999 to discuss previous assaults and negotiate ways to move toward peace (Agwanda & Harris, 2010, p. 44; Bahemuka, 2021, p. 5). The planning phase lasted eight months, and two thousand people participated in the conference (Bahemuka, 2021, p. 5; Horjen, 2014, p. 97).

There were several religious elements in the Wunlit conference, both Christian and traditional religious expressions. Rapisarda (2020, pp. 29, 327) finds that the combination of traditional religion and Christianity and “expressing the Christian faith through (...) the local culture” made the People-to-People process unique. The People-to-People process combined the traditional and modern and showed that theology, which included elements of traditional religion, was suited for peacebuilding (Rapisarda, 2020, pp. 336, 338). Religious symbolism and imagery were strong during the conference (Ashworth & Ryan, 2013, p. 55). The meeting started with the slaughter of a white bull, a highly esteemed animal in South Sudan. The sacrifice of the “bull of peace” gave the participants an oath to uphold peace. To break the oath would release a curse, and the perpetrator would end up as the slaughtered bull (Ashworth & Ryan, 2013, pp. 56–57; Horjen, 2014, pp. 100–101). The religious aspects lasted throughout the conference, aiming to bind together the Dinka and Nuer delegates in a shared religious community (Horjen, 2014, p. 102).

The People-to-People process succeeded in bringing the parties together and keeping relative peace in the Wunlit area (Ashworth & Ryan, 2013, p. 57). The Wunlit conference ended with the formation of local peace committees and action plans for implementation (Ashworth & Ryan, 2013, p. 57). However, the agreements were never fully implemented and especially

lacked a peace dividend (Ashworth, 2012). However, Ashworth (2015, p. 187) accentuates that peace was secured in an “uneasy alliance” until the civil war erupted in 2013.

3.3.3.2 The Entebbe Process

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed by the North and the South in 2005 excluded all other parties than the two negotiating parties. The church council facilitated a parallel process with three dialogue meetings in Entebbe, known as the Entebbe process, where they brought together participants from both the North and the South, including religious actors, civil society, and armed groups who were not signatory parties to the CPA. In Entebbe, concrete recommendations were made and given to the CPA negotiators (Ashworth, 2015, pp. 173–175).

Wilson (2014, p. 25) finds that peace conferences in South Sudan rarely manage to materialize the implementation phase of the agreements they broker. Ashworth (2015, p. 187) believes it is challenging to determine whether a dialogue is successful as it is a long-term process not easily measured and suggests that, “maybe their success should be judged on whether they can keep going in new incarnations, to keep people talking despite the new conflicts and other challenges which emerge”.

3.4 Chapter Summary

The South Sudanese have experienced war and conflict for most of their lives. First, by suppression from the Islamist government in Khartoum, favoring the northern areas of the country, leaving the southern parts under-developed and in the periphery, and later, by fights along ethnic and communal lines between Southerners. Religion was used to legitimize war and conflict but also as a powerful tool in the Southern claim for independence.

As Wilson (2019, p. 22) formulates, “because of the nature of violent conflict in South Sudan, there is not just one peace process, but instead many processes at many levels”. There is a need to address conflicts at different societal levels with representation and inclusivity. The peace process in South Sudan has not taken these crucial elements sufficiently into account.

Religious actors have facilitated reconciliation processes and peacebuilding through decades of conflict. In the midst of the religious environment stands SSCC, whose peacebuilding efforts will be further explored in the analysis. The following chapter will present the thesis’ methods, research quality, and ethical considerations.

4 Methods

The chapter explains the choice of methods and how the data collection and analysis were undertaken to answer the research question: *What opportunities and constraints did South Sudan Council of Churches experience in its peacebuilding efforts from 2015 to 2022?* In addition to this, the chapter will consider the research quality and ethics.

4.1 Choice of Research Period

When choosing which period to research, several years and happenings were considered. The independence struggle and religious dialogue processes in the 1990s and 2000s have been extensively covered by other researchers.

The first years after South Sudan seceded Sudan in 2011, when the new state was formed, and religious actors navigated their role in society, could have been intriguing to explore. Examining this phase might have given a different outlook on religious peacebuilders' opportunities and constraints than a later period. However, though SSCC's roots date several decades back, the organization struggled to find a new role after South Sudan's independence when it split from the Sudan branch of the council, and the activity level was low (Ashworth & Ryan, 2013, p. 64).

In 2015, SSCC launched its framework for the organization's peacebuilding efforts, the Action Plan for Peace (APP) (SSCC, 2022). Starting the research period in 2015 made it possible to include the APP and allowed for the inclusion of the peace negotiations in 2017, where SSCC had a mediating role. The years after 2015 are less documented by scholars than the years before. SSCC's work is ongoing and not strictly divided into different periods. Therefore, the research period lasted until the time of the data collection.

4.2 Choice of Methods

The thesis does a single-case study with semi-structured interviews and a thematic analysis of written statements. The thesis' topic could have been addressed with other methods. However, the thesis focused on the informants' reflections and how they experienced the opportunities and constraints in conducting peacebuilding. I used triangulation when collecting data, by analyzing both interviews and SSCC's written statements, to get different perspectives of a complex situation and cross-check the information to strengthen the data material (Grønmo, 2007, pp. 67–68). Combining these methods provided answers to the research questions by

getting an account from those who had worked with peacebuilding and analyzing their official statements, to shed light on the research question from different angles. Interviewing SSCC representatives and other informants close to the organization gave first-hand accounts of the research question. The research period is of recent date, and the informants had personal experiences with the events and activities central to the thesis. Interviewing them contributed to an in-depth analysis.

The thesis did not test theories as in deductive approaches, nor did it collect the data before acquainting to the research field like in inductive approaches. The thesis used an abductive approach by broadly familiarizing with literature in the field before data collection and revisiting and further engaging with the literature as the analysis developed (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 169).

I explored the possibilities of conducting a field visit to South Sudan, which would have allowed for a different type of data collection and sample, where I could more easily have accessed informants at for instance the grassroots level. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic with rapidly changing travel restrictions, and the security situation in South Sudan, I decided not to travel but rather collect the data in Norway and by using digital platforms to interview the informants in South Sudan.

4.2.1 The Case Study

Case studies aim at getting a comprehensive picture of a situation or unit of analysis and shed light on the research question from different perspectives (Grønmo, 2007, p. 105; Thomas, 2011, p. 23). I chose to do a single-case study to go in-depth into SSCC's opportunities and constraints as a peacebuilder, to get a comprehensive understanding of its role in the peacebuilding environment. As a prominent ecumenical organization, embracing the largest Christian denominations in the country, SSCC represents a substantial range of religious actors and has been central in the peacebuilding environment since its inception in the 1960s (Agensky, 2019; SSCC, n.d.). SSCC has been included in several studies on religious peacebuilding (Agensky, 2019; Ashworth & Ryan, 2013; Horjen, 2014; Wilson, 2019), but there has not yet been conducted a case study of the organization.²

Stake (1995) divides case studies into three categories: the intrinsic case study, meant to shed light on a specific case, the instrumental case study, meant to contribute to a wider

² At least not by what the student could find digitally in September 2022.

debate, and the multiple case study, that includes several instrumental case studies. The thesis is both an intrinsic and an instrumental study. I found it beneficial to do a single-case study of SSCC to contribute to an understanding of religious peacebuilding in the particular context of South Sudan but also to contribute to the research on religious peacebuilding generally. The relevance exceeding the case will be further elaborated on in section 4.6 on generalizability.

4.2.2 Semi-structured Interviews

Brinkmann and Kvale (2015, p. 127) accentuate the interview as a useful method when researching human experiences. The thesis aims at understanding the informants' reflections and experiences regarding SSCC's opportunities and challenges in doing peacebuilding.

The interviews were semi-structured with prepared themes and open-ended questions, with space for follow-up questions and issues the informants might want to raise (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 7). This approach enabled me to be an active listener and let the informants talk relatively freely (Thomas, 2011, p. 163). I found this to be an appropriate approach to discussing topics I had some familiarity with beforehand at the same time as it was room to explore new themes. This technique was well suited when using an abductive approach, as I did not want to test existing theories but develop my knowledge during the data collection (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 169).

The interviews used triangulation, as I interviewed SSCC representatives and actors who knew SSCC well but were outside the organization. Triangulating allowed me to cross-check and validate the interviews (Grønmo, 2007, p. 68; Steen-Johnsen, 2019, p. 92). This procedure was useful when using an abductive approach. The empirical data was conducted before I had familiarized myself thoroughly with theories on religious peacebuilding and the South Sudanese case, which made it challenging to validate information during the interviews.

4.2.3 Written Statements

SSCC issues written statements approximately every other two months. The statements contain a response to concrete events, like condemning acts of violence and political events, and more general statements at commemorative days, like the International Day of Peace. The statements vary between being critical and positive and often address the government. The Board of Trustees and the Secretary General sign the statements. The statements are core parts of SSCC's

advocacy work, and are distributed by email, in printed copies, and some are broadcasted over the radio (Modi et al., 2019, p. 44; Wilson, 2019, p. 21).

The statements are SSCC's official communication. I wanted to analyze some statements to complement the information from the interviews. I believe this approach increased the data quality as it gave me a critical view of my primary methodological approach, which was semi-structured interviews (Grønmo, 2007, p. 68).

4.3 Sampling

This section introduces the methods used to select informants. The sampling of written statements will be presented in the data collection section.

The informants were recruited purposively, based on their role in or in relation to SSCC, and through a gatekeeper (Hennink et al., 2020, pp. 92, 104). Using purposeful sampling allowed me to strategically target informants with various perspectives, which made it possible for me to approach the research question from different angles (Hennink et al., 2020, p. 92). Gatekeepers are often prominent individuals with extensive local knowledge (Hennink et al., 2020, pp. 99–100). Using a gatekeeper allowed me to get in touch with informants who were not easily accessible from across the globe. I did not know the gatekeeper beforehand, but I knew about their work with SSCC.

There are various challenges with using a gatekeeper. Tjora (2021, p. 151) emphasizes ethical challenges related to the fact that the informants know each other's identities. The gatekeeper might also guide the scholar in a specific direction that does not necessarily lead to the most relevant sample (Tjora, 2021, p. 150). Conducting digital interviews added a layer to the challenge of navigating in an unfamiliar environment and being able to recruit informants. The contact information of SSCC's senior officials was not accessible online. Hence, I was more dependent on the gatekeeper. There can also be challenges related to the fact that the informants might share perspectives when they knew each other and are part of the same environment (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 156). I tried to be mindful of this by keeping a critical view of the informants' relations with each other and the gatekeeper. I also gave clear criteria to the gatekeeper about what kind of informants I was looking for (Grønmo, 2007, p. 102). I experienced the gatekeeper as knowledgeable and resourceful, with an extensive contact network, and that they knew whom I would benefit from interviewing.

The selection criteria for the SSCC informants were that they 1) were active in SSCC in parts of the research period (2015 to 2022), 2) that they held senior positions in SSCC, meaning that they contributed to SSCC's peacebuilding at the national level, and 3) that they represented different denominations. The criteria for the non-SSCC informants were that they 1) were civil society actors, and 2) had in-depth knowledge about SSCC from the research period (2015 to 2022).

The sample has strengths and weaknesses. I did not emphasize diversity in ethnicity as a criterion when sampling because the focus was on the informants' role in SSCC. However, it would have been valuable to include a sample with diverse backgrounds, as SSCC is a cross-ethnic and ecumenical organization. Several of the SSCC informants are public persons with background information available online, which makes their ethnic identities known, and the sample includes both Dinka and Nuer informants. I aimed at getting a variation of civil society informants, and the sample includes informants from European and African countries, including South Sudan. The SSCC informants might have had an interest in shedding a positive light on the organization and their work. However, they shared reflections on their shortcomings, and I used triangulation to include various perspectives (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 285).

4.4 Data Collection

This section will present how the data was collected, starting with considerations taken when using digital platforms to conduct interviews, followed by an account of how the interviews were executed and how the written statements were sampled and collected.

4.4.1 Semi-structured Interviews

Ten in-depth interviews were conducted. The informants included four SSCC representatives who had all been members of SSCC's Board of Trustees, and six civil society representatives from South Sudan and other countries with extensive knowledge about SSCC's peacebuilding efforts. The interviews with the four SSCC informants and two civil society informants were conducted on telephone through the message application WhatsApp from 27 to 28 April, while the informants participated in a workshop reviewing the APP. The ongoing workshop might have led to specific attention among the informants toward the APP and shaped their answers. However, as the APP is the foundation for SSCC's peacebuilding efforts, I did not find it problematic. The interviews were conducted "spontaneously" as the gatekeeper called me

through WhatsApp and gave the phone to one informant at a time throughout the two days. The other four interviews were conducted digitally and in-person in Oslo, Norway.

The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions in three categories. I started with informal warm-up questions showing interest in the informant and introducing myself to create an environment of trust. Tjora (2021, p. 131) points out that the informant and the interviewer experience the interview situation differently. The interviewer is often well prepared and experienced in conducting interviews, while the informant not necessarily knows what to expect. Several informants were used to speaking publicly. Nevertheless, building trust was crucial to creating confidence between the informant and myself and particularly important when conducting interviews online. After the introduction, the interview entered a reflection stage with in-depth questions about the informants' opinions and experiences. The reflection part was superseded by an informal and summarizing conversation (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, pp. 160, 163; Tjora, 2021, p. 159). At the end of the interviews, I informed about the thesis' subsequent phases.

The interviews lasted between 30 and 75 minutes. The sound was recorded by a portable recorder, to secure that I understood everything the informants said and to create a conversation where I could focus on being present and asking follow-up questions instead of writing thorough notes (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 204; Tjora, 2021, pp. 172, 180).

