"When You Live Here, That's What You Get": Other-, Ex-, and Non-Religious Outsiders in the Norwegian Bible Belt

Stefan Fisher-Høyrem [1] and David Herbert [2,*]

[1] University Library, University of Agder, Postbox 422, 4604 Kristiansand, Norway;
     stefan.fisher-hoyrem@uia.no
[2] Department of Criminology and Sociology, Kingston University, London, Surrey KT1 1LQ, UK
[*] Correspondence: david.herbert@kingston.ac.uk

Abstract: This article presents data from our investigations in Kristiansand, the largest city in Southern Norway, an area sometimes called Norway's 'Bible belt'. We investigate how social media is reshaping social relations in the city, looking especially at how social order is generated, reinforced, and challenged on social media platforms. Drawing on the figurational sociology of Norbert Elias, as well as findings from research conducted among Muslim immigrants in Scandinavian cities and their response to what they perceive as the dominant media frame, we focus this article on a less visible group of outsiders in the local social figuration: young ex- and non-religious persons. The mediated and enacted performances of this loosely defined group and their interactions with more influential others provide a case study in how non-religious identities and networked communities are construed not (only) based on explicit rejection of religion but also in negotiation with a social order that happens to carry locally specific 'religious' overtones. With respect to the mediatization of religion we extend empirical investigation of the theory to social media, arguing that what while religious content is shaped by social media forms, in cases where religious identifiers already convey prestige in local social networks, social media may increase the influence of these networks, thus deepening processes of social inclusion for those in dominant groups and the exclusion of outsiders. In this way, platforms which are in principle open and in practice provide space for minorities to self-organise, also routinely reinforce existing power relations.

Keywords: social media; nonreligion; figurational sociology; Norbert Elias; public events; social stratification; mediatization

1. Introduction

In this article, we present data from the project *Cultural Conflict 2.0*, which combines computational and ethnographic methods in its investigations of how local social conflict and stratification occur in local social media clusters. Part of this project, which has spanned several cities across several European countries, has investigated what sociologist Norbert Elias might have called the social order of the medium-sized city of Kristiansand and in particular what Elias termed established-outsider figurations.

Elias' theory of established-outsider relations lends itself well to examinations of how social media mechanisms contribute to shaping local community relations. Elsewhere, we have investigated how local social media clusters in Kristiansand and the symbols of prestige that circulate in these clusters tend to reproduce and reinforce the local social order as this is otherwise made manifest in the city's history, its cultural economy, and self-promotion (Fisher-Høyrem and Herbert).

In this article, we focus on a particular group of 'outsiders' in the local social order, namely ex- or nonreligious youth. Comparing our findings with data from another part of the project, where

we conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with young Muslims from Kristiansand in Norway and Herning and Copenhagen in Denmark (Hansen and Herbert 2018; Herbert and Hansen 2018), we find striking parallels between the two groups' tactics in a local media environment they both experience as hostile. We suggest that these parallels can be best understood in terms of the social dynamics set out by Elias in his theory of established-outsider relations.

1.1. Elias' Theory of Established-Outsider Relations

In his book *What is Sociology?* (Elias 1978) Norbert Elias proposed that sociology's primary concern should be the long chains of interdependence between human beings, and how these figurations are created and maintained through notions of prestige and shame. This paper draws specifically on his conceptualisation of established-outsider relations, which he proposed as 'a universal human theme' (Elias 1994, p. xv) of creating and maintaining social distinctions within the same community, however this community might otherwise be divided in terms of class, race, gender, educational levels, or wealth (Elias 1994, p. xviii).[1]

For Elias, the fundamental characteristic of social figurations is the distinction between a dominant 'established' group and other 'outsider' groups. The issue is not one of majority versus minority, but of status, visibility, and power. The superiority of the established group stems not from numerical size or use of force but from a comparatively high degree of internal cohesion together with a certain extent of communal control. The cohesion is created and maintained by collective norms. The cost of being included in the established group is individual adherence to the behavioural *norms* and constraints set up as defining characteristics of the group. Diversion from these norms is cast as disreputable, since it implicitly challenges the group's existence. Put another way, the two key elements in established-outsider figurations are *power* and *morality*, or rather, power reinforced by a sense of moral superiority.

We will conceptualize social relations in Kristiansand using Elias' typology, but we are also concerned with understanding how social media might influence them, and for this, we turn to the theory of mediatization, particularly the mediatization of religion (Hjarvard 2011). Mediatization refers to processes through which communications media become woven into daily life so that, as Hjarvard puts it, 'media are not outside society, but part of its very social fabric' (2011, p. 121). Other social institutions, for example political institutions, become dependent on the media for communication with the public, and as such become reliant on media institutions and forced to adopt media logics (2011, p. 119). Social media can be seen as deepening the process of embedding media even more deeply in social life than mass media alone; whereas in a mass media dominated age most of our knowledge of the world beyond our local area and social network came through the mass media, now the latter are also known to us at least partly through social media, which have their own formats and logics. Addressing 'the role played by media in the [P]rotestant, yet highly secularised societies of the Nordic countries' (2011, p. 210), Hjarvard argues that mediatisation impacts on religion in three key ways:

> The media become an important, if not primary source of information about religious issues. Mass media are both producers and distributors of religious experiences, and interactive media may provide a platform for the expression and circulation of individual beliefs.

> Religious information and experiences become moulded according to the demands of popular media genres. Existing religious symbols, practices and beliefs become raw material for the media's own narration of stories about both secular and sacred issues.

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[1]　For a discussion of Elias' theory of established-outsider relations and race, see, e.g., (Stanley 2016).

