

Identity, Roles and Narratives of Ex-Members: Some Examples from the Swedish Religious Community Knutby Filadelfia

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Abstract

In this paper, identity, roles and narratives of ex-members will be discussed, based on examples from the Swedish religious community Knutby Filadelfia, which ceased to exist in May 2018 and all members became ex-members. Narrative analysis is used. Based mainly on the preliminary enquirer report, where three of the former leaders in the group were accused by six ex-members of physical and sexual abuse, it is argued that the ex-members tend to identify with the Victim role and the Apostate role in relation to their former group. The role of therapists in the new identity construction is discussed, as several of the ex-members seem to have had assistance from therapists to create their new identities and roles in the process of leaving the group, therapists who seem to have encouraged these two role constructions. The question is raised whether other kinds of roles, for example the Hero role coined by Streib et al, in which the ex-member is seen more as an active agent with an increased awareness of his/her own motives, wishes and goals in life, and that he/she could learn something also from negative experiences, would have been more constructive for the individual.

Keywords

Ex-member, identity, role, narrative, therapy, Knutby Filadelfia

Introduction

In the autumn of 2016 the long-term members of the small religious community Knutby Filadelfia just outside Uppsala, Sweden, with roots in the Pentecostal movement, discovered that their female charismatic leader, conceived of as the future Bride of Christ, had had an intimate relationship with a pastor in the group. In combination with other events and circumstances – other extramarital relations from the side of the pastor, failed prophecy, constant overwork – the discovery led to the dissolution of the group one and a half years later, and all members – most of

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them members for around 20 years – left the group. Several of the ex-members today consider themselves to be cult victims, and some took the charismatic leader and two pastors to court in January 2020, accusing them of physical violence and sexual abuse. The three were sentenced to community service and fines. This was the second time Knutby Filadelfia was in the media spotlight in Sweden. In January 2004, there was one murder and one attempt to murder in the group, with many spectacular details, which made the group notorious both in Sweden and abroad. The story will be outlined below.

This article will investigate and discuss the new identity formation of some of the ex-members after 2016, the ex-member roles they construct and occupy, and their narratives as they appear in the preliminary enquirer report. The article will not discuss whether the ex-members' memories and narratives are true or false, but take the standpoint that if the individuals define their memories as real, they have real meaning and real consequences in their lives (Warner and Feltey 1999: 161). Thus the analysis will be based on the ex-members' narratives and take a narrative approach. The article will also discuss the role of therapists in the exit process and in the new identity formation of ex-members.

The primary material consists of the preliminary enquirer report (PER 2019) prepared for the court case, and social media material. The preliminary enquirer report contains both the narratives of abused ex-members as well as the narratives of the three accused former leaders. While the emphasis in this article will be on the ex-members' narratives for the analysis of ex-member roles, the narratives of the former leaders will also be taken into account and discussed to some extent.

Informal talks and interviews with members/ex-members have, for ethical reasons, been used to a very limited extent, mainly for historical information, with great care taken to protect informants' identity. The author has been in contact with the group since 2011, and thus has seen the group both as fully working and as in the state of decline, and has continuously been interviewing members and ex-members in different layers in the group, as well as conducting field visits and having informal talks and discussions with members and ex-members.⁸⁶

Knutby Filadelfia – a short summary of ideology, life style and history

In 1921, Knutby Filadelfia was founded as a Pentecostal congregation (Peste 2011: 218). Its early history, here briefly summarized, is outlined in a dissertation by Sanja Nilsson which was published in 2019 (2019: 72-74). Knutby Filadelfia was, as many Christian congregations in Sweden in the 1980s, deeply influenced by a fertile Christian milieu with influences from several orientations. Noteworthy in this milieu is the Faith Movement church Word of Life, which was established in 1983 by Ulf Ekman, a former state church priest in Sweden (Coleman 2000: 89-90). The then head pastor in Knutby Filadelfia, Kim Wincent, attended a Bible school arranged by the Word of Life, and was inspired by the experience. As Nilsson remarks, Ekman's teachings

⁸⁶ This article is a continuation of a study for which ethical permission was obtained from the Regional Ethical Review Board in Uppsala in 2012, with the purpose of investigating the situation of children and young people in Knutby Filadelfia, also in relation to staying in or leaving the group.

