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Embodying God: ritual, value, and secular-sacred entanglements in Norwegian folk high school education

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This paper explores the role of Lutheran ritual in value formations in Norwegian folk high school education. Folk high schools, subsidized by the state, offer gap year programs that are meant to instil values in young adult students before they attend higher education or enter the workforce. Drawing upon fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork at a Christian folk high school in south-eastern Norway, I assess how the school's Lutheran masses were designed to develop values relating to community, experience, and equality by inviting all students and staff, irrespective of their personal relationships with the Christian faith, to participate. I argue that despite prevailing stereotypes of Norway being predominantly secular, the 'hidden sacrality' of Norwegian political and social life was made visible through these masses at the state-sponsored Christian folk high school. I take the body as an analytic, arguing that the school's rituals, designed to encourage students to 'embody God', were situated in students' bodies in such a way that sameness and difference, secularity and sacrality, and faith and doubt could co-exist.

Introduction

Grøndal[1] is a Norwegian Christian folk high school in southeastern Norway. As part of its school programming, Grøndal offers students Lutheran liturgical masses[2] held twice a month on campus called *Thomasmesse* (Thomas's mass), which are designed to encourage students to 'embody God' through ritual practice. Inspired by the Biblical account of the apostle Thomas, Grøndal's priest developed the mass as a place where faith and doubt could co-exist.[3] Over the course of fifteen months of ethnographic work at Grøndal, I found that most of the school's students voluntarily participated in these services despite the majority of them describing themselves as secular, Atheists, or 'not Christian' in belief. These assertions reflect national statistics; most contemporary Norwegians do not attend church regularly nor say that they believe in God, and younger cohorts, the majority of whom comprised *Thomasmesse* participants, are even less likely to engage in regular religious practice.[4] Even so, 64 per cent of Norwegians in general are members of the Church of Norway,[5] and baptisms,

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confirmations, and wedding ceremonies are still commonly practised and performed mostly by priests in Lutheran churches. These cultural ties to the Church of Norway reflect Norway's historical commitments to Lutheranism; in 1537, Lutheranism became the official religion of Norway (then under Danish rule) and was also specified as Norway's state religion when it gained independence from Denmark in 1814 and entered a new union with Sweden. The Church of Norway was fully supported by the Norwegian state until 2017, when it became an independent legal entity, and despite its new legal status, it remains funded, in part, by the state today. The historical, and contemporary, presence of Lutheranism in Norwegian statecraft has contributed to what Van den Breemer, Casanova and Wyller call a 'hidden sacrality' in the Norwegian secular (2014: 9), which reveals 'entanglements' between the secular and the sacred (Balkenhol, van den Hemel & Stengs 2020) in Norwegian political and social life.

While considerable work in academic discourse has problematized distinctions made between sacred and secular formations, particularly in Protestant contexts (Asad 2003; Mahmood 2009), I find Balkenhol et al.'s conceptual framework of the 'secular sacred' most useful in assessing how religious and non-religious forms became 'entangled' through the *Thomasmesse* rituals. Balkenhol et al. suggest that 'entanglements' between the secular and the sacred are located in 'persons, objects … and places' that 'intertwine, conflate and conflict' (2020: 5). For a student body composed of young people who largely identified as not religious but actively participated in Lutheran rituals, I found that these sorts of conflicts were minimized during ritual activity but came up in conversations I had with students after the rituals when I asked them to describe their relationships with Christian faith. Most students who identified as 'not Christian' meant that they did not identify as having a clear faith profile or a 'personal' relationship with Jesus, while others, who identified as being 'culturally Christian' or 'not *very* Christian', generally had a positive relationship with religious traditions and holidays but did not want to be associated with more 'conservative' forms of Christianity they described as being 'exclusionary' or 'judgemental'. Many students articulated their relationship with Christianity as a dynamic process, saying they were 'doubting', or 'unsure', of what they believed but, through the *Thomasmesse* rituals, had become more open to experiencing Christian faith, especially within the communal context the masses offered. By privileging student participation over uniformity in belief, *Thomasmesse* muted distinctions between faith and doubt in the student body and revealed how 'entanglements' between the secular and the sacred are present in both religious practice in Norway and in the state apparatus of the folk high school network.

Christian and secular[6] folk high schools alike receive funding from the government and share a central office in Norway's capital, Oslo. These schools also represent historical entanglements with Lutheranism; conceived by writer, philosopher, and pastor N.F.S. Grundtvig in the 1840s, the first folk high schools were designed to provide the peasantry with free Lutheran education meant to develop democracy, equality, and life-long learning methods outside of traditional forms of schooling in Scandinavia (Sørensen & Stråth 1997). The influence of folk high schools in Norway's national identity should not be understated, as the folk high school and Norwegian Romantic movements also contributed to Norway's eventual independence from Sweden and the formation of its nascent nation state (Stråth 2018). To date, the Norwegian state supports 83 folk high schools across Norway, with 11 per cent of Norwegian young

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people attending them usually after secondary school and prior to further education or entering the workforce.[7] Norway's folk high schools remain an important part of Norwegian value-making (Lövgren 2015) and are periodically required to submit value documents outlining their chosen core values for student development in order to receive continued funding from the state.

