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Young Adults Doing Lived Theology: Three Modes of Theologising

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Abstract

This study asks: “How do young adults theologise?” It explores creative processes of navigating a gap or a wound experienced by Finnish young adults’ between their personal beliefs and values and the Lutheran religious tradition. The dramatic religious decline and change among young adults has been shown in many studies. Here, the situation is explored through co-theologising with young adults. Based on narrative-discursive analysis of reflexive interviews, the study depicts three modes of theologising: 1) Cognitive theologising explores faith expressed in words, 2) Affective theologising focuses on the power of sensing and feeling, and 3) Practical theologising looks at the human potential and capacity to act. The aim of these modes is not to bridge the gap or heal the wound but to describe and understand it. In the end, these ‘acts of theologising’ are put together, pointing to novel methodological approaches embracing uncertainty and doubt, such as holistic theologising.

Keywords

Theologising – lived theology – cosmopolitanism – young adults – methodology

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1 Introduction: Mind the Gap

> Every Christian has a fundamental right to doubt, of course, every Christian and every person too.
>
> JÜRGEN MOLTMANN (2005)

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This quotation reflects an essential trait of postmodern religiosity: people doubt. The younger the people, the more they doubt. For example, recent statistics from Finland show that only 19% of young women[1] identify themselves as religious. Instead, they prefer a non-religious identity (68%). This is in a sharp contrast to older generations, where clearly more than half consider themselves as religious.[2] Indeed, the intergenerational differences in religiosity are now higher in Finland than in any other European country. (Ketola 2021a, 39–40.) These changes are seen both in the declining numbers in church membership and in church attendance, as well as in the belief in Christian doctrines (e.g. Ketola 2021b; Äystö et al. 2022). Yet even today, about 66% of Finns are members of the Evangelical Lutheran church of Finland (ELCF), but the numbers are falling – especially among the younger generations.[3] Thus, these days most Finns can be characterised as 'Lutheran-based secular' (Riitaoja et al. 2010), or 'Secular Christian' (Poulter et al. 2015). At the same time, the entanglements of religious believing and belonging have become challenged in many ways, as has been shown in many sociological studies on religion (e.g. Day 2011; Davie 2012; Niemelä 2015).

According to a recent study, the reasons among younger generations to leave the ELCF are mostly related to belief and dogma (Äystö et al. 2022). Likewise, a longitudinal study has shown that young people are leaving the church because "they do not find it to be in line with their own beliefs" (Niemelä 2015, 172). Thus, there seems to be a 'gap' between the normative teachings of a religious tradition, and people's ideas and lived experience. As a response, both academic theologians and lay people have lately been questioning how to deal with this gap. (Dillen 2014; Salminen 2021) But to deal with the gap is not easy or simple, as it is both wide and deep. It has origins already in the philosophies of enlightenment, which introduced questioning the idea of authority across the society, including the traditional ways of justifying religious beliefs. (E.g. Zagzebski 2012.) Hence, modernity, characterised as an era of doubting, has been a high season of challenging the 'special knowledge' of religious and academic experts; the 'facts' and 'truths' of the so called 'ontological authorities'[4] (Alasuutari 2018, 166–176). Consequently, professional knowledge, power, and authority have faced the challenge of democratisation (cf. Schön 2016).

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[1] In this study 'young women' refers to those, who self-identify themselves as females and belong to generation Z, i.e., they are born between mid-1990s and 2015. Cf. e.g. Ketola 2021a.

[2] The vast majority (87%) of women born 1940–1949 identify themselves as religious in Finland. The contrasts between age cohorts are not this dramatic among men. See Ketola 2021a, 39–40.

[3] See "The Church in Numbers" in <https://evl.fi/the-church/membership/the-church-in-numbers>. Accessed 12/5/2023.

The challenge of democratisation has not left the churches nor academic theology untouched. According to Annemie Dillen, speaking from the perspective of Catholic churches' traditional teaching, "the process of appropriation has no longer functioned well" (Dillen 2014, 226). But a good question is, has it ever? According to a lived religion scholar Robert Orsi, people have always improvised religious idioms in the context of their everyday lives and related to their lived experience (e.g. Orsi 1985; 1999). He has described this as the 'dynamic engagement of religious traditions', by which he means "the constellations of practices, values, and beliefs, inherited and improvised, in ongoing exchanges among generations and in engagement with changing social, cultural, and intellectual contexts" (Orsi 1999, 43). Rather than through appropriation, religious traditions have always been 'lived' through engagement, improvisation, and exchange.

The slow and gradual (and disputed) transition from modernity to postmodernity has introduced ever deeper dimensions to doubting. It has been claimed that postmodernity is an era of 'incredulity toward metanarratives' (Lyotard 1993). Postmodernity has challenged both the meaning and future of religious discourses. Consequently, also the concept of theology has been opened to new understandings. For example, Namsoon Kang, in framing a cosmopolitan theological discourse, has stated that "theology is not just a professionalized discourse that offers intellectual insights and pleasure in academia only … theology should be about one's way of life, a kind of gaze into oneself and others, and a mode of one's profound existence in the world" (Kang 2013, ix). Such a widened understanding of theology is a call for empirical approaches in studying theology. Such approaches often prioritise individual experience and agency when exploring both content and process of theology, i.e., both what people say and the saying itself (cf. Astley 2002, 56; cf. Moltmann 2000). As such, people seek to construct personal or individual theologies (e.g. Francis 2009; Gortner 2016). Methodologically, this shift has opened up new horizons for participatory approaches from action research (Cameron et al. 2010) to ethnographic methods (e.g. Wigg-Stevenson 2014; Ideström et al. 2018). Lately, also literature on 'lived theology' has started to take shape (e.g. Marsh et al. 2019; Müller 2021).