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contained discussions of evil spirits and spiritual warfare, teachings that were later to play an important role in the Knutby Filadelfia congregation (Nilsson 2019: 73).

In 1992, Åsa Waldau (b.1965), who was to become the future charismatic leader of Knutby Filadelfia, moved to Knutby. Waldau was at the time both a popular as well as a controversial youth pastor in the Pentecostal congregation in the nearby town of Uppsala (Nilsson 2019: 74). Waldau was the granddaughter of one of the leading figures of the early Pentecostal Movement in Sweden, Willis Säfve;⁸⁷ however, she grew up in a secular home. At the age of sixteen, she had a salvation experience which became decisive for her life. In Knutby, she worked mainly with music and with children, but, during this time, she worked as well as a travelling evangelist and travelled all over Sweden. She visited many Pentecostal congregations, and often attracted much attention. Many people were convinced that Waldau had direct contact with God. Later on, several of the people she met during these travels moved to Knutby, among them Helge Fossmo and Sara Svensson, who both later came to play important roles in the history of Knutby Filadelfia (interview 1). Two other persons, who also moved to Knutby after meeting Waldau during her time as a travelling evangelist, were the 2 Pastors who were accused in the court case in 2020 (interview 2).

In 1997, Knutby Filadelfia started a Bible School (Nilsson 2019: 75), and the membership doubled to around 100 members within a few years (interview 1). Most new members were young, enthusiastic people with a family background in the Pentecostal Movement (Lundgren 2008: 59). Gradually, Knutby Filadelfia began to develop a unique belief system. The most important belief was that there was a strong expectancy around the year 2000 that Jesus would return very soon to usher in the millennium. “Very soon” really meant the immediate future, and the congregation started to prepare for this to happen. Knutby Filadelfia was believed to have a special role in coming events, and the most special role was reserved for Åsa Waldau (informal conversations 1). At the end of the 1990s, some members began to discuss whether the concept of the Bride of Christ might refer to a human person, and soon a belief developed that Åsa Waldau would be the future wife of Jesus. Nilsson points out that there were several layers and levels in the group, and that only some members in the group were aware of this belief while others were not. Later on, Waldau became known in the media as “the Bride of Christ” (Nilsson 2019: 80-81).

In December 1999, a frightful event shocked the congregation of Knutby Filadelfia. The first wife of the Pastor Helge Fossmo was found dead in the bathtub in their house, a death which was at the time considered to be a tragic accident.⁸⁸ The couple had three very young children. The death was a trauma to the whole community, and many of the members believed that it must be a sign indicating that God’s kingdom would soon come and that they would then meet their close friend again. Several of the members prayed for the imminent return of Jesus (informal conversation 1), and talked in this context about “coming home” and “being taken home.” These prayers were later criticized as possibly referring to death as something positive, thus providing a

⁸⁷ See Nilsson 2019: 70.

⁸⁸ In 2004, Helge Fossmo was also tried for the murder of his first wife, but was not convicted as the judge decided that there was not sufficient evidence (Peste 2011: 218).

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rationalization for what later became a charge of murder regarding Fossmo's second wife in 2004 (Peste 2011: 217).

As in classic Pentecostal congregations, prophecies, visions, and demons played a major role in the community's theology (Lundgren 2008: 61-63; Peste 2011: 219). It was quite common to have dreams and visions about Åsa Waldau as the Bride of Christ (interview 3; informal conversation 2). It was believed that some members of the congregation, especially Waldau and Fossmo, were under attack by demons, as they had important roles in upcoming global spiritual events. It was believed that especially Fossmo was in frequent battles with the Devil. Claiming that it would increase his power to fight the Devil, he initiated a secret sexual relationship with Sara Svensson. Fossmo had other secret extramarital relationships in the congregation as well (Nilsson 2019: 77). Meanwhile, the standards in the group regarding sexual relationships were that sex belongs to marriage, and the relationships of Fossmo were thus unknown to the congregation at large.

