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Title: Coming from the outside. Learning and experiences among youths from non-religious families in Christian youth organizations

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Abstract:

The purpose of this article is to examine the learning processes that take place when youths from non-religious homes become active in religious youth organizations. The empirical foundation for the article consists of interviews with Swedish youths who are active in youth organizations belonging to free church denominations. The experiences and reflections of the interviewed youths are analyzed in terms of communities of practice, situated learning and conversational learning and discussed in relation to socialization processes. The results show that more organized learning situations, led by adults or youth leaders within the congregation, are of some importance for the learning within the groups. But that friends and peers also play an imperative role for these youths from non-religious homes, when it comes to learning how to behave and what to believe, as well as knowing what can be said and what shouldn't be mentioned in the context and group they become a part of. The article finally underlines how learning about the values, expectations and practices within a religious group or organization, is not necessarily the same as actually embracing them.

Keywords: Youth, Learning, Youth Organizations, Chris

1. Introduction

Being part of a religious organization or group comprises many different aspects for the individual. It is a question of community, of belonging to a group, a question of faith and traditions, and of sharing your beliefs and convictions with others who think and believe in a similar way. The shared beliefs and values form the foundation for the group or congregation, alongside with common rituals, holidays and views on life.

How such values and beliefs are transmitted to and among the members of religious groups has been studied particularly within religious studies, often with a focus on the transmission of values from the older to the younger generation. In many cases, parents and the family are seen as particularly important when it comes to the religious development of children and youth. Several research studies, both quantitative and qualitative, have focused on how religious values are transmitted from parents or grandparents to children and youth of different ages (Brañas-Garza & Neuman, 2006; Crane, 2003; Warner & Williams, 2010). Questions such as if the religious affiliation of the mother or the father is most significant for the religious activity of the child, and if grandparents matter, have been raised (Bao, Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Conger, 1999; Copen & Silverstein, 2007). Other studies have looked at for instance how religious values are transmitted within mixed-faith or clergy families (Arweck & Nesbitt, 2010; Guest, 2010).

But what about those children and youths who come from non-religious homes, but still choose to become active in a religious group? In a country like Sweden, where only a small proportion of the population is active in a religious organisation or congregation, this is a highly relevant topic to investigate.

My objective in this article is to do a qualitative analysis of the experiences of a number of youths from non-religious families, who have become active in Christian youth organizations in Sweden. The main focus will be on the socialization and learning processes

that take place when a young person who has no explicit religious upbringing, joins a religious organization. As I will show, it is in these cases not only a matter of the transmission of established values from the older to the younger generation. The processes they go through are rather complex, where learning from your peers plays an important role, and where values and guidelines for how to behave and what to believe, what can be said and what shouldn't be mentioned, are not fixed and settled, but developed and negotiated in interaction and conversations with others. I will discuss these processes in relation to direct and oblique socialization, and also use the concepts *communities of practice*, *situated learning* and *conversational learning* as theoretical tools in the analysis of the youths' experiences (cf Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2002; Wenger, 1998; 2007).

2. Research procedures

The empirical foundation for the article consists of interviews with young people who are active in Christian youth organizations in Sweden. These individual interviews are part of an ongoing qualitative research project on youth and Christianity. The selection of participants for the study is based on that they belong to a certain age group (15-22) and that they are, or recently have been, active members in the youth organization of one of the so called "free churches" in Sweden.¹ Up to now, 16 youths have been interviewed in the project through in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews as well as through focus group interviews. The collected data material is analyzed through qualitative content analysis.

Among the youths so far interviewed for the project, some come from non-religious families, and they have thus not been brought up in a religious environment. Following the objective of this article, I will concentrate on these youths, and in the analysis use examples from three of the interviews, namely the interviews with Jenny, Anton and Amanda. They

were all born in Sweden and can be said to have middle class background, based on the occupation and educational level of their parents. They were in the process of finishing high school and were planning to continue their studies afterwards. When it comes to their origin and also educational level and class background, they are quite representative for the participants in the study.

3. Background

The religious scene in Sweden has historically been dominated by the protestant Church of Sweden, which until 2003 was the state church. Since everyone who was born in Sweden automatically became a member of the church, and you had to make an active choice to leave it, a very high proportion of the population belonged to the Church of Sweden. Even though the number of members has decreased since 2003, 70 % of the Swedish population still belongs to this church (numbers from 2010 www.svenskakyrkan.se).