Values, or 'animating ideas' (Haynes 2017: 8) that constitute what is 'good and proper' (Graeber 2001: 1), have gained renewed attention in anthropology (see Eriksen 2012; Haynes & Hickel 2016; Howell 2016; Otto & Willerslev 2013; Rio & Smedal 2009; Robbins 2015). While anthropological work to date has largely focused on the ways in which values are realized materially or through social action, I take a different approach in this paper, focusing on the body as a site for value-making that mechanizes what is desirable for individuals operating within a social whole. I draw from Joel Robbins's work on value realization through ritual (2015) and Catherine Bell's work on the 'ritualized body' (1992) to assess how the embodied ritual practices in *Thomasmesse* served to inform both the realization and problematization of two of the school's chosen core values: *opplevelse* (experience) and *fellesskap* (community). I argue that by encouraging full student participation in these rituals, despite the range of individual religious beliefs represented in Grøndal's student body, these values – community and experience – contributed to an encompassing value (Dumont 1986) of equality, as participants were asked to view each other as equal 'through God's eyes'. I employ Marianne Gullestad's (1984) analytical lens of 'equality as sameness', arguing that while difference is usually minimized in Norwegian social life, *Thomasmesse* provided a 'safe place' for students to explore religious difference by first grounding their sameness through shared *Thomasmesse* ritual practice. I suggest this form of equality was contingent on the folk high school pedagogical model of 'embodied value-making', as I call it, which prioritized students 'trying out' the *Thomasmesse* rituals instead of adhering to specific confessions of faith, so that students could explore what difference in faith and doubt among themselves could feel like on an affective register. This open invitation in Christian practice, where difference in belief was muted for the sake of developing an experiential-based community, is what made *Thomasmesse* a powerful apparatus for establishing school values through embodied ritual.

Though *Thomasmesse* was designed to minimize epistemological and interpersonal conflicts relating to faith through an emphasis on shared, communal practice, tensions over secular-sacred entanglements arose in disagreements staff had over how the *Thomasmesse* rituals should be administered. Even so, negotiating these conflicts presented a realm for reinforcing school values, a phenomenon Tom Bratrud (2021), echoing Max Gluckman (1958 [1940]), suggests is a critical part of value realization. I argue that conflicts between student difference and sameness, the secular and the sacred, and the citizen and the state were mediated through students' bodies as they experienced a specialized form of religious community *Thomasmesse* offered to them. I conclude by considering the implications of this Christian practice on both Norwegian social life and statecraft, which I suggest may illuminate similar entanglements in 'secular' societies more broadly.

The setting

It is *vinteruke* (winter week), and the entire student body, the *stipps*,[8] and most of the school's staff have spent the last several days staying at a ski lodge several hours inland from school and high up in the mountains. While students spend much of their time

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back at the folk school busy in their individual programmes – football, handball, chess, backpacking, tourism, and international development – several mandatory school-wide activities, such as the ski trip, are also scheduled throughout the year. The trip has gone forward despite the ever-present spectre of COVID-19, as the school has rented out the entirety of the lodge for its hundred or so students and staff, thus managing to operate within the bounds of Norway's pandemic-related restrictions. Over the course of the week, most of the students spend their days skiing or snowboarding, but other activities are available for students who would rather go ice-fishing, play board games, or practise yoga.

The final night of winter week, a *Thomasmesse* service is scheduled to be held at a local church near the lodge. Normally, *Thomasmesse* is held bi-weekly on campus in the school chapel or at a church near the school, but this time the students and I have the chance to experience rituals we've performed together before in a new and different setting. Later, Jens, the school priest, will tell me that it's important for students to see how their shared Christian heritage is present all over Norway, not just at the church back home by Grøndal.

We leave the lodge together, a stream of staff and students cradled under a tapestry of stars. Otherwise, the path to the church is completely dark; there are no streetlights, and as we slide slightly on the icy road dissolved in blackness, we grab each other's arms every now and then to catch our falls. We arrive at the church, a small, simple white wooden structure, snow-covered and cross-shaped; its extended quadrants are capped by gentle eaves that circle around the centre of the building and slope upwards to a humble wooden steeple. We make our way inside its white-washed interior, softly lit in candlelight supplemented by several electric chandeliers that add an additional glow to the room. The room's carefully carved beams, painted in embellishments of gold and powder blue, line a short aisle that leads to an altar that displays four large golden candlesticks supporting thick, lit candles.

As students and staff enter, stomping clinging snow from boots and peeling off damp mittens and hats, they pick up folded pieces of paper with the order of service printed on it, even though they've participated in several *Thomasmesse* services by now and are familiar with the routine. The church is small, quiet, close: the painted wooden benches built into the walls of the three quadrants positioned around the altar don't leave any space for social distancing. We fill every seat, knees touching, shoulders together.

The message

'Welcome to *Thomasmesse*',[9] Jens says to us, extending his arms wide. 'Before we start this evening, I'm going to ask two *stipps* (student leaders) to join me for a moment; Hans and Sven, will you two come up?' The *stipps* rise from their pews, smiling as they side-step students' knees before making their way to the aisle. When they arrive at the altar, Jens, smiling, asks them to give each other a hug. They pause, looking at each other from the sides of their eyes, before turning and extending their arms widely, murmuring in an exaggerated embrace. Jens thanks them while students laugh softly, before excusing them to return to their seats.

'This is today's theme', says Jens, looking into the small audience of students watching him silently, sweating slightly under their woollen sweaters and ski jackets. 'The thing about people is that so much of what we experience is physical', Jens continues. 'You become a person when someone else sees you and holds you. And that's what's so interesting about the creation story; God created us in His image, and it's as if He has

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given us something inside of us where we want to be near to God. And then, we find that it's God who also wants to be near to us. To hold us. To give us a really good hug. And then we can also do that for each other. My faith is very important to me.' Jens pauses. 'It makes me feel strong and safe.'

'My faith'

Jens's message concludes. Two *stipps* are responsible for leading the next portion of *Thomasmesse*, and Jens calls them to the front of the church. '*Min tro*' ('My Faith') is a part of the service where a pair of rotating *stipps* interviews a chosen guest (a teacher or student), inviting the guest to share their personal experience with faith. This evening, the *stipps*, Sven and Hans, call Håvard, the school's football teacher, to join them at the empty seat in between them where the three of them will sit for the duration of the interview. He joins them, his hands folded gently in his lap. Sven asks, 'What is your faith?'

Håvard is soft-spoken and it's difficult to hear his answers from the pew in which I sit. 'My faith isn't necessarily about answering tough questions', he says, 'but it's more about how I've experienced God; that informs my *grunntro* (core beliefs).'

Hans asks the next question: 'Why did you choose to work at a Christian folk high school?'

Håvard answers, 'The main reason was the football class, but it was a bonus that it was a Christian school. I thought, "maybe the *miljø* (milieu) will be extra good." And that has been the case. There is a good community at the school because of the values here. There is love here; people are kind to each other; people feel seen but safe. You are safer and stronger in yourself after a year here.'

