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Chapter 10

Moral Involvement or Religious Scepticism? Local Christian Publications on Asylum Seekers

Abstract: Norway's Christian leaders have been directing a stream of almost unanimous criticism at the present (2017) Conservative and populist government's increasingly restrictive policy on refugees and asylum seekers. Some have claimed that the criticism from Christian leaders is an elite phenomenon, and that local Christians are more positive to the adopted restrictions, as well as to proposals for an even more restrictive policy. This chapter presents results from a study of local Christian publications from August 2015 to April 2016. Publications online and on paper from 52 local organizations and congregations in a region in Southern Norway have been analysed. The results indicate that local Christian congregations and organizations welcome and support arriving refugees and asylum seekers, and to the extent that they comment on political issues, they support the criticism coming from their national leaders. The local publications studied can be seen as a kind of counter-information to national right-wing populist politicians and media trying to create 'official fear'.

Keywords: refugees, migration, local publications, local Christianity

10.1 A More Restrictive Policy

After the general election in autumn 2014, Norway got a so-called blue–blue government, a coalition between the Conservatives (Høyre) and the Progress Party (Fremskrittspartiet). The Progress Party in particular, has placed scepticism toward immigration very high on their agenda (Fangen and Vaage 2014). Progress Party member Sylvi Listhaug, serving the government since December 2015 as Minister of Immigration and Integration, has been criticized for using harsh language against immigrants and asylum seekers.¹ While still Minister of Agricul-

¹ From January 2018, Listhaug was no longer Minister of Integration, but Minister for Justice, Public Security and Immigration. In March 2018 she resigned from Government after heavy criticism from the opposition.

ture and Food, she told the press that she, a Christian, considered leaving the Church of Norway because she disliked the bishops' criticism of the government's refugee policy. In an interview in the Christian daily *Vårt Land* on 4 November 2015, she criticized the bishops directly, referring to 'a tyranny of goodness' haunting Norway. Later, on 5 February 2016, she followed up on her criticism in the newspaper *VG*, stating that the church is not for everyone, as it has become a political actor for leftists, a player likely to destroy the welfare society due to its stance in favour of free immigration. In response to another bout of criticism from bishops, she said in an interview with the weekly *Morgenbladet* on 8 April 2016: 'It is not for the bishops to define who is a Christian and who is not, or who has the right form of Christianity and who does not'. Furthermore, in an interview with the newspaper *Aftenposten* on 7 January 2016, she expressed concern about the future of her children if immigration to Norway gets out of control. When presenting some restrictive reforms in Norwegian refugee policy in an interview with the newspaper *VG* on 29 December 2015, Listhaug used an old Norwegian metaphor, stating that refugees cannot expect 'to be carried into Norway on a chair of gold'.² According to the *Atekst* software program for retrieval and analysis of newspaper material, Listhaug's statement about the chair of gold was quoted and commented on 360 times in Norwegian newspapers and magazines in paper format from the time when it was published until the end of 2016. She even got international attention, for example in the *Independent* on 21 October 2016, after posting a statement on Facebook the day before attending a conference on integration that Norwegians 'eat pork and drink alcohol', and those who come to Norway should adapt to that.

Clearly, Sylvi Listhaug, has been a central figure in the immigration debate since she took over as minister, but it should be noted that the government has been standing behind her proposals, and that some of the restrictions have been supported by some of the political parties outside the government as well. On a less rhetorical and more concrete level, Sylvi Listhaug, on behalf of the government, sent for consultation several proposals for a more restrictive policy toward refugees and asylum seekers in December 2015 (Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2015). The proposals included a stricter policy on family reunion, and limitations concerning unaccompanied minor asylum seekers. According to the new proposals, instead of a permanent permission, minor adolescents would only get a temporary permission to stay in Norway. The consultation process resulted in protests from several organizations, lawyers, and even administrative agencies

² It should be added that all the newspapers quoted so far are independent of political parties and considered mainstream media in Norway.

under the government. Many of the consultation responses claimed that some of the proposals contradicted international law and human rights conventions. However, the government decided to maintain almost all the proposals (Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2015–2016). When presenting the news in media interviews, among them in *Aftenposten* on 6 April 2016, Sylvi Listhaug expressed as a positive quality of Norwegian immigration policy that it would be the strictest in Europe. The proposals were discussed in the Parliament in June, and many of the proposed restrictions were formally adopted, such as permission for the police to stop asylum seekers at the border in times of crisis. However, the most controversial ones, concerning unaccompanied minor asylum seekers and a more restrictive family reunion policy, were not.³

10.2 Protests from Church Leaders

Five or six decades ago, many church leaders, especially in minority churches, argued against Christian involvement in politics, recommending individual Christian conversions and Christian upbringing of new generations as better strategies for a better world, rather than political efforts. Exceptions from the rule of political non-involvement were Christian ‘core issues’ such as abortion and financial state support for Christian schools.