But this does not necessarily mean that the individual members all regard themselves as believing Christians or that they are active in any of the services or activities arranged by the congregations. Sweden has, as several other countries in the north-west of Europe, in various contexts been described as highly secularised (Berger, Davie, & Fokas, 2008; Pettersson & Riis, 1994). Even though such descriptions can be questioned, depending on how you define faith, religious involvement etcetera, it is notable that religiousness in the general debate in Sweden to a large extent is associated with something different from or outside of ‘Swedishness.’ In the media it is often ethnic and religious minorities in Sweden, or other countries and nationalities, like the Mid-East but also the United States, that come to represent religiousness, or religious piety, while the Swedish society at large is regularly depicted as secularised (eg Demirbag-Sten, 2011; Sundberg, 2012; Westgårdh, 2011).

¹ The methods for data collection and analysis of data have been approved by the ethics board for the Stockholm region in Sweden. The interviews are all based on informed consent. All names of the participants in the study

The image of Sweden as a secularised country and of Swedes as non-religious is furthermore supported by surveys and research studies on youth and religion. Surveys from the Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs show that only a small minority of young people in Sweden are active in religious organizations (Ungdomsstyrelsen, 2005, p.37; Ungdomsstyrelsen, 2006, p.226). Similar results are evident in a quantitative research survey on youth and religion, made in 2008, where only 7 per cent of the participating youths were active in a religious organization (Lövheim & Bromander, 2012, p.60). There are also qualitative research studies of young people in Sweden which indicate that religion is not a big part of everyday life. In these studies, youths who are defined as of Swedish origin describe themselves as not having any relation to religion or not being religious at all, and are also commonly described in that way by youths from religious or ethnic minority groups (Bäckman, 2009; Karlsson Minganti, 2007; von Brömssen, 2003, p.320ff).

This view of Sweden as a secularized country, where people in general have a rather passive relation to Christianity and the Church of Sweden, but are not actively religious, is however complicated by the role of the free churches in the Swedish society. The traditional free churches were in most cases established in the 19th century and have thus existed alongside the Church of Sweden for a long time. Included in these are evangelical and charismatic churches such as the Methodist church, the Baptist church, the Pentecostal movement and the Mission Covenant church.² Even though these denominations differ from each other in various ways, they also have a lot in common. Throughout their history they have traditionally been characterized by a rather strict moral code, which has been manifested for example in a restrictive view on alcohol consumption and on sexual relations before marriage (Cedersjö, 1999; Cyrillus, 2008; Gustavsson, 1994; Johansson, 1998). The views on

have been changed, for the sake of anonymity, as have other details that could identify them.

² The Mission covenant church, the Baptist church and the Methodist church in Sweden have recently come together in a new joint church preliminary called "Common future". At the local level there are however still differences between the various congregations and youth organizations. There are also more modern free

issues such as alcohol consumption and sexual relations have changed with time, and also differ significantly between different denominations as well as between congregations within the same denomination. Previous studies have however shown that many of these values are still alive, even if they are negotiated in different ways by young people (Persson, 2003; Zackariasson, 2012).

The free churches and their members have also traditionally been associated with a deeply felt religiousness and religious piety. This focus on moral rules and religiousness resembles the way that for instance Islam and Muslims are depicted in the Swedish media today. The religiousness associated with the free churches thus contributes to establishing them as different or diverging, in relation to the image of Sweden as a highly secularised country, at the same time as they are firmly rooted in Swedish history and tradition (cf Micheletti, 1995, p.32ff).

For young people who are active in a free church or one of their youth organizations, the conceptions of Sweden as a secularised country and of the free churches as distinctly religious, may have direct impact on how they view themselves and their religious involvement and on how they are viewed by others. This is true not the least for youths who come from non-religious homes, where being active in a church is not something self-evident, and where a strong religious involvement may even be seen as something quite negative.

4. Learning and communities of practice

As mentioned above, there are several studies within the field of youth and religion that have looked at the transmission of religious values, ideals and attitudes to and between individuals of a certain faith. A large part of these studies tends to emphasise the relations between the older and the younger generation, particularly within the family. It is in other words to a high

churches and Christian organizations that have not existed for as long in Sweden, but the study primarily involves the traditional free churches, which evolved in the 19th century.

degree direct, or vertical socialisation that has been at the focus of attention. When it comes to religion, religious practices and religious beliefs, such features of life have often been understood as something that is communicated and in a sense inherited within the family – that is where the learning and socialization is thought to take place (cf Collins-Mayo & Dandelion, 2010).

For youths who come from non-religious homes, the situation is however different. To them oblique or indirect socialisation becomes the primary way to become acquainted with norms, values and behavioural guidelines that are influential within the religious group they have become a part of. It is to a large extent through interacting with other members of the congregation they come to learn what is expected from them when it comes to what to believe, how to behave and also in some cases what to feel. Both intergenerational and intragenerational interaction is central in these processes, i.e. both vertical and horizontal socialization.

