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Title: Being yourself. Identity and self-presentation among youths in Christian youth organizations

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Abstract:

A person's identity, both social and personal, can be said to be constituted by several different aspects, such as gender, age, ethnicity, class and also religious affiliation. In a country like Sweden, where only a small number of youths are involved in religious organizations, it is however not necessarily uncontroversial for youths to present themselves as religiously active. To openly declare your religious commitment places you in particular collective identities, associated with certain beliefs or stereotypes that may challenge norms surrounding how Swedish youths are expected to think, behave and act. This article examines how a number of youths, active in the Christian youth organization of one of the Swedish free-churches, present themselves and their religious involvement to friends at school. The results show different strategies used for handling experienced or anticipated reactions to their involvement in a religious organization and the collective identities they may be ascribed because of it.

Keywords: youth, identity, religion, youth organizations, Christianity, free-churches, Sweden

To be yourself or be true to yourself is an ideal that is and has been recurrent in advice to young people. But seeing that a person's identity is complex and consists of many layers and aspects, being yourself is not necessarily an easy task. Your personal identity and sense of self is one thing, but how you relate to and present yourself to others in the various groups you belong to in your daily life, is something quite different. Age, gender, class, sexuality and ethnicity may all be important aspects of how you regard yourself and for how you are regarded by others (Hetherington, 1998:27f). So is religious affiliation or faith (Hemming, Madge, 2011). But not all of these aspects are important in all circumstances, and the individual may choose to emphasize or tone down certain parts of his or her identity in different social settings.

Whereas some personal traits and identity markers are continuously visible to people around you, others are not. Religious affiliation may be both, depending on the religion and the choices of the individual. It may be quite distinctly signaled, for instance through the use of religious symbols, such as when Muslim women put on the veil, Jewish men wear a kippah, or when Christians choose to wear large and visible crosses or crucifixes as jewelry. Within some religious orientations, the individual is required or strongly expected to wear or use such symbols, but for others it is more a matter of choice, as in protestant Christianity, which is the religious tradition in focus in this article.

Even though religious involvement or faith may play a very important role for the individual, it is thus a part of the identity which in many cases is not visible to others, if a person chooses not to emphasize it. In this particular aspect it resembles for instance sexual orientation. Much like an LGBT-person needs to 'come out' in a heteronormative setting, or else is primarily assumed to be heterosexual, persons active in a religious group or congregation need to 'come out' in a society or a setting where religious involvement is not automatically expected (cf Nylund Skog, 2012:120f). They must in various situations and contexts choose whether or not to acknowledge or mention their association with a religious group. For a young person in a country like Sweden, it might be a question of letting people around you know that you are a member of a certain congregation or religious youth organization, or that you regularly go to worship, or to present yourself as a believer in discussions about religion – in class or informally among friends.

In doing so, you also open up for being categorized in particular ways. You may, in the eyes of others, come to be associated with a collective identity, and supposed to represent a

particular religious group and what they stand for, even aspects that you do not agree with or believe in. Or you may come to represent 'being a religious person' in general. And, as my material shows, this is not necessarily connected to personal faith, but to being involved in a religious organization generally. In this article I will examine how a number of youths, active in youth organizations within the Swedish free churches, handle these issues. How do they present their involvement in the youth groups to others, outside of the religious environment? And how do they handle the reactions, or anticipated reactions, and expectations connected with expressing a religious involvement or identity in a largely secular environment, such as an ordinary Swedish school?

Sweden – a secular society?

Alongside with other countries in the north-west of Europe, Sweden has been described as highly secularized, even if it has a strong history of Christianity/Lutheranism (Berger, Davie & Fokas, 2008, Pettersson, Riis, 1994). Some, like Thorleif Pettersson, even argue that it is one of the most secularized countries in the world, or, like Phil Zuckerman, describe Swedes (as well as Danes) as irreligious (Pettersson, 2009:242, Zuckerman, 2009). But, as Pettersson points out, this does not mean that religion does not play a part in the everyday life of many Swedes, or that religion has no significance in the Swedish society (Pettersson, 2009). There are, furthermore, scholars who argue that the importance of religion and the role it plays in society is increasing in most countries in Europe, including Scandinavia, and that this should be a major reason for studying religious involvement among young people and the role of religion in schools (Weisse, 2010).

