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Faith Away From Home

How Christian Youth Encounter Pluralism

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MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society,

AVH5110: Thesis for Master in Religion in Contemporary Society (60 ECTS), Autumn 2022

Word count: 35,268

Acknowledgement

This project could not have been completed without the help and excellent guidance of my academic supervisor Jan-Olav Henriksen. Neither could it have been done without the consistent support from my family. Thank you.

Abstract

While much has been written about how youth develop their religious identities, there is little research that examines how the process of moving into different environments affects religious identity in a Norwegian context. This project sets out to answer the research question, "*How do young Norwegians of Christian background who have moved to Oslo experience their religious identity after their change in environment?*" This project recruited seven participants who grew up in various places across Norway and had moved to Oslo within the past 10 years. In-depth qualitative interviews were used to capture their religious experiences at home and in Oslo.

This project utilises Peter Berger's theory of pluralism in modern society to analyse how those who have moved to Oslo as young adults had to navigate the internal pressure of being Christian while being faced with pluralism and secularism. Berger argues that with multiple religious positions available, no single religion can be taken for granted. Due to external complexity in the world, and individual is forced inward to decide what to believe.

The findings according to this analysis were complex. Some youth were compelled to radically reorient their identity according to their surroundings, while others limited their contact with opposing religious positions. A common theme emerged however; in the complexity of Norway's religious landscape, youth had to individually choose religious expressions that were subjectively meaningful for themselves.

Abbreviations

DNK	*Den norske kirke* (The Church of Norway)
YOR	Youth On Religion survey

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1. Introduction

Norway is a deeply religiously complex nation. Though it is highly secular in many regards, it has a long tradition of a majority state-sponsored Protestant Lutheran church, and many areas are becoming more religiously diverse (Repstad, 2020). The complexity of Norway's situation does not merely exist abstractly; it is something real and tangible that must be engaged with by individuals.

However, Norway's religious culture is not uniform throughout, and different environments offer differing degrees of this complexity. Young adults who move across the country for either education or employment are perhaps uniquely positioned to experience these differences in religious environments. In particular, those who have moved to Oslo, Norway's capital and largest city, are bound to experience changes in the way they express their identity. Those youth that identify as Christian are likely to find themselves in a unique position. They may be a part of the majority religion, but it certainly is not the only religion available. And what does it mean to be religious at all in an increasingly secular culture where many see little need for faith?

While much research has been conducted on the religious development of youth, there is little that addresses the role of moving across different environments within a Norwegian context. Certainly growing up and becoming independent play a large role in development, but how does embracing a new environment and a city like Oslo shape Christian identity?

1.1. Research Question and Method

This project thus sets out to examine how young Christian Norwegians navigate the complexity of the religious milieu they find themselves in. The research question to be discussed is: "*How do young Norwegians of Christian background who have moved to Oslo experience their religious identity after their change in environment?*" In order to answer this research question, qualitative interviews were conducted with seven young adults who had recently moved to Oslo.

Peter Berger's theory of pluralism will be used to analyse the research material. Taken from his 1979 book, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation*, Berger describes how with the abundance of religious options available in a pluralistic modern society, people are forced to choose their religious positions subjectively in order to resolve inner uncertainty.

After the project's methodology, literature review, and theory are given, the analysis according to Berger's concepts will be presented. This analysis is broken up into three chapters in order to answer the three sub-questions under the research question. These sub-questions are: "*How did these participants experience their religious formation in their home towns?",* "*How have the participants' religious identities developed or changed within the experiences of moving away from home?,*" and, "*In what ways do these participants reflect on the roles that pluralism and secularism play in their religious development?*" After the three sections of analysis, the results will be presented and situated within the other literature in the discussion chapter.

2. Methodology

In order to adequately answer the research question of *"How do young Norwegians of Christian background who have moved to Oslo experience their religious identity after their change in environment?",* a qualitative approach is best suited. The question seeks to understand intimately personal themes such as subjective self-identity, lived experiences, emotional states, and individual histories. Broader quantitative surveys would be inadequate in capturing the desired nuances, so in-depth quantitative interviews were used as the chosen method. (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey 2011, p. 109-110).

2.1. Qualitative Interviews

In order to answer the research question, Rubin and Rubin's (2005) "responsive interviewing" model of qualitative interviews was used. This model draws heavily from interpretive constructionist theory with its emphasis on interpreting the interviewees' understandings in their own words and building a larger theory by drawing points of connection between them. Responsive interviewing advances this by focusing on the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, and it allows for more open ended questions and dynamic responses (p. 27-37). Within this responsive interview method, interview questions structured both thematically and chronologically were employed in order to draw out the lived narratives of the participants. As Brinkmann and Kvale (2009) suggest, the prepared interview guide acted as a type of script that allowed the interview to be semi-structured. The questions flowed thematically while still allowing the participants' stories to dictate the relevant themes. The questions were designed to give the respondents space for self-reflection and to give their own conscious reasoning or explanations for any religious development.

2.2. Sampling

Consideration was given to which participants will be the most relevant in this project. The samples were limited to young adults between the ages of 20 and 30 who have moved to Oslo from other parts of Norway as an adult. Additionally, they must have identified as having a Christian background. This particular qualification is difficult to concretely define; what being "Christian" means varies from person to person. The decision was made to leave this qualification up to the interpretation of the participant as it allows a greater variety of stories to be captured in the data collection process. For example, the interviews included people identifying as Christian without much conscious thought, those who have a robust view of personal faith, one participant who was actively Christian but no longer identifies as such, and one who grew up religious before abandoning faith as a teenager, only to become Christian again after moving. Rather than trying to set hard boundaries on who is "sufficiently Christian" enough to participate, all of these different experiences were collected in order to find common threads between them.

These samples have been found mainly through extended social networks within school and church communities. This includes formal church and educational networks and informal networks of young people who know each other without being bound to any particular organisation (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey 2011, p. 96-99). After a year of living in Oslo, I had acquired familiarity with many of these formal and informal networks, and a limited number of participants that were personally known only tangentially were selected in order to maintain a professional distance. The formal networks used included those attending a large church in Oslo and those studying at MF. Those who were recruited personally through church groups or from students studying theology are valuable, though it was possible they might reflect a limited number of views of faith due to their connection to religious institutions. As participants who may have had or were currently undergoing religious change apart from religious institutions were desired, "snowballing" was used to reach outside formal church structures. This is the process where participants may reach out to

their own relevant contacts unknown to the researcher for possible interview participation (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey 2011, p. 100-101). Using snowballing to access friends of friends who are less engaged with the formal religious structures was a useful method in finding those less connected to my personal social circle. They therefore gave a wider breadth of responses while also tapping into larger informal networks that were unknown to me.

2.3. Overview of Participants

It is necessary here to give an overview of each participant's background. All identifying information is de-identified, and pseudonyms will be used to preserve anonymity.

Kaja is from an urban area on the south-west coast, and she had lived in Oslo for about four years at the time of the interview. She grew up in a Christian family, and was semi-actively involved with *Den norske kirke* (DNK). She described the environment as more or less secular as she noted her family seemed to be "more Christian" than any other families around. She also spent two years at a rural Christian boarding school before moving to Oslo to attend university.

Isak comes from a small town in a rural area on the west coast and had moved to Oslo over a year ago to intern with a Christian organisation. His family is actively Christian, and he grew up in a *trosbevegelsen* church that later merged with a local pentecostal congregation. He reported a fair degree of diversity of the types of Christian churches in their area, though most people are secular.

Ingebørg is from a rural area in northern Norway. She grew up in a Christian family and was semi-active in DNK. She reported their home environment as very secular and was not aware of any churches aside from DNK. She moved to Oslo for *folkehøgskole* and has lived there for four years.

Maria comes from a city on the south-west coast. She grew up in a Christian home actively involved in DNK, but she did not have many friends who were Christian. In *ungdomsskole* she decided to stop being Christian. She then attended a Christian

folkehøgskole before moving to Oslo afterwords where they became Christian again. She has lived in Oslo for eight years.

Henrik grew up in a small town on the west coast in relatively close proximity to an urban area. His family is Christian and they expressed a fair degree of awareness of the local church environment. The family attended DNK before attending a more conservative Lutheran free church, and then attending a church associated with a Lutheran mission organisation. He was active in many Christian youth organisations and reported he had a roughly even mix between Christians of various denominations and non-religious people in his friend group. After attending a Christian *folkehøgskole*, he moved to Oslo for university and has been there about one year.

Ingrid grew up in a small town in eastern Norway. Her family was Christian and actively engaged in DNK, though the wider community was secular, and she did not report much religious diversity in her town. She moved to Oslo about five years ago for university, and while she described a strong faith for most of their life, she stopped being Christian two years ago.

Synne is from a small town in a rural area in western Norway, and it was described as being in the heart of Norway's *Bibelbeltet.* Interestingly, no one else in her family is Christian; she became religious at a young age through Christian youth activities and friends. She was actively involved in DNK and the local *bedehuset* and would visit other types of churches with friends. She moved to Oslo three years ago for university.

2.4. The Interview Process

Once willing participants were found, they were provided with an information sheet and consent letter ahead of time that explained precisely what the project is, what questions the research seeks to answer, why they fit the sample criteria, and how their data will be used and processed if they consented to participate. At the time of meeting, they were allowed to read it again and ask any questions before signing.

The prepared interview questions acted as a guide that began with topics about their religious background and home environment. As the interview continued, questions began about their religious practices, experiences, and beliefs since being in Oslo. Throughout the interview, there were questions angled to detail their encounters with secular ideas, their church involvement, and how their religious life has developed or changed in response. It should be noted here that while the project is focused on how participants navigate pluralism, the use of the word "pluralism" was generally avoided in the interviews. This was an intentional choice on the outset for the sake of avoiding technical, academic English for those who spoke it as a second language. Instead, more colloquial terms such as "diversity" and "different religions" were most often used to capture a similar idea.

Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey (2011) note how open ended questions and probes are an effective method of eliciting detailed answers and explanations (p. 118-119). For example, near the start of one interview, the question was asked, "In what ways did your Christian community speak about the wider culture in Norway?" They responded by saying it was often discussed that the church in Norway was losing numbers as people did not feel the need for Christianity and that the church was dying. Their answer was followed up with a probe asking how people in the community responded to this perception and if it spurred any positive engagement. They responded by describing instead that it engendered an "us vs them" mentality, and they sought to separate themselves from the wider culture.

The choice was made to remain flexible with how closely to follow the interview guide. In keeping with the responsive interviewing method, this approach was taken to facilitate a conversation between two humans and to build a relationship with the interview participant (Rubin & Rubin 2005, p. 30-35). Before starting, rapport was built to get to know the interviewee more. The interview guide was out during the process, but sensitivity was given to the themes that the participants themselves deemed significant during interviews. The flow of interviews could vary wildly; in one interview, a participant could say a few sentences to each answer and probe, and the guide was followed almost exactly as laid out. In other interviews, an open question would be asked, and the participant would speak for 10 minutes retelling stories. In the process, they could touch on many themes in forthcoming questions. Occasionally, participants had to be refocused to the topic of the project, but all the while care was given to that which mattered to the interviewee without judgement. The goal

was to keep the interview length at around an hour, but if the participants had more to say and was willing to proceed, the interview continued until all the questions were answered.

2.5. Transcription

All interviews were audio recorded. As part of the preparation for analysis, each interview was transcribed nearly word for word. Minimal editorial choices were made on pauses, instances of misspeaking, or filler words and sounds (uhm's and ah's). This transcription method sought to maintain accurate tones of voice and emotions conveyed as they were relevant to the analysis. In all quotes of participants used in this project, ellipse (…) are used to denote pauses in their speech and *do not* represent editorial omissions. Likewise, dashes (-) denote sudden verbal interjections or a mid-sentence change in topic. Though interviews were taken in English, participants occasionally used Norwegian when they found it necessary. Norwegian words remain verbatim and untranslated in quotes as they were often used to more fully capture the idea the interviewee wished to express. After transcription, codes were made of the common themes that have emerged from the data.

2.6. Ethics

Before beginning this project, approval was granted from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. Because religious belief and identity are sensitive subjects, all data, analysis, and presentations of such in the project are de-identified. As stated above, pseudonyms are used for participants. In addition, names of towns, schools, churches, and specific organisations are also de-identified. Their data was stored only on my personal computer with password protection, and it will be deleted at the completion of this project. At the recruitment process, potential participants were straightforwardly informed about the research questions, project goals, and data management via a project information and informed consent form sent to them ahead of time. This form notified them that if they agreed to participate, they could

still withdraw at any time without explanation and that they were free to not answer any questions they were not comfortable with. All participants signed this informed consent form. During interviews, it was ensured that all participants were comfortable during interviews and that they only spoke about the topics to the extent they freely wished to do so.

2.7. Problems

Generally, the interview process went smoothly. There were however two minor issues that emerged: those of sampling and of location. As mentioned above, a degree of variance in how the interview participants relate to Christianity was allowed. This was admittedly not my intention at the outset however. I had initially planned to find participants who were all consistently active in their religious faith throughout their lives. This was problematic for two reasons. "Sufficiently Christian" proved difficult to measure and define as previously stated, but it also significantly limited my pool of potential participants. While not insurmountable, I found that my knowledge of the formal networks I could draw from (MF and the church) were more limited than I anticipated. While I knew many people who might like to participate, the number of people connected to these networks who were both willing and available to be interviewed by someone they did not know was small. It thus seemed reasonable to slightly expand the participant criteria.

The final sample of interviewees also ended up having a gender imbalance, with five women to two men. While it was planned to have an even number of female and male participants, several males who were contacted and who had initially expressed interest in participating ended up not responding to further requests. As the snowballing process of finding a suitable number of interviewees continued, the final number ended up being majority female. While this is not ideal, the project did not dive deeply into issues surrounding gender, and therefore the impact is of the imbalance is negligible.

Additionally, the matter of physical space in the interview also proved to be a difficulty. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic and out of respect for those being interviewed, it was offered that the interviews be conducted wherever was most comfortable and convenient to the participant. Regardless, most interviews were conducted at MF. I often

managed to book a quiet room which was ideal for most interviews, but on occasions where no room was available, they were conducted in a secluded corner of a common area. Occasionally however, the noise and presence of other people was a distraction during the interviews, and we had to relocate and allow the interviewee to gather their thoughts again. This should not be considered a serious issue as participants were given space to go back and find their place again if they become distracted, but it certainly is not ideal.

It is also necessary here to acknowledge my own positionality in this project. As a Christian with some theological education whose background was heavily influenced by the religious landscape of my own country, I quickly realised I had many presuppositions surrounding what Christianity, church, and faith mean. These assumptions coloured the way I built the interview guide and some of the followup questions in the first first interviews. For example, the guide had a question asking, “How would you describe your relationship to a formal church structure?” This would perhaps make more sense in my own country where, from my experience, Christians seem to have more denominational loyalty, but most of the interviewees here found it confusing and in need clarification. Nonetheless, the process of administering the interviews quickly revealed my presuppositions, and I was able to make the necessary adjustments.

3. Literature Review

In order to gain insight on the previous research done on the religious development of youth, the first two works to be discussed are Madge et al.'s *Youth On Religion: The Development, Negotiation and Impact of Faith and Non-Faith Identity* (2014) and Smith and Snell's *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (2009). Both of these are large-scale studies that utilised qualitative and quantitative methods, and their findings will be relevant for this project.

Youth On Religion (2014) is based on a UK study that focused on three distinctly diverse, multi-faith urban environments: two different London boroughs, and the city of Bradford in North England. These areas were chosen in order to understand how youth negotiate their religious identities, the operative factors in those negotiations, and the importance those identities had in daily life within diverse areas undergoing rapid demographic change. Overall, they found attitudes of liberal individualism highly present in the participants, and noted a *locality ethos* that points to different trends in importance of religion in the three geographical areas.

In contrast, *Soul in Transition* (2009) is based on the third wave National Study of Youth and Religion in the USA. This was a series of surveys and interviews spread across the entire country, with repeated data collection from the same participants across several years. The third wave of the survey interviewed and surveyed those participants at ages 18-23 as they were transitioning into early adulthood. While the broad based data collection is not able to say anything conclusive about the role of youth's social environment in identity formation, it's longitudinal analysis is nonetheless helpful in supporting several theoretical causal mechanisms of religious change in youth.

Additionally, Smith and Snell conclude that cultural values of classical liberal Protestantism have deeply effected American youth— even those outside liberal Protestant expressions of faith or without faith at all. For those participants, values of individualism, tolerance, pluralism, moral values, and skepticism towards dogmatic faith and religious authorities were clear trends (2009, p. 287-290).

In addition to these two projects, another pertinent research project on religion in youth is Holmqvist's *Jeg tror jeg er lykkelig…: Ung tror og hverdag* (2007). This work was based on over 1000 surveys and 21 in-depth interviews with *ungdomskole* students in four different Norwegian counties: Oslo, Oppland, Agder, and Troms. The counties were selected for their broad differences in religious culture, though the participants themselves were selected at random in conjunction with the schools that responded to the participation request, and geographic differences in religious expression was not a central part of their analysis. (2007, p. 176).

The findings in Holmqvist's book are in many respects in line with the previous works discussed. For Norwegian youth, approach to religion is characterised by individualism and an open tolerance towards those who hold a faith or a different faith. Generally speaking, it seems that Norwegian youth in this study view religion as less important than youth in the previously mentioned studies, even if those youth believe in God or identify as Christian. Only 11% in Holmqvist's work responded that religious faith was important in life, even though around 80% felt that it was fine for others to be devoutly Christian or Muslim. Additionally, their experience of church was that it was often boring, irrelevant, and disconnected from their day to day life (Holmqvist 2007). In this way, Norwegian youth can be seen as spiritually tolerant and open, but not necessary seeking.

The results of this study will be particularly useful in the current project. While Homqvist sampled younger youth with a variety of religions, it nonetheless paints a picture of the cultural assumptions the participants of this project inhabit. Individualism and tolerance were key values, and even themes of scepticism towards religion's relevance in modern society were notions the participants had to grapple with due to friends and other social networks.

A smaller study done by Hans Morten Haugen (2017) on Christian youth in Oslo supports this notion of tolerance being a central value, although interestingly it suggests that more active religious engagement is correlated with a higher degree of inter-religious acceptance. Based on group interviews with youth belonging to the Church of Norway, the study found that those with a less clearly defined faith were more likely to refer to Norway as a Christian country that ought to be protected. For more devout youths, they were more likely to refer to Norway's Christian heritage, but still emphasise the role of loving ones neighbour

when faced with the presence of religiously different immigrants, suggesting that more devout youth do not view the larger national culture as distinctly Christian (Haugen, 2017, p. 110).

The study uses a relgiocentric/religiorelativstic dichotomy to explore how these attitudes relate to religious development, and suggests that openness towards others (religiorelativistic) tracks with a more developed faith. Though many devout youths reported being open towards the commonalities between different religions, Haugen also notes how those with "low-intensity faith" are challenged when meeting others with serious commitment to non-Christian religions, and this process of experiencing difference could contribute to religious development. While Haugen's study focuses almost entirely on Christian attitudes towards non-Christians, its implications for how Christian youth navigate pluralism is beneficial for the current project at hand.

Another relevant study is that on identity development of religious youth of immigrant background in Sweden. Using dialogical self theory, the study explored ways upper secondary school aged youth oriented their identities as Swedes. Respondents noted incongruence and conflicts between their religious identities and their identities as young Swedes, and the latter sets of identities were often marked by liberal individualism and secular attitudes. Dialogical self theory explains a number of strategies youth use for dealing with these conflicts, and the study highlights how encounters with other youths of similar background and faith strengthens their religious identity (Vikdahl & Liljestrand, 2021).

While the project at hand does not set out to study those of an immigrant background, it still has much in common. The participants in the Vikdahl and Liljestrand study were typically of either non-Protestant Christians or Muslims, while the participants in this project mostly had some type of belonging to the predominant church, *Den norske kirke*. Nonetheless, due to a similar secular environment in Norway, any type of serious religious devotion will likely be met with challenges regardless if it is within the most common strand of Christianity. Vikdahl and Liljestrand observe how these young people experience both external and internal conflict in this secular milieu: "Youths are exposed to a number of socialisation processes and during adolescence are more or less 'forced' to orient themselves towards who they are in relation to these identity making sources" (Vikdahl & Liljestrand, 2021, p. 327).

In Irene Trysnes's chapter *Å være ung i kristne ungdomsmiljøer: Forhandlinger om kjønn og identitet* (2021), she studies how Christian identity is formed by experiences in Christian youth festivals. In such environments, youth describe their faith in terms related to having positive feelings and an authentic, personal relationship to God rather than theological or doctrinal categories. Faith is conveyed as something therapeutic, comforting, and safe, with heightened experiences during the festivals being central. This emphasis of experience over dogma in both the way messages are presented by festival leaders and retold by those interviewed reflects a type of theological minimalism where doctrinal differences among Christians are either unknown or marginalised in favour of experiences that can be any combination of exciting, entertaining, profound, and intimate. Interestingly, some youth understood the category "Christian" as a spectrum, and they would use differing language as a way of marking themselves within or outside the immediate context. The notion of "personal Christian" reflects not just a right belief, but also the right feelings that comes from divine closeness that the respondents reported. In contrast, some youth would describe themselves as "not very Christian" to demarcate themselves against the broader religious culture the festivals created (Trysnes, 2021).