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[4] It was already Max Weber who pointed to the priests' expertise, i.e. 'special knowledge', in determining dogmatic truths. Alasuutari 2018, 166–176.

At the same time, the 'lived theologies' of young adults have been explored empirically in different contexts (e.g. Kuusisto & Kallioniemi 2016; Jensen 2021). These empirical studies have labelled young adults as the 'least religious generation' (Clydesdale & Garces-Foley 2019, 12) or the 'postmodern pilgrims' (Denton & Flory 2020, 223). In addition to non-religiosity, empirical studies reveal tendencies in young peoples' values, which drive them away from religious tradition. For example, in Finland, young women – while being least religious – often embrace the values of tolerance, equality, and peace. Thus, they embrace environmentalist-green or humanist-egalitarian values, which are in contrast with traditionalist conservative values (Helve 2015, 104; Ketola 2021a, 28). Indeed, young adults who have left the ELCF often find it too conservative and intolerant (Niemelä 2017). Instead of appropriation of tradition, young adults now search for authenticity and weigh their relation to the church through their personal values and beliefs. (Niemelä 2015; Tervo-Niemelä 2017.) In these negotiations, a significant amount of emphasis is put on personal experience. (Hytönen et al. 2021, 265.) Instead of appropriation, young adults want "to think for themselves with regard to religious issues" (Arnett 2015, 212). Often in these processes they capture diversity and embrace multiplicity (ibid.). Such virtues are embedded in cosmopolitan theology (Kang 2013).

However, the construction of a worldview – of finding beliefs and values to align with – does not happen in a vacuum. It rather happens in space and place, in a specific context and situation. Developing an ideology or a worldview – "a way of making sense of everything" (Arnett 2015, 211) – means reflecting existential questions both individually and with regards to religious traditions. In Finland, being infused by secular or cultural Lutheranism, many religiously rooted values and practices still have a strong role in the construction of Finns' identities and worldviews (Sinnemäki et al. 2017, 23). Thus, Finnish young adults develop "their value systems in between old and new worldview diversities" (Kuusisto & Kallioniemi 2016, 87). In this context – torn between their personal worldviews and the Lutheran tradition – young Finns reflect on the gap: they contemplate on what beliefs to accept and how to relate to their religious roots. According to Mary McClintock Fulkerson (2007, 13), it is particularly our wounds – the experience of 'not to be in line' – that generate new thinking. Focusing on the brokenness of existence – the wounds or gaps – teaches us that it is important to notice the unnoticed, to hear what is silent, to break out the old paradigmatic boxes, and turn to creativity instead.

In this article, I explore the ‘act of theologising’ (cf. Derrida & Anidjar 2002) as creative reflection, which both remembers and looks forward and presents a linguistic critique. According to Fulkerson (2007, 233), “such creative thinking is formed by a combination of convictions – theological and faith-driven at the same time as cultural, political, and autobiographical.” Many previous studies have explored this creative process under the titles of theological reflection (e.g. Foley 2015; Graham et al. 2019) or theologising (e.g. Kuindersma 2013; Bevans 2018; Roebben 2020). Recently, relating theologising the study of lived religion, it has been determined as “a quest of making life theologically meaningful and making theology meaningful in life” (Tveitereid 2022, 70). Thus, to explore theologising as lived means approaching the creative processes of theological reflection as rooted in experience. Indeed, “[t]he experiences and the practices of people themselves are a *locus theologicus*, a place from which to theologize” (Dillen 2014, 226). At the same time, theologising is more than a process; it becomes an everyday means of doing theology (cf. Green 1990; Riggs 2003). Such ways or models for theologising have often been explored through academic voices (e.g. Bevans 2018; Vähäkangas & Bergmann 2021). But what really happens in young adults’ everyday lives when a gap or wound appears – when lived experience and religious tradition collide?

2 Research Question and Methods

This article explores and depicts modes of theologising. A mode, here, is “a way or manner in which something occurs or is experienced, expressed, or done” (Stevenson 2010). Thus, this study explores and depicts how young adults experience, express, or do theology, while navigating between their own beliefs vis-à-vis their respective religious traditions. In other words, this article asks, “How do young adults theologise?”

The article is based on novel empirical data, which I collected in 2019–2020. This data gives voice to fourteen (14) Finnish young adults, who a) belong to, i.e., are members of, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF), and b) are affiliated with youth networks of the largest Finnish faith-based organisations (FBO) focusing on development aid, i.e. Changemaker (CM) and Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission’s youth network (FELM Youth).[5] I have reached out to these young adults in order to explore their cosmopolitan theology as lived theology (cf. Kang 2013; also Beck & Sznaider 2010). This article analyses the collected data from the perspective of theologising.

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[5] Changemeker (CM) is part of the FinnChurchAid, and FELM Youth is part of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Mission (FELM). For more information on “The Church’s mission” and

The data collection took place through a step-by-step conversational and participatory approach (e.g. Cameron & Watkins 2010; de Roest 2019). A careful orientation (step 1) aimed at supporting the initial data collection (step 2) and in-depth data collection and co-theologising (step 3). The orientation process (step 1) started with discussions with co-ordinators of both youth networks. This was followed by participation in both networks' weekend events. These encounters and free talks supported the participation of all stakeholders and enabled 'two-way knowledge flows' (de Roest 2019, 47–49). After the meetings, I focused on initial data collection (step 2) by drafting and sending an open-ended e-questionnaire to young adults in both networks with the help of the network coordinators. The questionnaire was carefully worded to meet the discursive practices of the young adults. It had three thematic sections: 1) personal biographies, 2) experiences of meaning and conflict with Christianity and religion(s)/religiosity, and 3) personal and political hopes and visions for the future. The questionnaire was completed by ten persons from both FBOs. As the aim of questionnaire was to prepare for in-depth data collection (step 3), I focused rather on individual than collective analysis of this data. I analysed the respondents' individual replies with an eye on narrative-discursive biographies focusing on "the speaker's reflexive work" (Taylor & Littleton 2006, 1). This helped me further to get familiar with the discursive practices of young adults' participating in the study. In addition, I made theory-informed analysis of individual replies, which was completed by drafting personal interview schemes with preliminary interpretative insights and specified interview questions for each participant. In addition, I structured the whole data set through visual mind map analysis (Wheedon & Åhlberg 2019) and drafted a word cloud of keywords used by the respondents.