As a cultural and social environment the media have taken over many of the cultural and social functions of the institutionalised religions and provide spiritual guidance, moral orientation, ritual passages and a sense of community and belonging (2011, p. 124)

Furthermore, Hjarvard argues that by transforming and substituting for religion in these ways, mediatization weakens religious institutions—'the mediatisation of religion primarily tends to be intertwined with the process of secularisation' (2011, p. 133).

Through an analysis of social media and social relations in Kristiansand, we will seek to shed light on Hjarvard's contentions. But first, returning to Elias, when cast in terms of established-outsider relations, what characterizes the *social order* of Kristiansand, historically and contemporarily?

1.2. Social Order in Kristiansand

Kristiansand (population 90,000) is the administrative and economic centre of the Norway's southernmost region—a region which for the past century has been known as a stronghold of conservative Evangelical Christianity. The close association between regional Christian mission ministries, free churches, and the mercantile middle- and upper classes is well-known and accounted for by historians and has molded the political, religious, and cultural landscape of the region and its coastal 'capital' for at least the past 120 years. Historians have demonstrated how in this region, Evangelical beliefs have been intertwined with commercial interests and political engagement and influence, resulting in a "striking coincidence between religious and commercial networks", at least since the late nineteenth century (Seland 2014, my translation).

The city remains something of a national political anomaly in its comparatively strong support for the conservative branch of the Christian Democratic Party (KrF), its high level of religious activity (Botvar et al. 2010; Botvar and Aagedal 2002; Magnussen et al. 2013), its adherence to 'traditional family values', and a low degree of (and comparatively strong skepticism toward) gender equality, also among persons who do not consider themselves religious (Ryen 2002; Magnussen et al. 2005; Henriksen and Repstad 2005; Repstad and Henriksen 2005; Ellingsen and Lilleaas 2010). Religious people in the region who are "sporadically active" are more conservative than the same group nationwide, which 'supports the hypothesis of a Christian conservative hegemony' (Halvorsen 2004). Researchers have suggested that this might be because of the 'extended effects of a conservative Christianity beyond the "core congregation"', so that the same conservative values (with regard to family structures, sexual norms, and so on) somehow spill out of the specific church contexts.

From the 1930s, tourism gradually became one of the region's primary economic engines, and Kristiansand was increasingly promoted as a tourist attraction associated with summer, seaside, and hospitable locals (Johnsen 2010). Since the early 2000s, the business cluster Usus's local project *Kristiansand—the Childrens' City* has incentivized local businesses not usually catering to families with children to find ways of doing so. The local foundation *Cultiva*, which manages a 1.4 billion NOK trust fund supposed to support the city's cultural economy—and whose board includes politicians belonging to the local Christian networks—has likewise changed its official strategy so as to fit into this general catering to middleclass nuclear families.

Elsewhere, we argue that the group enjoying dominant status in Kristiansand's social order consists of an 'established' network of businesses, politicians, and other upper-middle class influencers explicitly or implicitly affirming hetero-normativity, nuclear family values, sports and outdoor life, and a loose mix of 'conservative' Evangelical Christianity and mercantile interests. While this group might be a numerical minority, its norms and symbols of social prestige manifest across a range of social arenas, such as the promotion of the city as a whole as well as new neighbourhoods, the field of cultural production, and public rituals (Fisher-Høyrem and Herbert). On social media—for example on Instagram and Facebook—Evangelical Christianity manifests mainly in the form of short quotations from the Bible which are included in posts about lifestyle, food, fitness, and fashion. Keyword and network analysis of Instagram posts in Kristiansand shows a close relationship between the clusters relating to fitness, fashion, and Evangelicalism.

2. Locating Outsiders

The same algorithms that allowed us to locate the dominant groups in Kristiansand's social order make sure 'outsiders' remain unaffirmed and invisible in our computational data. In order to locate outsider groups, we hypothesised that outsiders would fail to meet the informal criteria for belonging to the established groups. We decided to focus on two groups in particular: visible ethnic-religious minorities and ex- and non-religious young adults.

Nonreligion is relatively new as a distinct field of research in Norway, and the most comprehensive analysis of what little national statistics exist has been done by Sivert S. Urstad. The number of religiously unaffiliated people in Norway has increased from 4% in 1991 to 16% in 2017. Even though the category of «nonreligion» is varied and complex, Urstad's analysis suggests that among nonreligious young adults (18–30), most live in urban areas, are on average less politically conservative, slightly less likely to be married, and have somewhat higher education levels than their religious peers (Urstad 2017b). The category 'nonreligious' is obviously broad and inclusive, and recent surveys demonstrate a variety of life stances and perspectives within this category (Urstad 2017a).

Interestingly to our present purposes, a 2017 report shows that religion, and implicitly non-religion, is an important factor in the lives of queer persons in the region (Stokke et al. 2018). Specifically, the strong presence of Christianity in the public sphere results in many 'having difficulty combining self-respect as gay or lesbian with a faith in God' (Stokke et al. 2018, p. 14). Only 32% of the lesbian, gay or bisexual respondents identify as religious, and of these, only 5% describe themselves as «strong believers» or «very religious». In a national survey, 31% to 46% of the queer population identified as nonreligious, and compared to this, the share of nonreligious persons in the southern region is higher (Stokke et al. 2018, p. 80). In addition, the report gives several examples of queer persons experiencing normative pressure from regional religious groups specifically, as well as from society in general. Southern bisexual women who identify as religious are for instance more likely to be married to a man, thus conforming to heteronormative expectations (Stokke et al. 2018, p. 81).

