



# YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS ON RELIGIONS IN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

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This article introduces findings from a four year (2011-2014) study on young people's (18-24 years) life views and life values in Iceland. Methodological approaches are both quantitative and qualitative. The data was collected in two steps, first a survey which was conducted among students in seven upper secondary schools in 2011 and 2012, and then focus group interviews with 3-6 students in five of the schools in 2013 and 2014. In the article, the focus is primarily on the results from the focus group interviews with special attention to the young people's views on religion, religious diversity and religious activity. The main research questions in this article are: What kind of attitudes do the young adults have towards religion and religious diversity in Icelandic society? What part do religion and religious activity play in their daily life according to responses in the focus groups interviews?

For most of the XX century the Icelandic society was seen as rather homogeneous, but in recent decades the languages, cultures and religions of Iceland's population have become increasingly diverse and the ratio of non-Icelandic citizens to the total population has changed from 1.8% in 1995 to 7% in 2014 out of a total population of 325,671.<sup>1</sup> Over the past few years there has been a rapid increase in the youngest age groups. Religious diversity has also increased in recent years, with a growing number of religious organizations in Iceland. Twenty years ago religious organisations in Iceland, recognised by the Ministry of the Interior, were 17, now they are 43. In 1995, 91.5% of the population belonged to The National

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<sup>1</sup> *Statistics Iceland*. Population. <http://www.statice.is/Statistics/Population>, accessed 19.09.2015.

Lutheran Church of Iceland, now the figure is 73.76%.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, research on young people's views and attitudes is of interest, as the Icelandic society has changed a lot over the last two decades with growing cultural and religious diversity.

A number of related studies have been conducted in Iceland, but most of them have focused on various aspects of young people's life styles and health,<sup>3</sup> and some on experiences of immigration,<sup>4</sup> but only few on young people's religious views and activity.<sup>5</sup> This study attempts to broaden the perspectives on young people's views of life and values in a modern multicultural society with a special focus on religious views and activity, as they are an important part of the growing diversity in Iceland.

<sup>2</sup> *Statistics Iceland*. Population. <http://www.statice.is/Statistics/Population>, accessed 19.09.2015. In Iceland children are registered in the same church or religious organization as their parents, i.e. if both of them belong to the same organization. If they don't belong to the same organization the parents have to choose. If the parents are not married and don't live together the child is registered in the mother's religious organization.

<sup>3</sup> Þóroddur **Bjarnason**, "Aðstæður íslenskra skólanema af erlendum uppruna" – *Rannsóknir í félagsvísindum VII*. Ed. Úlfar Hauksson (Reykjavík: Háskóli Íslands, Félagsvísindadeild, 2006), 391-400; Sigrún **Júliúsdóttir**, "Fjölskyldubreytingar, lífsgildi og viðhorf ungs fólks" – *Rannsóknir í félagsvísindum VII*. Ed. Úlfar Hauksson (Reykjavík: Háskóli Íslands, Félagsvísindadeild, 2006), 211-224; Guðbjörg **Vilhjálmisdóttir**, "Habitús íslenskra ungmenna á aldrinum 19-22 ára" – *Rannsóknir í félagsvísindum IX*. Ed. Gunnar Þór Jóhannesson and Helga Björnsdóttir (Reykjavík: Háskóli Íslands, Félagsvísindadeild, 2008), 195-205.

