Knowing, Being, and Doing Religion: Introducing an Analytical Model for Researching Vernacular Religion

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Abstract

This article introduces a new analytical model for researching vernacular religion, which aims to capture and describe everyday religiosity as an interplay between knowing, being, and doing religion. It suggests three processes that tie this triad together: continuity; change; and context. The model is envisaged as a tool for tracing vernacular religion in ethnographic data in a multidimensional yet structured framework that is sensitive to historical data and cultural context, but also to individual narratives and nuances. It highlights the relationship between self-motivated modes of religiosity and institutional structures, as well as influences from secular sources and various traditions and worldviews.

The article is based on an ongoing research project focusing on everyday Judaism in Finland. The ethnographic examples illustrate how differently these dynamics play out in different life narratives, depending on varying emphases, experiences, and situations. By bringing together major themes recognized as relevant in previous research and offering an analytical tool for detecting them in ethnographic materials, the model has the potential to create new openings for comparative research, because it facilitates the interlinking of datasets across contexts and cultures. The article concludes that the model can be developed into a more generally applicable analytical tool for structuring and elucidating contemporary ethnographies, mirroring a world of rapid cultural and religious change.

Keywords: *vernacular religion, Jewish studies, Jews in Finland, doing religion, ethnography, everyday religion*

In his 2017 address to the American Academy of Religion, Russell McCutcheon notes that the study of religions has parted ways in recent decades with many of its classical analytical paradigms, shaped over centuries by the

Enlightenment heritage, Christian supremacy, and colonial power structures (McCutcheon 2018). Perhaps the (still) most influential, and contested, of these is the World Religions Paradigm (WRP): that is, the perception of religious traditions as monolithic entities separated by clear-cut borders; a static understanding of religions, directing the focus at knowledge and creed, treating religions as consistent and mutually exclusive theories of the world built primarily on words and genealogy (Cotter and Robertson 2016, 2; Enstedt 2020, 64). In response to such approaches, which have increasingly been recognized as narrow and skewed, several alternatives have taken shape, seeking to create more nuanced understandings of religion by increasing the attention paid to ethnography – a 'move toward appreciation or at least consideration of the vernacular' (Goldstein 2015, 126).

Common to such 'religion-as-lived' approaches, as Kupari and Vuola (2020, 10) describe them, is the aim of capturing religion as a complex, contextual, and changing component of life. Researching religion-as-lived means exploring the tangible life of human beings with emotions, bodies, thoughts, and mundane worries. It also means relating this intimate perspective to the larger social, historical, and institutional structures that set the conditions for and shape the personal religious trajectory, paying attention to power relations and the physical milieu (Kupari 2020, 182; Kupari and Vuola 2020, 9). The alternative avenues for researching religion provided by such ethnographic approaches have supported a critical dismantling of the WRP, which seems to have set (Protestant) Christianity as the default template for all religions, and thus to have placed traditions in hierarchical orders and marginalized localized expressions (Enstedt 2020, 65; Owen 2011, 255). While the WRP is still strong in education, media, and public debate, furnishing talk of religions with political ramifications and hegemonic overtones (Sutcliffe 2016, 24–5), researchers have turned to religion-as-lived paradigms to create counternarratives to the normative epistemologies (Taira 2016, 79), often supported by conceptual analyses of materiality, embodiment, and sensory apprehensions of religion (Illman 2019, 92–3; Whitehead 2013, 23–5; Enstedt 2020, 65).

This article seeks to contribute to this ongoing conceptual development by tapping into one of its strands: vernacular religion, which offers a way to account for ethnographies of everyday life, including mainstream believers, as well as the deeply engaged and the thoroughly indifferent (Bowman and Valk 2012; Fingerroos et al. 2020; Goldstein 2012, 2015; Whitehead 2013; Tieteen termipankki). Our aim is to introduce an analytical model that explores vernacular religion as a dynamic dialogue between three inter-

dependent modalities: 'knowing'; 'being'; and 'doing' religion. The model also suggests three processes that tie this triad of vernacular religiosity together: continuity, change, and context. Taken together, these variables form a three-part scheme for tracing vernacular religion in ethnographic data. The model is developed and tested in an ongoing research project on everyday Judaism in Finland. It contributes to the study of vernacular religion by bringing together major themes recognized as relevant in previous research in a structured framework, and by offering an analytical tool for detecting these themes in ethnographic materials. Furthermore, the model has the potential to create new openings for comparative research in the field, because it facilitates structured comparisons across contexts and cultures. However, future research is still needed to establish how the model can be used to interlink datasets through the consequent comparison facilitated by the analytical model. The goal is thus to develop it into a more generally applicable analytical tool for structuring and elucidating contemporary ethnographies, mirroring a world where cultural and religious identifications and self-designations are in turmoil. Today, several significant boundaries of religion and secularity, culture, and identity, previously perceived as self-evident markers of belonging, are challenged and changed (af Burén 2015). Static conceptions of identity, based on fixed ideas and hereditary traits, give way to more flexible ways of perceiving boundaries and creatively challenging and crossing them, both in the Jewish world (Ochs 2005; Popkin 2015) and across cultures (Nynäs and Illman 2021).

The vernacular framework has attracted growing interest in recent years in research on Indigenous and Pagan groups, alternative spiritualities (Bowman 2014; Harvey 2000; Lassander 2014; Whitehead 2013), Muslim (Purewal and Kalra 2010; Thurfjell 2019), and Christian communities (for example, Howard 2011, Hovi and Haapalainen 2015; Romashko 2020), but has not been applied to Jewish contexts to any greater extent. Recent discussions of the complexities of Jewishness, highlighting the often contested and reinterpreted nature of Jewish identity and practices (Glenn and Sokoloff 2010; Bronner 2014), present interesting ground for researching vernacular Jewish practices, and the Jews of Finland offer a unique yet representative sample due to their special migration history, responses to the Holocaust, social situation, and religious customs (Banik and Ekholm 2019; Czimbalmos 2020; Muir and Worthen 2013; Vuola 2019).