The rituals

When the interview ends, the *stipps* and Håvard return to their seats. The next portion of the service is called *bønnevandring* (prayer walking) and is the most participatory part of *Thomasmesse*. Three stations have been set up by *stipps* around the front of the room: the first, a small table covered in dozens of unlit votive candles; the second, several pews strewn with scraps of paper and pens for writing *bønnelapper* (prayer notes); and the third, three chairs set up in a row to the side of the altar for *forbønn* (intercessory prayer).[10] While recorded praise songs, sung in both Norwegian and English, play over the church speakers, Jens invites students to rise and light a candle, write requests as they feel led, and receive prayer. 'Some really want to do this and others maybe don't', he says. 'Let's respect each other. It's very important to have quiet time together. Welcome.'

The students rise slowly, many of them holding their arms around each other, shuffling in formation towards the three stations while giving each other a gentle arm squeeze, or resting their heads on each other's shoulders as they wait in line. Not all the students join the formations; several remain quietly seated. Students' faces glow in the light of the votives; they smile softly as they turn and walk to another station.

A group of students sits in the pews at the prayer note station, scribbling thoughtfully. Jens and two teachers stand at the intercessory prayer station, positioned behind the three empty chairs; three *stipps* join them to wait for students to approach to receive prayer. As students sit, pairs of teachers and *stipps* gently place the palms of their hands on the students' shoulders in a posture of prayer, their eyes closed. They say nothing; all we can hear is the recording of gentle acoustic worship music playing from speakers overhead. They remain silent for the duration of the ritual; those interceding simply

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lift their hands from their respective recipient's shoulders when their prayer concludes, usually after a minute or two has passed, indicating that the student can rise from the chair and move on.

While I have observed several *Thomasmesse* services on campus over the course of my fieldwork, this is the first time I have elected to participate by receiving prayer. I join a line of several students waiting for prayer. We face the front of the room, eyes averted from those receiving prayer, in what feels like an offering of privacy. When we see the movement of someone rising from one of the chairs from the corner of our eyes, we turn our bodies quietly and take the newly vacated seat. A chair becomes available, and I sit in it, waiting for Jens to place his hands on my shoulders. I can sense the warmth of his palms before I feel the slight weight of their contact. I have not been touched in such an intentional way by anyone outside of my family since the start of the pandemic. Tears spring to my eyes. Jens does not speak but I can hear him murmuring a prayer, although I cannot decipher his words. After a moment, he gently lifts his hands and gives my shoulders a soft squeeze before I rise and return to my seat at a wooden pew across the room.

Once everyone who wants to has received prayer, Jens moves to the front of the altar and, gathering the prayer notes at their station, invites two new *stipps* to the altar to read them aloud. The notes are usually written, and always read, anonymously. The *stipps*, a young man and a young woman, unfold the notes and stand, reading them in turns, one by one.

I pray for all who feel alone
I pray for my dear brother in heaven and that he can feel the hug I give him now
I pray for all my family and friends
I want a good life
God, why is it so hard for me to feel that you are here?
That we can make the world around us better for everyone
To be open to new experiences even if it can feel uncomfortable at the start
That you help everyone who is struggling
That my eating disorder will go away, I'm so tired of it
Thank you for a new day every day
Thank you for the 'fellesskap' (community) here
I hope everyone can 'oppleve' (experience) the happiness I have now
Lord, thank you

To conclude the service, Jens makes the sign of the cross and prays, 'Lord, we pray that you will meet all of us where we are and give us the safety to be free. Amen.' He smiles as students rise and shuffle out of their seats, pulling their mittens and hats on to meet the frozen chill of the dark night beyond the warmth of the church doors.

Experience and the body

The value of *opplevelse* (experience) was present both during the *Thomasmesse* rituals and regularly referenced in the dozens of interviews I had with Jens, students, and staff after the services. In addition to the other experiential and values-based education the school offered, the *Thomasmesse* rituals provided a unique dimension to value realization at Grøndal, in which the school's usual activities were paused, slowing the speed of daily life (Kapferer 2006: 676). Joel Robbins (2015), building on Louis Dumont's work on value theory (1986), writes that in most forms of social action people normally only realize lower-level values, ones that may link together to contribute to an eminent value but can also represent conflicting values that inhibit a paramount value

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from being fully achieved. As Robbins notes, some collective activities, like rituals, hold a particular social power that cause certain values to emerge as 'exemplary', which allow them to encompass lower-level values in the service of their full realization (2015: 21). For Jens, this meant that the *Thomasmesse* rituals were one way Grøndal could realize equality through the value of 'experience', as he encouraged students to participate fully, no matter their individual positions with faith or belief. 'When we talk about faith', he said, 'it takes a lot of time. It's a long way in with words, but that's why actions are so beautiful. They connect the words to really understand.' Linking ritual practice with 'understanding' was key to *Thomasmesse*, he said, and necessary for bringing the value of a shared experience to Grøndal's students and staff, no matter the individual faith profiles represented in the student body.

When Jens first developed *Thomasmesse* twenty-five or so years ago, he said he made attendance voluntary, which meant that the masses were mostly composed of students who already had a positive relationship with Christian practice. While *kristendomsfag* (Christianity teaching) at Grøndal was, and still is, mandatory, Jens was apprehensive about making *Thomasmesse* the same, telling me that it was 'close to the limits' of what he felt was socially acceptable in Norway. 'You can't force someone to religious practice', he said. 'Then it takes away from the "safe space".' By implementing a school policy in which the first *Thomasmesse* of the school year is compulsory, however, Jens felt that giving students who wouldn't normally be interested in religious practice a more directed chance to 'try it out' would better prepare them for deciding whether they would like to continue attending further masses. Soon after this policy change, Jens said that he and Grøndal's students shared an 'experience' during the first collective *Thomasmesse* he didn't expect. 'It was a low-pressure, liberal service', he said, 'but suddenly, we experienced the same experience of God, the presence we had. It was kind of a breakthrough, and since then, we've had many students coming for it. It's a whole other activity and it's become a central part of the school.'

