
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Images of Place, Secularity and Gentrification: On Urban Religious Belonging in an Inner City Neighbourhood in Oslo

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Through extensive fieldwork conducted in an inner city neighbourhood in Oslo, Norway, the authors found that a variation of actors and settings evoked different religious and secular images of place. In what ways is the urban experience shaping or challenging the religious sense of spatial belonging, and why is a secular discourse dominating the scene? In order to obtain such images and sense of place in the context of a recently established area based initiative, we interviewed representatives for the religious communities localized in the neighbourhoods of Tøyen and Grønland. Here we encountered no religiously infused language despite a sizeable spatial religious presence. In the sciences of religion, the view of a separation between the secular and the religious as a social fact and a social norm in modern societies dominates. We argue that there is a privatization of religion (Casanova 1994) within the larger discourse of urban renewal and gentrification. Simultaneously we find the reverse of Taylor's (2007) proposal of the emptying of religion in social space: namely a filling up of religion in social spaces, that we label 'urban religious belonging'. This article provides further empirically based knowledge into the connection of religion, secularism and the urban sphere, the difference between belief and representations or discourses, as well as a methodological approach for studying these connections and fractures.

Introduction

When walking the streets of Tøyen with the yellow vest as a 'night raven' a common question to get from both the smaller children and young people we meet, is "do you do this voluntarily?!! Don't you get paid?" When the volunteerism is confirmed, the teenagers usually respond; "it's good that you're doing this. It is important". Some of the young boys even add a "Go with God" or "You will get to heaven" in Arabic. The 'ravens' are mostly white, native Norwegians in their late thirties or early forties patrolling the neighbourhood streets with friendly nods, every Friday and Saturday night.

The basis of this article is the readings of and reflections on material collected as input to a part of the policy process of an urban area based initiative in Tøyen (Oslo, Norway) and supplemented by later findings in a similar study in neighbouring Grønland. We included a study of religious organizations since we thought that religious discourse, practice and views have been neglected in the everyday structuration and planning of urban renewal in Norway. This omission might be understood as founded partly in the view of religion as belonging to the past in discussions of place (Smith 1992, Stump 2008) whereas non-religion is the future (de Botton 2013), and partly because of the lack of religion in urban studies (Park

1994, Knox and Pinch 2010). Through ethnographic methods, interviews, participant observation and experimental workshops we investigated how, among other topics, representatives from religious denominations see the plans and their role in urban development. After the studies, when analysing the material, we realized that the dominant discourse *inside* the religious denominations in the context of urban renewal and area based initiatives is framed as a secular one, and in contrast we only encountered religiously founded expressions from local inhabitants when we were *outside* of a denominational setting, as illustrated in the first section of this introduction. Why is this so? In what ways are the urban experience shaping or challenging the religious sense of spatial belonging? And why is a secular discourse dominating the scene?

An underlying idea in the input to the policy process – and in this article – is to explore if our merging of place- and faith-based discourses can make our cities more viable and compassionate places to live our lives. Since religion and religious practice are active and visible parts of this particular urban district's development, the insights from the religious communities give valuable material on urban renewal and may strengthen the quality of such planning processes. It is hoped that the article's findings will, in light of the combined theoretical perspectives, contribute to a further understanding of secularity as practiced locally. In this article we will thus analyse the faith-based communities' articulations and images of the district:

what do they see as the positive aspects of the district and what are the negative dimensions they articulate? We will analyse the extent to which the language used is based on a religious discourse or a secular discourse: do they justify their valuations through references to central tenets or stories in their religions or do they use a language drawn from the secular sphere?

People experience a sense and degree of belonging to the places they live, work and spend their leisure time, and to the faith, values and community spirit encompassed in that urban space. To many this experience also includes a religious belief that structures not only their use of, but also their thoughts and opinions on the places they inhabit. In this paper we discuss the denominations, and particularly the first generation immigrants (adults, seniors) and second generation (youths and young adults) that belong to the multiple Muslim communities in Tøyen and Grønland. We conducted similar interviews in the local Christian denominations as to those in the Muslim denominations. In this paper we analyse the strategies they use to express their belonging to this urban space and whether the strategies are given secular or religious justifications.

There are certain limitations on generalizing the findings from this particular area, especially concerning its demographics, level of poverty (60 percent of the children grow up in low income families) (Brattbakk et al. 2017) and location within a wealthy welfare state in the Nordic hemisphere. Why this area is seen as a special place will be elaborated below, along with an argument on the value of generalizing these location-based findings.

First, we will present a description of Tøyen and Grønland in order to have a factual basis followed by our

sociologically based theoretical framework. Thereafter follows a description of our method for the interviews with leaders of the denominations before we present the major findings of the data material. In order to complete what we see as a richer picture, we include inputs from our own work with adolescents in the same project, as well as other relevant studies on the place of religion in the district. The empirical findings will be discussed in light of our analytical approach combining theories of secularization, social-cultural analysis and insights from urban renewal research within human geography and social anthropology, before we conclude with a discussion on the place of religion and the place of the secular.

Socio-economic and Cultural Description of Tøyen and Grønland

The areas we investigated Tøyen and Grønland are located in the eastern inner city of Oslo, Norway, and are home to a diverse population, a wide spectrum of private and public services, a rich cultural scene and a mix of housing types and buildings (Figure 1). The area functions as a nexus for diasporas in Norway and as the country's prime representation of a multi-cultural community (Enstedt 2015). Our research and earlier studies found that the districts are a vital part of Oslo, fulfilling a range of purposes and functions for many different groups (Brattbakk et al. 2015, Huse 2014, Brattbakk et al. 2017). In addition, Tøyen and Grønland as well as their surrounding neighbourhoods are to a large degree characterized by all those who come there in order to work, shop, go to a café or a pub, receive treatment, buy or sell drugs, beg, swim, visit the mosque, the church or the