The in-depth data collection and co-theologising (step 3) aimed at increasing my initial understanding of research participants' perspectives and experiences created by prior stages of data collection. The interviewees consisted of twelve women (12) and two men (2), who volunteered to participate in an interview while responding to the e-questionnaire. They were all native Finns aged between 16–27 years by the time of the interview. They lived in urban settings; about half of them (7/14) in the capital city region of Finland, and the rest in middle-sized towns across the country. Most of them were studying at

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FBOs, see The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland/Mission in <https://evl.fi/our-work/international-dimension/mission>. Accessed 12/5/2023.

university (8/14), whereas some were upper secondary school students, starting further studies or entering working life. The length of the interviews ranged from 60 minutes to 150 minutes. Each interview followed the individual interview scheme with three thematic sections. All but one interview took place face-to-face in a location available and suitable for the interviewees (e.g. libraries, cafés, private homes), the last was an online interview due to the Covid lockdown. All interviews were recorded and transliterated. The transcribed interviews consist of 154 750 words (in Finnish). In addition to the interviews, there were lengthy free-form talks before/after the recording and some e-mails exchanged during the course of data collection. These I have reflected on in my private research journals.

The in-depth data collection followed the course of reflexive interviews (Passoa et al. 2019). Thus, it was important for me to design each interview carefully as I wanted to enable the interviewees to widen and deepen their earlier reflections presented in the questionnaire. In addition, I wanted to discuss my own preliminary interpretative observations and some analytical concepts. Thus, I wanted to stimulate the "willingness and confidence in lay expertise", i.e., to encourage the young adults to speak their own mind – both with regards to their own thinking and to my analysis (cf. Dillen 2014, 228). To build trustworthy and free atmosphere, I bought coffee and cake and small-talked with each interviewee before the recording started. During the interview, I built common ground by relating to the interviewee's experiences: chatting about their studies, travels, lifestyle, and dreams in a personal manner outside of the interview scheme. Throughout the interview, I presented some analytical concepts and asked the interviewee to comment on and question my musings. About half-way in the interview, I also presented the word cloud to each interviewee, and let them 'talk me through it' by verbalising their thinking related to the key concepts (such as love, mass, and prayer) while encouraging them to make coloured marks and notes on the word cloud. As a result, the interviews became very conversational as well as conceptually rich and dialogical. The interviews allowed room both for the interviewees' subjective reflexive talk, and for mutual dialogue. This approach was chosen deliberately, not only to enable the participants to engage in "reporting their experiences descriptively", but to "share meanings of the reality surrounding them and the events of their own lives" – and to engage not only in the topics at hand but also in their process(es) of reflexivity (Passoa et al. 2019, 1–3).

The transcriptions of reflexive interviews play a special role in this study which draws from verbal(ised) – spoken and transliterated – experiences as data. As such, the data reflects an espoused theology which focuses on articulation of beliefs (see Cameron et al. 2010). However, the data also reaches beyond words and language, as I perceive talk as “an important way in which humans act, interact, and organize themselves” (Wuthnow 2011, 1). Here, I follow the ethnomethodological view of talk and interaction, where meanings are constructed and re-constructed in ‘talk-in-action’ taking place in the “practical projects of everyday life” (see Wetherell 2001, 291). This approach highlights the dynamic, interactive, and intertwined nature of data and its collection. Thus, it is important to note that the interview data depicts person(s)-in-situation and ‘particular interaction’ (cf. Taylor & Littleton 2006, 25) creating situated knowledge bound in time, space, and place. Here, I also recognise my own positionality as a white, middle-class, native Finnish female with academic education in political science, sociology, and theology. Thus, the new knowledge created here is very intersubjective by nature (de Roest 2019, 128). Instead of only focusing on the interviewees’ theologising, the new knowledge focuses on our theologising together; the theologising of and with the research participants (cf. de Roest 2019). This is what I call ‘*co-theologising’*. It includes paying attention to my own presence in the interview. As such, the talk produced in the interviews can be particularly described as talking *to* and *with* me. The core of this data lays in ‘individual’s unique experience’ (Taylor & Littleton 2006, 25) and ‘personal experience stories’ that were shared during the interview (cf. Denzin 2013, 16).