Jens's description of students and staff having the 'same experience of God' indicates an example of what Émile Durkheim called 'collective effervescence' (1974), a phenomenon that happens when people come together in ritual practice and share similar thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Ritual encounters have long been a realm of anthropological inquiry, with contemporary work suggesting that rituals can become inscribed and located within and upon the body (Bell 1992; Csordas 2004; Magliocco 2014). Bell, drawing upon Lakoff's (1987) work on categorization, describes how a 'ritualized body' emerges in ritual practice, where concepts, knowledge, and social processes are not constructed a priori, but rather, become 'embodied' through experience and encounters (1992: 95). While the role that the body plays in value realization has been largely absent in previous work on value theory, I have found that the linkages between the *Thomasmesse* rituals, Grøndal's stated values, and the bodies of its individual participants were necessarily intertwined. In other words, the body became the site for realizing the value of experience, and even though participants from a range of faith and non-faith backgrounds conceptualized what happened during *Thomasmesse* in different ways, students and staff articulated what they had encountered in their bodies in similar terms.

While the embodied aspects of the *Thomasmesse* rituals were privileged over proclamations of faith, language was still a present vehicle for drawing students together through shared experience while recognizing their differences in belief. The way language was positioned during *Thomasmesse*, and during conversations I had with

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students and staff afterwards, was usually conveyed in personal or individualized terms. Jens told me that he was careful to use the subjective when describing Christian faith with students; 'I mostly say, *for me*', he said, both in an interview I had with him and in the *Thomasmesse* ritual described earlier ('faith is very important to me', he said. 'It makes me feel strong and safe'). Håvard, too, described his faith during '*Min tro*' ('My Faith') as one that had been shaped by his personal 'experiences' with God, rather than through cognitive processes meant to 'answer tough questions', and the language he used to describe the Christian milieu at school was 'seen', 'strong', and 'safe', words that students could equally access. In this way, language was mobilized as an added dimension to the sensorial aspects of the *Thomasmesse* experience, through words meant to invoke an embodied relationship with faith. This language was usually described to me in phrases that centralized affectivity, where my research participants recalled feelings of 'warmth', 'love', and a sense of 'calm' that came over them during *Thomasmesse*. Torgeir, a teacher who identified as a Christian, said that when receiving intercessory prayer, he experienced 'the Holy Spirit entering the body', before trailing off with a laugh. 'No', he said. 'It's like, it feels like a calming presence.' I asked, 'So you wouldn't say it's the Holy Spirit, or…?' He said, 'I could say that, sure. I do think that the Holy Spirit is a part of that. I feel peaceful and connected with what God thinks of me. For my identity, someone who is loved by God. I think it is very individual for people, what they experience.' Torgeir told me that when he gave intercessory prayer, he hoped that the students and staff who were receiving it experienced something similar, where they could see '*hvem du er i Guds øyne* (who [they were] in God's eyes)', and that they were 'created in God's image'. He paused. 'Even if you don't have faith, I think it can be a good experience, to sit and think good thoughts.' Because of the silent nature of intercessory prayer, prayers given were open to the recipients' interpretation, and were contingent on feeling instead of verbal communication. This meant that students who did not believe in God or have religious faith could also access, and interpret, intercessory prayer in ways they found meaningful without subscribing to Christian belief.

One such student, Karl, told me how he experienced intercessory prayer as a self-described atheist, saying that he didn't feel 'the essence of God powering through' him or 'anything like that'. Instead, he described feeling 'the love' from teachers and *stipps* which gave him a 'warm feeling' that communicated to him that he 'matter[ed]. Love is a feeling that you care for others', he said. 'I imagine warmth versus cold.' Another student, Herman, also described a similar feeling of warmth in relation to *Thomasmesse*. He likened the experience to 'the physical manifestation of a hug' that brought him a sense of 'comfort' he said had been missing in his life. Herman, like Karl, had grown up praying before family meals and had attended church occasionally, and identified at the beginning of the school year as an atheist or 'at least agnostic'. As we sat together at the final *Thomasmesse* I attended before finishing fieldwork, however, he told me, 'I think I might have been kind of dishonest [about my faith]. I think it's fair to say I've been affected by the services here.' Herman said that he felt he had been 'unfair' in seeing others 'experience' God and then thinking,

> *None of this is real, your life is a lie*. I want that happiness to be real and to mean something. I want that for myself as well. That's why I came to that conclusion. Us being here together is a physical manifestation of an idea. You can see this idea of God embodied in this room, so in a very strange way, God is present. The idea of God is that He is present in each and every one of us. There's something

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> nice about God being in all those who believe in Him and maybe in those who don't? I wanted it to become real, so I tried to make it real. Simple as that.

Herman's remarks on the *Thomasmesse* experience being a 'physical manifestation of an idea' echoes Pierre Bourdieu's assessment of how belief is not situated within cognitive processes, but rather is evoked through embodied expression. 'Practical belief', he writes, 'is not a "state of mind", still less a kind of arbitrary adherence to a set of instituted dogmas and doctrines ("beliefs"), but rather a state of the body' (Bourdieu 2005: 88). Jens, too, said that he felt belief was less of a 'mental structure' and more of a 'practice', which was why he felt encouraging all students to participate in *Thomasmesse* was more important than students adhering to specific forms of belief. 'God is in everybody', Jens said, referencing Luke 17:21. 'Jesus said, "the kingdom of God is within you." He said it to everyone in the crowd, not just the disciplines.' While Jens was clear in his own beliefs and positioned the sensorial experiences happening during *Thomasmesse* within the theology of an embodied God, a belief in God was not necessary for students to access the affects associated with Jens's Biblical message. By referencing God as someone who 'hugs', 'holds', and 'wants to be near' people, Jens invoked God as a physical being who could be mobilized, and felt, through the touch associated with the *Thomasmesse* rituals. Everyone in attendance had a body, and their bodies could, in turn, be used as a vehicle for experiencing and sharing God's love – or love more broadly – with each other. In this way, the value of experience established a shared sense of relating, one that was necessary for developing the sort of community *Thomasmesse* sought to create.