Trysnes's work is an excellent snapshot of uniquely heightened experiential events in the lives of Christian youth. It reflects much of the literature previously mentioned in the way youth conceptualise themselves with the input their environment gives them. While this project differs from Trysnes's by dealing with young adults retelling their stories across their lives, they often recount particular moments within an environment away from daily life that was formative for them, and many of the trends are similar.

4. Theory

4.1. Typology

In order to aid in the analysis process, Madge et al.'s typology of religiosity will be used. It includes strict adherents, flexible adherents, pragmatists, and bystanders (2014, p. 72-87). Strict adherents in the Youth On Religion (YOR) survey were broadly characterised as

being firmly devout with little change in their religious beliefs over time. While they often insisted on their faith being a result of their personal choice to remain adherent, they still described pressure from family and the wider religious community, and strove to follow their religion as closely as possible with minimal variation in the ways they presented themselves in different social environments.

Flexible adherents in contrast saw their religion as more of a framework from which to build their own moral values. Dogmatic beliefs and religious tradition were of less importance, and personal choice in questioning or accepting beliefs within their religion was often emphasised. While theological beliefs still play some role in how they live their lives, youth of this category tended to emphasis morality as a religious value. Flexible adherents also had a degree of openness when considering other ideas, and described how their religious expression might change in another context. In this project, moving to a flexible adherent type appears to be a common response to the insecurity modern pluralism produces. Its tendency towards openness and questioning also seems to make it a more resilient type of religious expression among participants.

Pragmatists may hold religious beliefs and practices, though they were much less attached to a particular religious tradition. Even if they did identify with one particular religion, their views could be subject to fluctuations and change from different life experiences. They were characterised by a high degree of questioning that led them through significant religious journeys, and they often picked different aspects from various religions to believe.

Bystanders are those who have no particular adherence to a religious tradition and give little thought to religious questions. They may only witness religion in people they know or in the media, but it holds little personal significance to them. However, this lack of personal importance does not preclude them from being interested in questions around the role of religion in society. While this project focuses on youth with a Christian background, this category will be relevant for some participants who abandon their religious identity at different points in their lives.

Each of these categories as ideal types are not static groups; they encompass a certain amount of both overlap and inconsistent behaviour and attitudes of the individual. As the

project at hand deals with development over time, it is possible that the participants will move into and out of different types as they recount their stories.

4.2. Pluralism

The inner reflexivity and subjectivity in Peter Berger's notion of pluralism in modern society will also form the theoretical basis for this project, and his work *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (1979) will be central. In it, Berger describes the situation of modernity as having moved from fate to choice. Premodern religious institutions had a monopoly on religious truth, and they offered their communities a high degree of certainty that was taken for granted. For the individual in a premodern society, their identity and religious adherence was a matter of fate; their place both within the cosmos and in the world could not be anything other than what the predominant religious institution taught. In contrast, modern society is characterised by the abundance of choice with many religious beliefs and institutions on offer. (1979, p. 11-25) The pluralism of modern society has the effect of weakening plausibility structures— the range of social conditions within a particular context that ground and enforce an individual's assumptions about reality. Simply put, with so many religious traditions and institutions offering claims about the ultimate nature of reality, taking any one of them seriously becomes increasingly difficult. It is this disintegration of social support, Berger claims, that causes pluralism to have a secularising effect (1979, p. 26-27).

Following Berger's argument, Jan-Olav Henriksen calls this "the erosion of commitment." Because religious tradition has lost its objective, epistemological status within modern social contexts, an individual is in a situation of needing to reflect internally on all possible religious options they encounter and to what degree they will adhere to these options (Henriksen 2001, p. 7). As weakened plausibility structures diminish confidence in objective religious truths, subjective experience of religion becomes all the more important. Berger summarises this internal process people living in a pluralist society undergo by writing:

> Fate does not require reflection; the individual who is compelled to make choices is also compelled to stop and think. The more choices, the more reflection. The individual who reflects inevitably becomes more conscious of himself. That is, he turns his attention from the objectively given outside world to his own subjectivity. As he does this, two things happen simultaneously: The outside world becomes more questionable, and his own inner world becomes more complex (1979, p. 22).

It is this subjective process in response to pluralism that will be central for this project. How do the participants experience and navigate their religious identities in different environments and in encountering different types of people? It should be noted here that for the purposes of this project, "pluralism" does not need to necessarily denote a multiplicity of views that participants encounter. Even entering into a religiously homogenous subculture that is unfamiliar to the individual has the potential to spark a similar process of reflection and uncertainty.

A missing piece of Berger's work is that he never gives a concrete definition of pluralism. In this case, Nikiforova's (2008) description of pluralism is elucidating. Rather than being an ideology, pluralism is a description of social reality. Moreover, it is an organic process of encountering and reckoning with different ideas as they appear in people's lives. Nikiforova argues, "Pluralism is not just another word for diversity. It goes beyond the mere plurality or diversity to an *active engagement with that plurality* [emphasis added]" (2008, p. 140). Religious identity is formed not just by connection with one's own group, but also formed against a perceived "other". In increasing encounters with others, it is then likely that one's identity will complicate in response (2008, p. 141).

Berger also gives his own typology on possible methods of responding to this modern pluralistic situation, and the bulk of his book fleshes these possible options out. This typology builds much on the inner rational processes of the individual, and it will therefore not be as useful for this project as the one given by Madge et al. above as I wish to avoid going too far

beyond what the data material allows. Nonetheless, it will still be of some value. It is as follows: the deductive option, the reductive option, and the inductive option, the last of wish Berger advocates for.

Briefly put, the deductive option is a reaffirmation and reassertion of objective religious tradition, and consequently denies the reality of subjective complexity in modern life. The reductive option reinterprets religious belief and practice in light of critical scholarship and secular assumptions and makes secular understandings of the world the authoritative criteria for religious affirmation. Finally, there is the inductive option, which takes religious experience as pieces of evidence. As an empirical method, it attempts to weigh and balance experience found within one's religious tradition against the evidence for other truth claims in both diverse religious and non-religious modes of thought (Berger 1979).

It should be noted here that Berger most often uses the term "religious experience" to describe a heightened encounter of other-reality transcendence. These often mystical religious experiences are self-authenticating and therefore have an unimpeachable plausibility structure (1979, p. 33-34). However, this project will in contrast use the term "religious experience" to denote more mundane, everyday encounters with religion unless otherwise noted. This could be any encounter with a religious belief, claim, or practice such as hearing a sermon in church or saying prayers before bed.

4.3. Other Themes and Trends

There are several other key trends happening in Norway today that will be important to note here. While some may be more or less directly connected to Berger's notion of the uncertainty of pluralism and secularisation in the modern world, they are still useful in understanding how Christian young adults navigate and reorient their identities in such environments.

The first is the individualisation of religion. Pål Repstad writes, "*Individualisering handler om at det blir større individuell variasjon i måter å være religiøse på, og at flere utvikler sin religiøse tro og praksis mer uavhengig av de religiøse institusjonene og deres offisielle lære og forskrifter*," (2020, p. 21). Individualisation thus describes a decreased

impetus to hold fully to a church's teachings. A person may only partly adhere to "official" beliefs or practices or engage in religion life completely separate from any formal religious institution. A common trend in Norway is that one need not be active in church or believe all its doctrines to consider themselves Christian, and adherence to a faith is based more around if it works for the individual and gives them positive feelings (Repstad 2020, p. 22-49).

Religious subjectification is closely connected to individualisation. Repstad describes subjectification as, "*peker på at religion i mindre grad overtas fra ytre autoriteter som foreldre og religiøse ledere, og at folk tror og praktiserer mer slik de finner det tjenlig og meningsfylt for dem selv*," (2020, p. 21). Though there is considerable overlap, the nuance between individualisation and subjectification will be important in this project. While the practical outcomes for individuals within these two trends may often be similar, subjectification will here be used to highlight the inner process of an individual *choosing* a preferred religious expression as personally meaningful, even if it is still taken from religious authorities. Therefore if a person asserts that they wholly adhere to one religious tradition, accept an institution's authority out of their own choice or preference, and seek to actively live out that tradition in their personal life, they can be seen to have a subjectified religious expression even if it is not individualised. Even for strict adherents in the YOR survey, those ostensibly using something like Berger's deductive option to strongly reaffirm a religious tradition, they emphasised that their devotion was a product of individual choice rather than a taken-for-granted fact (Madge et al. 2014, p. 75).

An example of the interplay between these two trends is the change in the use of the term "personal Christian". While it at one point in time denoted a clear choice one took to be seriously devout, it is now used in many contexts to mean being Christian in one's own way, with an emphasis on inner feelings rather than commitment to tradition or authority (Repstad 2020, p. 50, Trysnes 2021, p. 127). The term previously denoted a subjectifying trend, and over time it opened the possibility of an individualising effect if one's personal feelings and preferences allowed deviation from official doctrine. Simply put, individualisation describes a mismatch between a person's belief and practices and that taught by the church or community, and subjectification describes an increased focus on inner feelings and religious preferences that may or may not lead to individualisation.

Another trend to note is that of liberalising religion, especially Christianity. In this case, “liberal theology” means more openness and tolerance especially on ethical questions rather than classical liberal Protestant theology. Repstad suggests that this could be considered a type of internal or organisational secularisation, as religious institutions are more focused on this life on earth rather than a life after death. Religious authorities also find it less acceptable to present a strict God thoroughly active in human life with harsh demands for ethical behaviour and the Bible as the literally true word of God (Repstad 2020, p. 32-34). This trend presents a more optimistic view of humanity where a wider range of views about faith and ethics are allowed, such as the prominence of softer views around cohabitation and homosexuality and the role of women in the church. Instead of seeing people as utterly sinful in need of repentance, there is an emphasis of being self-assured and finding self-realisation within faith in God. In many contexts, there are also less barriers between different churches and increased cooperation across confessional lines. (Repstad 2020, p. 123-144).

The last of these themes is what can be called theological minimalism, and it is connected both to individualisation and liberalisation. One’s personal experience in religion has had an increased focus, and the particularities of dogmatics is less relevant for many in Christians in Norway today. Trysnes argues that different Christian environments have become more similar, and adherents are less aware of the theological distinctives between them as personal feelings take focus. For many youth, even if they strongly identify as Christian, it may be difficult for them to articulate what being Christian means (Trysnes 2017, p. 130-131). Some difficult doctrines are ignored or abstracted, and theological justifications for certain practices are adjusted in favour of practicality as institutions are seen as less trustworthy and dogma becomes more irrelevant in modern society (Repstad 2020, p. 112-124).

5. Analysis Part 1— Life at Home

This chapter will address the first sub-question: *"How did these participants experience their religious formation in their home towns?"* It will examine how the youth experienced religion in family life and among the wider community. Moments of differentiation will be examined as important instances of identity formation, and the role of churches and youth events will be discussed afterwords.

5.1. Experiences of Differentiation

It was clear from the initial questions about life at home that family was highly influential in the development of religious identity. When discussing early experiences and practices, five of the seven recalled things like praying or singing before family dinner, praying or receiving blessings before bed with parents, and attending church together. When follow up questions about their personal experiences, practices, or thoughts about faith at that time, some struggled to come up with an answer. Many said that they did not reflect too much on their faith. "It was just the way we were," was a reoccurring phrase.

This is not surprising that youth generally go along with whatever faith identity is given by their parents and social milieu, but it will be useful here to look at what experiences and concepts participants discussed that caused them to differentiate themselves from this taken-for-granted religiosity. These moments of recognising difference in themselves and their social milieu appeared to be an important step towards both fuller identity negotiation within a pluralistic society and an internal reflection of if and how they ought to be Christian. Some participants described profound, definite experiences of grappling with their religious identity while living at home, though not all did. Even for those who did not, the recognition of difference is a necessary step along the way. Two types of differentiation will be discussed below: that which pulls the individual into a deeper or stricter understanding of Christian

faith, and that which pushes them away— either into more open or secular religious expressions.

5.1.1. Differentiating Towards Faith

In Henrik's narrative of his youth in a small town on the west coast, he described how Christian youth activities, and a Christian camp in particular played a major role in differentiating his faith from that of the parents. He said:

> And then, I think it was the summer after seventh grade, I went to a camp with [Christian youth organisation], and I took a personal choice to become a Christian and not just live off my parents' faith. And after that, it was more natural to have a personal conversation with God. Not that it was like a ceremonial prayer or that kind of thing, but it was a conversation that… it felt alive.

Youth meetings continued to play a large role in his life. However, he remarked that even as a "personal Christian", his religious identity was still closely tied to group identity. Interestingly though, these youth events primarily served a social function instead of religious ones. When asked how these youth communities impacted his view of himself, he said:

> I don't think I was very open minded to being changed by Christianity at that time. I was more like, this is my identity, this is my social network. And of course I believe in God. I read the Bible when I'm supposed to… but it was more of a fellowship kind of thing than a spiritual change kind of thing.

When asked what being Christian meant for him at this time, he said. "Well for me, during middle school, being a Christian meant going to Bible study groups, which at the time was more of a social gathering more than a biblical study," and recounted how the group would have a party with candy, soda, karaoke, and also, "read the Bible a little." While more

will be said about Christian youth groups in a later section, it will suffice here to note that Henrik can been seen as a strict adherent, with these youth meetings serving two functions. First, it was the youth camp that facilitated an environment which encouraged Henrik to take the personal choice to consider his faith subjectively and differentiate himself apart from his parents. Additionally, youth meetings later on functioned to reaffirm this personally committed faith. As Henrik described, the level of religious education or spiritual development these youth meetings offered was irrelevant; as long as one had a baseline level of personal belief and practice, then one's ongoing participation and association with these social groups was most important. If Henrik's understanding of being Christian primarily means involvement in Christian social events, then his activity in these clubs can be understood as an expression of a high level of religious commitment.

Isak is likewise a strict adherent, with similar upbringing in family practices and youth meetings. However, coming from more conservative *trosbevegelsen* and pentecostal churches, he described how his taken-for-granted religiosity entailed a degree of scepticism towards "cultural Christians", especially those within DNK. Isak mentioned both DNK's allowance of two views of marriage and the cultural norm of baptising and registering all children as members for reasons for this scepticism. When asked what being Christian meant for him at the time, he described how his conservative religious environment used this differentiation against "liberal" Christians to encourage an active individualisation of faith: "I think it's been this kind of attitude towards the people who are like cultural Christians. As… like they are not real Christians, that you have to participate on your own, and take an active choice."

Isak reported a higher degree of personal religious practices in his childhood than other participants, and he eventually differentiated himself from his church community. He noted his rejection of creationism and discomfort with the church's level of scepticism towards "the world" (partially towards alcohol and parties) as points of disagreement that emerged. Nonetheless, he described himself as highly committed to church and youth meetings, and he still showed a degree of scepticism towards cultural Christians by saying that Christianity is not conforming to other peoples' beliefs but conforming to the Bible.

For both Henrik and Isak, their environments emphasised taking an active choice as a way of being better Christians. Having a personal, subjectively meaningful faith meant being more authentically Christian, and therefore being strict adherents, even if they demonstrated

some amount of religious change. This differentiation and subjectification process towards a "stricter" religion reflects Berger's pluralisation thesis as they are rational choices made in response to multiple potential options for legitimate Christian practice. Neither participant was afforded the opportunity to simply let religion be taken for granted— their religious communities themselves pressed them make a choice.

It was most clearly seen with Isak in particular that an awareness of alternative Christian expressions such as DNK served as an antitype, and the conservative community's teaching contained a built-in impetus for religious subjectification. As his church emphasised taking an active choice to be Christian, he followed this and found it personally fulfilling. The subjectively meaningful practice of studying the Bible eventually led to a degree of individualisation when he departed from some of his church's teachings. Nonetheless, this can be seen as a variation of Berger's deductive option; while the authority of the religious institution was certainly weakened to the point that Isak felt free to question it, the Bible, (or at least one's interpretation of the Bible), was reaffirmed as the source of religious authority.

5.1.2. Differentiating Away From Faith

Most participants reported experiencing challenges caused by encounters with non-Christians within their social networks. Ingebørg from rural Northern Norway discussed much about how her experience with the questions of secular classmates affected her, and she noted changes away from her unreflected faith of her family both in the way that she outwardly expressed and internally considered her religion. While among non-Christian classmates, she spoke about how she would present her Christianity in a much more uncertain way, recounting:

> And I remember I had to like kind of… how do I say this? I had to confront myself, like, what do I believe in? …Because I didn't have a lot of Christian friends in school and such, I didn't really say to anyone that I was Christian, and kept that to myself. . . cause it wasn't really cool when people would ask me like, "Are you Christian?" And I was like, "Ahh I don't know, maybe.

> Could be true, could not be true…" But I remember that I would often say that it's actually proven that Jesus lived, but if he had special powers, I don't know. But I know that some of it is true, the historical part. So I had like a personal religious crisis maybe. . . because it's such a personal matter, I wasn't really confronted like so much, so I didn't really think about if I personally believed, but still kept going to church and just like… my network there was like really good.

She also noted how she wasn't as concerned with Christian theology, but instead reformulated Christian faith internally to make it more understandable for herself and others:

> I felt really like being a Christian meant something personal, and like what you define yourself as, like… what do you believe in. So I kind of allowed myself make my own sort of like *trosbekjennelse*, like I… and I at that point, and also, I guess that's for many years, up until I was at that folk high school, I said to myself that I believed in love. Like. . . so that was, God and love was equal. [Laughs] So I guess it was just easier for me to have that little bit more like… I don't know, like secular.

This way of adjusting one's personal beliefs in wake of the challenges experienced at school is interesting. It raises the question of why continue to identify as Christian at all? A potential answer is in that Ingebørg gave many details into how her activity in a Christian youth group at her church was extremely important to her. She connected how the youth community's emphasis on social activities over religious formation let her remain a part of the youth group even while undergoing a religious crisis and reformulating her ideas about Christian beliefs. She said of her youth community, "So that was nice to have a place where I really felt at home, but also it wasn't… it didn't matter if I believed or not."

Evidently, access to a valued community of Christians was worth maintaining some type of Christian identity, even if that identity caused negative pressure and shame when encountering secular peers. This type of negative pressure in Ingebørg's case resonates with Berger's theory. While it's possible she may have been presenting an less-than-authentic

picture of her religious beliefs to her sceptical classmates (a Jesus without "special powers"), it still had an individualising and secularising effect in the form of her crisis of faith. Ingebørg in her own words described her individualised *trosbekjennelse* as easier for her since it was more secular.

This "easier" expression of religious identity had the practical advantage of being a bridge to both secular and religious social networks and allowed her to stand between the two. Though Henrik and Isak likewise both valued their Christian community, they did not convey a similar pressure from a secular social environment that Ingebørg experienced. Because Ingebørg valued both her Christian community and acceptance among secular peers, making adjustments to her religious identity was a means of easing the tension between these to environments.

Ingebørg could therefore be understood as a pragmatic adherent, or at least somewhere between a pragmatic and flexible adherent. In implying that Christianity is something that was not cool among her peers at school, it was necessary to make adjustments out of a desire to be accepted. However, at least a surface-level Christian identity was still useful in that it gave access to a valued community in the youth group. In this way, Ingebørg can be seen as a using a pragmatic approach; maintaining a Christian identity in the midst of spiritual doubt and uncertainty in order to continue accessing a meaningful, open, and lax religious community.

Much like Ingebørg, Maria also described how experiences with non-Christian classmates deeply affected her while living in an urban area on the west coast. She was teased and made fun of for being Christian at school, which embarrassed her and made her feel like an outsider. While she had a similar Christian upbringing to the other participants, these experiences of feeling different eventually made her abandon her taken-for-granted Christian identity altogether. She said:

> As I got new friends in middle school, they kind of… I started to get embarrassed by the church things. So I took more *avstand* from the whole thing. And I think, it was middle school, I sat down with my mom and dad, and said I'm not a Christian anymore, and took really distance from it.

She also explained after a follow-up question that instead of intellectually questioning Christian beliefs, her rejection was born out of more "teenage rebellion". She said:

> I wanted to be cool. It wasn't anything about the Christianity itself actually, it was more like… it's not considered a very cool thing to be. It's maybe boring, it's a bit lame you know. So that's the reason I rejected it.

While Maria's Christianity caused her to struggle to fit into her social network, she made it clear that this break was not just a rejection of being associated as a Christianity, but also a dismissal of Christian beliefs. After telling her parents she was no longer Christian, she no longer sang hymns or prayed with the family around dinner or before bed and stated she no longer believed in it. However, she told a story that sometime after she took this choice, her mother came to read a story from the Bible about heaven after her grandmother had died. Though Maria had decided she was not a Christian, she felt hope and comfort in the Bible story as she grieved.

After this moment of throwing off Christian identity, Maria can be considered to having many traits of a spiritual bystander, but also perhaps having some impulses of a pragmatist. For her, because religion was something shameful and embarrassing, it became irrelevant. Even as she remained a Christian, most aspects of Christian dogma were not given much thought. Instead, because of her association with church and social identity as a Christian were the most contentious parts once she entered middle school, these social dimensions were the core of her religious identity that needed to be disposed of. After this process, they are largely irrelevant, and Maria was not concerned with them. The exception to this wholesale irrelevance of Christianity is the comforting Bible passage about loved ones in heaven. Curiously, Maria was not entirely clear what the passage meant to her. While she clearly was not considering herself a Christian by then, she recounts it giving comfort, but she leaves it unclear to what extent she believed it. At the very least, it shows that at this point, Maria still received some pragmatic use from religion in the wake of tragic life circumstances.

