
A Deliberate Action

Leaving the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark

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MEMBERS LEAVING CHURCH: BACKGROUND

Over the past ten years, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark has seen a steady decline in the membership rate, falling from 83 percent in 2004 to 78 percent in 2014, a fall of 5 percentage points, and approximately 0.5 percentage points per year.1

One explanation for the falling rate is the fact that while the Danish population has increased from five point four 4 million in 2004 to five point six million in 2014, the share of non-Christian immigrants and their descendants has been growing even more.2 The membership rate over the whole population is therefore declining as a result of this. A decline in membership rate is not the same as a decline in membership in numbers, so the actual membership numbers must be examined in order to see how things are evolving.3 The number of members fell from four point five million in

2. Kirkeministeriet, Kirkestatistik.
3. Lüchau, Saks teser, 313.

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tiation throughout life, at every contact the individual has with the church. It is always possible to resign, with the consent of your parents before the age of eighteen.

As Lächau and Andersen have argued, the well-educated, well-earning younger men in the larger cities is the group of church members most likely to opt out of church, but for what reasons do they opt out? General considerations point to the secularization of society, the individualization process and the general loss of tradition making resigning from church possible. Individuals are not as tied to the same life choices as family and friends as they were before. To Taylor, secularization as a concept is not designating the process of pushing out religion from society, but more as a change in the conditions under which religion is part of the society. Taylor describes the development as a shift from a society where faith in God stands unchallenged and unproblematic, and where not believing is unthinkable, to a society where faith is one possibility among many others.

Being able to resign is thus a result of the development of the society over the last few decades, especially the ethic of authenticity of the 1960s. The focus on authenticity has put pressure on individuals to find yourself. You have to make choices in life to be living life properly. Choosing becomes in itself an identity marker.

How is the choice of resigning from church made, then? This study focuses on the process leading to resignation from church, and has a specific focus on what could be described as drivers and triggers in the process of resignation. Drivers can be described as the events, considerations and motives that led towards the resignation. The trigger is the catalyst for the resignation to finally take place. Since a trigger in practice acts as the straw that breaks the camel’s back, triggers can in principle be anything, but the drivers are crucial for understanding the deeper layers of the process leading to resignation.

FORMER RESEARCH ON THE TOPIC

An older study of the area of leaving religion is Pål Repstad’s "Fra ilden i asken" ("From the fire to the ashes") from 1984. Repstad is focusing on

5. Kirkeministeriet, Kirkestatistik.
6. Ibid.
7. Lov om medlemskab af folkekirkere.
8. Iversen, Døben som optagelse, 73–86.
9. Ibid., 85.
10. Lächau, Sekts teori, 316.
11. Lov om medlemskab, ch. 1, § 2 and 3.
12. Taylor, Secular Age.
13. Ibid., 15, 423.
14. Ibid., 475.
15. The distinction between drivers and triggers has been developed through discussions with Danish sociologist Peter Lächau while working on the interviews.
religious pacification, a term describing the process an individual is going through when he or she stops being actively participating in religious activities. Repstad interviews twenty-one informants, all of whom have been active youths in a Christian association in the Church of Norway or a free church. He takes four main perspectives in his qualitative study, some of which may be present in each pacification process simultaneously:

- Perspective of meaning: the informant was pacified because religion no longer conveys meaning to the person's life experiences (using theories of Max Weber and Peter L. Berger). The increasing lack of meaning for some members may be due to education and new insights.16
- Social ties perspective: the informant was pacified because they no longer have close social ties to the religious group (using theories of Emile Durkheim).17
- Perspective of profit: based on a cost/benefit thinking that sees participation as a way to tangible rewards and prestige. When these rewards disappear, it is a contributing factor to the pacification.18
- Perspective of the occasion: the informant is pacified because he/she no longer has the opportunity to participate. It may be lack of time; moving away; becoming less mobile; no longer having children at home who could give occasions for going to church; using leisure time in a summer home or camping; women working instead of being at home and active in the religious community.19

Repsstad's study gives meaningful explanations for pacification of the informants, who identify themselves with both the perspectives of meaning, social ties and occasions. Perspective of profit is harder to agree to for the informants.20 Repstad's work can be used as a perspective on this Danish pilot study, particularly the perspectives of meaning, social ties and occasions.