In my analysis I aim to look not only at what the youths have to learn as they become members of these groups, but also at how the learning takes place. In order to discuss this I will use the concepts of ‘communities of practice’, ‘situated learning’ and ‘conversational learning’ in my analysis. My main reason for including these concepts as analytical tools, and not only discuss my material from the perspective of socialization, is that when using the term socialization, there is a risk that the individual’s active role in the learning processes is obscured. Norms, values and behaviour tend to be perceived as something already existing and settled, which is passed on to the individual from the community. I want to underline the active role of the individual in these learning processes, and furthermore point out that norms and values are not fixed and given once for all - the individuals in a certain group also contribute to shaping them.

The concept ‘communities of practice’ was first coined by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, in their book on *Situated learning* (Lave & Wenger, 1991). They discussed situated

learning as something closely related to learning through participation or experiential learning, but wanted to particularly underline the individual's position in and relation to a certain group or community, or as they called it, a community of practice. In Wenger's further elaboration of the concept, he describes that such a community has some kind of identity based on shared interests and mutual engagement (Wenger, 1998, p.73ff; 2007). The community of practice also has a joint enterprise which is negotiated and formulated collectively, and through conversations and interaction the members of the group learn from and with each other and develop a common competence, both on an individual level and a collective level (Wenger, 1998, p.77ff, 136ff). That the group of individuals constitutes a community is furthermore underlined by the development of a shared repertoire – a certain way of doing things, a particular vocabulary, common symbols etc. - that is generally shared by the members of the group (Wenger, 1998, p.72ff; 2007).

The Christian youth groups that I have studied can in many cases be regarded as such communities of practice. They are primarily formed around a common interest among the members, the Christian faith, and this common interest forms the foundation for the members' interaction. That it is a Christian youth group within a particular denomination and congregation is in other words central for the identity of the group, and the common enterprise could be described as 'being a young Christian' in that particular congregation.³ In addition to socializing with each other, this is what the interaction in the group is centered around: what is expected from us as Christians, what should we believe, how should we behave, towards ourselves, towards others and towards God? Having such a common enterprise distinguishes these groups from a random group of friends.

The groups also share certain repertoires or practices, which can be illustrated by for instance how prayers are conducted, which songs that are sung, which words and phrases you

use when talking about both religious issues and everyday matters, as well as the wearing or use of crosses and other religious symbols. To do such things in the expected and accepted way shows the individual's competence within the group and may also influence his or her position within it (Wenger, 1998, p.82ff; 2007).

But even if these groups in many respects can be regarded as communities of practice, there are also aspects that make them different from many other groups that are used to exemplify such units. The most important difference is that the groups are part of a youth organization, led and organized by adult youth leaders and connected to the congregation as a whole. One could choose to consider the youth leaders as members of the community of practice, but with a slightly different role and position than the youths themselves (cf Wenger, 1998, p.75f). But, even so, these particular circumstances have consequences for the learning that takes place. The adult representatives of the church may for instance have strong opinions about what should or should not be communicated to the youths – there might be an underlying agenda for what the youths should learn. This means that some of the learning may be quite regulated by the adults, and hence more related to a transmission oriented learning, where adult representatives aim to transmit knowledge, ideas and in this case also values to the younger generation (Rogoff, 1994, p.210).

In addition to situated learning and communities of practice, I will use the concept 'conversational learning' in my analysis, as it is described and used by Ann Baker, Patricia Jensen and David Kolb (Baker et al., 2002). My reason for doing this is to further underline the importance of conversations within the ongoing learning processes. Baker, Jensen and Kolb's point of departure is that experiences are an important part of informal learning processes, but they emphasise that to really contribute to the individual's learning, the experiences she or he has, must be shared and discussed with others (Baker et al., 2002,

³ There is however one exception in my data material - in one group the Christian faith actually plays a rather insignificant role for the identity and community of the group, even though it is part of a Christian youth

p.51f). Conversational learning thus involves individuals coming together in a joint meaning-making process, where a continual dialogue between tacit and explicit knowledge contributes to sharing experiences and developing ideas on an organizational level but also for the individual (Baker et al., 2002, p.4).

As I will show, conversations and conversational learning play a significant role in my data material. But where Baker, Jensen and Kolb tend to focus on how knowledge is created when people share experiences and knowledge with other individuals in the same organization or group, my data in addition indicates how defending your views and opinions in conversations with people outside the group, may also contribute to the individual learning (cf Baker et al., 2002).