Gradually Norwegian church leaders have approached the political field on a broader scope of issues, such as socio-economic equality, climate, and pollution. In the 1990s, churches found on their literal doorsteps the politics of refugees and immigration, as several asylum seekers responded to their cases being rejected by seeking asylum in churches. Most of these refugees and asylum seekers were Kosovo Albanians. During the peak year of 1993, about 140 local churches of various denominations had asylum seekers in their church buildings for short or long periods, a practice that church leaders generally accepted as legitimate in acute situations (Vetvik and Omland 1997). In 1997, 25 Norwegian church leaders from various denominations presented a common statement warning against fear of Muslims (Haugen 2010).

Today general warnings against political involvement are almost non-existent in churches, except among Jehovah’s Witnesses and a few small faith communities. Reservations against direct church support for specific parties are still widespread, but for the past three or four decades, church leaders in Norway have often placed themselves in a centre-to-left position in many socio-political

³ See the newspaper *Dagsavisen*, 11 June 2016, for an overview of the Parliament’s decisions.

issues. They are concerned with climate and environmental issues, as well as equality and justice, nationally and globally. Many also claim that public immigration policies are too restrictive. Leaders are more conservative in matters of family policy and sexuality, as well as in bio-ethical issues. This is shown in an interview study of Norwegian national religious leaders from 2011 (Furseth et al. 2015, 153–157). However, especially the Church of Norway has seen a recent liberalization of attitudes, including in the matter of same-sex marriages. In April 2016, the Church of Norway General Synod accepted same-sex marriage ceremonies in churches, and in February 2017, a new liturgy was introduced.

A similar centre-to-left socio-political profile is documented in a previous study of 118 national and regional leaders in the Church of Norway (Gulbrandsen et al. 2002). This study showed that the church elite turned out to be the most politically radical group of all Norwegian elites. They preferred environmental concerns to economic growth, they were the strongest proponents of increased wage equality, and they opposed regulation of immigration based on labour market needs.

Many individual bishops and other church leaders have issued criticisms of Norwegian asylum politics. The website of the Church of Norway, as well as the websites of many minority churches and umbrella organizations, like the Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities (STL) and the Christian Council of Norway, show a centre-to-left engagement in many current socio-political issues, including criticism of the present government's restrictive immigration policies. Together with several humanitarian and political organizations, the Christian Council of Norway, with most Christian faith communities as members, takes part in the so-called Forum for Asylum Politics, a meeting place for organizations involved in asylum politics. In November 2016, this forum issued a joint statement, strongly criticizing restrictive decisions made recently or planned by the government. The forum protested against initiatives such as plans to remove refugee status for Somali refugees, reduction of economic support for families with children in refugee reception centres, and an increasing number of returns of refugees to Afghanistan (Asylpolitisk forum 2016).

The involvement by Norwegian Christian leaders was summed up by columnist Sven Egil Omdal some years ago, in the newspaper *Stavanger Aftenblad* on 1 March 2014:

Christian leaders have turned into a humanitarian vanguard. When someone feels cold, weeps or is afraid of Norwegian state power, more and more often a bishop or Christian general secretary is nearby, offering warmth, comfort and vigorous protest.

10.3 Criticism from the Churches – An Elite Phenomenon?

As we have seen earlier in this chapter, Christian leaders have been overwhelmingly critical to government policy. In 2016, however, a few Christian leaders voiced scepticism toward the profile of churches and Christian organizations in these matters. One of them was Vebjørn Selbekk, the editor of the conservative Christian newspaper *Dagen*. In an interview with the newspaper *VG* on 6 February 2016, he stated that he sympathizes with Sylvi Listhaug, claiming that the question of immigration must be solved politically and that the church has no special competence in the field. Erik Furnes, general secretary of Indremisjonsforbundet, a conservative, low-church inner mission organization, expressed similar views. In an editorial in the organization's magazine *Sambåndet* in April 2016, Furnes reminded readers that it is the politicians who have a responsibility to 'take care of the totality of concerns' and criticized church leaders for having voiced statements that were too specific against the policy of the government. In an interview in *Vårt Land* on 6 February 2016, Furnes warned against one-sidedness from the church, stating that he, to some extent, understood Sylvi Listhaug.