Vernacular religion

The research framework of *vernacular religion* originates within folklore studies. The term was coined by Leonard Primiano as the study of 'religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it' (Primiano 1995, 44). In recent decades the approach has been developed and expanded by several researchers in the study of religions (Bowman and Valk 2012, 2020; Bowman 2014; Fingerroos et al. 2020; Goldstein 2012, 2015; Hovi 2014; Hovi and Haapalainen 2015; Howard 2011; Illman 2019; Kupari and Vuola 2020; Whitehead 2013). The concept serves as a tool for researching religion as part of everyday life in a theoretically and methodologically systematic way that questions a dichotomous pre-understanding of religion in which official and popular, intellectual and emotional, institutional and personal are placed as opposite, incompatible extremes on a mutual scale (Bowman 2014, 102; Riccardi-Swartz 2020, 124). The intention is thus to offer a tool for studying religion without (or at least mindful of) the dualistic and pejorative point of departure included in regarding everyday religion as a more or less distorted version of 'pure' religion, contaminated by its exposure to human thought and action (Whitehead 2013, 15). Following Primiano (2012, 384), 'vernacular religious theory understands religion as the continuous art of individual interpretation and negotiation of any number of influential sources'.

Within ethnographic research on religion several corresponding terms are used in parallel, summarized by Kupari and Vuola (2020, 9) under the umbrella term 'religion-as-lived'. With their roots in different academic disciplines, the various approaches facilitate slight but significant variations in research focus (Kupari 2020, 177–8, 182). Among them the most widely applied approach is *lived religion*, which stems from the sociology of religion and focuses on religious activities that take shape outside organized institutions and the many ways in which religion feeds into personal life narratives (McGuire 2008). In comparison, vernacular approaches tend to emphasize the characteristically folkloristic aspects of everyday religion, such as narrative structures, local practices, and oral history (Goldstein 2015, 126; Romashko 2020, 195, 203). The vernacular implies a sensitivity to societal hierarchies. The entanglement with oral history approaches leads it to mirror a shift in analytical attentiveness from the narrators and their position to the narrative itself, its form, and implications in relation to cultural and societal power structures (Fingerroos et al. 2020, 5–6). In vernacular religion, the interplay – and conflicts – between individual experiences, preferences, and perspectives on the one hand, and larger, formal, or informal

contexts on the other, are in the limelight (Whitehead 2013, 15). In weaving together dimensions of personal experience and expression with historical structures and theological conceptualizations, it pays specific attention to local and contextual, and often marginalized, perspectives (Howard 2011, 7; Riccardi-Swartz 2020, 124). In this capacity the 'vernacular welcomes the neglected into the study' (Goldstein and Shuman 2012, 116). An analysis of the vernacular is thus at its core relational; this characteristic can be singled out as a relevant contribution of the vernacular approach to the study of religion and culture (Fingerroos et al. 2020, 7).

The vernacular approach is also characterized by a careful maintaining of the dialectic between the institutional structures and everyday practice, official and personal, encompassed by the original linguistic meaning of the word (Howard 2011, 5–6). A look at the dictionary is revealing here. It starts from the linguistic meaning, defining the adjective 'vernacular' as a regional dialect specific to a particular place, period, or group – the 'normal spoken language' as opposed to the literary standard. The noun is defined as a 'mode of expression that occurs in ordinary speech rather than formal writing', also used as an ethnic or class marker. In examining synonyms and antonyms, hierarchies and values become evident. Among the synonyms are relatively neutral expressions such as 'colloquial', 'informal', and 'regional', but also negative connotations such as 'vulgar', 'incorrect', and 'uneducated'. Among the antonyms – what the vernacular is *not* – are normative descriptions such as 'correct', 'educated', 'proper', and 'learned' (*Merriam-Webster*). Against this linguistic background, Goldstein and Schuman (2012, 116) note, the vernacular holds the potential to deal with 'stigma': the ambivalent, even conflicting, aspects of everyday narratives and practices.

The Finnish translation of the term vernacular religion, suggested by Tuija Hovi and Anna Haapalainen (2015) as *omaehtoinen uskonto*, adds an alternative angle to the description. *Omaehtoinen* can be translated as 'self-motivated', 'spontaneous', and 'voluntary'; something that is done on one's own terms. Synonyms include 'unforced', 'unguided', and 'self-evolving', and are often related to educational praxis and learning. In this interpretation *omaehtoinen* implies that general rules and structures have been shaped by the individual to her own liking; a positive process requiring maturity, self-realization, and adaptiveness (*Kielitoimiston sanakirja*). In the research on vernacular religion the relationship between this self-motivated mode of religiosity and institutional structures is especially focal, as is the dialogue with secular sources and influences from other traditions and worldviews incorporated in personal religious practice (Hovi and Haapalainen 2015,

160). Thus, this definition taps into another, equally viable, interpretative strand, shifting the focus from substance to function. By de-emphasizing the juxtaposition created by a definition of the vernacular as the obverse of something more proper and formally established, the vernacular comes forward in its own right (Fingerroos et al. 2020, 5–6).

In sum, the vernacular religion approach facilitates a broad take on the study of religion in everyday life (Bowman and Valk 2012, 5). The approach favours multidimensional analyses that are sensitive both to the overarching sociocultural power structures and to the inner world of individual subjects (Goldstein and Shuman 2012, 117). It is also essential to include the parallel dimensions made visible by regarding it as a self-guided process of learning in which the individual continuously forms her ways of being and doing religion in everyday life as facilitated by the structures of society. Some researchers even describe a 'vernacular turn' in the general interest in religion, stressing both prospects and perils (Fingerroos et al. 2020, 5). In recent decades, Diane Goldstein contends, 'our intellectual context has pretty radically changed in light of a growing populism in the intellectual, bureaucratic, and popular world around us that (for better or worse) now pays greater attention to the voices and knowledges of vernacular culture' (Goldstein 2015, 126). While the vernacular has 'largely changed in connotation today', receiving recognition and influence, claims to know and represent 'the voice of the people' can also be used for undemocratic and hegemonic ends (ibid., 138).