5. Results

5.1 Becoming active – and Christian?

The youths that I will concentrate on in this article, all became active in the youth organization of one of the free churches in Sweden when they were in their early or pre-teens. Jenny, who was 21 years old when I interviewed her, had become active in the Mission Covenant Church when she was fourteen years old. No one else in her family was active in any religious group and the main reason for her to join the youth organization of the church was that one of her friends used to go there after school. Jenny started to tag along and gradually participated in more and more of the activities. Eventually, after a couple of years, she came to the decision that she believed in God and started to see herself as a Christian. She described this as a long and complicated process, which involved many discussions with others, as well as personal deliberations. With time Jenny became involved in the congregation in various ways. At the time of the interview, she was volunteering as a youth

organization.

leader for younger children, and she was also part of a 'care-taking group' that among other things contributed to the practical tasks in connection with church services.

Anton, who was 18 years old when I interviewed him, had a similar background in some ways. When he started sixth grade, one of his new school mates was a member in a scout group in the Mission covenant church, and since he was interested in scouting he also joined the group. After a year or so, when he turned 13, he started to attend the Friday night gatherings for teens, and at 14 he was also confirmed within the same congregation. No one in Anton's family was active in the church, but his older sister had been confirmed in the Church of Sweden. When I made the interview with Anton, he had been a member of the congregation for a couple of years. He was volunteering as a scout leader for younger children and active on the regional level of the church's youth work.

Like Jenny, Anton described his path towards seeing himself as a Christian as a gradual process, rather than as something that happened suddenly. When I asked him during the interview if he would describe himself as a Christian he said yes, but added that he could not say exactly when that change took place. He explained that this was a question he got from time to time and always found difficult to answer, since he could not really distinguish a clear turning point, when he went from being a non-believer to becoming a believing Christian.

That the process of religious conversion, or being born again, can be either sudden and direct, or slow and more gradual, has been discussed already by William James in his classic book on religious experiences (James, 2002, p.178ff). James writes that in revivalist movements the main focus has been on sudden conversion, where the individual becomes born again in a rather dramatic way, following a period of trouble and agony (James, 2002, p.179). This has been true also of large parts of the Swedish free churches, even if there are variations between the different churches. But both Jenny and Anton thus saw their conversion as a slow process, even though Jenny later on in the interview talked about how she changed and became a different kind of person once she started believing in God.

The process that Jenny and Anton were going through, where they in various ways discovered what being a Christian meant in this particular context, can be understood and interpreted based on the idea of situated learning and communities of practice. When joining the group, they started to learn about how they were expected to behave, what the commonly accepted attitude to the Bible was in this particular group, what they were supposed not to do, and, in some cases, what they were expected to feel and think. Through interacting with the others in the group, they obtained a certain kind of competence, which would give them access to this particular community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998, p.137ff). But compared to other groups that could be labelled as communities of practice, the Christian youth organizations are distinguished by the fact that they are religious groups. The question of conversion and faith is constantly present, albeit in varying degrees at various times and in various groups. In addition to learning about what it would mean to be a Christian in that particular community and context, the youths also had to find out whether or not they believed in God.

That learning about what being a Christian might comprise, when it comes to behaviour, values and also feelings, is not the same as actually believing in God, is exemplified by the third protagonist in this article, Amanda. She became active in the youth organization of a Baptist church when she was around 14 years old, and she stayed active until she finished high school at the age of 19. She came from a non-religious family and her main reason for joining the youth organization to begin with, was – similar to both Anton and Jenny - that one of her best friends was very active in that particular church. Amanda started to come along to some of the activities in the church. She felt at home very soon and explained in the interview how she really enjoyed the community and friendships within the group.

But unlike Jenny and Anton, Amanda explicitly presented herself as a non-believer, throughout her time in the youth organization:

Amanda: /.../ I was really one of the few in that group who wasn't a believer.

Interviewer: Did you talk about that as well? Was that something you discussed with your friends?

Amanda: Yes a lot!

Interviewer: In what way? What did you say?

Amanda: Well it was... It popped up from time to time. I was really open about it. Right from the beginning I said that: No but I don't think I believe in God very much. And I asked the youth leaders at one point: "Is it OK that I'm here anyway?" And they just: "Yeah sure. That's really not a problem. But of course we want to tell you about it. Because we believe in this so strongly./.../" So it was really open. But among my friends we discussed it a lot. They were like: "How can you *not* believe in God!?" Like – "He obviously exists!" And I would go "No! He obviously *doesn't* exist!" (laughs) So I think it was a bit strange for them that I didn't believe in God, because it was so obvious to them.

(Amanda 20110914)

Amanda explained in the interview that during the years she was active, she did at times come close to believing in God. It was something she considered seriously, even if she did not tell her friends about her deliberations. The way she described her deliberations and reflections during this time, is quite similar to how Anton and Jenny talked about the process through which they came to define themselves as Christians. But unlike them she thus in the end came to the final conclusion that she did not believe in God.

