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Svein Tuastad


ABSTRACT

In Scandinavia, religious schools are both rarer and more controversial than in many other European countries and the United States. Scandinavian politicians fear that these schools foster social division and undermine personal autonomy. However, researchers have not paid much attention to these political concerns. In this study, the ethical autonomy of students at religious schools is scrutinized and compared to the experiences of students at non-religious schools based on interviews with 35 recent and former Norwegian high school students. Deep ethical confrontations occurred regularly only at the religious school, but it paradoxically also had a stronger sense of ethical belonging.

KEYWORDS

Autonomy; Scandinavia;
religious schools

The role religious schools play in contemporary European school systems and the degree of opposition to them vary widely.¹ In some school systems, as in Ireland and Germany, religious schools are well integrated and have high political legitimacy.² In other systems, such as Norway and Sweden, religious schools are at the center of political disputes.³ As in other polities where religious schools are contested, three central charges are laid against them: they foster social division, undermine personal autonomy, and fail to produce democratic citizens.⁴ Consequently, political and scholarly debates and analyses address not only the cognitive learning outcomes at religious schools but also the social and cultural aspects of their learning conditions and the influence of the school environment on individual autonomy capabilities and national integration processes. The body of empirical studies on the performance of religious schools does not provide clear-cut conclusions that either sustain or disconfirm the charges regarding autonomy,

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integration, and citizenship due, in part, to the many kinds of religious schools, as, for instance, a review in this journal concluded.⁵

Compared to studies on religious schools' cognitive and civic learning outcomes, far less empirical research has considered autonomy, which is scrutinized in this study (see the following literature review). This study contributes to this field of educational research, addressing the ethical dimension and the informal learning conditions in religious schools and comparing them to those in secular, public majority schools based on the accounts of former and recent Norwegian high school students.

As a part of the cluster of protestant countries in the north of Europe, Norway comparatively belongs to the most secularized countries in the world.⁶ Most students in Norway attend public schools at the primary and secondary level. At the upper secondary school level, in 2020–2021, 85% of the students attended private schools of which approximately one-third were religious schools. There were altogether 413 upper secondary schools in Norway in 2020–2021. Among those 413 schools 95 schools were private, or independent, schools, of which 37 schools were religious schools. The religious schools were in large Lutheran schools, but the religious school segment included Catholic Schools and schools owned by the Pentecostal movement and other free churches, as well.⁷ The private, religious schools overall have the same financial resources as the public majority schools. They have public funding; the school authorities do not allow school fees above a comparatively low maximum. Consequently, these schools are not elite schools (confer note 18 and 19).

Research questions

The study was intended to answer two research questions:

1. How do students at a Norwegian Christian high school describe the conditions for practicing ethical autonomy at the school? Do the students' accounts vary over time?
2. To what extent do the experiences of the students at the religious school differ from those described by the students at the public majority schools?

The data materials analyzed to answer these questions came from 35 in-depth interviews with students who attended a Christian high secondary school in Norway (hereafter, RS1) and public schools (hereafter, PS students) over 1990–2018. In addition, data from the national school elections were analyzed, and interviews were conducted with five informants with

special knowledge about RS1 issues on which the available documents had little information.

Theoretical perspective

For students, achieving ethical autonomy in schools entails learning about relevant ethical traditions and practicing deliberating ethical questions.⁸ This article draws on Jürgen Habermas' discourse theory to describe the contents of this ethical dimension. Habermas' discourse theory divides considerations about what to do into pragmatic discourses, ethical discourses, and moral discourses.⁹ Ethical and moral questions involve practical judgment in a sense other than pragmatic discourses.¹⁰

The ethical domain concerns questions of identity because a variety of distinct cultural settings exists, and groups do not necessarily share the same ethos. How do we in this family, religious group, or cultural community identify our core values that inform our actions? Which ethics among the competing conceptions of the good life should guide my life? Ethical discourses address these questions. The question at stake in this study within the framework of discourse theory is how RS1 handles questions of ethical autonomy.

In Habermas's theory, ethical discourses concerning questions of what the good life consists of differing from the moral point of view. Individuals and groups often have different answers on what to do—different ethics—and moral norms inform just ways of handling ethical variations. These are questions of justice, and the moral discourses demand universalization and impartiality in the deontological tradition of moral reasoning from Immanuel Kant.