The analytical model

Vernacular religion does not constitute a separate, clearly distinguished aspect of people's lives. Rather, it is acted out in various ways as part of everyday life and emerges as relevant in different ways for different individuals, often situationally. For some, religion is the basis of all important life choices, offering moral guidance and existential reliance that structure reality and create confidence. For others, religion is an aspect of one's culture or history, intertwined with family life and traditions, foodways, profession, or place of residence (Illman 2019, 102–3). Understanding what religion means to individuals and what they do with it therefore requires a multidimensional analytical model (Fig. 1) that integrates the plurality of perspectives stressed by the vernacular, which holds non-binary thinking and contrastivity in high regard (Fingerroos et al. 2020, 7). The analytical model presented in the following proposes a conceptualization of vernacu-
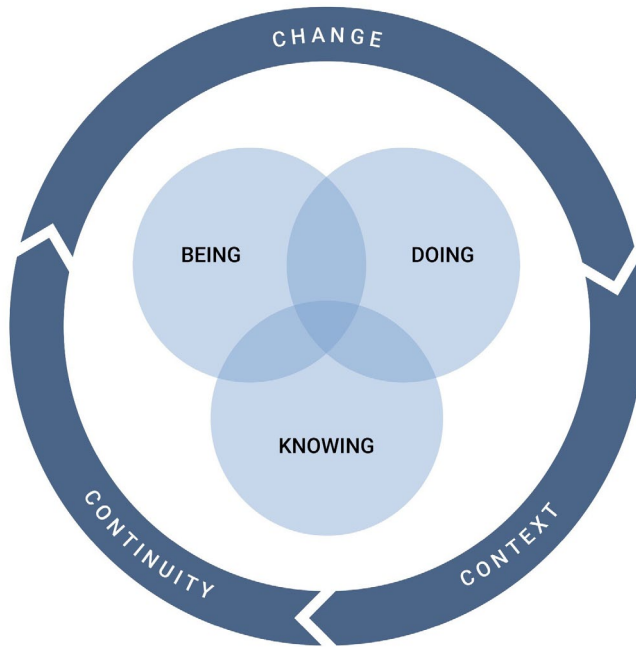
Figure 1. The Visualized Analytical Model

lar religion as an interplay between three dimensions: 'knowing'; 'being'; and 'doing' religion. Moreover, it proposes that this triad of dimensions or modalities are tied together by the dynamic forces of continuity, change, and context.

Knowing

In line with the WRP described above, knowledge has traditionally been seen as the core aspect of religious identifications and belongings, involving the truth claims, theological propositions, and historical narratives that one needs to know and accept to be regarded and confidently act as an adherent of a certain institutional tradition. This 'emphasis on religious beliefs and texts' (Enstedt 2020, 64) has generated a widespread critique of a 'bias towards textuality' in the study of religions (Owen 2011, 255; Riis and Woodhead 2010, 3–4). In contrast, the vernacular framework can illuminate the modality of knowing as vastly more nuanced, including various dimen-

sions essential to people's religious engagements in everyday life: embodied practices; aesthetic factors; and the sensorium at large (Whitehead 2013, 23–6). Focusing merely on aspects of religious life that can be observed and measured results in a neglect of the emotional, bodily, and relational aspects of religion (Riis and Woodhead 2010, 3–4) – traits that often lie at the heart of vernacular religiosity, and now step out of the shadows of texts and beliefs.

The concept of material religion has recently been explored through a variety of concepts and disciplines (see, for example, Hutchings and Mc-Kenzie 2016). This research has contributed to the growing interest in how religious knowledge is influenced by those who harbour this knowledge, their experiences, bodies, and tangible life-worlds (Lassander 2014, 31–4). Understanding vernacular religion is a complex task that involves physical and psychological processes, material objects, and the environment, as well as socially and culturally constructed patterns of interpretation and value (Hovi 2014). The role of vernacular knowledge is thus a question of interplay and contextualization, directing attention to the relationships between persons, objects, and beliefs, where texts, thoughts, and sensory apprehensions function as mediators invested with value and significance (Whitehead 2013, 99–101). We therefore propose that emotions also need to be accounted for in mapping vernacular religiosity. Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead describe emotions as constructed in the interplay between individuals, social structures, and symbols that are shaped by the subjective world of the individual, interpersonal relations, cultural symbols, and material settings. Thus, emotions 'belong to the situation as a whole' (Riis and Woodhead 2010, 6–7). This inclusion does not diminish emotions to mere inner psychological states, social symbolic systems, or neurological scripts. By questioning the 'deep binaries' between reason and emotion (ibid., 17), it bridges the gap between different ways of knowing that are relevant to the vernacular approach. 'As a response to positivist perspectives on knowing and experiencing, and as a rival voice to master narratives and dominant top-down story lines, personal narrative is simultaneously powerful and vulnerable', Goldstein (2015, 137) contends in relation to vernacular knowledge; 'embedded in the ordinary', it can be both persuasive and manipulated. To map the modality of knowing in the ethnographies, we thus seek narratives of study and scripture, adaptions of creed and certainties, but also other ways in which informants talk about 'knowing' their tradition through the body, emotions, experiences, practices, and so on, attempting to capture the significance attached to this modality in their reflections.

Being

As clarified above, the vernacular approach places at its heart the dynamic dialectic between personal dispositions, experiences, and emotions on the one hand and overarching societal structures, theological systems, power-relations, and historical developments on the other. Consequently, personal identities are regarded not as isolated and enduring characteristics, but as evolving and open-ended modalities connected with numerous circumstances and contexts. Every person harbours a collection of multiple identities, foregrounding specific identities in given contexts formed by external and internal factors. Thus, everyday life takes place within a power-infused interactional web in which varying aspects of these multiple identities – cultural, religious, secular, gendered, ethnicized, and so on – emerge in varying situations (Popkin 2015, IX–XII). Bearing an identity implies both perceived likeness and uniqueness. At the individual level one may differentiate oneself from others, but at the social level one may experience likeness with others who share the same collective identity in contrast to the surrounding society. Thus, the individual draws different lines between 'us' and 'them', depending on the situation and the interpretative patterns evoked (Bekerman and Zembylas 2016, 210–13). This interactional or relational approach stands in clear contrast with the WRP perception of subjects as autonomous objects that can be measured and explained with reference to clear-cut schematic tables (Cotter and Robertson 2016, 12–3).

Ann af Burén's (2015) conception of 'simultaneities of religious identities' can specify this vernacular approach. It describes the 'both-and' character of vernacular religious identifications: how people ascribe meaning to and interpret religiously significant events of daily life, and see themselves in relation to religious and cultural designations. Simultaneities do not necessarily signal a lack of consistency or coherence; instead, they display a complex and situated interpretation of the boundaries of the subject and her/his surroundings, through which the individual can 'relate to the many meanings of the concept of religion selectively' and 'appreciate and appropriate religious aspects from a variety of contexts' (af Burén 2015, 212). People today often combine elements from various religious traditions in their personal outlooks, ranging from the self-conscious combination of two or more traditions to a sense of belonging to no specific tradition at all. By attending to simultaneities, the complexity and incongruity of vernacular religion can be uncovered (Bekerman and Zembylas 2016, 218; Nynäs and Illman 2021).