5.2 An open-minded environment?

In the interviews with Amanda, Jenny and Anton, they all described how their decision to become active in a Christian youth organization to some extent was questioned by members in their families, at least initially. In the case of Jenny and Anton it was the parents who were sceptical or even worried about what kind of congregation their children would be involved in. Amanda's parents were in comparison rather positive to her joining the youth group.

According to Amanda they were probably happy that she was socializing with "nice and well-behaved kids" as she put it in the interview. Her older brothers were more negative however, and she described how they used to tease her for her involvement in the church. Even if their families were not involved in a church, or maybe because they were not, they evidently had preconceptions about what the church and the youth organization may be like, preconceptions that were not necessarily positive.

Obviously the youths themselves also had certain ideas about what it meant to be a Christian, before they joined the church, and these conceptions were not altogether positive either. Amanda, for instance, had the impression that the free churches were rather narrow-minded and strict communities. But this view changed when she joined the church:

Amanda: Earlier I pictured free churches as rather... sort of that they take rules very seriously and so on. But this was a pretty open church actually. You kind of talked about things like that. Even if all of the youth leaders held the opinion that you shouldn't drink [alcohol] and you... eeh...most of them probably had the opinion that you shouldn't have sex before marriage either. But it was possible to... you could discuss the issue. And we did /.../ Well maybe not sex so much, but we talked a lot about drinking and drugs during the meetings. It could be like the theme [of the meeting]. Like: "If people you hang out with drink, what can you do to

avoid doing it yourself?” Like that ... they could raise the issue and then we would discuss it.

(Amanda 20110914)

Amanda’s impression that rules and guidelines were not carved in stone, but could actually be discussed, can be seen as an example of how fundamental values were not just transmitted to the youths from the adult congregation in a straightforward manner. Her way of describing it emphasises the collective process – the issue was raised, but then they would discuss together how it should be handled. The youths, and the leaders of the youth group, can be said to work together with determining what the appropriate behaviour would be, which can be seen as a way of increasing the competence within the group (Wenger, 1998, p.136ff; 2007).

Amanda’s view of the youth organization and the congregation as an open-minded environment was echoed in how Anton described the church he belonged to:

Interviewer: What ideals or norms did you feel they tried to communicate to you in the youth organization? /.../

Anton: Well... I didn’t think about it that much. It was more that they tried to tell us what Christianity stands for sort of. What does the Bible say. I think that it has often been a rather open atmosphere, like: “You can think what you want. It’s nothing we will try to change.” At least in [this congregation]. No but, that’s the way it has been. It’s been a lot like: “You can have your opinions, but this is what I think”. Quite a lot like that. But maybe that’s because they don’t want to scare people off as well. If you say like: “This it what you should think!”

(Anton 20111014)

Anton's description of the youth group makes it appear even more open-minded than Amanda's group. Here it is not only a question of discussing how various issues and potential problems should be handled, but an apparent freedom for everyone to think what they like, without anyone else trying to change that. But even if Anton and Amanda, and also Jenny in her interview, emphasised the open-minded atmosphere of the churches they belonged to, they simultaneously expressed how youth leaders and adults in the church tried to communicate certain things to them. Anton says in the quotation that the youth leaders tried to tell them what Christianity stands for and what the Bible says, and in the earlier extract from Amanda it becomes clear that there is a certain set of guidelines or expectations that frame the discussion. The starting point for the discussion would be "how do you avoid drinking alcohol even if people around you choose to drink", presupposing that abstaining from alcohol would be the primary choice for the members of the youth group.

Amanda returned to the ideal of not drinking alcohol, and also the views on sexual relations outside of marriage, later on in the interview, when we talked about her thoughts around being a "good Christian":

Interviewer: So what were you supposed to be like, to be a good Christian sort of? What impression did you get? /.../

Amanda: Well... I think it varied a lot, what the various youth leaders thought.

But it was sort of, like... well for most of them I really think it was that you should be a good person. That was actually the impression I got. It sounds a bit "cheesy" but... At least at the Friday night gatherings, that was the main message. But then some of them thought that you shouldn't drink, you shouldn't have sex before marriage, you shouldn't... You should pray and be active in your faith. Several of the youth leaders thought that you should do that.

(Amanda 20110914)

Once again there is a certain tension in Amanda's statement. On the one hand the most important thing was to be a good person. But on the other hand several of the youth leaders, according to Amanda, held the opinion that you should not drink alcohol, not have sex before marriage and also that you should be active in your faith. A similar attitude was present in Jenny's and Anton's youth groups as well, even though the one Amanda belonged to appeared to be slightly stricter about such things. All of the youth activities in these congregations were for instance alcohol free and drug free and underage drinking as well as excessive drinking were generally seen as negative, both by the youths themselves and by the adult congregation.