In early 2016, *Vårt Land* published a couple of interviews pointing to an alleged cleavage between Christian leaders and the local grass roots. A local politician from the Christian Democrats, Torolf Nordbø, claimed in an interview on 2 February that the lack of immigration control is worry number one among many people at grassroots level, and author Lars Akerhaug told a journalist on 1 February that, while visiting some local Christian communities to present his books on extremism in Norway, he noticed an undercurrent of scepticism toward Muslims. Akerhaug quoted statements like 'all Muslims can lie; it is part of their religion', and 'the Muslims have come to take over Norway'. As the Christian leaders have a different view, these opinions are seldom voiced in public, he said, adding that these views come from the grass roots members and from visitors who may not be members of the congregation.

So, my question is whether the Christian criticism of the government's refugee policy is just an elite phenomenon, while Sylvi Listhaug and the government have broad support at the local and grassroots level in the Christian communities.

10.4 A Study of Six Municipalities

My study is based on local Christian websites, Facebook pages, parish magazines and local organizations' publications in the town of Kristiansand in the southernmost part of Norway, as well as in five surrounding municipalities: Birkenes, Lillesand, Søgne, Songdalen, and Vennesla. In total, these six municipalities, situated in the Agder region, have about 130,000 inhabitants and is part of an area sometimes referred to as Norway's Bible Belt, known for its vital and diverse Christian involvement in the majority Church of Norway and in a wide range of minority churches and Christian organizations. Christian faith and participation in organized Christianity are more widespread here than in other areas of Norway (Botvar, Repstad, and Aagedal 2010). Although a softening of the strictest and most pietistic religious traditions has been observed in recent decades, active Christians still seem to be more conservative and restrictive in matters of morality in the region of Agder than elsewhere in Norway (Repstad 2009; Magnussen, Repstad, and Urstad 2012; Repstad 2014). Hence, it is not unreasonable to believe that if Christians in this relatively conservative region are critical towards the government's restrictive policy against refugees and asylum seekers, the same will be the case for Christians in other regions.

I have systematically studied websites, Facebook pages, and printed publications from 52 local congregations and Christian organizations, using a combination of counting and a more hermeneutic qualitative analysis. There is no comprehensive overview of the number of such publications available in these municipalities, but I believe I have reviewed most of the material published from August 2015 to March 2016. Not all local faith communities and organizations publish electronically, but most of them do, so I would dare to say that my study captures the general sentiment in local Christian publications in the area during the period in question. Like many other European countries, Norway experienced a considerable increase in the number of asylum seekers during these months, followed by a marked decrease. At some point during this time frame, there seemed to be a marked national change in rhetoric about refugees and asylum seekers, in the media as well as in public opinion. From October to November especially, there was a shift from empathy and care to more concern for strictness and control. It will be interesting to note whether this shift is reflected in the local Christian publications as well.

10.5 A Widespread and Stable Local Christian Concern

What did I find? Publications from 28 of the 52 congregations and organizations – over half of them – mentioned refugees and asylum seekers during the eight months analysed. Most statements are connected to local humanitarian efforts, and there are many recommendations to take part in such volunteer work. These projects are sometimes organized by the congregations or organizations themselves, sometimes in cooperation with others, either municipal bodies, other Christian communities, or humanitarian organizations like the Red Cross.