This study makes use of the analytical distinctions and terminology of discourse theory to study incidents at RS1 related to how the good life should be led and incidents indirectly involving religious aspects and interventions based on religious motives. Analytically, what was at stake were various ethical considerations of the good life, including religious ones. For instance, I view as ethical confrontations the RS1 students' and teachers' strong disagreements about religious restrictions and appropriate behavior.

As described in further detail in the School Context section below, the objectives of the various Norwegian school types, including the religious ones, formally are quite similar. Resultingly, there exists no option for any school in Norway to *not* respect and promote ethical autonomy.

However, even if values such as tolerance and autonomy as described in school documents formally resemble at two schools, the real status of these values can still be very differently handled at the two schools. To a large extent, the efficiency of autonomy learning depends on the way these

values are put into practice, which can vary massively. This difference relates to, on the one hand, the formal dimension, and on the other hand to the informal practice: The formal declaration of values can be very different from the effective promotion of them.¹¹ Arguably, for students to develop capacity for personal and ethical autonomy, these values will have to be practiced.

The concerns about some of the religious schools described initially, relate to the effective promotion of autonomy, not to the formal documents and plans. To investigate this matter in larger depth, it might not be sufficient to only look at various school documents, the legal school regulation, or the reports from the governmental school supervisions. The aim of this study is to scrutinize how ethical autonomy is practiced as experienced by students at a religious school in contrast to for students at public majority schools.

Research status

A literature review of social relationships at religious schools and their civic and cognitive learning outcomes found very few studies that directly addressed autonomy learning and the wider learning environment at religious schools.¹² Some studies indirectly investigated aspects, such as relationships between religious parents and students at religious schools,¹³ promotion of religious identities and identity formation at religious schools,¹⁴ and potentially sensitive issues such as sexual education and evolution.¹⁵ In works exploring how violations of legal rights occur in religious schools,¹⁶ American legal professional James Dwyer claimed that research on religious schools is sparse, and conservative religious groups have strongly resisted scrutiny by outsiders.¹⁷

Research has indicated that Norwegian religious schools overall do not practice social segregation, understood as having a specific socio-economic composition, nor do their student bodies consist of the children of elite groups.¹⁸ A Norwegian qualitative, interview-based study concluded that parents of students at private schools, including religious schools, instead of desire more diversity for their children and do not experience social or cultural segregation at these schools.¹⁹ Some reports from civil society organizations and the media revealed undue pressure placed on members of religious communities, including at some religious schools.²⁰ However, such an isolationist culture is not representative of most religious communities and schools, including RS1. In the following section, I situate RS1 as part of a non-isolationist religious community.

While many of these studies indirectly explored aspects of autonomy in religious school contexts, they did not directly focus on the specific conditions for ethical autonomy at school as perceived by students and how the ethical dimension unfolds, as examined in this study.

The specific school context

To preserve the participants' anonymity, I do not give the name of the religious school, its owners, or the public, majority schools students in this study attended. Describing the school context, I concentrate on the religious schools. The students from the public schools interviewed for this study, were all from different schools, arguably representing typical public schools in the Western region of Norway. The scholarly literature suggested that the owners of RS1 belonged to a relatively religious conservative community.²¹

The Education Act regulates the public upper secondary schools in Norway, as well as home teaching and private schools without public funding.²² Most Norwegian religious schools, including RS1, receive public funding; these schools are regulated by The Independent Schools Act.²³ Religious schools at the upper secondary level are entitled to 85% of the support basis per pupil when the school has been approved by the Ministry. The regulations of these schools are strict; for instance, the school curriculum must be equal to or similar to the curriculum in force for government schools and it must be approved by the Ministry.²⁴ Moreover, the objective of the Independence Schools Act basically contains the same objectives of education and training as stated in the Education Act, regulating the public schools.²⁵

Hence, the teaching at religious schools largely follows the standard national curriculum. Resultingly, the specific religious profile at Norwegian religious schools manifests in their social composition in that there are more religious students there as well as in that for instance prayers might be mandatory to attend at these schools.

As the teaching content is quite similar in religious schools and the ordinary public majority schools, it might appear paradoxical that religious schools in Norway, as in Sweden too, have been and still are politically controversial. However, the political controversies, as touched upon initially, relate to issues of social division, integration and autonomy. These are issues manifesting in the informal social activities and the overall social environment. In order to describe them precisely, they must be studied as the issues at stake do not appear from only reviewing the formal documents.