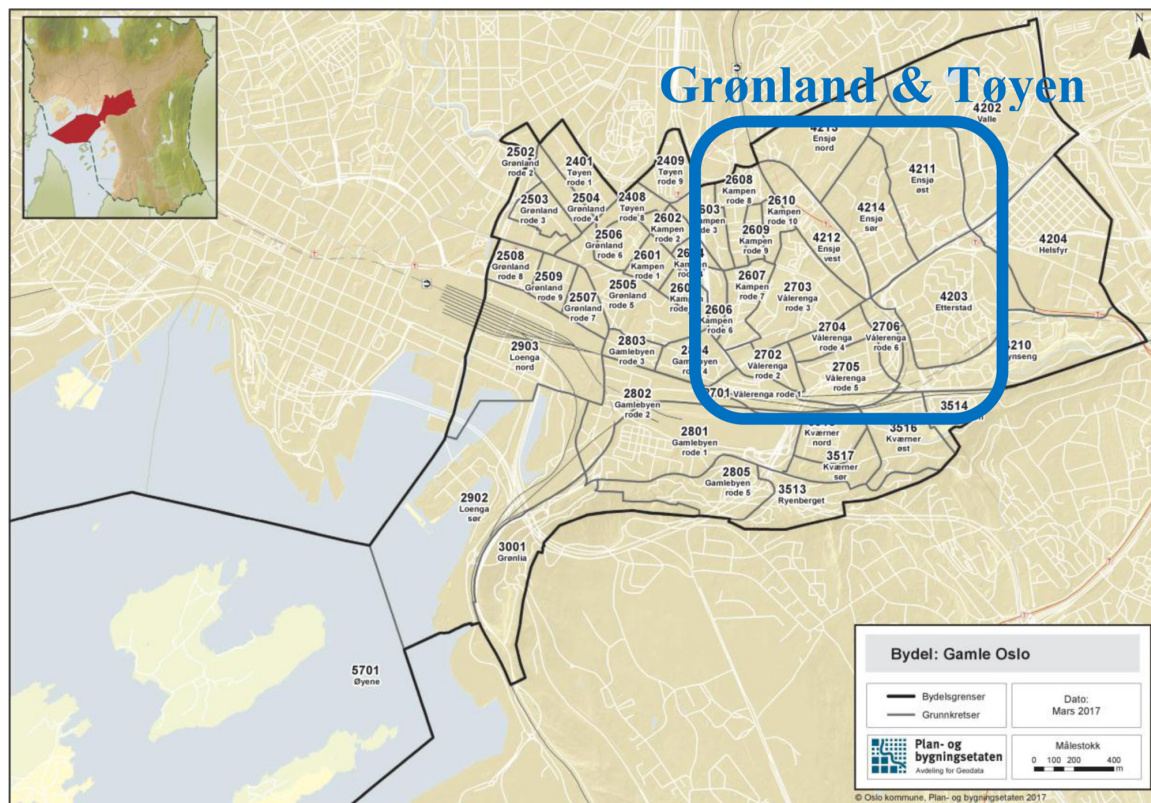


Figure 1: Location of Tøyen and Grønland in Oslo (Oslo Kommune 2017: 4).

library, play football, do voluntary work, or participate in different cultural activities.²

Tøyen and Grønland stand out in a Norwegian context and within Oslo according to several socio-economic indicators. In demographic terms these districts have an over-representation of age groups <6 years, under-representation of schooling age, and an over-representation of age groups 20–50 years. Furthermore, these districts have a much higher presence of social housing and single-person households and the highest occurrence of children in low income families in Oslo. In addition the participation in the paid workforce is low (and especially among women). Moreover in these districts there is a high degree of dependence on public welfare benefits (Norges offentlige utredninger 2020). Underneath these numbers earlier research and our own has identified an increasing socio-economic polarization in the area, a growing gentrification and a tendency for richer and well-educated parents to move from the area when their children reach school-age, or send them to schools outside the area (Brattbakk et al. 2015, Kadasia et al. 2020).

In May 2013 the political parties in Oslo reached a compromise to set up an area based initiative in Tøyen. The cost of this five-year development process was shared equally between the municipality and five national ministries. The overarching goal of the urban renewal programme was phrased like this: “The development process for the district should contribute to the experience of feeling safe, a community that includes and inspires residents to want to remain in the area” (Brattbakk et al. 2015: 2).³ Similarly, the local borough council commissioned a study for neighbouring Grønland in 2017 (see Brattbakk et al. 2017).

Parts of Tøyen and Grønland appear to be undergoing a gentrification process (Huse 2014) although not following a uni-directional trajectory (Andersen et al. 2021), similar to the changes that have already occurred in its neighbouring districts, and the urban regeneration programme seems to speed up this process.⁴

In the process of eliciting the wishes and needs of the inhabitants for the future development of the area, the municipality was particularly interested in locating the “silent voices” in the district, referring to the groups of inhabitants that are not normally heard in the discussions on urban planning and local development. One of these so-called “silent” groups was the denominations in the extended neighbourhood in the inner eastern part of Oslo. This area has a 39.5% presence of people with an immigrant background (Brattbakk et al. 2017). In 2006 approximately 70% of these were estimated to be Muslims (Vassenden and Andersson 2011).⁵

From the middle of the 19th century, this area of Oslo expanded due to the industrialization of the city. With industrialization came novel forms of religious communities such as lay ministries or Protestant and Calvinist derived denominations that were outside the control of the Church of Norway (Stensvold 2005a), e.g. the Free Church and the Salvation Army. The latter is visibly present through their provision of different services for people suffering from addiction problems or poverty in this

part of town. This particular area in Oslo has a long history of folk and labour religiosity. In 1974, Pakistani migrants formed the first Islamic community in the area (Stensvold 2005b). Due to immigration, the districts are currently the location of four out of the five purpose-built mosques in Oslo in addition to several Islamic centers. In addition, there is a range of Christian denominations and organisations such as the Salvation Army, the Quakers, Charismatic Christianity, the Catholic Church and the Norwegian State Church. The prominence of actively used denominations in the area might lead one to expect a high level of religious discourse among both members and officials in the denominations. Yet, as stated above, this hypothesis is not in accordance with our findings. In what ways is the urban experience shaping or challenging the religious sense of spatial belonging? And why is a secular discourse dominating the scene?

Theories of religion, secularity and place

Even if religion was one of the important historical reasons to form cities in the first place (Kaplan et al. 2009), urban geography has paid little attention to religious issues (Park 1994). Recently, however, religion has been the focus of several works by urban geographers (Knox and Pinch 2010) often examining how religion is strongly interwoven with culture, identity, space and ethnicity. This position is reflected in the study of urban religion in recent times (Becci and Burchardt 2013, Burchardt and Westendorp 2018). Moreover, an idea of religion as separated from other spheres of life is a particular Western notion (Asad 1993). For religions like Islam and Sikhism, which today are increasingly being practised in European cities, the religious and non-religious spheres are not seen as separable (Knox and Pinch 2010). The sociology of religions is fundamentally intrigued by the possible conjunctions and disjunctions between religious beliefs and religious belonging, mainly due to the basic tenet of Emile Durkheim (1912) of religion as society’s worship of itself through the externalized totem. Grace Davie (1990) holds that Europe is experiencing a division between the two where belonging to a religious community becomes less important while belief persists to a larger degree. However, she makes an exception for the “black churches” where “the community grows out of the church which is its principal reason for existence” (Davie 1990: 466). Distancing herself from Davie, Abby Day (2011) suggests that beliefs should be understood as being social in nature, hence the title of her article “Believing in belonging”.

The belief in a separation between the secular and the religious as a social fact and a social norm in modern societies has dominated the sciences of religion. The underpinning of this divide can be found in different theories of secularization. These theories are under constant discussion (Berger 1999, Bruce 2011), and they come in a variety of forms focusing on rationalization (Weber 1993) or differentiation (Durkheim 1912); and on whether Christianity played a role in secularization or not (Blumenberg 1983, Löwith 1970). Jose Casanova (1994) argues, on the other hand, that we can distinguish between secularization as 1) the decline in religious belief, 2) the privatization of

religion, and 3) the differentiation of the secular spheres. These three different notions of secularization each have their own sphere of investigation, but they might also be connected.