<sup>4</sup> Hanna **Ragnarsdóttir**, "Börn og fjölskyldur í fjölmennningarlegu samfélagi og skólum" – *Fjölmennning á Íslandi*. Eds. Hanna Ragnarsdóttir, Elsa S. Jónsdóttir and Magnús Þ. Bernharðsson (Reykjavík: Rannsóknastofa í fjölmennningarfræðum KHÍ og Háskólaútgáfan, 2007), 249-270; Hanna **Ragnarsdóttir**, *Collisions and continuities: Ten immigrant families and their children in Icelandic society and schools* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Gunnar E. **Finnbogason** and Gunnar J. **Gunnarsson**, "A need for security and trust. Life interpretation and values among Icelandic teenagers" – *Nordic Perspectives on Religion, Spirituality and Identity. Yearbook 2006 of the Department of Practical Theology*. Ed. Kirsi Tirri (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2006), 271-284; Gunnar J. **Gunnarsson**, "Eru stelpur trúaðri en strákar?" – *Uppeldi og menntun*, 8 (1999), 9-33; Gunnar J. **Gunnarsson**, "I don't believe the meaning of life is all that profound". *A study of Icelandic teenagers' life interpretation and values* (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2008).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The definition of religion is an important part of the theoretical framework. According to McGuire, sociologists have used two major strategies to approach the phenomenon, i.e. substantive and functional definitions. The substantive definition emphasizes what religion is and the focus is on the content of religious belief and practice. A functional definition of religion emphasizes what religion does for the individual and social group. Religions are therefore defined by the social functions they fulfil.<sup>6</sup> In our study, we refer to the functional understanding of religion, as the young people were asked about the function of religion in their lives and in society.

Theories on secularization,<sup>7</sup> desecularization<sup>8</sup> and detraditionalization<sup>9</sup> together with discussions on religious diversity<sup>10</sup> create an important part of the theoretical framework of the project. From the middle of the last century many scholars claimed that the impact of religion and religious institutions in society would gradually fade out in the public, social and individual life.<sup>11</sup> Some scholars have also discussed privatization of religion as a distinctive feature of modern secularized or pluralistic societies.<sup>12</sup> But over the last one or two decades it has been pointed out that religion is playing an increasingly important role in the society, both

<sup>6</sup> Meredith B. **McGuire**, *Religion: The Social Context* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1992), 9-15.

<sup>7</sup> Peter **Berger**, *The social reality of religion* (London: Faber, 1969); Thomas **Luckmann**, "Theories of religion and social change" – *Annual Review of the Social Sciences of Religion*, 1 (1977), 1-28.

<sup>8</sup> Peter **Berger**, "The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview" – *The Desecularization of the World. Resurgent religion and world politics*. Ed. Peter Berger (Washington: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 1-18.

<sup>9</sup> Linda **Woodhead** and Paul **Heelas**, *Religion in modern times: An interpretive anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 342-347.

<sup>10</sup> Carole M. **Cusack**, "Some recent trends in the study of religion and youth" – *Journal of Religious History*, 35 (2011), 409-418; Hans-Georg **Ziebertz**, Boris **Kalbheim** and Ulrich **Riegel**, "A typology of religious attitudes among young people in Germany" – *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 27/2 (2006), 203-214.

<sup>11</sup> Berger, *The social reality of religion*; Luckmann, "Theories of religion and social change", 1-28.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas **Luckmann**, *The invisible religion: The problem of religion in modern society* (New York: Macmillan, 1967).

in dialogue between people and in the context of social tension and conflict.<sup>13</sup> Therefore some scholars have questioned the secularization theories and started to talk about desecularization.<sup>14</sup> Religion is back on the agenda in Western societies, in the media as well as in political and general discourse. Religious diversity has become an important part of the pluralism of society. Cusack emphasizes that religious socialization has changed in Western societies from being homogeneous into a particular religion of the family and community, to increasing diversity where the relationship between people's beliefs and the religious institutions are broken.<sup>15</sup> Ziebertz, Kalbheim & Riegel point out that different religions and life views are now one possibility of many for developing spiritual or religious beliefs. Young people, born into a modern society, learn that the values, beliefs and lifestyles available to them are no longer based on a single ideology.<sup>16</sup> Woodhead & Heelas refer to the concept 'detraditionalization'. It involves the decline of the belief in a pre-given or natural order of things. Detraditionalized authority is thus rooted in individual experience and subjective validations, rather than external standards of shared cultural custom.<sup>17</sup> Habermas has referred to religious tolerance as the peacemaker for multiculturalism, and for the equal coexistence of different cultural forms of life within a democratic polity. In his discussion, he makes a distinction between a unilaterally declared religious tolerance, the limits of which are defined by the authorities, and a conception of tolerance based on the mutual recognition of everybody's religious freedom.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Wolfram **Weisse**, "REDCo: A European Research Project on Religion in Education" – *Religion and Education*, 37 (2010), 187-202.