A main finding is that not one single statement from the 52 local Christian organizations expressed support for the government's asylum politics and its proposals for a more restrictive policy. This does not mean that many of the publications explicitly objected to the restrictive policy, but some did voice a protest. An employee in the Salvation Army in Kristiansand was invited to speak at an event in one of Kristiansand's largest minority churches, the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church, and according to the report in the magazine of this faith community, *Frikirkeaktuelt*, in November 2015, she had 'much to say about what, in her opinion, is an unsuccessful policy'. She criticized several concrete proposals for a more restrictive line of action. A pastor in the Pentecostal congregation Filadelfia in Kristiansand quoted Angela Merkel's statement that fear is a poor adviser. He concluded by asking whether we in Norway are meant to be only five million inhabitants: 'Could we not be seven? We have enough space, and we have an economy enabling us to meet the challenges of our continent', he wrote in *Filadelfiamagazinet*, March 2015. The local congregation of the Church of Norway in Søgne some miles west of Kristiansand encouraged its members on its Facebook page in September to take part in a demonstration outside the town hall to show the politicians that they 'welcome the refugees to Søgne'. This was before a meeting where the local council was to decide how many refugees (if any) the municipality should receive. The Christian social welfare organization Blue Cross housed many asylum seekers in Kristiansand during an acute period in the early autumn of 2015, when several refugees arrived on the night ferry from Denmark. Twice that autumn, the Blue Cross organized benefit concerts for refugee help, and a well-known singer-songwriter in Norway, Ole Paus, was interviewed on the Blue Cross website, encouraging people to turn their backs on the attitudes of the Progress Party. On the website of the Pentecostal congregation Betania, we found before Christmas 2015 a feature article on Budget Hotel in Kristiansand, which served as a temporary home for 82 refugees. Here the authors took issue with the oft-used term *lykkejegere* (fortune hunters): 'Had we

been in the same situation, we too would probably have stopped at nothing in our hunt for happiness and a better life'. Finally, City Mission pastor Bjarte Leer-Helgesen in Kristiansand has a much-read Facebook page where he, on 16 December 2016, wrote ironically about Sylvi Listhaug and her use of the term 'tyranny of goodness'.

There are some more statements with a political sting, but most of the 28 congregations and organizations writing about asylum seekers mention various humanitarian initiatives, inviting members and others to take part in these. Examples are refugee cafés with low-threshold language training and social contact, football for young asylum seekers, collection of clothes for asylum seekers living in temporary emergency centres, and organized systems of refugee hosts. As mentioned, many initiatives were the results of cooperation, such as the welcome centres for refugees in Vågsbygd Church and in the parish hall of the Cathedral in Kristiansand. Christian social welfare organizations such as the Blue Cross, the Salvation Army, Christian Intercultural Work (KIA), and the Church City Mission in Kristiansand are doing their share, and so are several minority churches, such as the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church and local Pentecostal congregations.

The lowest level of activity was found among low-church organizations often associated with so-called 'prayer halls' (*bedehus*). These have a long tradition of being 'within, but not controlled by' the Church of Norway. Only two out of 13 organizations in this category mentioned refugees or asylum seekers in their publications. This part of the Norwegian Christian landscape has shrunk in numbers and resources recently. Furthermore, they have a religious tradition characterized more by words and dogma than by a focus on 'good deeds'. However, there were exceptions: According to their website, the local branch of the Norwegian Lutheran Mission established a café with language training and homework assistance for immigrants every Tuesday.

The minority churches are at least as active as the Church of Norway, possibly because active members in the minority churches are used to taking initiatives themselves. They have less bureaucracy and a shorter distance between thought and action. I do not have direct evidence of such an explanation in my empirical material; it should be considered as a hypothesis for further research.

There is no significant change in frequency or content of the texts about refugees during the period analysed. Neither is there any indication that the efforts to help are a kind of disguised missionary or conversionist project. Here, the activists at the local level seem to follow the recommendations given in a statement from the Christian Council of Norway (2009) about baptism of asylum seekers, where it is stated that 'no one should be manipulated to adopt a faith through

some exploitation of their vulnerable situation or their wish for protection'. Such exploitation may exist, especially in some charismatic milieus (Stene 2016), but there were no traces of it in the publications analysed. The reasons given in every case for encouraging people to help were a combination of general ethics and the occasional reference to Biblical recommendations to help people in need, such as the Pentecostal congregation Betania's reference on their website to Matthew 25:35–40⁴ when asking people to bring winter clothes for asylum seekers to Betania's office for further distribution.

How are the refugees and asylum seekers presented? In general, these publications are rather modest and ascetic in their use of pictures and advanced layout. That said, Norwegian helpers are presented more often than the asylum seekers with names and pictures, and those who are quoted in the text are nearly always Norwegian helpers. However, the texts are dominated by care and respect for asylum seekers, presenting them as human beings in need of help, and characterizing them more as motivated people with resources than as pitiful, calculating or selfish creatures.