Charles Taylor (2007) elaborates on Casanova's categories and distinguishes between three different meanings of secularity. The first version is an emptying of religion from social spaces, the second is a decline in religious belief and practice, and the third version is that faith or religious practice and belonging become one option amongst several – and “belief in God is no longer axiomatic” (Taylor 2007: 3). When combining these perspectives related to sciences of religions with one related to human geography and urban renewal, we see how they enrich and inform, but also challenge each other.

The relation between the different conceptualisations of *secularization* and the different conceptualizations of the *secular* constitute a part of conglomerate of notions including religion, the sacred, the profane, secularism and transcendence among others.⁶ The dichotomy secular/religious is practised and theorised with reference to specific places in space and time (Asad 2003). It is thus challenging to draw a specific line between the two. However, as Døving writes regarding the hijab debates in Norway when analysing self-professed Muslims' contributions to the debate, “Their arguments can be characterized by a striking absence of references to the Qur'an, Allah, the Prophet or shariah, and a just as striking use of secular concepts such as identity, freedom of religion, democracy, feminism and freedom of speech” (2012: 224–225). Our view is that place and the secular/religion divide is produced performatively through the engagement with the surroundings. A performative production consists in use of language and other forms of actions that result in a socio-cultural production of place. For example, as we will return to, one informant told how his denomination explained the value of adhering to traffic regulations according to Islam. Traffic regulations are often seen as the textbook example for the school of positive law, i.e. that laws are used to order society in a certain manner but that they could just as well have been different; they rely on custom and not on further normative sources (such as religion) (Hart 2012). According to Røe (2014) and Ruud et al. (2007), a socio-cultural approach to the analysis of place investigates how different places are constructed and presented through social processes. The socio-cultural analysis sees places as produced through “the circulation of representations, which may or may not be part of dominating discourses” (Røe 2014: 512).

In socio-cultural studies of urban areas, the concepts of *image of place*, *interests in place* and *uses of place* are central to the theoretical analysis. We follow Roe and Vestby (2012) in seeing the district and the proposals, comments and analyses made by the population, including the representatives of the religious denominations, as related to the use, images and interests they might have or make of the district. Although the power struggles and conflicts of interest are relevant, most important in this context is the concept *image (or representations) of place*, and this position will be utilized as a framework for presenting our

findings. The image a person presents of a specific place can inform us of how the person sees herself or himself in relation to the place (Cresswell 2004). Such *images and representations of place* are conducive for human political and social actions, but in light of recent theories of science of religion and particularly secularization they might also be conducive for faith-based actions.

Method: Ethnography and Socio-Cultural Analysis

This paper builds upon extensive ethnographic fieldwork, here particularly focusing on interviews with representatives from local religious communities, conducted in a central urban district in Oslo, Norway in 2015 and 2016. The data is complemented with findings from a new socio-cultural analysis of the sub-district of Grønland two years later (Brattbakk et al. 2017). The fieldwork was conducted in order to provide politicians and bureaucracy with background material for making economic and political prioritizations regarding an area based initiative in the district, primarily for the next four years.

The research project was a commissioned research that was granted to our research institute through an open tender. The research group was set up as a transdisciplinary group with researchers from urban studies, anthropology, human geography, religious studies, and sociology with the goal of providing a plurality of perspectives. The project group consisted of seven persons developing different sets of interview guides depending on the groups we were to interview. The sets were divided into enquêtes to be used on the street, questions to be asked of minors or the elderly, and more substantive sets for semi-structured interviews with persons in key roles within the community, including representatives of religious communities. Inputs from the different methods used will be introduced when relevant for contextualizing the primary findings from the interviews with the representatives from the religious communities.

The first step in interviewing representatives of religious communities was to establish an overview of these communities. For recruitment we used the project's contacts in the district administration, as well as e-mail and telephone contact with researchers on minority religious groups in Oslo. Among the interviewees are representatives from Shia and Sunni Islam and State Protestant (Church of Norway), Free Protestant and Catholic Christianity. Most were male representatives and leaders, but we also interviewed a few female leaders. Furthermore, we aimed to include as many nationalities and ethnicities as possible, and especially to include denominations that had members from the largest immigrant groups in the area: looking in particular for those of Pakistani, Somali, and Iraqi denominations.

In total, we conducted eight interviews on the premises of the denominations. These lasted for approximately one hour each with one to three persons in each interview. In addition, we carried out participatory observations on two celebratory arrangements, one for a Christian church and one called “The Day of the Religions”. The interviews were recorded and transcribed – and constitute the basis

for this article. In the interview sessions, we would normally present ourselves and introduce the context for the interviews before asking the respondents to give a short presentation of their denomination and their religious and non-religious activities. After these presentations, we asked questions concerning the surrounding district. Here we discussed the location of the denomination, how the interviewees and their members used the district, what they thought of the mix of people in the district, what groups they thought were marginalized, how they saw development over previous years and what they believed and hoped the future urban developments would be. We also asked which factors and actors the interviewees saw as important in these developments and which networks they deemed crucial.

These interviews constitute the core of our methodological approach, but we supplemented them with the findings from the ethnographic fieldwork that related to religion. A third source for this article, is the workshop conducted at the local youth club. Here, we applied a drawing-based methodology aimed at discovering the meaning people provide to places (see Tolstad et al. 2017). We present this method together with the findings.

An operationalization of the theory of “plausibility structures” (Berger and Luckmann 1966) would mean that the respondents use the “sphere”, the “structure” or the “frame” that they consider suitable when responding to our questions and discussing with us in the interviews and the fieldwork – if there are issues that are discussed with references to transcendence or sacred texts, traditions or rituals or whether the respondents relate their answers to the “immanent frame”. This observation is in line with earlier findings in the study of language use for argumentation and claims in the Norwegian public sphere in general (Døving 2012, Bangstad 2014a).

Some social and material factors that might have informed the discussions in the interview settings should be highlighted here. We created a space for a social scientific interview with business cards, recorders, pen and paper, camera, academic degrees and specializations (Latour and Woolgar 2013). The design of these meetings, where we as representatives of a political and a scientific sphere enter into churches and mosques in order to discuss and learn about the voluntary sector and civil society, most likely affect the interviewees’ understandings of the situation. The research group consisted of all white, majority Norwegians from a middle class (and higher education) background, while the representatives from the religious communities were a more diverse group of both minority and majority Norwegians. In addition, this contrast might have influenced their choice of secular language as it is the dominant Norwegian public discourse. The complexity of positions of privilege and power should thus be taken into account in the discussion below.

Images of Place among the Denominations

From the interviews, youth engagements and participant observation in the larger study, we found several *images of place* portrayed by the inhabitants of the area. Likewise, we found conflicting images of place among the denomi-

nations. Here, we classified the images in question as 1) tolerance and plurality vs social control, 2) movement and ephemerality vs. presence, 3) affordability vs. growth, and 4) futures. These images were to some extent recognized within the religious communities, but wariness towards social threats in the neighbourhood (e.g. youth radicalization) was also apparent, as was an interesting ambivalence when discussing the area’s past. Below we will explore the valuations of the district based on these overarching images of place, followed by a general discussion.