The dynamic concepts of identification and simultaneity are utilized in structuring the analytical model. The vernacular focus on everyday

life turns the spotlight from stable monolithic entities of identity to the unfinished evolving processes of identification in traditional and historical forms, as well as in modern, hybrid, and personalized practices. In ethnographies we trace how 'people make sense of experience and claim identities by telling their stories' (Goldstein 2015, 137). We pose the following questions: how do they talk about who they are? and how has this changed over time and in relation to significant experiences, institutions, persons, places, and practices?

Doing

If religions are regarded as parallel systems of ideas and practices that can be clearly identified and placed side by side for comparative purposes as the WRP proposes, religions also appear to have historical agency; they can interact, dialogue, and clash with each other as fairly consistent entities of texts and rituals (Owen 2011, 254). However, from an ethnographic perspective it is human beings who engage with each other in daily life, not abstract systems. Religious agency, the capacity for action, is thus seen as shaped and framed by the myriad ways in which a person adopts, adapts, and applies religious norms in her own life (Kupari and Vuola 2020). This is more complex than merely 'being' religious, Orit Avishai claims: it also entails a project of 'becoming' through practice against the image of a religious or secular other (Avishai 2008, 423). Hence, she introduces 'doing religion' as an analytical approach based on postcolonial and interactionist theories that focus on religious agency, and on how individuals perform and 'become' within power relations and normative structures of tradition and expectation. Doing religion is seen as a strategic undertaking – to achieve social, gendered, political, or personal goals otherwise unattainable for the individual in a certain place and time (ibid., 413). It is a semiconscious, self-authoring project of cultivating a religious subjecthood through practice – in line with vernacular perspectives that pinpoint religiosity as a complex identification constructed and acted out by the individual in relation to social norms and historical structures (Bowman 2014, 102–3). Religion is not done in a vacuum, but is shaped in relation to both personal and structural religious and extra-religious ends; it is an orientation and an aspiration, an existential undertaking framed by bustling day-to-day life (Avishai 2008, 428).

Adam Yuet Chau outlines different modalities of 'doing religion' to serve as anchor points in the wide spectrum of possible activities. These

include discursive-scriptural, personal-cultivational, liturgical, immediate-practical, and relational modalities – dimensions available for adoption by individuals and groups as they craft their ways of doing vernacular religion in changing circumstances (Chau 2011, 67–8). It is important to acknowledge that factors such as age, gender, class, education, coincidences of time and place, position in social networks, and personal dispositions influence how persons form patterns of vernacular practice (Fingerroos et al. 2020, 10). In this respect tradition functions as a 'constraining and enabling structure, which individuals artfully employ to navigate their lives and realize religious aspirations' (Kupari and Vuola 2020, 12). To summarize, we will look for the very practical ways in which our informants engage with their tradition: what do they do when they 'do religion'? Do they mention formal rituals or personal routines of daily life, such as eating, working, engaging with family and friends, objects, visiting places, and so on? What kind of situations make them reflect on religion, and how does this affect what they do?

Summing up the proposed analytical model

The three modalities – 'knowing', 'being', and 'doing' religion – should not be regarded as mutually exclusive categories or as necessary conditions for vernacular religion. When applying the model to ethnographic data, the different aspects emerge in different ways in different life narratives as individuals place varying emphases on them in their everyday lives and in their ways of talking about it with a researcher. It is important for our purposes to offer an alternative to the scholarly tendency to make 'belief the measure of what religion is understood to be' (Cotter and Robertson 2016, 7) and draw attention to different ways of relating to and adapting religion in daily life. The dimensions we have conceptualized as knowing, being, and doing are equally important intertwined aspects of the vernacular repertoire – but they are precisely that: conceptual tools. In developing our analysis, we therefore recognize that people do not match abstract categories, and are mindful of the gap between 'pristine textbook descriptions and messy practices' (Taira 2016, 82).

Hence, we propose the triangulation of knowing, being, and doing as a methodological tool that at best can form a prism through which vernacular religion can be studied in greater detail. This article tests its usefulness in relation to a specific ethnographic context, vernacular Judaism in Finland, but in the future we hope to be able to show how the analytical structure can

also enable comparison over time and between traditions. To acknowledge the dynamism inherent in the model (Fig. 1), it is envisaged as a constantly spinning wheel, in which focuses shift, and new connections are created between the different modalities. We regard continuity, change, and context as important and interlinked relations between the three modalities, shaping and reshaping the wheel of vernacular religion as it is adapted for various ethnographies. Furthermore, these movers are interchangeable, and the possibilities are therefore as numerous as the three key dimensions are intrinsically entangled.

In our ongoing research we strive to demonstrate how this model can be applied to ethnographies relating to the Jews of Finland. We map how individuals in the various datasets describe personal and institutional ways of knowing, being, and doing Jewish that feel historically and religiously embedded, yet meet their personal needs and correspond to the secular Finnish lifestyle (Czimbalmos and Pataricza 2019, 1, 4–5). Longstanding established minority communities such as the Jews of Finland seldom advocate a total rejection of the surrounding culture but rather 'creatively straddle both worlds' (Kupari and Vuola 2020, 8). This is illustrated by the following examples that demonstrate how the model can illuminate ethnographic accounts.

Analysis: Tracking patterns of vernacular Judaism in Finland

The subject of Jewishness and how to understand who and what is to be considered 'Jewish' is under constant discussion. More than in many other religions, ethnicity and ancestry have been important indicators of belonging in traditional religious definitions of who is a Jew (Glenn and Sokoloff 2010, 3). However, contemporary, critical, and secular apprehensions contest the decisiveness of genealogy alone. Framing Jewishness as a matter of genes and upholding 'a belief in biological uniqueness […] offers an ethnic anchor when boundaries between Jews and non-Jews blur', Tenenbaum and Davidman (2007, 444) contend. One can thus be, and be perceived as, Jewish in a variety of ways, connected to one or all of the three modalities described above. In line with the transfer in terminology from identity to identification, the following account strives to enable an open-ended understanding of multiple – practical, personal, existential – liaisons in everyday life. Following Avishai's suggestion, the analysis focuses on how individuals 'make sense of the complexity, ambiguity, and transience of religious traditions' in personal life narratives (Avishai 2008, 429). The analysis aims to demon-

strate different ways of relating to and expressing vernacular Judaism by applying the proposed analytical framework.[1]

Eve's story

Eve's narrative answers most clearly the questions raised in relation to the modality of being. She is conscious of her (self-)identification(s) as a Jew, reflecting on how different contexts affect her, and on situations where her Jewishness is emphasized or minimized – for example, when she does not feel comfortable claiming it. Nevertheless, the modalities of knowing and doing are far from irrelevant in Eve's narrative. She grew up in Helsinki with a Jewish mother from a family originating in the earliest Jewish settlement of Russian soldiers in Finland in the nineteenth century, and a non-affiliated father with a Lutheran background, whom she describes as 'very sympathetic' to Jewish ways and instrumental in upholding Jewish family traditions. They were secular and not particularly active in synagogue life; Eve did not attend the Jewish school. As long as her maternal grandmother was alive, holidays were celebrated with all the Ashkenazi[2] foods and traditions, which have receded since her death and are today adapted creatively in the family. Eve remains an inactive yet committed member of the local Jewish Community.