Reviewing the scholarly literature (confer note 21 and 41), I could not find any analytical descriptions of the informal social environment of the various religious school types in the Norwegian context. To gain

supplementary information in addition to reviewing the websites of various religious schools and communities, I interviewed five informants with knowledge on specific religious matters which it was difficult to find information on in the literature.²⁶ Based on these interviews, one way of characterizing the various religious school types at the upper secondary level in Norway, is to, first, group one sort of religious schools as having a very moderate religious profile so that the difference between these schools and the typical public schools is small. The second group, which contains the largest group of religious schools, has a distinct religious profile, while these schools are not isolationistic. Finally, one sort of schools is isolationistic.²⁷

The owner of RS1 is one of the major organizations within the Low church tradition. This organization belongs to one of the strongest Low Church segments among these organizations, as a scholarly report classifies it.²⁸ The Low Church tradition normally pays more attention to subjective religious experience and less to sacraments and rituals.²⁹ The ownership of RS1 suggests the religious profile of the officials at the school represents a middle position with respect to inclusiveness, charismatic preaching and religious restrictions.³⁰

In addition to the review and the interviews to specify the school context, I analyzed data from national school elections and compared voting patterns at religious schools and non-religious schools in Norway over 1990–2015.³¹ I did this to ensure that RS1 did not belong to the first type described above, with a very weak religious profile, but that RS1 was a de facto religious school. I found that in the total sample of all students, explicit religious parties drew support from less than 5% of Norwegian youth in total (including at the public schools), while more than 50% of the RS1 students voted for religious parties (Kristelig Folkeparti and De Kristne). No decline in support for religious parties has been observed at RS1 recently. We, therefore, can speak of RS1 as a distinct religious school concerning the student composition.

Altogether, the interviews with the informants with particular knowledge on various religious communities (see note 26) indicated that RS1 had a distinct religious profile but did not belong to an isolationistic religious tradition. It occupied a middle position in its religious ethos, possibly representative of typical religious schools in the Scandinavian school systems.

Data and methods

The data material consisted of the results of individual interviews with 35 informants who were students at RS1 and public high schools over 1990–2018 (see [Appendix A](#) for the interview guide). The first of four data

collection rounds occurred in 2008 and 2009 and focused the RS1 students' experiences in the 1990s and 2000s. The second round of interviews took place in autumn 2012, and the third in winter and spring 2013. I conducted the final data collection round in spring 2018, some years after the first rounds. As I started to analyze the data, it seemed the material would benefit from interviews with more recent PS students. As the material expanded, it also became more evident that the interviewees should include more minority students.

The total sample included 21 RS students and 14 PS students. Twelve students, including nine RS1 students, attended school during the 1990s. Six informants, including five RS1 students, were high school students over 2000–2010. Finally, 17 students, including RS1 students, attended high school after 2010.

All the students were 15–19 years old when they studied at RS1 and the public schools, except for one student in the mid-20s. Twelve attended high school before 2000, and 23 after 2000. The interviewees included 20 women and 15 men; three students had minority backgrounds. In the results section, the informants are identified by pseudonyms instead of their names.

I recruited PS students through contacts in my own expanded network (e.g., friends, persons suggested by colleagues, civil society organizations members, and friends of family members). Two key informants made key contributions at various stages in the recruitment process.³² They suggested and identified relevant criteria for the main student groups at RS1 that needed to be included to capture the variety of student experiences. I asked the other RS1 informants how well they could describe the main groups of students, and their accounts were quite similar to those of the key informants. The largest group of students identified themselves as religiously active, while another big group identified themselves as neutral, “more or less” Christians. Two other smaller main groups, perhaps comprising less than 10% of the student body each, clearly identified themselves as religious conservatives or as critical students or outsiders. Recently, fewer RS1 students belonged to the critical students category than in the 1990s.

To include the various student groups, purposive recruitment (the identification of different student groups) was combined with snowball sampling, in which informants suggested other potential informants.³³ Snowball sampling poses the possible methodical problem of reaching only one specific network that does not capture the variety of experiences.³⁴ Measures to address this challenge included recruiting informants from different networks and students attending the RS1 at various time periods. Purposive sampling was also used to recruit PS students to ensure diversity of social class, ethnicity, and the dimension of shy–active students.³⁵

Following the conventional five-phased analytic cycle in cross-sectional analysis, some main issues appeared.³⁶ In the literature on qualitative analysis, one suggestion is to sometimes combine the contextual and cross-sectional approach,³⁷ and in this study, combining cross-sectional and contextual analysis was appropriate. Utilizing the contextual approach, it was of interest to see to which extent the various groups of students at RS1 shared or if they had diverging perceptions, following their religious clique.