Knutby Filadelfia came under the media spotlight for the first time in 2004 when a murder and a murder attempt took place in the group. The second wife of the Pastor Helge Fossmo, also sister of Åsa Waldau, was shot to death at the age of 23, and another male member, a neighbor of the Fossmo couple, was seriously wounded. After the police investigation, Helge Fossmo was sentenced to life in prison, after having been found guilty of conspiracy to commit murder. Sara Svensson was convicted as the perpetrator of the deed. It was assumed that she had carried out the crimes under the influence of the Pastor; he had been sending anonymous text messages to her phone urging her to carry out the murder. Sara Svensson believed these messages came from God. She was committed to psychiatric care.

The murder in 2004 attracted tremendous attention from the Swedish media for several years. Due to their "unorthodox beliefs," Knutby Filadelfia was excluded from the Swedish Pentecostal Movement in 2004 (Frisk 2018). Waldau withdrew from official leadership in the group in 2008, allegedly due to overwork, and to prepare for the impending return of Jesus (interview 3). Meanwhile, she worked as an artist, musician and designer (Frisk 2018). The group continued to exist largely intact, with members turning inwards, entertaining the same beliefs as before about Waldau as the Bride of Christ; however, denying these beliefs to the general public and media.

From around 2008 (PER 2019: 50: 20), but especially from 2011-2012 (PER 2019: 53: 250), with a peak around 2013-2015 (PER 2019: 51: 92), violence crept into the life of the group. Waldau started to be physically violent towards some of the members, and this pattern of violent behavior in the group spread so that other members as well started to become violent towards each other (PER 2019: 53: 250). One of the members says that Waldau acted as she did to save the members from evil spirits (PER 2019: 51: 115). Waldau herself says that everyone had to be ready when Jesus returned, which could happen any minute. Waldau explains in the preliminary enquirer report that she became very worried when she felt that someone was not ready, and that it became of utmost importance for her to try to stop the members from committing sin (PER 2019: 53: 244-246). In those cases, Waldau says that she sometimes would slap the member to wake him up, to make him take command of the situation (PER 2019: 53: 248-249). According to Waldau, other

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acts of violence might have happened when the women closest to her became physically too close, and she felt that they were invading her space (PER 2019: 53: 255).

The physical violence, plus a condition of constant overwork as the members were both building physical houses as well as working on themselves by initiating different severities advised or ordered by Waldau, like sleeping in difficult conditions, or not having intimate relations with their spouses, or desperately trying to stand “right”⁸⁹ before God through different actions, also influenced the situation in a destructive way, and escalated during the last years of the existence of the group. Another contributing factor was probably a sense of “failure of prophecy” from Waldau, as the group had waited for almost twenty years for Jesus to turn up and marry her, and it had not happened. In addition to the disappointment when members discovered both that Waldau had had an intimate relationship with one of the pastors, as well as the same pastor’s other extramarital relationships including one with a 17-year old girl, these factors finally brought on the downfall of Knutby Filadelfia (Frisk 2020).

The exit process from new religious movements: Perspectives on identity, narratives, roles

Identity, narratives, and roles are closely related to the individual as well as to the social context. The sociologist J. P. Hewitt notes, in his 1991 identity theory, that social identity and personal identity are major forces in contemporary self-construction. According to Hewitt, social and personal identity link situations and their roles into meaningful sequences and create a sense of wholeness that combats the fragmentation of everyday life (Hewitt 1991: 191).

Identity construction is also an important aspect of the life narrative. The sociologist Martin Kohli describes how an individual chooses themes in order to construct his/her biography, and through this process confirms or reconstitutes his/her own identity (Kohli 1981: 70). The individual constructs, through a personal narrative, his or her identity and thus develops a purpose and a place in the world. Identity construction is a dynamic and evolving process (Wells 2011: 50-51).