Community and equality

Over the course of participating in a dozen or so *Thomasmesse* services, I came to find that the values of experience and community were co-constitutive in making egalitarian relating possible during its rituals. Community could only be established through students' willingness to experience *Thomasmesse* together; likewise, this experience could not be realized without the communal practice of shared ritual encounter. This form of close community – *fellesskap* – is one that Maja Hojer Bruun (2011) writes has strong ties to Scandinavian conceptions of equality and contributed to what I came to view as the encompassing value (Dumont 1986) meant to be realized through the *Thomasmesse* rituals. Egalitarianism as a social value has garnered considerable attention in anthropological work in Scandinavia (Abram 2018; Barnes 1954; Gullestad 1984), and was notably critiqued by Marianne Gullestad, who argued that Norwegians are less interested in establishing equality than making each other the same. While contemporary scholars have developed Gullestad's position considerably in recent years, arguing that her conceptual framework of 'equality as sameness' should be grounded contextually rather than taken for granted as a social fact (Aarset 2018; Erstad 2018), repositioned from the private to a public state project (Vike & Lo 2023), and reoriented to include how notions of tolerance and inclusion also inform perceptions of equality in Scandinavia (Jacobsen 2018), a point I take up later in this paper, Gullestad's work remains salient to the discussion at hand. While Gullestad did not view the social processes of Norwegians making each other 'the same' positively, I argue that the *Thomasmesse* rituals I describe here provided an alternative form of egalitarian relating that promoted student difference *within* sameness that was both positive and largely absent in broader Norwegian secular social life. Through Jens's message that students

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were all 'created in God's image' and were equally loved and valued by God – irrespective of their individual beliefs – students were made to be both equal *and* the same through their differences. By positioning difference as a positive and critical aspect of equality and faith, students were able to develop a sort of community that was contingent on expressed differentiation.

These differences were situated within bounded, repeated rituals that were designed to create a 'safe space' that would preserve students' agency within the context of communal ritual practice. Reading anonymously written prayer notes out loud, for example, revealed student difference in such a way that allowed students to feel 'seen' but 'safe', as their requests could be noted while their privacy was maintained. The prayer notes also made student difference in faith visible. Trygve, who identified as an atheist, told me that he liked writing prayer notes even though he didn't believe in God. 'But even if you don't believe, you *are* practising Christianity?' I asked him. He nodded emphatically. 'I'm one hundred per cent practising Christianity. It's not weird, I don't put too much thought into it.' When I asked if he ever wrote *bønnelapper* (prayer notes) and he said, 'Every time. I always write, "I hope everything goes fine for everyone." No "amen", no "please, God", just a normal message for everyone.' By reading all prayer notes aloud, all students' faith – or lack thereof – was given equal attention, while the individual needs of students were respected and valued. The anonymous nature of the ritual made this kind of sharing possible; differentiation happened within the context of unified practice.

The only portion of *Thomasmesse* that did not prioritize anonymity – and publicly displayed difference – was '*Min tro*' ('My Faith'). Even so, participants were asked if they would like to share prior to the service and had the option to decline the invitation. '*Min tro*' was also not a proclamation, or statement, of beliefs; rather, it offered students and staff the chance to share their own stories of how they had experienced faith before attending Grøndal, and to give reflections on how they viewed the forms of Christian practice on campus. An invitation for being a '*Min tro*' guest was one of honour, and was, like *bønnelapper* (prayer notes), designed for students to develop an 'understanding' of how differences in faith within the student body could still contribute to a shared community. '*Min tro*', then, was a bridge between the uniformity of the shared rituals that happened during the rest of *Thomasmesse* and the subjectivity of individual student belief that was also happening at the same time within them. Over the course of my fieldwork, I witnessed a range of students and staff who had been invited to share during '*Min tro*', and each of them had vastly different ways of speaking about their religious orientation; some said they had a Christian faith, some said they weren't sure, and others said they had no faith at all. In this way, the individual dimensions of the communal whole of *Thomasmesse* were revealed, but within specific parameters that students could accept, prepare for, or decline, should they be asked to participate.

Still, there were limits to the ways difference contributed to equality in the *Thomasmesse* community. Gender, for example, presented a realm where students and staff were usually equally represented, but only insofar as they identified as cisgender. Jens regularly referred to God using male pronouns and said that God represented a father figure to him, but also sometimes described God's qualities as being maternal and usually spoke to his own position as a father when talking about God in this way. I never observed Jens delivering material on prescribed gender roles during *Thomasmesse* and male and female students and staff were usually equally present in '*Min tro*' and other

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activities, such as leading songs or engaging in skits Jens directed from time to time. Gendered language employed during the services, however, used binary terms, which could have precluded students who were nonbinary or gender-fluid from fully engaging in the *Thomasmesse* community. I did not encounter any students who identified as such during my fieldwork, and Lisa, a teacher, speculated that this might have been because Grøndal's status as a Christian school could have deterred nonbinary students from attending. 'Maybe they don't think they'd belong', she said. 'But I don't think that would be the case.' Margrethe, a student who identified as pansexual, told me that she had some reservations of her own before enrolling. 'I was nervous coming here, but Jens is an amazing person', she said. 'He's very modern and that's what you have to be if you actually want to reach a big group of people.'

Students who decided to forgo the *Thomasmesse* services altogether presented another realm of difference that, in my view, was not regarded unfavourably by Grøndal's staff, but one that inhibited them from fully contributing to the school's community. Several students who chose not to return after the first compulsory service told me their reasons ranged from having a general lack of interest to experiencing more overt discomfort around the 'emotions' that came up for them during the rituals. Religious difference outside the bounds of Christianity could have also contributed to why some students chose not to attend *Thomasmesse*, but out of the dozens of interviews I conducted over the span of my fieldwork, I only spoke with one student who said she practised a religion other than Christianity. Raziya, a Muslim student from Iran who had gained refugee status with her family in Norway several years prior, said she sometimes attended, and enjoyed, *Thomasmesse*, but only if it didn't interfere with her Monday evening dance classes. She didn't offer any further remarks on how her Muslim faith related to the Lutheran context of *Thomasmesse*, and after several questions to that end, I didn't press it; it's possible that doing so would reveal differences she did not wish to draw attention to, or perhaps the differentiation I would have expected her to experience wasn't as significant to her as I thought it might have been. I had heard that previous *Thomasmesse* services before I arrived also included '*Min tro*' guests who were Muslim, and while I didn't witness this myself, I had heard that these guests' perspectives were embraced by Grøndal's student body.