<sup>14</sup> Berger, "The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview", 1-18.

<sup>15</sup> Cusack, "Some recent trends in the study of religion and youth", 409-418.

<sup>16</sup> Ziebertz, Kalbheim and Riegel, "A typology of religious attitudes among young people in Germany", 203-214.

<sup>17</sup> Woodhead and Heelas, *Religion in modern times: An interpretive anthology*, 342-347.

<sup>18</sup> Jürgen **Habermas**, "Religious Tolerance – The Peacemaker for Cultural Rights" – *Philosophy*, 79 (2004), 5-18.

## METHOD

As already mentioned, the methodological approaches in the study were both qualitative and quantitative. Since the aim was to study young people's views and attitudes, upper secondary schools were chosen as the arena of data collection, mostly for practical reasons. That of course calls for an awareness of the fact that the school context might influence how the young people express themselves and that not all young people attend upper secondary schools in Iceland.<sup>19</sup> We chose schools in different areas of Iceland and with different structures for the sake of variation. When choosing the age of the informants, we had in mind that they were autonomous (18 years and older) and therefore permission from parents was not needed. But at the same time, we had in mind young people close to the end of their upper secondary education, as they are approaching a turning point in their life. Therefore, most of the participants were 18-20 years old but some of them a little bit older (21-24 years).<sup>20</sup>

In the first step of the data collection, a survey was conducted in seven upper secondary schools. Three of the schools were in Reykjavík and four in other areas of Iceland. 904 students (around 10% of students in the last two grades in the upper secondary schools in Iceland) responded to statements, 491 girls (54.3%) and 413 boys (45.7%). The survey included 77 statements on which the students were asked to take a stand with a range of responses on a four-point scale, with the response categories ranging from one (strongly agree) to four (strongly disagree). Then there was a fifth category, the possibility 'don't know'. In addition to covering measures of background variables and religious affiliations, statements in the survey included themes such as views of life, relation to others, values and value judgments, religious views and activity, diversity and social change.

In the second part of the study, the findings from the survey provided a basis for focus group interviews. Focus group interviews are designed to use group dynamics to yield insights that might not be accessible without the kind of interaction found in a group. The aim is to collect data through

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<sup>19</sup> Around 97% of students that finished the 10th grade of the Compulsory school in Iceland started in upper secondary school in 2014 according to the Ministry of Education, see <https://www.menntamalaraduneyti.is/frettir/forsidugreinar/nr/8062>.

<sup>20</sup> In Iceland the upper secondary education is 16 to 20 years of age, see <http://www.studyiniceland.is/page/icelandiceducationalssystem>.

group interaction and the focus is therefore more on the discussion in the group than the individual.<sup>21</sup> Our interest was to explore how young people discuss specific themes in a group rather than how they express themselves as individuals. Therefore focus group interviews seemed to be the most appropriate method in this part of the study.

The aim of qualitative research is to obtain a deeper insight into how people relate to their life situations, and qualitative interviews attempt to understand the world from the interviewee's point of view, and to develop the meaning of people's experience. An interview always involves an interaction between participants, interviewer and interviewees. In this interplay, the interviewer has determined the themes and directions beforehand and during the discussion influences how it develops.<sup>22</sup> Awareness of what the interaction involves and what effects it has is therefore extremely important. Knowledge is constructed in the interaction between participants, each with their own background, experience and preconceptions.<sup>23</sup>

The findings from the survey showed some trends that were of interest to explore further. In order to gain more information about the attitudes and views of young people in Iceland, the results from the survey were used to develop the framework for the focus group interviews. Since the informant group in the focus group interviews was not all that large, it is obvious that it does not admit generalization, but comparison with the findings from the survey provides a basis to draw some wider conclusions. At the same time, the results from the interviews provide a basis for deeper understanding of the views and attitudes of the young people.