Drawing on Elias' established-outsider theory would allow us to concentrate on ex- and non-religious groups in a particular local social order, suggesting that though there are many ways to be non-religious, these ways—even when occurring on social media—are specific to place and social figuration. We snowballed for respondents at cultural events, media reports, and in Kristiansand's field of cultural production.

Between February and November 2017, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with seven individuals between 19 and 30 years who were all found by snowball sampling starting from the youth group of the local Humanist Association and a podcast supported by the local Youth Mental Health Hospital for its recurrent discussions of the challenges associated with leaving a strict religious community. As part of our mapping of the city's social order, we also observed local Constitution Day celebrations, with a particular focus on the two groups of outsiders.

In another part of the project, between August 2015 and January 2016, we had already conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with young Muslims from ethnic minority backgrounds aged between 18 and 30 years in Kristiansand, Norway; Herning in central Jutland, Denmark; and Copenhagen, Denmark, five of whom were female and 15 male. Seven were from Kristiansand, eight from Herning (north west Jutland), and five from Copenhagen. 13 of the 20 were Norwegian or Danish born; the other seven had lived in Norway or Denmark for between six and ten years.[2] We supplemented the existing data from this part of the project with two interviews with two young Muslim men from Kristiansand, focusing specifically on their experience of the dominant media frame and their personal use of social media, as well as their experience in local Constitution Day celebrations.

Statistics on immigrant minorities in Kristiansand are certainly easier to come by than they are on nonreligious groups. According to a 2014 report from Statistics Norway, 15% of Kristiansand's

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[2]　For details on this study, please see (Herbert and Hansen 2018; Hansen and Herbert 2018)

population has what is called immigrant background.[3] Of these, 69% are from Africa and Asia. Immigrants from EU, US, etc. are comparatively more equally distributed throughout all of Kristiansand's neighbourhoods. Immigrants from Africa and Asia, however, tend to live in specific areas, such as Slettheia (31%), Grim-Møllevann-Dalane, Kvadraturen-Eg, or Hånes-Timenes (between 14% and 17%). Some areas, like Flekkerøy and Ytre Randesund only have 2% inhabitants with immigrant background from Africa, Asia, etc.

In terms of integration, Kristiansand's statistics are less than impressive. In higher education, the share of persons between 19 and 24 years of age with an immigrant background is relatively low compared to the same group on a national level. Immigrants from Africa, Asia, etc. are over-represented in businesses such as cleaning or public transport, and four times as likely to be unemployed or receiving welfare as the rest of the Kristiansand population (Høydahl 2014, pp. 386–87). The percentage of the Kristiansand population receiving welfare is on the national average, but in the group of persons with immigrant background from Africa, Asia, etc., the percentage is much higher than the national average for this group (Høydahl 2014, p. 391).

The percentage of persons with immigrant background who participate in political elections is lower in Kristiansand (36%) than in Norway as a whole, and while on a national scale people with immigrant background tend to show increasing levels of participation in elections, this seems not to happen in Kristiansand. Among people with immigrant background who had lived in Norway for 20–29 years, only 27% of those living in Kristiansand used their right to vote, 14 percentage points lower than on a national basis. After the elections in 2011, people with immigrant background were also under-represented in the City Council (Høydahl 2014, pp. 378–79).

3. Outsider Experiences of the Social Order

While these two groups—ex- or nonreligious young adults and Muslim youth—rarely encounter one another in their daily life in Kristiansand, their responses to the local social order have surprising parallels. They have comparable responses to their respective experiences with public rituals. They share a sense of being marginalized and have developed strategies for establishing 'alternative' spaces, offline and online. They also both have a sense of being framed negatively (or ignored) by mainstream (national and local) media, which leads them to shy away from potential conflicts online and instead use social media as a way of creating safe spaces and facilitate in-group bonding. The following describes their experiences during public rituals, their sense of a hostile dominant media frame, and their attempts to establish spaces for themselves on- and offline.

3.1. Public Rituals

In his book *Models and Mirrors*, Don Handelman distinguished between three types of public events based on the logic of their organisation and performance. First there are public events that *model*, or seek to instigate or at least predict some real transformation in the social order of the lived-in world. Secondly, there are events that *present* the social order of the lived-in world. These events hold "up a mirror to social order, selectively reflecting versions of the latter that largely are known, if in more dispersed and fragmented fashion (Handelman 1998, p. 48). Finally, there are events that *re-present* the social order by contrasting or comparing it to distinct alternatives, or by highlighting its internal contradictions thus questioning its ultimate legitimacy.

As Judith Kapferer has convincingly shown, Norwegian Constitution Day (or simply '17th of May') celebrations clearly belong to the second type (Kapferer 2004). On Handelman's terms, they occur at the very interface of social order and the event itself, imparting a sense of affirmation of the

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3　Statistics Norway deploys the term 'immigrant background' to include both persons who have immigrated themselves and Norwegian-born persons with two immigrant parents. They further distinguish between immigrants from the EU (including Switzerland), North-America Canada, Australia and New Zealand on the one hand, and immigrants from Africa, Asia, Latin-America, Oceania (except Australia and New Zealand) and Europe outside of the EU/EEC (Høydahl 2014, p. 363).

existing order. The celebrations put a strong emphasis on intergenerational relations, family and kin, and the historical continuity of the national and local community (despite their national significance, in most Norwegian towns apart from the country's capital, these celebrations often carry a strong scent of local patriotism (Blehr 2000, p. 177). For Kapferer, local Norwegian Constitution Day celebrations constitute suitable case studies 'in situational analysis [as described by Gluckman 1958 and others], concentrating on the Constitution Day festivities as a way of making sociological meaning of the city's cultural and social characteristics (Kapferer 2004, p. 109). This is particularly the case in the so-called citizens' parades, a case which according to Kapferer 'reveals [. . .] the central myths and everyday constructions of reality in [the city, giving] point to the sites and events of Constitution Day (Kapferer 2004, pp. 112, 117, 120). We might therefore expect the peculiarities of Kristiansand's social order to be more pronounced in its official Constitution Day celebrations.