Tolerance and Plurality vs. Social Control

Tolerance and plurality, but also generosity, were recurring issues amongst most of the denominations. Many of the larger and more established religious denominations talked about the fruitful cooperation that existed between the denominations. These relations manifested themselves in the local street festival called “a day of religion” that they co-organized to demonstrate the multitude of and good relations between the faith communities in the district. The good relations were also evident in the cooperation of people within the district with the police in preventing youth crime and recruitment to extremist Islam as a collective endeavour between denominations. However, only half of the denominations we talked with were included in these types of cooperation.

Plurality was also a keyword among many of the denominations – both as a feature of the past and as existing in the present. There were reflections focusing on creating solutions for all the different users.

Given the cultural plurality here, I hope for attractions that everyone can use.

Interviewee (senior male), Christian denomination

It became clear from the interviews that it was precisely the ethnic, cultural and religious plural society that caused the good cooperative relations between (some of) the denominations. Further, there was pride in, and enjoyment of, the multitude of services and experiences that came with a plural society, such as food, music, worldviews and new forms of solidarity. Even though not all denominations specifically mentioned issues of a richer cultural and social life, these issues seemed to be taken for granted and treated factually. Some of the denominations defended religious pluralism as a value in itself through the mentioned meeting places and the collaborative and individual efforts against Islamic extremism. Some informants told us that their courses in Islam for youth had an explicit goal in preventing radicalization. Such a discourse on prevention fits with the Norwegian Action Plan against radicalization (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2014), but it departs from the Action Plan with its unique focus on Islam.⁷ The interviewees also articulated the reasons for engaging in counter-radicalization in secular language with emphasis on protection and factual knowledge (Heath-Kelly et al. 2014).

Some of the respondents presented a position through which they portrayed ethnic, cultural and religious

plurality as a potentially problematic issue. They explained that the visible presence of people who appear not to be of Norwegian ethnic origin in the district's streets during the daytime, is not representative of the population living there.

There were some further remarks about some types of pluralism that were not much valued. One instance of dis-valued pluralism came when one respondent described Roma people as a problem and had no sympathy for their alleged begging and/or stealing.⁸ Moreover, several respondents mentioned alcoholics and drug-users as specific groups that were present, but only one denomination talked about them as a major problem for the district.

I remember when I used to run a shop just outside the district, and one of these public housing complexes was established on the other side of the street, and we had many customers from that place – alcoholics and so on – and they stole so much! There was no one to look after them; they could just go around and do whatever they wanted.

Interviewee (senior male), Muslim denomination

This denomination and another one both spoke ill of their neighbouring charities that donated food to drug users and other people in need. One interviewee referred to a neighbouring charity that had caused problems in the past because of the charity's many clients.

They are disturbing us ... they come and they form a crowd. Last year we had some chaos, but this year we have made a good plan (for handling this).

Interviewee (senior male), Muslim denomination

The denomination now cooperated with the charity in order to avoid conflicts between the place for worship and the place for food donations.

We encountered instances of a very clear division on the issue of drug-users among the local residents. Some of the respondents frequently saw them as outsiders coming into the district to buy, sell or use drugs – or as being resident in one of the municipal flats and thus contributing to a general downgrading of the district. Other religious actors, like the local Tøyen church, saw the drug-users as the ones in most need of help from religious institutions. A recommendation from several respondents was either to limit the number of drug-users living in such flats or to remove them from areas where families with children live. At this point in time, the discourse in general was focused on the negative effects of all the substance abuse support services (this critique has subdued in the recent years). Regardless of whether the respondents saw drug-users or Roma people as a social problem or an enrichment, they formulated their concerns based on a secular discourse of social ills.

Closely connected to the plurality and tolerance was also the issue of solidarity, often framed as a strong "neighbourhood value". Here, respondents mentioned

both solidarity within and between the denominations and their members. One interviewee contrasted the solidarity of yesteryear with the current gentrification, seen as an "alien value":

But now there are these expensive flats that have been built in an area with run-down buildings. That affects the solidarity. What's great, is that we have an old workers' tradition based on solidarity here and – at least ten years ago – you could sense that people looked out for each other.

Interviewee (senior male), Christian denomination

The senior respondents talked about a version of the area in the past with strong ties between people in a time with little money and many social problems – but also a time of low living standards, crime and insecurity. Some feared that the gentrification of the area would dissolve the ties between people. The rise in real-estate prices could also make it very tempting for people to sell their apartments or make it difficult to renew lease contracts. There is clearly an image of the district as being deprived. Solidarity was also seen as a key to inclusion, and it was felt that estrangement from a community could open up avenues into crime and drug use.

Additionally, there have been several reports from the area that some male Muslims try to enforce a kind of moral and social control directed towards young girls or women who are not dressing or behaving in line with their view of decency according to religious or social norms (Hagen et al. 2016, Stokke 2012). This kind of social control is part of the paradox between religion's presence at street level and its absence in the public discourse of these groups. Several similar reports have also come from gay and lesbian residents or visitors who have been given reprimands in public space, and in a few cases also been exposed to violence, due to their sexual orientation (Enstedt 2015). Strong social control based on religious beliefs of this kind may be seen as a form of territoriality (Knox and Pinch 2010), where some people try to enforce social and moral norms in an area because they see the whole area as a sacred place (Hubbard 2006).

The tensions we found between on the one side a general valuing of religious plurality and on the other side the negative perceptions of different elements viewed as foreign, indicate that the identity connected to the place is also a political identity. These tensions point to tolerance as politically produced (Brown 2006), and stand in contrast to the discussions on religious tolerance in political philosophy, where the ideal of a maximum of tolerance of intolerant movements is seen as a vehicle for psychologically producing adherence to the liberal state (Rawls 1971).⁹

Movement and Ephemerality vs. Presence

In the general population in the area, a recurring theme was the thrill of adventure caused by the social instability of the area (Brattbakk et al. 2015). However, the interviewees from the denominations connected their attachment

to the area to a sense of homeliness due to shops, parks, sports and – of course – the congregations' long-standing presence.

In one denomination, they explained that some of the members just dropped in for some minutes to pray – and then continued either home or to work. Some discussed the lack of parking spaces. Others again talked about the central location of their church or mosque for arriving by metro or bus.

We used to have far fewer members where we used to be (located) ... The board is considering buying a property, and it should be here – in the central city. They would really like something that is located not more than one kilometre from where we are today.

Interviewee (senior male), Muslim denomination

With members from the whole of Eastern Norway, but with a majority from the areas surrounding Oslo, most of the denominations are not closely connected with the local community. Only one of the respondents lived in the district, but several others had lived there. Especially amongst the Muslim communities the location with public transportation and its vicinity to shops with products from Asia, Africa or the Middle East that catered to their needs, was mentioned as an asset – and all they lacked were parking spaces. The district then appears as a necessary and good spot to stop by. It is a place where one can meet, have a social and religious life – but also leave.

Several respondents mentioned the transitory character of the district. They saw that residents with social and cultural resources left, and the ones that moved in were well-off agents of gentrification or people lacking economic resources moving into private or public rental housing.¹⁰

Average time for a person to live here is three years. And what we're experiencing is that those with fewer resources remain. We lose a good many human resources.