How valid are the findings? The study covers a limited area, so the potential for mechanical generalizations to Norway is limited. However, unsystematic visits to websites in other parts of Norway (including Oslo and the county of Hordaland) seem to confirm the tendencies found in the south. And, as mentioned before, Agder is a comparatively conservative region in Norway, both politically and religiously, so it is a reasonable hypothesis that we may find even stronger criticism of the government's immigration policy elsewhere.

We cannot rule out the possibility that there is some informal and hidden support for a restrictive immigration and refugee policy among grassroots Christians. The same can be said about a possible scepticism against Muslims. Most of the texts that I have looked at were written by employees or volunteers at the local level; some might call them members of local elites, or at least local opinion leaders. Be that as it may, there are no indications of such scepticism in the analysed material, and I can add that the threshold for member response on the organizations' Facebook pages does seem to be quite low. Support for my conclusions can also be found in the fact that very few Norwegian priests or pastors in local congregations have expressed negative attitudes against asylum seekers and immigrants (Haugen 2014).

4 'For I was hungry and you gave me food....'

10.6 A Change of Sentiment

I have not found a massive and unanimous, explicit support for a more liberal policy. 24 of the 52 organizations, mainly in the low-church milieus, were silent about asylum seekers and refugees, and most of those who mentioned them recommended local humanitarian projects without political comments. However, all the statements within the field of politics clearly went against restrictions proposed by the government and/or criticized government rhetoric, especially from Immigration Minister Sylvi Listhaug. Furthermore, the strong recommendations to help can also be interpreted as indirectly political in the heated debate in 2015–2016, when Christian leaders were stigmatized as ‘tyrants of goodness’, although my interpretation here should not be stretched too far.

The study gives no indication that organized Christianity at the local level followed the change from generosity and empathy to control and fear that took place some weeks before Christmas in 2015 in some media, among some politicians, and in parts of public opinion. Many indications of this change can be mentioned. A change from a concern to help to a sceptical attitude seems to have been a general European phenomenon. Researchers behind a content analysis of newspapers from eight European countries (not including Scandinavia) summarize their findings like this:

Temporal trends: the narratives of the coverage changed dramatically across Europe during 2015. The sympathetic and empathetic response of a large proportion of the European press in the summer of 2015 and especially in the early autumn of the same year was replaced by suspicion and, in some cases, hostility towards refugees and migrants, following the November attacks in Paris. (Chouliaraki et al. 2017, 2)

A study of regional and local newspapers and regional TV in the south and north of Norway showed a similar shift, although not as dramatic as the European study. The authors have analysed 10 local and regional media from August 2015 until July 2016. What they call the perspective of help was the most prominent one, but the relative number of items with this perspective decreased from November 2015. The total number of articles about refugees also decreased significantly from January 2016 (Hognestad and Lamark 2017, 12).

A similar change took place in the Liberal–Conservative *Aftenposten*, Norway’s biggest newspaper. Charlotte Åsland Larsen (2016) has conducted a quantitative and qualitative study of this newspaper during two periods of time, August–September 2015, when many asylum seekers started to arrive, and January 2016, when Norwegians looked back on a year with a large influx of asylum seekers, and before it was clear that immigration was on the decline. Solidarity and

care for refugees dominated the newspaper's news coverage during the first period, while what Larsen calls a discourse of burden became more frequent in the second period. There was also a sharper focus on refugees as individuals during the first period. For example, refugees were more often presented by name and picture during this period. During both periods, Norwegian journalists, politicians and experts were the chief speakers rather than the refugees themselves. Discourse about refugees as threats was also present in *Aftenposten*, but in very few cases. This approach was presumably more widespread in other media, not least in social media.

10.7 Influential Media – But There are Countermoves

Some politicians, especially members of government from the Progress Party, have tried to trigger worries about uncontrolled immigration and radical Islam after the relatively large number of refugees that came to Norway in 2015. As for the media's more general role, they no doubt have the power to influence popular opinion, especially in alliance with national politicians. In the terms of Zygmunt Bauman (2016), the fear that is a general trait in all human existence can be translated into *official fear*, where those who are different are marginalized through a number of mechanisms, such as stereotyping, scapegoating, and moral paralysis. On a more concrete level, media studies often conclude that reports about refugees tend to be stereotypical, and that they feature in the news in connection with negative topics and events (for an overview, see Figsenschou, Thorbjørnsrud, and Larsen 2015, 129). These three Norwegian media researchers have analysed several Norwegian media's presentations of asylum politics and asylum seekers from 2011 to 2014. Their picture of the media coverage is ambiguous. They claim that Norwegian politicians and bureaucrats get a lot of space in the media to promote what they call a strict, but fair immigration and refugee policy. At the same time, they note that concrete narratives about specific individuals are often told as well.⁵ A typical example is when individuals are introduced and encouraged to tell their dramatic stories, often when they are refused refugee status by Norwegian authorities. According to the researchers, these narratives can function as criticism of a strict policy, as they resonate with and appeal to an intuitive, common-sense morality. However, at the same time, the events narrated are presented mainly as isolated single events, and