I wrote notes in a "field diary" after each interview, with a summary capturing emerging topics, my thoughts, and questions I got different answers to than expected (Hennink et al., 2020, p. 197). As Tjora (2021, p. 172) points out, an interview guide "matures" after being used, and it is advantageous to update it as the study develops. I revised the interview guide as the interviews went on, especially after the first interview with an SSCC informant. I was interested in theology's place in SSCC's peacebuilding efforts. In the initial interview guide, I asked, "Is theology important in SSCC's peacebuilding efforts?" After talking to the first SSCC informant, I understood that the question made little sense to a priest working with religious peacebuilding, as theology and religion permeated their work and perceptions of reality. I changed the question to approach the topic differently. For example, I asked, "what separates religious peacebuilding from other types of peacebuilding?" and "why are religious actors in particular important in peacebuilding in South Sudan?" A concrete question on theology was more pertinent in the interviews with the non-SSCC informants.

4.4.1.1 Transcription

I transcribed the interviews thoroughly and verbatim to ensure that I did not overlook something that could be important as the analysis developed (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, s. 207). Tjora (2021, p. 185) points out that it is convenient to transcribe in detail, not to lose information that can be potentially important, and instead to decide on what it is necessary to include when doing the analysis. When transcribing, I highlighted sentences I found interesting, either thematically based on previously read material, sections the informants seemed to put particular weight on, or topics emphasized by other informants. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015, p. 206) emphasize that the transcribing process is part of the analysis. I found it fruitful to fully transcribe the interviews to get into the analytical mode and reacquaint with the interviews.

4.4.2 Written Statements

The written statements were sampled from the research period from 2015 to May 2022. I read through the statements which were available online and a selection sent to me by one of the informants, since not all statements were digitally available. The statements were brought into the analysis after the first stage of coding the interviews, to shed light on the information from the interviews. Of a total of 14 statements, nine were used in the analysis. These were chosen because they illustrated points made by the informants. A list of the statements is attached in appendix 2.

4.5 Analytical Tools

The thesis approached the data and analysis in an explorational way close to the empirical material. I identified patterns and themes in the data material and revisited the literature during the data collection and analysis (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 224; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012; Tjora, 2021, pp. 234, 248). Abduction uses a “discovering” rather than “justifying” approach to the data material, as the literature is adding to the findings rather than laying a foundation for the data collection (Tjora, 2021, p. 248).

To operationalize the abductive approach, I used sociologist Aksel Tjora’s SDI method (Tjora, 2021, pp. 20–21). I used thematic, or content, analysis to analyze the written statements. Ryan and Bernard propose thematic analysis as an advantageous approach to searching for themes and repetitions in a text, by comparing the data material and looking for patterns (Ryan

& Bernard, 2003, p. 89). To operationalize the thematic analysis, I used the same approach as for the interviews, the SDI method (Tjora, 2021, pp. 20–21).

4.5.1 The Stepwise Deductive-Inductive Method

The Stepwise Deductive-Inductive method (SD) is an abductive approach to collecting and analyzing data. The first stages of the method are inductive, collecting and analyzing data by keeping close to the empirical material. Later, abduction is performed by relating to existing literature and research and revisiting the data material (Tjora, 2021, p. 248). Hence, the method has both inductive and deductive dimension. The SDI method consists of seven stages: Generating empirical data, processing raw data, coding (with empirical codes), code grouping, concept development, concept discussion, and theory (Tjora, 2021, p. 21). The first two stages: generating and processing raw data, was covered in section 4.4 on data collection.

4.5.1.1 Empirical Coding

The coding stage of the SDI method is explorational and inductive. However, Tjora (2021, p. 218) emphasizes that a purely inductive approach is impossible as the researcher is predisposed to particular perspectives. I familiarized myself with the general literature on religious peacebuilding, and politics and religion in South Sudan before the interviews, to ask the informants qualified questions.

I coded the interviews and written statements in Excel in several stages. I started by doing open coding, meaning I approached the data material inductively, staying close to the empirical material (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 88; Tjora, 2021, p. 218). I categorized each transcript into codes, and new codes emerged with each transcript. I added relevant quotes from the interviews into the different codes. This approach made it possible to compare and get a picture of what recurred in the material. This overview also made it possible to ensure that I exemplified with quotes that were representative of the data material, not just anecdotal (Tjora, 2021, p. 246). I used quotes from all the interviews, to ensure that the various voices were included.

Tjora (2021, p. 219) argues that coding close to the empirical data enhances the probability of securing an inductive approach by not entering into a deductive mindset testing existing theories with predefined categories. I used quotes actively during the coding to stay

close to the material. Some of these are kept as titles in the different sections of the analysis to capture the proximity to the empirical material.

4.5.1.2 Code Groups and Themes

After coding all the transcripts, I combined the codes into broader code groups which formed a structure for the analysis (Tjora, 2021, p. 229). For example, the codes “Dinka”, “Nuer”, “Christian”, “community”, and “tribalism” were merged into a code group on identity. After establishing the code groups, I began analyzing the written statements to shed light on the interviews and test some of the preliminary findings. Based on the code groups, I developed broader themes.

By staying close to the empirical material during the coding, I got several codes and code groups that were not directly linked to the research question, like how women are affected by war differently than men, the role youth can play as peacebuilders, and that hate-speech is a problem in the South Sudanese society. Though these are intriguing topics, I wanted to stay close to the research question and go in-depth into some of the themes and omitted several possible codes, categories, and themes from the analysis (Tjora, 2021, p. 234).

I selected three themes with ten code groups as the foundation for the analysis (Tjora, 2021, p. 230). The sections in the analysis are comprised by the themes: 1) religious actors’ added value in the peacebuilding environment, 2) reconciliation, and 3) SSCC’s organizational capacity. The code groups make up the ten subcategories presented in the analysis.

4.5.1.3 Concept and Theory Development

The last two stages of the SDI method: developing concepts and theories, aim at making the research relevant beyond the case and secure the study’s validity (Tjora, 2021, p. 249).

The concept-generating phase is more abductive than the first stages, as concepts are developed by relating to existing literature (Tjora, 2021, p. 277). I started familiarizing myself in-depth with the literature when forming themes for the analysis. I may hence have been affected by the literature I read but saw this as more advantageous than damaging, as I got a more comprehensive understanding of my findings when I could relate to existing research on religious peacebuilding and South Sudan and discover where the data aligned with or deviated from previous research.

The findings and analysis are generated based on the SDI method's steps of thorough coding, code grouping, and establishing themes. It is worth noting that Tjora (2021, p. 252) emphasizes that the SDI method is meant to provide students with a method for working strategically and structurally with data collection and analysis rather than developing concepts and theories. The concept-generating and theory development stages are first and foremost meant to equip experienced researchers with a tool to develop theories and is not mainly aimed at master's students. However, when discussing the findings, the thesis has been inspired by the concept-generating stages of the SDI method. It does not develop specific concepts or typologies but provides analysis and findings that will hopefully be relevant for research on other cases. This issue will be revisited in section 4.6.3 on generalizability.

4.6 The Research Quality

Awareness of the thesis' strengths and weaknesses is crucial to secure good research quality. I worked actively to strengthen the quality before and during data collection and analysis (Grønmo, 2007, s. 241). This section will present considerations relating to reliability, validity, generalizability, the researcher's positionality, and the limits of the thesis.

4.6.1 Reliability

Reliability is about the credibility and consistency of the research (Tjora, 2021, p. 267). In principle, another researcher should be able to conduct the study at a different time. However, this is challenging in qualitative studies. Grønmo (2007, p. 228) points out that analysis takes place in parallel with the data collection in qualitative research and that the researcher conducting the study and at what time it is performed is decisive for what findings unfold and are emphasized. In addition, various considerations, such as the choice of interview questions and how these are transcribed, affect the findings (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 281).

As previously mentioned, I asked open-ended questions during the interviews and transcribed them in great detail to comprehensively visualize the interview situations and not overlook important information (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 282).

Balancing reliability and privacy need thorough consideration. I chose to anonymize the informants and will delete the audio recordings after the end of the process to protect the informants' privacy. This choice affects the thesis' reliability and makes it more challenging to verify the data material. I have strived to explain methodological choices thoroughly and

transparently, like the sampling process and how the data was collected, to enable the reader to assess the thesis' credibility (Grønmo, 2007, p. 229; Tjora, 2021, pp. 264, 266). I have used interview quotes actively to engage the reader in the original material instead of just paraphrasing and providing my interpretation (Tjora, 2021, p. 265). Using the SDI method, I aimed to make it possible for the reader to follow the different stages in the research process, as a method with clear criteria for data collection and analysis (Tjora, 2021, p. 259).

4.6.2 Validity

Validity is about the study's relevance, logic, and precision (Grønmo, 2007, p. 231). Finding the most appropriate method for approaching the research question and securing that the data material answers the research question increase a study's validity (Tjora, 2021, p. 263).

I have previously argued that semi-structured interviews and a thematic analysis of written statements were the most appropriate methods to answer the research question. Other methods could have led to interesting findings about religious peacebuilding in South Sudan. However, it would be appropriate to ask a different research question to illuminate other sides of the topic. I have strived to be as transparent as possible in explaining the choice of methods and how these were applied to make the reader able to consider the appropriateness of the methods. The literature chapter places the thesis in a research context and is supposed to contribute to the reader's ability to evaluate its relevance (Tjora, 2021, p. 262).

It is worth reflecting on whether the informants tried to satisfy me as a researcher by confirming my assumptions about the case. I tried to be conscious when formulating questions and avoid guiding questions, so that the informants would express themselves as freely as possible. However, this process is difficult to verify, and can be said to be a challenge with the interview as a method. To address this, I used triangulation by analyzing SSCC's written statements to approach the research question comprehensively and by interviewing informants outside SSCC in addition to the SSCC informants (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 285). The interview guide is attached in appendix 3.

Openness about the thesis' limits and challenges with the data material and methods are crucial to secure validity. Limitations will be presented in section 4.6.5. The researcher's credibility is central to a study's validity (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 283) and will be elaborated on in section 4.6.4 on positionality.

4.6.3 Generalizability

Generalization is often associated with quantitative studies generalizing statistically. Generalization is also applicable in qualitative research, though in other forms (Tjora, 2021, p. 267). Kvale and Brinkmann (2015, p. 297) point out what they call “analytical generalization”, that findings from one study can be used to indicate findings that might be obtained in another, similar study. Tjora approaches generalization through the applicability of concepts and theories generated in the last stages of the SDI method. Tjora (2021, p. 268) calls this “conceptual generalizing”, that concepts and theories developed in one case study might be relevant when approaching other case studies.

In section 4.2.1 on the case study, I presented Stake’s (1995) three types of case studies: the intrinsic, the instrumental, and the multiple. This thesis aims at being both an intrinsic and an instrumental case study. Intrinsic in that it sheds light on SSCC’s peacebuilding efforts in South Sudan and provides findings from the concrete case, which is relevant to understand the opportunities and challenges faced by this particular religious actor in this particular context. The thesis is also an instrumental case study that is relevant beyond the very case. I use literature on religious peacebuilding and examples from other cases to place the thesis in the wider research field of religious peacebuilding. I aim to generate findings that can hopefully contribute to research on religious peacebuilding elsewhere.

4.6.4 Positionality

The researcher’s position and relation to the research field are of importance both ethically and related to the research quality. I have chosen to include positionality in the section on research quality because it is closely related to the researcher’s credibility.

The researcher’s positionality affects which findings the researcher emphasizes. Because of inclinations, some findings resonate better with the researcher (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 97). Reflexivity, to be aware of potential predispositions, was crucial during the process (Hennink et al., 2020, p. 19). I reflected on my political and religious views, in addition to my limitations especially related to a lack of experience with South Sudan. I believe reflecting and discussing positionality and subjectivity, in addition to methodological and analytical transparency, enhances the research quality.

One of the main reasons why I wanted to conduct a field trip to South Sudan was to get an overview and understanding of the South Sudanese culture. I believe meeting people and

observing their environment provide a different picture and understanding of a context than conducting interviews digitally from home in a Western country.

Both visible and non-visible identity markers determine whether a researcher is perceived as an “insider” or an “outsider” (Dam & Lunn, 2014, pp. 96, 103). As a student from a Western country, I tried to be particularly aware of the power balance between South Sudanese informants and myself, and reflected on how I could be perceived as a representative of neo-colonialist thinking (Dam & Lunn, 2014, p. 105; Lunn, 2014, p. 3). The Norwegian government and civil society actors have been engaged in South Sudan for decades. The engagement could be perceived positively by some informants and negatively by others. I experienced that the SSCC informants appreciated my interest in their situation and for wanting to shed light on their work.

I am humble about the fact that I have not been to South Sudan and been able to get to know the culture. Despite being an “outsider”, I tried to prepare myself as well as possible before the interviews so that I hopefully was perceived as an informed researcher who followed the informants’ reasoning.

4.6.5 Limits

A sample will always affect a study’s analysis and conclusion. I decided to interview SSCC representatives and civil society actors with extensive knowledge of SSCC. Parts of the thesis focus on SSCC’s relationship with the government and the civic space to engage in religious peacebuilding. Interviewing government representatives might have given other findings. However, because of the research question’s particular focus on SSCC’s *experienced* opportunities and constraints when doing peacebuilding, I found it advantageous to shed light on the research question from SSCC’s perspective in addition to informants who knew the organization well. The sample would also benefit from being composed of informants of different genders and various generations. I aimed at including women in the sample, but there are few female religious leaders. All the SSCC informants were men, though three of the six civil society informants were women. There were no youth in the sample. Including youth might have given different findings and is a large and diverse group in the South Sudanese society. As already noted, a field trip might have made it easier to get in contact with other types of informants, like at the grassroots level, which could have shed light on the research question from different perspectives.