In 2017 we attended and observed the May 17 celebrations in the city center of Kristiansand, prioritizing the events that were given prominent space in the official programme, and especially the citizens' parade. We also followed the celebrations the following year, largely through news media reports.

The city center is the site of a range of events throughout the day. The most common kind of event is laying down wreaths at local and regional memorial monuments: the local Eidsvoll men (those from the area participating the writing of Norway's constitution in 1814), locals fallen in the two WWs, local cultural personalities like authors or artists, and the July 22 Memorial Monument.[4] In many cities the official celebrations include church services (many of the parades start and/or end at a local church). Religious groups tend to show high degrees of participation. In larger cities, especially in the western and southern parts of the country, many Christian free churches and mission organisations organise events in addition to the official celebrations. In Kristiansand, the church service (at 11 a.m.) in the cathedral is very well attended. The sermon celebrates a narrative that casts Norway as a 'Christian country' since the 11th century, with a harsh climate and generally poor in natural resources but which through God's blessing and protection has become one of the wealthiest nations on earth. The moral responsibility that comes with this is also highlighted, and people are encouraged to show gratefulness and generosity. Hymns are sung celebrating God's protection and blessing.

In the middle of the day, an association of free churches, "Together for the City", has organized an event at the main stage. The official programme states that a named person (his surname shows him to belong to a local business family) will have a 'conversation with exciting guests'. The event is fairly well-attended, and the predominantly young crowd also includes numerous heads of local Christian business families. A gospel choir from one of the local Christian university colleges performs two up-beat songs from the latest album of a black gospel singer. The 'exciting guests' turn out to be two Iraqi men in their fifties who are interviewed via translator. They answer questions about what they think about Norwegian culture and the 17 May celebration in particular, before the host guides the short conversation into the question of conversion to Christianity. They are both recent converts and speak very warmly of Norway and Christianity. The crowd applauds when the host can reveal that they have both recently been granted asylum, though it is unclear whether this happened before or after their conversion. The choir performs two more songs before the event closes. The centrality, visibility and loudness of this event is illustrative of the status enjoyed by particular networks of free churches, business, and politics in Kristiansand.

But in terms of importance none of these events can compete with the citizens' parade. By far the most well-attended event of the day, this parade is a celebratory manifestation of Kristiansand's social order. The main part of the parade consists of representatives of the city's civic society. By far the most common type of organization attending are the local sports association: football, handball, rowing,

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[4]　22 July 2011 was the date of the deadliest terror attack in Norway since World War II. A right-wing extremist set off a bomb outside the Prime Minister's office killing 8 people, and then took the lives of 69 people (mostly teenagers) at the Labour Party's summer camp at the island Utøya.

trial, martial arts, skating, gymnastics, dancing, ice hockey, swimming, cycling, volleyball, tennis, fencing, badminton, and more. More than 83% of the city's children and youth are members of a sports club. There are also NGOs such as the Red Cross, Skeiv Ungdom (Queer Youth), or Redningsselskapet (a volunteer sea rescue organization), all interspersed with marching bands from the city's schools. Most sections count between 30 and 100 people.

Of all the sections in the parade, one stands out: the association of free churches walking under the banner 'Together for the City—a network of Christians'. More than 800 people, mostly between the ages of 15 and 30, dance and sing along to Hillsong's tracks booming from loud speakers on a truck carrying a live band. Participants in their 20s, some carrying flags or individually made placards with 'Jesus loves you', walk with several of the same heads of local Christian business families and church leaders that attended the 2:00 p.m. event. The general sense among onlookers seems to be one of fascination towards the sheer size of the section, but not surprise. There is little snickering at or mocking of the open public worship.

3.1.1. Other-Religious Minorities

Generally, visible minorities Asian or African descent tend to be found interspersed among groups not directly related to ethnicity (for the most part sports clubs). When visible as a group, ethnic minorities are mostly found on the margins of the events, for instance as vendors in temporary food tents put up for the occasion.

The Thai Association participates in the main parade with a small section, some wearing their own national costumes. Remarkably, none of the city's Muslim organisations or associations participate with their own specific section in the citizens' parade. According to the official programme (distributed to all households a week earlier) the Afghan Association is also supposed to participate in the parade, but they do not. During a later interview with two young Muslim respondents, we asked why this might be the case:

> Farshid: It's partly about how the mosque and the imam see themselves, and indeed how the population sees the imams and the Islamic faith. Maybe they don't feel welcome enough to present themselves publically in a parade? [. . .] but [Muslim immigrants] have to understand that this too is part of Norwegian culture.

When we ask why the Muslim Union does not participate with a section in the parade, Akif (26) argues that religion is not supposed to be central to the event, at least in principle. We ask him if he did not notice the section with all the Christian churches in it.

> Akif: Well, yes, towards the end there was this section called 'Youth for Jesus' or something, and that was the biggest section of all, really. But I was like, oh well, there's Kristiansand for you . . .