While Gullestad's assertion that nationalism, racism, and the 'renewed importance of Lutheran Christianity in contrast to Islam' are part and parcel of 'egalitarian culture themes' in Scandinavia (2002: 45), emerging research in the region suggests the increasing relevance of tolerance as a social value in Norway's younger populations (Jacobsen 2018). While I do not wish to downplay the xenophobia that scholars have argued remains present in the Nordics (Andersson 2010; Hoffmann & Moe 2020; Midtbøen 2014), I do want to make the case that *Thomasmesse* constituted a place where Lutheran practice was not utilized as an apparatus for social exclusion, as Gullestad suggested, but rather, created a social world where difference, religious or otherwise, was positioned positively in such a way that equality *beyond* sameness could flourish. It was clear to me that Grøndal's staff hoped students who exemplified difference inside, or outside, of the *Thomasmesse* rituals would be regarded as equally important members of the school community, and that students were not pressured to attend them long term, as doing so would take away from the 'safe space' the rituals necessitated. In other words, students who did not come to *Thomasmesse* also contributed to Grøndal's overarching value of equality, as their absence served as a visible reminder that differences in faith

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outside of ritual participation were valid positions for students to take, and reinforced that Christian practice was just one of many ways that students could develop a sense of community on campus.

Conflicts and entanglements

This did not mean that differences in faith did not, at times, produce conflicts among students and staff. Several months after the ski trip, a dozen or so students – including Trygve and Karl, the two students I mentioned earlier in this paper, who described themselves as atheists – were chosen by Grøndal's teaching staff to be a part of the following school year's incoming *stipp* team. Arguably, the *stipps*' most important, and controversial, role was to assist Jens and other teachers with delivering intercessory prayer during *Thomasmesse*. By leading this ritual, *stipps* served as 'exemplary persons' (Robbins 2016), selected by staff to embody Grøndal's chosen values to the rest of the student body.

All *stipps*, whether they identified as Christians or not, administered intercessory prayer, which had drawn criticism from teachers who told me they had reservations with the practice. Lisa, a teacher, said that one year she had spoken with a *stipp* who wanted to give intercessory prayer but was a self-proclaimed atheist. 'She just wanted to wish students the best', said Lisa, 'but I thought, *well, this isn't really prayer then. This is going too far*.' As Gullestad and others have noted, Scandinavians tend to avoid conflict to establish social conformity (Gullestad 1991; Hollos 1976; Stenius 1997) and the same was true for Grøndal's staff. Martin, a teacher who had been on staff at Grøndal for the previous twenty-five years, expressed similar concerns, saying that having atheist *stipps* giving intercessory prayer was 'crossing a line that shouldn't be done' and that it was 'blasphemous' for *stipps* who regarded the practice as nothing more than giving 'good energy'. He told me, 'You should believe if you're doing something spiritual like that.' I asked him if Grøndal's staff had engaged with discussions about this practice, and if disagreements had been expressed. 'We haven't had conversations about this', he said. 'We're not very good at talking about the systems [we have in place].'

Tensions between faith and doubt during *Thomasmesse* reflect Jon Bialecki's work on American charismatic evangelicals and his observations of how two different 'poles' can exist in religious communities between 'closure' and 'openness', or what he calls a 'hermetically sealed group' and 'absolute universalism' (2017: 211). He suggests that most religious communities move between these poles, ultimately landing on a place somewhere in the middle and establishing 'patterns or planes that have a particular (although not total) stability' (2017: 212). While Jens may have been critiqued for being 'too open' in how he led *Thomasmesse*, particularly in encouraging *stipp* leadership in delivering intercessory prayer, the established 'patterns' that he had designed produced a sense of 'stability' that students and staff said they appreciated. Like Lisa, most staff talked about *Thomasmesse* as being one of the 'most important' parts of life at Grøndal and integral to the kind of community the folk high school sought to create. In other words, students being able to fully access the *Thomasmesse* rituals while contributing to the sort of egalitarian community that staff hoped students would become a part of, were worth the reservations they may have had in how these rituals were produced.

Conflicts about who should lead the *Thomasmesse* rituals also reinforced the importance of the forms of equality that the services brought to the Grøndal community in the first place. Tom Bratrud, in his work on value realization in Christian ritual

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in Vanuatu, writes that 'conflict effectively clarifies people's different interests and ongoing construction of values and their meaning' (Bratrud 2021: 465), which can lead to slippages in how values are both interpreted and linked to social action, but are also important in assessing the contextual dimensions of how values 'take shape' (2021: 474). In the case of *Thomasmesse*, staff conflicts over how doubt was mobilized during its rituals represented a 'disvalue' (Robbins 2022: 40), a realm of disagreement over the accepted limits of how student difference should be represented and displayed.

Ultimately, Jens felt that promoting secular student leadership within *Thomasmesse* was worth any disagreements this practice produced, as it signalled to the student body that students could access the masses equally, even if they lacked the Christian faith that the rituals themselves endorsed. Lisa said that, despite her reservations with Grøndal's allowing *stipps* who did not identify as Christians to give intercessory prayer, she still felt that their leadership was one reason why student participation in *Thomasmesse* had increased in recent years. 'Maybe the *stipps* make it the natural thing to do. Some years ago, almost no one went. But in recent years, students aren't afraid of it anymore. It's more accepted. We've noticed a change.' As Naomi Haynes and Jason Hickel have noted, hierarchies often co-operate within egalitarian value orientations (2018), and in the case of *stipps*, this intentional, differential leadership was meant to represent how equality could both encompass, and transcend, student difference.