While this process of abandoning her religious identity seems quite dramatic, it illustrates the weakening of plausibility structures in Berger's theory of pluralism. While Maria clearly became more secular after encountering pressure and embarrassment among her

peers, this had nothing to do with the plausibility of Christianity's theological claims, but everything to do with the increased inability of being accepted as a cool, normal teenage girl among secular friends. When explaining why she rejected Christianity, she actually remarked:

> I just don't want to be identified with that be that because it's not cool. So it was nothing about the faith, or like I can't believe that, in the resurrection. *I couldn't say things like that because I hadn't even thought about it*, but I just don't want to be identified with it [Emphasis added].

For Maria, doctrines like the resurrection of Christ had little importance for her even while she was Christian. Rather, merely being associated with Christian social networks (and therefore being seen as "uncool") was what being Christian meant. Afterwords, it became impossible to maintain her identity once her immediate plausibility structure shifted towards a secular friend group.

5.1.3. Neutral Differentiation?

Each of these cases highlights a different way that experiences of identity differentiation led to religious development. It should be noted however that not all recognition of differences necessarily leads to either dramatic changes or reification of religious expression. Simply put, youth can differentiate themselves from different religious positions while still maintaining a taken-for-granted religiosity. For example, Kaja was able to differentiate her Christian identity both against her staunchly conservative grandparents and against her secular friends who saw Christianity as weird and uncool. She said:

> I mean our family was definitely a Christian family, raised with Christian values as people say. Uhm, but we weren't extreme in any way… My grandparents were very… more conservative Christians. They don't drink, they like go to church almost every Sunday, do a lot

> of church activities. So it was kind of a part of my life as well, but. . . our family didn't go to church everyday.

After being asked about her own personal experiences shortly after, she replied:

> I don't think I had that growing up. I think I just… that was just the way we were. Like yeah, I believed in God, we… like before bed we'd pray. Yeah, but I don't think I ever decided on my own that this is what I believe when I was young, growing up when I lived at home… But I did like it, I think, cause not a lot of my friends were Christian. On our street we were kind of like the only Christian family, and I do… I mean it's always been the thing that Christians are looked weirdly on, like it's a weird thing. But I never was ashamed in a way. But I never expressed it as much.

Kaja expressed a loose, flexible adherent type commitment to her parents' "not extreme" Christian values, and reported a lack of personal religious experiences, vague theological beliefs, and infrequent involvement in any Christian community. Surprisingly, she remarked how she felt confident and unbothered in her Christian identity despite its inherent ambiguity. This is especially compelling considering the fact that she also described a high degree of awareness of non-Christian religions from growing up in an urban environment in addition to a lack of clear Christian friends that could potentially reaffirm her identity.

For Kaja, even encountering polar religious extremes were not enough to trigger a process of inner reflection while living at home. This suggests that though she encountered a multiplicity of religious positions, none of them shook her plausibility structures. While Kaja's eventual religious reflection and subjectification occurred after leaving home, her experience shows how Berger's notion of pluralism need not necessarily engender religious insecurity if it is not fully engaged with. The mere presence of pluralism is not necessarily the decisive factor, even if it exists in a high degree. Rather, it seems as though some point of critical mass of differing religious opinion must be reached before it is then *engaged* with; it

is then perhaps only in this engagement that pushes the individual into a process of spiritual reflection.

5.2. Social vs Religious Spaces— Churches and Youth Events

It will also be worthwhile to examine how religious environments and institutions contributed to the participants' religious development. First, the role of churches will be examined. Afterwords, the broad category of youth events will be explored. This includes youth groups, clubs, camps, and church choirs.

5.2.1. Churches

Overall, many of the participants relayed tangential relationships to the churches they grew up with. A key theme that emerged was what will be called "low-friction" churches. This is an ideal type of a church or other Christian community that is irrelevant and unchallenging, but nonetheless safe and comfortable. Henrik had this to say:

> I've always felt like the church I was going to most of my, I would say conscious Christian life, they had a bit weak theology I would say. It wasn't challenging on a personal level. It wasn't… It wasn't anything wrong with it, but there was nothing pushing, nothing burning.

Kaja remarked likewise:

> I mean the church I attended, *Den norske kirke*, it's not very… *utfordrende.* It doesn't challenge you in many ways, especially not as a youth. I don't know, you're not really embraced in some kind of spiritual way. It's more like you come and go, there's not too much happening.

Other comments from the interviews showed that this type of church experience was relatively common in varying degrees. While four participants described their churches as being unable to spur on spiritual development or embrace them fully into the community, it also seemed that because the churches were mainly filled with older people, the youth felt unable or unwilling to find their own place there. Most interviewees reported their personal church attendance going down as they became older, and they matter-of-factly noted how they would often spend time in different churches with friends apart from their families. As noted above with Isak, it seemed that his more conservative pentecostal community's scepticism towards DNK was based in part with it not challenging people to be active Christians.

Despite this, a potential benefit to an unchallenging low-friction church was that is was *safe*. Ingrid and Synne discussed how they felt that their churches were safer environments than outside the church, and that their churches offered many open events where non-Christians would feel welcomed. Kaja became more aware of this distinction when visiting a pentecostal congregation. She recounted her mixed reaction when people put hands on her head to pray for her. She said, "I would feel something else, and I'd feel… and I was just like, 'Oh wow, it's nice.' But it's also like, 'Uhh! That's a lot!'". She then said of this experience: "And it kind of gave me something. Maybe. But it wasn't as safe as *Den norske kirke* was. It's more challenging. But it also makes you think about it more."

This type of low-friction church thus seemed to function as a double-edged sword. While youth experienced it to be warm, inviting, and open, there was not much reason to stay once they were there. It would then appear that low-friction churches are easy to enter, but also easy to leave. For those who had this impression, it seemed to offer them greater flexibility to explore spiritual options outside their family's church either by visiting other congregations of friends if they were available in the participants area (as in the case of Kaja and Synne), or by becoming more secular if there was a dearth of alternatives (as with Ingebørg). However, a common response among participants to this type of church experience was to instead ingratiate themselves in youth events.

5.2.2. Youth Events

For several participants, there was a clear impression that youth groups, clubs, and camps were just as important, if not more important than regular church services. It appeared that these youth groups were smaller communities in themselves that existed within and across different multi-generational churches.

Henrik and Ingebørg emphasised the social dimension of youth groups over the religious content. Henrik said they were formed, "to try to make a better alternative than going out drinking underage and that kind of stuff. And we had a lot of fun. We decided to make the evenings interesting and enjoyable, more than perhaps spiritually educational." Ingebørg remarked similarly that her Christian youth club, "wasn't really that much religious," in explaining how she felt at home there despite being uncertain of her own faith. When youth were not able to connect with the broader church community, groups specially arranged for them offered a space to take part and "be Christian"— even if such groups are not overtly focused on Christian formation. In this way, youth groups can reflect the low-friction type as well, though only in part. They may do very little to spiritually challenge its members if personal religious belief and practice are de-emphasised. However, they seemed to more effectively embrace the youth, offer a sense of community, and encourage taking on a more active and consistent role.

Henrik and Ingebørg's retelling of their experience of youth groups raises the question of exactly how religious are these youth groups. Henrik repeated several times that his youth events were more social than religious. Ingebørg remarked that she didn't have many Christian friends despite the fact that she had a deep attachment to her Christian youth community. These apparent contradiction can be understood if these Christian youth meetings are seen as secular in themselves. Of course, the youth group is ostensibly for religious people, but one's level of personal faith becomes irrelevant once they're inside.

Ingrid likewise described how in her small, predominately secular town in Eastern Norway, singing in DNK's youth gospel choir was a popular activity even for non-Christians. Though she framed singing in this choir as a subjectively meaningful spiritual practice for herself, it was nonetheless comfortable and inviting enough for non-religious youth to participate. For these three participants, the barrier to Christian youth groups was low. Though activities were arranged by churches, much of the potentially challenging religious content that could push away a potential member seems to have been washed away, if it ever even

existed at all. Instead, the interviews conveyed the sense that many of these youth activities were meant to be safe and inclusive spaces were youth could belong irrespective of their religious beliefs.

Not all participants had this impression of youth events being virtually secular. Synne's recounting of her childhood contrasts with the others; she was raised in a non-Christian family but became religious independently through such youth events in her rural hometown in the heart of *Bibelbeltet*. Interestingly, her description of the such activities had many low-friction characteristics. A variety of Christian camps, meetings, and a youth choir were intentionally designed to be as welcoming as possible, and they were seen as "safe" enough that her non-Christian parents were happy to have her there. She also noted how she had numerous Christian friends in school that made it easy for her to join with them to these activities, and she expressed satisfaction that it gave her relationships with Christians from numerous denominations.

For Synne, the low-friction characteristics of several different youth groups actually made it easier to engage with a faith she had no background in. She was able to learn enough and incorporate many spiritual practices from these communities so that by the time she became a teenager, she could be considered a strict adherent. She suggested in the interview that her hometown's relatively high number of Christian people and organisations made it much easier to move into a religious identity, and she also noted how despite the low barriers into religious life, she was challenged to subjectify her new-found faith into personal practice, as when a youth worker encouraged her by telling her to, "…read the Bible, open it for yourself. See what it says." Synne's experience in these youth spaces was low-friction enough to easily slide into a social community of Christian young people while still being engaging enough to greatly impact her religious development.

5.3. Churches, Youth Events, and Pluralism

5.3.1. Trans-denominational

The role that the participants' religious communities played interacts with Berger's notion of pluralism and modernity in two different ways. Firstly, the low-friction nature of these communities led to few if any boundaries between different Christian denominations. Youth events allowed Christians of different church backgrounds connect and have "fellowship" together, and there seemed to be little issue of youth visiting other churches with friends. Initially, one might assume that encountering different expression of Christianity in this way might spark a degree of religious uncertainty that Berger describes, but this does not seem to be the case while youth were at home. Synne explicitly said she was glad that the different churches and youth organisations were able to cooperate around a common purpose without conflict. She responded that she was unbothered by the differences of theology, and did not feel a pressing need that it was something to be navigated because, "…it's the same mission of course," but, "people have different preferences." She said:

> And I was so happy that we could go, yeah, go all the places. And I remember people saying, "Where do you belong?" And I was like, "I belong… eh, well, I'm a Christian!" [Laughs] And I belong— I go to church, and I go to the youth group and *bedehuset*, and I go to… like, yeah. It was not very like, I belong to *this* denomination.

Henrik in contrast appeared to be the most knowledgable of his town's theological landscape when he recounted how his father explained the doctrinal nuances to him, and Isak had a stricter background that engendered scepticism towards other churches and acknowledged denominational differences in baptism and communion. Despite these things, both similarly viewed their youth communities' trans-denominational cooperation as quite beneficial for them and not at all a barrier.

Why then did encountering people from diverse theological positions not lead to religious reflection? A possible interpretation is that these youth events presented a type of lowest common doctrinal denominator where deeper theology is minimised and different Christians can participate together. This theological minimalism could create space for an emphasis of values and socialisation, and the participants in these groups therefore did not need to engage with a newly encountered expression of faith. As a teenager, Synne said, "…I

became more of an activity Christian. That's my reflection like before, like too much activities, not so much time like… What is the gospel? Who is God?" The label "activity Christian" seems to be a way for Synne to convey a lack of deep spiritual learning when all of her time was spent at youth events across different churches. Similarly, the stories told by Henrik and Ingebørg showed the potential for socialisation to take precedence over religious education, even to the extent that Christian youth events themselves become non-religious. As a feature of low-friction communities, minimising theology allowed diverse Christian youth to build relationships in a safe environment and be encouraged to live out common values without being needlessly challenged by doctrinal questions.

5.3.2. Christian Bubble

The second way that these youth communities potentially functioned in relation to pluralism was as a safe space to guard against secularising influence. The term "Christian bubble" denotes such an environment, and it captures how a relatively homogenous Christian community becomes the entirety of one's social network and experiences.

When asked if and how his religious community shaped is view of non-Christians living in his town, Henrik replied, "I don't think so. I was— well, we were quite isolated in a bubble. And we were fine with that." Synne replied likewise to the same question: "I think there was very… maybe very like separated. It was, of course, okay, you're Christian, you're not Christian, and not very much discussions." For them, their active involvement in a religious community seemed to have limited their engagement with anyone outside it. This is possibly an unintentional effect of the local Christian sub-culture where a strict adherence to religious participation limits the individual's time to spend with non-Christian people.

Isak answered the same question differently from the other two, saying, "I think it's like not just a general scepticism towards like the world, but also these certain parts of the customs of the world are off limits for Christians." He noted sex and alcohol as examples of things that were taught to be avoided. While this guarding against "the world" was framed by avoiding the spiritually dangerous activities, Isak's church community's practical solution was to encourage involvement in youth clubs where opportunities for such harmful activities

would not exist. Synne likewise described a stark "separation" between those who did and did not drink, and Henrik said explicitly that the youth events were created to be a safer alternative than underage drinking. Even if dangerous actions were specifically discouraged instead of alternative worldviews, the effect was clustering Christian youth together away from non-Christians.

Regardless of the rational given for maintaining a separate community apart of the wider secular culture, this type of bubble limited non-Christian perspectives from its participants. While Isak described his scepticism towards non-Christians, Henrik and Synne gave the clear impression that they were generally unaware and unconcerned what the secular perspectives were; they were so ingratiated into their youth communities that most outside views were irrelevant. This is especially striking in Synne's case. Despite her non-religious family, (and secular and Muslim acquaintances in school), she did not describe any difficulty or challenge from a non-Christian worldview while living at home throughout the interview. Instead, she positively recounted how her whole week was filled with church and youth events. All three of these participants found themselves in a network of churches and youth groups that created strong plausibility structures where their Christian identities faced little challenge.

These experiences of being in a Christian bubble resonate as a variation on Berger's deductive option. The deductive option is a reaffirmation of religious institutional and traditional authority in order to shut out pluralism and religious uncertainty (1979, p. 61-62). While there seemed to be too much pluralism with multiple denominations and Christian expressions for a pure insistence on any one church's institutional authority, the ease with which youth were enveloped in religious social life points to a process where strict adherence to faith becomes easier to embrace. They may adhere to a faith more value-focused or theologically vague, but the social networks of youth groups nonetheless provided a strong enough plausibility structure to render any engagement with non-Christian views unnecessary. This may not be a reaffirmation of institutional power or traditional confessions of faith, but it instead allowed the youth to reaffirm the Christian community as an essential core of one's identity.

5.4. Conclusion

This chapter sought out to analyse how the participants experienced their Christian identity while growing up in their hometowns. The interviewees came from disparate environments from the extremely secular rural north, to the centre of *Bibelbeltet* and large, pluralistic west-coast cities. Despite this, the participants' religious experiences had many commonalities. Many noted how their religion was something unreflected and assumed until they encountered experiences of differentiation from their surrounding environment. These differentiation experiences could either pull participants deeper into faith or push them away by either subjectifying or individualising their religion. Both of these responses track with Berger's views of pluralism, and more on this will be discussed in following chapters.

Special attention was given to the role of churches and youth events. In its analysis, the social functions and low-friction aspects of these organisations seemed to be most impactful. Youth events seemed to play the most formative role in the religious lives of young people as they allowed space for practicing and exercising their Christian identities among their peers, even if some participants acknowledged not gaining many benefits in their religious development. Nonetheless, it appeared that these youth events often functioned to protect its members from non-Christian influences while trying to be as warm, safe, and open as possible. While some participants experienced regular church services to also be just as low-friction, the lack of a strong social network of peers made it more difficult for youth to gain religious benefits. These themes will be followed up and examined as the participants recount their stories of leaving home.

6. Analysis Part 2— Life After Leaving Home

This chapter will address the second sub-question: *"How have the participants' religious identities developed or changed within the experiences of moving away from home?"* The process of leaving home gives many youth new opportunities to explore new ways of life. This chapter will examine two stories of religious transformation, the struggles of navigating new challenging religious environments, and how participants found their place and religious community after moving to Oslo.

6.1. Faith Journeys

While all participants relayed some degree of religious development, stories of two particular participants be explored here from the outset as they represent the most radical religious transformation: Maria's story of coming back to her Christian faith, and Ingrid's process of abandoning it. While these two journeys seem to be diametrically opposed, they both have a number of common themes that will illuminate the rest of the analysis.

6.1.1. "Okay, maybe I'm a Christian…"

As previously discussed, Maria grew up in an urban area on the west coast and decided to stop being Christian after feeling embarrassed around her classmates as a teenager. Though she was a religious bystander at this time, her mother encouraged her to attend a Christian *folkehøgskole* in eastern Norway. Maria eventually decided to attend despite being resistant initially. She recounted how she wanted to be more open-minded about the school's religious character and did not want to dismiss it out of hand, but she found it shocking when she arrived:

> I was surprised cause I kind of got confirmed that no, I'm really not a Christian. At the first time, I kind of took a reflected choice of, I can't identify myself with this. And that was kind of because I left my faith in my childhood years were it's all about tellings from the Bible and paintings and… yeah, the easy way, and when I came to [*folkehøgskolen*], I was met with much more grown up faith. And they were discussing things like, was the Noah's ark really happening, or was it just a picture of…? And I was like, "What?!" It was completely… I was shocked by all of these things. And I was like no, I really can't believe in this. And I think it maybe scared me a little bit too, because I… like inside, I thought maybe that I was going to become a Christian again, and I felt even more sure that I was not a Christian, so that was kind of shocking to me.

Maria later described her encounter with the "grown up faith" at this school as something "foreign" that hit her, "…like a slap in the face." Despite her openness and dim optimism of perhaps becoming Christian again, Maria found it impossible to connect with the teachings and theological discussions. Though she initially rejected her faith primarily due to its associations with "uncool" things like church, she expressed surprise and fear at the fact that she was truly disconnected from this foreign Christianity.

Despite this, her time at the *folkehøgskole* was remarkable formative. She recounted feeling a need for a fresh start after having having serious difficulties with friends at home and was amazed at the community she found at the new school. She made many Christian friends who were accepting and respectful of her as a non-Christian. As they were all planning on moving to Oslo together after school, Maria reflected on this this fact and wondered if her incredible turnaround in circumstances could truly be random, or if, as she said, "there is someone who's playing a part of the game." Maria noted that, "it felt like destiny to be cliche! [laughs]" She did however feel notice feeling alienated by her lack of faith by the time school was over:

> I kind of felt a bit lonely at the end, cause I understood that I was a part of this big community, but not… there was a part missing. Not that anyone excluded

> me, but I've just felt like spiritually lonely cause they were sharing something that I didn't share. And I thought actually that was a bit sad. So at the end of that year, I started to reflect on… yeah, my faith again. And… maybe it was something here.

Additionally, she retold how she got a boyfriend at the *folkhøgskole.* While he initially claimed to not be Christian in order to be appear cool, he later admitted he was. After they all moved to Oslo, she would "just follow" him and their friends to church. While attending a popular conservative pentecostal church together, Maria found the sermons thought provoking and noted they provided "deeper wisdom" that resonated with her life experience. Nonetheless, she had serious questions. She said:

> So slowly, slowly, slowly, and I was talking a lot about my boyfriend with these types of things and we had a lot of discussions. And it took a long time… It wasn't like one day I woke up and like, "Oh, I'm a Christian," it was a slow process. And at the end, I kind of started to say, "Okay, maybe I'm a Christian…" But it was like… yeah, it took a long time.

Maria emphasised how this was a difficult process that evoked conflicting emotions. She came to a point where she wanted to be a Christian but did not feel like she was one. She felt as though she had accept the totality of Christianity and "bite over the whole cake," though this was difficult for her. She remarked that she could not immediately accept the church's assumptions on parties, cohabitation, and sex before marriage. The congregational *syndsbekjennelse* was also something too disorientating and confronting as she said, "[Laughs] I remember standing there like… 'I don't do a lot of bad things!' That was a problem for me, because like, I don't want to stand here and say these things because I'm a good girl!" For Maria, navigating this foreign world of religious practice and ethics was necessary as she was compelled to be Christian again in some sense, but she had to be certain it made sense for her:

> It was a hard process. I used a lot the time, I used a lot of effort to figure out what I actually meant. And I was very clear, and I just didn't want to do as all of the others. I wanted to find out this in myself, not just hop on because everyone else was doing it.

Maria's process eventually settled on being a flexible adherent type Christian. A seemingly divine improvement in life circumstances and a feeling of belonging to a community compelled her to reconsider her thoughts on Christianity. Though more will be said of Maria's process later in this chapter, her story at this point makes clear that she was not satisfied to merely follow either the church or her group into a strange new way of life; instead, every religious claim had to be internally considered before being accepted.

6.1.2. "...Suddenly I realised that I don't believe in this."

In contrast to Maria, Ingrid recounted how she eventually lost her faith and stopped identifying as Christian after moving to Oslo. As mentioned, she grew up in a small town in Eastern Norway with a Christian family in DNK. She described herself as, "growing up quite liberal," and pointed to her church's openness and inclusive posture towards everyone, particularly gay people in the community. She recounted how she became "more spiritual" after moving to a Christian boarding school and described an eagerness to learn and mature in her faith. Though she had what in some ways could be considered a low-friction Christian environment, her commitment towards practicing faith and "having a ministry" fits into her being a strict adherent.