But even if religion still plays an important part in the Swedish society in various ways, and the secularization of a society and its effects is an issue that can be discussed on several levels, the fact remains that only a small minority of Swedish youths are active in religious organizations, something which has been shown in survey studies of extra-curricular or leisure time activities among young people in Sweden (Ungdomsstyrelsen, 2005:37, Ungdomsstyrelsen, 2006:226). According to one recent quantitative research survey on youth and religion, only 7 per cent of the participating youths were active in a religious organization and only 5 per cent participated in organized religious activities at least once a year (Lövheim, Bromander, 2012:60). To present yourself as religious in an ordinary Swedish school, or to openly talk about your involvement in a congregation or religious youth organization, would thus mean that you become

part of a small minority compared to the large majority of youths who do not engage in any religious activities in their everyday life.

Religious involvement has also, in Sweden, to a large extent been associated with ethnic minority groups. This becomes evident for instance in qualitative studies on youth and religion, where religiosity in various ways becomes tied to the 'non-Swedish' while the 'Swedish' is associated with not being interested in religion and not being religiously active (von Brömssen, 2003, Karlsson Minganti, 2007). Several of the studies done on youth, religion and identity in Sweden are also focused on ethnic minority groups, or youths with an immigrant background, whether it concerns Islam or Christianity (Cetrez, 2005, Lundberg, 2012, Berglund, 2012). In contrast the youths in my study are in most cases of Swedish origin, and do not belong to any ethnic or visible minority. But through their association with a religious youth organization they thus nonetheless differ from the vast majority of Swedish youths, who take no part in organized religious activities. In that sense they resemble the youths studied by Arniika Kuusisto, who were members of the 7th day Adventist church in Finland. Like the youths in this study, they belonged to the ethnic Finnish majority, but she still defines them as a minority group through their religious involvement (Kuusisto, 2010).

One effect of this, which is also discussed by Kuusisto, is that some of the dominant views and attitudes within the religious setting may be at odds with the more general attitudes within the mainstream youth culture (Kuusisto, 2010, Zackariasson, 2012b). The rather liberal attitude towards alcohol consumption and sexual relations outside of marriage that characterizes the mainstream youth culture and popular culture in Sweden, may for example come into conflict with what is expected from youths belonging to a free church, both by the congregation and by friends and peers outside of the religious setting (cf Bäckman, 2003, Forsberg, 2003, Lalander, 1998, Waldén, 2010).

Research procedures

The article is founded in a qualitative, ethnological research project on youths who are active in Christian youth organizations in Sweden. Within the project, 19 youths in the ages 15-23 have been interviewed, through focus group interviews and individual interviews.¹ The selection of participants is based on their involvement in a Christian youth organization belonging to one of the Swedish free-church denominations. Since 2011 a number of Swedish free-churches, the

Mission Covenant Church, the Baptist Union and the Methodist Church, have joined together and become one ecumenical church with the name 'Equmeniakyrkan' (Equmeniakyrkan). The different youth organizations had already earlier merged and formed the common organization, Equmenia, which according to their website have 30 000 members in total in their local youth organizations (Vad är equmenia?). The interviewed youths have all been active in local youth groups connected to Equmenia, and thus to what is now Equmeniakyrkan, with the greater part coming from the youth organization of the previous Mission Covenant Church.

The names of all of the participants and congregations have been changed, as well as certain personal details, in order to ensure anonymity. The interview material has been analyzed through qualitative content analysis. For this article, the analysis has been concentrated on those parts of the interviews where the participants describe how they present themselves to others, and where they reflect on whether or not they would define and describe themselves as Christians.

As has been discussed by for instance Rebecca Raby, there are both advantages and disadvantages to being regarded as an insider or as an outsider as a researcher, when it comes to how much and what kind of information, opinions and experiences the interviewees choose to share (cf Cetrez, 2005, Raby, 2007:49f). Since this project is primarily interview based and most of the interviewed youths had not met me before the interviews, they most likely regarded me as an outsider. The difference in age also contributed to this. On the other hand, I am quite well acquainted with Swedish free church traditions, even if I am not involved there myself, and hence had knowledge of some of the things they youths referred to in the interviews, while others were new to me. My experience was that the interviewed youths found it quite easy to share their experiences and views with me, partly because I was not directly involved in their daily life or in the organization they were a member of, and thus was regarded as a neutral listener (cf Aukrust, 2005:219).

Identity and self-presentation – theoretical framework

That identities are not stable and constant, but are affected and influenced not only by our experiences and backgrounds but also by how we are regarded and categorized by others, is a key perspective in a social constructionist view on identity, represented by for example George Herbert Mead, and a number of scholars following him (Mead, 1962, Hetherington, 1998,

Zackariasson, 2006, Alsmark, Linde-Laursen, 1997, Appiah, 2007 etc.). This view on identity is central in the analysis of my material.