In Sweden, the Church of Sweden in 2000 separated from the state, and there was a wave of resignations. Jonas Bromander in 2002–2003 examined the reasons for members' resignations in his qualitative study.21 Bromander's findings were that the resignations from the Church of Sweden were the product of a yearlong process, and characterized by a declining church loyalty. The direct cause was often the size of the church tax, perhaps because in Sweden the inability to pay the church tax is considered to be a legitimate reason for the resignation.22 Other reasons for resigning were bishop K. G. Hammarsspartaking in public debates and the Church of Sweden's economic affair.23 Bromander declares the declining church loyalty as crucial to the resignation process, and looks at how people are alienated over time from the Church of Sweden. His informants expressed that they do not feel their beliefs are consistent with the church's faith. At the same time, they are not socialized to church during childhood, nor do they meet the church naturally in their everyday lives. Bromander concludes that when they do not meet the church and do not use the church, they become very easily alienated over time and thus more likely to opt out of the church.24 His findings correlate with Repstad's insights on the perspectives of lack of meaning and occasion as a reason for religious pacification.

Kati Niemelä in 2003 studied why Finns withdrew from the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church. In the same year, a new law was passed which made it possible to resign from the church by letter. The church then saw a large increase in resignations.25 Niemelä based her study on five hundred and thirty-eight letters, both e-mails and handwritten that people had written to her with their reasons for leaving the church. She includes in her analysis both the content of the letters and results from two quantitative studies, "Urban Young Adults 2004" and "Gallup Ecclesiastica."26 Niemelä uses argumentative analysis as a method in which the reasons or arguments for resigning are the object of her analysis. Her results show that one hundred and sixty-eight persons have resigned due to a conflict between the church and their attitude to religion and philosophy. A conflict with the church's general attitudes led one hundred and forty-two people to take the final decision. To one hundred and one people the resignation was the result of a personal disappointment with the church anchored in a particular situation. Only fifty-seven, below ten percent, stated that the resignation was for economic reasons. Fifty-five had what Niemelä characterizes as negative attitude towards the church, and the remaining eighteen had reasons that did not fit into the other categories.27

Niemelä furthermore concluded that there was a generation gap in the causes of withdrawal. The young (under thirty) leave the church mainly

16. Repstad, Fra id den til asken, 18–22.
17. Ibid., 24.
18. Ibid., 28.
22. Ibid., 62.
23. Ibid., 76.
24. Ibid., 75.
26. Ibid., 199.
27. Ibid., 700.
because they do not wholeheartedly endorse the church’s message, and because the church does not make sense for them personally. Older people tend to see membership as part of being a Finn and a good citizen. The older are more likely to resign because they are disappointed with the church. Niemelä’s findings correspond with Repstad’s perspectives of lack of meaning and partly lack of social ties as reasons for resignation.

Concerning the economic argument for withdrawal, the former Finnish studies found that economic factors played a key role among the factors that led to the resignation, particularly during the financial crisis in the 1990s. According to Niemelä’s study, as of the turn of the millennium this has changed because it is not an important factor but is rather an unusual reason for resignation.

A Finnish quantitative study by Lyytikäinen and Santavirta has looked into the connection between church tax and membership. It shows that the size of the church tax has only a small effect on the resignations, as the decision seems to be driven mainly by non-economic variables. The authors argue that a bigger factor than economy in the decision process may be the easy opting-out website established after a Finnish law reform in 2003. However, you could argue that economy or the ease of opting-out is just the last step in the process of resignation. The actual decision could have been taken long before as will be shown in this Danish study.

As the Swedish and Finnish old national churches face the same challenges as the Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church, a comparison of reasons for leaving the church will be made in this study. Are the same reasons to be found in Denmark as in Sweden and Finland?