The thesis examines the opportunities and constraints SSCC experienced when engaging in peacebuilding between 2015 and 2022. In 2015, when SSCC launched the APP, a civil war raged in South Sudan. The period for research changed dramatically from 2015 to 2022. Examining how the potential for religious peacebuilding change from wartime to a ceasefire with relative peace would be an interesting question for further research.

Examining the effectiveness of religious peacebuilding is difficult, though essential, to be able to use case studies instrumentally and for analytical generalization, as Brinkmann and Kvale (2015, p. 297) suggest. Steen-Johnsen and Vik (2022, p. 114) argue that it is necessary to accumulate more knowledge about how religious peacebuilding initiatives affect violent conflicts. Building peace takes time and can be challenging to measure. As several informants in this thesis emphasize: “peace is a process, not a project”. This thesis has not examined the concrete effects of SSCC’s peacebuilding efforts and whether the organization’s activities work as intended. Research on effects would be captivating, as more knowledge on concrete results is needed to secure that the *amount* of religious peacebuilding does not make up the main part of the research but is accompanied by concrete results and the effects of various approaches to violent conflict.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

Brinkmann and Kvale (2015, pp. 85, 99) point out the importance of taking ethical considerations throughout a study and operate with four areas for ethical considerations: Informed consent, confidentiality, consequences, and the researcher’s role. The researcher’s role was explored in section 4.6.4 on positionality. The other three areas will be used to examine the thesis’ ethical aspects.

4.7.1 Informed Consent

Researching peacebuilding in a politically tense situation needed ethical considerations. It was crucial that the informants were familiar with the thesis’ purpose and proceedings and understood what they participated in (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 92). The informants received written information about the thesis ahead of the interviews through the gatekeeper. I repeated the information at the start of the interviews and opened up for questions.

Most of the interviews were arranged at short notice by the gatekeeper calling me and standing with the informants who were ready to be interviewed. Because of the spontaneous

nature of the interviews, and since I did not have the informants' contact information, they did not sign a consent form. However, as they were experienced in interview settings and used to speaking publicly, I concluded that they understood the scope of their participation and that verbal consent was enough.

The gatekeeper represented one of SSCC's donor organizations, and the SSCC informants might have felt obliged to participate in the study (Hennink et al., 2020, p. 99). However, I stressed that participation was voluntary and that the informants could withdraw whenever they wanted, and that the gatekeeper would forward my contact information.

4.7.2 Confidentiality

An essential obstacle to collecting data online was that civil society was under pressure from the South Sudanese government, and activists had been harassed and threatened by the government (IPI, Security Council Report & Stimson, 2021; UN, 2020). Fear of being surveilled could make some informants hesitant to speak truthfully online. Using the gatekeeper's phone to communicate with the informants was a security measure, though the gatekeeper's phone could also be surveilled. Making assessments of the disadvantages the informants might experience by participating in the thesis was crucial to ensure, to the extent possible, that no one was harmed by contributing (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, pp. 95-96). Disadvantages will be elaborated on in section 4.7.3 on consequences.

I entered the project wanting to try not to anonymize the informants, so as to strengthen the research quality and make the data material verifiable and traceable. I asked all informants whether I could publish their names or if they wanted to be anonymous. Nearly all informants agreed to their names being published. However, I explained to the informants at the outset of the interviews that I would decide whether to publish their names later in the process. It is worth reflecting on the fact that I opened up to publishing the informants' names might have led them to censor themselves even though I let them choose, as the power balance in an interview setting is unequal. Most of the informants did not mind their names being published, which seemed to be because they wanted to stand up for their opinions, especially the SSCC informants. Steen-Johnsen (2019, pp. 96–97) describes something similar in her study of religious peacebuilding in Ethiopia, where the informants got confused when asked if they wanted to be anonymous, as they had “nothing to hide”.

As I became more familiar with the South Sudanese context and civic space, I decided to anonymize all the informants. Anonymization reduces the verifiability. Nevertheless, privacy and the security of the informants were my main priorities (Tjora, 2021, p. 266). The context the informants worked in was tense and could change rapidly. Peacebuilders and civil society fear sanctions from the authorities, and religious actors have been exposed to reprisals (Radio Tamazuj, 2017). As an “outsider” without extensive knowledge of the political dynamics in the country, I concluded that it would be too complicated for me to assess which statements that could potentially cause difficulties for the informants.

In the analysis, I broadly distinguish between “SSCC informant” and “civil society informant”. Because the civic space is under pressure in South Sudan, I did not want to name the civil society organizations in case this would lead to restricted access for the organizations. Some interviews were done in Norwegian and translated into English in the analysis. I have not specified which interviews this applies to as to secure anonymity in a field with relatively few actors. A list of when the interviews were conducted and some information about the informants is attached as appendix 1.

All informants consented to the use of audio recordings. I stressed that the recording would only be used by me to transcribe the interviews as detailed as possible and would be deleted after the project.

The data was stored in an encrypted folder on a private computer with good data protection, as recommended in MF’s guide for storing research data. The names of the informants could not be traced to the audio recordings or transcripts. The transcripts were anonymized by using a number following either “SSCC informant” or “civil society informant”.

All research processing personal data, that is affiliated with a Norwegian institutions which have an agreement with the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), is obliged to fill out a data management plan which will be assessed by the NSD (NSD, n.d.). The NSD assessment is attached in appendix 4.

4.7.3 Consequences

It was crucial for me to assess the disadvantages the informants may experience by participating in the study. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015, p. 96) point out that the informants might experience the interview situation as safe and therefore tell something they later regret and do not necessarily want to be published, even if it felt safe to share during an interview. It was essential

to reflect on this, given the thesis' sensitive topic and because the informants shared their political opinions and personal beliefs. However, as previously mentioned, most of the informants were experienced in an interview setting and familiar with discussing peacebuilding publicly. Wood (2006, p. 380) raises an essential point, that local actors often are better equipped to assess the risks of participating in a study than the researcher because they know the local context.

4.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter has explained why semi-structured interviews and a thematic analysis of written statements are advantageous methods for approaching the research question. I have argued that the thesis is both an intrinsic and an instrumental case study. Intrinsic in that it explores the concrete case of South Sudan Council of Churches' peacebuilding effort. Instrumental in that I aim to place the study in a research context and make it relevant for research on religious peacebuilding elsewhere. The steps of the SDI method have been explained, aiming at transparently equipping the reader to engage in the methodological choices and analytical procedure. The chapter has aimed to demonstrate ethical considerations and reflections to enhance the research quality.

5 Analysis

The chapter provides an analysis of the opportunities and constraints South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) have met in its peacebuilding efforts since it launched the Action Plan for Peace (APP) in 2015, focusing on three themes recurring in the interviews: 1) SSCC's added value in the peacebuilding environment, 2) reconciliation, and 3) SSCC's institutional capacity. The themes will be unfolded with several subcategories. The section on SSCC's added value is more extensive than the other two sections, as this topic is broader, with several relevant subcategories.

The SSCC informants are both religious leaders in various Christian denominations and representatives of SSCC and do not always make a clear distinction between the different roles. They talk about "religious actors", "the church", "the faith communities", and "SSCC" alternately. The same is evident in SSCC's statements, where "the church" is often used when describing the work and positions of SSCC. The wording will be used interchangeably throughout the analysis, and the difference will be identified when it is necessary for understanding the situations the informants describe. The findings in the analysis lay the foundation for the discussion in the subsequent chapter, where the theories explored in the theory chapter will be used to discuss the findings.

5.1 Religious Actors' Added Value in the Peacebuilding Environment

The prevalence of religion in South Sudan is widespread, and the population's trust in religious actors is high (Wilson, 2019, p. 27). Religious actors have engaged in peacebuilding activities for centuries, but what opportunities and constraints come with doing *religious* peacebuilding in particular? This part of the analysis looks at religious actors' and SSCC's added value in the peacebuilding environment, first in terms of how theology, the interpretation of the Bible, affects peacebuilding, followed by an examination of SSCC's navigation in an ethnically divided society. The section further explores SSCC's social capital and status in society and looks at the organization's relationship with the government and its role in the peace negotiations in Addis Ababa in 2017.

5.1.1 "Peace from Above"

SSCC legitimizes its peacebuilding efforts in several ways. Through interviews and written statements, it becomes clear that a theological aspect is a fundamental part of SSCC's

peacebuilding activities and inseparable from its social engagement. SSCC's work is legitimized by Bible verses and an overarching conviction that they, as religious leaders, have been chosen by God to work for peace. All SSCC statements begin with a Bible verse reflecting the statement's topic.

One of the recurring themes connected to theology is integrating different ethnicities into a united Christian identity. One civil society informant accentuates a Bible verse about living united under God: "The gospel of John 17³ is one [text] they have kept on going back to, when Jesus talks about the unity of believers." Another Bible verse frequently referred to by SSCC is Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus". Acknowledging differences and diversity at the same time as appreciating a shared religious community might contribute to peace and reconciliation to a more considerable extent than a narrow religious identity, aiming at eliminating ethnic differences (Tounsel, 2021, p. 140). The informants accentuate a perspective on ethnicity which is based on the notion that God created humans in communities and tribes, and that the Christian identity should embrace the diversity.

Though theology is the foundation for SSCC's work, one civil society informant believes SSCC must recognize the role theology can play to a greater degree than what is done today: "We need to get back to the spirituality and include this as a pillar [in the APP]. We cannot preach about reconciliation if we do not reflect upon why we do what we do". Another civil society informant is "deeply impressed by some of the religious leaders' ability to reflect and anchor their work in the Biblical" and believes this to be because they preach about "lived life". This is confirmed by how SSCC uses Bible verses in their statements. One example is a statement issued on the International Day of Peace, 21 September 2021, where two Bible verses were used; "Make every effort to keep unity of the spirit through the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3); "And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace" (James 3:18).

Prayers and spiritual actions are used to promote peace both by SSCC and in churches at the grassroots level. As one SSCC informant formulates: "We want to really pray that God

³ John 17:20-23 ²⁰ "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— ²³ I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

gives us a unified vision and a strategy.” However, one SSCC informant emphasizes that spiritual action alone is not enough.

Most of them talk in terms of prayers only. Anything you go for, you end up talking of Jesus coming to our aid. No. You can pray, but if you do not overcome the trauma in your heart, your prayers will just go in vain.

Wilson (2019, p. 19) finds something similar in her study. Her respondents see sermons and prayers as religious actors’ most essential tools to build peace. However, Wilson (2019, p. 36) argues that “praying alone is not enough” and believes that prayers mainly work to make individuals better human beings, not to drive societal change. However, one SSCC informant believes that spirituality will help people to work for peace in society.

I believe that, without God, human beings cannot make peace. [...] true peace has three dimensions. The first dimension is peace with God. Peace from above. That you as an individual, you have peace with your God, you are empowered by the love of God [...] that is peace from above. The second one is peace from within. That you, with yourself, you are in peace within your heart. That will lead to the third, which is peace between us.

The informant believes “peace from within” is necessary to create societal peace. Wilson (2019, p. 36) finds that it is essential to translate “inner peace” to societal engagement and action to create positive peace in South Sudan. However, she finds that it is unclear whether religious actors are using their platforms to preach for societal action and not just about peace within yourself as an individual. In their study of religious peacebuilding in South Sudan, Modi et al. (2019, p. 44) find that local churches have empowered communities by preaching about peace and using the “encouraging interactions between parishioners during worship [...]”.

One civil society informant believes that “religious leaders have a mission from a higher power outside themselves,” which can function as a motivation to conduct peacebuilding. As another civil society informant accentuate: “it helps to believe that God is on your side”. Religiosity contributes to keeping up the spirit, as accentuated in an SSCC statement on 26 March 2015: “As Christians, we always have hope. When times are dark, we remember that Christ suffered and died but then rose from the dead.” Several SSCC statements legitimize

SSCC's work and position in society because it has a "divine authority". One civil society informant points to the authority religious actors have when they talk about "[...] the values of peace, compassion, and love. Some of those values are very important in peacebuilding, reconciliation, and harmonious living". The value of compassion is central in SSCC statements, like on 7 June 2015: "Forgiveness seems foolish in the world of politics and militarism, but for the Church of the Crucified Christ who, even as he was dying, said, 'Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing'" (Luke 23:34). A statement on 17 December 2015 stated that "True peace and Reconciliation involve Personal Transformation through Repentance, Conversion, Forgiveness and Trauma Healing". Several informants find these values to be essential when describing how to achieve peace, and like the statement above, which mentions conversion, one SSCC informant expresses that "a spiritual transformation is needed" in addition to "[...] the change of hearts, attitudes, and perspectives. As Christians, we cannot make peace without our values. The values of love, forgiveness, reconciliation, unity, integrity, and the values of the respect of the dignity and value of the human person." This resonates with Wilson's (2019, p. 20) findings, whose respondents believe that religious actors' "greatest power is through their spirituality to influence people to be better peace actors". One SSCC informant sees it as a moral obligation to work for peace: "For you to even be a priest, it must have been a calling, and this calling is from God. So, while others are different, maybe fighting one another, you are supposed to bring people together."

Elements of local, traditional religions were essential in the People-to-People process, for example by opening the meeting with slaughtering a white bull (Horjen, 2014, pp. 100–101). One civil society informant believes that the traditional religions are still important to Christian South Sudanese: "I believe [local religions and Christianity] live side by side in daily life and that people use both strings in their lives." This is in line with Rapisarda's (2020, p. 21) contextual theology of understanding religious expression in relation to culture and history in South Sudan. Wilson (2019, p. 16) believes there is too little understanding of the role of traditional religions in relation to other religions in South Sudan. Their activities are often "invisible" to outsiders (Pendle & Hutchinson in Wilson, 2019, p. 16).