Interviewee (senior male), Christian denomination

Others, who had lived in the district previously, said that they had moved because of environmental factors, like traffic and lack of nature and safety. Others talked about the need for larger apartments or dreamt about buying houses in the suburbs. This is in line with Kadasia et al. (2020) who find that middle class families have low residential stability in the area and identify two main motives for leaving – *practical reasons* (small housing units and lack of outdoor areas) and *emotional reasons* (social and cultural reproduction linked to perceived conditions for upbringing like school quality and street crime).

Closely connected to mobility out of the area is also internal mobility within the district. As illustrated in a series of youths' drawings (see below) there are a variety of places to move between: football fields, the mosque, kebab shops, home, school and parks. This form of free

movement is connected to and based upon a form of trust in the district. There are many places that are highly valued, but also places that are perceived as being dangerous. In particular the parks and the squares were emphasized as valuable, but also threatening. Many of the smaller parks and sporting grounds were seen as neglected and as places that attracted drug-users and crime. Several saw the municipality's and other public institutions' lack of responsibility and long-term thinking as a cause for the run-down state of public space in the area.

All of the denominations had their own meeting grounds for young people. Examples of such meeting places include homework support, sports, organized trips, library, leisure activities, faith-based instruction and discussion evenings. All the denominations perceived activities directed towards youths as the key to solving the social problems in the district. One interviewee describes the denomination's efforts to create free leisure activities in this manner:

So we wanted to create free activities for the young ones around here. And we were in contact with the Church, and they really agreed: instead of the youth hanging around in the park, and coming into contact with anyone, we could have a place where they could come and stay.

Interviewee (senior male), Muslim denomination

When we asked specifically about what kind of activities that should be encouraged, almost everyone talked about sports.

I have walked and driven past many times, and also that little football field next to the school, it is really overcrowded. People are standing in line to play football. And in reality, one should see the positive in the fact that people want to be physically active, and that one places them in an environment where they get fit.

Interviewee (senior male), Muslim denomination

Sport was seen as a perfect tool for integrating young people, resonating with Walseth (2016) who highlights sporting activities as a way for Muslim organizations to create social capital among young people and to recruit and gather youths. However, in our material we see strong tendencies towards a gendered division in such use of place. Boys talked about doing sports and girls how they liked to spend time in the library or the mosque. The secular emphasis on sport is thus a gendered discourse. We also found that there is an underlying unthematized and unreflected gender bias amongst several of the respondents. They often talked about the needs of youths in general terms whilst most of our research shows that their suggestions pointed towards the needs of young boys especially. The causes for this one-dimensional view are difficult to ascertain, but the emphasis on young boys involved in crime in the district over the last 20 years could very well

be one influence, together with the general view of boys being the more “active and problematic” (*Interviewee, senior male, Muslim denomination*) users of public spaces compared to girls. However, the neglect of female interests in urban planning should be highlighted and further investigated (Hagen et al. 2016).

When interviewing a parent group of residents with Somali origin, several told us that one of the important reasons for choosing to live in this neighbourhood was the proximity to the mosque. Living close to the mosque made everyday life easier as frequent visits to the mosque were important to them. The mosque was important for attending religious services for the adults and the Quran School for their children, but the social aspects – like meeting friends and finding social support – was equally important. These findings show that for some groups this area has a special meaning as a place for everyday religious practices. For them, the increased departure of group-members and gentrification seemed to diminish their urban religious belonging.

Experimental Drawings of Eutopia

Based on input from the extensive fieldwork conducted in the district throughout 2015 and 2016, we could see that religious values, language, ideals and buildings held a prominent place. Still, we only encountered religiously founded expressions from locals when we were *outside* of a denominational setting. This imagery was particularly present when we experimented with art-based methods among youth residents (Vestby 2020)

In one session participants from the local “Youth Workshop” took part. This is a municipality-initiated project to provide a small income, job training and leisure activities for disadvantaged youths aged 14 to 16, all with a minority background. The drawings from the workshop are part of a “warming-up exercise”, called “splotting” (Hagen and Osuldsen 2021 (forthcoming)-a). This is an experimental method aimed at mapping the urban spaces,

streets, corners or other cities and landscapes integral to each individual, facilitating the youths’ own building of stories around their emotional and virtual attachment to these places (Hagen and Osuldsen 2021 (forthcoming)-b). We asked the youngsters to draw an amorphous figure on a blank sheet and to insert the places that they carry in their hearts and that “make them feel good”. We take this sense of *feeling good* from the Greek *eutopia* (Bauder 2016), rather than a description of an impossible utopia.

We gathered 15 drawings from this group of youths (see **Figures 2–5**). As is shown below, the mosques are present in some of the young girls’ drawings, while the soccer field dominates the boys’ drawings. In later workshops we also encountered young boys who included a mosque in their “splot”. The selection of drawings is intended to display how religion fills social spaces for some adolescents and is not representative for the group in total. The heart in the centre of the drawings indicate that these are places where they feel good.

As the drawings also show, the teenagers frequently wrote names of places outside of their local neighbourhood. This could be other countries, but also places in Norway that they considered as “good places”.

These findings amongst the youngsters could lead one to expect that there would be some form of discourse on the specific religious dimensions of the district. However, this was not the case amongst the representatives from the denominations when we discussed urban renewal and urban development. Why is that?

Affordability vs. Growth

This part of Oslo was the location of the first homes for the Pakistani Muslim settlements in the early 1970s, due to low rents and lack of housing in other parts of Oslo (Brattbakk et al. 2017). The Muslim denominations had also chosen the district for financial reasons, as the rent for office space was low. This is their home ground in many respects, even though many of them no longer live here.

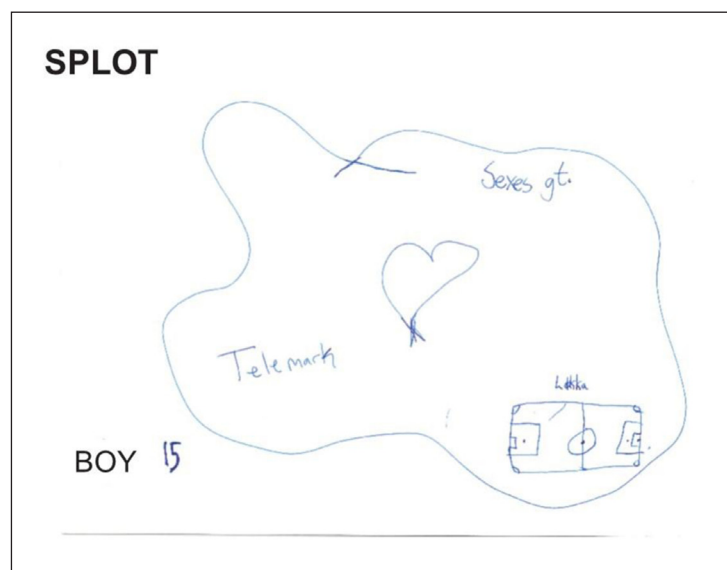


Figure 2: Drawing from the youth workshop with the football field, a local street name, Telemark (county/region) inserted.