3.1.2. Ex- and Non-Religious Groups

Akif's resigned response parallels that of participants in the local branch of the Humanist Association's section in the parade. Their section is remarkably small for a city of almost 90,000 people, counting only 8–10 participants, several in their twenties. This low turn-out is also in stark contrast to the more than 200 teenagers who signed up for the Humanist 'confirmation' ceremony the same year. As they walk past us, a group of young men on the other side of the road start mocking them, pointing fingers, and singing a Christian childrens' song: "Jesus loves all the children/all the children in the world/red, yellow, white, or black—it's all the same to him/Jesus loves all the children in the world". They sing loudly, almost shouting, extending their arms and pointing towards the Humanist participants in a shaming gesture, as if turning them into an altogether different kind of spectacle. Most onlookers ignore it, some giggle, and a few of the participants smile nervously.

In interviews, the young humanists confirm that the shaming is a regular occurrence during the annual parades.

Lisa: I've actually learned that song just from hearing it being sung at me in the parade […] That happens at least two or three times every May 17 parade.

Per: But it varies from year to year. Two years ago there was a lot of it, I believe it happened more than twenty times just during that one parade. And someone spat at me. But someone in the section behind us phoned up that Christian association thingy later, and the year after it was a bit better.

Interviewer: You seem to simply accept it?

Lisa: I haven't thought about it, to be honest […] You can't do anything about it. I mean, when you live here, that's what you get.

The following year, the same thing happened. This time, a young woman participating in the Humanist Association section for the first time since she moved to Kristiansand that same year reacted by writing a letter to the editor of the regional newspaper. Other national media news quickly picked up the story. In an interview we conducted with her, she said many responded by saying she was over-reacting to what was essentially harmless fun but that she also received phone calls from Christians saying such shaming behavior was not representative of their faith. Being from another town, she was also surprised at how her local co-members simply accepted the situation as a given.

For the present purposes, this is the crucial point: that most onlookers appear to view this behaviour as harmless fun, and that the victims accept their place in the local social hierarchy. According to Elias' theory of established-outsider figurations, such episodes of shaming point to the uneven balance of power between the established group's sets of norms and codes and other groups' 'failing' to emulate these norms. Here, we might make the simple observation that onlookers seem to get the joke. The joke works *only* if there is already a shared understanding of the idea that *not* participating in practices associated with learning Christian children's songs is to diverge from expected behavior. While most people witnessing the shaming would not consider Christian faith necessary for living a good life, they must be aware of the norm as existing among prominent groups in the city. This is then not simply a case of Christian young men being confident in their own beliefs. What is in the moment cast as good-humoured teasing equally expresses the established-outsider figuration and the attempted (and silently legitimized) stigmatization of outsider groups as divergent.

The centrality, visibility, and overwhelming physical presence of networks consisting of Christian free churches and business families in a celebration that to such a large degree celebrates local community, family ties, and regional patriotism is remarkable. Again, it should be underscored that the issue is not one of majority versus minority but one of social status, visibility, and power. The visibility and centrality, both in terms of the official programme at the main stage and in terms of physical presence in the most important parade, of a group strongly associated with business and conservative Christianity points to these characteristics as defining for the 'established' in the social order of the city. The responses to this dominance we observe from ethnic-religious minorities and non-religious groups are similar in that they seem to accept the situation and their place in it.

3.2. Media Framing

Recent research has shown that immigrants from Asia and Africa are under-represented in Norwegian mainstream media, including the regional newspaper *Færdrelandsvennen* in Kristiansand. When this group is represented, it tends to be in negative terms, as criminals, victims in need of help, or indeed as 'exotic' or different in some or other respect (Dahlstrøm 2013; Engebretsen 2015). Young immigrants from the area report that this makes integration more difficult for them (Fjeldstad et al. 2013; Mainsah 2011).

In the Norwegian/Danish interviews we conducted between 2015 and 2016, respondents were asked a series of questions concerning their social media use, the way the national media represents Islam, and in what ways media representations impacted on their lives and behaviour in public

environments, including on social media. All respondents experienced a negative framing of Islam in mainstream and a sense of heightened public exposure after a terror attack. They reacted to this with a variety of strategies, from avoidance to invisibility to modelling good behaviour in daily life (e.g., giving their place in a queue to an elderly person) and building support networks.

However, it was noticeable that only Copenhagen based respondents expressed a sense of being exposed or on trial daily, and only they (or at least four of the five) spoke of using social media as a tool to engage wider networks. In Kristiansand, by contrast, it seems young Muslims to a greater extent have accepted a fundamental separation between their minority culture and the surrounding social environment. Here, respondents describe similar feelings of tiredness but referring to days in the immediate aftermath of a terrorist attack rather than on a regular basis.

3.2.1. Other-Religious Minority Tactics

Isra (24) describes the days following terrorist attacks as 'extremely exhausting' and explains how she, her family, and friends seek to avoid contact outside their immediate social circle in order to, 'remain in the background and as far as possible to try not to attract attention'. Similarly, Akif (26) describes how his normal social media routine is occasionally punctuated by a felt need to comment on recent terror events, at least if these occur in Europe:

> Akif: When there is a terror attack, I often feel I have to write something. But I often wonder why I feel that way. I mean, this guy [London terrorist attack] was a British bastard, born in Britain, originally from Pakistan. Why should I have to publicly disavow him, when I am here in Norway, originally from [another country]? But again, he is a Muslim. So I do it. I have disavowed so many terror attacks in Europe. But when that thing happened in Afghanistan, where 80 people were killed—much more than in any European Islamist attack—then I didn't write anything. And the day after I thought about why that might be. Why do I do it?

Crucially, when Akif does respond to news on social media, his comments are not directed to the Norwegian majority culture but rather to younger members of his own in-group. While he sees himself as a bridge-builder of sorts between Norwegian society and Muslim groups, his efforts target primarily Norwegian-born young members of Muslim families.