In the end, this study – drawing from the rich and intersubjective data as described above – has been produced through the narrative-discursive analysis, which was originally developed to explore identity work in biographical narratives (Taylor & Littleton 2006). Instead of identity work, I have focused on ‘theologising work’, i.e., theological reflexivity as narrated by interviewees in their (biographical) talk. As such, the analysis operates between the speaker and their discursive environment emphasising the social nature of personal reflexivity (Taylor & Littleton 2006, 23). Here, I view my own role as ‘writer-as-performer’; thus, I do not claim to possess the data or ‘right’ interpretation of it but I rather find myself intertwined with the data. (Denzin 2013, 5.) I do claim for “some authority over the subject matter that is being interpreted”, but I also note that the presented interpretation reflects my unique self as well the research participants and the time and place when this particular analysis has been written (see ibid.). Looking to the data through the chosen interpretative lens, it has been important to ask: how do people experience and express themselves in relation to the world and its constraints around them (cf. Taylor & Littleton 2006, 23) – in this case, the world of theologies and theologising within the Finnish context. The analysis itself has been carried out by reading and re-reading the transliterated material, “examining the details of talk” and “sorting and sifting to uncover features of data” (Taylor & Littleton 2006, 28). In this iterative analytical process, special attention has been given on categorisations, values, meanings and life trajectories used by the speaker, as well as resistance, (re)negotiation and resources as elements of personal reflexivity. Rather than the overall story, attention is on the details (Taylor & Littleton 2006, 23–28). In this study, a special detail is the wound or gap, i.e., all the reflexive talk expressing 'trouble', contrast or conflicts, which make the constrains of discursive construction visible (Taylor & Littleton 2006, 29).

3 Results: Three Modes of Theologising

This study depicts three modes of theologising: Cognitive Theologising, Affective Theologising, and Practical Theologising. The aim of these modes is not to bridge the gap or heal the wound depicted above but rather to describe and understand the situation of 'not to be in line' more deeply.

3.1 *Cognitive Theologising*

The first mode of theologising arising from the study is Cognitive Theologising. It focuses on depicting the words of wisdom. Thus, it explores how faith is expressed in words, what the difference between knowing and believing is, and how we manage if we think and believe differently. Thus, cognitive theologising shares the traditional focus of theology: language and cognition (Afdal 2022, 86–88). But instead of prescribed doctrines, cognitive theologising takes a deep and wide approach on faith expressions rooted in the everyday life and personal experience. Hence, this mode of theologising shares many traits with 'ordinary theology' (Astley 2002). In my analysis, I draw examples from experiences and expressions explicitly pointing to a gap or a wound, as these examples make the constraints of discursive practices visible (cf. Taylor & Littleton 2006). Indeed, it is these negotiations between expressive freedom and discursive limitations where meanings are made while we construct ourselves as human-beings (cf. Wuthnow 2011; Taylor & Littleton 2006; Wetherell 2001).

In their everyday, reflexive talk, the young adults participating in the study did, indeed, present a significant amount of critical and analytical talk on the concepts they wanted to use when expressing their personal faith vis-à-vis their views on the inherited idioms of religion. Religion, here, was mostly perceived as structure, institution or tradition – thus, different from and sometimes in contrast with personal faith. For the young adults, it was important to find personally meaningful, not-too-narrow and not-too-prescribed phrasings that would best catch their religious worlds (cf. Orsi 2004). Thus, analysing the difference between personal belief and 'religion' was essential for many young adults.

For example, Mona, 16, explicated this carefully:

> Belief and religion are […] different things, as religion is related much to a congregation, and so, then it entails a lot of people's opinions in it. And now the quarrel is not anymore so much on what God says […], but what people think that God says. I believe the way I do, but I do not believe in 'religion' in the same way.
>
> MONA, 16

For the young adults, religious language, including the concept of religion, was not taken for granted but concepts were rather perceived as socially constructed categories. Such categories were found flexible and amendable – to such an extent that the young adults could themselves analyse these categories critically in relation to their own experiences and their own ways of believing. Indeed, Mona's analysis on the concepts of belief and religion was very much alike those of academic scholars who have studied the 'category of religion'. These scholars have shown that it is not only the content of 'religion' that is shaped by people's opinions, but that people's opinions also shape how we perceive and define 'religion' per se. (See e.g. Horii 2017).

In the processes of differentiating between the content of their personal faith and vocation, the young adults were exposed to religious talk and concepts in different religious or non-religious social contexts. As seen already in the first extract, the concept of opinion was meaningful in these negotiations. As they found it meaningful to differentiate between different human voices vs. the Divine, the young adults often benefited from explicating religious thinking as opinions rather than truths. Thus, instead of 'God-talk' (Astley 2002), they often found theology as 'human-talk'.

This is how Roosa, 22, reflected on her experiences in Christian youth groups:

> When I first went to the young adults' evening, and then […] I heard the priest say, that in a good parish everyone can have their own opinion. I totally agree. I think that there ought to be room for one's own personal opinions, and not that 'everyone needs to agree' – and that then someone kind of tells you the opinions you ought to have.
>
> ROOSA, 22

Here, the concept of opinion was meaningful in the context of a specific trouble of conflict: Due to her personal life situation, Roosa's religious views on family and dating life were different from her peers and their 'normative theology' (Cameron et al. 2010). The experience of this gap had caused her existential dissonance followed by anxiety (Cole 2016). The challenge of conflicting beliefs or opinions has also been treated in theological epistemology (King & Kelly 2017); disagreement can be a call to revise one's opinions (conciliationism), whereas permissive epistemologies let conflicting views to exist at the same time (e.g. rational pluralism). Even though these academic discussions have their roots in the 'cognitive architectures' of truth and evidence, some room has been left to 'lived' experiences, personal reflexivity and situatedness. Here, the point has been to increase one's self-understanding in relation to faith and questions on truth – even if we would not know how to agree to disagree. (Levinstein 2017.) The young adults truly embraced the goal of increasing self-understanding – and this is what they expected from others, too.

As a companion to the concept of opinion, there was an idea of religious truth in the background, as it seemed that many wounds had their origins in tensions between personal and collective 'truths'. These experiences were expressed implicitly or explicitly using a rich vocabulary. But was truth as a concept still important to young adults, or did they whole-heartedly embrace the post-truth era (cf. Sismondo 2017; Baier 2023)? As a concept, truth only appeared in Roosa's and Joel's, 19, argumentation.