In the church Jenny belonged to they had previously had an incident with some of the younger youth leaders boasting about their partying on weekends. This was not appreciated by the adult congregation, particularly considering that these individuals were involved in the youth work with children and teenagers. Their behaviour led to extensive discussions and a special thematic weekend on alcohol consumption and the church's attitude towards drinking alcohol was arranged. Attitudes towards sexuality could also be quite strict, with a focus on that sex was something you should primarily save for serious long term relations, out of respect for yourself and for your relation to God (Zackariasson, 2012).

Even if the atmosphere in some ways was quite open, there were in other words certain things you were supposed to do or not supposed to do, and learning what was considered to be an acceptable or not acceptable behaviour, can be seen as part of the competence the individual had to gain within this particular community of practice (Wenger, 1998, p.152f; 2007). To a certain extent this competence was developed collectively within the group, through interaction and conversations with others. Amanda described how especially sexual behaviour, and the rules and expectations surrounding this, was something they primarily talked about among the youths themselves. She explained during the interview that the

discussions in many cases were directly linked to acts committed by someone within (or outside of) the youth group. In other words that someone had had an experience or performed an action related to sexual behaviour, which evoked the reactions and reflections of the others, for instance because it was seen or experienced as a sin. The discussions among friends about what was regarded as an acceptable sexual behaviour, can thus be seen as an example of conversational learning. Through discussing these experiences and actions within the youth group, the individuals took part in a meaning making process, where prevalent attitudes and moral guidelines were made explicit (Baker et al., 2002).

But not all of the learning would be founded in interaction and conversations between the youths in the group. At the Friday night gatherings, which were the main meeting points for the youths of the congregation, there would always be a short sermon, generally conducted by one of the youth leaders. The sermons were used to discuss a particular passage in the Bible, to summarize the theme of the evening, or to communicate certain values to the members of the youth organization. Compared to the discussions within the youth group about for instance sexual behaviour, this could be seen as an example of transmission oriented learning (Rogoff, 1994, p.210). The youth leaders, who in their work are expected to represent the youth organization and the adult congregation, aim to transmit knowledge, for instance about the Bible and what it says, but also about attitudes and expected behaviour, to the younger generation. And according to the interviewed youths, this was one of the arenas where they learnt a lot about what it might mean to be a Christian. At the same time as they were encouraged to make their own choices concerning what to believe and how to live, what they learnt from the youth leaders through the sermons at the Friday night gatherings became a central part of the knowledge they needed in order to be able to make such decisions and choices.

5.3 Defending your views

Values and norms were thus communicated to the youths both in learning situations that were initiated by the adults and through discussions and conversations between peers. Not only moral guidelines and acceptable behavior were discussed with peers, but also questions of faith, religion and beliefs. This was something that both Jenny, Anton and Amanda emphasised in the interviews, that they during the years had spent a lot of time discussing religion and religious values with friends of their own age. Compared to the sermons or thematic evenings within the youth organization, this was done in a thoroughly informal way, and generally without any explicit intention from the people they talked to, to teach them anything specific.

As we saw in section 5.1, Amanda used to get into vivid discussions with the others in the Christian youth group about the existence of God. But discussions with friends and peers outside of the congregation, i.e. outside of the community of practice, could also be significant for the youths' views on and understanding of religious issues. In the interview with Jenny she explained how she used to have a lot of discussions about religion with her classmates in school:

Jenny: We were several Christians in my class, Syrians and so on, who were Syrian orthodox. We discussed quite a bit. Especially in Religious studies. We discussed the differences for instance. I've always found religion really fun. No matter what religion it is, I find it really interesting. So we had a lot of discussions. They often turned to me when it came to Christianity and the free churches. So by the end it was pretty well known that I was a Christian! (laughs) /.../
(Jenny 20110210)

In Jenny's descriptions of the discussions she had with her classmates, it becomes clear that they had views, opinions and backgrounds that differed from hers. The Syrian orthodox students in her class turned to her to get to know more about the free churches, and what they discussed was mainly the differences, according to Jenny. She also had a lot of discussions about faith and religion with her best friend, who was not a believing Christian. In the example of Amanda earlier, she learnt about the norms around sexuality within the church from others who were members of the same group. But in Jenny's case the situation is slightly different. Baker, Jensen and Kolb's view on conversational learning as a process where learners "construct meaning and transform experiences into knowledge through conversations" may still be valid (Baker et al., 2002, p.51). But here it is not a question of creating a common world view or a common set of moral guidelines within a particular group or community. Rather the meaning making process in Jenny's example involves demarcating boundaries, highlighting differences and in so doing learning more about yourself and where you stand, at the same time as learning about others.