> Akif: I try to inform young Muslims about Islam. I might have some more knowledge, since I have lived in Palestine for so many years [. . .] I am educated, and I might know a few things more than someone who is 16 and was born here. They have many questions, and I try to explain how one might be both Norwegian and a Muslim. (Akif, age 26, Kristiansand)

On Facebook, Akif separates his Norwegian and non-Norwegian networks into separate groups so that the one cannot always see what he is posting to the other. He assumes that Norwegians will not really be interested in what is important to him and his fellow Muslims, and so he does not try to explain himself to 'outsiders'. While talking about this, he jokes about the suspicion this might cause in a culture where Muslims might be portrayed as conspiratorial.

> Akif: Sometimes I share [on Facebook] things that my Norwegian friends can't see. I have Norwegian friends who only speak Norwegian, so I put them in one group. But if I write something in Arabic, then that's something else. The Norwegians don't get to see everything—you know, I am a dangerous man [laughs] Oh, are you recording? I'm joking, I'm joking! [laughs] [. . .] One guy said to me 'write so people can understand you!' He only knew Norwegian. So here [on the Arabic-speaking group] I put things about Ramadan or other things that you [Norwegians] don't care about.

Facebook does allow its users to distinguish between close and remote friends, but this does not seem to be what is at stake for Akif:

> I never add (as friends) anyone I haven't met, except, like, celebrities. But everyone I know
> in Kristiansand, and who are on Facebook, are friends. [Online and offline] are not two
> separate worlds.

Together with other young men in the Muslim community, Akif has set up closed groups on Facebook
and SnapChat (where potential new members need to be accepted by one of the group's two or three
administrators) in order to distribute information about common events.

Like Akif, Farshid (28) separates his Norwegian and non-Norwegian networks on social media.

> I try to write things that point beyond the mundane […] Quotes and poetry and so on.
> And maybe I translate the poem to English, even though it loses much of its meaning. I do it
> in Norwegian and English, and sometimes in Persian. If I am writing to people outside of
> Norway, I use Persian. For instance, if I am posting something about Afghanistan, I post
> in Persian so that only Afghanis can understand it, and not others. Because it is none of
> their business. But if I am saying 'Happy Constitution Day' or something like that, then I
> use Norwegian.

(Farshid, age 28, Kristiansand)

Farshid's attempt to use social media to raise awareness of something transcending the everyday
is, in other words, primarily targeting family and friends already belonging to the minority culture (or
indeed living in other countries), and even there, it might not always work as he intends. As he admits,
laughingly, 'If my status update gets less than 30 likes, I delete it!' This seems to affirm social media as
a space for building networks of solidarity amongst marginalised groups (Leurs et al. 2012).

3.2.2. Ex- and Non-Religious Tactics

The experiences of our ex- and nonreligious young adult respondents mirror those of the young
Muslims. Julie (26), for instance, grew up in a strict Christian community, where she experienced some
abuse. After a few years in therapy (as she puts it) she moved to Kristiansand, trying to avoid religion
as best she can. A semi-closeted bisexual, she finds this more challenging than she expected in a city
comparatively larger than the town where she grew up. She knows of few others with similar histories
still living in Kristiansand. This is why she doesn't participate in the annual Pride parades.

> Julie: I don't know of any others [like me]. I mean, most queer people who have some kind of
> religious belief tend to move away from Kristiansand anyway […] Living in Kristiansand
> you can't escape the sense that there's this class division, and that it's got to do with religion.

When asked from where she gets this sense, she points to the regional newspaper. Her impression
is that the regional newspaper gives more attention to religious topics 'than is normal', and she can
list off the top of her head a number of examples of recent positive stories about local churches and
congregations.

> Julie: It's probably a hangover from my religious days. I still feel ashamed of who I am.
> I mean, you never see any positive interaction between religion and homosexuality in the
> newspaper here. There's just two sides. One accusing the other of being sinful, the other
> accusing the first one of being bigoted. Just accusations, accusations all the time […]

She is not alone in feeling this way. In the milieus we encountered while snowballing for respondents,
it is not uncommon for respondents to describe the regional newspaper in similar terms. When asked
to point out the source of the sense of being an outsider, Heidi (32) puts it this way:

> In Kristiansand, you see it in [the regional newspaper]. You see it in Concert Hall. You see it
> in the City Council. You see it everywhere. There's always a Christian finger in the pie […]

These experiences might be understood on the background of certain editorial changes made in the regional newspaper over the past decades. In 2005, several local Christian churches threatened to withdraw their adverts, being dissatisfied with its alleged 'critical approach to religion'. Five years later, the new Editor in Chief was looking to accommodate and quoted the strong local ties between Christianity, local business, and politics as examples of why religion should be considered relevant to the regional news media. In 2012, the newspaper officially declared this field a priority and hired its first journalist specifically covering 'religion and worldviews'. Local media scholars have shown that following this shift, the most common news stories about religion in this regional newspaper are previews of cultural events taking place in a church, where the emphasis is on 'everyday heroes', music, and positive experiences (Dahlstrøm 2013, p. 132–33). The Editor in Chief reports that the newspaper is now receiving far fewer complaints about how they cover religious topics.

So how does the ex-religious group respond to this in their social media life? Some, like Bjorn (27), tend to avoid social media as much as possible.

> Bjorn: I don't have Instagram, and I hardly ever post or read anything on Facebook except in some group chats where we tell each other of upcoming events.

Having left the religious group where he grew up, he has now joined the social circles associated with the *Free* podcast. He describes the milieu as politically left-leaning, with a strong interest in cultural entrepreneurship, and with a high percentage of detractors from religious groups. Many are active in organizing music or artisan festivals during the summer.