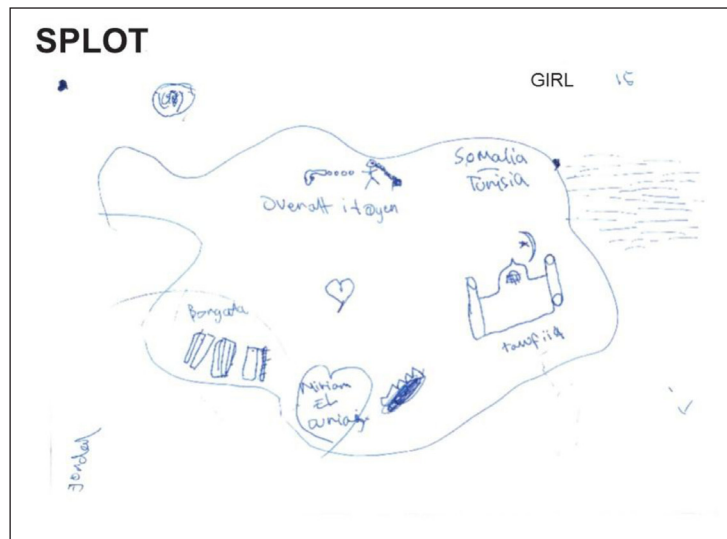


Figure 3: Drawing from the youth workshop with the Tawfiq mosque, Somalia, Tunisia, Tøyen and a local street name inserted. This girl also wrote “everywhere at Tøyen”.

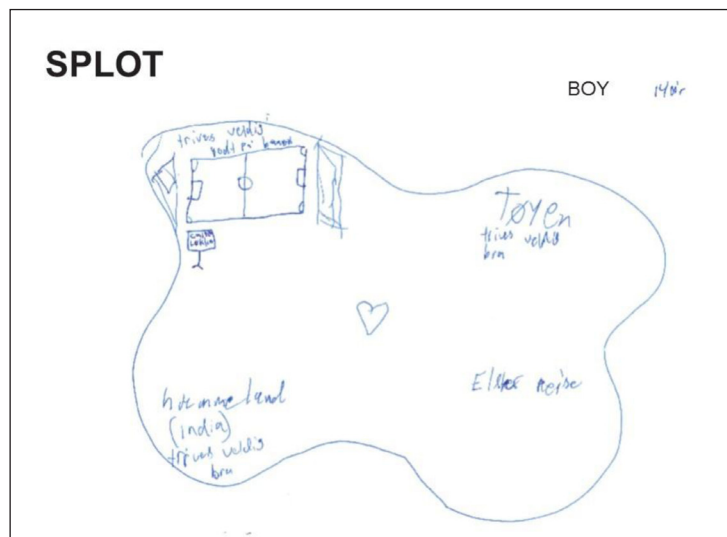


Figure 4: Drawing from the youth workshop with the football field, Tøyen, India (homeland) and travel inserted.

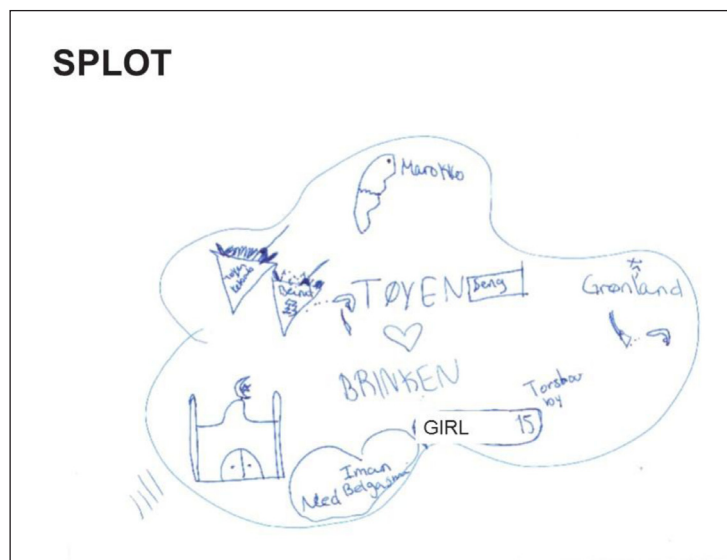


Figure 5: Drawing from the youth workshop with the mosque, Tøyen, Grønland, Torshov and Morocco inserted. The name of the imam at the mosque is scribbled in a heart.

Many of their members and their leaders invest much time in social and religious affairs in the area, ascribed to a sense of belonging. Moreover, they appreciate the central location in Oslo, but also express frustration that many services, such as banking or postal services, have moved or are closed, and that there are few shops in the neighbourhood forcing them to the malls in the suburbs to buy clothes and shoes etc. The views on the emerging gentrification are to some degree divided between those sceptical towards the emergence of a form of infrastructure based on new niches, fashions and ideals, and positive views towards new shops, more purchasing power and less municipal housing. One interviewee describes their location in a rather deserted area of Tøyen. The surrounding area was at the time under planning for extended office space, with additional facilities promised by the municipality, aimed at the local youth.

I would rather see that our church was located amongst apartment blocks and flats than offices and tall buildings ... as long as it is just not offices, but a real pedestrian area, as they promised, and a sports complex for the local population.

Interviewee (senior male), Christian denomination

This increase in tall office buildings being constructed, a trend in some parts of the district, led to deserted streets after office hours. Many of the respondents talked about the future of the district as dependent upon zoning. They discussed the regulation of existing properties as well as the building of new ones in order to accommodate families, to avoid too much office space and to create an outdoor environment that was safe and attractive enough for everyone at all hours. We asked one interviewee what it would take for locals to stay in Tøyen or Grønland.

First and foremost, one needs large apartments for large families in the area. Here, the situation is really bad. The modern building trend is rather bad, in my view, where the goal is to build as small as possible.

Interviewee (senior male), Muslim denomination

Also in this case, we could detect a view where the interplay between the different levels of government with different forms of businesses and companies would be decisive for a good development of the district.

Futures

Every denomination but one saw their future as being in Tøyen and Grønland. The only one expressing doubts had only family as members from the area. The dreams and visions articulated by the representatives from the denominations can be articulated with reference to sports, meeting places and education.

As we have already mentioned, sports are seen as the key to harmonious upbringing through its physical endeavours, collective efforts and bridge-building qualities. All

of the denominations had some forms of educational or instruction-based activities ranging from faith-based instruction over thematic seminars to homework support. The interviewees saw the faith-based instruction and the internal seminars in the denominations as valuable in creating good citizens through achieving several targets: integration into mainstream society, knowledge of one's predecessors' culture and religion, establishing a complete and harmonious personality, and providing a forum for discussion and reflection on society, personal development and international affairs.