⁵ See also Chapter 3.

not related to any political context. Therefore, these stories can contribute to greater division between those who deserve to stay and those who do not. Thus, they may end up as slightly idealized narratives about people who deserve to stay, without any critical searchlight on the rules and their interpretation.

The results of my study may be conceived as a sign of the limited power of national media and national politicians. The profile of the local publications can be considered a kind of counter-information, stressing humanitarian and Christian responsibility. Such counter-information can probably be of more significance if individuals relate to each other than if they are more isolated media users. Moreover, direct contact with refugees – something many of the local Christian activists have – will probably dismantle some stereotypes about Muslims and refugees in general. The old contact hypothesis formulated by Gordon Allport (1954), claimed exactly that: Personal encounters will reduce prejudice and increase mutual understanding. The thesis has often been criticized, but it seems robust, especially when the situation is not strongly conflictual to begin with. A large meta-study including more than 500 studies confirmed this some years ago (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). In the words of the famous composer and record producer Phil Spector's first hit: 'To know, know, know him is to love, love, love him'. More recent studies from Denmark have also strengthened the contact hypothesis: Personal contacts at work and in neighbourhoods increase tolerance toward ethnic minorities, as members of the minorities appear less threatening, and majority members who gain more concrete knowledge of minority people also understand their situation better (Thomsen 2012; Rafiqi and Thomsen 2014).

Local media seem to be quite vital and important in Norway, possibly because of a general ideology in many regions in the direction of decentralization.⁶ The media that I have studied fall in the category of religious journalism, that is publications edited by religious institutions (Hjarvard 2012; see also Chapter 3). This probably limits the scope of influence to Christian in-groups. On the other hand, such publications tend to spread their own message without necessarily following trends in the national and more secular media, and may be important for the identity-forming in the groups.

So, if there are worries among Christians in and around Kristiansand about Islam and immigration, such worries seem overshadowed by a simple Christian ideal of helping those who need help. It is interesting that this moral commitment is found in very broad parts of the Christian landscape, not only among mainstream and comparatively liberal adherents of what Nancy Ammerman

⁶ See Chapter 1 on the territorial dimension in Scandinavian politics.

(1997) in her studies in America called ‘Golden Rule Christianity’, but also among conservative Evangelicals.

The main findings in this study can be discussed in a broader class perspective. Active Christians in Norway belong mainly to the middle class (Repstad 2010, 384). In an interview study of middle class morality and values in Norway, the researchers find that representatives of this class state ‘that they dislike racists, the intolerant, the dishonest, those who are judgmental etc.’ (Skarpenes, Saksind, and Hestholm 2016, 14). The authors claim that such statements reflect a value hierarchy culturally rooted in Christianity and humanism. The hero in this Christian–humanist repertoire resembles the Good Samaritan, they claim. Another hero is the socially responsible citizen. The discourse in the local Christian publications that I have studied, is in accordance with this middle-class moral profile.

A final point: a trend toward a more sensual Christianity, an aestheticization of religion in a wide sense, is reported in several recent research reports from Norway (Repstad and Trysnes 2013; Løvland and Repstad 2014). These reports point to an increasing significance of religion’s experiential and emotional dimension, and less weight on dogmatic and theological aspects. Processions are getting longer, sermons are getting shorter. In preparation for confirmation, young people learn fewer commandments and light more candles. Sometimes an interest in aesthetics is read as a sign of superficiality and of a noncommittal attitude. Søren Kierkegaard’s criticism in that direction still has some influence in Scandinavia. However, aesthetics in a wide sense – that which appeals to the senses and the emotions – can be important resources to form sentiments and encourage practices. Our study indicates that this shift in lived religion does not necessarily empty Christianity of its immediate ethical content.

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