The Christian, theological aspect also becomes evident through the language and wording used in SSCC statements and by the informants during the interviews. Even when the informants do not reflect upon theology concretely, they use a religious vocabulary to describe their actions and motivations. Formulations like "grateful to God" and "praying that God will

give us strength” are recurring. One informant formulates that it is a comfort “knowing that we are in this world, but not of this world”, referring to the idea that even though they as humans and Christians are present in worldly affairs, there is something bigger awaiting them in the next life.

5.1.2 “The Blood of the Tribe has Become Thicker than the Blood of Christ”

Ethnic division is one of the main challenges to peace in South Sudan (Day, 2019, p. 38). National and local conflicts have played out along ethnic and communal lines, and political division is formed along these (Agenksy, 2019, p. 286; Ashworth & Ryan, 2013, p. 57). Identity in South Sudan center more than anything around ethnicity and local communities, and the lack of a common South Sudanese identity is a challenge to building a peaceful and co-existing society (Agenksy, 2019, pp. 287, 291). Religious actors try to bind together different ethnicities under a united, Christian, South Sudanese identity. However, the ethnic tension in society also affects SSCC. This section will look at how SSCC negotiates the situation.

“How can we make a South Sudanese identity? To be able to say, ‘First, we are South Sudanese, and *then* Dinka and Nuer’.” The civil society informant sheds light on the challenging task of uniting. When describing the main hindrance to making a common South Sudanese identity, several informants point out society’s communal and tribal construction. One civil society informant formulates: “In a Clan-Ethnic community [like South Sudan], there is communal thinking. If one of ‘mine’ is put on trial, the whole community is under accusation.” An SSCC informant points to the difficulty this entails when wrongdoing is made. “[...] our tribesmen in the political arena, whether they are wrong or correct, we defend them.” A civil society informant formulates how this affects politics: “[...] even most of the political parties follow ethnic lines. You will find that a political leader is followed by an ethnic group, not because they believe in the political party’s values, but because you come from a particular tribe.” The informant accentuates how ethnicity is used to legitimize actions: “Even with politicians, if I was appointed a Minister or a senior government official, I will be happy and celebrate. But when they fire me, I will be annoyed and mobilize my people and tell them that ‘you know, I was fired because I come from this ethnic group’.” Ethnicity is hence used to bind people together and form political alliances, but also as an excuse to delegate blame.

In a statement on 26 March 2015, SSCC blamed the government for nourishing ethnic tension.

We call upon the people of South Sudan to refuse to fight in this senseless conflict. We pledge ourselves to inform the grassroots communities what is really going on, as we believe many of their leaders are misleading them, encouraging them with stories of ethnic conflict and revenge rather than urging them to reconcile and bring peace.

One civil society informant highlights that the government tries to coopt church leaders.

The political elite uses ethnic lines to mobilize some of the local churches so that they follow them. You will find political leaders from different ethnic groups, and the bishops or pastors come from the same group. At the same time, it is hard for them. If they are rejected; these political leaders say, ‘this person is against us and the community’. It is a real dilemma, and it has created some division, especially at the grassroots level in some churches.

The Episcopal Bishop Enok Tombe noted in 2014 that “the blood of the tribe has become thicker than the blood of the Christ” (Jeffrey, 2018). This phrase is mentioned by several informants and seems to guide how SSCC thinks about religion and ethnicity, namely that ethnic and tribal belonging has bypassed Christianity as an identity-maker in South Sudan. By suggesting this, it is implied that religion has previously been more important than it is today, referring probably to Christianity’s role as a unifier in the struggle against the Islamist Khartoum regime before South Sudan seceded in 2011 (Tounsel, 2021, p. 3).

Several informants find unity across ethnic divisions to be SSCC’s most important and challenging job. In a statement on 4 October 2018, SSCC stated that “All of this [working toward peace] requires the creation of a national identity, which can be owned by all South Sudanese. While we can be rightly proud of our own tribes, we must shun tribalism by all means.” In Wilson’s (2019, p. 29) study, the respondents generally believe that religious actors play a positive role in combating “tribal animosity”. As explored in section 5.1.1, SSCC has made several attempts to promote an understanding of religious identity as something broad and bonding, emphasizing that God created humans differently and multi-ethnic, rather than promoting Christianity as an identity superior to ethnicity, meant to eradicate the ethnic differences that are present in society (Tounsel, 2021, p. 140).

Several informants use a theological foundation for legitimizing the work to bind people from different ethnic groups together. One SSCC informant formulates that: “We, being a neutral call, and managed by the Lord, as it is in the Bible, we have been given his mandate to reconcile the communities.” Another SSCC informant emphasizes that humans were created differently: “We believe that God’s purpose in creation is that we live together, we live with him together, he wanted us to live with him and also with one another. That is why he created us tribes and communities.” The two quotes exemplify that religion, and ethnic and communal belonging, do not need to eradicate one another. Tounsel (2021, p. 140) puts forward a relevant point when arguing that “it is dangerous to consider identity politics in a zero-sum manner”. Tounsel formulates how crucial it is not to contribute to polarization when discussing identity in South Sudan.

Several informants emphasize that the challenges around ethnicity in society also affect SSCC and the member churches. As noted in chapter 3, the Southern Policy of 1929 gave Christian missionaries access to Southern Sudan and divided the land into different zones for missionaries from various denominations (Wilson, 2019, p. 6). One civil society informant looks at this policy as one of the reasons for the churches’ division today, as different ethnic groups reside in separate parts of the country, where some denominations are more substantial, leading to an ethnic division inside the churches composing SSCC.

The Presbyterian church is the church in the northern parts of the country, namely Malakal, which is the Nuer base. So, the Presbyterian church has become dominated by Nuer. To SSCC, it is a huge challenge to raise above the separation.

One SSCC informant formulates that it is challenging for SSCC to detach itself from the widespread focus on ethnicity in society: “The problems in South Sudan, today, we, in the church, the leadership, even the pastors, break into our tribes, to represent more our tribes, instead of being above our tribes.” Another SSCC informant explicitly states that there is no doubt that the churches are ethnically divided but that SSCC’s most crucial role still is “to bind the different denominations together and contribute to a united Christian voice to lead the people toward peace.”

5.1.3 Religious Actors as Socio-Political Actors

Religious actors possess significant legitimacy in the South Sudanese society (Wilson, 2019, p. 27). Ashworth and Ryan (2013, p. 48) point out that religious actors can be central in solving conflicts even when the conflict is not religious, because of their role in society.

One SSCC informant formulates religious actors' role in solving disputes: "Wherever there is violence, and a problem, the question that comes to [people's] minds and hearts is 'where is the church'. And the church is still there because the people trust the church". Wilson's (2019, pp. 9–10) study finds that 82 percent of the respondents "turn to religious leaders when they have a problem", including non-religious respondents.

One SSCC informant suggests that religious actors possess a unique position in the South Sudanese society because the state apparatus is weak: "Any slight problem happening, people fighting or killing, they will not ask 'where is the government?' like in other places, people will always say 'where is the church?'" Because the government institutions have been weak, the churches have filled much of the space usually covered by government institutions (Aghsky, 2019, p. 283). One civil society informant accentuates that there often are no government institutions at all. "[The church is] the only institution in South Sudan that have presence at the grassroots level. In every village, at least you will find a church, but in some places, you do not find government institutions." The churches' historical presence in the local communities when few other organizations were there has given the churches a special status in the South Sudanese society (Aghsky, 2019, p. 283; Ashworth & Ryan, 2013, p. 47). Several informants mention the churches' widespread and longstanding presence in South Sudan as the reason why people trust religious actors. As one civil society informant formulates: "Before [...] all these NGOs and the UN, the faith communities were there, and I believe they will be there, so that provides some sustainability [...], both to the families, communities and up to the national level." The informant sees the faith communities to be a constant in an ever-changing environment, and as someone who can reach people at different levels in society.

Some of the informants believe distrust in government officials is another reason why people turn to religious actors. One civil society informant formulates: "The trust in religious actors is often greater than their trust in political authorities because people believe them only to be interested in power." Horjen (2014, p. 163) believes that the South Sudanese government lacks trust in the population because people have not experienced increased living standards and security, and that past grievances and injustices have not been addressed.

Some religious actors' distrust of the authorities is exemplified in the documentary film "The Anti-Vaxx Preachers" by the British broadcaster Channel 4. The documentary team follows an NGO's effort to vaccinate the South Sudanese population against Covid-19. The vaccination rate is low. One of the reasons is an anti-vaccination message spread by influential preachers, preaching that the vaccine is a tool the government uses to control the population (Channel 4, 2022). On the other hand, one civil society informant points out how vaccines against Covid-19 were promoted at religious gatherings. This exemplifies how religious actors and meeting places significantly influence people in both positive and negative ways, as they are seen as moral authorities. Religious actors have a mobilizing effect on people. Since there are few other actors in the districts, religious meetings become essential for engagement in societal affairs, be it peacebuilding or educational activities. As one civil society informant puts it:

Between Friday and Sunday, there are millions of faith gatherings and people meeting without a big budget. So, they already have a platform they can use to influence people's attitudes, values and even the norms toward peacebuilding, social cohesion and living together.

5.1.4 South Sudan Council of Churches and the Government

The civic space in South Sudan is shrinking (Day et al., 2022, p. 19; HRW, 2022a). Amnesty International (2020, 2021) has found that peaceful protestors and civil society actors are systematically harassed and subjected to arbitrary arrests and detentions. Threats and violence against religious actors became more widespread after the civil war broke out in 2013 (Wilson, 2019, p. 2). Several informants confirm that the civic space is declining and that civil society activists have been imprisoned and sanctioned for demonstrating. However, most informants believe that religious actors, to a certain degree, are exempt from the sanctions faced by other parts of civil society because they hold a particular position in society and because of a unique relationship with the government. One civil society informant formulates:

[...] the church in South Sudan has a historical engagement with the politicians. They were part of the [independence] struggle, not that they picked up arms, but they were there. At one point, the church was the only voice and civil society that was present. So,

they know these people, they saw them in the struggle and in the trenches [...] The role the church has played, when no one else played it, has been respected.

The relationship between the government (the previously liberation movement SPLM/A) and religious actors during the independence struggle is also emphasized by another civil society informant: “We were not involved in the military struggle, but because we both had the same aim, we were ready to work side by side, and yes, we suffered together.” During the civil wars with Sudan, SSCC worked closely with SPLM/A and delivered services to the population in the country’s southern parts (Agensky, 2019, p. 289). Agensky (2019, p. 289) argues that these activities are the key to understanding religious peacebuilding in South Sudan today and that peace can only be achieved through religion, aid, and governance.

The historical relationship between SSCC and the government might have widened the space for religious peacebuilding. However, several informants accentuate that the environment is changing and that political leaders are trying to get religious actors on their side. One civil society informant formulates: “There are some dictatorship tendencies there, which are increasing and a threat. The co-option and the compromising of some church leaders is also there”. This is accentuated in Wilson’s (2019, p. 34) study, whose respondents emphasize that the government has tried to infiltrate newly elected religious leaders and force them to support the government. As to whether the religious actors are afraid of reprimands from the government, one civil society informant formulates: “I think most of the church leaders, they have lived with these experiences for long, since Sudan. For most of them, this is part of their daily life. They know that this is the risk.” Another civil society informant emphasizes that there are attempts to repress religious actors, but that they so far have managed to continue their activities.

A simple example is if you have any meeting at all in South Sudan now, you need permission from the security services, unless it is a church meeting. They [the government] have not yet dared to say that the church needs to get permission from them before they have a meeting on their own property.

Another civil society informant believes the government do not want to upset the population by sanctioning the religious communities: “They [the government] can threaten the church leaders,

but no one would kill church leaders, because they fear the reactions of the common congregations”. The two quotes indicate that the informants believe that the government do not dare to repress religious actors the same way as other parts of civil society, because they fear negative feedback from the people.

Though the informants believe religious actors are not oppressed like other parts of civil society, the independent South Sudanese news service Radio Tamazuj (2017) found that over 40 church leaders were killed between December 2013 and March 2017. Whether the church leaders were killed because of their religious role is not clear. Most of Wilson’s (2019, pp. 34–35) respondents believe the religious leaders were killed because of reasons other than their religiosity, either because they “spoke out against powerful actors”, were seen to be affiliated with one part of the conflict, or because of their ethnicity. The identities of the perpetrators are unknown, though Wilson (2019, p. 34) points toward rebel groups and the government. When two Catholic nuns were killed in 2021, President Kiir issued a statement condemning the attack and blaming the armed groups that did not sign the R-ARCSS (Global Sisters Report, 2021).

Though the historical relationship between religious actors and the government might have given SSCC and the member churches some leeway in their peacebuilding efforts that other parts of civil society do not have, several informants make it clear that they are critical of the government’s actions. When asked to elaborate on “the relationship with the government”, several informants are hesitant to confirm any relationship with the government, as it might question their independence. As one SSCC informant formulates:

It is not cooperation as such with the government. We tell the government they need to implement the agreement [R-ARCSS], we do not cooperate with the government. We tell and instruct them, because the agreement they have signed, they have signed it and they need to implement it [...] We must follow them step by step, otherwise nothing will move forward.

The informant indicates that SSCC is not responsible for implementing the R-ARCSS, because it was not a signatory part, but that SSCC pushes the government because it finds the implementation of the agreement to be important. One civil society informant emphasizes that impartiality from the government and SPLM/A has been important for SSCC for a long time.