Ingrid then moved to Oslo to study psychology and began attending two churches and a Christian group for psychology students, and one of these happened to be the same church that Maria attended. As she settled into life in Oslo, two challenges to her faith emerged: the explanatory power of psychology and conservative Christians' treatment of gay people. Though she had heard of Christian students losing their faith during their study program, she

was initially optimistic and felt that everything she learned in her course work bolstered her faith. Eventually though, she said:

> I guess I started to- it was very difficult for me to explain things the Christian way. It was- it ended up, all my questions I had, I could answer them with evolution. Like life in general, and people, and how we interact, and love, and… like falling in love. Like every part of being human, I ended up having an answer for evolutionary. And God kind of became less and less a part of that. And I… yeah, if you understand, evolution or psychology and just the biology in humans could suddenly explain more than I thought God could.

She also noted how simultaneously she became more aware of the debate around sexual ethics and LGBTQ people within the churches, and it deeply angered her. She said. "And combined with that, it was this whole… especially the gay discussion in, like all over Norway in the Christian community, it *really* made me pissed off." Ingrid described having many gay friends, and she spoke specifically about a Christian friend who tried to come out to their church but was treated poorly. This caused her to reflect and reconsider her own perception of her religious upbringing:

> I guess the feeling of it being an accepting and including community changed as well. And I felt like other people are more open and including than the community, and when I kind of lost the community as a safe and good place to be, and it turned out to be more like judgmental… I just didn't like that way of meeting and viewing people.

Clearly her psychology studies and witnessing the exclusion of gay people were the major forces of erosion of her plausibility structures. Though Ingrid was disturbed by these two developments, she tried for some time to hold onto her religious identity, and she emphasised how she worked hard to find answers. She recounted a moment of realisation while singing in a gospel choir, saying:

> It was a long process, and like it was- it actually is, it's still quite hard for me actually. I do remember choir practice where we- and saying like music and songs has been a huge part of my faith, we sang a couple of songs that has meant a lot to me, and suddenly I realised that I don't believe in this. And that was heartbreaking, and that was actually a breakthrough for me.

Ingrid continued to share how disorientating this process was, and repeatedly used the word "sorrow" to describe what she felt. She still attempted to find a way to hold on to her Christian faith however. She recounted forcing herself to go to church, but she found that it only pushed her further away, saying, "I think I saw everything differently, and I heard everything differently. So hearing the speeches, it kind of just made me more resentful and angry. And so it really didn't help at all going more to church." She gradually stopped attending both churches and the Christian psychology student group, and no one from these communities ever reached out to check in on her; she recounted that she went through this process "totally alone" and never spoke about it to anyone within or outside the church.

At some point, Ingrid definitively left her Christian identity and "tried living without it," despite her fear of "losing herself". Though she now says she is personally comfortable not being Christian, she has not been able to verbalise this to some friends and her family. At the end of this process, Ingrid appears to be a religious bystander. She now says she is still searching for who she is and what exactly she believes in. Though her values remain the same and wants to have an open mind, she considers herself something close to an atheist. She suggested the possibility that her values are still the same because of her faith background, but she gave the impression of being thoroughly detached from any religious community. Any current exposure to Christianity, in particular the LGBTQ debate, only pushes her further away.

Interestingly, Ingrid emphasised the positive aspects of religion for other people, and responded that she would choose to be Christian if it were possible. She said, "And that would be a positive thing for me as well. It really is a sorrow for me that I lost it. So I guess, cause it's not a choice I made." Rather than framing her loss of religious belief as series of decisions she made, Ingrid presented it has something that *happened to her*— a conclusion to a series of events in which her hopes and desired outcomes are irrelevant.

6.2. Contrasting Faith Journeys

6.2.1. Beliefs

The participants' long, difficult processes of reflection and consideration resonate with Berger's description of humans in modern society. He writes, "Quite simply, the modern individual must engage in more deliberate thinking— *not* because he is more intelligent, *not* because he is on some sort of higher level of consciousness, *but* because his social situation forces him to this," (Berger, 1979, p. 20). This aptly captures the participants situation. Neither Ingrid's Christianity nor Maria's non-religious perspective could be taken for granted after encountering competing views; both were pressed by their experiences with the world around them to turn inward and question their religious assumptions. What then caused opposing religious development in these two participants, and how do they overlap? The first is the way in which the participants had to grapple with the theological and ethical claims they encountered.

Clearly neither Maria nor Ingrid had such a taken-for-granted faith that Berger argues existed in pre-modern times. For Maria, her encounter with a foreign, "grown-up faith" and all of its corresponding theological arguments was so disorientating that it initially crushed any ideas she had about possibly being Christian again. The way back to religious belief therefore required an individualised and subjectifying approach after living outside a Christian culture for so long. As Maria was previously a religious bystander with deep scepticism, she already had an individualised assumptions about church and the Christian community— these simply were not trusted sources for constructing a worldview. Therefore, she needed time questioning and examining each piece of religious content she encountered to be certain it made sense within herself. The "whole cake" of Christianity could not be taken immediately, and even if some teaching resonated as true, Maria did not believe it out of deference to the church's authority. Everything had to be slowly reflected and subjectified within an individualised paradigm.

For Ingrid, the plausibility for Christianity's claims about God were eroded after studying psychology. Evolutionary science appeared to provide a more sufficiently grounded way of viewing human experience. While psychology does not necessarily disprove or exclude religious belief, the mere fact that it seemed to be a *better alternative* was enough to create significant doubt and undermine religious authority. As Ingrid dropped her belief in God and Christian explanations for the world, she underwent an individualising process; though secular explanations may not have subjectively felt true for Ingrid, it nonetheless diminished her trust in her faith.

Interestingly, their faith journeys reflect an amount of theological minimalism in that neither described specific difficulties or objections around belief in the supernatural or doctrinal assertions. Maria struggled to accept moral positions on cohabitation and premarital sex rather than say, the resurrection of Christ (something she gave no thought to even when she was a Christian previously). Ingrid was more vague and gave no concrete secular explanations that made her doubt her religion during her studies, but she noted decreasing confidence in explaining human experiences in "the Christian way". This potentially points to less trust in philosophical underpinnings of a Christian view of the world, but a struggle with particular doctrines on the supernatural did not appear to be Ingrid's main difficulty. Like Maria, Ingrid spent considerably more time expressing her frustration with the churches' exclusionary moral claims than doubt in the existence of God. A loss of belief in the supernatural certainly played a part, but anger towards the Christian community's ethics had the biggest role in Ingrid's total and final disassociation with religion.

6.2.2. Communities

The role of religious community is also central in the two participants movement to differing religious positions. Maria offered a complex and perhaps contradictory view of her friend group formed at the *folkehøgskole.* On the one hand, she gained a group of close friends that were accepting of her lack of religious belief, but on the other hand, she felt isolated in not being able to share in the group's spiritual connection. After her considering

her place in the friend group as a possible act of divine providence, her connection to her Christian friends and boyfriend made becoming religious easier. She could simply follow them to church and discuss her objections with them afterwords. The implication is that this community was open enough to welcome her as a non-Christian— objections and questions included.

For Ingrid however, her activity in a Christian group had the opposite effect. As her belief in a Christian worldview began to be washed away by alternative explanations, her view of the community flipped. When she encountered more conservative voices in Oslo than she was used to at home, she suddenly had to reevaluate if the religious community was as safe and accepting as she had grown up believing. It should be emphasised that Ingrid's religious doubt grew despite the strong plausibility structures of the three separate Christian communities she was in. Even a Christian psychology student group with the purpose of approaching the science from a religious perspective was not enough to hold back the questions that she encountered in her studies. After losing her belief, Ingrid still tried to find a way to "find [her] faith again" through attending church more regularly. However, her change in perspective pushed her back out even further when it only added to her resentment. Her more recent experience of witnessing exclusion retroactively cast her positive religious upbringing into doubt, and with a lack of belief in the theological claims of Christianity, she had little reason to remain a Christian.

Both of these participants had experiences of communities that can be seen as low-friction in different regards. While Maria was initially alienated by higher level discussions of the Bible and theology, her relationships with open and welcoming Christians at the school and church allowed her the space to slowly process the challenges she encountered. While some liturgical aspects such as the *syndsbekjennelse* proved to be too challenging for Maria, the sermons' "deeper wisdom" challenged her just enough to draw her closer into faith. In contrast, Ingrid found the very same church unbearable. It is plausible that coming from DNK, the liturgical aspects were a non-issue. Instead, the views given in sermons and assumed by people in the church were too confronting. Nonetheless, the ease with which Ingrid fell away from her Christian communities displays low-friction characteristics. Having both large churches and smaller groups in which no one questions or notices that an individual is absent is indicative of this. Evidently, Ingrid moved between these different

environments without any issue, but when she encountered serious questions, there was nothing stopping her from ceasing her attendance altogether.

6.2.3. Religious Choice?

The stories of Maria and Ingrid also raises the question of to what extent they were able to choose their religious position. The surprising feeling of "destiny" that sparked Maria's religious reevaluation is the closest to the mystical, transcendental events that Berger denotes as religious experience. While not mapping perfectly on the concept Berger uses, Maria's remarkable improvement in life at the *folkehøgskole* despite her previous resistance to it was nonetheless profound and unable to be ignored. It forced the question: "Can this really be random?" As she felt "unwillingly pushed" into a new community in which she flourished, the plausibility structure of her own secularism came into question. She remarked being "grateful" for being able to rediscover faith especially because that she was so resistant at the onset.

Ingrid explicitly stated that she did not choose to lose her faith. The immense sorrow and pain she experienced when losing her Christianity makes this seem like a traumatic event where her central identity was ripped from her. She is still unable to speak about the full extent of her loss of faith to those closest in her life.

The notion of religious choice is central to Berger's thesis, but this is difficult to reconcile with the experiences of the participants. Of course Berger recognises that, "Human beings do not choose their situation. At best, they may choose how to cope with the situation into which they have been thrown by the accidents of birth and biography," (1979, p. 95). In the case of Maria and Ingrid, it is extraordinarily difficult to separate between their "situation" and their response to it. If, as Berger argues, pre-modern religiosity is marked by fate while modernity is characterised by many possible choices, it seems odd that both these individuals felt subject to an unstoppable force in their lives.

However, Berger recognises the complexity of an individual's inner life brought about by encountering the modern world. He describes the liberation that occurs when one is unbound from a taken-for-granted religious tradition, writing:

> A very high price is enacted for this liberation. The individual comes to experience himself as being *alone* in a way that is unthinkable in traditional society— deprived of the firm solidarity of his collectivity, uncertain of the norms by which his life is to be governed, finally uncertain of who or what he is. (Berger, 1979, p. 23)

This precisely describes the difficult processes Maria and Ingrid underwent in their religious reorientation. If Berger's options of religious affirmation within modernity are taken as possible processes that an individual may undergo unconsciously, then they may still be of value here.

Maria could be seen to fit into the inductive option— the use of religious experience, both felt personally and within religious tradition, as pieces of evidence from which to build a more throughly grounded spiritual life (Berger, 1979, p. 62-64). Her experiences of "destiny" and Christian community were enough to open her mind and spark a process of religious seeking, but she then underwent a slow process of weighing each aspect of Christian faith against her own experience before deciding to accept or reject it. Her individualising and subjectifying of religious practice points to this inductive option. As she gradually took on more faith according to her own experience, this gave her more evidence for taking on a Christian identity. This is remarkable close to the way Berger describes the process: "One's own faith and the experiences brought on by this faith will actually constitute 'data' or 'evidence' upon which inductive reflection can take place," (1979, p. 141). Thus for Maria, religious individualisation and subjectification were core components for using an inductive method.

Ingrid in contrast can be seen to utilise Berger's reductive method— the subjugation of religious experience to critical sciences and secular assumptions (1979, p. 62). Though she was a strict adherent at the time, biological evolution became more plausible explanations for human life. Suddenly, faith in God became irrelevant to understand the experience of love if psychology provided a more grounded explanation. Berger outlines the deductive option as a concerted attempt to maintain a core of religious faith by way of "cognitive bargaining", or the surrendering of more implausible supernatural claims in order to maintain a core of the religious tradition (1979, p. 99-100). While it does not appear that Ingrid explicitly set out to

do this, it was clear that she at least began privileging secular scientific methods over her Christian tradition. She exerted great effort to find a way to be Christian while still adhering to the presuppositions of psychology; eventually, all that was left was her religious values. Berger predicts this problem in writing, "Secularity, like all dominant worldviews, is very hungry, so that it is difficult to call a halt to the giveaways," (1979, p. 101). When Ingrid found that even the Christian community did not share her values, then there was no longer any reason to continue being Christian.

6.3. Encountering High-Friction Environments

In the following section, the stories of Maria and Kaja both finding themselves in highly conservative Christian environments will be analysed to explore how it contributed to their faith development. Both of their experiences have great deal of overlap. By coincidence, Maria and Kaja are from the same large, diverse city on the west coast, and they both found themselves as outsiders in subcultures that were socially and geographically isolated. Upon entering these environments, they faced many challenges that forced them to reckon with their religious identities.

6.3.1. Maria

After Maria had moved to Oslo and had tentatively become Christian again, her relationship with her boyfriend ended. She said that since he had been her "spiritual guidance", she thought, "I need to study this at some point and get some real knowledge about what I'm actually saying I believe." She decided to attend a 12-week Bible school located in an isolated, rural area in Eastern Norway. This school was associated with a Christian youth organisation she had had experience with at the *folkehøgskole*. She said she was comfortable with this organisation, but recounted, "I thought I knew what I was going to, but I didn't! [laughs]"

Maria spoke in depth about many of the things she encountered there that were deeply uncomfortable for her, saying, "I had never met that kind of approach to this faith before. It was worse than [pentecostal church in Oslo]. And I was kind of shocked cause there were a lot of, yeah, spiritual things going on…" She continued describing one "weird exercise" where her group was made to stand in the rain with their hands behind their backs and their eyes closed while they prayed about "getting something from God." The leaders would then tap one person on the back, and any "pictures" the group received from God was meant to apply to that person. Maria laughed incredulously while recollecting the experience and said, "I can't… I struggle to understand we did this!"

She expressed that she felt "pushed" to participate. She said, "…it was a lot about it's voluntary, but they give you no room to actually step out of the situation," and that in that high-pressure environment, "…you kind of just do was you're told." She also recounted being exhausted by the school's hyper-focus on constant prayer and compelled vulnerability, saying:

> Because these were total strangers for me, but it's, "Oh, but oh here, you can share everything," and "Oh, it's Jesus!" And we're praying for it, and everything can be solved with a prayer like if you're talking about something that, yeah, that you're struggling with. Or like we can sit eating breakfast and they're like, "Okay, can I pray for you?" And it was all these things all the time, and I was totally exhausted.

Maria spoke about another experience where she was asked to publicly share many deep details of her life story to a group of peers and school leaders. She shared her life for over an hour and a half, but later regretted how much of she had revealed. After hearing Maria speak, one of the leaders pressured her to pray as a simple solution to the issues of her past. She said, "But she made me do things, and pray for things out loud in front of these people that I didn't want to do, and it was really uncomfortable!" Maria then decided to confront the leader about this, but she was again subjected to similar treatment:

> And it kind of happens again! Cause they were really like, "Ah, so sorry about the whole thing- and can I pray for you?!" Cause everything can be fixed with a

> prayer, so it's… and I was like, no, I didn't want them to pray for me, but once again, I'm like, [exhausted tone of voice] "Okay, just get over with it. Pray your prayers so you can feel good and go home."

By the end of her time at this camp, Maria was "fed up", but still did not know what to make of her experiences there. She remarked, "There's so many things that you slowly- because you don't speak to the world around you. You don't… and feels like, okay but maybe this is the way, it has to be like this." She remarked about returning home:

> And it was so relieving to get back to Oslo and like meet real people again. And meet people who were like, "What?! You experienced this?!" And I was like, yeah… cause slowly, slowly, slowly, you believe that this is the way it's supposed to be.

After telling this story in our interview, Maria agreed that her experience at this school sounded like spiritual abuse. She expressed surprise particularly at the fact that she thought she knew the youth organisation this school was meant to be affiliated with and expected it to be a safe place to grow in her faith. She continued by saying:

> I'm very lucky that I didn't lose my faith up there, cause… I was lucky that I had just enough- what's it called… self-confidence, and yeah, to kind of, I could have cut off, like… that happened, that was bad, it shook me, but I could have… but it was this close for me to just, "No, this is out of the picture." So yeah, I'm lucky that it didn't break me in total.

Surprising, Maria still concluded saying that she was happy to have gone through it because it did challenge her and make her develop in faith. Though the experience at this Bible school was overwhelmingly negative, she was able to go through it and decide that this expression of Christianity was definitely not for her.

6.3.2. Kaja

In Kaja's interview, she likewise spent a considerable amount of time describing her experience after leaving her city on the west coast to attend a rural Christian boarding school run by a conservative mission organisation for two years. This school was located about two hours north of Kaja's city, and she described it being, "in the middle of nowhere." As mentioned in the previous chapter, she described her spiritual life in a way that fit into a flexible adherent type, and though she felt more or less confident in her Christian identity, she had not reflected much on her faith before moving to the school. She was familiar with the school's reputation through her grandparents; though she was hesitant to attend, she decided to go simply because it looked like a fun and unique opportunity.

Kaja recounted that the culture at this school was radically different and much more conservative than she had experienced previously. She said, "From day one I had to question my own beliefs. And in every kind of discussion or just like talk, I had to kind of like, 'Okay, do I believe this?'" Additionally, she implied a high degree of social pressure to be Christian in a particular way, saying, "You didn't have to be Christian to attend this school, but… socially, yeah. *You know.*" The reason for this could be that the school was describe as, "very missionary-world", and she frequently used a slightly mocking, comically positive and naive tone of voice to quote students who embodied the culture. She said:

> And everyone was just like, the first day I remember so clearly, everyone was just like, "So what kind of Christian are you?!" I was like, "Uhhh…. I'm Christian?" And then I just got the big like, "Oh. This is a world."

She remarked that many of the people she met did not respect DNK. Kaja recalled, "So apparently *Den norske kirke* is so liberal for them, so it doesn't really count." In her city growing up, she assumed DNK and *bedehuset* served the same purpose and were basically the same. She realised however that the two were at odds for most of the people at the boarding school, and the two churches embodied a cultural division. She said:

> All the activities that was connected to the church happened in the *bedehus*. So in my head, those were kind of like the same thing, they were combined. They were like complementary, right? But *NO*, not at all! So that was when I was like, "Oh, okay. I need to think about my faith now."

Other instances of "extreme" and "shocking" beliefs she encountered was that women could not be preachers, divorced people were not allowed to work in the school, and the prohibition of drums in church music. She also laughed while recalling one classmate who bragged about never being closer than to two meters to a beer can; she also recollected another teenage student who stated she was ready to die that day out of a longing for heaven. While not everyone in the school held all these views, Kaja still found them absurd and was baffled that they could exist in that sub-culture at all.

Nonetheless, Kaja was forced to reflect on these religious expressions. She recalled, "I did get served a lot of opinions, and a lot of beliefs, which I then had to like, 'Oh, do I believe this?'" She also said, "I doubted like a lot. It was just like, 'Oh, but maybe it makes sense!' And then who am I to say which one is the right way?" Though her experience was bewildering and uncomfortable at times, she acknowledged that the process made her more confident in her own religious identity. She said it was when she "made up [her] own mind of religion," and while it was not necessarily an "awakening", it was a gradual process of coming to terms with the way she saw her own Christian identity.

Another aspect to the boarding school that Kaja expressed incredulity towards was the extent to which it was one piece of larger Christian infrastructure— a cultural bubble where one never needs to step into the outside world. She said that many of her peers had grown up in other schools within the same organisation and that, "They don't even learn about different religions in school… which is scary, right?!" The picture given was that those who are a part of this mission organisation are totally isolated even from other Christians. She observed:

> A lot of people I was like, "You haven't met Norway yet," in a way— the rest of the country. Cause they were just in this [mission organisation] bubble, and I could view them being in the [organisation] bubble forever because you could go to an [organisation] university, and then like it evolves and you go back and

> work at the school, and then you just stay in that… So I think it was like, since the school was like a bubble in itself, the environment around it, is kind of like schools connecting, or people in the environment.

Kaja reflected that the structure of the school and the larger organisation was concerning to her, and it was a part of the reason she felt unable to fully connect there. She had grown up in a larger city and was quite comfortable moving in between different Christian spaces, and the pressure to be wholly involved in one subculture was repulsive. She noted that for her, "It's a conscious move to not be like a hundred percent or be the core of something." Despite this, Kaja concluded that her two years in the boarding school was overall positive. The experiences of conservative Christianity were strange and disorientating, but the school was fun enough that she stated she would do it again.

6.3.3. High-Friction's Effects

The schools that Maria and Kaja attended can be categorised as high-friction environments. They function more or less in the opposite way as low-friction spaces by placing higher demands on its participants. In Maria's case, the rigorous demands came from the leaders themselves. For Kaja, there was ostensibly freedom of opinion, but a relatively homogeneous culture put considerable social pressure on her to follow the majority.