While the recent students described fresh experiences, the accounts from many former students depended on retrospective thinking. Such a retrospective design risks that informants may have distorted memories.³⁸ To mitigate this risk, I recruited informants representing different basic attitudes toward the school and belonging to different networks.

In the qualitative research tradition similar experiences from informants from various groups might signal valid findings.³⁹ In this study, such similarities related to reports from students from the various groups of students described above, similarities and differences in accounts from former and recent students as well as contrasts between the reported experiences from RS students and PS students.

The data materials contained sensitive personal information, and strict regulations apply to research involving such information. The Norwegian Social Science Data Services (<http://www.nsd.uib.no/>), which I contacted before the study, approved of the methods for data collection, data storage, and handling of sensitive information. I strictly followed its instructions. I contacted their parents of informants younger than age 18 years for permission to interview the children.

Findings

The experiences of the former RS1 students in my material constitute the core of the discussion in this section. Mostly, I interpret their experiences and compare them to those of the recent RS1 students and the former and recent PS students. Two main patterns appeared and they both were related to how an ethical dimension was present at RS1 while not in the same way at the public schools. On the one side, the ethical dimension meant the ethical autonomy for RS1 students sometimes appeared to be challenged in quite another way than what public school students would experience it. However, at the same time, the very existence of an ethical field of gravitation at RS1 many students highly appreciated.

Controlling the ethical climate

Several former RS1 students experienced what appears to have been pietistically motivated resistance from school representatives against pop-cultural

expressions, modern trends, and alternative denominations. School representatives and teachers seemed to have a goal to control the ethical climate—often in ways the students found hard to accept. In the accounts of some informants, including religiously active students, the totality was too restrictive, as the following episodes demonstrate.

Rita, a female student at RS1, recalled that in the early 1990s, elderly persons delivered sermons that were quite dull even for the most loyal, practicing Christians. “It was very conservative. (...) It was almost against the rules to have the songs we were to sing on a screen,” she said.

Thea and Lena described themselves as modest, loyal girls while attending RS1 in the early 1990s, and at the time of the interviews, both still regularly attended church. They belonged to different cliques and told about two different episodes in which the school did not allow sharing information about religious arrangements when the organizer was of a different denomination than RS1. “The teacher came and tore the bill down. He was furious,” Lena said. She added that although she did not speak out, which was consistent with her normal behavior, she reacted against it when talking to her friends.

In the early 2000s, a popular Christian artist sought to hold a concert at the school, but the school finally decided against it based on religious reasons. This event indicated that cultural struggles were not a closed chapter at RS1 in the 2000s or more recently. Some teachers still controlled, for instance, what kind of music they saw as appropriate to play in class, reported Olaug, a recent student. However, when teachers were not there, the students still played it.

Veronica was a recent student who had attended a public lower-secondary school (PSX) before switching to RS1. She compared the two schools: “At [RS1], it is more like if what you say is correct according to the opinion of the teacher. It is no doubt, at [PSX], they encourage critical thinking in another way than at [PS1].” However, Kari, a recent student and a believer, had attended another religious school, RS2, which she gave evidence was clearly more religiously conservative than RS1. For instance, RS2 had cut out chapters on sex education from the textbook, but RS1 had not.

Exemplifying some teachers’ goal to favor the school’s religious and ethical belonging, Simon, a non-religious student at RS1 in the early 2000s, remembered an assignment for students to write a list of their idols. After the exercise, the teacher asked those who did not put Jesus first to raise their hands, and only Simon did so. He felt the whole incident was quite embarrassing.

In all these episodes, the teachers and other school authorities saw it as their mandate to direct the overall ethical and religious impact to fit with the owners’ principled views. Some teachers sought to normatively filter and frame outside impulses, as described by several RS1 students.

Sometimes, the ambition of some of the school representatives to control the ethical climate at RS1, led to quite strong confrontations. Arne, a student in the early 1990s who had a Christian upbringing, remembered one incident in particular that had an impact on him. The school refused to allow him to play drums at RS1 because, the school representatives said, “the devil is in the drums.”