In the case of disaffiliation from a new religious movement, the process of disaffiliation concerns an alteration of identity in the transition from being a member to being an ex-member. The exit narratives of the ex-members are part of the new identity construction (Newfield, Schneur Zalman 2020: 73). Susan Rothbaum, a counselor to former members of alternative religions, writes that ex-members in a single stroke lose everything that has structured their lives and defined their personal identities, from mundane routines to the meaning of life. Ex-members have a foot in each world, but feel at home nowhere. They must find a way to create a new identity outside the group during the time of transition. Rothbaum opines that the experience of being between two worlds can be both painful and productive. She writes that anti cult-oriented support groups affect ex-members’ retrospective evaluation of their experiences, thus pointing to the importance of the social context in recreating identities. Recipients of anticult therapies are less inclined to recognize

⁸⁹ This is a special expression, often used in the group. “To stand wrong” meant to be out of grace with Waldau, which also meant to be out of grace with God. Waldau was conceived of as being intuitive and spiritually sensitive to the extent that she felt each person’s relationship with God.

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positive aspects of the membership, and tend to look for explanations in the direction of the mind control model (Rothbaum 1988: 205-207).

Rothbaum further notes that membership in religious groups often means a systematic breaking down of individual identities, which generates substantial problems for the leave-taker. A systematic breaking down of individual identities is an element inherent in the belief system and practices in many religious groups, as the individual ego is viewed more or less as an island of selfishness, a delusion separating seekers from God or preventing them from realizing their true nature. Rothbaum argues that members join religious groups because they are dissatisfied with their own faults and limitations, and wish for a change. Later, the members may discover that the cost of membership is higher than they thought, and that they, as members, may also lose something essential to them. As Rothbaum writes, once the sculpting process for the new identity has begun, it is difficult for members to reassess whether the sculptor is as skilled as they thought, and whether they like the image that is being created (Rothbaum 1998: 208-209). Thus doubt may begin to rise, which may initiate an exit process.

The sociologist Stuart Wright discusses different role models for the ex-member, and elaborates on the “apostasy” role and the “victim/survivor” role. Wright as well notes the close relation between narrative and role, and writes that the narrative of the apostate often is formulated as a captivity narrative emphasizing manipulation and capture of the unsuspecting target who does not have any choice or free will (Wright 1998: 98). Wright asks the question why some leavers turn unfavorable experiences into a moral campaign while others resolve them with considerably less trouble and conflict (Wright 1998: 95-97). Wright writes that apostasy is a role behavior, and is learnt as a function of role-taking (Wright 1998: 100). Streib et al (2009:169-170) categorize different roles of ex-members in minority religions. Some ex-members are portrayed as “heroes,” and emerge in the narratives, after conflict and turmoil, with grief and anger, but also as active agents with an increased awareness of their own motives, wishes and goals in life. Typically, they trust that even a negative experience can be something from which they can learn. Others are in the narratives portrayed as “survivors.” Survivors mean that they have been cheated and wish to warn others. And, finally, there is the role of the “victim,” focusing on damage and entitlement to compensation (Streib et al 2009: 169-170).

David Bromley is another sociologist who writes about the social construction of different kinds of exit roles. He defines “apostasy” as a role that is constructed when an organization is in a state of high tension with its surrounding environment and involves an individual exiting the organization to form an alliance with an oppositional coalition. It is a role of high visibility, and is used to invoke social control measures of various kinds against new religious movements (Bromley 1998: 19). Thus roles of ex-members may also have a significance on larger social and structural arenas.

Narratives are mostly constructed in a social context. One situation in which narratives are socially constructed is in the therapist-client relationship. The professor of anthropology Cheryl Mattingly argues that this mutual construction of a story, which she calls “therapeutic emplotment,” is integral to the healing process (Mattingly 1998: 2). The British sociologist Eileen Barker writes

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that the therapist's assignment is to help clients to construct a new reality so that they can reconcile themselves with the emotional upheaval and complex situations related to joining and leaving a new religion. Thus, the therapist's primary task in working with the client does not aim at the construction of an accurate and balanced account of the religious group, as is the case with academics studying these groups (Barker 1995: 21-22). This is, as well, one of the main reasons why the perspectives of therapists and academics differ regarding minority religions; their aims are simply very different.