Maria and Kaja's entrance into their respective environments caused significant religious uncertainty in line with Berger's thesis. Though they were both Christians, the way religion was expressed was so dramatically unfamiliar, it alienated them and caused them to feel like outsiders. These experiences of differentiation are similar to those previously discussed. In facing new perspectives, the participants were forced to reflect internally in an attempt to resolve their religious uncertainty.

In Maria's case, the methods used by the leaders and lack of consent given appear abusive. This is an extreme case, but still forcefully confronted her religious assumptions. Though she came to the school with a degree of openness and with the purpose to learn about her faith, she did not mention any particular positive thing she learned. Any practice or way of

being Christian mentioned was conveyed dismissively, and Maria instead focused on her exhaustion and the stripping of her autonomy. Though she was initially willing to learn and was considering if the spiritual practices could be beneficial, these questions became irrelevant once she felt forced into uncomfortable situations. Her internal process of spiritual reflection and seeking was shut down by the rigidity of the high-friction demands. For her, the loss of personal safety and freedom were non-starters in weighing the merits of new religious claims. Kaja similarly expressed the new spiritual ideas she encountered dismissively. Unlike Maria, Kaja's school officially allowed a degree of variance in Christian expression; however, Kaja still felt significant social pressure to embrace the majority views.

6.3.4. Christian Bubbles—- A Different World

The concept of a Christian bubble was used in the previous chapter to explain the experiences of youth events. However, the stories of Henrik, Isak, and Synne all pointed to how these environments were experienced by cultural insiders and denoted low-friction characteristics. Those participants found safety and comfort in their cultural seclusion. In contrast, the cases of Maria and Kaja suggest that if one is not already acclimated and immersed in particular cultural expressions and assumptions, these Christian bubbles are highly disorientating and alienating.

Both of these participants suggested that the environments they encountered were in "another world". Kaja noted this explicitly, calling her school a "missionary-world", where the people enmeshed in that culture cannot conceive of anything beyond it. She also observed the difference between the boarding school and the public school at home she left, saying, "Like that I can see both… both worlds in a way, because it's definitely two different worlds! [laughs]" Maria was likewise relieved to return home back to "real people" who shared her sense of shock at what she experienced. Such word choices point to the impression that these environments and communities were detached from the larger world. These communities operated under a different set of social rules, values, and language that appears foreign to anyone on the outside.

The stories of the two participants suggests that they were meeting a new set of plausibility structures that were continually reinforced. Because these two schools were rural, isolated, and religiously homogenous, the authority of both religious leaders and the community was more compelling than it would have been in Maria and Kaja's pluralistic home city. Both were deeply sceptical towards the expressions of Christianity they experienced, but without any outside perspectives challenging the majority views, they gradually begin to question if they were the ones who were wrong.

Maria especially linked together how the cultural isolation contributed to her thinking that she had to accept what she was being taught. Though she wanted to intuitively reject it, Maria kept having to wonder if this was the true way of being Christian, "Because you don't speak to the world around you." Over time, the demanding practices and religiosity became more *plausible*, but not any more *comfortable*. This is perhaps the core reason why Maria found the school so threatening and nearly caused her to lose her faith entirely. The plausibility structures were so strong that it could have convinced her that it truly was the single correct expression of Christianity, but it was nonetheless unacceptable when it violated her sense of safety.

Kaja's experiences were not as harmful as Maria's, but they still point to the powerful role of plausibility structures. Interestingly, Kaja noted that this was not her first time being in such a Christian subculture. She had been become familiar enough with these types of Christians through connections with her grandparents to differentiate herself from them. However, she expressed that it was not until she entered the boarding school that she was forced to confront her own personal faith. While living at home, she was able to easily move between different Christian environments as a flexible adherent. From her family's loose association with DNK, more conservative missionary-influenced *bedehus* with her grandparents, and visiting pentecostal churches with friends, she stated she did not feel a need to reflect on her own Christianity even if she recognised the differences between herself and them. However, "from day one" at the boarding school, she was compelled to question her beliefs. It could be argued therefore that the isolation within a relatively homogenous space with stronger plausibility structures was a primary factor that finally spurred Kaja's process of inner reflection. The critical mass of the majority religious position was too great to ignore, and she was forced to engage with it on a deeper level.

6.3.5. Secure Flexibility

Given that the participants described both the challenges they faced at these schools and their gratefulness for having gone through them, how exactly did it affect their religious faith? In discussing how modernity shatters a person's sense of objective truth, Berger writes, "If answers are not provided objectively by his society, he is compelled to turn *inward*, toward his own subjectivity, to dredge up from there whatever certainties he can manage," (1979, p. 21). The unacceptable religiosity found in the high-friction environments only inflamed Maria and Kaja's sense of uncertainty. Paradoxically, they remained flexible adherents in spite of their experiences, and they were more secure and confident in their own religious positions. Any religious development that happened seemed to be built in *opposition* to the majority expression; they found flexible ways of being Christian that were subjectively meaningful and beneficial to them as individuals.

Maria told about how after her time at the Bible school, she joined a church in Oslo that was a part of the Lutheran *Frikirken.* While more about this will be discussed in a later section, her description suggests that the low-friction nature of this church was a refuge for her, and she enjoyed being able slip in and take a seat in the back without anyone "bothering" her. When asked if she currently has any particular religious practices, she responded that she has intentionally chosen to go without them. She suggested some practices such as silent prayer before bed and playing piano while singing worship songs, but she framed these to be quite casual. She said:

> I don't sit down with a piano and like, "Okay, now I'm going to have time with God." Not like that. But it's… because that was also… things that I felt like burdened me and both from [pentecostal church] maybe and [Bible school]. So I think I actually had a little bit like, I don't want nothing to feel like I have to do anything.

When asked what being Christian now means for her, Maria brought up the "relief" she found in her current low-friction church. She also expressed peace in having, "calmed down and just rest in that." She said:

> I live my life in this world, I'm put here, I have to live my life here, but I have like a higher power in my life who follows me, kind of through it, which is very good to have. But it's not something… yeah. I feel more calm about it now, I don't feel the pressure of like, "Oh you should read the Bible this often, you should do this, you should do that."

She continued:

> But yeah, it's more like, I have a higher power with me in my life and I can do as I want to in life. I don't feel like I have to go this path or this path, but I feel free, but I have this guidance and a higher power with me.

Kaja also embodied a secure flexible adherence after leaving the boarding school. When asked how her faith after that time influenced her view of herself, she again used a mocking tone to mimic the type of person she met at the school. She said:

> Yeah, I mean I guess I got more secure in who I am because of my faith, and like reassured in many ways. But again, I'm not… like many other people are like, "Everything is okay because you're *saved*!" Right? [Laughs]

At this point in the interview, Kaja brought up how she heard the classmate state her willingness to die out of a desire to be in heaven. She then contrasted the classmate's feelings with her own and said:

> And I'm like… this is bad! [Laughs]. This is bad, right? So I'm not there. I don't know, I feel like I got very secure in who I was because of my faith. And I think it maybe had something to with that I had to take a lot of… I didn't follow the majority belief at my school. So, in general that kind of affected me, I had to stand up for my own faith in a way there, and when I came back to the city or to my other friends, I was kind of like more secure.

Despite the fact that Kaja emphasised the increased confidence in her religious identity, she was still vague on what that identity entailed. When asked what being a Christian meant for her after leaving the boarding school, Kaja seemed hesitant. She stated that it would depend what the person asking meant by the term "Christian". She gingerly concluded, "But still for me… I did value a personal relationship with… I don't know… my… God," with her tone of voice possibly conveying reluctance to say the word "God". She also noted that for her, faith meant, "reassurance that there is something there… to… I don't know, it's like this bond beyond everything else happening." In explaining what she meant by this, she said that as a Christian, one could see life in "another dimension" and with a "broader view".

In discussing what being Christian means for them, both Maria and Kaja relayed positive answers in vague terms. Instead, they clarified their identity by rhetorically pointing back to their experiences in high-friction environments and saying effectively,"Not that!" Maria emphasised her freedom to take any path she wanted in life, and Kaja reiterated her rejection of the majority culture of the boarding school.

The religious identity of both therefore appear highly individualised and subjectified. In Kaja's case, she connected this explicitly to having to "stand up" for her own faith; the process of openly rejecting the predominant high-friction culture and defending herself within it engendered enough confidence to be Christian in her own way.

Maria's case may be different however. Her time at her school was shorter, but it was more high-stress than Kaja's. Though she attempted to stand up for herself and question the school's practices, it only lead to more exhaustion. It was not until she came back to Oslo and found a safe, low-friction church that Maria could reject what she was taught after the fact. Though Maria spoke about the great importance her new church was to her spiritual life, she nonetheless conveyed that necessity of her independence and not being pressured to practice faith a certain way.

Interestingly, both reflected the concept of theological minimalism, and neither gave answers related to church doctrine when discussing their Christian identity. Maria described a "higher power" that follows her and gives guidance, and while Kaja hesitantly described a "personal relationship" with God, she spoke much more about a different way of viewing the world connected to a "bond beyond" daily life. The impression from this is that theological or

doctrinal questions do not seem particularly relevant for Maria and Kaja. Both noted while answering that they themselves felt these answers were either superficial or vague, but they still showed confidence in their own religious identity. Throughout their two stories, questions about doctrine are either barely mentioned or never brought up. Instead of being challenged by a view of God for example, Maria was resistant towards a compulsive approach to prayer. Kaja likewise pushed against overzealous religious language and strict adherence towards an insular culture rather than say, any particular view of the Bible. Both participants seem unconcerned with philosophical aspects of theology, and instead ground their religious identities in particular individualised ways of being in the world.

6.4. Life in Oslo— Diversity of Churches

When youth become adults and leave their homes, it is not at all surprising that they value their new-found independence. While this independence can be found almost anywhere, Oslo in particular was described as offering unique opportunities due to its status as Norway's capital and largest city. Ingrid, for example, spoke about Oslo, saying, "The big city, it opens up. There's a big diversity… it makes it easier to find your own way and not just go along with whatever everyone else does." Kaja, who came from a west coast city, described it as more "vibrant", and both her and Ingebørg, who came from a rural northern area, valued the ability to be anonymous. Some participants such as Isak and Synne noted how the city was disorientating and busy at first, even though they viewed their experience in Oslo as generally positive.

Due to the city's vibrancy and number of Christians in Oslo, there were many different churches for the participants to chose from once they moved. Henrik said of the church landscape in Oslo that, "…in a large city, it would be easier to find amongst the diversity a congregation that you identify with and feel a part of." Synne said that the abundance of secular social activities could possibly undercut other people's motivation for being Christian, but she still likewise said of Oslo, "But it can also be very fruitful because there are many

activities, and many people can find maybe- because there are so many different congregations, maybe people can find their place."

This sentiment of having many different churches to chose from was common among the participants. The theme that then emerged from follow up questions is that because there are many potential churches in the city, participants had to exercise their personal *preference* to select which churches they would be a part of. The cases of Isak and Maria are particularly illustrative here because their preferences led them to different types of churches that were outside their experience.

6.4.1. Choosing One's Home

Isak described how he had begun attending a church within DNK even though his background was in *trosbevegelse* and pentecostal churches. He noted how the structure and beauty of liturgical expressions of faith appealed to his "structured mind". He said they were "intriguing" and "dragging" him towards DNK, and he noted how he loved taking weekly communion by saying, "It's something you can receive, and it's not something you have to do. But it's about something physical that you can like taste, and drink, and you can taste and feel." He also pointed to *syndsbekjennelsen* as giving him a sense of freedom, saying:

> But when I come here and I listen to it, and when I say it, and afterwords like God forgive- God have mercy with me, it's so nice because it's a… yeah, you are so much aware of your sins, and it helps you get free I think.

Isak also acknowledged how this was a departure from his family's religious expression and said, "Like my father he, before I came to [DNK], he was like, 'I think the Norwegian church is too… *dyster*.'" Despite this positive affinity, Isak also described mixed motivations for attending DNK. He admitted his change in churches was at least partly a reaction against the religious environments he and his family were in. He said:

> But, maybe it has to do with some of the things with more *frikirke* type of things. Because like, for example, when I'm at youth camps or so… there's always something about… there's a lot of feelings involved. Yeah, there's always this need to be feeling God and to feel the atmosphere and such. And maybe it's a react- I'm not sure it's a… like a want to go to another… I don't know if the liturgical part is tugging that much in me more than reaction to something I don't want.

In Isak's case, his attendance in DNK also led to a new religious practice. He said that he was exposed to silent contemplative prayer at this church and spoke about how beneficial it was to him after moving to Oslo. He recounted how he felt emboldened to "experiment" with prayer and silence, and he found it satisfied a need of rest from living in the city. Isak said, "I think it's part of the more busy life maybe. It's nice to just sit down and not necessarily be always active with God."

Maria described her process of leaving the pentecostal church to join the *Frikirken* church in Oslo with similar language as Isak. She said, "I don't know why I was curious about it and I can't really put my finger on what it was, but it was something in me that kind of dragged me kind of towards it." She mentioned that she noticed how "cool" everyone was and how the church had a indie rock style of music which suit her more.

In addition, the church provided a safe place to not be burdened with or overwhelmed after her experience at the Bible school, and she contrasted this church with others she had visited by saying, "And they have a very- approach like there are four or five people in the entrance, and like, 'HELLO WELCOME! Please come in!' And they kind of grab you and drag you in. [Laughs]" Maria recognised that while some people might feel ignored with her *Frikirken* church's relaxed approach, she said, "But for me it wasn't like that. So, uhm, that's maybe why we have different church communities and with different styles so that different people can feel at home at different places."

Maria also spoke in depth about the way her church felt more authentic than at the pentecostal church. She said:

> I think it's more honest and real. It's more… because in [pentecostal church], for example, like they're kind of conservative on, what's it called… gay people and *samboerskap* and all of these things. But they talk a lot about it from stage that everyone's welcome and everybody can come here. But none of the ones that are on stage, either the ones talking or singing in the band… there's nothing wrong about any of those. It's like a clean… face outwards kind of. But that was the direct opposite at [*Frikirken* church].

Instead, Maria described being impressed that her *Frikirken* church in contrast had people who were openly gay or divorced leading the service:

> And… here you could see them! They were not hidden in the back or like, "hush, hush" and… "but you're welcome, but- but don't talk about that." So that was like… I felt like I believed so much more, and had so much more… *tillet.* And to- those who stood there with their lives open.

While not using the term "liberal" to describe the church, Maria appreciated its more open, "different approach" to ethical issues that she had never heard before. She described the way the church handled ethic questions and religious practice by saying, "They have another way- Bible-centred, but still another way to look at things." Her resistance towards personal religious practice was noted above, but she described how this church had become central for her Christian identity and her source of "spiritual *påfyll*." She passionately conveyed how she had become active in the community after a year of quietly attending without meeting anyone. She continued:

> But I feel very- I need [*Frikirken* church]. That's kind of where I get… it's so nice to come there and just take in, kind of. So it's a big part of my life as a Christian. So that's one of the reasons as well as- if I ever leave Oslo, it will be a… yeah, scary for me because I won't find [church] anywhere else [Laughs].

6.4.2. Dragged Towards Church

The vast number of Oslo's churches was a common observation across the interviews. From the participants descriptions, the differences in churches reflect not just alternative styles of presentation and denominational affiliations, but also fundamentally different ways of being Christian. Berger writes:

> In the fully modernized situation… this means that the individual may choose his *Weltanschauung* very much as he chooses most other aspects of his private existence. In other words, there comes to be a smooth continuity between consumer choices in different areas of life… and finally a decision to settle for a particular "religious preference." (1979, p. 17)

What then were the factors that led the participants to become involved in their church communities? Some such as Kaja, Ingebørg, and Synne stated they attended churches where they already had friends, but they also acknowledged the importance of a variety of choices being able to meet the preferences of different people. Ingebørg pointed to a church's style as something that she felt was important for youth: "In the kind of like, the *innpakning*. Like how the service is tied together, with like aesthetics and all of that, which actually is quite important at the end of the day." In contrast, Isak and Maria did not know anyone before attending their churches, but both used similar language to explain how they ended up in their churches. They felt that there was something within them that "dragged" them there.

Both initially suggested that it was the style of the churches that appealed to them. Isak found the liturgy beautiful, and Maria enjoyed the cool aesthetics, rock music, and hands-off approach to welcoming guests. These different preferences of aesthetics can be seen as a type of "consumer choice" that Berger describes, and they sparked enough curiosity for Isak and Maria to get their feet in the door. This was only possible because both were in a period of life where they felt the freedom to choose something different than their backgrounds. As discussed above, Maria was processing her difficult experience and adopting a more individualised approach to faith. Isak was likewise new to the city with more independence away from family. While they may have felt dragged to a particular religious

expression while in a period of openness and exploration, they also felt compelled to stay there and benefit from the deeper religious life the churches offered.

Isak for example found great theological significance in the liturgy. He pointed to the physicality of communion and the sense of "getting free" given in *syndsbekjennelsen.* As a strict adherent, he was able to find personal meaning in the structure and theology of DNK's liturgy, and he found the new experience of contemplative prayer to be beneficial with his new lifestyle in Oslo. It should be noted that this does *not* appear as an instance of Berger's deductive option; he does not make an appeal to a higher religious authority of DNK. Instead, his embrace of these religious forms point to his subjectification of the religious tradition as it was his preferred choice out of many possible options.

His journey towards his new church and religious expression thus seems to be partly a process of individualisation. When moving to Oslo, he reflected on his past religious experiences and felt the need to break away from it. In spite of his *trosbevegelsen* background and family imbuing scepticism towards DNK, he realised he disliked the emotionalism he had experienced in his previous religious environment. Like other participants mentioned above who developed their religious identities in opposition to negative religious experiences, Isak "individualised" himself away from his background. Once he found a church that immediately appealed to him by offering something new, he immersed himself in its religious expression and subjectively found meaning in it.

Maria's process was similar. She individualised herself away from the conservative pentecostal church she had attended with friends to find a fresh community of faith. It was the style of the *Frikirken* church that initially piqued her interest. The indie rock worship music and cool clothes of the church members seemed like it could suit her better, and she felt no pressure to engage with people socially. As she spent more time there, the expression of religious life appeared more real and authentic to her. The church's combination of a low-friction approach to religion and open acknowledgement of the complexity of human experience was so valuable that this church community became central in her Christian identity.

It is clear above how Maria subjectified and individualised her faith through her journey. Though participation in this church became a central religious practice for her, the

low-friction nature of the community allowed Maria to maintain an individualised Christian identity. It is precisely because the church made no demands of her that allowed her to become so invested in its community.

It is possible to interpret Maria's process as using something similar to the inductive option Berger argues for. The church became central to her life as a Christian, but that does not mean it holds a monopoly on religious authority. Instead, it seems that her church offers pieces of religious experience and expression, and Maria as an individual is able to choose to what extent she will incorporate them in her life. She maintains few religious practices; the only central practice of attending church is as such because it seems to her to be believable and authentic. Maria in a sense is her own final religious authority— after a long journey of working through a multitude of religious experiences, she has accumulated a large data set of possible ways of being Christian. After sifting through all the data, she has chosen that which accords with her personal experience and that which is most existentially viable in a complex world.

6.5. Conclusion

This chapter sought to examine some of the ways the participants navigated their religious identities after leaving home. The stories of Maria and Ingrid were discussed as examples of complete religious change— of either rediscovering or abandoning faith. How their beliefs evolved and the role of community and free choice were examined. Maria and Kaja's experiences in high-friction environments were also explored. These two unique stories of cultural outsiders in Christian bubbles led to significant religious development, though primarily through the challenging process of individually disassociating from harmful or irrelevant expressions of Christianity. Finally, the ways participants navigated the manifold church scene in Oslo was discussed. Personal preference was seen as a key factor; this allowed Maria and Isak to find congregations that resonated with them and provide them the most beneficial religious expression.

In the process of leaving home, the interviewees were allowed more freedom and independence than at any point previously. To an extent, they were all forced to consider what faith means for them during this process. Though they found themselves as adults making independent decisions, communities still played important roles. They could repel the participants away, or they could embrace them and give them a sense of belonging. The next chapter will examine how participants navigated the pluralism and secularism of Oslo.

7. Analysis Part 3— Pluralism and Secularism

This chapter will address the last sub-question: "*In what ways do these participants reflect on the roles that pluralism and secularism play in their religious development?*" All the participants were asked questions that explored their interactions with pluralism and secularism. While they all came from a variety of areas, they all ended up in Oslo. All participants noted how when taken in its entirety, Oslo is more diverse than their home towns. However, the participants did not all have a uniform experience of the city; they found themselves in varied social networks and had differing encounters with Oslo's diversity. There are thus two variables when discussing experiences of pluralism and and secularism: what kind of environments did the participants grow up in, and to what extent do they engage with secularism and pluralism while living in Oslo? This chapter will examine the roles Christian bubbles played for strict adherents, the uncertainty caused by Christian diversity, and how flexible adherents experienced pluralism positively.

7.1. Reflected, But Unengaged

As discussed in a previous chapter, Henrik and Isak had limited social engagement with people of different religious positions, and their social groups were mainly bound to their religious community. Although there were large portions of secular people in their towns, they did not recount much non-Christian interaction, barring some exceptions which will be discussed. By coincidence, both were involved in the same national Christian youth organisation while living at home, and both moved to Oslo to work for this organisation. This youth organisation was noted to provide training in interacting with non-Christian religious positions and apologetics (the argumentation and defence of Christian doctrine).