I love playing drums. On one occasion, the caretaker entered the room while I was playing drums, and he plainly knocked me away from them. We started fighting. At [RS1], I really struggled against them to have permission to play drums. I remember I stood in front of them all, in the teachers’ room, with the Bible in my hand, trying to convince them. I was 16 or 17 years old, frantically arguing for permission to play. (...) What they did was to attack my own personal religious convictions. Today, it does not matter to me, but I still remember the feeling of injustice back then.

In this case, the ethical confrontation even became physical. School authorities had formal decision-making power over what was allowed within the physical school facilities. Arne and his closest friends often played tricks on fellow students and teachers, but he accepted correction and described his overall time at RS1 as very fine. He highlighted this confrontation as different. RS1 clearly had strong restrictions on what students could do based on strict religious codes, and even for a student like Arne, a practicing Christian, the school placed religious restrictions above his personal interests.

Like many students, Arne in retrospect saw that such efforts by the school representatives might have triggered counterproductive effects. “I cannot now remember how it turned out, if I got permission or if I just played all the same,” he said regarding this ethical confrontation. “I guess there was a kind of compromise.” Arne’s expectations of autonomy in no way vanished. His statement that he might have played drums all the same signaled it took more than resistance from teachers and school representatives to change his basic convictions. If he could not have autonomy, he took it.

Another type of episode in which teachers and fellow students directly commented on ethical issues linked to individual students sometimes caused anger. Anna often experienced such incidents. Anna criticized the school more bluntly than most other informants; in that respect, she was a critic. She started at RS1 in the early 1990s and described a quite rough episode when she argued with fellow students in class. In the following excerpt, Anna initially referred to her fellow students before reflecting on the role of the teacher:

I got furious. I said, “Bloody hell, this I simply do not accept. You cannot say that in 199[XX], a whoreson [*løsunge*]. There are no whoresons in our society today.” I remember how I became irritated at the teacher. He should have intervened. But, you know, the teacher he saw it in that way, too.

In another episode Anna recalled, a teacher said that rape victims who wore miniskirts were partly to blame. Anne said she protested, but the teacher told her to calm down. She said she reported the teacher to the head teacher, but that had no effect.

While these episodes likely constituted extreme cases, students from different cohorts personally experienced similar incidents, such as Tina and Else. Tina, a student in the early 2000s, had a Christian background, including frequently boarding at religious settings. She told about a teenage student who had become pregnant. When the student later had cancer, a teacher said it was a punishment from God, according to Tina.

Else was also a student at RS1 in the early 2000s, and she referred an episode that caused unintended amusement. Her teacher stated that if students wore three earrings, they might go to hell. Else quoted her teacher's statement and then commented on it:

“All those who wear suchlike, go to hell. However, not you, Else, because you look fine with them.” I thought, but then it was all up to her! It was her personal taste, which she decided. However, the younger teachers, they were not like that.

In these ways, the teachers involved themselves in personal ethical affairs, even when the students had not invited them to do so, and they commented on and assessed persons ethically. However, the impacts of these interventions are another question. Paradoxically, for some students, they triggered reactions that possibly contributed to ethical autonomy learning.

These episodes reflect how many RS1 students experienced and reacted to episodes that involved ethical dimensions. However, one group of informants, the most religiously devoted students, saw this aspect of the social life at RS1 differently than most students interviewed.⁴⁰ These students stressed that RS1 offered a religious environment in harmony with their Christian ethics, which they saw as the main purpose of the religious school. As David put it, the school gave him confidence in salvation, and that, to him, was the main objective of the school. “When you hear the sermons, you become less insecure,” he said.

David appreciated the way the ethical dimension at RS1 brought students together. In this way, the ethical dimension did not only trigger confrontations—it created a sense of belonging, too.

Ethical belonging

Many recent RS1 students expressed a feeling similar to pride at attending RS1 due to the high levels of perceived professionalism and the social joy for those boarding at the school. The apparent sense of belonging also involved an ethical dimension in the accounts of many RS1 students. The sense of belonging partly concerned lifestyle because many RS1 students

did not feel at home in the partying aspect of the youth culture in their local communities in which many drank alcohol, and some used drugs. To them, it felt good to come to RS1.

The sense of belonging also had a vaguer but not less important aspect related to what appeared to be identity affiliations toward RS1. I earlier referred to Anna, who was among the most critical students who attended RS1 in the early 1990s. However, when asked if there was any feeling of solidarity or belonging at RS1, she clearly confirmed that there was:

You could see that the Christian community was good for some of them. For instance, during the morning sermon, I sat there waiting for it to finish, so we could get started. But many of them sat there with their eyes closed, and they were close to each other.