When SPLM/A was a liberation movement, they wanted the church to be theirs, but SSCC was clear that they were independent. ‘We are not part of the movement. We can sympathize as individuals, but the church council is not part of SPLM/A’. However, the churches were providers of education and health services in the SPLM/A areas.

As the informant brings attention to, and as noted above, SSCC provided social services and worked closely with SPLM/A during the independence struggle (Agensky, 2019, p. 289). However, impartiality from the government has been important to SSCC both before and after independence. This manifested itself during the peace negotiations in Addis Ababa in 2017, which will be presented below.

5.1.4.1 The R-ARCSS Negotiations in 2017

The dual role of historical closeness with the government on the one hand, and independence on the other, played into what most informants find to be SSCC’s key achievement in its peacebuilding efforts: moving the peace agreement in Addis Ababa in 2017 forward, which eventually led to the signing of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in 2018.

SSCC participated in the R-ARCSS negotiations with a delegation of observers and had, at the beginning of the process, primarily a spiritual role. One civil society informant formulates SSCC’s role: “SSCC was active as a church, by opening the meetings with prayer.” Official meetings and events at both local and national levels in South Sudan are usually opened by a blessing from a religious actor (Horjen, 2014, p. 102). However, this way of including religious actors should not be used to “tick the box” that religious actors have been sufficiently included (Maihack & Reuss, 2019, p. 4).

One civil society informant accentuates SSCC’s informal role in bringing people together: “Having a church service on Sunday, everyone was going off to their individual churches, and the church leaders said ‘no, we are all in this together, we will have a common church service on Sunday’.” One civil society informant emphasizes that even though the SSCC delegates had different opinions on the way forward in Addis Ababa, they managed to talk with one voice and use their religiosity and differences for the better.

The church delegation included church leaders who would be sympathetic toward Salva and Riek, but nevertheless, it was still a single, united delegation that spoke with one voice, and then the different factions in it were an advantage, because when the church group wanted to say something to the leaders, it could send a Dinka Catholic to Salva Kiir [who is Dinka and a Catholic] and a Nuer Presbyterian to Riek Machar [who is Nuer and a Presbyterian], with the same message. At least they had some personal connection with the person they were talking to.

The negotiations reached a stalemate, and SSCC was asked to facilitate meetings between the parties (Maihack & Reuss, 2019, pp. 2, 4; Tounsel, 2021, p. 129). One civil society informant formulates that: “IGAD gave the churches a ‘window of opportunity’, a mandate to engage the parties in a South Sudanese way. There were so many external and international actors, but this was South Sudanese to South Sudanese.” Regarding SSCC’s capacity to facilitate these kinds of meetings, one civil society informant formulates:

The question is what kind of capacity they needed. All the technical knowledge was already there. We asked ourselves these questions – what capabilities do [SSCC] have, legal expertise, all of that. But it was never really about that, but about the political will and moral pressure from their own to move forward.

The informant points out that SSCC helped the process proceed, not by its technical capacity, which the negotiating parties already had, but by their religious, moral, and social capital. SSCC’s efforts to break the stalemate are mentioned by one civil society informant as “one of the pieces necessary” to get the parties to sign the agreement. Wilson (2019, p. 24) believes that the fact that religious leaders got the job of facilitating parts of the process confirms that they have legitimacy across political and ethnic divisions.

Independence from the government is important to SSCC. This became evident when navigating what role to take in the Addis Ababa negotiations. The Episcopal Bishop Enoch Tombe led the religious delegation and pronounced that “religious leaders must maintain a critical distance – close to power, but not too close” (Wilson, 2019, p. 24). One civil society informant formulates:

[When IGAD called on the church leaders], they had a very nuanced response, because on the one hand, yes of course we want to make peace, but we are not your errand boys, we are not here to resolve all the difficulties within your peace process [...] The church leaders were there as observers, they were present in a lot of the negotiations, there were some in the churches who had doubts even about that. We should not be sitting in political negotiations, because that is not our role. [...] The outcome was very unlikely to be what we wanted it to be.

The informant puts into words the duality of engaging in an official process. SSCC wanted to contribute to peace but did not want to be used or intertwined with the negotiating parties and risk losing their independent role and becoming responsible for the outcome of the negotiations when they could not control the results.

There are different opinions as to whether SSCC's observer status in Addis Ababa was effective. Wilson (2019, p. 22) finds that, on the one hand, it made SSCC more independent and less partisan than it would have been as a negotiating party. On the other hand, the observer status limited SSCC's impact and it was not able to affect the agreement's outcome as it might have had if it was a negotiating party.

As a facilitator, SSCC contributed to moving the process forward but had little influence over the agreement's content. Wilson (2019, p. 36) believes religious actors pose a high risk when engaging in peacebuilding and that their legitimacy can be put at stake if they are perceived to be political. In Wilson's (2019, p. 9) study, most respondents believe politics to be the primary driver of conflict in South Sudan. Looking at politics as closely linked with conflict and war makes it challenging for religious actors to engage in the political scene. "[...] if war is politics [...] then accusations of religious actors participating in politics is accusing them of participating in the war efforts" (Wilson, 2019, pp. 27–28). This view poses challenges to religious actors' ability to influence the outcome of political decisions and to engage in Multi-Track processes.

5.1.4.2 Criticism of the Government

As the previous section showed, SSCC has had a dual role in collaborating with the government at the same time as distancing itself from the government, accentuating that it is the government's responsibility to end violence and implement the R-ARCSS. SSCC's

independence is important to all the informants, and one civil society informant puts into words that SSCC is not afraid of criticizing the government.

If you read the statements [...] SSCC have issued over the last ten years, they try to be very critical of the government, but not personally and of individuals. They are critical of actions, not of people. [...] So, the churches have tried to have the prophetic voice of speaking out against injustice, but also to be the pastors of the individuals who are trying to govern the country.

Another civil society informant emphasizes that SSCC has been critical of the government's *action* rather than the *individuals* in the power positions.

In the catholic church, we have an old saying, 'hate the sin, but love the sinner'. [...] they have tried to be very pastoral, but at the same time to be very clear about the actions, you know, we cannot stand silent when people are being killed.

This position is evident in the SSCC statements, where the blame is directed against "the government", "the opposition" and "our leaders", but not on named individuals. After criticizing the government's lack of ability and will to work for peace, SSCC states that it also consists of churches for the wrongdoers and, in a statement 7 June 2015, states that it is criticizing "out of love, not anger" and that "the leaders of this nation are our sons and daughters, our brothers and sisters, our parishioners and congregants [...]".

The SSCC statements demand the government to act and work for peace. In a statement marking the tenth anniversary since independence, on 9 July 2021, SSCC wrote that the political will to make peace is missing and that the day marks "a wasted decade". SSCC makes it clear what it requires from the government. In a statement on 26 March 2015, SSCC stated: "The parties have already signed a number of Cessation of Hostilities agreements and ignored them; we insist that they be honoured without further delay." SSCC underscores that it will not stay silent if it is not satisfied with the government's actions. In the same statement, SSCC underscored that: "If our statements are not heeded, we will take more proactive steps to try to achieve peace and reconciliation for the people of South Sudan." However, it is not clear how

SSCC means to sanction the government if they do not listen to SSCC and change the status quo.

One SSCC informant formulates that “we [religious actors] must be both ‘watch dogs’ and ‘guide dogs’”. The same wording was used in a statement on 7 June 2015, stating that the religious actors have consistently tried to be “guide dogs” instead of “watch dogs”: “A watch dog barks when there is trouble, but a guide dog leads you away from trouble in the first place.” In the statement, SSCC states that its approach on leading the political leaders in the right direction has “been ignored” and that it must change its approach to be a “watch dog” instead. However, as with the lacking action noted above, it was not clear how SSCC would implement a new role of being a “watch dog” rather than a “guide dog”. The statements after 2015 continued to be critical of actions rather than individuals and without clear sanctions. Modi et al. (2019, p. 45) argue that religious actors are not critical enough of the government and that the desire not to be too critical has made it seem like religious actors support the government.

5.2 Reconciliation

Reconciliation has been a focus for SSCC since long before South Sudan’s independence in 2011. As elaborated on in chapter 3, SSCC was relatively successful with reconciliation and dialogue processes in the 1990s and 2000s, with the People-to-People process and the Entebbe process (Ashworth, 2015, pp. 173–175; Horjen, 2014, p. 96). Through the interviews, it becomes evident that the informants find reconciliation to be at the center of SSCC’s work and a field where it not only made an impact in the past but can play a role in the future.

Reconciliation is one of the four pillars in SSCC’s Action Plan for Peace (APP), in addition to the pillar on neutral forums, which in the analysis will be included as part of SSCC’s reconciliation efforts because the two are closely linked, and the main goal of the neutral forums is to contribute to reconciliation (SSCC, 2015). SSCC meets different challenges and opportunities when working with reconciliation. This part of the analysis will focus on two of these; how trauma affects SSCC’s reconciliation efforts and how dialogue can be used as a tool for reconciliation, particularly focusing on the neutral forums.

5.2.1 “Wounded Healers”

“You basically have an entire population who have lived their lives in conflict and war. So, the level of trauma is very high.” As the civil society informant emphasizes, the South Sudanese

population is traumatized by never having experienced peace. Everyone, from the political leaders to the children growing up, have mainly experienced unrest, with only shorter periods without violence, which have quickly developed into new disputes. Jok (2021, p. 365) believes that trauma healing and reconciliation have come second in line when the state was built after war, and that there has been a lack of recognizing the needed “[...] reconstruction of the people themselves [...]”, to build a viable future for a population that has experienced atrocities.

“We need to be healed from our trauma so that we can have the perception or the possibility of reconciling.” The SSCC informant’s quote is an example of several informants’ entries into talking about reconciliation. The informant puts into words that trauma needs to be dealt with for the people to be able to move on and create a peaceful future. In 2019, SSCC launched an Ecumenical Trauma Healing Manual aiming at “offering a standard and coherent approach for Churches & its partners to address Trauma & Healing among communities in the country” (SSCC, 2020).

One SSCC informant emphasizes how cycles of violence create a form of fatigue. “It is the trauma that comes with having to do the same thing all the time. With almost the same actors or even if it is with different actors, it is the same situation, people killing each other.” The challenges fatigue entail are accentuated by Botman (2004, p. 257) with reference to the South African reconciliation process, “Ordinary people everywhere could bring an end to human rights violations if their apathy can be turned to action”. However, as the informant above describes, the hopelessness of trying to engage in peacebuilding and positive change when the violent reality keeps repeating itself is a significant challenge.

Several informants emphasize that they, as religious leaders, are meant to heal others and that this is challenging, as they are themselves traumatized. As one SSCC informant formulates:

Even myself, as I speak to you, I am a healer but also a victim. Because having lived in war situations for nearly fifty years, you ought to be affected [...] you are doing healing as a wounded healer yourself.

Recognizing trauma might contribute to an understanding of assaults, like accentuated by a civil society informant: “They [SSCC] say ‘we know our leaders are traumatized, we know our leaders do not actually know about peace. Because they are military people, they spent their

whole lives fighting. They do not know how to make peace’.” An understanding of the lack of knowledge about peacebuilding but at the same time demanding a political will to work for peace, is evident in SSCC’s statements, e.g., on 7 June 2015 and on 9 July 2021.

Considering trauma’s role in society can also help bind the population together in common suffering and recognition that others might have similar experiences as themselves. This approach was central to SSCC’s dialogue processes in the 1990s and 2000s (Agwanda & Harris, 2009, pp. 43–44; Ashworth & Ryan, 2013, p. 55).

5.2.2 Dialogue as a Way Forward

As a traumatized and scarred population, what is the path toward peace and reconciliation? A recurrent answer among the informants is the importance of dialogue and the neutral forums pillar of the APP. Dialogues have been instrumental in SSCC’s previous reconciliation efforts (Agwanda & Harris, 2009, pp. 43–44; Ashworth & Ryan, 2013, p. 55). Several informants look to the SSCC-led dialogue processes in the 1990s and 2000s as models for the neutral forums pillar in the APP. A civil society informant formulates:

[...] the neutral forums will call together groups, just like we called together groups [in the Entebbe process], the civil society was a group, the militia leaders, the church leaders, they will call together groups at all levels, in a safe space, it will be confidential, nothing will come out of that meeting unless they agree on a statement. It is not going to be journalists or international observers. There will be South Sudanese only.

One SSCC informant emphasizes that trauma healing must be a central part of the neutral forums.

The first thing in trauma healing is actually to be vulnerable, to accept our weaknesses and the difficulties we have as we heal but also to transcend this and to say, ‘yes, we are wounded but we have hope. We have to move on, we have to live’.

One civil society informant believes that the neutral forums could create safe spaces to raise the challenging questions that are necessary to move toward reconciliation: “We wanted to create a neutral forum [...] where the South Sudanese could speak to each other, address the root

causes of the conflict, build trust and overcome particular obstacles.” Ashworth and Ryan (pp. 56–57) and Horjen (2014, p. 102) see dialogue as peacebuilding because it can create an understanding of the other party and acceptance of differences, which in time can develop into a common understanding of a complex reality. The parties seek a common ground on which to move forward, not necessarily based on a mutual understanding of events, but a shared experience of the pain and trauma caused and experienced by the counterpart. As Horjen (2014, p. 90) formulates:

A South Sudanese peace meeting is a place where all viewpoints shall emerge. The conversational form is not a debate – one tells and listens and, over time, finds a common point of view⁴.