In Denmark there are, as mentioned above, no studies on a qualitative basis. Peter Lüchau and Peter B. Andersen made in 2012 a quantitative analysis of data from Statistics Denmark, the central statistics bureau of Denmark, focusing on socioeconomic factors aiming to find out, who are at higher risk of opting out. It turned out that the group that is most likely to resign, consists of men aged eighteen to forty-five who live in the metropolitan area, have a higher education and a higher income than the average Dane. Lüchau and Andersen have also been comparing results with the Nordic studies’ socio-economic data on the individuals who are most likely to opt out of the church, and they conclude that there is a great similarity with the Danish data in the field.

HYPOTHESIS: WITHDRAWING FROM CHURCH IS A LONG PROCESS

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark, represented by the local ministers and church offices, are not asking systematically about the reasons for resignation, when members terminate their membership. There is no tradition for this, perhaps for reasons of discretion and respect for privacy. But ministers have the opportunity to ask the retired members why at the time of the resignation.

In the Danish context, we thus have no data on members’ motives or considerations related to the resignation from the church. Every year, when church statistics for the previous year are published, the media is filled with articles that explain the decision to resign from the church as if it was made due to economic reasons.

Based on the Swedish study, the present study examines the motivations that come into play in the process of resignation. At the same time, it will be examined whether it can be supported, that the economy and the debate on same-sex marriages plays a crucial role in the resignations in Denmark. The Swedish and Finnish studies concluded, each in their way, that the economy is not the greatest factor, but rather acts as a trigger for the resignation.

The hypothesis of this study is that neither personal economic matters, the easy opting-out website nor gay marriages play a crucial role, but that the process of withdrawal is a thought through process, that spans several years and that the final decision is triggered by different catalysts. The study is preliminary and is based on in-depth interviews with four persons, all resigned from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark, all fall roughly within Lüchau and Andersen’s definition of who is at greatest risk for withdrawal.

34. Kirkeministeriet [Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs], e-mail message to author, June 2013.
35. For the abnormal year 2012, the additional number of resignations is explained as occurring because of the Danish debate on same-sex marriages being allowed in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark. However, in 2012 it was made public in Denmark that you could opt out of the church by sending your local minister an e-mail. This could have triggered a wave of resignations from people ready to leave the church and could also be an explanation for the high level of resignations in 2012 (Politiken, September 10, 2012). This explanation is in line with the Finnish study on church tax (Lyytikäinen and Santavirta, “Effect”),

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28. Ibid., 211.
29. Ibid., 214.
30. Ibid., 211.
31. Ibid., 212.
METHOD

The purpose of the interviews in the study has been to get as close as possible to people’s thoughts and reflections on resigning from the church, as well as identifying factors pushing towards resignations, and it was therefore decided to use qualitative, semi-structured interviews to collect data, as these open up to the informants’ language and thoughts. Since the hypothesis was that the resignation occurs as the culmination of a year-long process, it was interesting to look at the informants’ relationship to the church throughout their life, and thus using life story interviews provides background.

The relatively limited material does not allow a generalization of the results of the survey, but is only intended as an initial identification of a currently hidden area.

The use of life stories as data is inspired by both Pettersson, Bromander and Furseth, but the analysis using life stories is mainly based on Furseth, as sketched out here. Furseth’s concept of life stories can cover entire life spans or only parts of them, and they can deal with all aspects or only one aspect of life. They have a synthesizing character, as it is “the attempt to describe or tell the totality of her or his life as a subjective synthesis that makes life stories unique.” A life story interview is a dialogue between the informant and the interviewer, but also a dialogue with oneself and one’s past.

Life stories as data can be analyzed in various ways as Furseth describes. This study has chosen the life course analysis, which studies life phases to uncover the underlying structures that form the individual’s life, to single out specific conditions for different life courses, which make it possible to generalize. Focus is not on people’s own interpretation of their own life or worldview, but on what people do, or what they have done, and what socioeconomic and cultural factors shape and form their lives. This kind of analysis emphasizes transitions and events in the informants’ lives. Important is life age and historical time, since all lives are shaped by the possibilities and events of a certain historical time. This method creates a dialectical perspective, because it connects social history and life history. Another important implication in the analysis of life stories is to remember that life stories cannot be taken “at face value,” but are complex data, and at the same time historical and social facts and subjective representations of these. This study analyzes the life stories in a holistic approach, taking the