The most explicit verbal account on truth – depicting very well the overall cognitive landscape of young adults – was given by Joel:

> I have such a way of thinking, that if something is true then it is true. […] If your own faith is true, then it will crush all the wrong information. And if it is not true, then why should I be afraid of the truth. […] I think that Christians ought to have more courage to think if one's own faith is true or not. Then you don't have a need to control other people, as truth can freely travel here in the world. And then the truth doesn't get broken even if there are differing thoughts from other people, too.
>
> JOEL, 19

Even if the young adults' personal context was Finnish and Lutheran, their thinking was framed by religious diversity. Thus, the young adults negotiated not only between their own faith and the Lutheran tradition, but also between different traditions. Here, it was important to explore what is true and meaningful to oneself rather than taking a normative stand on the faith of the others. Such quests have been topical also in discussions exploring (in) authenticity (e.g. Cole 2016) and cosmopolitanism (e.g. Kang 2013). Indeed, it has been claimed that the search for 'a God of one's own' has challenged the traditional Judeo-Christian doctrine of absolute truth (Beck 2010). Thus, the 'multireligionism' of the world opens new ways to consider both the concept of truth and our understanding of others and otherness, as two sides of the same coin: the coin made of one's own theological self-reflection, self-identity and self-definition (Beck 2003; Kang 2013).

As seen here, talk and conceptual practices still carry heavy meanings in young adults' theologising. Language and the use of it pertain as important tools of how we as human beings navigate in this world and its constraints, as well as in how we construct ourselves. This study has shown how young adults view language and amend it with critical and reflexive eyes – or rather tongue – also being sensitive to the power of language and its use. Thus, it could be said that young adults engage in non-stop data collection or religious thinking and conceptualisation within in their everyday lives and in relation to their personal experiences. This data tells about the religious worlds that they negotiate with, in the context of their everyday lives. As an outcome, young adults are not only challenging theological traditions and re-interpreting prescribed idioms of their religious tradition; they also go beyond the criticism by employing their creative potential in constructing meaningful stories in the varied circumstances of their everyday lives (cf. Graham et al. 2018, 55). Thus, young adults use both creativity and imagination in search for their authentic religious thinking and expressions. In this enterprise, they also question the legitimation of religious language per se. Analysing such discursive dynamics also entails an analysis of power embedded in (the use of) language. As such, cognitive theologising becomes close critical discourse analysis (e.g. Hjelm 2016), rooting it in the everyday and lived experience. This answers to the need to amend discursive approaches as "an implementation in practice" (Moberg 2013).

3.2 *Affective Theologising*

The second mode of theologising arising from the study is Affective Theologising. Its core points to the transformative power of sensing and feeling, and addresses questions such as what personal faith feels like, how do we sense 'belonging' and participation, and what is a religious community. This mode of theologising draws from a wide perspective on affects, which are perceived as more than subjective experiences of emotions and feelings. Instead, affects can be described as "the visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing" (Seighworth & Gregg 2010, 1). In addition, affects are approached as sensations, i.e., impressions, which bring together the intertwined nature of bodily sensation, emotion and thought in human experience (Ahmed 2014, 230). For example, it is sensations that act dialogically when we pick up an atmosphere or a mood (ibid, 221–222). As such, affective theologising has a special focus on emotional reflexivity – both as self-feeling and self-reflection embedded in reflexive dialogue (Burkitt 2012, 469; Holmes 2015).

As affects reach beyond consciousness and talk (Burkitt 2012), they are sometimes hard to phrase. Rather than in words, affects appear like impressions in the air; "pulsations for which we do not have adequately calibrated language" (Bray & Moore, 2). Thus, affective theologising entails intuitive experiences which seek to find their way out in words. This was the case with many of the young adults in this study, who sometimes found it challenging to find suitable words to describe their experiences. But even if voicing their experiences was sometimes hard, it did not mean that affects were not there – on the contrary.

For example, Sofia, 16, struggled to find words to describe the essence of her faith, which was something else than active believing:

> Like, there is such … It's a bit vague now, but I think it entails such … like … mmm … I would maybe like to combine safety, and then some people talk a lot about hope, and some people for example about trust.
>
> SOFIA, 16

As it seemed very important for Sofia to point beyond her chosen words – meeting her discursive constraints – I wanted to get a more nuanced understanding of what she wanted to express. Thus, I asked Sofia, "You mentioned safety. What does it mean to you? How do you experience it?" As it was still challenging for her to find the words, I continued with a more metaphorical account: "Is it like this bodyguard type of safety or more like a state of mind?" This imagery clearly helped Sofia to attach to her affective experience and phrase it. ”Yes, yes, it is mental, yeah, definitely this mental version, like when thinking about the life and the limits of it, or like hard things in life," she explicated enthusiastically. Here, I think, the role of the researcher was of particular relevance. Again, the use of creativity and imagination – this time by the researcher – helped Sofia to explicate her affective meaning-making in words (Graham et al. 2019, 71–75). This, I think is a core element of affective theologising. As it entails verbalising the non-verbal or pre-verbal, it is not easy, but it is still possible – and even essential. (Cf. Bray & Moore 2019.)

Some of the young adults, then again, talked so much about their emotions and sensations, that affective theologising seemed to be their main mode of religious reflexivity. In other words, they seemed to master the reflection-action processes (Holmes 2015, 64) while, for example, negotiating between their personal faith and experiences and their relation to religious communities.

Many of these young adults were, indeed, socially inclined, and active in one or many religious communities. Hence, they had many affective experiences to reflect upon by virtue of participating in religious communities or events. For example, for Emma, it was important to look for a spiritual home. During her 'postmodern pilgrimage' (cf. Denton & Flory 2020) she had visited several religious communities.