Several SSCC informants accentuate that the neutral forums would be “owned” by South Sudanese and come up with South Sudanese solutions and ways forward. One SSCC informant formulates: “[Dialogue processes at the local level] have given us the wisdom, not to talk to people in public, but in a private talk.” Another SSCC informant formulates the need to take ownership of the reconciliation process: “Who can understand you as South Sudanese if you are not a South Sudanese yourself?”. These quotes underpin a skepticism toward outsiders engaging in the South Sudanese’s internal affairs. This might be because several peace agreements have been negotiated by international actors like IGAD, the Troika and others. These processes focused on high-level negotiations with few actors and did not result in lasting peace (Jok, 2021, pp. 364, 373; Liaga, 2017). Owiso (2019, p. 7) emphasizes that the peace process must be driven by the South Sudanese themselves with support from other African countries and the African Union in a context-sensitive manner. Searching for “African solutions to African problems” is a common policy in the African Union and emphasized in the African Union’s Transitional Justice Policy (African Union, 2019).

As of writing, seven years after the APP was launched, the neutral forums have not yet been realized. None of the informants have a clear answer to why that is, though the immense planning needed to engage different stakeholders and the challenge of getting different factions in the same room are highlighted by several as challenging. Ashworth and Ryan (2013, p. 61) emphasize the comprehensive efforts and planning necessary to organize a conference like in

⁴ The student’s translation from Norwegian

Wunlit, which makes it challenging and time-consuming to replicate. Another main obstacle is getting “oppressors and oppressed” to be willing to meet each other. As formulated by an SSCC informant: “It is not easy to reconcile with those who have done bad to me, the perpetrators who have made me suffer”. Another SSCC informant emphasizes that reconciling is not a quick fix.

It takes time for healing to take place. So, it will include elements of trauma healing, counseling, prayer, and services that can cool their hearts and change their minds. Not so that people will forget the pain, but so that they will know how to live with it and deal with it in a way that does not destroy them.

A civil society informant believes the government’s previous National Dialogue process and the R-ARCSS’ Committee for Truth, Reconciliation, and Healing might challenge SSCC’s ability to drive a parallel process: “I do not believe they [SSCC] want to appear like they compete with the [government’s] initiative as the situation is now.”

One civil society informant believes the neutral forums pillar is the weakest of the APP, especially because SSCC has not managed to connect local reconciliation processes with the national process.

All that has taken place is local peace meetings. At a local level, the churches have brought together conflicting parties, and it has been very successful. It has helped to bring localized peace to parts of South Sudan, but it is not neutral forums, which were supposed to bring together leaders, political, military and business leaders, all the different groups with civil society leaders.

Wilson (2019, p. 22) argues along the same lines, highlighting that SSCC has successfully organized dialogue forums at the grassroots level but that these forums alone are not enough to secure peace in the country. Though the neutral forums have not yet been realized, several informants are optimistic that they will manage to organize the forums. One civil society informant accentuates that: “When we were doing the initial consultation with the government, with all the factions, [...] many of them were positive that if the church would call the neutral forums, they would be happy to be part of it.”

5.3 South Sudan Council of Churches' Organizational Capacity

SSCC meets internal and external challenges related to its capacity to conduct peacebuilding. Several of these center around unity, with challenges coming from disunity inside SSCC's member churches and new churches emerging outside the SSCC community. This section presents some of these challenges and how SSCC manages or does not manage, to respond to them.

5.3.1 "Peace is a Process, not a Project"

Capacity-building is one of the APP's four pillars. Through the interviews, it becomes clear that the informants see capacity-building differently. The SSCC informants are positive about the concept, which might be because it is an established term in the NGO and donor environment and something it is necessary to be positive about to secure funding (see e.g., Eade, 2007; Guy, 2016). On the other hand, one civil society informant believes the concept is meant to "teach them to be more like us". The informants who are positive about capacity-building find that SSCC has a vision to do peacebuilding but lacks the knowledge to convert it into action. When discussing trauma healing, one SSCC informant formulates: "We need to build capacity of how to manage this situation. How to support the people on the grassroots because we have the language, but we do not have the materials to use the language to enhance". One civil society informant uses the word "resources" to describe the situation: "A problem is defining having enough resources to respond to these issues [disunity, different factions in SSCC], including local resources, and identifying them."

In her study, Wilson (2019, p. 37) finds that religious actors believe non-violent action is important but lack an understanding of *strategic* non-violent work. Wilson (2019, p. 22) believes capacity-building is the APP's most crucial pillar and that SSCC needs organizational capacity-building to carry out its mandate as a unifying peacebuilding actor. The already mentioned civil society informant who disagrees that SSCC lacks capacity believes that it is a condescending concept.

The capacity is there, it is always there. [...] It is not a question of capacity, but a question perhaps of the surroundings [...] Capacity-building is a term I have struggled with for more than 25 years. To most NGOs, capacity-building means teaching them to

be like us, or in a technical language – ‘a more developed partner, helping a less developed partner to develop’. I think those are very condescending, near-colonial, very paternalistic definitions [...] What they need is to be empowered, the freedom and space, and that includes sometimes giving the money, because a lot of things cost money, to develop their own way of doing it, not to fit into our way of doing it.

Jok (2021, p. 371) accentuates a similar point, arguing that international donors should support local peace initiatives on their premises to engage the grassroots and support local and traditional peacebuilding methods rather than being guided by their own interests. The informant critical of capacity-building emphasizes the importance of securing funding. Economic constraints affect SSCC’s peacebuilding efforts, and the informant recognizes that it is challenging to secure financing without playing by the donors’ rules. The informant mentions “empowerment”, which is also brought up by another civil society informant:

The foundation of SSCC is co-existence and dialogue. I think of the church network as Coca-Cola with X number of outlets. We need to empower the outlets to understand the vision and get competence. Rhetorically it is there, but it is hard to realize in practice, to build capacity, which is the fourth pillar [in the APP]. I believe this has been under-communicated. It might have been communicated at the Juba level, but it has not been an active profile from the Council at the national level to the inter-church committees regionally and locally.

The informant suggests that capacity-building is needed at the national level as well as at the grassroots level, especially to strengthen the inter-church committees and the bond between the different levels. Modi et al. (2019, p. 44) argue that religious actors have not managed to include cultural and traditional leaders, who have important outreach in the South Sudanese society, in their peacebuilding activities. They also argue that Christian actors focus too strongly on Christian cooperation without including other faith communities (Modi et al., 2019, p. 44).

Whether it is called capacity-building, empowerment, or getting more resources, several informants bring up donor requirements as a challenge. The informants accentuate that peace is “a process, not a project”, and that the donors require APP to be “projectized”. One civil society informant formulates:

I think [a] challenge is to maintain and develop the vision of the APP and then operationalizing it. Because when operationalizing it, it has to go into the hands of technical people. And because of the funding, it also has to go into the hands of our international partners, and I think that dilutes the vision.

The informant sheds light on the challenge of operationalizing a “vision”, namely the APP, into something that can be implemented and hence broken down into different parts that are possible to secure funding for:

We recognize that in order to implement it bit by bit, it would have to be projectized, and it would also have to be projectized to get funding, because donors do not give money to processes, they give money to individual projects.

The informant puts into words the challenging duality of securing funding without compromising on SSCC’s ways of operating.

During the independence struggle, SSCC was a channel for international donors wanting to support religious actors working for peace and independence. International advocacy has been central to secure funding. Several informants accentuate that SSCC has used its “international, ecumenical family” to advocate for both political and financial support.

SSCC is a peacebuilding actor but, as emphasized by several informants, first and foremost an interest organization for its member churches. One civil society informant believes that it is crucial to separate SSCC from other NGOs to understand its opportunities and constraints. “SSCC does not have the capacity like professional actors, and I do not believe they are supposed to.” The informant accentuates SSCC’s role in the liberation struggle as a large humanitarian actor and emphasizes that SSCC is striving to first and foremost be an “umbrella organization coordinating the different churches and bringing them closer together”. Another civil society informant emphasizes that SSCC and the member churches first and foremost are churches: “Although we do advocacy, and although we do campaigns, we are not mainly a campaigning group.” However, the informants do not see being a church as something competing with peacebuilding activities, like accentuated by a civil society informant:

The first respondents are the local actors and churches [...] they are close to people, which makes them want to act and respond when things happen [...] when the cry for a peaceful life is the strongest there is, this becomes the most important thing they [the church leaders] bring forward.

The informant believes that SSCC and the member churches respond to the issues people are concerned with, which in South Sudan centers around conflict resolution and peace.

5.3.2 “Unity of Voice, Unity of Purpose”

“I have always talked about ‘unity of voice, unity of purpose’ as a driving force for all of us [...] but now, there is internal division in the church.” The civil society informant sheds light on a central challenge for SSCC, to maintain the unity across ethnic divisions and denominations that makes the organization unique. Another civil society informant formulates that SSCC still works on finding what unites the different churches after South Sudan seceded Sudan:

The history of unity is that it was always under pressure, but there was always unity. But that was when we had a common enemy in Khartoum. Now that the enemy is gone, what is the purpose of a church council? [...] What is it that unites us?

One civil society informant believes that the internal split in the member churches affects SSCC, especially the division in the Episcopal and Presbyterian churches. Wilson (2019, p. 30) finds that there are divisions in SSCC but that the reason for these divisions is unclear, and does not seem to be related to ethnicity and tribalism, but rather management disagreements and “strong and divisive personalities”. On the management side, one civil society informant points to the lack of organizational infrastructure in SSCC:

There has not been a systematic Board of Trustees and anchoring of APP in the member churches. [...] SSCC lacks an updated constitution, the one they have today is from before they seceded Sudan. They drafted a constitution, but it has not yet been ratified. A new constitution would have been a kind of commitment from the members.

The lack of anchoring SSCC's work at the grassroots level is emphasized by another civil society informant: "There is little ownership to SSCC in the churches. [...] There has always been a challenge that the link between the national and local levels is poor. It has been weak and bureaucratic." The informant believes that SSCC has been unsuccessful in reaching out to the local churches and getting the people to familiarize themselves with SSCC's work and added value to the religious community. Several informants believe that the inter-church committees do not work well enough, as formulated by one civil society informant: "The idea was that the APP should be implemented locally through the inter-church committees. But the linking of the national and local level has been weak and lacking ownership." One civil society informant points to a sometimes conflicted relationship between SSCC at the national level and the local churches: "[They say] 'You are only sitting in your offices, doing nothing'." This resonates with Wilson's (2019, p. 22) findings, as some of her respondents find SSCC to be bureaucratic and slow in implementing plans. However, one civil society informant emphasizes that some inter-church committees have done substantial work locally. "Some of them [the inter-church committees] have stopped local conflicts before they have spread and became more challenging to handle."

5.3.3 Generational Shift

SSCC's Board of Trustees is, as presented above, composed of members of SSCC's member churches. Several informants accentuate that the unity of these actors is essential for SSCC's effectiveness and relevance. However, the board is now comprised of new church leaders, as formulated by one civil society informant: "There has been quite a change in the church leadership positions in the last three or four years. The leaders that wrote the APP in 2015 are no longer the ones who are running the churches." One civil society informant believes the transfer of knowledge between the two generations has been poor: "New leaders are coming in, who almost do not know about the APP, so it needs to be invested a lot in why we are together." One civil society informant emphasizes that the lack of a common bond between the new church leaders is challenging for SSCC:

The generation of church leaders who went to the war together, and even before the war, were living in a country under Islamist dictatorship. The church was being oppressed on

every level. That forms a bond, the church gathered for survival, they had no other option, they did not join together for theological reason.

One civil society informant emphasizes that SSCC is working on integrating the APP in the work of the new church leaders.

We had [in a meeting in April 2022 revising the APP] the new church leaders and some of the old leaders [...] The new ones, I found many of them to be quite open. And many of them said quite publicly “I do not know anything about this, I am learning and hearing completely new things.” [...] What I hoped and still hope will come out of the meeting we had, is that the vision has somehow been reactivated and that it will be owned by the new church leaders, new staff, and new NGO people, because again, all the NGO people have changed and rarely last more than one or two years.

The informant emphasizes the importance of passing on information, not only between the church leaders but also between the partner organizations working with SSCC, as the turnover is often high in NGOs working in conflicted areas.

5.3.4 Non-SSCC Churches

As the sections above show, SSCC meets internal challenges in retaining unity. The unity is also challenged by external actors. Several informants emphasize that it has become more challenging to navigate the religious environment because SSCC no longer covers all the churches in South Sudan. Churches that are not members of SSCC engage in issues on politics and peace, as accentuated by one civil society informant:

I have heard about churches calling themselves ‘the church in opposition’, making a direct link to their support for Riek [Machar]. The split in the Episcopal and Presbyterian churches, you notice it very strongly.

There are several prosperity churches emerging, especially in Juba, where the congregants are asked to pay the priest to pray for them (Wilson, 2019, pp. 8–9). “There are ‘mushroom churches’ that are not part of the mainstream.” The civil society informant refers to churches

growing up “anywhere”, often with only one congregation with a single pastor and no common superstructure, and further elaborates:

We have had groups of little churches we have never heard of, which have issued statements on behalf of ‘the church’, and SSCC has had to react. And then international people, ambassadors, and others, come to us and ask if this really is what ‘the church’ is saying, and the Council has to say, “no, this is not what THE church is saying, it is what a group of church leaders are saying” [...] It is becoming very difficult to speak together as one church.

In statements, SSCC uses “the church” and “SSCC” interchangeably when describing its actions and positions. In a statement on 29 April 2022, SSCC stated that “[...] we identify as the Church of Christ, rather than individual churches” and accentuated in a statement on 26 March 2015, that it represents “the church of God in South Sudan” and in a statement 9 November 2019, called itself “the CHURCH”, indicating that SSCC represents the “true” churches.