It is also predominant in an article by Peter J. Hemming and Nicola Madge on young people, religion and identity. Their starting point is that religious affiliation or faith can be an important aspect in a person's identity, and in their article they discuss religious identity in relation to agency and complexity. Referring to Bradley (1996) they point out that while personal identity is based in the individual's unique sense of self, background and experience, the social identity is connected to the social groups we are a part of and the commonalities we share with others (Hemming, Madge, 2011:40). The social identity, as they describe it, refers to 'our social location within society and how we interact with other people within social groups' (Ibid).

The religious identity of individuals is in certain aspects connected to their unique sense of self, background and experiences, in other words what Hemming & Madge refer to as the personal identity (Hemming, Madge, 2011:40). Whether or not I define myself as for instance Christian, is tightly linked to my experiences and background, as well as to my sense of self. Here, belief in God is obviously vital, but to believe in (a Christian) God is not equivalent with defining oneself as a Christian. It is also a question of accepting or identifying with the core values and doctrines presented by the church or by a particular congregation. For the youths I have interviewed these are questions that were often pondered and carefully considered, before they decided whether or not they should define themselves as Christians (Zackariasson, 2012a).

In this article, I will, however, not elaborate on this aspect of religious identity. Instead, I will concentrate on religious identity as part of the social identity, in other words how religion, together with aspects such as age, gender, sexuality and ethnicity, play a part in how we present ourselves to and are regarded by others. Hemming and Madge refer to Payne (2000) when pointing out that social identities not only refer to what we are, but also to what we are not and how we see ourselves as different from others. They also argue that identities may be ascribed to us, even though these identities do not necessarily correspond with our own understanding of ourselves and that such ascribed identities are significant not only for how others relate to us, but also for shaping our personal identities (Hemming, Madge, 2011:40).

Another way of looking at this is presented by Anthony Appiah. Referring to Ian Hacking he argues that what the collective dimensions of identities have in common is that they are tied to an idea of 'kinds of persons', which are brought into being by the creation of labels for particular

groups of people (Appiah, 2007:66). When a group of people is seen as some kind of category and implicitly or explicitly labeled as such, an idea of a certain ‘kind of person’ is created, and a collective identity arises. Appiah writes: ‘Once labels are applied to people, ideas about people who fit the label come to have social and psychological effects’ (Ibid). These effects influence both how people perceive themselves and how others perceive them, in relation to what is regarded as appropriate behavior for a person belonging to that category or collective identity, whether it is as an ‘American’, ‘a black woman’ or a ‘Catholic’. For each possible collective identity, there is a consensus around a set of stereotypes concerning that particular group or category of people. A set of beliefs about what a person with that label typically is like or would behave like, which both the individuals themselves and people around them must relate to (Appiah, 2007:67, cf Walseth, 2006).

In the analysis of my material, it becomes clear that the youths I have interviewed in different ways navigate around a possible collective identity that could be labeled ‘free-church youth’ or ‘young Christians’. Through their involvement in the Christian youth organization, they could potentially be ascribed these collective identities, regardless of whether or not they defined themselves as Christians or shared the core values of the congregation the youth organization was tied to. There were several ways for them to handle this and in the following analysis, I will give examples of three different stances among the interviewed youths: to avoid talking about your involvement in the Christian youth organization, to take a stand and explicitly present yourself as a Christian, and, finally, to consciously use narratives and actions in order to present your involvement and yourself in a particular way.

Avoiding the issue

As I have argued above, presenting yourself as active in a youth organization of one of the free churches in Sweden, means placing yourself in a minority position in relation to the non-religious majority of youths. It also opens up for being associated with the collective identities of ‘young Christian’ or ‘free church youth’ with the stereotypes, beliefs and expectations that are tied to this (cf Appiah, 2007:66ff).² How the youths I interviewed handled this potential labeling, depended on several things, one of the more significant being to what degree the individuals saw themselves as believing Christians.

Olivia for instance, who was 15 years old when I interviewed her, had been active in the Christian youth organization since she was quite young. She participated in a number of the activities they organized, and had, among other things, for several years played in the orchestras of the church, which regularly performed at Sunday services. When she was younger, she used to view herself as a Christian, but recently she had started to feel uncomfortable with that label. In the interview, she explained that over time she had come to realize that she did not believe in God, even if she respected those of her friends who did. Olivia assumed that people within the youth organization still thought she was a believing Christian, since she continued to be so active in various ways, and had been a member for such a long time. During the interview, I asked her if she had told her friends at school about her connection to the church:

Maria: What about friends at school? Do they know that you are active in the church, or that you play there?