Being born of a Jewish mother, the traditional religious definition of a Jew, Eve's Jewish identity has never been questioned. However, as she has neither received a traditional Jewish upbringing nor undergone a conversion process, which includes obligatory studies of Judaism, she has not seen the need or had the opportunity to expand her knowledge. Because she lacked an 'institutional anchorage' in the Jewish school, Eve feels she can create a more independent or 'self-motivated' understanding of Judaism; a choice of

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1   For the research project *Boundaries of Jewish Identities in Contemporary Finland* (in short the *Minhag Finland* project*)*, 101 members of the Jewish communities in Finland, aged eighteen or over, were interviewed during 2019–20. The interviews were conducted in a number of languages, and the quotations from the Finnish or Swedish interviews used in this article have been translated by the current authors. To meet the requirements of academic detail while honouring the personal integrity of the participating research subjects, a reasonable and functional balance between descriptive detail and generalization has been sought to present the interviewees. They have therefore been given aliases, common Jewish names, and no specific details concerning age, occupation, family ties, or international connections are disclosed. In a small and tightknit community like the one under study, such details would easily compromise the interviewees' anonymity.
2   Ashkenazi Jews – that is, Jews of Central and Eastern European origin. Sephardi Jews, by contrast, are from the areas around the Mediterranean Sea, including Portugal and Spain.

wording resonating with the vernacular framework. 'Because I'm born of a Jewish mother, I don't have to prove anything,' she declares, self-conscious of the internal power structure that works in her favour: 'For a convert to say that I don't know anything and I don't do anything [Jewish] would be impossible.' Yet Eve describes her Jewishness as a 'strong aspect of [her] entire way of being', something she thinks about 'almost all the time' but does not primarily experience as 'religious'. She struggles to find the right description and concludes: 'It's just there; it's a part of me [and] there's nothing left if you take it away.'

Eve also associates a general feeling of estrangement with being Jewish. When still at school, she experienced antisemitic comments and stereotypical remarks concerning her dark looks, temperament, and intellectual skills, all seen as 'typically Jewish'. In professional life she is reluctant to publicly bring out her Jewishness: 'It's not something I usually say when I meet new people, […] I don't like to always have to position myself.' She thinks her caution is simply part of her outlook on life, but she acknowledges a partly Jewish aspect: 'How much of this is just my own neurosis, and how much is something you feel as a result of generations of estrangement?' Her identification as a Jew varies, depending on the situation and in relation to her social interactions. For her, being Jewish means having a connection with Jewish contexts and narratives, more than with strict criteria of genealogy, observance, or faith.

Eve regrets knowing so little about religion in general and Judaism in particular: 'I'd like to know more so that I could argue better and understand more,' she admits. Institutional ways of doing Jewish, such as synagogue rituals and observance of Jewish law in daily life, are unimportant to Eve, who visits the synagogue a few times a year for special occasions. She dislikes the strict approach of the Helsinki synagogue and refers to experiences from abroad, where a more liberal and informal Jewish community life has appealed to her: 'It was an eyeopener for me that Judaism could be something else.' Although Eve does not uphold a strict Jewish lifestyle, she associates choices and habits of everyday life with her Jewishness. 'I would never buy ham,' she declares, confessing a deep resentment of Christmas but seeing these as rather 'unreflected' reactions: 'just a feeling from somewhere'.

Food memories are an important positive link to tradition for Eve, who orders traditional Ashkenazi dishes for the holidays and vividly describes the happiness she felt when she managed one year to recreate the tastes of her grandmother's dishes herself. Today, she belongs to an international group of Jewish friends, who at times celebrate Shabbat and holidays in an

inventive fusion of customs and foods from all over the Jewish world. These informal and improvised celebrations are deeply meaningful to her, serving as an example of how doing Jewish innovatively strengthens the modality of being without, depending on knowing as the basis for its meaningfulness: 'It's been so much fun,' Eve concludes, 'I have this multikulti gang, it's broadened my thoughts of what is possible and what is ok.'

Materiality figures prominently in Eve's narrative: 'When I think about my being Jewish, the role of objects is important.' This feeling is not limited to formal religious objects: many artworks and textiles from her grandmother's home carry a Jewish association for her at a personal level: 'To me, they have a Jewish meaning, though they're just regular beautiful things.' Although she does not keep Shabbat regularly in her home, she has ordered *havdalah*[3] candles for herself, because she misses their smell. Similarly, she has incorporated aspects of Jewishness that comfort and sustain her in her secular life: humming liturgical melodies as lullabies for her child and repeating Hebrew verses to herself. These personalized rituals are so ordinary to her that she almost fails to mention them during the interview: 'Daily life is daily life; it's hard to see it and put it into words.'

As for the dynamics of Eve's vernacular Judaism, the power of context is well established in the examples above, both in her careful selection of situations where she displays her Jewishness and in her positive acknowledgement of how Judaism is done elsewhere. Continuity and change are intimately connected with her apprehension of what being Jewish means and are verbalized in relation to her role as a mother; a link in the chain of traditions and heritage. When asked if her child is Jewish, her answer is ambivalent. She has introduced her child to Jewish things and hopes that a natural interest will come with time, but has not let the child go through institutional rites of passage. Since becoming a parent Eve has thought about tradition in a more complex way. She values the work done by the community to uphold the Jewish heritage in Finland but struggles to accept many of its practices and attitudes. Currently, she cannot find activities that could become natural gateways to more active participation. 'It would have to be something that blends in with everyday life, which is already kind of full and demanding.'