Jenny and Anton both talked about how they often had to explain and defend their standpoints and views on various issues. It regularly happened when they debated things with friends outside of church, but it also occurred when they got into debates or arguments with other Christians. Since Anton was engaged at the regional level of the youth organization, he came to meet people from several congregations and sometimes different denominations. In his view there were distinct differences between the Christian youth groups in Stockholm, like the one he belonged to, and youth groups from smaller towns, concerning the attitude on various issues, such as abortion, homosexuality or how you should regard the Bible.

Anton described how this frequently led to heated discussions, but underlined how he saw this as something positive:

Anton: There is a meaning with the social part as well. You can discuss things.

And that has made me grow in my faith. A lot. All the discussions you have when you don't agree. That really makes you... think things through.

(Anton 20111014)

Later on in the interview Anton explained that in order to win arguments with people who had very strong opinions on certain issues, he tried to beat them with their own weapons. When discussing with people who founded their arguments in Bible verses, he used other verses to show what the consequences would be if the Bible was followed rigorously and literally. When discussing homosexuality with homophobic young women he could for instance refer to the verse on how women should be silent in the congregation and claim that this meant that they had no right to say anything in the matter. To be able to defend his own views, he thus had to use knowledge or competence he had already obtained, from his interaction and discussions within the community of practice the youth group constituted (cf Wenger, 1998; 2007). But the discussions with people outside of this community also contributed to his learning and the development of his competence, as they forced him to think things through, as he puts it.

Like Jenny, Anton then appreciated discussing religious issues with others, also with people he did not agree with. But this was a view that was not commonly shared by their Christian friends. Jenny explained that among her friends a considerable number found it rather challenging to discuss religion with people outside of the congregation:

Jenny: Like when this question about why God does things comes up. Most Christians find it distressing when people ask such things. But I never really saw it like that. 'Cause I think in a different way... I believe in an

active/passive God. I believe in a God who has given us free will /.../ So I never experienced that discussion as distressful, in that way. I always think it's positive to discuss things. That people get to voice their opinions. But quite a few people think it's unpleasant when people question your beliefs. But I most of all enjoy it.

(Jenny 20110210)

Wenger underlines that to be in a community of practice, where you are a full member, is to be in a familiar territory (Wenger, 1998,, p.152). Discussions within a community of practice, where there is some kind of common ground, shared repertoire and common enterprise, are in other words quite different from having to defend your opinions among people who have completely different attitudes and views. That both Jenny and Anton found such discussions positive and beneficial for their faith can be understood in light of how the process of them becoming Christians was quite slow and gradual. They had already before they started to regard themselves as Christians, discussed religious issues with a number of people, in order to try to find out what they believed in, and what they as Christians would be expected to believe in. Their path towards seeing themselves as Christians was not simply an act of accepting values and attitudes that were communicated or transmitted to them. It involved a lot of active work by way of searching out, and grappling with different views and perspectives. As a consequence they were both quite clear on which position to take on various issues that could be seen as controversial in some contexts, whether it was the theodicy problem that Jenny mentions above, or the questions of abortion and homosexuality, which Anton talked about. Through defending their views in debates with others, they also got to sharpen their arguments, and hence obtained an even firmer ground to stand on in discussions of religious issues.

As was clear from the quotation in section 5.1, Amanda also spent a lot of time discussing religion with her friends, particularly within the Christian youth organization. But she did not see this as something altogether positive, unlike Anton and Jenny. One factor that contributed to how she experienced the debates with other youths in the congregation was how she persistently presented and positioned herself as a non-believer:

Amanda: Sometimes we could sit and it would be like me against fifteen youths who really knew a lot about this and knew what arguments they should present sort of (laughs). Like. “What do you say about this and this and this?!” And I just... It was a bit difficult, but it was always in a friendly way. It was never a questioning that became judgmental. As I remember it now. I could get annoyed at times. But mostly it was I who brought it up. Maybe it was me who kind of got the discussion going.

(Amanda 20110914)

In this particular situation and group of friends, Amanda, as a non-believer, clearly became the exception. If some Christian youths may find it challenging or tiresome to defend their beliefs when interacting with people outside of church, like Jenny talked about earlier, Amanda’s story exemplifies the same experience but from the opposite position. Even if it sometimes was she who brought up the subject, as she says, she did also find it difficult to be so massively questioned about her standpoint.

The discussions Amanda took part in can nevertheless be seen as yet another example of conversational learning (Baker et al., 2002). Through engaging in these discussions, she learned about what being a Christian meant in the particular group she was a member of, and about what was expected from her as a Christian. Only then could she determine whether or

not this was something she agreed with, and if the values and expected way of life that were presented to her, was something she could embrace.