Olivia: Well... I don't usually... I don't know. It's not that it's embarrassing or anything, but it still becomes that I don't say 'church', but 'where I play'. That's just the way I've come to say it. But some of my closest friends... they've been to concerts and things like that, so they know that it's, like, a church I play in. /.../ But otherwise – not a lot of people know about it. But I think everyone knows that I'm not a Christian! Or no one believes me to be a Christian, if that had been the case.

(Olivia 20120323)

Olivia's parents were not involved in the church and there was no pressure on her from the family to be active in the youth organization. It was her own choice, and in the interview she emphasized several things she found to be very positive about the activities and her friendships within the group. But, as is evident in the extract above, even if Olivia did not actively keep her involvement in the youth organization secret, she neither spoke very openly about it to her friends. Even though she enjoyed the activities and relationships within the organization, she was reluctant to be associated with the religious aspects and the fact that it was connected to a church. Her way of expressing herself also indicates that she found it important that people outside of the congregation did not mistake her for being a Christian. It was a label, or collective identity, she apparently wanted to avoid.

That Olivia no longer regarded herself as a believing Christian can be assumed to have contributed to her reluctance to talk about 'church' with her friends at school. This tendency was

also visible among other participants in the study who did not define themselves as believing Christians. Lukas and Britta for instance, who were 17 and 19 years old when I interviewed them, were involved in the youth organization of the local free-church in various ways, but saw this as a spare time activity much like any other. They did not believe in God and did not define themselves as Christians, but were at the same time fully aware of, and generally positive to, the organization's connection to the church and the Christian values the activities were supposed to be founded in. Britta even held a position in the youth council of the congregation and was thus active in developing the youth work within the local church as a whole. Both of them argued that it did not really matter to them that it was a Christian youth organization, since they did not define themselves as Christians. It was, as they saw it, no big deal.³ But even if they presented it as no big deal, they still avoided letting their friends at school know that it was a *religious* organization they were active in, which indicates that it was not a neutral issue. (Lukas 20120418, Britta 20120516)

Some of the participants in the study, who to a greater extent defined themselves as Christians, also avoided talking about their involvement in the Christian youth organization with friends at school. Rasmus, who was 19 at the time of the interview, was one of those youths who for a long time had seen himself as a believing Christian, even if he, at the moment, had a period of doubt and regarded himself maybe more as a searcher than as a believer. He had, for a number of years, been involved in the Christian youth organization in several ways: musical activities, as a scout, and also as a youth leader. But at school, when he was younger, he had mainly talked about being a scout, and not about the fact that his scout group was connected to the Christian youth organization:

Rasmus: A lot of people knew that I was a scout. But that I was active in the church I don't think almost anyone knew. You didn't really see yourself as... 'in the church'. You knew that it was a church... you knew that it was, like, Christianity. But... maybe that's why I felt more like a believer back then. That at that time I didn't know sort of how everything worked. You just thought that you were a member of the scout group.

(Rasmus 20120410)

Rasmus attributes the fact that almost none of his classmates knew he was active in the church partly to that he did not really see himself as 'in the church', but at the same time he states that he was fully aware of the Christian connection. Later on in the interview, we continued the

discussion around the topic and Rasmus explained that he thought his involvement in a church would have been regarded as ‘strange’ or ‘special’ by his friends at school, in a different way than his scouting activities were. It seems, then, that to Rasmus the label as a ‘scout’ was quite unproblematic. This was something a lot of people knew about him, a natural part of his social identity and an uncontroversial collective identity to be associated with.⁴ That the scout group was part of a Christian organization and thus connected to a church, appears as more problematic, in Rasmus’ description. The collective identity as a ‘young Christian’ or ‘free church youth’ seems more controversial to him, which can be understood in relation to both his own ideas about what being ‘in a church’ would mean and to his assumption that his friends at school would find it strange or special.

Taking a stand

The way the interviewed youths chose to present their involvement in the Christian youth organization, and their connection to the church, can thus be related to what the collective identity ‘young Christian’ or ‘free church youth’ signified to them, and to whether or not they defined themselves as Christians. But it was also connected to how they expected that their friends and acquaintances outside the organization understood this identity, what stereotypes and beliefs they thought others had about what a ‘free church youth’ should be like (cf Mead, 1962:173ff, Appiah, 2007:66f).