40. Ibid., 33–38.
41. Kvale, Interview, 183.
42. Pettersson, Kvalitet, 189–95.
43. Bromander, Utvärder, 28–31. Bromander has used Pettersson’s tools in his study as well.
44. Ibid., 81–84.
RESULTS: ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS

Table 9 Informants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of birth</th>
<th>Year of resignation from church</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Profession</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kjeld</td>
<td>1965 2012 (at age 47)</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>Development engineer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andreas</td>
<td>1966 2009 (at age 43)</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>Development engineer / Volunteer, working with youths in atheistic association / Training for psychotherapist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emil</td>
<td>1992 2012 (at age 20)</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Unskilled labourer / Applicant for university studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kurt</td>
<td>1961 1984 (at age 23)</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Photographer / University studies, natural sciences</td>
</tr>
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Kjeld: From Family Man to Middle-aged Single

Kjeld is forty-eight years old. His parents grew up in Northern Jutland, but moved close to the Danish capital, Copenhagen, for jobs. He was baptised as an infant and raised according to traditional values. He has taken a long education as an engineer. He settled down north of Copenhagen with his wife and children, was married in a church and had the children baptized and confirmed. After the divorce, he resigned his membership in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark.

His process of reflecting on resigning spans fifteen years. As he answers, when asked about what it meant to him to be a member of the church:

"Yes, but gradually it didn't really matter."

In fact, his reflections about the membership began when he was at university, where he adopted what he himself calls a scientific worldview. Already then, he felt like an atheist, but still called himself a Christian human being with no belief in a God: "No, I have reached the conclusion that I am an atheist, and this is also part of the decision, but it's far from the only reason." And:

... I believe myself to be, very much so, a Christian, because I live in and grew up in a Christian country... so all my values are based on Christian faith. It is a very important part of it to say, "Yes, there is no doubt that I am a Christian," though I do not have a belief in a God.

I[Interviewer]: So you would actually call yourself both Christian and atheist?

R[Respondant]: Yes, I will do that because my culture is Christian,

Marriage and baptism of the children took place in local churches, and he felt they were part of tradition, more than religious ceremonies. The baptism of the oldest child is described as his most important contact with the church besides his own confirmation. The family used the church on family occasions, and at almost no other times. In his years as a family father, he has continued reflecting on his membership in the church, and uses the metaphor that he felt it as if weights were moving from one side of the scale to the other until the tipping point came, and he resigned.

The important drivers in his process towards resigning were his education and the divorce, which has disillusioned him. After the divorce, he decided to resign from the church in order to better his finances and then be able to keep the house as the framework of his life with his children.

Yes... and then this came along, the divorce, and you start to look at what with the economy, because there is some money in it, after all. In fact quite some money in it. It's a pretty expensive membership when you just look at it as a membership."

I: Now it's maybe ten to fifteen years ago, you first considered opting out of the church. Is it something you've thought about many times since?

R: No, not really, it's just been like, lying in the back of the head, and then it may have been a little more prominent in some periods. It is not something that has been intrusive. It has been a slow process. You could say the last straw was... it in connection with the divorce, where you just take a step back, and then
it comes up again with all the things about being married in a church and the promise you make there. And as I said, it is also the economy, it has also had its share of it, but far from the main part of it.

The divorce has given Kjeld the opportunity to reconsider his entire life, and he looks back to when he and his now ex-wife were married in church and vowed to stay together until death separated them. That promise did not last, and Kjeld is clearly influenced by the feeling of having broken his promise. Resigning his membership was a very hard decision, since church is still perceived as a very valuable part of the society to him, but he can't justify his membership to himself anymore.

I: So you could say, well, your reasons to resign, they . . . have they changed over time?

R: No, it . . . I really don’t think so. Well, I would almost say that. . . . well, that I have stayed in church, because there are some basic things there that I also still think I favor. I just might say that their import have decreased, compared to some other things that I have valued.

Would Kjeld join again if the church tax was lowered?

I: Would you sign up again if church tax was lower?