Stuart Wright writes that anti-cult therapists contribute significantly to the construction of the "victim" role for ex-members of new religious movements. Wright refers, for example, to one wellknown anti-cult therapist, Michael Langone, as lionizing the role of the anti-cult therapist as one who helps the victim come to understand his or her victimization at the hands of the cult. (Wright 1998: 101). According to Wright, the treatment of ex-members does not simply serve a reintegration function for the sick, it is also a powerful position from which to wage a political campaign against new religious movements (Wright 1998: 102), thus relating to David Bromley's social and structural perspective described above.

Wright quotes J. David Brown, who has conducted research on ex-members who have changed to occupations in professional counseling. He quotes Brown as, regarding abuse counseling, writing that there is an emotional and symbolic identification of ex-members with their therapists during treatment, combined with deep personal meanings imputed to these relationships. The therapist enacts a powerful charismatic role in the professional ex-members' therapeutic transformation (Wright 1998: 107). Thus, Wright opines that the exit-counseling enterprise functions as a charismatic community for re-socialization and therapeutic transformation, as well as a mechanism for recruiting, cultivating and promoting apostates (Wright 1998: 109).

The social constructions of memory and reality resulting from the therapist-client relationship are not always accurate. There is an infamous murder case in Sweden, where Thomas Quick, an inmate in a closed psychiatric hospital, during the 1990s confessed to being the perpetrator of around thirty murders over the past three decades in Sweden, Norway and Finland. In close consultation with his psychiatric hospital therapists, Quick and the therapists co-constructed various murder scenarios, and Quick was later convicted for eight of these murders. Later he, however, retracted his confessions and, in 2013, was retried and deemed not guilty for any of the crimes (Frisk & Palmer 2015: 68-69).

There has been some previous research on Knutby Filadelfia in relation to exit narratives. Palmer & Frisk write in an article based on an interview with the Pastor Helge Fossmo, sentenced for conspiracy to murder in Knutby Filadelfia in 2004, that there are many similarities between his narrative and the construction of his therapist, Rigmor Robèrt. Fossmo describes in the interview how he worked closely with his therapist, to whom he gives credit for helping him understand his role in Knutby Filadelfia:

Rigmor Robèrt helped me to understand Knutby. I read about cults since I left the group. Why is it not a crime to control people's minds? Today I see that what happened in Knutby should not be allowed. (Frisk & Palmer 2015: 69)

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Below the identity formation, narratives, and roles taken by the ex-members of Knutby Filadelfia will be discussed. As noted before, most ex-members came to identify with the victim role, and some with the apostate role. The process of their identity constructions will be scrutinized. Shortly, the narratives of the three accused former leaders will also be related.

Narratives and roles related to the exit process in Knutby Filadelfia: victims' narratives

Narratives are always constructed in a context. Narratives are constructed for someone, with specific goals which the narrator for different reasons wishes to emphasize. In short, all narrators have a message which they want to convey to the listener, and who the listener is sets the agenda for how the narrative is constructed. Although narratives are constructed around a core of facts or events, the narrator has great freedom to interpret, select, and emphasize whatever he/she finds relevant (Lieblich et al 1998: 8). According to Lieblich et al, a narrative should be seen as neither a fiction nor as an accurate representation of reality; but is affected by surrounding conditions and is influenced by the cultural resources from which the storyteller draws (Lieblich et al 1998; Wells 2011: 45). In the case of Knutby Filadelfia, "the evil cult narrative," which was spread so widely in the media and popular culture, is the main cultural resource used (Frisk & Palmer 2015).

The primary material for this article are the narratives of the ex-members of Knutby Filadelfia as they appear in the preliminary enquirer report. The preliminary enquirer report must, however, be considered very special material, as the criminal accusations are in focus for the narratives by ex-members. The narratives were told to the police by some of the abused ex-members, with the explicit purpose of reporting criminal accusations against the female charismatic leader and the two pastors. These special conditions of course affect the narratives, and the victim role narrative thus appears natural in that context. The preliminary enquirer report strengthens and reinforces the victim narrative. Thus, the basic orientation of the narratives told in the preliminary enquirer report are already set from the beginning.