Interestingly, Henrik and Isak both stated that due to their relatively short time in Oslo and their working for a Christian organisation, they did not personally know any non-

Christians in Oslo, and all of their relationships came from either church or work. Nonetheless, they still had many thoughts on pluralism and secularism.

Through Henrik had little personal experience with non-Christian people, when asked if he considered Norway a secular country, he responded with well-reasoned ambiguity. Many other participants answered this question with their own personal experiences or struggles with the secular impulses of Norwegian culture, and these will be discussed later. Henrik in contrast did not give any personal stories; he spoke instead about history and demographics. He explained that, to his knowledge, secularism originally reflected a "church for the people" rather than just the priesthood, and he then discussed his understanding of the shift of the concept during *Opplysningstiden*. He also pointed towards the presence of Christians and Muslims in Norway and stated that all religious people probably amounted to three quarters of society. He concluded saying:

> But all of Norwegian society is influenced by western consensus kind of thing, and that's a place where religion is not the standing point, *utgangspunktet*. So I would say that we have definite secular influences in our society, but whether or not our society is secular, I'm not sure.

When asked what the state of Norwegian society means for him as a Christian, he responded by quoting Paul and saying it is important to be, "in the world but not of the world." He also referenced the church's "mission commandment" and concluded optimistically saying:

> We have to stay relevant right? And that means interacting with the world, and I think that's healthy, not just for the world but for us as well. Being challenged in our views and being confronted with doubt, which strengthen our faith and it would strengthen our community, and also it would strengthen our interpersonal bounds with other people and people of other mindsets.

He summed up his thoughts on the topic by conveying Oslo's diversity as something complex and multifaceted, but ultimately neutral:

> But of course, diversity brings both benefits and challenges in terms of discussing religions and discussing worldviews, because some worldviews, like Judaism would be closer to Christianity than atheism. But of course I'd rather speak to an atheist about logic than a Hindu. So diversity is diversity I would say.

Isak responded in a similar manner to Henrik when asked how secular he considered Norway by reflecting on the history of Christian thought. He stated that Norway is indeed a secular country, but that people, "are deeply submerged in Christian thinking." He referenced a popular historian in explaining how many people assume that Christian values such as human dignity are universal and secular. He said:

> Yes, but you know, Tom Holland argues that secularism is caused by Christianity, so yes it's similar, but it has come to the point that the things that is Christian teaching is seen as human, seen as something that all humans naturally have, and I don't agree that all of the things the Christianity teaches is so… like, natural.

This understanding of Christian values complicated Isak's perception of Norway. He explained, "And when you look at it that way, a lot of people in Norway are Christian, but it's not all of them that are following Jesus." When asked if diversity of both Christian and non-Christian perspectives are beneficial, Isak responded positively:

> Yes, I believe so. I've had some talks with some people who are disagreeing me… disagreeing about me concerning like, sexual ethics and such. It's nice to hear some other perspective. Yeah. So I think you need to have, you need to discern- you need discernment, but in the end it's beneficial.

Isak also suggested that diversity can help lead to greater truth and challenge false beliefs so that, "it's at least closer to the truth." He also emphasised that "inter-Christian

discussions" ought to function this way. In Isak's answer, it was not clear who disagreed with him about sexual ethics or even what his opinions were. Whether it was other Christians or non-Christians, Isak still framed the disagreement positively, and he did not give any indication that such disagreements challenged him on a deeper level.

7.1.1. Christian Bubbles and Theoretical Pluralism

Both Henrik and Isak can been seen as strict adherents from their youth and through most of their time in Oslo. They articulated a deep commitment to their faith, and expressed a higher adherence to theological doctrines than some other participants. They both conveyed being very involved in their churches and work with a Christian organisation, but neither recalled many direct experiences with non-Christian people. Interestingly, both have a much more optimistic view of diversity's potential for strengthening faith than Berger would argue. Though they both admitted to not having many relationships with non-Christians, they nonetheless had clearly reflected on the implications for Norwegian secularism and pluralism.

Henrik hinted at some of the ways the youth organisation shaped his thinking. He stated in the interview that church ought to be a place to grow as a person and a Christian, "and also as- I would say a critical thinker, but that's [youth organisation] speaking." Isak likewise noted how he was interested in apologetics— something this organisation gave training in. Their involvement in this organisation could then partially explain why both Henrik and Isak had well-developed ideas about secularism and pluralism.

In discussing how "liberalisation" happens to even conservative Christians, Pål Repstad points to the strength of human relationships. He writes, "*Mye tyder på at livserfaring bryter inn og trumfer teoretisk og teologisk refleksjon. Å møte levende mennesker er en viktig impuls til forandring,*" (2020, p. 141). However, if one thoroughly inhabits a Christian bubble, they can limit the kind of life experience they receive. As mentioned, both participants spoke about diversity and secularism in abstract terms, and they did not mention many concrete ways they were personally affected by it. Though both participants had spent

much time considering secularism and pluralism in theory, neither could give many examples of engaging with real people of differing views.

Henrik mentioned the worldviews of Judaism and Hinduism, but he never mentioned speaking to people belonging to those religions. Isak spoke positively of diversity, but he only mentioned a Catholic friend as someone with a different religious background. They appeared to be thoroughly tied to their religious environments and therefore within a Christian bubble both at home and in Oslo. It should be noted that this does not seem intentional on their part; as mentioned, both had only lived in Oslo for just over a year, and the Covid-19 lockdown during that time was mentioned to inhibit their social activity. Nonetheless, the impression given is that their social networks were built almost entirely from Christian community through their churches and work.

While both participants seemed to be within a Christian bubble, they were not completely shielded from non-Christian experiences. While living at home, Henrik recounted how he had an atheist friend in a Bible group who was there to enjoy the social activities. The friend would ask harder questions from a secular perspective, such as the morality of divine violence in the Bible. Henrik recalled the experience being positive since it made the group examine the Bible on a deeper level and confront their assumptions. Isak likewise said how some people disagreed with him on sexual ethics, but still noted that as long has one has discernment, "It's nice to hear some other perspective." These are certainly encounters with alternative religious views, but they never appeared as serious challenges to Henrik or Isak. For Henrik, the secular friend's questions caused the youth group to go back and study the Bible more deeply. He did not speak more about this, and the cheerful tone he recounted the story gave the impression that whatever uncertainty that existed was resolved relatively quickly.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Isak went through a process of adopting more liturgical forms of worship in DNK. While it was a stark change for him, he framed this process as intuitive and relatively uncomplicated; he merely followed what appealed to him. While he did not say so explicitly, it is possible this experience contributed to Isak's especially positive view of Christian diversity. That being said, his remarks are similar in tone to Henrik's. As he maintained a largely Christian social network, Isak framed "discernment" as being the key to sift through opposing views and reaching the truth. His tone of voice and

word choice of it being “nice to hear” other views suggests however that such opposing ideas can be more or less dismissed.

If either Henrik or Isak experienced anything more than momentary curiosity in their encounters with other religious positions, they did not express it. It seems that their plausibility was never seriously doubted likely because both still existed within their Christian bubbles. With so many other Christians around them to reaffirm their beliefs, it is possible they felt little impetus for grappling with non-Christian claims about reality. This is potentially why neither seemed to embody the type of existential religious uncertainty that Berger predicts. Secularism and pluralism were presented as a set of concepts and theories within the safe confines of religious community and all the strong plausibility structures such an environment affords. It’s one thing for an apologetics lecture or Bible study group to discuss atheism as a proposition; it’s quite another for a close group of secular friends to question one personally how they could ever believe in God.

This notion should not be taken too far however. It’s entirely possible that critical thinking and apologetics training could truly preserve a strict adherent religiously after one moves beyond the Christian bubble they have inhabited for years. Nonetheless, neither Henrik or Isak have had the opportunity to do this. What does seem to have happened is that their religious development within their communities has given them familiarity with other religious options and the tools for answering them intellectually. In contrast, they do not seem to have significant experience in negotiating their Christian positions in a non-Christian milieu in the way other participants have. Living in a pluralistic city like Oslo does not force a person to engage with it’s diversity— one can simply reside in their sub-culture and never step outside it. Henrik himself pointed this out when asked how Oslo affects him being Christian: “I think that having a community is helpful, whether or not you’re living in Oslo or a city like it or some other place.” The makeup of any particular city does not matter in itself. Instead, the extent to one engages with its diversity is the decisive factor.

7.2. "What is your will, God?!"

Of course, not every Christian who moved to Oslo remained in a bubble. Synne, who moved from *Bibelbeltet* in order study to become a teacher actively chose to embrace the diversity. When she noted the ease with which herself and others get caught up in religious activities, she was asked if she intentionally wanted to avoid a Christian bubble when moving to Oslo. She responded:

> Yeah, exactly. That's the word: Christian bubble. I was very aware of that, that's the reason I studied at this university, not [school], which is a Christian… yeah. And I want to work at a public school, not a Christian school. So I feel like that's were I kind of get other perspectives, and I think that's so important, to get other perspectives. So that's actually something I wanted.

While Synne noted her belief that diversity was positive along the same lines as Henrik and Isak, she repeated said that faith had grown increasingly complicated and less "black and white". While she saw this as a natural part of growing up, she also saw Oslo as a particularly difficult place to be by describing it as "the centre of liberalism." She said, "But of course Oslo is very, like- I think there are more extreme opinions here in the other direction than me, because I'm more conservative, if you can use that word. Of course what is conservative now? [Laughs]" She pointed to her own views of sexuality being challenged and the diverse ways of being Christian:

> Because in my belief, like I still believe that like homosexual marriage does not belong to church for example. And in Oslo, that's a very radical thing to say even though it's very not radical 50 years ago. But now it's… now, many people would be against me, many Christians would also be against me. I've seen that there are many ways to be a Christian, or maybe Christian people think different things.

She continued to describe how the different ways of being Christian cause a deep uncertainty. She explained:

> Yeah, I think it was easier to be a Christian growing up. I think now, it's- now there are many voices who say a lot of different things. And I feel like in Oslo as well, I'm very affected by those voices, and sometimes I'm like, but God what is your will?! What is your will, God?! I don't know! Some Christians say this, some Christians say that. What is God's will, and what is the truth? And it's not easy. It's very deep, but that's the way it is. Yeah. And there are many voices… and I think if I had stayed at home and not left, I would not have seen these voices.

Synne recounted that she did struggle with this uncertainty for a time, and was unable to take concrete positions on matters of faith and Christian ethics. However, she explained that her faith did change when found more religious confidence by embracing Lutheran theology. Her and her boyfriend began reading a Christian novel that explained faith from a Lutheran perspective. She said:

> And it's been so good in my view of grace. How I am saved by grace, and it's not achievement, it's a work that is done. This has made me more aware, it made me- I feel like I have grown, but also it has made more sceptical to like, what do we hear around? Because so many times, it's- we've talked about, have you heard the word pair Law and Gospel?

After explaining how she saw the Law and Gospel approach the best way of presenting Christian teaching, she noted how she afterwords became more reflective and sceptical towards the sermons she was hearing in church. She noted that, "Now I listen to much more speakers and preaches and think, is this the centre of the Gospel? Is this what we need to hear? Is this healthy?"

7.2.1. Strict Uncertainty

Synne's experience after moving to Oslo most clearly reflects the type of nervousness and anxiety that Berger sees as endemic to modernity. Berger describes the duality of modern pluralism as, "On the one hand, it is a great liberation; on the other hand, it is anxiety, alienation, even terror," (1979, p. 22). Interestingly, Synne appeared more deeply affected and disorientated by the diversity of *Christian* positions than the presence of non-Christian views. She retold that while living at home, she had two Muslim friends who were a part of her otherwise all-Christian friend group, saying, "So, we were kind of, we were the Christians and the Muslims together." She also noted having many secular friends through school and work and described how they enjoyed pleasant and respectful conversations about faith.

When discussing the religious diversity after moving to Oslo, she likewise said, "So I think diversity is good, but of course I wish everyone knew God." Here, Synne appears to be working from a strict adherent faith that assumes exclusive claims about Christianity. She does not feel a need to be "liberated" from Christianity once encountering secularism or Islam. As a strict adherent actively trying to step out of a bubble in *Bibelbeltet*, the truth of Christianity never seemed to be in question. On the contrary, she remained deeply committed to her faith, even though she was glad that people of other religions and no religion have a place in Norwegian society. In Synne's focus on other "Christian voices", it suggests that it is not other religions or secularism that caused her uncertainty. Rather, it's the multiplicity of other Christian views that undermined her previous religious confidence and "black and white" assumptions. Synne fervently asked, "God, what is your will?," rather than, "Who is God?"

In order to resolve the anxiety and tension caused by different "liberal" opinions, Synne used something approximate to Berger's deductive option. While growing up at home, she reflected a certain amount of theological minimalism; as discussed previously, she framed her experience at home positively as people of different churches were able to coexist as one large community without conflict. The "extreme opinions" in Oslo in contrast where so outside her frame of reference that they destabilised the plausibility structures of her

conservative strict adherent faith. Afterwords, she found relief and a renewed sense of security by subjectifying her religiosity deeply within the Lutheran tradition.

While Synne did not give many details about what these opinions were, they forced her to examine what Christianity truly meant *for her*. Due to this, her process does not fit perfectly into the deductive option. She framed her regained religious security as opinion using language such as, "my view" and "my belief" rather than appeals to an objective truth, and she appeared to want to allow space for other Christian views to exist.. While this approach to embracing tradition neither eliminates or incorporates the contrary opinions, it still resolved the resulting anxiety by grounding Synne's faith in a subjectively meaningful source of religious authority.

7.2.2. Facing Secular Norway

While non-Christian religious positions did not cause Synne's intense religious questioning, she still expressed two types of difficulties while encountering secularism in particular. The first is frustration towards spiritual apathy and indifference. As a "conservative" strict adherent, she wanted to share her convictions with people in her life, and she recounted frustrating discussions with some classmates who identified as "cultural Christians" who would visit church only on Christmas or "believed the same values". Synne also explained that for people with no Christian identity, they would have little interest in engaging with religious ideas beyond expressing a surface-level pleasantness. Synne said:

> Many of my friends here in my studies say, "*Åh så koselig* that you go to church!" And I'm like, this is not… we are not there because it's just cosy and nice, but it's because we believe in a radical love and Jesus and that we are sinners!

She continued by explaining any type of challenge or questions to her faith could be better, because when people respond with polite pleasantries, Synne said, "Then you have nothing to say! It's so frustrating!"

The second type of difficulty she encountered was fear towards secular hostility. This seemed particularly relevant for Synne as she identified as conservative; she tied more overt hostility towards ethical positions of conservative Christians. She said, "But I think in general they get angry when it comes to the homosexual debate and abortion debate maybe… and the gender debate." She did not speak about any direct experience of being met with hostility for her convictions. Instead, she pointed towards secular perceptions in the media. Even without personal experiences in her own life, public perception towards conservative Christianity has been enough to cause fear:

> Norway has become- it's more difficult to be Christian in a way, because if you want to share your meanings or opinions in the public debate, you get hate mails and you get like freezed out. Or like, the people standing there, I have so much respect for them, but I wouldn't dare it myself. I think I'm too afraid because I don't want to be stuck out.

While secularism did not appear to dramatically affect Synne's faith the way opposing Christian views did, they nonetheless caused her to struggle internally. It should be noted however that these particular emotional responses could be particular to Synne as a strict adherent with a conservative view of Christianity and a unique concern that people "know God." It will thus be helpful to examine how flexible adherents view secularism.

7.3. Finding Space to Be Christian

When other participants were asked what roles the secularism and pluralism played in the way they viewed their religious development, they broadly agreed along the lines of those

previously discussed that diversity in the abstract is good. Some like Maria and Kaja shared Synne's frustrations with secular assumptions and attitudes towards Christians. However, unlike Synne, they do not appear afraid at perceived hostility. In fact, as flexible adherents, they took a different approach entirely: they appealed to *both* the pluralistic nature of modern Norway and its historic religious culture to advocate for their Christian identities in public life.

Maria expressed both frustration and empathy for her secular friends. She conveyed that Norway is a safe and secure country where most people don't need God:

> We haven't a big crisis in life. So in that's when my non-Christian friends also says, when it's like, "Don't you need a god in your life?" It's like, "No, I can manage on my own." And I believe that, because we can. Most of us are doing very good in this country and don't need to rely on a higher power.

Even with understanding the secular perspective, Maria still felt annoyed by the extend that some people in her life will go to dismiss Christianity. She said:

> I can sometimes get a little bit upset when people are- because sometimes it feels like a competition of who knows the least about Christianity. Like, "[Mocking tone of voice] Oh, I don't remember what happened on Easter. Oh, I don't know!" And then it's almost like cool to… yeah, and you don't want to be associated with Christianity at any cost. And I think that's very interesting. Last time it was Eid, Muslims… yeah. I had so many friends who were posting things on Instagram, like "Happy Eid to my Muslim friends," and everything. And they would *never* post the same on Easter, "Happy Easter to all my Christian friends!" They would never do that!

She also noted frustration when witnessing how Christianity is disregarded in the media. She laughed while saying, "I think it's a bit like, can't you just accept that this is a Christian culture, and you're a part of it? And you don't have to believe, and that's okay… but, it is Christian. Just accept it!" When asked to clarify how she understood "Christian

culture", she expressed that Christian values are a "natural foundation" to the culture even if it is in fact secularising today. Interestedly, she also said "But somehow I don't mind that it's going in this direction kind of." Though she hoped Christian values remained, she stated that people, "have to find out about these things themselves," and ought not to feel pressured to be personally Christian even if the country is Christian. Even with a degree of openness towards a secularising culture, she again expressed frustration at the way Christianity is denigrated on TV and radio. She said:

> All of these opinions, like, they can't accept that Christianity is important for many people, and don't just wave it off like something like, "Oh, that's something they believed in the old days, and it's not relevant anymore." Because it is for some people, and we can at least respect that, as we do for example, the Muslims.

Maria acknowledged what she saw as a double standard in both her secular friends' and the public sphere's recognition of Islam and dismissal of Christianity. However, she did emphasise that Muslims do have a place in Norwegian society and that they deserve to be recognised. Additionally, she saw many commonalities between Christians and Muslims and said, "Even though we don't believe in the same thing, we believe in something, we can relate on that." She noted common ethical concerns such as care for the poor and refugees as points where she wished there could be more positive cooperation and argued that, "We can live side by side and learn from each other on different levels."

Kaja's responses had similar themes to Maria's, and though she also had encountered secular challenges her faith, she seemed less personally perturbed by them. She noted that some people can be "bitter" towards religion, and that some in the past have tried to argue with her. However, she seemed much less bothered by hostile challenges and would freely admit ignorance of compelling arguments for why she is Christian. She said, "My response is very humble- and '*I don't know*.' Like I'm not very clear or good at defending my faith." These more bitter challenges seemed rare however. Most secular people she encountered

would stress they were not antagonistic towards religion despite the fact she also noted that being anti-Christian is "cool" for some. Kaja said:

> I feel like there has been this thing were it's like cool to be like anti-Christian, right? And when people say like… I don't know if they would like say… Christianity or something and they're like, "Oh I'm not Christian, but I don't have anything against-" They would like immediately go there, and I was just like, smile inside. And just be like, it's kind of funny.

Kaja said in various ways how it was "funny" to see the presumptions secular people have of Christians. She repeatedly said how she prefers to let her values and kindness speak for her, but she mentioned how many are surprised when she tells them she is Christian. Challenging secular prejudices was worthwhile for Kaja as she said, "Not necessarily like… they don't like become Christian, but it's fun to see them evolving their perception of Christian people." She did express slight guilt however when saying how most people would probably assume she is not Christian before telling them. While she noted that the "guilt" came from comparing herself to the people she knew at the high-friction boarding school, she still seems to be comfortable with her current "approach" of engaging with secular people.

When asked about what Kaja considered the role of the Christian church in Norwegian society to be, she spoke about the historic role it played in shaping culture which, "A lot of people now want to like reverse or not kind of state as a fact." Though she felt sadness at the church "dying", she saw even the mere presence of churches as adding a certain "warmth" to society:

> It's a safe space for everyone, everyone is welcome. Uhm yeah, even though people don't necessarily use that kind of option in their lives, I think it's an important part, for it just to say "*åpen kirke*", I think it makes our society more warm.

Kaja explicitly connected a lack of faith to a lack of "warmth" in Norwegian society. Interestedly, her vague theological beliefs discussed previously appears here again. Kaja

seems to suggest that any religious faith, even non-Christian faith can provide the dimension that is missing in secular society:

> But I also think that, yeah, when people say, "I wish I had a faith." And I'm like yeah, it does enrich my life, I wish you had it too. I think Norway and our society is lacking a dimension. Yeah. It's hard to pinpoint. But it is lacking something. And I think, I wouldn't say that it is, but a faith of any sort or kind of like warmth of some sort, which I kind of feel like faith is, would help.

Kaja overall was happy with Oslo's diversity. She described enjoying the large variety of churches, and she recounted how she "never settled" in one church and opted instead to visit many different types of services. When asked about the diversity of non-Christian religious positions, she did not give details, but she stated simply, "I don't know, I feel at home when there's a lot of diversity." She mentioned being more "comfortable" when in a diverse environment, and this is possibly due to her experience at the boarding school. She seemed to reference such homogenous Christian settings when saying, "But I have a lot of friends who just want to be like in this environment their whole life, yeah, I could never! Phew! I get stressed just thinking about it." If a Christian environment causes a degree of stress, then it is probable that Oslo's diversity affords a greater sense of individual freedom in which Kaja can be Christian in her own way.