Several interviewees mentioned the sorry state of formal educational provision in earlier days in the district and compared it to the much better situation now. Many denominations worked together with the local schools. They told about formalized cooperation on subjects such as conflict resolution and providing a location where schools could learn more about religion. Comments concerning the housing situation were far more critical than towards schooling. Interviewees said that there should be better control on the distribution of public apartments in order to avoid mixing psychiatric patients and drug-users with families with children. The municipal and national level should also be wary of establishing new institutions for the disenfranchised in the area, since such a change was perceived as bringing more problems and more people in need to the district.

Both educational and sports activities are described as important meeting places. Other types of meeting places mentioned were places that could provide a civil and harmonious environment like parks, squares, and cafeterias and restaurants. Interviewees contrasted these good public places to bad places like "the street" and "the subway station". What characterizes the "good public places" is that they are contained and open public spaces, designed and intended for performing actions of more or less specific purposes. What were often considered "bad places" on the other hand, seemed to be designed for transition from one purposeful activity to another, and hence also often poorly lit, attracting criminal activities such as drug dealing and substance abuse.

Many interviewees emphasized the need for clean, tidy and illuminated parks and squares. One large park, in particular, was very positively evaluated by everyone we interviewed in the project. Some interviewees proposed to extend this park and its qualities to cover a larger area. Many interviewees saw parks as contributing to both safety and beauty. Typically, the beautifying of the inner city is a strategy that accommodates the gentrifiers, thereby increasing the likelihood of greater social inequalities in the area as well as higher living costs, which will be to the detriment of those from the lower classes (Florida 2017).

Discussion

When analysing the Images of Place from the perspective of the sciences of religions, the absence of religious discourse in the discussions with representatives from denominations was striking, as we had field input from a variety of actors that religion and religious institutions are important parts of the lives of local inhabitants.

As accounted for in the introduction, we met people of all kind and ages during the study. Among all groups we met living or working in the area different aspects of religiosity had an important place. They discussed the increased presence of religious buildings in the physical space and their importance in the social space for young and old. In conversations, we encountered value systems expressed in religious language. Consequently, the findings indicate that religiosity exists understood as private belief and practice as well as occupying social spaces. Nevertheless, underlying the images of the area presented by representatives of the denominations is an understanding that the possible social and religious order depends on secular factors such as income, employment, schooling, socialization, living conditions, neighbourhood factors etc. However, the images we found of tolerance, visions, dreams and growth do not specifically point to immanent values, but to something beyond – or transcendent of – the daily concerns of those we met. Taylor (2007: 676–685) describes, with a discussion centred on Luc Ferry (2002), how secular concerns can give a sense of life and constitute a valuable life. This transcendence, they describe as “horizontal” rather than “vertical”, i.e. the valuable life is not constituted by its relation to something above, but to something on the same level or, for our purposes, *to something in the neighbourhood*.

The following discussion will focus on the justifications for the respondents' viewpoints. These justifications are not religious but belong to the secular sphere. The explanation for this, we will argue, is that the respondents classify the questions asked and the subject area of urban development and renewal to be a legitimate part of the secular sphere in society. In other words: it is our presence as researchers that brings this discourse out into the world. This secular discourse is then one interpretational frame for understanding the conditions for social life and social development in the district and in Oslo. Doving finds that the argumentation regarding the public use of hijab was conducted in a secular language with emphasis on a human rights discourse with focus on religious freedom, and she concludes that “the secular argument is the preferred choice of the debaters” (Doving 2012: 225). In a thesis analysing the discussions surrounding the debate around Muslim calls for prayer, Lilleheil (2005) demonstrates how the interventions by Muslims in the debate were either based on a discourse of religious freedom or on a discourse of recognition where the Muslim traditions should be allowed to have a similar spatial place to the Christian church bell traditions.

Throughout our fieldwork period we met people who used religious language, explicitly connected to religion as an institution and used religious buildings as points of orientation in their mental geographies. Burchardt and Westendorp (2018) suggest that urban places obtain their meaning from people's own investments in them, i.e. that the plausibility structures become visible through their “material objectivations” as spots or in language (Steets 2016, Berger and Luckmann 1966). This sense of an urban religious belonging combines the sense of place and religious space.

We also encountered instances of providing a perspective on law as a positive force for religious justifications during the interview. One illustration of such a religious justification was when one of the interviewees told us that they held courses where they taught the Islamic positions on conventional legal issues like traffic regulations and tax cheating. A different illustration is the courses on Islam to prevent radicalization given by some denominations. Consequently, there exist possibilities and discourses that address societal issues in a religious manner. Walseth (2016) likewise identifies some justification rooted in Islam when she analyses Muslim sporting activities, but the main reasons her informants give are secular ones.

The images of place we encountered were pronounced in secular language and varied from social psychological justifications to explanations for the need of urban development:

I believe that the main reason for ending up in bad company is that young people's lack a sense of belonging. It is a transition for the parents with a different background; when they come to this country they don't know how to relate to their children, and the children are raised in a new environment. And if there are problems, then the youth will turn to their secondary socialization – to friends – and if youth get friends in criminal environments, then that's where they'll find their sense of belonging.

Interviewee (junior male), Muslim denomination

We also encountered economic explanations for urban development. Here, the emphasis is much more on the underlying factors – or root causes – for a just and equitable society:

I believe that the economy plays a big role – in terms of family. If one has a low level of income, and the children do not have the things they ought to have, and the impoverished parents are not able to find the things that the children need, then the troubles start in the home and from there it goes the wrong way – that is what I have seen.

Interviewee (senior male), Muslim denomination

Some respondents also discussed the demographic composition, and family orientation, of the district:

Yes, of course, because it is the families who make an area into an inclusive and good environment, if there are only singles (living there) then one cannot create an environment.

Interviewee (senior male), Christian denomination

These emic analyses of how society works can be understood as being versions of social science: God is absent, Jesus is never mentioned and no one talks about the life

of Muhammad. There is no sacralisation of the place or discourse on salvation or damnation. Belonging depends, according to the interviewees, upon a range of factors outside the religious sphere. Religion can play a role in and for the lives of families and individuals when and if economic, urban, social and psychological factors interplay in a way that makes adherence to socially desirable norms possible. The place for socially beneficial religion in this urban setting – as opposed to crime or extremism and radical religion – seems founded in its beneficence rather than in its transcendence.

However, secularization is not only one single matter. As discussed above, Jose Casanova (1994) argues that we distinguish between secularization as decline in religious belief, as privatization of religion, and as the differentiation of the secular spheres. Even though there has been a decline in religious belief in Norway, the persons we interviewed were religious and represented denominations. Then, in our case, it is not meaningful to talk about the numerical decline in belief as having a strong and direct link to the secular explanations, but rather to connect to how religiosity finds its place in society.

It seems clear that privatization of religion and the differentiation of the secular spheres are at work in our conversations with the representatives from the religious denominations. We would suggest that the secularized discourse on urban development that we encountered might be understood as a variety of what Charles Taylor has called a “change in the conditions of belief” (2007: 31) but related to the justification for the organization of place rather than as a temporal concern. As described, Taylor sees the secular age and secularization as being a time and a process whereby religion is no longer the dominant frame for understanding and interacting with the world. In the secular world, the conditions of experience give the religious one possible place amongst many other forms for justification of individuals’ and groups’ ethical predicament. However, in our analysis of the interview material, we encountered explanations, justifications and place images founded in “a self-sufficient, immanent sphere contrasted with what relates to the transcendent realm” (Taylor 2007: 34). This view aligns with what Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman (1966) refer to as “plausibility structures”, which are socially constructed and maintained understandings of the reality that the respondents have and that they can share with others. “Secular language” appears to be the dominant mode of speech when people of religious background are concerned about *the impact* of the utterances (Doving 2012, Bangstad 2014a).