Five of the seven schools that participated in the survey were willing to take part this time and helped us find a group of students to be interviewed. Since our interest focused on the growing diversity in the Icelandic society, we tried to find participants with different ethnic or cultural backgrounds, which became the case in most of the groups. When this did not work out, the groups reflect to some degree the homogeneity of

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<sup>21</sup> Steven J. **Taylor** and Robert **Bogdan**, *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1998), 113-115.

<sup>22</sup> Seinara **Kvale**, *Den kvalitative forskningsintervjun* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1997), 14-26.

<sup>23</sup> Louis **Cohen**, Lawrence **Manion** and Keith **Morrison**, *Research methods in education* (London: Routledge Falmer, 2007), 349.

the student group in the school in question. On the other hand, it was not possible in advance to know the participants' religion or worldview, as this information is not registered by the schools. But when we met the groups, we asked them about what religious organisation they belonged to. Most of them belonged to The National Lutheran Church, some of the participants, mainly boys, said that they did not belong to any religious organisation, and some belonged to the Catholic Church, all with a foreign background. Three to six students in each school, both girls and boys, all together 27, were interviewed in 2013 and 2014. Each interview lasted around one and a half hours. They were half-structured and based on several main themes. They were also structured as group discussions rather than everyone in each group being asked the same questions. This was considered appropriate to elicit how young people express themselves in a dialogue on various factors related to religion, religious plurality and religious practice. At the beginning, the structure and purpose of the interviews were explained to the participants and they were asked if they agreed to take part. The interviews were tape-recorded, typewritten and content analysed. In the analysis, the interviews were coded in order to find emerging themes or patterns in the data.

In this article, we introduce findings from the focus group interviews related to young people's conversations about religions and religious experience in a multicultural society, with some comparison with the findings from the survey on these issues. To ensure anonymity, names of the schools and the participants are not revealed and in quotations from the interviews letters are used instead of names.

## FINDINGS

As an introduction to the findings from the focus group interviews, an overview of the main results from the survey will be given.<sup>24</sup> The findings from the survey reveal that the majority of the participants are of the

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<sup>24</sup> We have already presented some of the findings from the survey both in Icelandic and English, see for example: **Gunnar J. Gunnarsson, Gunnar E. Finnbogason, Hanna Ragnarsdóttir and Halla Jónsdóttir**, "Friendship, diversity and fear. Young people's life views and life values in a multicultural society" – *Nordidactica: Journal of Humanities and Social Science Education*, 2 (2015), 92-113. <http://kau.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A843896&andswid=6877>.

opinion that human beings always need something to believe in (59.4% agree or agree strongly with the statement, “People always need something to believe in”) and that it is important to be convinced about one’s life view or belief (81.2% agree or agree strongly with the statement “It is important to be convinced about one’s life view or belief and have the courage to live in accordance with it”). However, the majority of them are not of the opinion that religions are important in the society (58.4% disagree or disagree strongly with the statement “I feel religion is important in the society”), and religious activity seems not to be an important part in their lives (75.1% disagree or disagree strongly with the statement “Religious practice, for example prayer, is very important to me”). Their religion and beliefs are not others’ business (65.3% agree or agree strongly with the statement “It is no one else’s business what my religion or beliefs are”). At the same time, the participants generally have positive attitudes towards ethnic and religious diversity. A big majority is of the opinion that it is important to respect different cultural and religious traditions (88.3% agree or agree strongly with the statement “It goes without saying that one should respect peoples different traditions, culture and religion”) and many of them say that all religions should have the opportunity to flourish and build their own houses of worship (61.3% agree or agree strongly with the statement “It goes without saying that all religious organizations should have the opportunity to prosper as well as build places of worship”). They are also of the opinion that people can dress as they please for religious reasons (78.3% agreed or agreed strongly with the statement “People should be able to dress as they please for religious reasons”).