Giving secular students the platform to operate as 'exemplars' also revealed the overlaps between secularity and sacrality happening within the *Thomasmesse* rituals themselves. Balkenhol et al. call for a 'praxeological approach' when considering how people interact with the 'entanglements' between 'shifting, coalescing, overlapping and contradicting qualities associated with secularism and religion', a position I find useful to the discussion at hand (2020: 8). Praxeology, the philosophy that humans usually engage in purposeful rather than reflexive behaviours, reveals how the secular and the sacred were entangled through the *Thomasmesse* services, as students voluntarily participated in shared Christian practice irrespective of their personal religious beliefs. By viewing the *Thomasmesse* experience as a social process that deliberately made space for student differences in faith and belief, the secular and the sacred became muted through points of mutual intersections that centred around the words invoked in Jens's message: 'love', 'safety', and 'respect'. It is important to note that the forms of secularism and sacrality present in the *Thomasmesse* community were able to become entangled *because* of their likeness: as I have mentioned, tolerance, agency, and acceptance – qualities dually associated with secularity[11] – were prioritized above adhering to specific Christian doctrines or confessions of faith. Some students expressed surprise, and relief, over the 'welcoming' version of Christianity they found invoked during *Thomasmesse*; 'When I first said I was going to a Christian folk high school, my mom was afraid I'd get radicalized', Inga told me with a laugh. 'But the Christianity I've found here hasn't been a problem. It's *koselig* (cozy, pleasant), it's just tradition.'

Conflicts about differences in Christian belief represented in Grøndal's student and staff populations were also minimized during *Thomasmesse*. Accepted difference had limits at Grøndal, and the sort of tolerance extended to religious affiliations outside of Christianity was not generally granted towards what students called 'conservative' Christian views like heterosexual marriage or eschatological notions of hell or damnation. Many students said it was views like these that made them hesitant

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to engage with Christian practice in the first place, remarking on how they perceived Christian faith as part of a conservative ideology marked by 'judgement' and 'exclusion'. Bjørnar, a student, went so far as to say that he had grown to 'hate' Christianity because of its conservative profile in Norway, but came to view the *Thomasmesse* services as a decidedly 'different' Christian practice he valued. By providing a welcoming space for students who had different experiences with Christian faith or otherwise, Jens hoped to challenge these negative stereotypes associated with certain forms of Christian 'religiosity' in Norway, which he said fomented a sense of 'certainty' that made doubt, an important part of faith, impossible to situate. Referencing Jesus' parable of the Sower,[12] he said, 'I do think that there is much trampling and ripping up of weeds where faith could have grown when you say, "this is not good enough." You don't see the good that is actually happening.' While *Thomasmesse* provided a place for students to interact with a version of Christian practice that was decidedly liberal under Jens's leadership, it also presented a faith profile that, in my view, hadn't been superficially diluted to appeal to a wider audience. Jens and the rest of the teaching staff were serious about their respective relationships with faith and were open to communicating their own convictions and beliefs with both students and me whenever asked. These distinctions, though, as well as others made between personal belief and cultural practice, were intentionally minimized during *Thomasmesse*, or were revealed with constraints in embodied rituals designed to strengthen, rather than divide, the community at Grøndal. 'The open door is what you have to have in the folk high school', Jens told me. 'My experience is that it's not such a big difference between Christian youth and secular youth. It was bigger before. I think that's the case in Norway.'

Concluding discussion

As I have noted, Christianity in Norway takes on different meanings depending on the context in which it is being invoked. The distinction between articulating Christianity as a traditional practice or a personal faith usually presented itself as an important one for Grøndal's students to make and reflected broader tensions in how Norwegians view Lutheranism as a cultural artifact or expression of *tro* (faith, belief). Despite the strong ties to Lutheranism in both the state and cultural traditions in Norway, many of my research participants said that Norwegians today have a growing scepticism towards Christian belief. It was through *Thomasmesse* rituals, then, that students could 'try out' what it 'felt' like to engage with Christian practice on an embodied register, in such a way that contributed to an experiential community they regarded as a 'safe space'. By integrating the individual and the relational into a collective ritual experience (Robbins 2015), students and staff could work towards a shared value of equality produced through embodied practice that transcended the social contracts Gullestad argued Scandinavians generally employ, where difference is minimized for the sake of conformity (1984).

This is not to say that the *Thomasmesse* services did not produce unequal relations, or seamlessly invoked full participation from all students, a circumstance I hope I have adequately described in this paper. The limits to integrating student difference within a specific faith tradition were apparent, and the reasons why most students felt comfortable participating in them were most likely because of the previous Christian practice they had encountered prior to enrolling at the folk high school. Even so, the *Thomasmesse* community was unique, a social milieu I did not expect to find among a

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group of students who did not subscribe to being called 'Christian' but participated in Christian rituals anyway. As Jens said, '*Thomasmesse* shows Norway's "secular" youth in religious practice, but how can they be so secular, these kids? I don't know always how to address their needs as post-structural adults, but I do know they're getting something from these services. Otherwise, they wouldn't keep coming.' By providing a social space that integrated student difference into the sameness of shared ritual, I argue that what students 'got' was the opportunity to embody a cultural and religious practice that is no longer common in Norway, but whose significance remains. In this way, the *Thomasmesse* experience revealed 'entanglements' between the Norwegian secular and sacred that emerged not only in the activities of the institutionalized, state-funded folk high school system, but also within the interior epistemologies of students, many of whom had viewed Christianity in a negative light but found a new way of interacting with Christian practice and faith that they valued. As Keilin, a student, said, 'In Norway, even though we're secular, we're also a Christian nation as well. Christian values are buried so deep in society, not hidden, that's not what I mean, but a part of society. So maybe I'm a *bit* Christian now that I think of it.'