In the studied districts, newly built mosques stand out ostentatiously in the cityscape, and, clearly, the religious fills social space and visual signs. These new buildings obviously signal an introduction of new religious practitioners and an increase in religious activities. However, our findings – in line with other studies of religion in Norwegian public discourse (see e.g. Doving (2012), Stokke (2012), Lilleheil (2005), Thorstensen (2013)) – show that the respondents do not use arguments built upon beliefs to state their views on urban processes and renewal, even

though such arguments cannot be said to be value free (Bangstad (2013), Bangstad (2014b)). We therefore argue that there is a privatization of religion within the larger discourse of urban renewal and gentrification, while simultaneously we find the reverse of what Taylor (2007) proposes: namely a filling up of religion in social spaces. In this study, we found examples of religion or the systematized and institutionalized practice of faith in the congregations. We furthermore found elements of what would qualify as sacralisations in the meaning of setting things apart and providing them with an aura of meaning. The secular here is not just what is left, but rather a commitment to the political principles underpinning a secular state (Bangstad 2009). These political principles can furthermore differentiate between desirable and non-desirable religious activities and positions.

Some of the denominations owned the buildings or localities that housed their own churches or mosques while others told stories about renting in different locations at Tøyen or Grønland. This form of ephemerality might be among the most vulnerable ones to the forces of gentrification. As indicated above, such material changes will most likely transform the horizons in the area, and it seems difficult to enter into guesswork concerning the impact on the understanding of place and what form of religion that might find its place there. Furthermore, few of the religious leaders lived in the area, but some had lived there earlier on. This residence pattern also seemed to be the case for most of their congregation. This form of physical remoteness and mental connectedness in the context of a gentrifying community could be explored further.

Conclusions

Through our focus on evaluative images of a place in this research project, we have managed to join viewpoints from the history of religions, human geography, and ethnographic research. This line of inquiry is based in a tradition where humans are understood mainly as meaning-seeking (Berger and Luckmann 1966), and is informed by a view where actions and imagery are directed towards ideals, values and notions of the good (Taylor 2007). Instead of investigating the conflicting lines in the discussion of the place of and for religion in society – which is a contentious issue in all senses of science and politics – our engagement with the local denominations was motivated by the effort to give a thick description of the area to the commissioning political body. We find that the fruitfulness in the theoretical encounter between the study of place as a socio-cultural phenomenon and the study of secular/religious discourse can be found in the broader understanding of the seemingly paradoxical situation with youth emphasizing the mosques and the denominations’ talking in a secular voice. Understanding this co-existence demands cooperation between different disciplines. Our approach is distinctively different from valuable contributions as that of Enstedt (2015) whose focus is on conflicting uses of place. The relevance to policy processes could be that the ties between the youth, their religion and their religious buildings have a material foundation that is at

risk if or when the material surroundings change through e.g. gentrification. A question that remains to be systematically investigated is how gentrification and the relocation away from the area to suburban areas affect both the religious denominations and their members.

In this study, we included a range of local actors, among them the denominations, so that as many voices as possible could “be heard”, and with this article we do not aim to discuss what is the proper or legitimate place of religion in this area or in Norwegian or European society. We found a privatization of religion within the larger discourse of urban renewal and gentrification in the area, but we also detected a distinct filling up of religion in social spaces. Drawing upon Davie (1990), we suggest labelling this phenomenon *urban religious belonging* based on how the mosques constitute a centre in the youngsters’ images of place. However, the lack of substantive religious arguments and images of place found among the religious leaders suggest that we cannot draw any conclusions about the youngsters’ beliefs – only of belonging. To what extent is there a potential for generalizations from this particular case? We used a wide qualitative ethnographic approach in our research design, and we then applied a narrow theoretical framework in our analysis, as means of exploration when we found paradoxes. The higher order notions of “secular” and “religious” stand in clear contrast to the very specific questions and explorations of neighbourhood practices. The current findings go beyond an ability or a willingness to engage in secularized discourse from the part of denominations. Rather, we will venture, that what we encountered should be understood as transcendent concerns for the members and the local community. However, a transcendence understood horizontally rather than vertically where what matters are the full social lives of the neighbourhood and their members rather than a vertical concern with salvation. However, as Døving (2012) elaborates, in the presence of researchers involved in policy development our respondents might have seen us as inviting them into a secular discourse. However, our findings resonate with other studies of religious practices in the Norwegian public sphere. Nevertheless, the article’s findings will hopefully, in light of the combined theoretical perspectives, contribute to a further understanding of the complexities of local practices within an urban context regarding the instability of the dichotomy between secular and religion.

Notes

- ¹ Civilian security patrols wandering Tøyen’s streets at night to keep order in the area. Not to be confused with vigilante where local groups entitle private law enforcement.
- ² As discussed by Enstedt (2015), an Islamist group, Ansar al-Sunnah, demanded that Grønland be given to them and subject to Sharia law in 2012.
- ³ All translations from Norwegian to English in this article are the work of the authors.
- ⁴ Gentrification is a socio-economic transformation of an area which has as its main characteristics that

an older district, and often with a blue-collar past, sees an influx of the middle class with a consequent transformation in terms of physical appearance, social ties, cultural expressions and new shops and services that appear in order to meet the needs, preferences and interests of the new affluent inhabitants.

- ⁵ Due to informational privacy and to differences between census data and the diocesan borders of the Christian churches, any estimate of the number of Protestants and Catholics in Norway will be very uncertain. In Oslo, 48.2% of the population were members of the State Church in 2015. The Catholic Church in Norway estimates that there were approximately 35,000 Catholics in Oslo, which then is 3.7% of its population (Dingstad 2014).
- ⁶ For in depth discussions and relations to political and national contexts, see Bangstad (2012), Hurd (2008), Taylor (2011), Endresen (2014), Zuckerman et al. (2016), Casanova (2011), Asad (1993), Asad (2003), Joas (2014).
- ⁷ The Action Plan states that, “[t]here are two dominant opposing violent extremist groups in Norway today: Al-Qaeda-inspired extremists and right-wing extremists who are hostile to Islam” (Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2014: 10). It is important to highlight that “Al-Qaeda-inspired” is not used as a synonym with “Islamic” as these two are understood as highly different.
- ⁸ This negative perception of Roma resonates well with the Norwegian majority who tend to perceive Roma as the least desirable group to have in a community (Moe and Hoffmann 2017).
- ⁹ The relations between prejudices and tolerance are complicated and is the subject of both conceptual and empirical studies. See Habermas (2004), Hadler (2012), Wise and Driskell (2017).
- ¹⁰ Huse (2014) provides a rich account of such social changes in the area.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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