R: I have not thought about it. It could be an element, but again, I also believe that it would be a process in which several things had to mature, coincide, or how you could put it. I . . . as I said before I don’t totally reject the idea that it could happen . . . Right now I just think that it’s the right thing, not being a member. . . . But I can imagine that it could happen. Because I also believe that if I had a need for a religious affiliation, it would be the church, I cannot really see any of the other things really appealing to me.

A reason for resignation is by no means the last year’s debate on the marriage of homosexuals: “But it’s nothing that I . . . of course they should be allowed to.” Education and the accompanying change in worldview, as well as the divorce have been critical drivers for Kjeld’s process towards a withdrawal from the church. The final straw, the trigger, was the bank’s review of his budget in relation to his wish to keep the house after the divorce. Economy has this way played a role as a trigger, but not as a driver. The debate on same-sex marriages in the church has had no weight.

With Repstad’s line of thought you can say that Kjeld’s process has been affected by the perspectives of firstly lack of meaning, when he had his education and was estranged from the thoughts of the church. You can never say that Kjeld had social ties to the church, but he certainly had occasions for coming. Now his youngest has confirmed his baptism, there is no more similar occasions coming up to tie Kjeld to the church, which means that the perspective of occasion is very important in the case of Kjeld.

Andreas: From Family Man to Spiritual Explorer

Andreas is forty-seven years old, an engineer and divorced five years ago. He grew up in Western Jutland, where his mother’s family was part of the conservative Christian movement, Inner Mission, and was close to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark. His upbringing was based on traditional values. He settled in Copenhagen, and trained as an engineer. He and his wife were wed by a retired minister on a little island, and had their child baptized. After the divorce, he has explored new and more spiritual sides of life, and resigned his membership from the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark four years ago. He is now taking an education as a psychotherapist.

Andreas’ process of resigning had a duration of approximately ten years. During his adult life, Andreas has not been using the church for more than family occasions. The first driver in Andreas’ process of resigning has been his education, since he adopted a scientific worldview during his training years. “Previously, I was probably more like a rational engineer, where everything had to be so . . . all this with religion and church . . . I put it down in some boxes, right, and then I said, it’s not for me, this. And then we close the lid.”

Later in life he encountered the thoughts of atheist and scientist Richard Dawkins, which drove Andreas into a reflective process of whether to resign from church or not. It was very important to Andreas not just to say no to the church, he wanted to put another community instead of the church, and to find another way of supporting social work as well. He joined an atheistic movement, where he still works as a volunteer with youths, but doesn’t see himself as an atheist. He calls himself spiritual and has in recent years begun exploring the Buddhist environment in Copenhagen. His way into the Buddhist environment was to go through a course in mindfulness.

I: Are there any events in your life that have been particularly important to your philosophy of life? Has something happened that made you, for example, more interested in a spiritual way of life?
R: Yes, that's probably a consequence of the crisis I came in when I got divorced. ... I think it goes back to that. It was certainly then I began to be more seeking. ... Before that, it was probably more of an anti-church attitude that I lived with, you might say. ... But after that I just had a need for something different, so I started to look back in some way.

I: Yes? So the divorce, it pulled like the rug from under your feet?

R: No, that would be to say too much, but, no, I was probably just getting other interests. Well, and then I also needed. ... I also went into therapy. So it has been a great. ... I also began to engage in something like volunteer work, and ... I got many new interests, that is, and is actually starting to educate myself as a psychotherapist now. Because well ... because of the interest I have in what I have seen over the last three or four years. With ... being close to people, the relationships, that is.

Andreas sees the church’s offer of preparation for confirmation as very irrelevant to young people. Andreas’ process of resignation was characterized by the desire to find an alternative community. He sought it in an atheistic organization, but found a lack of spirituality. He went on a course in mindfulness, and searched from there and found a spiritual community in the Buddhist community of Copenhagen. However, he was still not ready to withdraw from the national church because he wanted an alternative to the support he gave to social projects through his church. When he got the idea, that he could support an African sponsor child for the same amount as he paid in church tax, he resigned, because now he could legitimise the decision to himself. Sponsoring an African child gives meaning to him, and it made the hard decision easier, but it still took courage for him to resign:

R: I thought it took courage. I have a mother who still has her childhood faith intact, and she still cannot really understand this. ... It was a showdown there, there was a conflict with her, I had to take, too, just as it not only was ... it was not just sending the papers away, like. ... There was something at stake, too.