The implications of the role that *Thomasmesse*, and Christian folk high school programming more broadly, will play in shaping Norway's future generations remain to be seen. While the state's involvement in the folk high school's value-making is explicit, in both the funding and governance it provides the folk high school network, the repercussions of *Thomasmesse* on Grøndal's students in their lives after graduation are implied and warrant further study on the influence that folk high school education has on graduates' future civic or public engagements. Even so, the religious participation that emerged in this context reveals the salience of Christianity in Norwegian statecraft and suggests the presence of a 'post secularity' that exists in 'secular' societies in Europe and elsewhere, where new forms of religious practice are revealing how the secular and the sacred are being reconceived and reproduced (Beaumont 2019; Habermas 2010; Rectenwald, Almeida & Levine 2015; Taylor 2011). My aim with this paper, then, has been to demonstrate how sacrality and secularity became bound together within the individual, institutional, and state bodies represented in the *Thomasmesse* experience, a circumstance that I suggest reveals Norwegian entanglements with Christianity more broadly. In the case of *Thomasmesse*, tensions that emerged around these categories were neither reinforced nor dismissed completely, but rather were situated within the greater service of developing a community meant to create equality both within and *beyond* sameness through embodied ritual practice.

That night after *Thomasmesse* concludes, I push open the wooden doors of the church and watch students disappearing into the cold darkness, the shadows of their bodies engulfed by a landscape of inky sky and muted, falling, snow. Suddenly, dozens of flickering lights flood my vision: they're torches, and students are holding them in front of their bodies, touching the tips together to light them. They smile and laugh, faces warmed by the glow. Once all the torches are lit, the students shuffle forward in unison, a moving body of different beliefs and experiences, a unified procession of lights pricking the darkness. The excitement and joy are palpable: the frost in the air, the fire, the snow, it all feels human and elemental. After the warmth and quiet of *Thomasmesse*, the vastness of the Nordic landscape feels foreboding, but somehow safer within the context of torchlight and laughter, of bodies still close, now providing a refuge against the snow. When we arrive back at the lodge, students begin scaling the slope of the main trail directly behind the building, holding their torches to form a giant heart shape with

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their bodies on the side of the mountain. Voices call to me. 'We need you', they say. There is a hole in the heart; two students beckon for me to join, my light bridging the gap. The teachers and staff are below us, taking pictures and videos to capture the moment. Liv, a student behind me, slips on the ice falling slightly into me. 'Just hold my hand if you need to', I say, and she grins and clasps it. The teachers call to us that they've got the photos they're after, and we cheer, making our descent, our bodies in motion breaking the outline of the heart. Some students walk gingerly down the slope, while others slide down seated on the icy snow, holding their torches up in jubilation. Embers from the nearly spent torches have fluttered in burning scraps to the ground, their light mirroring those of the unending stars above. Students continue to laugh and embrace; a couple of them gather some of the torches from students who are making their way inside the lodge, and as they sword fight with them, they cackle, overjoyed with the chance to play with fire. Several of us place our still-burning torches in the snowbanks at the door of the lodge, waiting for them to burn out. We will collect what's left of them tomorrow, their charred soot encrusted in the glassy snow.

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NOTES

[1] The school, and all research participants' names, have been changed.

[2] Scandinavian Lutherans use the term 'mass' (*messe*) to describe their services.

[3] Thomas, one of Jesus' twelve disciples, is sometimes referred to as 'Doubting Thomas' because of his initial expression of disbelief upon hearing Jesus had been resurrected (John 20:24-29 KJV). *Thomasmesse* was originally conceived by the Finnish priest, Olli Valtonen (Kotila 2006), but the liturgy Grøndal practised was developed by its school priest.

[4] *https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/06/13/how-religious-commitment-varies-by-country-among-people-of-all-ages/*.

[5] *https://www.ssb.no/en/kultur-og-fritid/religion-og-livssyn/statistikk/den-norske-kirke*.

[6] These schools are referred to as *frilynte skoler* which is translated as 'liberal schools' on the folk high school website (fhs.no) but were described to me by my research participants as being closer to 'secular' in the way they understood the term in English.

[7] Fhs.no.

[8] 'Stipps', short for *stipendiater*, refers to the student-leaders staff selected from Grøndal's previous year's cohort who were responsible for leading activities and creating a positive community on campus.

[9] Jens led the mass in Norwegian, and English translations are my own. My subsequent interviews were in both English and Norwegian.

[10] While the term 'intercessory prayer' has taken on various connotations in different religious contexts, in this case it simply meant praying on behalf of someone else.

[11] Attributes that Talal Asad (2003) notably critiqued, but remain salient in the secular imagination today.

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[12] Recorded in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the parable likens faith to seeds sown on various soils.

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Incarner Dieu : rituel, valeur et imbrications entre laïcité et sacré dans l'éducation secondaire populaire en Norvège

Résumé

L'article explore le rôle du rituel luthérien dans la formation de valeurs dans l'éducation secondaire populaire en Norvège. Les écoles secondaires populaires (*Folkehøgskoler*), financées par l'État, offrent des programmes d'année de césure destinés à instiller des valeurs aux jeunes adultes avant leur entrée dans l'enseignement supérieur ou dans le monde du travail. À partir d'un travail de terrain ethnographique de quinze mois dans une école secondaire populaire d'obédience luthérienne du Sud-est de la Norvège,

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l'auteur examine la manière dont le culte a été pensé, dans ces écoles, pour développer des valeurs liées à la communauté, à l'expérience et à l'égalité en invitant la participation des lycéens et du personnel, quelle que soit la relation personnelle de chacun à la foi chrétienne. L'auteur avance que, malgré les stéréotypes dominants qui font de la Norvège un pays principalement laïque, ces cultes dans les lycées populaires chrétiens financés par l'État dévoilent une « sacralité cachée » de la vie politique et sociale norvégienne. Prenant le corps comme objet d'analyse, elle suggère que les rituels des écoles, conçus pour encourager les élèves à « incarner Dieu », sont confiés au corps des lycéens de telle manière que la ressemblance et la différence, la laïcité et le sacré, la foi et le doute puissent coexister.

Jamie Glisson is a social anthropology doctoral candidate at The University of Edinburgh. Her research explores how Norwegian folk high school education employs Lutheran rituals, service projects, and international study trips to create embodied values that inform how young adult students view (in)equality in an inequitable world.

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