The findings from the survey show that girls are more likely to have stronger support for religious diversity than boys. They also show that a higher proportion of boys define themselves outside religious organizations or as unbelievers, and in many cases, girls are more likely to agree with statements that involve a religious position or significance of religious practices. On the other hand, students that have parents of only Icelandic origin do not differ significantly from other students in regards to support for religious diversity and the same is the case if we look at the difference between students in Reykjavik and provincial areas of Iceland.

In the focus group interviews, the participants were among other things asked about the growing ethnic and religious diversity in the Icelandic society, and about their life views or religious views and what part



religion and religious activity played in their lives. The results from the interviews show some clear patterns in the attitudes of the young people. In this paper, the focus is especially on four themes that appear in the data. These are: Attitudes towards religious diversity, friends and religions, religious belief and activity, and the church in the society.

**1. Attitudes towards religious diversity.** The participants in the group interviews were generally positive towards the growing ethnic and religious diversity in the society and they were ready to respect everyone's freedom of belief. The discussions in different groups show similar patterns. The following statement from one of the boys in one of the schools in Reykjavik is a good example of this:

C: "... one cannot just tell them what ... is right or what is wrong or something, so that this is just like this, how each person feels and what they want to believe in, you cannot demand that they leave their religion behind..."

And one of the girls in a school outside Reykjavik expressed similar views by taking a different perspective and imagining herself moving to another country:

A1: "Definitely, well I mean, personally I would not want to move, maybe to the Middle East and not be able to practice my religion or my customs, perhaps because it is not usual there or they do not want it..."

Some of the participants had in mind that it is important that different religious and cultural traditions conform to the laws of the country. One of the boys in a school in Reykjavik was very positive towards cultural and religious diversity but stressed this at the same time:

B: "You know all customs you bring with you to Iceland and all religious traditions must conform to the law in the country and the law of the country should at the same time ensure you right to ... belong to whatever you want, so, this needs to be interplay."

Some of the young people were of the opinion that people should keep their religion to themselves. One of the boys in a group in a provincial school expressed the view that he did not like it when people were forcing their beliefs on others. It is not clear whether this is a sign that boys are less

tolerant to religious diversity than girls, as we saw in the findings from the survey. Anyway, he emphasized, like many of the informants, the importance of respect and tolerance:

V1: “We just need to show tolerance and really learn to show tolerance in a society where we have a lot of different religious communities.”

One of the girls in the group agreed with him, but both of them were worried that we are not as tolerant as we think, although most people are positive.

When interviews were conducted there was an ongoing debate in the media about a future mosque construction in Reykjavik. The participants in the focus groups were positive towards a mosque in Iceland although they were aware of negative attitudes. The discussion between two participants, a boy (B) and a girl (S), in one of the groups shows this tension in the society:

B: “I think it is very interesting to have a mosque here, I think it will just make the cultural life spicier, you know, to have such a big frame around an exotic religious group like this...”

S: “I think that many people are, you know, not saying much about this, but then as soon as it comes there, yes, to build a mosque there, then like wow, just wait, we do not want this, you understand.”

They even talked about prejudices and were of the opinion that there is a lot of prejudice towards religious groups, but at the same time they believed that it is decreasing with the younger generation.

To summarize, the participants were generally positive towards the growing ethnic and religious diversity in the society and they were ready to respect everyone’s freedom of belief as long as it was within the framework of Icelandic law. In the focus groups, we did not find many signs of difference between boys and girls in this matter, although findings from the survey showed that girls are more likely to have stronger support for religious diversity than boys. Neither did we find any difference between groups in Reykjavik and in provincial areas of Iceland. In their discussions, most of the informants stressed the importance of respect and tolerance and some of them maintained that prejudice is decreasing with the younger generations.