The preliminary enquirer report consists of several hundred pages. The narratives about physical violence, mostly by the charismatic leader Åsa Waldau, the "Bride of Christ," are numerous. Of these narratives, fourteen were chosen and taken to court, narrated by six ex-members (Ansökan om stämning B6654-17). These specific narratives were probably chosen because the proof situation was the most proximate regarding these specific cases. Some of the other events happened so long ago that the crimes were past statute, and could not be taken to court for that reason.

When reading the different cases, it is striking that many of the narratives turn out to be quite vague, both regarding when in time they occurred, but also regarding, for example, if other people were present, which might be significant for the witness/proof situation. In most of the narratives, it is striking that the violence seems to happen out of context, and comes out in the narratives as an inexplicable cruelty directed towards the members who could do nothing except accept they were being beaten. The focus is often on the pain inflicted, and for how long it has lasted, which on some occasions could be for months. This emphasis on painful consequences is also typical and

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significant for the court case narratives, and should perhaps not have been emphasized to that degree in other contexts.

A typical narrative from the preliminary enquirer report could, for example, run like this:

[Blows to the wall] have happened at least five times. All occasions took place in Åsa's house, maybe it also happened abroad. Åsa has taken A's head and knocked it into the wall. A remembers an occasion when they were in Åsa's bathroom. Åsa had a stone wall in the bathroom. A just remembers that Åsa got very angry and slammed A's head into the stone wall. It hurt a lot and was very uncomfortable. A thinks the event happened in 2014. She thinks that she may have told B and that B may have been present on one of these occasions. The blow hurt her head and the pain lasted for a while; she can recall that the head was tender and swollen for a couple of days afterwards. (PER 2019: 50: 22-23)

As is evident, in this narrative there are uncertainties regarding both time, place, and possible witnesses. The event is centered on the violence; no other context is given.

A second typical narrative runs:

This was at the end of such an evening [Saturday night]. They were in the hall ready to go home. Some people were in the hall at the entrance and some were a little further into the hall near the stairs. C herself was near the stairs and saw the whole incident. Åsa grabbed D's jaw with her hand and pressed her head against a large wooden wardrobe. Her head thumped and Åsa scolded D. She questioned what D was doing and told her to wrestle and fight back. First, she gave her a box on the ear, and then she pushed her up against the closet with force. It felt more violent than the ear box. When she gave her the ear box, it was with an open hand with the inside of her hand, as C remembers. It was maybe 2-3 strokes but could just as well have been 1 stroke, she does not really remember. D looked scared and panicked. She did nothing; she just looked at Åsa and was silent (PER 2019: 51: 116).

Regarding this incident, the context and the reasons for the violence remain unclear. The ear box is described in detail; however, it is unclear if it was one ear box or several.

A third narrative runs:

This was in October-November in connection with a building of a small extra house for Åsa. E does not remember what year. F had calculated how long time it would take to build it, and when he informed Åsa that it would be ready in May, she beat both E and F. They were at Åsa's home in the living room. She first hit F and then he [E] thinks that she hit him [E] as well, but he is not sure if it was on the same occasion that he also was beaten. She first hit F in the face over the cheek with an open hand once and then she did the same with E. It hurt. He looked down at the floor and his thoughts were occupied by a feeling of guilt that he had been standing "wrong" according to Åsa. Verbally, she scolded mainly F. (PER 2019: 51: 85).

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In this narrative as well the specific time is uncertain. The event happened in October-November, but the narrator does not know which year. E is not sure who was beaten at this specific occasion, if he himself was included or not. The context on this occasion is elaborated slightly, as the reason for the violence is given (a building project which was delayed).

Two roles are continuously prominent in the narratives: the role of “the Victim,” occupied by the narrator, and the role of “the Evil one,” occupied by Waldau. Both roles are well known in the typical narrative structure. In the third narrative, F expresses feelings of guilt, typical for the victim role. In neither of the narratives do the narrators express anger or oppose the violence, or take any kind of active role. Waldau personifies evil, with an anger perceived as coming from nowhere or almost from nowhere, which is expressed in physical violence, described as very sudden and with very little explanation. Also the opposite pair, “evil” and “good,” expressed in human character, is a part of the typical narrative structure.