7.3.1. Strict and Flexible Approaches to Secularism

The ways that the strict adherents and flexible adherents above reflect on pluralism and secularism are markedly different. Henrik, Isak, and Synne all remarked on Norway's historic Christian culture. However, they did not connect the country's religious heritage meaningfully to the way they engage with pluralism or secularism. They all saw secularism as a problem to be overcome, and they expressed deep understandings of Christian mission as

the solution to that problem. As Isak noted, the role of the church in Norway is to, "spread the kingdom of God," and Henrik and Synne gave similar responses. For these strict adherents, they appear to be motivated to engage with non-Christians out of particular theological beliefs; "loving people and spreading the word" are important objectives for them regardless of the history or current state of Norway's Christian culture. This approach to meeting secularism and pluralism resonates with Berger's deductive option. Though Norway's pluralistic situation is not denied or ignored, the reaffirmation of religious tradition and authority provides both resources and an impetus to tackle it head-on.

In contrast, the flexible adherents Maria and Kaja do not appear concerned in the same way as the others. Maria found her encounters with secular friends frustrating, but she also framed it as being "interesting". Her problem with society's ignoring of Christians stems less from people not following Jesus and more from the disproportionate recognition of other religions in Norway. She noted how her friends go out of their way to acknowledge Muslim holidays, but it is still cool to be ignorant of anything associated with Christianity. This point can be understood as *an appeal to pluralism itself*; if Muslims have respect in Norwegian society, then Christians ought to enjoy the same respect.

Maria likewise appealed to Norway's Christian culture in a way that the strict adherent participants did not. Isak and Synne for example recognised how a Christian culture may impart certain values, but they viewed being truly Christian as a deeper set of beliefs and much more than merely holding a set of values. Synne even conveyed frustration and saw people identifying with cultural Christianity as a barrier. In contrast, Maria saw Norway's Christian heritage as a legitimising force for devout Christians in society. She even noted that it is alright if people do not personally believe, but people in the media should have more regard for those who find the religious heritage meaningful. Interestingly, Maria is not personally invested in maintaining a Christian culture. She described thinking it's fine if the culture continues to secularise, but she seems to take issue with a reckless and callous secularism that exists in the public sphere. Norway owes much of its values to Christianity, so it is foolish to carelessly dismiss anyone who continues to be Christian today.

Kaja reflected similarly to Maria, though she articulated her concerns differently. For her, she seemed much less bothered by secularism than any of the other participants. She did not consider it her job to defend her faith or convince anyone of Christianity. Instead, she

opted to merely live out a set of values that could intrigue any non-Christians she encountered. In contrast to the frustration of those such as Synne or Maria, Kaja was actually amused by her experiences with secular people. For Kaja, embodying Norway's historic Christian values was a legitimate way to engage with secular people. She felt more comfortable showing kindness and openness rather than trying to convince anyone to be Christian.

Nonetheless, Kaja was mildly concerned about the trajectory of the country's culture. She thought of secularisation as society losing a type of "warmth", and she saw churches as providing a traditionally important social function that facilitated this. Even if most people today no longer take advantage of churches, they are still places where anyone of any background could feel safe and welcomed. This is in stark contrast to the strict adherents' view of churches. While they pointed to the church's missional and discipleship role as the most important, Kaja valued the openness and safety churches offered. While Synne outright rejected the church's "cosiness" as having any relevance, Kaja seems to view it as its highest value.

In addition, Kaja connected the social warmth that churches offer to the Christian culture that some wished to undo, and she hinted that this warmth could come from any type of faith. While she was not precise in her explanation, she seemed to indicate that even non-Christian religions can add a "dimension" that is missing in secular society. Like Maria who suggested that people of different religions ought to "stand up for each other," Kaja appeared to recognise the commonality between all religious people in a secular society; they offer a type of warmth that is lacking in modernity.

Why do Maria and Kaja reflect on diversity differently than the other participants? Part of the reason is that they share a similar background that is notably different than the strict adherents. They both come from a large, diverse city, and they developed individualised and subjectified religious identities in response to high-friction environments. As discussed previously, the three strict adherents developed religiously in Christian bubbles in their home towns. While Synne did have relationships with Muslims and secular people at different points in her life, the plausibility structures that supported her conservative strict adherent religiosity were too strong to be simnifically challenged. Henrik and Isak saw diversity as positive, but they still subjugated diversity under their religious beliefs. For them, pluralism is

only positive when strengthening Christian faith and while practicing "discernment", which appears as an implicit appeal to religious authority.

In contrast, Maria and Kaja seem to frame Christianity as one possible religious option rather than an objective transcendent truth. It is the religious option that is most subjectively meaningful for them, but they still point to the common experiences and values of other religions as an opposing force against secularism. Maria in particular empathises with the secular perspective. Due to her experience of being non-religious, she can appreciate why someone would not feel a need to believe in God, and she saw the common values between Christians and Muslims. For Kaja, a diverse environment felt more comfortable. With no single religious expression that dominates, she felt more free to be religious in her own way. In addition, her theological minimalism allowed her to recognise shared experience of other faiths and expressed that they could make society more open and welcoming. For both of these participants, their individualised flexible adherence places more emphasis on common social good rather than the continued flourishing of Christian communities. In contrast to the strict adherents, both express pluralism as something unequivocally positive.

7.4. Pluralism Inspiring Faith

Maria and Kaja were not the only participants to view pluralism positively. Ingebørg explained how after coming from a highly secular area in northern Norway, the religious diversity of Oslo allowed her to be more Christian. She described how she felt more secure and self-confidant in her Christian identity since moving for school. She explained this by saying, "I just feel… and I guess that's because there is more people like me here in Oslo. I feel like a part of something bigger, more than what I did at home." Because of this, she also explicitly said she had not just become more self-confident, but also more religious since moving.

When asked for more details about how the diversity of the city had contributed to her increased religiosity, she explained how she had met many Muslims through her university program. She said:

> But also in my program, a lot of Muslims and a lot of other people, I was really… I guess it's kind of strange, but I feel like that's a… it also makes me… it makes me feel more Christian! [Laughs]

When asked why she thought this was the case, she responded, "Yeah, I don't know. It's hard to explain, but it's just seeing other people being who they are and practice what they believe in, it makes me also feel like it's okay. Like, everything is okay."

Ingebørg, like Kaja, also reflected theological minimalism. She said, "I'm still not like very concerned about all the theology, but more so the values." While Ingebørg expressed positive feelings towards Christianity's historic impact on Norwegian culture in the creation of religious charities and social welfare organisations, she also noted that it's important that such organisations do not compel people to believe a certain way. For Ingebørg, the values were central for her religious identity, and she only saw Norway's Christian heritage as positive in as much as it promoted those values. This suggests development towards a flexible adherent type where Ingebørg lacks a strong commitment to doctrine and instead focused on the common good that religious faith can facilitate.

Ingebørg's experience is the clearest positive effect of pluralism across all interviews. This suggests that the way individuals experience pluralism is at least partly determined by the environment that they are accustomed to. Ingebørg's difficulties in a highly secular home town were alleviated after arriving in Oslo. In contrast to Synne who found the multiplicity of Christian opinions to be disorientating after moving from *Bibelbeltet*, Ingebørg experienced the relatively large number of Christians in the city to be refreshing. She did not appear concerned with the conflicting Christian views; the mere presence of any Christians at all was a welcome change. As she primary understood her faith through social identity and common values, she was easily able to, "feel like a part of something bigger," despite the divisions between different Christians.

Maria and Kaja saw pluralism as beneficial in its recognition of common experiences between different religious, the potential for cooperation, and in the capacity to provide space for all religious people in an increasingly secularising culture. Ingebørg however took this one step further in stating that *pluralism actively made her more Christian*. In the recognition that Muslims are able to practice their faith openly in society, she felt more comfortable being openly Christian.

On the surface, this contradicts Berger's thesis. According to Berger, the recognition of other religions ought to cause some type of uncertainty for an individual. However for Ingebørg, the presence of Muslims at her school allowed her to feel like "everything is okay," and that each person has the freedom to follow their religion and be respected. This is likely due to Ingebørg's unique situation. Coming from a secular area in the north, she had already gone through a crisis of faith and had to individualise and subjectify her religious identity. After coming to Oslo, she shared few of the theological commitments held by the strict adherents. They saw the church as having a clear mission to engage the secular culture in some way. In contrast, when Ingebørg was asked what she thought the role of the church in Norway is, she simply said, "I don't know, yeah. [laughs] That's a big question." She therefore sees Christianity within the frame of how it is personally relevant and meaningful for herself, and after growing up in such a secular place, Oslo's large number of both Christian and non-Christian religious positions do not challenge Ingebørg's plausibility structures. On the contrary, they *reinforce* them by legitimising an individualised Christian faith. While pluralism may threaten a strict adherent's religiosity, it emboldens the flexible adherents. As long as one's religion is personally meaningful, they have the space to practice it in a pluralistic culture.

7.5. Conclusion

This chapter examined the different ways participants navigated their religious identities while encountering secularism and pluralism. Strict adherents had varying reactions to these concepts. Those who remained in Christian bubbles while living in Oslo had considered pluralism and secularism mostly in the abstract, and they had little first-hand "real

world" experience with people of different views. Though Synne stepped out of the Christian bubble, she struggled with the city's diversity. Though they reflected that diversity was positive, they gave caveats and conditions. For them, there are limits to the benefits of pluralism. In contrasty, the three flexible adherents discussed viewed pluralism more positively. They saw pluralism as a way to advocate for their own Christianity while in a secularising society. In the case of Ingebørg, non-Christian religions even encouraged her faith. Secularism on the other hand might cause frustration, but it is not viewed as a challenge to be overcome by the flexible adherents. In some cases, non-belief is a perfectly understandable position to take, and it is only in its overly antagonistic form in the public sphere when some flexible adherents want to push back against it.

The analysis in this chapter showed the manifold ways participants relate to secularism and pluralism. Rather than these concepts existing as a static social situation, the individuals experienced them differently according to the backgrounds they were accustomed to at home and what implications their particular expressions of Christianity involved. Individuals can experience the same city's culture differently; it can endanger religious belief or uplift it. In any case, the participants were pressed to face Oslo's religious scene in some way. They could rationally consider pluralism abstractly, face it head on, or embrace it to find freedom in the diversity. Similarly to limitless ways one can be Christian, there are boundless ways to relate to a religious complex society.

8. Discussion

8.1. Summary

This project set out to answer the research question: "*How do young Norwegians of Christian background who have moved to Oslo experience their religious identity after their change in environment?*" Madge et al.'s typology of religious adherence was use to categorise the participants (2014, p. 72-87). Berger's theory pluralism was used to examine how the inner religious uncertainty caused by modernity contributed to religious development across different environments (1979). The analysis was broken up into three chapters which each answering a different sub-question.

The first sub-question discussed was, *"How did these participants experience their religious formation in their home towns?"* Most participants remarked that in some way, their religious identities simply followed their families and that "It was just the way we were." However, experiences of differentiation were examined as key moments. These were times when participants understood their religious identity as something different or distinct to those around them. Within these moments of recognising difference in themselves or their community, their identities could no longer be taken for granted in the same way. Differentiation was analysed according to those moments which drew them deeper into their religious faith, pushed them away from it, or appeared neutral. Additionally, the role of social events were discussed, with "low-friction" and "Christian bubbles" being major themes. While churches played some role in their development, many youth found them to be unchallenging. Instead, youth events appeared much more impactful. In youth events, some participants were better able to find community and belonging, though some discussed how they were not the most religiously educational.

The second sub-question was, "*How have the participants' religious identities developed or changed within the experiences of moving away from home?*" First, two religious journeys were discussed. The participants Maria and Ingrid took opposing paths of religious change by beginning as secular and Christian respectively, and they ended with the

opposite religious position. Nonetheless, there were many common themes between the two such as role of their communities and the need to individualise and subjectify their experiences. The effect of youth in high-friction environments was also examined. As spiritually open flexible adherents, Maria and Kaja struggled with the religiously homogenous sub-cultures that placed high demands on them. Though they were Christian, they were outsiders to these spaces, and they responded by forming their religious identity in opposition to the majority religious culture. Lastly, the way participants navigated the diverse church landscape of Oslo was analysed. With so many options for religious community in a large, new city, Isak and Maria were shown to have intuitively followed their personal preference to find a church that provided a religious expression that was comfortable and subjectively meaningful for them.

The third and last analysis chapter dealt with the sub-question, "*In what ways do these participants reflect on the roles that pluralism and secularism play in their religious development?*" First, the cases of the strict adherents Henrik and Isak were analysed to show how inhabiting Christian bubbles limited real world engagement with pluralism and secularism. Instead, it is an abstract concept to be discussed and overcome through theologising and the mission of the church. Synne's experience as a strict adherent was also discussed. She wished to actively engage with people of differing religious positions. While the plurality of Christian opinions caused a great deal of uncertainty for her, she found resolution in subjectifying traditional Lutheran theology. Finally, the differences in the ways flexible adherents navigated pluralism and secularism was discussed. The analysis suggests that they saw religious diversity as a positive way to advocate for themselves as Christians against secularism, and in the case of Ingebørg, religious diversity actively allowed her to feel more religious as a Christian. Additionally, they saw commonalities between themselves and people of other religions and recognised a common purpose in a secularising culture.

8.2. The Puzzle of Religious Identity

While this project uses terms such as "Christian" and "non-Christian" for the sake of convenience, the erosion of religious certainty brought about by modernity problematises this binary. When an individual is forced along a process to confront and reorient their religious identity, what does it actually mean to be Christian? The religious changes of Maria and Ingrid discussed in the second analysis chapter illustrate this point. Maria could not give a definitive moment as to when she felt she was definitely a Christian. Instead, she recalled how she thought, "maybe I'm a Christian," in the middle of the process. Likewise, Ingrid had lost all faith in Christian beliefs but still felt unable to let go of an enormous part of her identity. She continued to attempt Christian practices and take part in church community, even if they only had negative effects. Under what conditions is one truly either Christian or secular? As these two participants sat in the tension of undergoing religious reorientation, they could perhaps be called pragmatic adherents in that moment, but such labels seem inadequate once they more or less settled on a position of religious expression.

While these two participants represent quite radical changes, the way they developed was not unique among the interviewees. Some became more clear and firm in their beliefs while their practices diminished. Some gained self-confidence in being Christian while still being unable to precisely describe what being Christian means. The interviews only captured the individuals' religious lives up until the present moment, but their development will not stop here. This problem of categorising Christian and non-Christian is bound to persist. Should one's "Christianness" be evaluated according to their adherence to the traditional doctrines of the church, their commitment towards religious practices and values, or something else entirely? Such distinctions, if they are even appropriate, are beyond the scope of this project. This problem is why self-identification was selected as the sampling criteria.

8.3. Pluralism Demands Subjectification

In this project, it was particularly surprising to find that in Norway today, the label "Christian" barely tells one anything concrete about that person's religious beliefs, practices, or general orientation towards life. This complex scene of Christianity is what caused Synne's confusion and frustration in the third analysis chapter. In one instance, the label appears as just a marker of social participation in a youth group; in another, it describes a high commitment to traditional theology and ethics. In yet another instance, it can serve as a vaguely spiritual view of the world that embraces openness, diversity, and warmth.

This appears entirely in line with the trends of individualisation that Repstad, Holmqvist, and Trysnes observe. Repstad (2020) writes that in the survey *Religionundersøkelsen* in 1998 and 2008, eight out of ten believe that one can be a decent Christian without regular church attendance. Additionally, the term "personal Christian" has changed from someone who has taken a choice to be devout to someone who is Christian in their own individual way (p. 49-50). Morten Holmqvist (2007) raises this question of how to define "Christian" in the wake of individualisation, and his research points to a great deal of variance in theological belief among Christian youth. He found that of the youth surveyed, 59% identified as Christian, but only 19% of these respondents also believed in the existence of God, that Jesus was God's Son, and that Jesus was resurrected (p. 67-68). Trysnes likewise demonstrates how Christian festival-goers do not wish to be bound by set traditions or norms of behaviour. She writes:

> *Det er ikke nødvendigvis en korrelasjon mellom å tilhøre eller være aktiv i et kirkesamfunn og å leve etter de forventede normene og reglene. Dette stemmer godt overens med kristne ungdommers fokus på at de selv vil bestemme hvordan de skal leve livet. Kristne ungdommer ser altså ut til å være mindre opptatt av bud og regler for livsstil. De ønsker å leve livet slik de selv ønsker.* (Trysnes, 2017, p. 135)

While these scholars thoroughly examine how Christianity can be individualised, they do not discuss how this leads to more Christian diversity that must then be navigated. What becomes of a religion where many individuals express their faith in accordance with their own intuition and worldview? Its situation becomes increasingly complex. In a sense, this complexity around the multiplicity of ways to be Christian should not be so surprising— it is precisely the situation that Berger predicted. While Berger primarily had different religions in view when discussing pluralism, the extent to which a single religion can take on so many diverse forms points to the fact that *religious individualisation, subjectification, and pluralisation feed into each other*.

The modern situation of Christianity in Norway is thus a type of pluralism in itself that adherents must negotiate. Several participants made references to having to consider opposing views of fellow Christians. This is likely why even strict adherents reflected a subjective approach to their faith in the same way as the strict adherents in the study by Madge et al. (2014, p. 75). With so many competing ways of being Christian, even for those utilising Berger's deductive option, their appeal to religious authority could not be taken for granted. Their religion had to be subjectivised by necessity. There are vast options for possible criteria that one can use to self-identify themselves as Christian; the deciding factor is therefore those criteria which the individual finds most personally meaningful to live their life.

8.4. Low-Friction Christianity

The role of low-friction environments was analysed at different points of the participants lives. Particularly in childhood, churches were described with the term low-friction because they were unchallenging. Youth were often not encouraged in their spiritual development and they felt out of place in a setting with a preponderance of elderly adults. Nonetheless, low-friction environments felt safe and welcoming to the participants. Such settings conveyed positive feelings and good experiences, and doctrines and dogma were either de-emphasised or not addressed at all. Youth events played a large role in allowing

youth to feel more connected to religious life, but these events could be just as unchallenging and safe as regular churches. As adults, low-friction congregations were attractive to some interviewees. In making few demands, the participants were allowed more space for individualised and subjectified expressions of faith according to their preferences. Many participants also noted how they felt freedom to visit many churches across their lives, and in some cases did not feel bound to any one particular church.

The concept of low-friction churches resonates with Holmqvist's (2007) findings. In his study, youth reported their most recent experience in a church. 76% thought the sermon was boring, 71% though the service was too long, and 51% viewed church as old-fashioned. Nonetheless, 65% reported feeling welcomed and received well (p. 70-71). As in this project, many in Holmqvist's study reported attending church less as they got older. Holmqvist points to the level of subjective importance a religious community must have for its practitioners as a decisive factor for youth to become more committed. He writes, "*Dette felleskapet må bestå av mennesker som selv oppfatter handlingene og troen relevant, og som slik sett bekrefter denne utøvende troen som meningsfull og viktig… Uten et slikt bekreftende felleskap, vil disse opplevelsene ofte bli engangshendelser uten varig betydning,*" (2007, p. 75).

This tracks well with the findings in this project. As low-friction communities were easy to drop out of, the participants appeared most committed to their communities when it was most personally meaningful. Safety and lack of pressure could very well be what draws individuals to join a particular congregation as it did for Ingebørg and Maria. Additionally, it is possible that if one has a highly individualised religious identity, they may not need to commit to any single community. As with Kaja, a series of pleasant and warm "one-time" experiences at various churches may be all they desire.

8.5. Openness and Diversity

Repstad (2020) describes trends in contemporary Norway that provide explanatory power as to how and why low-friction churches exist. He describes religious liberalisation in the colloquial way of increased flexibility in religious belief and ethics (p. 126). In addition, there are lower borders between different church denominations as doctrine has become less

relevant (p. 131-132). Trysnes (2017) also notes this trend of theological minimalism has supplanted traditional confessional lines in favour of creating positive religious feelings and experiences. In order to meet the diversity of a pluralistic culture and individualised Christians, churches and youth organisations have shifted in order to provide space for all (p. 130).

These characteristics of low-friction communities seemed to deeply impact the participants religious identities and the way they expressed their faith. Either implicitly or explicitly, participants recognised the importance of respecting other's religious positions. Even strict adherents who differentiated themselves against "cultural Christians" still expressed willingness for alternative ways of being Christian to exist and partake in religious life. Madge et al. (2014) recount how in their findings, "liberal individualism" as an emphasis on personal choice, equality, and respect was a common value of youth across different religious positions. They suggest that liberal individualism could help youth foster connection with each other and could be a, "form of bridging capital facilitating interaction and communication across cultural and religious boundaries," (p. 213).

Hans Morten Haugen's study on tolerance and inter-religious acceptance among Christian youth have many points of resonance with this project, but it also differs in some regards. Using a model of religious development, he found that those with who were less developed made more references to Norway's Christian heritage as something needed to be protected. In contrast, more devout youth who were more developed expressed greater acceptance in emphasising the importance of Christian values and loving one's neighbour. He suggested that those who were Christian out of social belonging were less religiously developed, and his conclusion thus suggests that an active, more developed faith corresponds to greater inter-religious tolerance (Haugen, 2017).