**2. Friends and religions.** When the young people talked about their friends they were aware that the life views or religious views of their friends are different, but it seemed not to affect the friendship or the communication in the circle of friends. In a school in Reykjavik, this pattern was very clear in the discussion between two of the boys:

B: "Yes, I mean one of my friends is for example a hard core atheist and simply a skeptic, another friend is dedicated in his belief but, however, this is always irrelevant when I am with them, you know they are first and foremost my friends, no matter what beliefs or religion they have, I do not really care."

Sa: "Yes, it is sort of ... not part of one's daily life to be thinking about ... wow, this one has another religion, he must be doing something different."

In the other groups, we see similar views, the young people knew about their friends' views and they could talk about life and existence and respect the different views of their friends. In a group in a provincial school, one of the boys stressed that he and his friend had no problems with discussing life and existence, even though their religious views were different. When the group was asked further about if they talked about religious beliefs in their circle of friends, one of the girls pointed out that it depends on whether somebody in the group is a believer:

A: "Yes, it depends on whether there are some believers among the friends, for example in my circle of friends I am the only one who is a believer together with my sister, but you know all my friends are atheists but they still feel OK that I believe, they just respect it."

Of interest is that this girl is the only one in the whole group of informants that describes herself as a believer. In the discussion about whether her religious beliefs would cause any difficulties in communicating with friends or classmates, she stated that it did happen when she was younger, but that now this has changed and no longer causes any problems. She also talked about friends seeking help from her in times of difficulties:

A: "I have noticed that when my friends feel bad they often ask me about the meaning of life because they know that I am a believer and then I can give them some comfort or something..."

This girl seems to come from a religious family, but she also might be an example of what we saw in the findings from the survey, i.e. that in many cases, girls are more likely to agree with statements that involve a religious position or significance of religious practices.

To summarize, according to the participants, their own life views or religious views and different views of their friends seemed not to affect the friendship or the communication between them and their friends. However, there is this example of a religious girl who experienced that her beliefs affected her communication with her friends. But this is an exception from what we see as the main trends in the data and has to do with something in the past. Apart from this, we did not find any differences in the data between boys and girls or between groups in Reykjavik and in provincial areas of Iceland when it comes to the question if religious views affected friendship or communication among friends.

**3. Religious belief and activity.** It is a clear pattern in the material that most of the young people were not active in The National Lutheran Church or other religious communities, although some of them said they were more active when they were younger and they used to say prayers in the evening. It seems like many of the young people had the experience of saying evening prayers and of being active in Sunday school when they were young. One of the girls in a group outside Reykjavik described it in the following way in the discussion:

A1: "I was very religious when I was younger, I'm completely raised in the Christian faith, you know, my parents said prayers with me every single night just until I was eleven years old, you know, or something I cannot remember... this was just part of my routine to say my prayers at night and sometimes to go to a mass on Sundays and go to Sunday school when I was young..."

In another group in Reykjavik, a girl with a foreign background also described herself as very religious when she was younger and she used to go to Church very often. Now she is still saying prayers, although she does not go often to church any more. It is interesting that it is more common among the girls to talk about their religious upbringing and religious activity when they were younger, and it is more common among them than the boys that they are still saying prayers.

However, despite this experience in younger years, many of the young people said that now they don't go to church or pray and religion or religious activity is not a significant part of their daily life. This appears clearly in the following quotation from a girl in one of the schools in Reykjavik:

S: "At least for my part I do not think much about it, you know, I do not think much about whether I am a believer or whether I believe in God or that, I am registered in the National Church and baptized and confirmed, somehow this is not a big part of my daily life..."

We see similar views in other groups, especially among the boys:

T: "In fact, so to speak, I do not believe in any religion, but naturally perhaps more Christian, because of course I grew up like that, but you know, I am not going to church voluntarily, except maybe to a confirmation."

But when one of the girls in a group outside of Reykjavik discussed this, she was wondering if they were just in the stage of life when religion or religious activity is not an important part of life:

L: "I think it is perhaps so, that you are maybe at this age just like offline with faith, you know, at this age, then when you become older you are maybe more in the church..."