'Things change as you age,' she contends: 'Previously, I thought that it goes naturally, that it's no big deal if I don't keep up traditions so much,

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3 *Havdalah* is the ceremony that marks the symbolic end of Shabbat and the start of the new week. Its ritual involves lighting a special *havdalah* candle, blessing a cup of wine, and smelling spices.

and that all this hybrid stuff is ok. But now I've realized: what if everything just withers away?' She hopes that one day her child will experience Jewish traditions as meaningful, as something that binds people together across time and place, a context in which to feel at home. Eve's approach to being, knowing, and doing Jewish in everyday life is summarized in the story of her *mezuzah*.[4] Moving into a new home, she wanted to hang a small case with a *mezuzah* by her door, as is customary in Jewish homes. She did not know how to do it correctly or what should be inscribed in the scroll. 'Of course, I was in a great hurry, and I live a quite chaotic everyday life,' she laughs. Yet she wanted to get it done and decided to do it her own way, at least as a temporary solution:

So, I just wrote on a piece of paper, and I thought: what's most likely to be written on the real ones? So, I wrote [in the vernacular]: 'Dear, kind whoever you are, protect our home and create all good things for me and my [child],' something like that. And I thought, that has to work.

As time passed, Eve decided to stick to this personal *mezuzah*. The real prayers are usually full of 'oddities' when you start thinking about what they actually say, she reflects: 'So maybe you even get a more reasonable one if you write it yourself.' Who the addressee of the prayer is remains unarticulated: maybe a supernatural, cosmic power, maybe just 'tradition': 'It's a bit like my not buying ham, it's just how it's supposed to be.'

Elijah's story

Elijah's story centres most clearly around questions associated with the modality of knowing – both in a traditional theological sense and in the more vernacular sense of knowing through objects and practices, for example. In his narrative Elijah's Jewishness is tightly bound to the aspect of knowing, strongly influenced by changes, both in his own life and in society at large, and by the local context in which he decided to claim his Jewish identity. Elijah was born abroad and moved to Finland as a child. His father was Jewish, but practising Judaism was not important in his family, and he 'did not have a very Jewish childhood'. However, Judaism was present as an 'identity'. His wish to ensure Jewish continuity by 'securing' their Jewish identity encouraged him to convert to Judaism as an adult with his Lutheran

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4 A small parchment scroll upon which the words of the *Shema* are handwritten by a scribe in Hebrew. *Mezuzah* scrolls are rolled up, put into a *mezuzah* case and affixed to the doorposts of Jewish homes, designating the home as Jewish, and reminding those who live there of their connection with God and their heritage.

wife and their children. The Jewish community they joined in Finland does not accept patrilineal ancestry as a basis for membership: they were required to convert to join the congregation and become part of organized Jewish life in Finland. Shortly after the lengthy conversion process was completed, Elijah accepted responsibility for important positions of trust within the community. Contextuality plays a crucial role in this decision: if the local congregation had accepted his patrilineal ancestry, he might have decided not to convert, because it would not have been necessary for claiming an official Jewish identity. However, from Elijah's perspective it was a mere formality, because he regarded himself as Jewish anyway.

Elijah describes Judaism as a 'strange combination of religion and identity'; the most central aspect of who he is, something he 'thinks about every day'. He is aware of what *halachah*[5] stipulates as necessary criteria for 'being' Jewish, that is: being born of a Jewish mother or having converted through a formal process.[6] Yet in his narrative the modality of 'knowing' emerges as an additional and crucial aspect of Jewishness. He describes the Finnish community as 'diluted', pointing out that being Jewish to him is not a simple matter of 'bloodline' and heritage, but is above all about knowledge and doctrine, and 'understanding what you do'. He compares the situation to a fiddler's grandchild, who claims to be a fiddler because his grandfather was one, but who cannot play a single note. His analogy is intended to show that knowing takes precedence over 'merely' being: 'If you want to be a fiddler, it isn't enough that your grandfather was a fiddler, you have to know how to play the violin, so you can say that you are a fiddler.'

According to Elijah many people consider ancestry the most important aspect of their Jewish identity, so they do not study the Jewish law or learn about Jewish customs. They are therefore 'unable to read Hebrew' or 'understand anything about synagogue services'. Unlike those born Jewish, converts to Judaism need to study significant amounts of religious law and practice to be accepted as Jews, both formally and socially, in the community.

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5 Jewish religious law. Judaism acknowledges the development of *halachah*, but this acknowledgement varies, depending on the denominational context. For example, Conservative or Reform rabbis tend to adapt certain aspects of *halachah* to fit the conditions of the modern world.

6 The halachic expectations concerning who is considered Jewish and what a conversion process entails depend on the specific denomination. For example, Orthodox Jewish congregations do not accept patrilineal descent as a basis for Jewishness, and their conversion processes are generally longer and require strict observance of Orthodox Jewish law from future converts, whereas Reform Jewish congregations may accept patrilineal ancestry, and require the converts-to-be to live in accordance with 'less strict' regulations.

To claim Jewish belonging, he therefore does not consider kinship ties to be 'enough' without sufficient knowledge of Judaism. Like ancestry, belief is a less important aspect of being Jewish to Elijah, who does not describe himself as a religious person with a personal faith and devotion: 'People are paradoxical creatures,' he contends with reference to his own position. 'They can relate to religious things even if they aren't believers.' The modality of doing seems to be insolubly tied to the primary aspect of knowing. Elijah values formal religious rituals and practices, both as practised in the synagogue and at home. Thus, while not considering himself a believer, he is an active and meticulous doer of Judaism. To him, all practices that 'keep up Jewishness' and 'set it apart' are important; he specifically mentions dietary traditions and keeping Shabbat with the family. Previously, when Elijah had formal responsibilities in the community, the family participated more actively in synagogue services, but today the focus has shifted to everyday family life, which he considers an equally important arena for doing Jewish. Regardless of how you practise, the important thing is that you know, he emphasizes, thus underlining the supremacy of this modality in relation to the others.

Context, continuity, and change are all relevant aspects of Elijah's narrative. Perhaps due to his international background, he observes Finnish Jewry somewhat from the outside, criticizing the tendency to cling only to local practices – melodies, liturgical customs, wordings – at the expense of welcoming the growing diversity among Jews living in Finland today. Elijah is well aware of the challenges inherent in being a small peripheral community, and how the local circumstances and context of the diaspora limit the possibility of living an everyday Jewish life. However, he is both pragmatic and open to change: 'We have to compromise.' To him the community's increasing 'internal diversity' is positive, because the norm of what it means to be Jewish in Finland is thus broadened, and Jews with different cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds can feel respected and at home. Moreover, Jews from abroad are often 'more knowledgeable' than local Jews, he notes with respect. He acknowledges that his congregation is affected by the surrounding society and its traditions. He mentions flowers brought to the Jewish cemetery as an example; a tradition rooted in the surrounding society, heavily dominated by Lutheran Christianity. Today, most Jewish families in Finland have both Jewish and Christian relatives, so if you bring flowers to Grandma's grave, why would you not do the same for Grandpa, even if he's Jewish, Elijah ponders.