Anna estimated that at least half the class felt a sense of religious togetherness. David and Peter, among the religiously conservative RS1 students in the early 1990s, gave personal accounts of what Anna described from the outside. They saw the Christian ethos at RS1 as the most important element of the school. Peter thought that Christians in their period of life should have Christian friends. “Remember, at this age, you can be dragged two ways. You can be dragged into the wrong direction,” according to Peter.

Roar was a recent RS1 student who, like many others, wanted to get away from the local drinking culture. He plainly stated that it was tiresome to always belong to the Christian minority when he went to public schools. “It was good to come to a Christian school,” he said as if it was a relief. Benjamin, a recent student, had a similar experience as Roar, which he described in his own way. Benjamin said that at the public schools he had previously attended, he had a good time as a person—but not as a Christian, implying that given this identity, he found it especially good to attend RS1. Moreover, although the devotional meeting at the start of each day at RS1 normally did not catch his attention, he sometimes felt that it was very relevant. “Sometimes, it is about things which I myself have experienced. Then it becomes important. (...) It makes me feel like I belong to a community,” Benjamin said.

These informants represented different backgrounds and attended RS1 at different times, but like the other informants, they, in their own ways, expressed approval of RS1’s manifestation of a Christian ethos. This basic Christian ethos apparently had a different—possibly deeper—meaning than what the ethical confrontations represented. The Christian ethos made RS1 students feel that they belonged and had something in common, unlike what many of them had felt at public primary and lower-secondary schools. Not only the most devoted Christian informants but also many of the

more or less active Christians felt good attending a school based on a religious foundation.

Contrasts: overall differences in the accounts of RS and PS students

PS students also experienced episodes in which they believed that the teachers, fellow students, and other school representatives did not behave properly. However, the nature of their reactions was different from those of the RS1 students. The PS students were critical of arguably nonsystematic, occasional episodes of non-appropriate conduct during long periods of social interaction not involving any ethical dimensions.

For instance, Andreas, a new student at a big public school, remembered that one teacher occasionally lost his temper, and another teacher made inappropriate comments on the looks of a female student. However, as Andreas commented, these episodes were unfortunate events that could happen everywhere at some point. About the latter episode, he said, “People became very upset, but actually, the teacher was trying to be funny. Then he had a bad choice of words. It was a slip-up.” This incident and a similar episode did not demonstrate a systematic way of behaving, as Andreas saw it. Altogether, the main difference in the accounts of the PS and RS1 students was that neither the former nor the recent PS students identified ethical confrontations in the way that the RS1 students did.

In contrast to RS1 students, several recent PS students interviewed were unhappy with the social relationships in class. Mary, a recent PS student, was quite critical and described the social relationships in class as “unfriendly.” The descriptions of social relationships by recent PS students, as from the RS1 students, were overwhelmingly approving, but there was a striking exception to this overall picture: minority students at the public, majority schools clearly had different experiences. The minority students interviewed reported that they often felt that the school system did not manage diversity properly. In their view, some teachers and school practices represented a clumsy practice of toleration. At times, some teachers commented on terror attacks in Europe in ways that the informants found highly offensive. These comments possibly did not constitute ethical confrontations but were potentially discriminatory because obviously, the minority students did not identify with terrorists. However, they found the ways in which some teachers spoke about terrorism insulting because the students believed that the teachers implied that terrorism was a thing Muslims did.

Overall, the PS students gave little evidence of ethical confrontations or what they saw as norm violations based on ethical convictions.

Concluding remarks

This analysis supports the conclusion that the students at RS1 described their conditions for practicing ethical autonomy differently than the students at the majority schools did. RS1 students, in contrast to the students at majority schools, regularly experienced ethical confrontations. Many RS1 students felt that they had to stand up to teachers who tried to guide or correct their ethical thinking. In this respect, the ethical dimension at RS1 operated differently than at the public schools.

At the same time, most RS1 students apparently enjoyed attending RS1 more than the public schools they had attended when younger precisely because of the Christian ethics. The Christian ethics made them part of the majority at RS1 but part of the minority at the public schools in the ethical domain. Here, a paradox appears. At RS1, the students felt a stronger ethical belonging but also encountered stronger ethical confrontations than at the public schools. Possibly, the conflicting experiences were connected in that the very presence of a stronger ethical dimension imply both belonging and occasionally confrontations.