Through being associated with a particular group or collective identity, the individual also tends to be seen as representing the values of that group (Mead, 1962:214). This was something several of the youths in my study, who had chosen to speak openly about their involvement in the Christian youth organization at school, had experienced. Anton and Jenny, for instance, two of the interviewed youths, talked about how they used to discuss religious issues frequently with their friends at school, and how they tended to come to represent ‘the Christian’ or ‘the free-church member’ in such discussions (Jenny 20110210, Anton 20111014) (cf Zackariasson, 2012a). Amanda, who did not believe in God herself, described how she regularly had to explain and defend her involvement in the youth organization, and Elise explained how she, for a period of time, avoided presenting herself as a Christian at school, having experienced that she otherwise was expected to defend what others saw as representative of ‘the church’ or ‘a Christian’ (Amanda 20110914, Elise 20121123). Even if the attitudes they met were not

necessarily outright negative, they thus still had the experience of regularly being questioned, and of being expected to defend certain beliefs, attitudes and practices others associated with the free churches.

That the categorization as ‘a Christian’ or as ‘a religious person’ could have consequences for the social identity and for how the youths were regarded by others, was further exemplified in the interview with Moa. She was 19 years old when I interviewed her and had been active in the Christian youth organization in different ways since around the age of nine. Her mother had previously worked within the church they were members of, and all of the family had been involved in different activities in the congregation. At the time of the interview, Moa also worked as a youth leader in another congregation. Moa was quite clear on that she was a believing Christian, and this had been an important part of her life for many years. When I asked her during the interview if there had been a period when she was less involved, or had distanced herself from the church she replied:

Moa: No, you know, I belong to those few, or it feels as if there are few of us, who never thought it’s something, like, strange or stupid [to be a Christian]. I have sort of always, ever since I was small, if someone asks: ‘Oh, are you a Christian?’ ‘Yes.’ And then it hasn’t been a big thing either. It’s been like: Yeah, I’m a Christian. /.../ I don’t think I’ve received a lot of difficult questions and stuff. ... Sometimes it’s been like that of course. But then ... a lot of the time you realize that people ask questions mostly to be able to frame you, so to speak. So you don’t have to answer the questions because they don’t care about the answers anyway. That’s not what they want to know when they ask questions about faith, it’s mostly rather: ‘Yeah, you’re stupid because you believe’. And then I just ignored them sort of.

(Moa 20121113)

In the interview extract, it is evident how Moa’s first reaction was to state that she found it quite natural to present herself as a Christian, and that she did not experience this as very problematic. But almost immediately, after having given it just a little more thought, she remembers that her declaration of faith was in fact, occasionally, met with questions or comments. This was something she returned to later on in the interview. In various ways she explained how this particular part of her social identity by many of her schoolmates tended to be viewed as strange, different or, as in the extract above, even stupid.

The children in Moa's school also had certain ideas about how she, as belonging to the collective identity 'young Christian', should behave and live her life:

Moa: Like in middle school /.../ people used to be like... if I happened to sometimes use swear-words, sort of: 'Oohh! Moa cursed!' Or: [with a teasing voice] 'Can't you say a dirty word, just once?!', you know. Like that. It was like: 'can't you do this and be a bit naughty?!' /.../ I know that I heard of a lot of people who for example were visiting us and who like: 'Well, I'd better shape up now. I can't use swear-words now. I'd better behave'. While I maybe think – it's not the end of the world if you use swear-words, you know. (Laughs)

(Moa 20121113)

Moa's description indicates that she, as belonging to the category 'young Christian', was presumed to be better-behaved than her schoolmates, who reacted to this by urging her to use swear-words or explicitly pointing her out when she on rare occasions did. Even though she did not see cursing as an important issue, it was part of the others' stereotypes of how she should act when belonging to that particular collective identity (Appiah, 2007:67f). As she got older, her reluctance to drink alcohol and go partying were other aspects that contributed to that she was ascribed a certain kind of social identity – as being good, well-behaved and perhaps a bit boring – even though this was not necessarily something she identified with (Hemming, Madge, 2011:40).