While Elijah welcomes change in how Judaism is done in Finland, continuity is also close to his heart. Like Eve, entering parenthood triggered

reflections on continuity and a wish to 'secure' the tradition for his children. He does not want them 'to be all question marks' about their Jewish belonging, and therefore urges them to learn about the services in the synagogue and Hebrew to 'learn and understand deeply what these [practices] are'. He has 'studied a lot' himself because 'as a child' he 'didn't know a lot about synagogue practices' and is content to see that his children today have 'strong Jewish identities'. Elijah's understanding of Jewishness is aptly concluded in the following account:

> Blood can't define who is a Jew. […] In my opinion you need to self-identify as Jewish, and you need to belong to a Jewish community – that's a Jew for me. But I think it's also essential that you understand the Jewish culture, which includes basic skills. [Not having them] doesn't take away a person's Jewishness, but I think Jews have the obligation to study and acquire a knowledge of Judaism.

Esther's story

For Esther, Judaism is mainly connected with what you do: with rituals and rules of everyday life. Her story shows how the dynamic processes of continuity, change, and context become especially important when 'doing' Judaism – which is the most prevalent modality in her narrative. Judaism for Esther is not only a learned system of religious thought, but primarily a lived practice performed in a context affected by change and continuity. These three movers were all at play, defining and influencing how she observed Jewish traditions in Israel, where she was born, and the – sometimes very different – ways in which she observes them now in Finland. Esther was born to a converted Finnish mother and a Jewish father of *Mizrahi*[7] ancestry. She received a Jewish upbringing and kept kosher throughout her life, and was enrolled in a religious-public (*mamlachti-dati*) primary school in Israel. She received a Jewish education and had a *bat mitzvah*, which she describes as 'more like a clubbing thing' with a DJ invited to their house; 'there was nothing religious about it,' she says. Yet she describes her father as 'very

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7   *Mizrahi* Jews are the descendants of the local Jewish communities that existed in the Middle East or North Africa.

religious' but 'not Orthodox, but *Bnei Akiva*[8] style'. In terms of Jewish practice the family followed the customs of her father's family. Esther moved to Finland as an adult and married a man who was also an immigrant with an ethnic and religious background different both from her own and the Finnish Lutheran majority.[9] Esther lives in Helsinki and is a member of the local Jewish community.

She has changed her ways of doing Jewish in response to the challenging new context, in which she no longer represents the majority but a small and often unknown minority. She has adapted her everyday life to the new context, accommodating some of the customs of local Jewry and the secular mainstream in her own vernacular practice. Both her Jewish practice and her day-to-day life in a religiously mixed family have changed significantly over the years. In Finland she says it feels she 'sees Judaism from the side' and is 'not into it any longer'. This does not mean that it has become a less important part of her life, she clarifies, 'but I had to adjust'. Esther grew up with certain Finnish traditions – primarily culinary ones – in her family, but her father's *Mizrahi* traditions dominated their household. Having moved to Finland, she found that observance of certain practices in the diaspora was harder and that 'doing religion' was tightly framed by the Finnish mainstream, that is, a secularized society deeply rooted in Lutheran Christianity. In Finland Shabbat comes in early, and the infrastructure is not built to facilitate an observant Jewish lifestyle, at least not the kind she experienced in Israel. Esther mentions several examples of how clashing contexts have imposed change. For example, the Finnish calendar is not adjusted for Jewish holidays, which makes it difficult to harmonize the requirements of working life and religious life; and the Finnish winter weather complicates the religious demand to walk to synagogue on Shabbat.

Food stands out as the single most important symbolically significant practical concern of her day-to-day Jewish life in Finland. Keeping kosher at home is easy, she reports, 'because it depends on you and your house', but other things 'depend on the public', which makes it much more difficult to accommodate, because 'nothing here is kosher'. Esther finds it

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8   According to their website 'Bnei Akiva is a Jewish religious Zionist youth movement, which inspires and empowers young Jews all over the world with a sense of commitment to the Jewish people, the Land of Israel and the Torah, placing an emphasis on the value of Aliyah to the State of Israel'. <https://www.worldbneiakiva.org/>, accessed 21 July 2020.

9   According to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, as of 2019, 68.6 per cent of the Finnish population belonged to the church. <https://evl.fi/the-church/membership/the-church-in-numbers>, accessed 22 July 2020.

difficult to prepare the dishes she associates with some Jewish holidays when ingredients are unavailable and the local Jewish customs favour completely different foodways, based on the dominant Ashkenazi rather than her own Mizrahi traditions. Esther not only represents a minority in Finnish society, but within her own congregation, which has led to her mostly doing Jewish at home with her family. The Finnish synagogues mainly follow Ashkenazi customs, which differ significantly from the Mizrahi customs to which she is used. She therefore finds it 'weird' and 'pretty unfamiliar' to visit the community, because holidays 'did not feel like celebrations, and it wasn't as fun' – echoing the common stereotype of Finns as serious and reserved. The melodies of the prayers were different, and the food was 'horrible'. Her solution to this discomfort was to celebrate the holidays at home, preparing the dishes and following the customs that she misses and 'still loves'. Over time, she has become more creative in her ways of doing Jewish, 'adjusting' her traditions to Finnish life and buying local ingredients to be used innovatively in her Middle Eastern recipes. While Esther embraces change, she clearly also yearns for continuity, both foodways that nurture her sense of Jewish belonging and the customs she associates with practising her religion.