Tensions over ethical autonomy might be contingent on the degree of restrictions imposed by the school. If religious ethics impose strong self-restrictions in contrast to the prevailing norms within youth culture, young believers risk facing demanding, comprehensive pressure. In contrast, if religious ethics and youth culture norms converge, which seems to be the current situation, it might be easier to maintain a Christian lifestyle without heavy self-sacrifice—and to be a student at schools such as RS1, the argument goes.

Resultingly, the most likely scenario might be that ethical confrontations at schools like RS1 will decline, reflecting overall religious trends. The internal religious development at RS1 appears to have followed overall religious trends imposing fewer restrictions and becoming more open to subjective religious experiences.⁴¹ As the restrictive ethics has moderated, the reasons for ethical confrontations have faded in tandem. Else's earrings might no longer trigger ethical correction.

If this perspective is accurate, it could result in a win-win situation for RS1. This school, and other similar schools too, might still accomplish their goal of ethical impacts without causing friction because a less restrictive, more youth-friendly ethics might emerge. As schoolteachers who still pay attention to religious restrictions retire, it might reinforce this process. Consequently, RS1 might achieve ethical impacts, which the owners and many parents probably expect, while not becoming less attractive to religious students in general.

In the coming years, religious students might enjoy benefits from both the religious and non-religious scenes. It might become easier to be a

religious student while at the same time exercising the autonomy defining the prevailing youth culture. In the Scandinavian context characterized by an overall trend of secularization, many religious communities have faced steady decline recently. For them, the attractiveness of schools such as RS1 might represent a contrasting, hopeful trend.

Notes

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26. These informants included a former leader of an organization within the Norwegian church and two members of different religious communities. One informant had recently been a student at another religious school that gave far less attention to the religious ethos than RS1. These interviews were conducted in autumn 2014 and spring 2015. Furthermore, I interviewed a senior adviser at the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training to gain information about Muslims schools, of which there was is none publicly available.
27. The term isolationistic to describe some religious communities is from Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
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29. Ibid.; Nordbø, *Betre død enn homofil?*
30. I base the information in this paragraph on the interviews with the informants on the religious context (see Method), combined with accessible information from open statistics and textbooks.
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40. I choose to characterize this group’s attitudes as religiously conservative, first, because these informants referred to and quoted the Bible regularly and let the Bible guide how they answered. Second, I think their points of view were religiously conservative rather than religiously liberal. For instance, Peter, who studied at RS1 in the early 1990s, called abortion murder. He said that even if he had not been a Christian, he would protest the murder of 15,000 children annually (he referred to the number of abortions nationally).
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Appendix A. Interview guide

1. Introductory conversation and background information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When was it that you attended the upper secondary school? • What was the professional and religious background of your parents? • (All schools) How would you describe your religious life now and when you attended the upper secondary school?
2. Starting at the school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you describe the background for choosing the specific school; were parents involved in discussions with you? • (RS1-students) Was there any specific discussion on the fact that it was a religious school? • Can you remember your thoughts about starting at this specific school? • Looking at it now, are you happy you started at this school? Or would another school have been better? • If you now have, or you imagine you are going to have, your own children, would you like your son or daughter to start at the same school?
3. Main thoughts about the years at school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your main thoughts about the years at this school? Could you mention three words to describe it? • (For all) Can you imagine there is a difference between attending a majority public school and a religious school? • (For RS1) Did you ever get the feeling that it was a quite unusual thing to attend a religious school? • Did you find the way teachers tried to influence you, some way or the other, was OK and appropriate? • Are you happy you attended this school? • Do you now have friends attending the same school? • How would you describe the period when the time at the school was finished and you started on a new school or a job?
If think of something enjoy/enjoyed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you think of something you enjoy/enjoyed associated to the school? Can you perhaps rank three issues? • (For RS1-students) Did you personally find the religious profile to be a good thing? • Do you think you were involved? • How would you describe the social inclusion?
If think of something do/did not like very much	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you think of anything you do not/did not enjoy very much associated to the school? Is it possible to mention three things? • Did you ever think you missed something because of the specific school? • Did you ever feel school representatives tried to impact you when they should not? • If you had the option, would you still have chosen to attend the same school?
Final remarks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your thoughts about the interview? • Anything else to add, or which we touched upon too little? • Can I finally ask you about if you were to group students into different sorts, how would you do that (for instance according to religious or social criteria)