As mentioned earlier, other participants in the study, who, like Moa, had decided to talk openly about their involvement in a Christian youth organization, also related experiences of being viewed in a particular way because of this and having to defend or explain aspects associated with a collective identity as a 'young Christian' or 'free church youth'. But a significant difference between how Moa described the way she was regarded and how, for instance, Anton and Jenny described their experiences, was that Moa's religious involvement was not taken seriously. She had no problems with discussing religious issues with others who were sincerely interested, and actually wanted to know what she thought. But to be described as stupid, or being asked mock questions, was something quite different. And the danger of being regarded as strange because of your connection to the church, which Rasmus talked about, was something Moa had met face to face:

Moa: What else have I heard? A lot of weird things that you just think: ‘Where did you get all this from?’ Like: ‘But Moa you are so normal’. And I like: ‘Yeah and? What do you mean?’ ‘Yeah but you’re a Christian too. Christians aren’t normal’. Oh yeah? What kind of Christians have you met? (Laughs)

(Moa 20121113)

As youths in an ordinary Swedish school, the participants in my study were expected to relate to and to some extent conform to the mainstream image of what young people are like and how they behave (cf Kuusisto, 2010:784f). Or, in other words - through their age, but also ethnicity and background, they belonged to the collective identity ‘Swedish youths’. But when they openly talked about their involvement in the Christian youth organization, they were associated with a collective identity as ‘Christians’ or ‘free church youths’, and that label brought about a number of beliefs about what ‘kind of person’ they were (Appiah, 2007:65f). Certain kinds of behaviour, which are commonly expected from youths in their late teens in Sweden, although not necessarily endorsed by the adult society, such as using swear-words, having sexual relations, drinking alcohol or partying, were assumed to be things not allowed to do as a Christian (cf Kuusisto, 2010, Zackariasson, 2012b). Hence, the collective identity as a ‘free church youth’, which had less to do with their beliefs than with their connection to the Christian youth organization, in some aspects collided with the collective identity as Swedish youths, and contained the risk of being viewed as ‘strange’, ‘different’ or in some cases even weird or stupid.

Handling categorizations

One strategy for handling the risk of being labeled or categorized in such a way, was to carefully choose how to describe the activities in the youth organization to your friends at school. One of the participants in the study, Lena, who was 16 when I interviewed her, came from a family which was very active in the church, and she had, consequently, taken part in the youth activities there since she was a child. She was, among other things, very active in the scout group of the church and had been for several years. Recently she had also become active in another scout group, in a different part of town, which had no connection to any church.

In the interview, Lena talked a lot about the people and the activities in the two scout groups, and she underlined that she found them to be quite different. Even if they did scouting activities in both of the groups, the relations between the members were, in her view, strikingly

different. She explained to me that she did talk about both of the groups to her friends at school, but that she also emphasized that there were differences between them, like when she told her friends at school about her experiences of scout camps:

Lena: [I told my friends at school:] In the Christian scout group you have like camp check-outs and camp pick-ups. And they [my friends] like: ‘Oh, camp check-outs, what’s that?’ /.../ You know ... you sit by the camp fire and the guys are three rows in front of you: ‘Oooh, he’s so cute!’ kind of. /.../ Then you have camp pick-ups. ‘Oh, like a pick-up?’ And I just: ‘Yeah, exactly, then it’s a pick-up!’ But if you get to the non-Christian scout group, you have those two there as well. But then you have... how did I put it... yeah, then in addition there is camp sex. And they like: ‘What!?’ ‘Yeah, well it’s the same principle /.../ just one step further’. Really, they think it’s hysterical.

(Lena 20111003)

In another part of the interview, Lena explained how she also told her friends about sleeping-bag sex, which they found a thrilling idea. But at the same time she underlined – both to her friends and to me in the interview - that this particular phenomenon was something she did *not* have personal experience of. In this way, she positioned herself quite clearly in relation to different norm systems surrounding sexuality and romantic relations, making it clear where she, personally, drew the line.

Through choosing what to tell her friends at school about her experiences, and through combining narratives from the two different groups she was active in, Lena maneuvered between different categories and collective identities. The way in which she describes her experiences at the Christian scout camp to her friends revolves around the possibility of checking out or picking up boys, while aspects such as Bible study or singing hymns, which would also be a part of such a camp, are not mentioned.⁵ Through presenting this image, focused on having fun and on youthful interest for members of the other sex⁶, she can be said to place herself and her experiences as a young Christian within a more general youth culture. The message becomes that even if it is a Christian camp, it is characterized by things that occupy young people in general, which thus connects to the collective identity of a ‘Swedish youth’. Through supplementing this image with stories from the non-Christian camp, with its even more liberal views on sexuality, she further emphasizes how she is part of settings and groups where interesting things may happen. Even if she distances herself from some of the most daring practices – such as sleeping-

bag sex - her adventures, and the way she narrates them, become quite different from the stereotypes associated with the collective identity 'free church youth' (Appiah, 2007:67).