Waldau is in the preliminary enquirer report described as the one having all the power and who decides next to everything in the congregation, thus emphasizing the members’ powerlessness and victim-ness. G, for instance, one of the women who was very close to Waldau, says in the preliminary enquirer report that Waldau made her follow only her for many, many years (PER 2019: 50: 27). It is clear from G’s narrative that G does not consider the possibility, in a more active perspective, that she was the one following Waldau; according to the narrative, it was Waldau who made G follow her, setting G in a very passive role. Waldau is emphasized as the active actor, and G is the explicitly passive follower. The term manipulation regarding Waldau is sometimes, though not often, used in the preliminary enquirer report (see for example PER 2019: 50: 49), and one member says on one occasion that she considers herself “programmed” (PER 2019: 51: 91).

The narratives by the three accused former leaders

The preliminary enquirer report also contains the narratives of the three accused former leaders in Knutby Filadelfia, to which we will now briefly turn.

The narrative of Waldau herself, as related in the preliminary enquirer report, not surprisingly paints another picture of the power situation in the congregation. According to her narrative, for example, the intimate relationship with the pastor was initiated by the pastor as he explained that she had to give her body to him to be close to Jesus, and she had no other choice than to obey (PER 2019: 53: 277). During the years when the violence took place, Waldau emphasizes that she was withdrawn and nearly isolated from the congregation for several years, and that both pastors and certain other members, including some of the ones accusing Waldau of violence, exercised a power of their own towards other members, and sometimes even violence towards them (PER 2019: 51: 85). Waldau also maintains in the preliminary enquirer report that she did not have any memories of several incidents and details of which she is accused (PER 2019: 53).

Thus, in Waldau’s own narrative, her own role is much more passive than in the victims’ narratives, and dependent on the roles of others who are depicted as also being to varying degrees in power positions. In one sense, the role of Waldau in her own understanding could also be

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outlined as a kind of victim role, although it is not as explicitly expressed as in the case of the abused members. Waldau maintains that she did not have the kind of power the abused members claim she had, and that her role must be understood in the context of other members' power context and actions.

The pastor accused of sexual abuse of a 17-year-old girl who was in a dependent position in relation to him, also had other extramarital relations, including the one with Waldau. In the preliminary enquirer report he claims that Waldau was the one seducing him, and that he understood their relationship as a battle for Waldau to come closer to God. The pastor says that he was broken down during this time, as Waldau could, whenever she wished, decide that he was "standing wrong" without him understanding why. Regarding the 17-year-old girl, the pastor denies her being in a dependent position towards him, and emphasizes her own initiative, and also that he felt that the relationship was part of his service to God (PER 2019: 56). Again, in the pastor's narrative, Waldau's active role is emphasized, as well as the young girl's, and the pastor's role in his own narrative becomes very passive.

The third pastor reported himself for physical abuse toward another male member. He emphasized, however, that he hit this member because Waldau told him to, and that he considers himself a victim who has been used and manipulated by Waldau (PER 2019: 50: 8). Here the case is very clear: the narrative shows the manipulating role the pastor claims Waldau has, and the pastor considers himself explicitly as a victim. Still, he reports himself for the violent incident, and he was, eventually, found guilty to the crime.

Thus, in the narratives of the accused former leaders, we also find, to different degrees, a readiness to take on passive rather than active roles concerning events in the congregation, and that the victim role to a certain degree also is taken on by the former leaders.

Contact with therapists

It is clear from the preliminary enquirer report that at an early stage in the exit process, many of the ex-members came into contact with therapists who held an anti-cult perspective, as well as an old friend of one of the members, said to be a "Religious Studies scholar⁹⁰ with insight into manipulation processes" (PER 2019: 51: 147), and who clearly transmits an anti-cult perspective to this member. Some of their written conversations were copied into the preliminary enquirer investigation. The high school teacher writes to her that it is evident that she and the other members have been exposed to manipulation, mind control and brainwashing, and that she should not be ashamed. According to him, the members were manipulated and broken step by step with the passage of years (PER 2019: 52: 178-179). In their communication, the member starts using the term manipulation after he introduces it to her, and responds to him that he is right that Waldau manipulated them all (PER 2019: 51: 149).