This is how she described her experiences:

> In the Lutheran mass I get bored and tired. I like to play music in them, but … otherwise it is too stiff. There is not enough of praise and hymns are sometimes really boring. So, maybe a more charismatic community might be [good for me]… But then again, I have a Lutheran background. So, I'm kind of in-between. [..] I feel very free, 'cause I can decide myself. But then again, why isn't there such a community where one would feel like home! How much fun it would be to have such a community, where one would feel like being part of a family.
>
> EMMA, 22

As seen here, the gap with religious tradition(s) was mostly a matter of feeling for Emma. She was torn between her religious roots and her affective experiences in spiritual communities. As she said, "sometimes it bothers me more, sometimes less, depending on what else is going on in my life". Thus, her affective experiences entailed a lot of freedom (cf. Ahmed 2014), but even freedom did not always *feel* good (sic). For Emma, affective theologising was a tool for navigating in the world of religious communities. Thus, she negotiated between her varying experiences and with varying religious communities; in these processes she constructed herself and her religiosity by making meaning through affects (Wetherell 2013).

For many others too, communities – or rather the lack of communities or the feeling of community – played a special role. Experiences of boundaries and differences appeared deeper than just feeling 'out of place' or not-belonging (cf. Ammerman 2021, 133–134). Sometimes, these wounds even entailed fear.

For example, for Tiina, 27, it was hard to attend Lutheran services as a bisexual person:

> Well, you don't feel like attending [the service] if you need to be afraid 'cause you can get beaten up spiritually. […] This 'safe space' and such, what does it really mean, what does it call for. It is not just rhetoric. One needs to remember to think for oneself on how to behave.
>
> TIINA, 27

Her affective experiences of getting 'beaten up' had truly created a gap between Tiina and religious communities. Here, the gap was not purely doctrinal, nor private and emotional. Instead, Tiina's affective experiences included a great deal of sensing and reflecting – how religious talk, communities, and practices made her feel like. These sensations were, following Clare, lived experiences that did not happen in the past, but fundamentally shaped Tiina's being here and now (cf. Clare 2019, 3–4). Her experiences in religious communities had a fundamental impact on her sense of self, as she struggled for both safety and recognition (cf. Honneth 1995). Thus, Tiina's experiences clearly called for the 'fifth approach' in affective theologising; paying attention to practices of power and the "potential for realizing a world that subsists within and exceeds the horizons and boundaries of the norm" (Seigworth & Gregg 2010, 7). Tiina, and her affective experiences, made the boundaries of norms visible – not only as they were expressed in words but as they were experienced and reflected affectively.

Ultimately, affective theologising did not only cast a critical look on the outside, but also entailed self-criticism (cf. Burkitt 2012). For example, Heidi, 25, had experienced challenges in searching for her own way of negotiating believing and belonging. As a theology student, she had well-articulated views on Christian doctrine – e.g. "for me, theology of the cross means that God is acting from and in the margins" – but her affective theologising sometimes contradicted with her cognitive views. Some of her observations and experiences had sparked many controversial emotions:

> Like, when I've talked about the ecclesial social climbing here, it's also for me an attempt to heal from my own egocentric desire to success. This is in sharp contrast with my own [cognitive] theology. But then again, I do feel frustration about the fact that a 25-year-old woman is not heard, even if I had a lot to say.
>
> HEIDI, 25

Thus, Heidi reflected her "egocentric desire" and "frustration" in a dialogue with her cognitive theologising but also within the institutionalised context of her theologising. For her, affective reflexivity revealed traces of social patterns in her surroundings. Indeed, sensations are "not separate from social structures, and social structures are not separate from sensations" (Clare 2019, 43). Thus, Heidi reflected her experiences both internally and externally, i.e. in relation to her surroundings. Her affective experiences appeared as very situated, and they revealed that she was not in harmony with the situation around her. (Cf. Ammerman 2021, 123).

The above examples depict what many affect theorists have stated: affects always emerge as embodied knowing in contexts, in spaces and places. And in these contexts, there are also power relations shaping the "sensory possibilities within them" (Clare 2019, 63). Thus, affective theologising happens in a dialogue; it touches the affective negotiation between young adults and the church. And as such, it has a great deal of power – to change and to be changed. As Sara Ahmed (2014, 171) has put it, "[E]motions are what move us, and how we are moved involves interpretations of sensations and feelings not only in the sense that we interpret what we feel, but also in that what we feel might be dependent on the past interpretations." Thus, our sensing not only shapes who we are as human-beings; it also shapes who we become – or can become. As we sense and feel within social structures, we can transform, and our transformation encompasses the power to transform those structures. This is the power embedded in affective theologising.

3.3 *Practical Theologising*

The third and final mode of theologising arising from the study is Practical Theologising. It seeks to depict the human potential and capacity to act by exploring questions like how faith is acted out, what the church does in today's world, and how young adults want to change the world. Thus, the focus of analysis is on language as "a key to understand action, interaction and practice" (Afdal 2022, 87). This mode parallels with lived religion with focusing on studying religion in and as practice (cf. Ammerman 2021). It also relates to the conversation of practice theory and theology (e.g. Johansen & Schmidt 2022), wherein the differentiation between weak and strong practices (see Nicolini 2012) is essential. It has been said that "thin or weak conception understands practice as the doing mode of society and human life" (Afdal 2022, 77), whereas the strong programme of practice is ontological; it perceives everything in the social world as practice, including knowledge, language, and beliefs, which are all produced and enacted in social practices. (Afdal 2022, 78.)