This was to a certain extent a conscious strategy from Lena's side. In the interview she explained how she generally told her friends at school about the exciting or crazy things they did, and how this had probably influenced their impression of her:

Lena: They haven't really got this picture of well-behaved 'neat Christians' and so on. It's very much outside of the box and a little... we're quite wild really.

(Lena 20111003)

The extract indicates that Lena, much like several of the other participants in the study, assumed that her friends at school automatically would associate being Christian with being (too) well-behaved, and that this could influence how they regarded her (cf Mead, 1962:174f). But instead of avoiding letting others know she was active in a Christian youth organization, she worked actively against allowing this to be equated with being boring or too well-behaved. Through directing the focus to certain parts of her experiences, she can be said to use them to create a particular social identity for herself (cf Hemming, Madge, 2011:45). Or, to put it differently, through her narratives, she engaged in identity work, in order to avoid a possible identity conflict between the collective identity as a 'Swedish youth' and the collective identity as a 'free church youth' (cf Walseth, 2006:76f).

Amanda handled the situation in a similar way. She had turned 20 when I interviewed her, and when I asked her if she used to tell her friends at school that she was active in a church, she explained that it would have been impossible not to. She had spent so much time in church, for instance most Friday nights when they had regular gatherings for youths, that it would have been impossible not to tell her friends at school where she was going. Amanda never became a practising Christian herself, but the youth organization and the activities and friends there, were nevertheless a fundamental part of her life throughout her teens. She explained how she tried to convey to her friends at school why she was active in the organization:

Amanda: It was a bit strange to explain when I started senior high school. To my new friends there /.../. They like: 'Are you in a free church!?' 'No, but... Yeah, I am, but not really, sort of. They are so much fun. You would have understood. They are really fun!', kind of. /.../ I think I said this very often about the Christians: 'They are really fun, they

are really fun!' I really tried to explain that they weren't boring. As if it was something obvious that they would be boring, you know, just because they were Christian.

(Amanda 20110914)

To show her friends at school how much fun her Christian friends were, Amanda brought them to some parties and to some of the activities in the youth organization. Her identity work thus included not only narratives, but also giving her friends experiences of their own that might change the beliefs and stereotypes they had about 'free church youths' (cf Appiah, 2007:108f, Walseth 2006). In the interview, she explained, however, that she found it easier to bring school friends along to parties and movie nights, than to gatherings and meetings. If her school friends came along to religious gatherings she became nervous, since she was afraid they would find it strange.

It was particularly the religious aspects Amanda feared could be viewed as strange, and in the interview it became clear that she saw this as something that could have consequences for how her friends at school regarded her other friends, and also for how they regarded her (cf Mead, 1962:174f). Through her involvement in a Christian youth organization, and friendships with Christian youths, she could be placed in the collective identity 'free church youth', even though her close friends knew that she was not a believing Christian herself. Like Lena, she worked actively to counteract the potentially negative effects of being labeled as such, through focusing on how much fun they had and all the partying they did, and, subsequently, on how much her friends in church resembled any other youths. In other words: how the collective identity 'free church youth' or 'young Christian' did not differ too much from the more general category 'Swedish youths'.

Concluding discussion

Hemming and Madge write about the importance of religion for a person's social identity, but in Amanda's case, as well as for example Olivia earlier, it was not the individual's own religious affiliation that was the most important aspect (Hemming, Madge, 2011:41f). The collective identities the interviewed youths were ascribed, or anticipated they would be ascribed, were not necessarily tied to faith, even if Moa, who very explicitly declared herself to be a Christian, also was the one who recounted the most negative reactions from school friends. It was the

association with a religious organization as such that became significant, rather than whether or not the person believed in God or defined him- or herself as a Christian. The connection with a Christian youth organization was in itself perceived to be enough for others to regard you as different.

Even if the collective identity could be seen as more tied to the Christian youth organization than to personal faith, faith may, however, still play a vital part in how the individual chooses to react and handle the possibility of being labeled or categorized as a 'young Christian' or a 'free church youth'. The interview material indicates that this was a collective identity which was associated with, or assumed to be associated with, negative stereotypes and beliefs of being strange or boring. To face the potential negative consequences such a categorization might generate, would naturally be less appealing to a person who does not believe in God and does not define him- or herself as a Christian, than to a person for whom faith and religious affiliation are vital components of the personal identity and where taking a stand for you faith and your standpoints might consequently be seen as important and as a reward in itself.