I: So you’ve told it to your family?

R: Yes, yes.

I: Yes. So it was not an easy decision?

R: Yes.

Leaving the Church was not easy for Andreas. It was a process spanning many years, where he moved from being very atheistic and critical towards religion into being more spiritually seeking, ending up with a sponsor child as an alternative to his membership in the church. So using Repstad, it can be concluded that Andreas did not want to resign from church before he had found meaning elsewhere, which he eventually found in the Buddhist environment. As Andreas grew up with close social ties to the church, he also wanted to find social ties elsewhere before he could resign, and he found that in the Atheistic movement. One could argue that the perspective of profit is relevant there also as Andreas wanted to be able to give support to a needy child before he could resign. Giving support can be seen in the perspective of profit as it gives you the status of a helper and therefore strengthens your identity. Bromander has an informant, too, who speaks hypothetically about converting his church tax into supporting the NGO Save the Children.6 You could argue that you see the perspective of profit here as well.

Drivers in the resignation process of Andreas were his scientific education, his meeting the atheistic thoughts of Dawkins, the divorce and all the new insights the period after the divorce have given him.

Economy has never been a driver or a trigger to Andreas, as he sees it as a very important thing to support social work. He would not re-enter if the church tax was lowered.

The debate on same-sex marriages has made Andreas angry with the church. He thinks it should just be implemented. Likewise for the ongoing debate on women ministers. Both he sees as an expression of an outdated fundamentalism.

Emil: From a Family in Crisis to an Existentialist Identity

Emil is twenty-one years old, works as an unskilled worker in a bank, and applied for university studies in the year the interview took place (2013). He grew up in a suburb of the city of Aarhus in Eastern Jutland. His family had no relationship with the church but the baptism of the children as infants. He was brought up on more modern values. One of his siblings had a serious disease when Emil was twelve years old. The disease affected the life of the whole family. He confirmed his baptism as fourteen years old. The parents divorced three years ago. He resigned from the church when he was twenty.

Emil describes his relationship to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark as “unbelievably passive”, and the membership has had almost no
meaning to him: “I: What did it mean to you to be a member of the church? R: Well, I think, like so many others, it didn’t really matter.”

Emil’s process of resignation spanned three years, but took off in the preparation for confirmation, which was experienced as a rather marginal affair of very little importance. He says about the teachings of the local minister:

R: Well, I’m not sure that there was anything wrong there, maybe it was because of the general attitude among my peers. It was that it was just bullshit, most of it.

I: Also when you went to preparation classes?

R: Also this, about the faith in God, as . . . as a physical phenomenon. That it really wasn’t laid out that you can distinguish between the two, at least not in way for me to understand it. . . . On the other hand I do not think that you can understand it.

I: But you saw that it was not presented as an option?

R: Yes, because I said. . . . No, it was probably more my father who said, well, then, you really just take it as you yourself want it.

I: Your father said that?

R: Yes, pick the things you want . . .

And about his relationship to confirmation and baptism, he says:

R: Well, weddings, I feel fine about. But such a thing as baptism and confirmation, it . . . especially baptism, I think it’s kind of an abuse of the child. And I really think that confirmation, it is a major abuse. Because the fact is that you really lure young people with such materialistic things, and they do not even know what they are saying yes to. You are not formed at that point in your life. This is the time where you are most confused in your entire life.

Church has not been part of his life at all; he never attended a service with his parents. The only use of the church has been in connection with funerals in the family. These are described as very meaningful.

His mother resigned membership some years back, she has explained to Emil that she felt church to full of guilt and shame. His own identity is described as intellectual and he hopes to become a researcher at university. Apart from the possible influence from the crises in his family, he sees his decision of resignation as part of forming his identity, and has put a great deal of reflection into the decision: “Well, I also feel that way, you damn have to consider these things, and it’s also good just to take a break . . . one should not be too emotionally affected when you make a decision. One should not take decisions in rage, when in dissatisfaction or . . .”