5.4 Chapter Summary

Religious actors have a unique position in the South Sudanese society, both as moral guides for much of the population and because of their historical role as a provider of social services and peacebuilding during the liberation struggle. This legacy has created a special relationship with the government. SSCC legitimizes its peacebuilding efforts theologically, especially accentuating a message of a common Christian identity uniting different ethnicities. However, SSCC is affected by conflicts just like the rest of society, and ethnic division in the member churches challenges SSCC’s unity.

The SSCC-led dialogue processes in the 1990s and 2000s stand as a huge inspiration for the churches’ possible role in reconciliation and have inspired the work with the APP and the neutral forums pillar, which are accentuated by several informants as the main tool to reconcile and create a peaceful society. However, the forum has not yet been realized.

There are disagreements as to whether SSCC has the capacity to effectively build peace. Wilson believes the capacity-building pillar is the most important in APP, and that SSCC need to adopt an apolitical language to be able to work strategically with peacebuilding. SSCC has

organizational challenges, particularly in linking the national level with the grassroots and the inter-church committees meant to implement the APP. However, as some informants emphasize, a discussion on the role of the churches is needed to reflect on what position SSCC and the churches can and should take, as they are not regular NGOs but first and foremost churches. The next chapter will discuss the findings, drawing on the literature presented in the theory chapter.

6 Discussion

The chapter discusses the findings in the analysis, drawing on theories on religious peacebuilding. It aims at answering the research question: *What opportunities and constraints did South Sudan Council of Churches experience in its peacebuilding efforts from 2015 to 2022?* The discussion is structured around the same topics as the analysis: 1) Religious actors' added value in the peacebuilding environment, 2) Reconciliation, and 3) SSCC's organizational capacity.

6.1 Religious Actors' Added Value in the Peacebuilding Environment

The importance of theology in peacebuilding, namely the hermeneutics in interpreting the scripture, is not necessarily visible at first glance by an "outsider". It has, in many ways, been the most unanticipated finding in the study. There is no doubt that political structures, and to what extent the authorities let the population, religious actors, and civil society at large engage in civic and political activities, are crucial for the potential of religious peacebuilding. However, it is unwise to omit the theological dimension and the potential of using theology to build peace. A middle ground between essentialist and functionalist definitions of religion is advantageous to fully grasp various aspects of religious peacebuilding. As Galtung (2012, p. 255) wisely suggests, religions' ability to promote their soft qualities and find a theological justification for peace rather than war, is a way of using theology as social capital to build peace. Nevertheless, motivation and justification for peacebuilding cannot overcome externally determined factors such as political structures and the risks of opposing authoritarian regimes. It is therefore advantageous to recognize theology and socio-politics in tandem. Theology must be understood contextually, as Rapisarda (2020, p. 21) suggests, to fully recognize the role religion has in a particular society, how theology is affected by socio-politics, and how it affects the socio-political reality. This section will examine the theological aspect followed by the socio-political one.

6.1.1 Theological Justification for Peacebuilding

Theology is evident in SSCC's work, and its motivation and justification for peacebuilding can be found in theology. SSCC uses Bible verses with overarching messages of living in harmony and peace, and concrete verses on ethnicity and identity applicable to the South Sudanese context. SSCC uses theology to promote peace rather than conflict. The organization uses the

“soft qualities” of Christianity, as Galtung (2012, pp. 249, 255) formulates, to legitimize co-existence and peace. The Bible verses frequently referred to center around “unity in diversity”, that God created humans with different ethnicities and in different tribes. Identity is an essential notion in this matter. SSCC stresses that a Christian identity does not need to precede ethnic identities. This argument is in line with Brewer et al.’s (2010, p. 1024), that religious actors’ most important role in peacebuilding is bonding and bridging between and within groups. Brewer et al. (2010, p. 1024) argue that the bonding within groups is often stronger than the bond between them. SSCC mainly works on bringing different denominations together and can hence be seen as first and foremost bonding within the Christian group. However, SSCC bridges between different ethnic groups by using its ecumenical foundation as an overarching frame to include different groups in a shared Christian identity.

Harpviken and Røislien (2008, p. 352) emphasize the importance of contextual knowledge to understand the potential of religious peacebuilding. Frydenlund (2014, p. 9) suggests undertaking a “religion-sensitive analysis”, mapping religion’s role in society, its relation to the state, and religious actors’ authority, to understand the potential of religious peacebuilding. These approaches focus on religion in a socio-political matter, in what religion *does*, more than what it *says* (Haynes, 2013, p. 16). In addition to religion’s role in society, the theological foundation for religious peacebuilding should be included when undertaking a “religion-sensitive analysis”, as this is a key to understanding the perspectives of the religious actors conducting the peacebuilding.

6.1.2 South Sudan Council of Churches as a Socio-Political Actor

SSCC has a unique position in society. Agensky (2019, p. 277) argues that the potential for religious peacebuilding is best understood in a “peace-humanitarian-development nexus”, recognizing humanitarian and development efforts as crucial to building positive peace. During the independence struggle, SSCC provided social services to the population, conducted peacebuilding activities, and worked closely with the liberation movement SPLM/A (Agensky, 2019, p. 289). The opportunities and constraints SSCC has experienced in doing peacebuilding must therefore not only be understood in a nexus with SSCC’s humanitarian and development tasks today but the legacy it carries. SSCC’s position as a welfare provider has contributed to religious actors’ moral authority and legitimacy in the population and a unique relationship with

the authorities. This distinctive position seems to have given SSCC leeway in its peacebuilding activities that other parts of the civil society do not have.

The authorities do not necessarily treat civil society equally as a whole when deciding on the openness of the civic space. As Frydenlund (2014, p. 16) formulates: “[...] religion’s potential for peacebuilding may be found in its semi-independent position within society”. SSCC seems to have the authorities’ respect as they acknowledge the crucial role religious actors played before independence and in today’s society. Several informants believe that the government does not dare to stop SSCC’s and the churches’ activities because they fear the population’s response. Nevertheless, religious actors have been arrested and killed, like other civil society actors. Brewer et al.’s (2010, p. 1022) “religion-civil society-state nexus”, suggests that religious peacebuilders’ opportunities and constraints must be understood by the relationship between religious actors, civil society and the state. This approach aligns with SSCC’s role during the independence struggle and today’s legacy.

SSCC represents the majority religion in South Sudan. This has probably given it leeway into the political and peacebuilding arena because of its historical closeness to the government, as Brewer et al. (2010, p. 1022) suggest that majority religions can benefit from. However, SSCC includes both majority and minority denominations, which proved useful in the R-ARCSS negotiations in 2017. SSCC managed to build trust with the negotiating parties by using the different delegates’ ethnic and denominational identities to address the different parties at the same time as it stood united as a delegation. This approach contributed to enhancing SSCC’s role as a peace broker, as it took on two of Harpviken and Røislien’s (2008, pp. 367–370) religious peace broker roles: *the coordinator*, where the broker shares a normative system and identity with both conflicting parties, which SSCC did in that it provided a Christian framework shared by both negotiating parties, and *the representative*, where the broker shares identity and normative system with one of the parties. The way SSCC benefited from a delegation that included a variety of delegates with different ethnicities and denomination affiliation is an example of its potential to create “unity in diversity”, as several informants accentuate as a critical part of SSCC’s mandate.

It is worth dwelling on that SSCC moved the R-ARCSS negotiations forward and parties together rather than influence the agreement’s content. The observer status gave SSCC more independence than if it had been a negotiating party, and it could not be held responsible for the outcome of the process, which, as several informants accentuate, would probably have been

unsatisfying. SSCC showed awareness of the limited space it had to engage and acted accordingly to secure its legitimacy. If SSCC had gotten the opportunity to be a negotiating party, it is not at all sure it would have accepted. Being a negotiating party could have bound SSCC even closer with the political actors. At least, that might have been the impression left behind. Most of Wilson's (2019, pp. 27–28) respondents believe politics to be the reason for conflict and that the politicians are responsible. Being a negotiating party could risk SSCC's independent role and legitimacy in society.

SSCC is drawn between its historical relationship with SPLM/A and independence from the government, which is of utmost importance to the organization. That SSCC and SPLM/A were standing side by side in the independence struggle seems to have made it challenging but even more essential for SSCC to distance itself from what became an authoritarian regime responsible for crimes against its own population during the civil wars.

Wilson (2019, p. 36) argues that religious actors' legitimacy can be at risk if they are perceived as political. This seems of great importance to all SSCC informants, who are reluctant to confirm any relationship with the government. However, as Østebø and Østebø (2014, p. 84) argue, religious actors are dependent on some form of collaboration with the government to be able to perform their activities. Negotiating new roles and relationships after independence continues to be a balancing act for SSCC, where staying close enough to the government to be able to conduct activities in a society where the civic space is shrinking, at the same time as not losing legitimacy in the population, is one of the organization's most significant challenges.

Modi et al. (2019, p. 45) point out that the political will to make peace in South Sudan is lacking, which affects the potential for religious peacebuilding. SSCC has criticized both the government's actions and lacking actions, especially during the civil wars. However, SSCC has criticized actions rather than individuals. It is necessary to examine whether this type of criticism is enough to ensure SSCC's legitimacy in the population and if this contributes to building peace or is a mere way of distancing itself from the government. The statements' outreach and how the government relates to them are unclear. SSCC states that it will sanction the authorities if they do not listen. However, SSCC is not clear on what the concrete consequences will be if the government does not listen. SSCC's ability and responsibility to sanction the authorities is a necessary discussion, which leads to a point raised by several informants, namely what a church and an ecumenical organization are supposed to be, and what

tools they possess and are willing and able to use without losing the little space they have to conduct peacebuilding.

6.2 Reconciliation

Religious actors in South Sudan seem to have been spared government sanctions to a larger extent than other parts of civil society, which is not given and a constant in the future. The issues they raise and how they communicate will likely determine their potential to conduct peacebuilding. As Steen-Johnsen (2020, pp. 434, 445) argues, religious peacebuilders must address sensitive issues to contribute to positive peace, not to maintain the status quo, or indirectly contribute to relapse into conflict. However, with this approach, they risk losing the limited space they have. As R-ARCSS is extended for another three years and the implementation mechanisms of Chapter V on transitional justice, accountability, reconciliation, and healing are slowly forming, it is necessary to examine what role SSCC will take in the reconciliation mechanisms, directly engaging, supporting, or staying out of the process. SSCC can use its experience from dialogues and restorative justice to contribute to a representative and inclusive implementation of the peace process. However, to be effective, it will entail raising sensitive issues like justice, past grievances, and the fact that government officials were responsible for atrocities during the civil war.

Dialogues are a favorable reconciliation mechanism for SSCC. All SSCC informants accentuate the neutral forums pillar in the Action Plan for Peace (APP) as the main tool for peacebuilding. SSCC's relative success in facilitating the People-to-People process in the 1990s and the Entebbe process in the 2000s, seem to be a great inspiration for today's peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts. These Track Two processes are examples of how SSCC used its position as a middle-range actor in society, bringing different societal groups together from the national and grassroots level (Lederach, 1997, p. 39). As of writing, the outline of the neutral forums is not drawn. It is unclear why these have not yet materialized, seven years after they were initiated in the Action Plan for Peace (APP). The upcoming National Committee and the previous National Dialogue led by the government might be reasons for the hesitation. The same can be said about the immense planning necessary to conduct processes like the People-to-People and Entebbe processes. Nevertheless, based on the People-to-People and Entebbe processes, three of Frydenlund's (2014, pp. 21–22) dialogue types are relevant.

Experimental dialogue entails that the parties pursue an understanding of the religious “other” and share experiences and suffering (Frydenlund, 2014, p. 21). This is at the heart of religious peacebuilding in South Sudan. Like a civil society informant accentuates, SSCC wants to “create a neutral forum [...] where the South Sudanese could speak to each other, address the root causes of the conflict, build trust and overcome particular obstacles”. This is aligned with restorative justice, where the conflicting parties would come together, listen to each other, share similar experiences and grief, and find a foundation for a shared future (Botman, 2004, pp. 248–249; Horjen, 2014, p. 90). The experimental dialogue is closely linked to the *transformative dialogue*, which aims at converting conflict identities through shared history, religious identity, and theological concepts (Frydenlund, 2014, p. 22). The notion of identity is central to SSCC’s work. SSCC is a cross-ethnic organization aiming at binding different groups together under the banner of Christianity. Accepting being Christians at the same time as part of various tribes is central to SSCC and an example of contextual theology (Rapisarda, 2020, p. 21). Navigating this complexity is what SSCC is trying to do when using theology and Bible verses to substantiate differences as a blessing rather than something legitimating conflict.

All informants emphasize that the South Sudanese population is traumatized, and that trauma healing is essential to dialogue and reconciliation. Trauma healing can be a central part of experimental and transformative dialogues and would entail going into grief and losses, as Steen-Johnsen (2020, pp. 434, 445) accentuates as crucial to building peace. Religious actors cannot be detached from the political context and tensions in society as they are part of the political reality just like secular actors (Steen-Johnsen & Vik, 2022, pp. 127–128). This can pose both opportunities and constraints in facilitating reconciliation processes. Religious actors are “wounded healers”, as formulated by an SSCC informant. Because they have suffered, religious actors can identify with other people’s loss and trauma. However, they might be traumatized in a way that makes it challenging for them to take on a facilitating role. To understand the ability SSCC and religious actors elsewhere have in taking the lead in reconciliation and trauma healing, it is essential to recognize that they are themselves traumatized and what opportunities and constraints this entails in a particular conflict.