But in spite of this, it also appears that many of the young people were of the opinion that to believe or pray can sometimes help, for example in times of difficulties:

P: "Yes, this helps quite a lot of people to have something like that to believe in and to rely on, that is just very positive and can help them through very difficult things."

To summarize, most of the young people were not active in The National Lutheran Church or other religious communities, although they noted that they had been more active when they were younger. There seem to be some differences between boys and girls in the focus groups, i.e. the girls talk more about their religious upbringing or religious activity when they were younger than the boys, and it is more common among them to still say prayers. In this respect, the results are in line with the findings from the survey. However, it seems that for many of the young people, religion or religious activity is not a significant part of their daily life, the reason

possibly being that they have turned away from religion or that they are in the stage of life when they are ‘offline with faith’, as one of the girls stated. But whatever the reason is, one can wonder if the religious upbringing has at least had some effect, as many of them agreed that to believe or pray can help, for example in times of difficulties.

**4. *The church in the society.*** In the focus groups, the young people were asked about whether The National Lutheran Church or religious communities have a role to play in the society. Many of the young people were of the opinion that it is important to have a place and ritual when it comes to life cycle ceremonies. Some of the informants, especially some of the girls, mentioned the religious function of the church. Thus one girl in a group in the countryside stated that although there are not many people who go regularly to church, it is important for those who go there. Others talked about the importance of the church when you feel bad. But most of them talked about the life cycle ceremonies. The following discussion of two of the girls in one of the schools in Reykjavik is a good example of this pattern:

S: “I basically never go to church except when there is baptism, a funeral or a wedding and in this respect it is a fine place to take care of these things.”

K: “I think it is important in terms of these things to have a place where everybody can come together...”

One of the boys in the same group agreed that it is necessary to have a place and a ritual for the life cycle ceremonies, but he was not of the opinion that it has to be connected with Christianity.

The young people also discussed increasing resignations from The National Lutheran Church over the last years and they had their explanations. One of the girls thought that the Church is a bit old fashioned:

S: “I think, you know, that many people who resign from the National Church do it because they think that it is a bit rigid institution somehow, how it works and seems to be kind of old fashioned, and then to protest somehow they just resign without being some kind of a hot atheist...”

One of the boys in the same group was of the opinion that the Church is no longer a symbol of cultural unity and that religion or life view is more a personal thing in the XXI century:

B: "I mean, maybe once Christianity was a symbol of national and cultural unity, but I do not think it is any more, this is more, religious activity is a more personal thing in the XXI century I think, you know people have their own faith or belief, but I do not think that the society should be connected with any religious community..."

To summarize, many of the participants were of the opinion that the Church has a cultural function and claimed that it is important to have a place and ritual when it comes to ceremonies related to the life-cycle. Some of the participants noted that it is not necessary to connect it only with Christianity and it was also discussed that the National Church has become old fashioned. They also thought that state and religion should be separated. However, some of the informants, especially some of the girls, were of the opinion that the Church is important for those who believe and that it is important in times of difficulties.

## DISCUSSION

If we compare the findings from the survey and from the focus group interviews we see similar patterns and trends. The young people participating in the research project are generally positive towards the growing cultural and religious diversity in Icelandic society. They claim to be ready to respect different religious and cultural traditions as long as they conform to the laws of the country. They are aware of the increasing cultural and religious diversity within the Icelandic society, but it seems not to create social tensions among them. Although the young people recognize that prejudice exists in Icelandic society they are of the opinion that prejudice is decreasing among the younger generation. As they have grown up in a society with increasing ethnic, cultural and religious diversity, they seem to be socialized in the different way Cusack<sup>25</sup> discusses, i.e. where different religions and life views are one possibility of many for

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<sup>25</sup> Cusack, "Some recent trends in the study of religion and youth", 409-418.

developing spiritual or religious beliefs. Therefore they seem to be more open to the equal coexistence of different cultural forms of life as Habermas<sup>26</sup> talks about when he refers to religious tolerance as the peacemaker for multiculturalism. The young people in the study seem to respect everyone's freedom of belief, and different religious views or life views of their friends do not affect their friendship or communication.