Amanda's experiences of the discussions with the others in the youth group can also be discussed from the perspective of her position within the group. Wenger discusses the difference between full members and peripheral members in a community of practice (Wenger, 1998, p.164ff). Through her not believing in God, which was as a central part in this particular community of practice, Amanda can be said to inhabit a more peripheral position within the group. Even though she in many ways experienced that she was fully accepted and that she had very good relations to the others in the group, her explicit lack of faith separated her from them in a significant way.⁴ On a social, friendship based level, she might very well have been an accepted and integrated member of the group, but since she could not be engaged in the joint enterprise of being young and Christian, or a young Baptist, her status as a full member of the community of practice could be questioned (cf Wenger, 1998, p.167f; 2007). The way she experienced the heated discussions with the others in the group can be understood in relation to this.

6. Concluding discussion

Since Jenny, Anton and Amanda came from non-religious homes, they were also quite unknowing about Christian beliefs and values, and what would be expected of them as Christians. Unlike children and youths from religious homes, they had not achieved such knowledge during their upbringing, i.e. through primary or vertical socialization processes. Hence the oblique socialization became central, in the sense that the church and the youth organization became important arenas for learning about Christian beliefs, values and practices.

To a certain extent this was done through transmission oriented learning (Rogoff, 1994, p.209ff), particularly during the Friday night gatherings, which were generally organized and led by adult youth leaders. But the interaction and conversations with the other youths within the group were also essential. Together they took part in the joint enterprise of being “young and Christian”, which characterized the communities of practice these particular youth groups can be said to constitute. Since the conversations and discussions entailed learning about the central values within that particular congregation or strand of faith, and contributed to developing a shared repertoire within the group, they, in various ways, increased the competence of the individual and of the community of practice as a whole (cf Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; 2007).

But it was not only discussions and interaction within the group that were significant for the learning of the interviewed youths. Anton and Jenny both emphasised the importance of discussions with people outside of the group, who did not necessarily share their opinions and views. To defend your own views involves coming to terms with what you do or do not believe in or agree with, as well as sharpening your arguments. It could thus be seen as a kind of conversational learning that is part of the individual’s meaning construction and the transformation of experiences into knowledge, even if it involves people outside the group (cf Baker et al., 2002).

In the case of Jenny and Anton the discussions with people who had differing opinions were experienced as positive and beneficial for their own faith. But for Amanda the situation was different, since the discussions she got engaged in were based on the fact that she did not believe in God. This meant that the sometimes heated debates, where she held another position than most of the others in the group, to some extent threatened her position within it. Even though she had strong friendship bonds with the other youths, she still did not embrace

⁴ The explicitness is important here. If she had not been explicit about her lack of faith, she would not in the same way have ended up in the discussions she now took part in, and her position in the group would most likely

the very core of the community of practice – to be young and Christian - which in line with Wenger would put her in a more peripheral position in the group (Wenger, 1998, p.167f). One significant difference from the experiences of Anton and Jenny was thus that in Amanda's case the dissimilarities in opinions between her and the others lay within the group, instead of outside of it. Even if Anton and Jenny often discussed religious issues with other Christians, these were not a part of their particular community of practice. Hence they could still draw a distinct line between what was the shared repertoire and common attitudes within their own community of practice, which they felt at home with, and the diverse attitudes they met outside of it (Wenger, 1998, p.152).

But even if they felt at home in the community of practice, and viewed the youth organization and the church they belonged to as very open-minded, they did not always share the values and views that were prevalent in the congregation or youth organization. Anton had certain opinions that were not shared by everyone else in the church, and argued distinctly for the right to believe what you wanted. Jenny explained that there were some things she did not put much trust in, and among these were the Bible, to which she had a rather distant and skeptical relationship. Evidently both Jenny and Anton found these objections or reservations to the established faith to be compatible with believing in God and defining yourself as a Christian.

In Amanda's case the result was different. After having spent several years in the Christian youth organization, participating in activities, discussing values and beliefs with friends and peers, and seriously considering whether or not she believed in God, she eventually came to the conclusion that she did not. She had been a part of the community of practice and had learnt about the central values and moral guidelines within the church (cf Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998, p.100f). But in the end she concluded that she did not

have been different.

want to live her life according to these values and expectations. Her involvement in the group diminished and eventually ceased completely.

This is just one example of how learning about the values, expectations and shared practices within a particular community of practice, is not the same as embracing them. You may still continue to be part of the group, but when a member openly questions one of the most central aspects, a core part of the common ground within a particular community of practice, it significantly affects his or her position within the group, and makes membership problematic. In the case of religious organizations, faith becomes one such core value. To openly question this, or explicitly declare that you do not believe in God, not only affects the position of the individual member, but might in the long run jeopardize the foundation for the community of practice as a whole.

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