To be regarded as too well-behaved and boring, which the interviewed youths expressed concerns about, would indeed mark individuals as different in a mainstream youth culture where a lot of focus is put on having fun and on youthful hedonism. I want, however, to emphasize that such a 'mainstream youth culture' is heterogeneous and cannot be said to exist in any 'real' way. There are, of course, a number of different ways to live your life as a youth in Sweden today, and not all of them involve hedonism, sexual liberality or excessive alcohol consumption. Lalander and Johansson, for instance, point out that the view on sexuality among youths may not be as liberal as it first appears, and alcohol consumption among teenagers in Sweden has in fact been declining in recent years (Lalander, Johansson, 2012:165, Henriksson, Leifman, 2011). But it was nonetheless such aspects the participants in my study related to when they talked about how they were viewed, or assumed they would be viewed, when speaking openly about their involvement in a free church youth organization. The religious involvement in itself - the connection to a church - was one significant aspect that would mark them as different but also the attitudes towards alcohol and sexual relations.

I have, in the article, underlined the agency of the individuals, and discussed different strategies used for handling the possibility, or perceived risk, of being labeled as 'free church

youth' or 'young Christian', with the stereotypes and beliefs associated with those labels. One possible strategy was to avoid mentioning the connection to the church or Christian youth organization at all, another was to take a stand regardless of the negative reactions it evoked and yet another strategy was to actively present yourself and the activities and people within the youth organization in a particular way – a way that counteracts the image of being boring and too well-behaved. To Amanda and Lena this strategy of trying to redefine the existing categories, and counter existing images of young Christians, appeared to work quite well. Their friends at school reacted positively to their stories and descriptions of the people in the youth organization and apparently accepted their involvement in a religious group.

But this positive outcome can also be seen as connected to the particular setting the young individuals found themselves in, and the discussion climate and attitude among their school friends. Jenny and Anton who were also quite content with the choice of being open about their religious involvement, both emphasized that the discussion climate in their respective schools and among their friends was very good. There were heated discussions, but they were generally not ridiculed for their beliefs. Amanda and Lena described similar discussion climates, and, furthermore, both of them talked mostly about a period in life when most Swedish youths change schools, and thus get a chance of choosing how they want to present themselves to their new class mates.

Such aspects all make their individual situations quite different from the setting Moa described, where her religious involvement and Christian faith had been questioned and even ridiculed for a long time and where she felt that people were not really interested in serious discussions about religion. Even if she would have used the same kind of strategy as Lena and Amanda; to tell stories of her activities with the Christian youth group and underline how much fun they had there, the effect would probably not have been the same. The actions and strategies of the individual are certainly a significant part in the ongoing identity work, but they must in the end also be received in a favorable way by the people they are aimed at, to make it possible to influence existing stereotypes connected to each collective identity.

¹ In total 10 young men and 9 young women have participated in the interviews. A majority came from middle class families (according to parents' educational level) and their parents were, with few exceptions, born in Sweden. All interviews were recorded and the semi-structured individual interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hours. The numbers in the interview references denote the date the interview was made.

² Worth emphasizing is that young people's involvement in a religious youth organization may be viewed quite differently depending on which religious tradition it is connected to. Active involvement in a Muslim youth organization may be viewed differently than activity in a Christian one, and commitment to the Church of Sweden may be perceived in another way than involvement in a free church. This has also been discussed by Arniika Kuusisto in her studies of Finnish youths (Kuusisto, 2010).

³ This rather relaxed attitude towards the Christian foundation is at odds with how the youth organization presents itself, for instance on the web-site. Even though activities are open to everyone, regardless of faith, the religious mission is clearly stated throughout the official presentations. For example: 'Jesus Christ is Lord. That is the foundation of equmenia. Everything we do and want is about that. In a thousand different ways.' (Equmenia/Vi vill, my translation).

⁴ The identity as a scout was however not seen as completely uncontroversial by all of the participants in the study. Both Britta and Olivia talked about how they for a year or so stopped being active scouts, as it was not seen as very 'cool' among their friends at school. They missed the community and friendships too much though, and both came back to their respective scout groups after a while.

⁵ Even though the scouting would be the same, several of the youths I interviewed underlined that there were differences between the Christian scout camps they had been to and scout camps for all kinds of scouts. For instance that they in a Christian scout camp would sing a prayer before every meal, have Bible study sessions and services.

⁶ The context she described in this particular case was thoroughly heteronormative, with girls naturally checking out boys.

Word count: 7754 words

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