The findings from the survey and the discussion in the focus group interviews indicate that the daily life of many of the young people in the study is secularized. That is, religion, religious activity or the church is not a significant part of their life, at least according to their discussion in the focus groups and their responses in the survey, and they look at their own and others' religious views as a private matter. This seems to be in accordance with Berger's<sup>27</sup> and Luckmann's<sup>28</sup> and others' discussion on secularization and the opinion that the impact of religion and religious institutions in society would gradually fade out, both in the public, social and individual life. But at the same time the young people are aware of the religious diversity in society and among friends, they agree that it is important to be convinced about one's life view or belief, and many of them are of the opinion that it can help to believe or pray, for example in times of difficulties. Their religious upbringing seems to influence their views in this matter, as many of them learned to pray and went to Sunday school when they were young. Some seem to think that they are at an age when they are 'offline with religion' and this might change when they get older. In this matter, the findings both from the survey and the focus group interviews show some differences between boys and girls. In the interviews, the girls talk more than the boys about their religious upbringing or religious activity when they were younger, and it is more common among the girls to still say prayers. This is in line with findings in some of the earlier studies conducted in Iceland.<sup>29</sup> When the young people discuss the role of the church in the society, many of them agree that the church has its function in society and culture, although it is not the same

<sup>26</sup> Habermas, "Religious Tolerance – The Peacemaker for Cultural Rights", 5-18.

<sup>27</sup> Berger, *The social reality of religion*.

<sup>28</sup> Luckmann, *The invisible religion: The problem of religion in modern society*; Luckmann, "Theories of religion and social change", 1-28.

<sup>29</sup> Gunnarsson, "Eru stelpur trúðri en strákar?", 9-33; Gunnarsson, "I don't believe the meaning of life is all that profound", 162-176.



as before. The church takes care of the life cycle ceremonies and is important for those who believe and can also be of help in times of sorrow and difficulties. This indicates that the secularization process has not gone as far as the secularization theorists expected or that some kind of desecularization<sup>30</sup> has developed in the wake of the growing religious diversity in the Icelandic society. One might also say on the basis of the data that the young people in Iceland are to some degree detraditionalized,<sup>31</sup> although this requires further study. At least most of them don't go to church except for life cycle ceremonies and instead of referring to external authorities, such as religious traditions, the church or other religious institutions, they refer to a greater extent to an internal one. They are of the opinion that religious activity is more a personal thing in the XXI century and their views seem to be rooted in individual experience rather than one religious tradition. The young people live in times of growing religious diversity in Iceland and they seem to have learned that the values, beliefs and lifestyles available to them are no longer based on a single ideology, as Ziebertz, Kalbheim & Riegel<sup>32</sup> talk about. But at the same time many of them understand the importance of the life cycle ceremonies of the National Lutheran Church, although some of them, especially among the boys, do not think it is necessary to connect them only with Christianity and that church and state should be separated.

Although the findings showed some gender differences, there was no difference between those living in Reykjavik and those living in provincial areas of Iceland. The informants in the focus groups with foreign background were very few and on the basis of the material we did not find differences between them and other informants. In general, the young people that participated in the focus group interviews seem to be ready to respect everybody's freedom of belief and they understand the importance of mutual respect. In fact, many of them emphasize the importance of rules like the Golden Rule or as one of the informants said: "It is to be able to put oneself totally in another's shoes and borrow the eyes from others."

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<sup>30</sup> Berger, "The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview", 1-18.

<sup>31</sup> Woodhead and Heelas, *Religion in modern times: An interpretive anthology*, 342-347.

<sup>32</sup> Ziebertz, Kalbheim and Riegel, "A typology of religious attitudes among young people in Germany", 203-214.