In Esther's practical Judaism, knowing is given little attention. This may be a natural consequence of her upbringing in a predominantly Jewish society, complete with Jewish education and socialization as part of the majority culture. Like Elijah, however, she notes that the local community could be more open to different ways of reciting the liturgy and reading the Torah, based on other Jewish traditions of knowledge than the dominant Ashkenazi practices. The modality of being Jewish has required some rethinking on Esther's part. Being Jewish in Israel was different, because 'if you live in Israel, you don't have to think about how to define a Jew'. Being Jewish is unusual in Finland, where 'nobody cares about religion that much' and many people have 'never met a Jew before'. Switching from a majority status to a minority one influenced her self-perception and made her more conscious of her own Jewishness. When asked what being Jewish means to her, Esther answers that Judaism is 'a way of life' and that a 'Jew is a good person, like in any other religion'. However, here also she emphasizes the doing part in remembering that there are many ways to practise: 'The *halakhah* is created by rabbis' and interpreted in many ways, and there are thus many ways to be and do Jewish. Esther makes her point by saying: 'There is no being

Jewish to me. […] There is *tzedakah*[10] in any other religion in the world too, […] so it's being a good person.'

In addition to the change of context, Esther's changing life situation has also required her to reconsider what being Jewish means to her. Esther lives in an interreligious marriage, but says her husband is 'not a religious guy' and does not observe any formal religious customs. However, as a personal vernacular adaption of his tradition, 'he sings some prayers' sometimes, for good luck, 'and I sing my Jewish prayers for him'. She hopes that he will teach their child about his religion to enrich their child's understanding of its diverse ethnic and religious heritage. While open to plurality in her family life, Esther wishes to ensure Jewish continuity and has agreed with her husband to let their child go through Jewish childhood rituals and become part of the covenant. However, she does not want to enrol the child in the Jewish kindergarten or school, because she feels 'it wouldn't be fair to him [her husband] that it's only about my religion'. Instead, they have decided that the child 'can choose whatever [s/he] wants to be'. All in all, Esther regards herself as religious while not believing in strict rules. She jokes she is 'eighty per cent' on the 'scale of Judaism'. However:

> If I go back home [to Israel], people will say maybe I'm not religious at all, but I keep my Jewish identity by passing it on to my [child]. I still light candles on Shabbat, and keep kosher food and separate dairy and meat, and have *mezuzot* in the house, and read *Tehillim* [Psalms] sometimes, and say *Shema Israel* before sleeping, I guess? Stuff like that. So, for me, it's a big part of my Jewish identity. [I know it] isn't acceptable in some communities, but it's enough for me.

Conclusions

This article started with the widespread critique of the World Religions Paradigm and other similar schemes that seek to place religions side by side as mutually exclusive monoliths for theoretical comparison. As recent research has convincingly revealed, such epistemologies can be regarded as biased, essentialising, decontextualized, and ahistorical (Cotter and Robertson 2016, 7, 9–10), thus 'running the risk of reductionism and of a failure to recognize expressions of religion that do not fit this framework' (Enstedt 2020, 57).

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10   Hebrew, meaning righteousness, justice, charity.

In line with the many ethnographically based approaches that have been developed to broaden the scope of the research field, this article has sought to introduce a novel analytical model for the study of vernacular religion, using an ongoing research project on everyday Jewish identifications in Finland as a pilot study. The model is grounded in the complex interplay between the modalities of being, knowing, and doing religion that are bound by the dynamic movers of continuity, change, and context. It thus identifies and describes the persistent elasticity of religious belonging, practice, and identification. The Jewish context is well suited to demonstrate the constantly ongoing negotiation between the three vernacular modalities, and how varying simultaneities shape the process at societal and individual levels. It is hoped that future research can explore its usefulness in other ethnographic contexts than the one analysed in this article.

In today's pluralistic, complex, and constantly changing world, few individuals maintain a single unified identification throughout their lives. Being, knowing, and doing are conceptual relatives, and manoeuvring between them can be regarded as the manifestation of a person's vernacular religiosity. Identifying such patterns is a valuable analytical asset, we conclude, and to understand the complexity of religious (self-)identification and practice, ethnographies need to be studied in a fully contextualized manner. A model for studying vernacular religion should uncover its dynamics and capture its abundance in a structured methodological frame, but needless to say, lived reality is always more complex than the structures any model can capture. Returning to Russell McCutcheon, whose statement opened this article, we conclude: 'our object of study is the doings of historical human beings and both they and the field that studies them, unlike fossils, are not locked in amber' (McCutcheon 2018, 310).

The divergent narratives of vernacular Judaism in Finland show that individuals may have varying reasons for maintaining their connections with Judaism and may do so in a variety of ways. They highlight the three key modalities of being, knowing, and doing, but also exemplify the importance of situational investigations, reflecting on the dynamics of continuity, context, and change during the – partly conscious, partly unconscious – formation and re-formation of practices and attitudes. As Eve's example demonstrates, secular Jews may feel attached to their ancestry as an assurance of their Jewishness without feeling the need to engage in any specific ritual observance. This allows them to be selective with their practices and form their own traditions, like Eve in creating her own *mezuzah*. This emotional, embodied, and materially concrete act contributed

to her feeling of belonging and confidence, as well as to the building and maintaining of her own Jewishness. Elijah's narrative, especially his fiddler analogy, shows how the conventional boundaries of Jewishness are questioned and contested. He viewed Jewish identification as a matter substantiated in knowledge, while connecting religious practices with the importance of preserving Jewish culture and continuity. He was committed to raising his children as Jews and spoke articulately about the conscious decision to observe traditions to transmit knowledge to them. By referring to people as 'paradoxical creatures', who may perform religious traditions without considering themselves religious in the sense of being 'believers', he verbalized the evasive relationship between culture and religion. Esther, who sought affiliation with the local Jewish community after moving to Finland, found herself to be in a minority in her new country – as well as in her new community. Her practices and attitudes were affected by the changing conditions, making her realize that to live a Jewish life that was meaningful for her, she had to 'adjust' and adapt to the new context. Taken together, the three narratives show how differently the three modalities of vernacular religion can be combined and accentuated in life narratives, and how the movers of continuity, change, and context uphold the perpetual spinning of the wheel chosen as the visualization of the analytical model.

As Steven Sutcliffe contends, the ordinary 'stuff' of which religion is made often 'operates below the radar of "religious entities" and is often portrayed pejoratively by academics and journalists alike: as ephemeral, faddish, and consumeristic – in sum, not "real" religion' (Sutcliffe 2016, 27). In response to such assessments the vernacular perspective can offer a counternarrative that highlights the extraordinary value of ordinary life, including previously marginalized and belittled voices in the conversation. Nevertheless, it can also be employed to strengthen normative discourses of indigeneity and authenticity (Goldstein 2015, 138). Like any other analytical concept, therefore, it must be applied critically and reflectively (Fingerroos et al. 2020, 7).

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