Similarly, Lisa (19), active member of the local youth section in Humanist Association, as well as the local organisation Queer Youth, is reluctant to share too much of herself in social media.

> Lisa: I have my [facebook] profile as private as is possible. You never know . . . things get taken out of context [. . .] I want to know who the receivers are, but if I share with everyone, I won't have that kind of control.

Julie uses both Facebook and Instagram every day but mostly for catching up with whatever is going on in her social circles. She does little posting herself. Occasionally, she will post links to discussions about religion on her Facebook page, but she very carefully avoids drawing attention to her own ex-religiosity. She reserves her own posting for closed groups or (even more) group chats where she feels secure only like-minded friends will see her posts.

> Julie: I am very careful about what I'm posting on Facebook. I don't want to post anything on homosexuality or religion [. . .] but I do in closed groups with other sceptics.

Still, the ties to the world of the established are hard to break.

> Julie: I don't unfollow old friends, because that's signalling 'I don't want you in my life'. But I scroll past them, especially if they're spouting right-wing politics or religious bullshit [. . .] It's also kind of a guilty pleasure to just look at what people are posting and see how low they can go [. . .]

So, even though Julie finds it hard to break completely from her old religious friends, she might turn them into a spectacle to be mocked in secret together with her 'new' in-group of outsiders. Simultaneously, she has to navigate the internal norms of the new in-group, not showing too much solidarity with the established.

> Julie: . . . I think I'm somewhere on the spectrum between atheist and agnostic. I grew up on a farm, and everyone who grows up on a farm is a little bit superstitious [. . .] I feel some ['Force'] being there, but I don't believe it's real. I mean, outwardly, I'm more of an atheist, because you can't go into all those nuances and paradoxes in conversations with people. I mean . . . it's complicated. And creepy!

Drawing on Elias again, we might note here that outsider niches are also policed by certain codes of belonging so that Julie now feels torn between her experience of a kind of supernatural 'force' in the world and the atheism considered normative in the outsider group. Hence, she will not discuss the nuances of her non-religion with other sceptics.

3.3. Creating Alternative Spaces

Other-Religious Minority Spaces

As noted above, young Muslims in Kristiansand use closed social media groups in order to construct safe spaces apart from and in response to their portrayal in the dominant media frame, but unfortunately our team was not able to gain access to these. The Muslim community in Kristiansand also engages in inter-religious dialogues and (some) political debates and events, seeking to build their rapport with the city's population (Liebmann 2018).

Despite hosting a community of Muslim immigrants since the late 1990s, Kristiansand boasts only one official mosque, in a building granted permission for such use in 2011. As Ryan Appleyard has noted, this building bears no outward sign of being a mosque (Appleyard 2015, p. 9). The architectural invisibility in the cityscape restricts the immigrant community's ability to establish a public presence. Considering the importance of mosques as community centres for diasporic minorities, it also limits their access to the 'respite from an environment that often is discriminatory' which has become one of the mosque's social functions among European Muslims (Gilliat-Ray 2010, pp. 194–95 quoted in; Appleyard 2015, p. 54).

A telling example is how Ahmadi Muslims in Kristiansand have been unable to acquire land and building permission for a mosque. When the regional newspaper tried to host an online debate on this topic, the comment section had to be shut down due to participants' hostility. Appleyard notes how certain local politicians even placed bids on the disused building which now serves as the official mosque in order to inflate its value, thus making it more difficult for the Muslim community to establish a visible presence in the city (Appleyard 2015, p. 57).

3.4. Ex- and Non-Religious Minority Spaces

According to the former Head of the Department for Child and Adolescent Mental Health (ABUP) at the Southern Hospital in Kristiansand, the prominent position of Evangelical Christianity in Kristiansand's social order means that it '[…] is probably difficult to be a young person in Kristiansand if you don't want to join any of the Christian youth activities'. ABUP is an established research centre focusing on relations between culture and mental health, conducting its research primarily in Kristiansand and the surrounding region. While they do not make claims about the 'religious' culture of Kristiansand, the center's research output has emphasized the importance, at least locally, of including so-called 'existential information'—including the patients' and therapists' religious or nonreligious worldview—in the psychotherapeutic process.

As a part of this strategy to integrate cultural engagement with therapeutic practice, ABUP is also known to support a range of local creative projects. Among these is the podcast-turned-radio-show *Free*, hosted by Heidi and Elisabeth, who are both in their early 30s.[5] Heidi is a mother of two, and grew up in a local religious sect, from which she has now exited. Elisabeth is a single mother, identifies as queer, and moved to Kristiansand from a neighbouring town. Their website presents the podcast in the following terms: 'A shameless, humorous perspective on everyday life in this jungle of prayer houses, jovial southerners and good girls.'

The podcast's rationale is directly related to their experience of being outsiders.

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[5]   The name of the podcast has been changed, as have the names of all respondents.

> Elisabeth: Kristiansand is so, like … nuclear family parenting, Christianity, outdoor activities and sports. I am in opposition to all of that. Our goal is to promote *being* 'outsiders', not just *tolerate* or *accept* outsiders.

> Heidi: That's what I think of as this particular kind of 'being in' in Kristiansand. And church is somewhere to hang out. When I was married I lived at [neighbourhood], and even if I didn't try to fit into any church … It was like, all the neighbours went to different churches—they have more churches than trees there—so it was like, "which church do you go to?" […] And all the parents in our street went to bible groups, and were like "if you want, you can join our bible group" … And they go to Bible camps […] so all the kids know each other through that. So, it's not only that they go to the same school, but they also go to the same church or congregation.