Before resigning, he spent time researching on Christianity, in order to be aware of the consequences of his choice. He explains that his resignation was not so much a rejection of the church as an institution, as it was a break with Christianity, as such:

But it has also been kind of a showdown with . . . with Christianity. Determinism and that . . . morals and stuff. It was also a very, very big part of . . . well, it was not at all about something specific . . . not so much on the concrete level, the church as a great institution.

I: Yes. It is just as much because you needed to make a statement to yourself that you condemn Christianity?

R: No, I do not condemn Christianity. I consider myself . . . just more like being universally religious.

The trigger to the actual resignation was when he read the news that now you could resign your membership by e-mail.

R: I had gone with the thoughts for a long time. Then I saw in the news that now it was crazy easy. No one knew that it was easy to opt out . . . So I thought: “I’m writing an email immediately.”

I: So its been on your mind for a long time?

R: Yes, I had made the decision . . . But I should . . . pull myself together . . .

I: . . . and then you saw it in the news?

R: Yes.
I: Was it an easy or difficult decision?

R: Well, I do not really, no, it is pretty much a complex decision. There were many things to be considered, and it is not easy to join again, because . . . then you have to go through a lot of processes.

I: You would at least need to talk to the minister to re-enter.

R: Yes . . . . And, well, it was probably a tough decision . . . . But, but I still feel that it was the right decision. Well, you can't go and undo things you have done in just six months, then I think you break down as a person.

He did so at once, and was very disappointed at the insignificant reaction he got in a standard letter.

The drivers for Emil's resignation could be his sister's disease, as well as his parents' divorce. His growing identity as a coming college student and his existentialist views are important drivers, too. The trigger was the easy access to the resignation.

In Reptstad's sense of perspectives, you can in Emil's case talk about a total lack of meaning in relation to the church. He has had no social ties at all, so there has only been the perspective of occasions to keep him in church. After his confirmation, the frequency of occasions has been too low to keep him from resigning.

Economy was no motif at all to Emil. Emil would not join again if the church tax was lowered. The debate over same-sex marriages was not a motive for the withdrawal. On the contrary, Emil is very happy that same-sex marriage was introduced as an option for church members.

Kurt: From Shy Youngster to Disillusioned and Reflective World Traveler

Kurt is fifty-two years old, works as a freelance photographer and is single. He was baptized as an infant, and grew up in the city of Aarhus in Eastern Jutland. The family used the church for family occasions, and his parents wished him to confirm his baptism when he was fourteen, which he did. Kurt travelled the world for three years in his early twenties. He resigned his membership in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark as twenty-three years old. He holds a master's in natural sciences.

Kurt's process of resigning lasted nine years, and began when he was preparing for confirmation. He actually felt that the minister preparing him

for confirmation was driving him out of the church, because it made it too easy for Kurt to think, "You are just making it all up."

I: How long did it . . . so when did you first think of opting out?

R: I actually think it was when I was confirmed: "Was this really quite right?" . . . And I can actually remember a very specific event. . . . We sit for confirmation preparation class, and . . . I probably did not put it like that, but I was in a setting where someone told something about what the Bible was . . . well, I thought it sounded really very true. And then our minister tells us a story about a man . . . . And so should we relate to the story. And we all agreed, well, that story is nonsense . . . it's just a show, and so he uses it to tell us that miracles in fact happen. Up in the sky . . . he uses it in some way . . . but I just remember that I thought, "Well, the whole thing is just a construction." It dropped the penny actually for me . . . when it should really have been, I think, been used to tell something about that anything is possible when . . . with God's help, but then I said "No." Excuse me: "Hell, no. It is not possible." Well, it was a fanciful tale that had nothing to do with reality, and that was where I started doubting a little.

He finished school and travelled the world for several years, experiencing peoples' lives everywhere. He says that he realized that everybody seems to need religion, but that religion basically is the same everywhere. Coming home he finally decided that there was nothing in religion for him, and left the church, in what he describes as an easy decision. It is now thirty years ago.