Frydenlund’s (2014, p. 22) third dialogue type relevant to the South Sudanese case is *politically sensitive dialogue*, which raises political issues through a theological lens as a starting point to discuss sensitive topics. This is a burning issue regarding the implementation of R-ARCSS’ Chapter V. SSCC uses theology to legitimize its peacebuilding efforts and Bible

verses, which promote harmonious living and reconciliation. However, as Steen-Johnsen (2020, pp. 434, 445) argues, promoting a message of compassion, love and peace is not enough to create positive peace. Structural and underlying causes of conflict must be dealt with. Loss and grief must be raised, which in the South Sudanese case, as with Steen-Johnsen's (2020, p. 444) study in Ethiopia, entail government critique.

SSCC has been critical of the government, as underscored in statements over the years. However, being critical of the government's action rather than the individuals in power positions might pose challenges when the R-ARCSS Chapter V mechanisms are to be fulfilled. It is necessary to discuss whether a solely restorative process is enough, or if there is a need for a retributive dimension, punishing perpetrators, like the hybrid court is supposed to do. A crucial question is how SSCC's neutral forums will relate to the R-ARCSS mechanisms supposed to address similar issues. If SSCC is to take a role in the Chapter V mechanisms, it might be impossible not to raise the government's atrocities and not be critical of individuals in power positions. Government officials were responsible for severe human rights abuses during the civil wars, and a hybrid court should hold them accountable for these crimes. The officials themselves are not likely to self-examine. An example of this was President Kiir's speech at the launch of the Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing in April 2022, as he claimed that "what we need most is reconciliation before the next step of pursuing justice" (UNDP, 2022). As Akoi (2021) argues, a hybrid court might do more damage than good and reinforce ethnic conflict. If so, it is necessary to discuss alternatives, and whether a completely restorative process is enough, by trying to adapt the same framework as the TRC in South Africa. The TRC was criticized for neglecting other forms of justice than a restorative dimension, for instance a redistributive dimension (Botman, 2004, p. 249). The third mechanism in R-ARCSS' Chapter V, the Compensation and Reparation Authority, should look closely at the effects of this lacking aspect of the TRC.

It is beneficial to look at the religious aspect of the TRC in South Africa when discussing the design of the South Sudanese reconciliation mechanisms and how SSCC, and religion in general, would affect the process. An important point to raise is the critique the TRC received for its exclusive interpretation of Christianity and its lacking inclusion of other religions (Shore, 2012, p. 290). Though the majority of the South Sudanese population is Christian, it is essential to raise questions on the inclusion of minority religions and Christian denominations and congregations that are not included in SSCC. SSCC's inclusion of traditional religious

expressions in the People-to-People process is crucial to examine. Due to SSCC's standing in the South Sudanese population, its opportunities to engage in reconciliation are strong. Nevertheless, there are limitations related to how SSCC approaches core issues in reconciliation, like guilt, trauma, and root-causes of conflict. Implementing the neutral forums and how these, and SSCC in general, relate to the reconciliation mechanisms in R-ARCSS will shape SSCC's role as a peacebuilder in the times ahead.

6.3 South Sudan Council of Churches' Organizational Capacity

Religious actors cannot be detached from a political context and societal tensions (Steen-Johnsen & Vik, 2022, pp. 127–128). Acknowledging that SSCC is part of the larger societal challenges is crucial to understanding its potential to conduct peacebuilding. The ethnic divisions in society affect SSCC and the member churches. The “unity of voice, unity of purpose” that the informants point out as essential to SSCC's work is challenged for several reasons.

Until now, SSCC has had some leeway in peacebuilding that other parts of civil society have not had, because of its standing in society and its relation to the government. A generational shift in SSCC might change the position, as the younger generation “were not in the trenches” with the SPLM/A. The renewal of SSCC's Board of Trustees and the leadership in the member churches will be crucial to follow, to examine how much individuals affect the organization's status in society and its relation to the government. SSCC's organizational capacity will be tested in the transition, and the new leaders' ownership of the APP will influence SSCC's ability to build peace.

Whether SSCC has the capacity to conduct peacebuilding successfully is subject to debate. Some informants believe SSCC has the capacity to conduct peacebuilding, and that international donors should let SSCC control its work without interference. Others believe it is necessary with more resources. The informants stress that “peace is a process, not a project”, but seem to agree that the APP must be “projectized” to gain funding from international donors, which is necessary to conduct the activities they want. Wilson (2019, pp. 22, 37) argues that SSCC needs an enhanced understanding of *strategic* non-violent work. The effectiveness of SSCC's peacebuilding activities, and whether the organization approaches peacebuilding in a strategic way, is crucial to examine further to ensure that religious peacebuilding is not only measured by the number of activities but by their effects and results.

Religious actors are motivated by, as one civil society informant puts it, “a mission from a higher power outside themselves”. One SSCC informant argues that “spiritual transformation” is necessary to create a peaceful society and argues that “peace from above” will turn to “peace from within”, which in turn can create “peace between”. However, as emphasized by some informants, “inner peace” is not enough to create societal peace. In her study, Wilson (2019, p. 36) finds that it is unclear whether religious actors manage to develop the focus on inner peace into societal action. This is closely aligned with Steen-Johnsen’s (2020, pp. 434, 445) argument that religious actors must go beyond talking about love, compassion, and forgiveness and address the root causes of conflict to be able to conduct successful peacebuilding. Whether SSCC has the capacity to raise sensitive issues will be interesting for other scholars to examine, especially if the neutral forums and the R-ARCSS’ Chapter V mechanisms materialize.

It is worth reflecting on what capacity and role SSCC and other religious actors should have, what one can expect from them, and what responsibility they have to build peace. Steen-Johnsen and Vik (2022, pp. 125, 128) argue that religious actors are not predisposed to successfully conduct peacebuilding and get support from fellow believers just because they are religious. This is essential to note when discussing what role religious actors can and should take in peacebuilding. As several informants emphasize, the churches are, first and foremost, exactly this - churches. Is it right to expect a church council to be held accountable for implementing a peace process? Regardless, it is essential that look further into the activities and efforts they chose, to ensure that if they do work for peace, they operate in a strategic way that contributes to building peace; not to disregard that “peace is a process, not a project”, but to ensure religious actors’ legitimacy and effectiveness as peacebuilders. As one informant puts it, the most important issue in the local congregations is the opportunity to live in a peaceful society. Peacebuilding thus becomes SSCC’s main priority. Though SSCC represents the largest Christian denominations in the country, it lacks the immediate closeness to congregations and the people. SSCC can hence be seen as lacking an essential feature of being a church. How SSCC negotiates its relation to the member churches on the grassroots level is crucial for its success in continuing to be a central authority in the religious environment.

SSCC is negotiating its role in society, trying to embrace both the elites and the grassroots. To some extent, SSCC has been successful as a middle-range actor in Lederach’s (1997) pyramid. SSCC has contributed to the Track One R-ARCSS process and, before independence, facilitated Track Two processes, including elites and grassroots actors.

However, Lederach's (1997) pyramid is relevant not just to looking at the different levels in society but also to examine the hierarchy of a religious organization like SSCC. Religious leaders in elite positions are often closely linked with political elites, and it is inevitable to include religious leaders at the mid-level, not just the national level, to create positive peace (Frydenlund, 2014, p. 15). Whether SSCC is a middle-range actor or an elite actor at the top level, depends largely on its ability to use the inter-church committees. The committees are supposed to function as a mid-level between SSCC at the national level, and the member churches at the grassroots level. They have had some success in stagnating local and regional conflicts but are not streamlined and do not function as well as they could. SSCC's success as a peacebuilder and its legitimacy going forward largely depend on its ability to bring the different levels of society together, so that peace is built from below and that SSCC manages to engage the population rather than advancing into an elite actor itself.

6.4 Concluding Remarks

The thesis has examined the opportunities and constraints SSCC has experienced in its peacebuilding efforts from 2015 to 2022. It contributes to the research on religious peacebuilding by suggesting that the potential for religious peacebuilding must be understood by theology and socio-politics in tandem. Religious actors' potential to build peace can be found both in external and internal opportunities and challenges, related to their position in society and its organizational capacity. Internal motivation and justification are crucial to understanding why SSCC keeps going after so many years of violent conflict and traumatizing experiences. Theology is a central aspect in this manner. Believing God is on your side and that you are "in this world, but not of it", function as a motivation to not give up but continue to build peace. Nevertheless, religious actors' potential to build peace is determined mainly by the civic space allowed by the government. Several studies have critically approached the role religious actors can have in peacebuilding and how they must navigate to ensure legitimacy in the population and in relation to the authorities. Religious actors can play essential roles in the middle-range level of society. The South Sudanese case demonstrates that religious actors' positions in proximity to the authorities pose both opportunities and constraints. The government have tried to get the support of popular figures in society, which religious actors often are. The widespread corruption and government figures' aim at compromising certain religious actors have challenged the legitimacy of the church community.

The case from South Sudan shows opportunities and constraints in a transitional period from supporting an independence movement to becoming a civil society actor in opposition to much of the actions of the previously liberation movement, now turned government. The case demonstrates the tense position religious actors possess between the authorities and the people. It is worth problematizing how long SSCC can live on the legitimacy from the independence struggle and how the generational shift in the church leadership might affect SSCC's relation to the authorities, as the younger generation was not "in the trenches" with the government. How SSCC approaches the transitional justice mechanisms in the R-ARCSS and its planned neutral forums and whether it raises sensitive issues like justice, grievances, and root causes of conflict will be crucial to its legitimacy and ability to build sustainable peace. Balancing proximity and independence from the government is essential but an immense challenge, as to keep the little space SSCC has to engage today.

SSCC's future opportunities and constraints to conduct peacebuilding will be influenced by the organization's relation to the government, its position in society at large, and its status in the religious environment. Churches outside of the SSCC community appear at increasing speed, and the organization's legitimacy as the "one, true church" is tested. It is crucial to follow the spread of new types of Evangelical churches on the African continent and examine how these affect the existing religious communities, traditionally in a hegemonic position. Regardless of the growth of new religious actors, even if SSCC continues to be the prominent religious peacebuilder in South Sudan, it will not necessarily manage to lead the country into peace. Scholars, as well as practitioners, have high hopes for religious actors' potential as peacebuilders. Even though religious actors have several opportunities that other actors do not have, it is essential to recognize the constraints they face in the immense task it is to build peace.

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8 Appendix

Appendix 1

List of informants

Affiliation	Interview date
SSCC	27 April 2022
SSCC	27 April 2022
SSCC	28 April 2022
SSCC	28 April 2022
Civil society	16 March 2022
Civil society	28 April 2022
Civil society	28 April 2022
Civil society	6 May 2022
Civil society	13 May 2022
Civil society	31 August 2022

Appendix 2

List of SSCC statements

Title	Date
South Sudan church leaders' message	26 March 2015
Statement from SSCC on the deteriorating situation in South Sudan	26 May 2015
Church leaders' retreat – Statement of intent, Kigali, Rwanda	7 June 2015
SSCC message of hope – Advent and Christmas 2015	17 December 2015
SSCC statement on the revitalised ARCSS	4 October 2018
Let hope and opportunity for a peaceful South Sudan prevail	9 November 2019
A message of Hope Declaring the Second Decade of South Sudan's Independence as a Period of New Beginning of Peace, Justice, Freedom and Prosperity for all our People	9 July 2021
SSCC message on International Day of Peace	21 September 2021
SSCC Recommitment to the 2015 Kigali Statement of Intent and the Action Plan for Peace (APP)	29 April 2022

Appendix 3

Interview guide

Introduction

- 1) Short introduction about the project and my own background.
- 2) Informal questions about the informant.
- 3) Practical questions: recording to secure correct citation, and anonymity
- 4) Please tell me about yourself
 - a. Your name
 - b. Position in SSCC or in relation to SSCC
 - i. What are your main tasks?

Reflection

- 5) Action Plan for Peace – main take aways.
 - a. Which of the three pillars have been most successful
 - b. Grassroots vs. national level
- 6) What separates religious peacebuilding from other types of peacebuilding in South Sudan?
- 7) Why are religious actors important in peacebuilding in South Sudan?
 - a. SSCC in particular - What do you believe to be SSCC's most important role in peacebuilding?
- 8) What would you identify as key accomplishments by SSCC in peacebuilding?
 - a. Can you tell me about some concrete activities you believe to have been effective/successful?
 - b. Relation to the government
- 9) What are the main barriers for religious peacebuilding in South Sudan?
 - a. What are SSCC's greatest obstacles?
 - b. Ethnic rivalries in SSCC?
- 10) Religious actors' and SSCC's role in transitional justice
 - a. Trauma healing, neutral forums
- 11) What is the way to peace in South Sudan?

Conclusion

- 12) We have been through my questions. Do you have anything you would like to add or elaborate on?
- 13) Thank you so much for participating. I really appreciate you taking the time to talk to me.
- 14) The thesis will be finished by October 2022. If you would like to read the thesis, I will be happy to send it to you.

Appendix 4

Assessment from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data

18.09.2022, 14:57

Meldeskjema for behandling av personopplysninger

[Notification form](#) / [Religious peacebuilding in South Sudan](#) / Assessment

Assessment

Reference number	Type	Date
133459	Standard	16.06.2022

Project title
Religious peacebuilding in South Sudan

Data controller (institution responsible for the project)
MF vitenskapelig høyskole for teologi, religion og samfunn

Project leader



Student



Project period
23.08.2021 - 16.10.2022

Categories of personal data
General
Special

[Notification Form](#)

Comment
Personverntjenester har vurdert endringen i prosjektslutt dato.

Vi har nå registrert 16.10.2022 som ny slutt dato for behandling av personopplysninger.

Vi vil følge opp ved ny planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet.



Lykke til videre med prosjektet!