Practice – both weak and strong – was in many ways present in the young adults' reflexive talk in this study. Sometimes these reflections took the shape of personal epistemologies and ontologies; they pointed to ways of relating oneself to institutionalised religion, but they also told about ways of constructing oneself and the world within the constraints of discursive and pragmatic limitations – such as the Lutheran tradition. Sometimes, these negotiations happened through negating i.e. referring to non-spirituality or non-religion as ways of constructing oneself in the world of religions (see e.g. Beyer et al. 2018). Such reflections were shared, for example, by Maria, 27, who reflected on her experiences in confirmation school:

> The religious or spiritual side of the confirmation school wasn't really essential to me. It was nothing negative, but it was kind of nothing. I didn't get any religious experience or so.
>
> MARIA, 27

The lack of spiritual or religious experience in confirmation school had not left Maria indifferent to 'big questions'. Instead, in she often highlighted small everyday practices as the core of her lived religion and of Christianity in general (cf. Taves et al. 2018; Ammerman 2021). These small practices were not restricted to the mundane nor to the private spheres of life. On the contrary, they were so meaningful that Maria hoped that also the church would highlight the meaning of small things – and how these things create change in the world. For example, she wanted the parish to lead the way into a better future by example, such as through "serving only vegetarian food from now on". According to Maria, these kinds of small things would strengthen "the sense of continuity and hope for the future". Thus, in the young adults' theologising, the weak and strong conceptions of practices (Nicolini 2012; Afdal 2022) were often deeply intertwined. Small practices were not thin or weak, but they even constituted foundations for eschatological thinking and personal theologies of hope (see e.g. Moltmann 2021).

For the young adults, the meaning of communal practices was of essence as many negotiations took place between individuals and the practices in communities of practice (sic) (see Wenger 2009). This again entailed both weak and strong practices, which were observed in and through parish activities. For example, the habits of encountering a newcomer or a visitor were deeply meaningful.

This is what, for example, Joel, 19, had experienced:

> When and if I go to a new (Lutheran) parish, then nobody takes any contact with me. But then again, when I've visited the Pentecostal mass, then someone comes to chat and talk to me at once. And greets. And after one meeting they were arranging a sauna for the same evening. So, that us, we (the Lutherans) kind of lack the community there.
>
> JOEL, 19

In Joel's example, the theologies of encounter (cf. Vähäkangas 2021) deeply reflected his encounter with God. As Joel continued to explain, "If there is no community there, how my bond with God would then be involved---as I can be there [in the mass] or not, and it all goes the same way." Thus, experiences of a gap between the young adults' and the habitual practices (cf. Schmidt

2021) in religious communities had a deep impact; it made them feel alienated both from other people and from God. Small practices, like saying 'hello', had a big impact.

In addition, practical theologising often was ethical and political in nature (e.g. Hunsberger 2005). Even if the starting point was rooted in the young adults' personal experience, it also entailed a strong public gaze. These ponderings were relevant when the young adults were searching for their own calling and ways of Christian life.

This is how Henri, 22, reflected on his future aspirations:

> I try to study many things now, so that I could do something concrete when I'm older. 'Cause I feel like helping out people is close to my heart. [...] I don't see myself as a political influencer or such, at least not yet. Now I try to increase my understanding and education, so that I could somehow in the future."
>
> HENRI, 22

Often, the young adults' ethical and public theologising was put against "the church's theologizing about public life and the implications of the reign of God" (Hunsberger 2005, 317). For example, the practices of helping those in need – like providing shelter for refugees, development aid, and food assistance – were mentioned as examples of finding oneself to be in line with the church. Then again, all practices hindering equality, such as gender-related practices concerning priesthood and same-sex marriages, were problematic and caused tension. Thus, here theologising took place between personal moral stands and aspirations (cf. Grönlund 2012) – most often rooted in the young adults' humanist-egalitarian attitudes (Helve 2015) – and the practices of helping within the church.

Sometimes disappointments in parish activities had even deepened the gap between the church and young adults deeply engaged in church-based advocacy and voluntary work. These young adults saw the church rather as pushing them away from the Kingdom of God than supporting their efforts in building it (cf. Kang 2013). For example, Jenna, 19, had a very controversial relation with the Lutheran church, which she found "a stale and grimy community, where certain things don't move forward". This frustration associated with her rare participation in parish activities, even though she was not ready to leave the church and was active in church-based advocacy.

> As it [the church] does not have any role in my life, so kind of why I am a member ... But if feels somehow radical to leave it. I have not thought

> about it very seriously, but I have thought about it. There are such things – not so much about Christianity – but things that I don't fully agree with. So then, do I want to be supporting such action.
>
> JENNA, 19

Here, the critique is strongly opposed to actions, which function as a yardstick. Like Jenna, many young adults had become frustrated with the everyday culture and decision-making in the bureaucratic church. In contrast, they were very motivated to uphold religiously rooted values and put them into practice (Grönlund 2012, 62). In such efforts, they missed the church as a companion in their search "to find the common good" (Hunsberger 2005). Thus, the gap did not appear only between moral stands, but also in pace, place, and practice. The church as a public but also a static agent was not in line with the young adults' aspirations for making a change in the world.

As seen here, many young adults call for a theology focusing on "the Christian religion as practice" (Afdal 2022, 87). For them, it is social practices, rather than their own or other people's cognitive architectures, that call for attention and form or reveal the core of theologising. Thus, the practical mode of theologising creates an incentive to explore further the contemporary ways of studying and doing theology – in and as practice. In these approaches, practice itself is perceived as containing knowledge and thus it is "not just an object of research" (Vähäkangas 2021, 56). This resonates with the strong programme of practice (Nicolini 2012), even though practical theologising reaches beyond the dichotomy of weak and strong practices.