In addition to support from the Department of Child and Adolescent Mental Health, the *Free* podcast has been given a one-hour slot on the local radio station, as well as occasional live broadcasts (with a live audience) from the Theatre, a recently opened venue in an old theatre building. The managing director is explicit about the purpose of offering them this space:

> Tor (42): We want to be an alternative cultural venue. For many, the term 'alternative' has a negative ring to it, but for me it's something positive […] We want to be a space for those who don't drive in the middle of the road, so to speak. And that's exactly what we do. We had *Free* there for a live podcast, for instance, we want to be there for that particular social segment as well as all the other niches.

At the *Free* podcast's first live-show from the Theatre, one central topic of discussion was Heidi's ironic use of Christian idiom and mock swearing on the podcast. During an interview, she describes it as a way of reacting against her former religious background. Elisabeth added:

> Elisabeth: [W]e've had lots of feedback from other detractors from Christian groups, about making episodes dedicated specifically to that topic. Because they feel that Heidi [because she is so outspoken and secure in herself] is not representative of how difficult it might be to leave [a religious group]. For many, it's really complicated.

Creating an alternative community apart from the dominant Evangelical culture is one of the podcast's primary goals.

> Elisabeth: […] That's the point of us working with ABUP as well. We target young people who don't fit in, we talk about body positivity, self-worth … for young parents, especially young mothers.

> Heidi: At least we're trying to illustrate an alternative […] Many contact us and ask to be part of the 'community' […]

4. Conclusions

Drawing on Elias' theory of established-outsider relations provides a framework for understanding how conflicts play out within a figuration where a few specific 'established' groups enjoy positions of dominance based on strong internal group cohesion and criteria for belonging, leading to other groups—not necessarily in solidarity with one another—facing somewhat similar challenges as 'outsiders'.

In these terms, the above describes the experiences and responses of two groups of outsiders in Kristiansand. The parallels between the two groups, young ethnic-minority Muslims and ex- and non-religious young adults, are striking, considering how little contact exists between the two. Both describe living in a social order where Evangelical Christianity enjoys a position of relative privilege and prestige. Both find themselves implicitly or explicitly marginalised in public rituals.

Both experience the dominant media frame as implicitly or explicitly hostile and biased against them. And both have developed largely non-confrontational tactics for negotiating and coming to terms with their predicament, seeking to establish on- and offline safe spaces in order to build a stronger group cohesion and identity.

Some have argued that in 'Bible-belt' cities there is a more positive and accepting attitude towards religion (and its public expressions) in general, compared to bigger cities like Oslo and Copenhagen, where online confrontations between ethnic-religious minority culture and the majority culture is more common (Hansen and Herbert 2018; Herbert and Hansen 2018). This would seem to find support in studies from bigger cities such as Oslo (Botvar 2015).

But this explanation sits awkwardly with our findings regarding the manifestations of Kristiansand's social order, where Evangelical Christianity in particular, and not religion as such, is associated with power and social prestige and where the experiences of ex- and non-religious young adults mirrors that of their young Muslim peers. The experiences and tactics of our ex- and non-religious respondents cast a new light on those of young Kristiansand Muslims. The latter's relatively low exposure to daily direct on- and offline confrontation compared to that we find in bigger cities might not be a sign of greater inclusion in 'religious' regions. Rather, it might signal a disengagement of sorts, an acceptance of separation, and a sense that significant change and inclusion is not something to realistically expect. It might signal that the real challenge for outsiders is not religion or non-religion in any generic sense but rather the social figuration locating them at the margins according to criteria that in this particular case happen to carry Evangelical Christian overtones. Evangelical Christianity is a marker of the locally dominant social identity rather than being substantively related to the process of social exclusion. After all, as young Muslim Akif and young non-religious Lisa concluded independently of each other but in surprisingly similar form: 'There's Kristiansand for you', and 'when you live here, that's what you get'.

Mass and social media play a constitutive role in the way social order in Kristiansand is constructed and negotiated—from the positive image of Evangelical Christianity projected by the regional newspaper (keeping complaints down and advertising revenues flowing) to the counter cultural/therapeutic space of the *Free* podcast and the 'safe space' closed social media groups of young Muslims and non-religious. In this sense, social relations in Kristiansand are significantly mediatised, and social media extends this process. Furthermore, media perform some of the functions—for example, social media as a source of information and creating a sense for belonging for young Muslims—that may, under some circumstances, be performed by religion. However, there is little evidence here of mediatisation being 'entwined with the process of secularisation' (Hjarvard 2011, p. 133). Rather than 'religious symbols, belief and practice becom[ing] raw material for the media's own narration of stories' (Hjarvard 2011, p. 124), established Christian Evangelical groups thread Bible verses seamlessly into Instagram messages and weave religious ceremony into public celebrations without compromise or dilution. Even the outsider Muslims, who do not control the media narrative on Islam, are able to use the affordance of social media closed groups to generate counter-narratives which support religious community cohesion. Thus, while social media also nurtures non-religious communities, this does not seem to be part of a wider undermining of religion's social power through mediatisation; at least in this corner of Northern Europe, Evangelical Christianity retains its dominant cultural position.

Finally, a brief reflection on the social effects of technologies, specifically the articulation of social media platforms with the Kristiansand's pre-existing social order. In this case, social media has been observed to have ambivalent effects. While on the one hand it enables the self-organisation of minorities and provides 'safe' space for the development of counter-narratives, on the other hand it reinforces the 'network centrality' and hence social dominance of those who already have social influence. Further research is needed into whether this reinforcement of existing patterns of social dominance is a widespread outcome of the interlinking of social fields through social media platforms, and under which conditions it occurs.

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