I: At the time you resigned, was there a particular incident that caused you to make the decision?

R: No, it was a . . . a grand tour of that I was thinking about things and I thought it became more and more absurd . . . being a member of the organization. . . . And then at one point I thought, well, I should pull myself together, and then I resigned . . . it was probably maybe one or two years after this [his world travel], so let's say 1984, though I am not quite sure.

I: Yes. But that means, that being out traveling the world, it was . . . how to say . . . it helped to mature your decision?
important in understanding the process. Triggers are just catalysts and not causes.

The drivers on the other hand are crucial. The main drivers in this study are: higher education bringing on a scientific view of the world and its origin; the confirmation preparation seemed irrelevant; that there have been life crises such as illness in the family or a divorce; and a long educational journey that gave insight or disillusionment.

Economy’s role as a driver is non-existent. It has not been important to them to save the church tax. All were asked if they would join again if the church tax was lowered, and the answer was in every case, “No.” Kjeld had the economy as a partial trigger, and he answers to the question of re-entering that there would have to be many more things that had to change than just the economical side of it.

The debate over same-sex marriages in church has apparently not meant anything in relation to the resignations. Two of the informants have resigned before the debate took off in 2012, and the topic has not affected them much in the withdrawal process.

Repstad described in his study the mechanisms behind leaving a religious community, from being active to being passive, before finally leaving the community. The perspectives of meaning, social ties and occasion were very useful to bring into this study, and maybe also the perspective of profit. To the four informants, the church’s way of interpreting the meaning of life did not give meaning to their lives. None of them had any social ties in a religious community. One, Andreas, was raised in a religious community in Western Jutland and therefore had social ties as a child, but had lost them because of moving away to get his education. To Andreas it was very important to find a substitute for the support to the needy that he was giving through his church tax, and you could argue that his finding a sponsor child as an alternative and is relevant under the perspective of support. Two of the informants, the family fathers Andreas and Kjeld, had through their children and wives had occasions to attend church during the years, but with the aging of the children and the divorces, these occasions were no longer there, and the pacification from the church was complete. As Repstad says, it is the lack of meaning, lack of social ties, lack of profit and lack of occasions that sum up to the process of religious pacification and, in the case of this study, resignation from church.

When the results are compared with the Swedish study, from which it takes its design, it is clear that there are similarities in relation to the lengthy and complex process. Many factors have to come together to get to the point of resignation. One difference is that the economy in Sweden more often acts as the trigger. Repstad states that the frequency of the economy as
a trigger may be due to poor economy being a socially legitimate reason to resign for Sweden. The question is whether there are differences in this matter to Danish conditions. Are Danes not so keen to tell you that there is something they can't afford? The question cannot be answered from this study.

A comparison with the Finnish study is harder, but common to Finnish and Danish conditions is that the economy does not play any role in the withdrawal process. Niemelä demonstrates that especially younger people resign as a manifestation of honesty when they do not see a connection between the church’s faith and their own faith. Such a relationship cannot be seen out of this first Danish study.

PERSPECTIVES CONCERNING CHURCH LEADERSHIP

The informants of the study had four reasons, four main drivers, in their process to leave the church: Irrelevant confirmation preparation, acquired scientific worldview, church membership as an identity marker and life crises that led to existential reflections.

In relation to church leadership, this points to four things the church could reflect on: Can preparation for confirmation be made more relevant for the youths attending it? Is a scientific worldview really in opposition to being a believer and member of the church? The church could consider focusing on this debate in both mass media communication and adult education in the parishes.

Could life crises acting as the trigger of existential reflections be an open door to the church instead of a closing one, as this study hints? Many churches in Denmark establish community groups for grieving together after the loss of near relations. One could argue that going through a divorce, as was the case for two of the informants, is a grieving process, too. Are community groups for divorcees a possibility for the church? Would groups be a way to reach out to these men and women instead of letting them go?

Church membership as an identity marker is the hardest one to act on, as this concerns major developments in society.  

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Kirkeministeriet [Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs]. Kirkestatistik. Online: http://km.dk/folekirkken/kirkestatistik/folekirkens-medlemsstat/