4 Conclusions: Towards Holistic Theologising

In this article, I have explored three modes of theologising. Theologising, here, has been perceived as creative theological reflection happening in space and place (cf. Fulkerson 2017; Graham et al. 2019). It has further been noted that theologising always begins from experience. Indeed, it is the processes of theologising that bring together lived experience and religious tradition. (Dillen 2014.) As such, theologising encompasses reflecting on one's life from a theological point of view, and theology from life's point of view. These processes of making meaning happen both ways. (Tveitereid 2022.) Such processes have been explored here intersubjectively, i.e. through co-theologising with young adults (cf. de Roest 2019.) With such eyes, this article has explored how young adults' navigate in a situation, where they find themselves 'not to be in line' with the church.

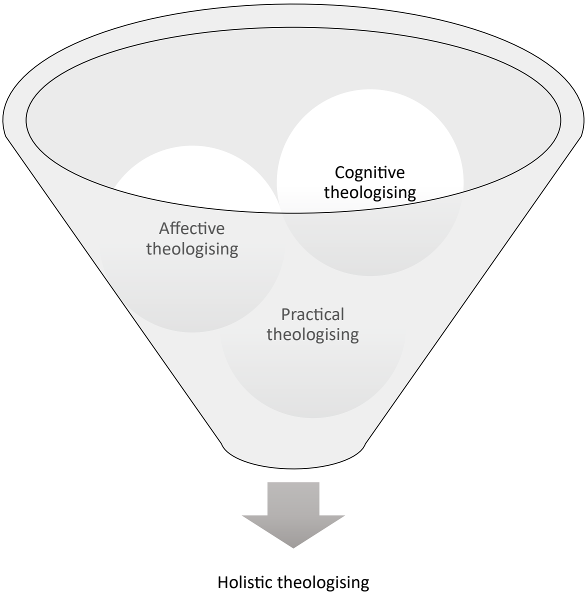

FIGURE 1 Cognitive, affective, and practical theologising as holistic theologising

As a result, I have presented three modes of theologising – cognitive, affective, and practical – which depict varying processes of doing theology rooted in the everyday lived experiences of young adults. All the modes of theologising seek to make meaning of and by experiences of a gap or a wound. Instead of being mutually exclusive, I see the three modes of theologising rather as intertwined and complementary. Together, they form a holistic whole of the meaning-making processes embedded in young adults' negotiations inspired by the gap or the wound. This is illustrated in the picture below.

Epistemologically, the three-dimensional representation of cognitive, affective, and practical theologising seeks to show how young adults navigate on their pilgrimage from the fragmented postmodern condition (Lyotard 1993; Baier 2023) towards the holistic cosmopolitan condition (Beck & Sznaider 2010). This claim is based on two notions. Firstly, instead of accepting that the small or individual narratives claim only "local and transient rather than universal and enduring" validity (Baier 2023, 3), this article has shown the critique and power embedded in all modes of theologising – from language to affects and practices. As such, all modes of theologising point to the entanglements of critical and everyday perspectives in the processes of doing theology (cf. Kang 2013). Secondly, this study has further shown, that in young adults' narrative-discursive practices, the binaries of humane and Divine, private and public, knowledge and practice, are treated as fluid categories. Such breaking of dualities has been described as the "cosmopolitanization or reality" (Beck & Sznaider 2010, 382) which calls for new forms of conceptual, methodological, empirical and normative analyses (Beck & Sznaider 2010, 283).

But what are these new forms of analyses like? For instance, instead of wondering or even digging the gap between young adults' everyday lived experience and the religious tradition, this study has shown how young adults navigate and construct their worldviews between experience and tradition. The dynamics of this navigation can show the way forward and help in building new methodological roadmaps, too. For example, the ability to embrace both individualism and collectivism, particularity and multiplicity (cf. Jensen 2021, 285; Helve 2015; Kuusisto & Kallioniemi 2016) can be a virtue both for young adults and in theological methodology. Hence, instead of binaries, this study calls for situated and flexible approaches in and to theologising. Such open-ended approaches, just like young adults' values, can be seen "a rational, reflexive response to late modern uncertainty" (Helve 2015, 105). In the end, it is the shared situation of uncertainty that brings us all together and answers to the quest of stimulating and developing "further thinking about doing situated theology" (Bergmann & Vähäkangas 2021, 3). Indeed, in the postmodern context, the request to give primacy for the situatedness of theological reflection (Fulkerson 2007, 235) means giving primacy to uncertainty – and doubt (cf. Moltmann 2005). This, again, opens new and unexpected horizons for theological methodology.

All in all, the notions of uncertainty and doubt don't just describe postmodern religiosity; they also cast a methodological challenge. As the lived realities are changing, so there is a need for methodologies to have new directions, too. To embrace uncertainty and doubt challenges old methodological notions of clarity and precision (cf. Law 2004). Instead, new methodologies need to dwell in creativity and experimentation – breaking out from the old paradigmatic boxes, like the boxes of believing and belonging (cf. Fulkerson 2007; also Niemelä 2015). An interesting way beyond dichotomies is provided, for example, by rooting theological analyses to the strong programme of practice. Here, practices are not explored as part of religion but religion *per se* is explored as a practice (Afdal 2022). Approaching religion as a creative practice is, indeed, a call to explore the processes of engagement, improvisation, and exchange (cf. Orsi 1999). In this article, these 'acts of improvisation' have been explored through and with young adults. But – as theologising can and is – "done by "ordinary people", or by academic theologians, or by church leaders" (Dillen 2014, 226) – this is also a call to theologise with young and old, lay and professional, academic and non-academic. Instead of starting from 'who', co-theologising could start with how, where and when i.e. from the social and material practices of doing theology (Afdal 2022, 87). Such an approach helps to reach beyond dichotomies and instead, looks at theology "not just spiritually but holistically in a materialized human reality" (Kang 2013, 101). What kinds of consequences such premises will have for all modes of theologising – and their application – remains to be seen.

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