In accordance with Haugen's work, the results of this project certainly point to having a developed faith can facilitate openness and tolerance. The findings here of strict and flexible adherents compare and contrast in interesting ways. Strict and flexible adherents should not been taken as occupying differing "levels" of religious development like Haugen describes; instead, they are more of differing orientations towards faith (Strict adherents and flexible can both undergo little development, for example).

Overall, most participants take the positives of diversity as a given. To an extent, all seem to embrace liberal individualism like those in Madge et al.'s 2014 study. However, strict adherents simultaneously mentioned the evangelical mission of the church while acknowledging the importance of diversity and personal freedom. This includes those strict adherents who had undergone long processes of religious reflection and development. In some cases, there seemed to be tension between these two values. While they respected those with different religious positions, they also framed diversity as having utility to make the Christian church stronger by forcing them to refine their arguments. Flexible adherents in contrast saw diversity as something liberating and comforting. Interestingly, flexible adherents gave similar answers to this effect despite that they had undergone different degrees of spiritual reflection, and they were able to acknowledge commonalities in faith and ethics between themselves and those of other religions. In effect, strict adherents reflected more on pluralism's potential to strengthen their own Christian community, but flexible adherents saw it as more of a good in itself.

It is likely that this liberalising trend towards openness and acceptance will continue in the future. As Norway's religious scene continues to pluralise, those who remain religious will necessarily be compelled to adopt a subjectified and potentially individualised religious faith. Churches and Christian organisations might well continue to present a low-friction approach were being welcomed with positive experiences over theological instruction is the norm, and liberal individualism is held as a high value above the difficult doctrines and strict morals that were common in previous decades.

8.6. Experiencing Pluralism and Secularism

Undoubtedly, the analysis suggests that many of the inner processes that Berger predicted resonate in the religious development of the youth in this project. Berger's three options for navigating a pluralistic world were occasionally useful. Sometimes participants used something like the reductive option to reaffirm a strict adherent faith, one used the reductive option in the process of becoming a religious bystander, and one flexible adherent

took the inductive option in processing all religious claims through the lens of her own individual experience. Even if participants did not fully utilise the possibilities for engaging with modern pluralism, they were still often marked by a degree of uncertainty and reorientation when facing opposing views.

However, the picture Berger paints of the modern religious individual is one of intense personal struggle. He suggests that as traditional sources of religious authority crumble, the individual is left alone to chose for themself what their religious preference will be. This inevitably leaves the person with deep uncertainty, heightened nervousness, alienation, and existential confusion (Berger, 1979, p. 22-25). While there were definitely traces of this in the findings of the analysis, the respondents answers, taken as a whole, were not nearly as earth-shattering as Berger predicts. Why? How is it that for several participants, religious diversity is actually quite comfortable?

A potential answer is that the larger liberalised milieu of Norway immunises individuals from the dramatic, faith-shaking questions that modernity would raise otherwise. As Ingebørg recounted when describing how knowing Muslims in Oslo makes her feel more Christian, she said, "It makes me also feel like it's okay. Like, everything is okay." Such a simple, matter-of-fact statement conveys assumptions of the liberal individualism. If most religious individuals are able to personally subjectify their faith while maintaining a liberal openness to those who practice and believe differently, then there is little space for conflict. Simply put, everyone is okay. Each person has a meaningful religious position that never needs to challenge or confront another's. The analysis suggests that this was the case even for the religiously conservative strict adherents; though they may encounter some disagreements, they do not feel overtly challenged until the diverse opinions reaches some point of critical mass. Until then, it is easy enough to let each person believe as they see fit.

8.6.1. The Protection of Christian Bubbles

Of course, diffuse liberal individualism is not the only possible explanation as to why participants did not always express dramatic religious reorientation in every case. Another surprising result of this project is the large role that different sub-cultures played, and this

could provide another answer. The project was initially built on the assumption that by merely living in Oslo, the participants would be engaging fully with its high degree of pluralism. Synne mentioned how Oslo has a reputation for being threatening to the faith of Christian youth who move there. However, while the "threat" of pluralism may be real, it seemed relatively easy to avoid; one could simply find a like-minded community and ingratiate themselves there. While Oslo undoubtedly offers a complex range of religious communities, social networks, and lifestyle sub-cultures, these different environments can be self-isolating to maintain strong plausibility structures. A conservative Christian does not need to interact with Muslims or secular people even if they live in the same city if they do not wish to do so. Kaja pointed to this in her interview by saying of the people enmeshed in the missions organisation's Christian infrastructure, "You haven't met Norway yet."

Pluralism then is not a monolith that is encountered fully in one instance the moment one crosses the border into Oslo; it exists as a complex web of overlapping social relationships and sub-cultures that takes time to engage with organically. The presence of Christian bubbles in a diverse city suggests that it is entirely possible to avoid encountering this diversity. Indeed, this seems to be what some participants elected to do either at home or in Oslo. However, it will be interesting to see how effectively Christian bubbles will be at shielding from diversity in the future. As noted above, Christian diversity has led to theological minimalism and homogenisation of Christian sub-culture across confessional lines as subjective experience becomes the focus of religious communities (Trysnes, 2017). Even within a Christian bubble, one is likely to encounter a greater degree of individualised religion that might conflict with one's own views. If such encounters do not also entail the same degree of liberal openness, then it is probable that these individuals are pressed into the type of deeper uncertainty that Berger predicts.

8.6.2. Being Challenged By Secularism

Over the course of participants' lives, they interacted with secularism in various ways. Vikdahl and Liljestrand (2021) studied the ways Swedes of immigrant backgrounds navigated the majority culture while having a religious identity. The researchers utilised dialogical self

theory to analysis the respondents from a psychological perspective, and they found that the tension between the two identities of religious and Swedish caused internal conflicts that needed to be resolved. Vikdahl and Liljestrand write:

> Conflicts in society of minds can be diminished by reducing the number, heterogeneity and complexity of positions… and the youths tended to prefer the *I*-position as religious when conflicts appeared in their society of mind between being religious or being a Swede. (2021, p. 323)

Youth were strongly socialised into a religious group, and knowing other youth of the same religion was helpful in maintaining their religious positions. Vikdahl and Liljestrand also cited research showing how youth sometimes hide their religious identity in order to not be seen as uncool or strange, and they note how some youth opted to conceal their religious identities in this study. Some took up cultural activities such as drinking alcohol that would be discouraged in their religious communities. They write, "It was difficult for the youths to reconcile their religious I-positions with their Swedish *I*-positions, because they experienced that their religious lifestyle was alien and even questioned in Sweden," (2021, p. 327). In any case, the youth, "…are more or less 'forced' to orient themselves towards who they are in relation to these identity making sources," (2021, p. 327).

The Vikdahl and Liljestrand study differs considerably in sampling and theory from this project, but there are still common themes. While this project did not deal with questions about Norwegian identity, participants were still forced to confront secular cultural forces as Christians. The analysis shows that several participants were forced to reorient and represent their religious faith differently when faced with secular peers. Ingebørg and Maria actively shifted their religious positions out of a desire to be accepted and be perceived as normal, Kaja made reference to Christianity being seen as uncool, and Synne was deeply frustrated by interactions with secular people. These trends of religious development suggests that like in Vikdahl and Liljestrand's study, Christian Norwegians must grapple with the tension of a secular culture even if they belong to the majority ethnic and religious group. Though they could point back to Norway's Christian history to argue for their own normality, several

explained that many secular people believed that the country's days of cultural religiosity disappeared long ago.

Smith and Snell (2009) present several possible casual mechanisms for both strong continued religiosity and decline as youths age. They give several, but the most relevant here are enjoyment of religious congregational participation, accruement of religious capital, need for identity continuity, and maintenance of religious beliefs (p. 231-241). While these factors correlate positively towards stronger religious adherence into adulthood, they are also predictive of religious disaffiliation when there is a lack of these mechanisms. When viewing the participants who underwent some change towards a more secular position at some point in their lives, many of these factors are relevant. Ingrid for example underwent a difficult process of losing her religious identity that was primarily caused by a loss of religious beliefs and a shift towards distrust in her religious community. This distrust stopped any previous enjoyment she had had in religious participation. Even after these changes however, she felt an intense need for identity continuity and fought to hang on to her Christianity for years. For others such as Ingebørg and Maria who became more secular to varying degrees earlier on in life, it is possible their reorientations do not seem as dramatic because they had accrued less religious capital. Once pressed to confront their religiosity by secular peers, there was therefore less personal cost associated with modifying their religious identity.

8.7. Conclusion

This project set out to examine how young Norwegians with a Christian background develop in their religion after leaving home and moving to Oslo. The results were dense, complex, and contradictory. This in itself seems to prove Berger's point to a degree: the modern situation is confusing. With no single religious authority to present an unassailable picture of reality, individuals have taken their experiences of religion and run in different directions.

While all participants experienced the same city after moving to Oslo, they experienced this differently based on their environment growing up and the social networks they inhabited after moving. For someone from the rural *Bibelbeltet*, Oslo's diversity can

appear threatening or disorientating. For someone from rural and highly secular northern Norway, the diversity of the city can grant freedom and security in being able to find their place. And still for those from other pluralistic cities, Oslo's diversity may be nice, though not particularly new or unique.

Berger outlined the shift from fate to choice that happened with modernity. While the analysis suggested that it does indeed cause problems as individuals must turn inward for religious identity, no one today lives as a pre-modern person. The participants in many regards were already imbued with values of liberal individualism and the assumption that there are benefits to be found in diversity. After being raised in a cultural milieu where individuals are expected to make their own choices about what to believe, it perhaps should not be surprising that following one's individual and subjective feelings about religion is taken for granted. Overall, Berger appears to be quite correct in identifying the role individual choice must play in religious affiliation. From the results of this project, it will be hard to predict what role secularism will play in the future. Due to the pluralistic situation, these participants have found various different ways of navigating it. However, whatever the future brings for Norway's religious scene, it is bound to remain complex.

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10.Attachments

10.1. Project Information and Informed Consent Letter

Are you interested in taking part in the research project

"Religious Change in Oslo's Christian Students"?

This is an inquiry about participation in a research project where the main purpose is to examine how living in Oslo affects the religious development of university students. In this letter we will give you information about the purpose of the project and what your participation will involve

Purpose of the project

This project is a master's thesis that aims to examine how the processes of moving to Oslo and transitioning to a new life stage affects the faith and perspectives of young Norwegian Christians. Qualitative interviews will be used to answer the following research question and sub-questions:

"How do young Christian Norwegians who have moved to Oslo experience their religious identity after their change in environment?"

— "How do these young people reorient and transform their religious identity?"

— "In what ways are secularism, globalism, and pluralism factors in their identity reorientation?"

The project sets out to understand the narratives of young Christians in order to examine larger theories of secularization and pluralistic religion, and to understand if and how the urbanized environment of Oslo affects religious change.

As in-depth interviews will be used, the sample size will be relatively small— between 6 and 8 people. The goal with the interviews will be understand the lived experience and narratives of the participants in their own words. After the answers from the interviews are analyzed, any themes that emerge from them will be examined in light of large-scale theories such as secularization, globalization, and pluralism.

Who is responsible for the research project?

MF vitenskapelig høyskole is the institution responsible for the project.

Why are you being asked to participate?

The participant criteria for this project is any Norwegian person between the ages of 20-30 who identifies as Christian and who has moved to Oslo from another part of Norway within the past 10 years. A maximum of 8 people will be to asked to participate as interviews are designed to be more in-depth.

What does participation involve for you?

The interview will be one-on-one and conducted in person (or by video chat if you prefer). If you choose to participate, you can expect the interview to last approximately one hour. The questions relate primarily to your religious faith in terms of your personal history, your upbringing, your current religious beliefs, and your religious environment.

Your answers will be recorded electronically via a voice recorder. I will also be taking notes on paper about your answers.

Participation is voluntary

Participation in the project is completely voluntary. If you chose to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. There will be no negative consequences for you if you chose not to participate or later decide to withdraw. If you choose to participate and then later withdraw, all your data collected during the interview will be discarded and not utilized in later data analysis.

Your personal privacy – how we will store and use your personal data

We will only use your personal data for the purposes specified in this information letter. We will process your personal data confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act).

In addition to myself, only the project supervisor Jon-Olav Henriksen will have access to your personal data.

At every stage of data collection, storage, and analysis, your data will be de-identified. This means that any identifiable details about you in the data you provide will be omitted in the master's thesis. If identifiable personal details are relevant in the data analysis and discussion, they will be generalized so that they cannot be traced to you. For example: approximate ages rather than specific ages will be listed, and regions of Norway will be presented rather than specific cities or towns of origin. Your name will not be listed.

In the collection and storage of your data, your name and contact details will be replaced with a code. The list of names, contact details, and corresponding codes will be stored separately from the rest of the data. Any digital files containing your data will also be password encrypted.

What will happen to your personal data at the end of the research project?

The project is scheduled to end May 15th, 2022. After the end of the project, the data of voice recordings and written notes will be deleted.

The collected data will be de-identified in its presentation and discussion of the master's thesis.

Your rights

So long as you can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to:

—access the personal data that is being processed about you

—request that your personal data is deleted

—request that incorrect personal data about you is corrected/rectified

—receive a copy of your personal data (data portability), and

—send a complaint to the Data Protection Officer or The Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data

What gives us the right to process your personal data?

We will process your personal data based on your consent.

Based on an agreement with MF vikenskapelig høyskole, NSD – The Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project is in accordance with data protection legislation.

Where can I find out more?

If you have questions about the project, or want to exercise your rights, contact:

MF vitenskapelig høyskole via Jan-Olav Henriksen (Jan.O.Henriksen@mf.no)

Our Data Protection Officer: Berit Widerøe Hillestad (personvern@mf.no)

NSD – The Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS, by email: (personverntjenester@nsd.no) or by telephone: +47 55 58 21 17.

Yours sincerely,

[Student] — Student

Jan-Olav Henriksen — Project Leader

Consent form

I have received and understood information about the project "Religious Change in Oslo's Christian Students" and have been given the opportunity to ask questions.

—I give consent to participate in an interview.

—I give consent for my personal data to be processed until the end date of the project, approx. May 15th, 2021

(Signed by participant, date)

10.2. Interview Guide

- Responsive interview method— allows for open ended questions. Potential follow up questions below are possible options depending on the previous answer.

- **Introduction and getting comfortable**
  - Establishing rapport
  - How old are you?

- Where in Norway are you from?
  - Which region?
  - How does it compare to Oslo?

- When did you move to Oslo?
  - What do you study?

- **Questions reflecting on the past**

- How were your religious experiences during childhood?
  - Was your family religious?
  - Was your larger community/social networks religious?

- What kind of church did you attend (if one at all)? How was it experienced?
  - How often did you attend?

- Describe in your own terms your religious practices growing up.
  - Where do you believe these practices came from? (Taught by the church, family, etc?)

- If you think back to when you were living at home, how would you have described what being Christian means?

- In what ways did your religious faith inform your view of yourself?

- In what ways did it form your view of your community? Of Norway as a country?

- What were some key themes that were often repeated in religious settings?
  - Core ideas taught in church or discussed within the family, etc.

- Do you think there was a wide diversity of Christian beliefs and/or denominations in your home town while you were living there?

- Did you have either friends or others in your life of different religious views?
  - Did you have any relationships with people of ethnic backgrounds in your hometown?

- Was there any way in which you felt your church growing up did not meet your spiritual needs?
  - Was there there some need that was lacking?
  - Was there any practice or teaching that was irrelevant to your life?
  - Do you think it gave you a solid spiritual foundation from which to continue on into adulthood?

- In what ways did your faith community speak about and approach the wider culture in Norway? Positively, negatively?

- **Questions on the present**

- How has your experience been overall with living in Oslo? Positive, negative?
  - Generally, how do you find life in Oslo compared to your home town?

- If you compare to before you moved, do you feel that you are more or less active in religious community?
  - If there is a difference, why?

- If you compare before you moved, do you feel that you more or less actively do personal spiritual practices (such as prayer, Bible reading, etc)
  - If so, why?

- What kind of church are you currently involved in (if at all)?
  - In what way is your current church in Oslo similar to the one back home?
  - In what way is it different?

- What was it that drew you to that particular church?
  - Connection with friends, worship style, preaching, presentation, etc?

- How would you describe your spiritual or religious development since moving to Oslo?

    - If not development, has there been any change, even negative?

- Has there been any point on faith on which you've changed your mind while studying?

- Do you think that living in a city like Oslo is more conducive or a hinderance to being religious?

- Is your social circle mainly connected to church? Is it outside the church, or a mix?

- Do you have many friends here who believe differently than you or who come from a different background?

- How would you describe your relationship to your religious community?
    - Your non-religious community?

- How would you describe your relationship to a formal church structure?

- In what ways do you feel that your church here is trying to connect with you personally?

- How do you personally assess your recent changes or development?
    - What caused it in your own mind?

- **Larger perspective questions**

- What do you think is the role of the church in Norwegian society?

- Norway is typically described as a secular society— do you agree with this idea?
    - If so, what does that mean to you?
    - What do you believe is your role in such a society?

- Do you find the diversity both in Oslo's religious landscape (both within and outside Christianity) to be beneficial?

- Do questions such as these matter to you personally? Have you considered them before?

Some possible attachments:

- Information letter to potential research participants.

10.3. Approval Letter from NSD

Reference number
334589

Assessment type
Standard

Date
05.11.2021

Project title
Masters Thesis in Religious Change in Oslo's Christian Students

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

Project leader
Jan-Olav Henriksen

Student
[Student]

Project period
19.10.2021 - 15.05.2022

Categories of personal data
- General
- Special

Legal basis
- Consent (General Data Protection Regulation art. 6 nr. 1 a)
- Explicit consent (General Data Protection Regulation art. 9 nr. 2 a)

The processing of personal data is lawful, so long as it is carried out as stated in the notification form. The legal basis is valid until 15.05.2022.

Notification Form

Comment
Our assessment is that the processing of personal data in this project will comply with data protection legislation, so long as it is carried out in accordance with what is documented in the Notification Form and attachments, dated 05.11.2021, as well as in correspondence with NSD. Everything is in place for the processing to begin.

TYPE OF DATA AND DURATION

The project will process general categories of personal data, special categories of personal data about health data, ethnic origin, philosophical beliefs and religion until 15.05.2022.

LEGAL BASIS

The project will gain consent from data subjects to process their personal data. We find that consent will meet the necessary requirements under art. 4 (11) and 7, in that it will be a freely given, specific, informed and unambiguous statement or action, which will be documented and can be withdrawn.

The legal basis for processing general categories of personal data is therefore consent given by the data subject, cf. the General Data Protection Regulation art. 6.1 a).

The legal basis for processing special categories of personal data is explicit consent given by the data subject, cf. art. 9.2 a), cf. the Personal Data Act § 10, cf. § 9 (2).

PRINCIPLES RELATING TO PROCESSING PERSONAL DATA

NSD finds that the planned processing of personal data will be in accordance with the principles under the General Data Protection Regulation regarding:

• lawfulness, fairness and transparency (art. 5.1 a), in that data subjects will receive sufficient information about the processing and will give their consent

• purpose limitation (art. 5.1 b), in that personal data will be collected for specified, explicit and legitimate purposes, and will not be processed for new, incompatible purposes

• data minimisation (art. 5.1 c), in that only personal data which are adequate, relevant and necessary for the purpose of the project will be processed

• storage limitation (art. 5.1 e), in that personal data will not be stored for longer than is necessary to fulfil the project's purpose

THE RIGHTS OF DATA SUBJECTS

NSD finds that the information that will be given to data subjects about the processing of their personal data will meet the legal requirements for form and content, cf. art. 12.1 and art. 13.

Data subjects will have the following rights in this project: access (art. 15), rectification (art. 16), erasure (art. 17), restriction of processing (art. 18), notification (art. 19) and data portability (art. 20). NB! Any exceptions must be justified and have a legal basis. These rights apply so long as the data subject can be identified in the collected data.

We remind you that if a data subject contacts you about their rights, the data controller has a duty to reply within a month.

FOLLOW YOUR INSTITUTION'S GUIDELINES

NSD presupposes that the project will meet the requirements of accuracy (art. 5.1 d), integrity and confidentiality (art. 5.1 f) and security (art. 32) when processing personal data.

To ensure that these requirements are met you must follow your institution's internal guidelines and/or consult with your institution (i.e. the institution responsible for the project).

NOTIFY CHANGES

If you intend to make changes to the processing of personal data in this project it may be necessary to notify NSD. This is done by updating the information registered in the Notification Form. On our website we explain which changes must be notified. Wait until you receive an answer from us before you carry out the changes.

FOLLOW-UP OF THE PROJECT

NSD will follow up the progress of the project at the planned end date in order to determine whether the processing of personal data has been concluded in accordance with what is documented.

Good luck with the project!

Contact person at NSD: Olav Rosness, adviser.

Comment

Data Protection Services has assessed the change registered on 18.5.2022.

The period for processing personal data has been extended until 10.1.2023

We will follow up the progress of the project at the new planned end date to determine whether the processing of personal data has been concluded.

Good luck with the rest of the project!