One psychotherapist, interrogated in the preliminary enquirer report, states to have been in contact with around 30 members/ex-members in the congregation. According to the preliminary

⁹⁰ According to Internet sources, he is a senior high school teacher in religion and history, and has also written school books.

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enquirer report, she diagnosed at least two of them with PTSD as a consequence of their experiences in Knutby Filadelfia. This therapist referred some of them to other therapists, and she was also the one suggesting to them to report the violence to the police and take the perpetrators to court (PER 2019: 56: 37). Thus, the idea to take the cases to court did not originate with the members themselves, but came from this therapist. In one informal talk I had with one of the ex-members, the ex-member told me that she was encouraged by her therapist (it is not clear if this was the same therapist or another one) to report accusations to the police; she had, however, in that case to think out something to report, as she did not really have anything (informal talk beginning of 2017).⁹¹ Thus, it is clear that this ex-member as well was encouraged to report violence to the police by her therapist, although she did not really seem to have a clear case to report.

It is clear from the preliminary enquirer report that several of the ex-members were in contact with therapists at the time of the interrogation. One of the ex-members says in the report that the therapy helped her to get memories back, and that memories came back to her with the help of therapy (PER 2019: 50: 29; 48). She states that the therapy has helped her to remember more from the abuse (PER 2019: 55: 15). This narrative confirms the role that therapy may have in remembering, constructing, and reconstructing memories. Of course, considering what has earlier been said in this paper about memories and narratives, nothing can be said about the extent to which these memories are “true” or “false.” It is clear, however, that memories might have, to some extent, been altered through selection, interpretation, and social support.

An interesting case of a role-taking of the “Apostate” is a female pastor in the congregation, who together with a well-known anti-cult therapist in Sweden, Rigmor Robèrt who was the therapist of Helge Fossmo (see above), started a very popular pod called “The Cult Podcast” (“Sektpodden”). From being bitter enemies for several years, during the years the pastor was still a member of Knutby Filadelfia, they became close friends after the breakdown of the congregation. Started in the autumn of 2019, a new episode has been published every week at the time of this writing (July 2020). Focused to a certain degree on Knutby Filadelfia, with several episodes dealing with this group, there have also been episodes about other “cults,” as well as thematic episodes dealing with, for example, sex, violence, or leadership. The structure of the episodes is typically that the Knutby ex-pastor asks questions, relying upon Rigmor Robèrt as an expert, in a typical Dr. Watson-Sherlock Holmes pattern, well known from many other narrative contexts. Thus the structure of the podcast follows a well-known narrative structure, with the roles “the Ignorant” (although the ex-pastor sometimes relates memories from the Knutby community to confirm the conclusions by Robèrt) and “the Expert.” The central character in “The Cult Podcast” is the therapist, who is the person the episodes revolve around. The perspective given by Rigmor Robèrt is a traditional manipulation-brainwashing-evil cult perspective, thus drawing upon well-known cultural resources.

⁹¹ The violence reported was restricted to a few of the members; most of the members in the community did not experience any violent situations at all.

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“The Cult Podcast” has received a lot of attention from media, and the Knutby ex-pastor, as well as Rigmor Robèrt, have been in different TV shows in Sweden during winter and spring 2020, and both are often consulted as experts in both TV- and radio programs. Thus the “Apostate” role, taken by the Knutby ex-pastor, has been reinforced and stabilized. The pastor could today be seen as a “professional apostate,” emphasizing and consolidating her new identity and role as an apostate in relation to Knutby Filadelfia.

Discussion

In the transit from being a member to becoming an ex-member, the members of Knutby Filadelfia have typically taken on the “Victim role,” as well as, in some cases, the “Apostate role.” In this process, they had social support of different kinds, first and foremost from each other. The interviews indicate that the breakdown of the congregation in many cases changed relationships between the members, making some of them bitter enemies as they realized they had been suppressed and abused by certain other members as well, not only by Waldau. Several of the ex-members, however, also had support from each other and communicated a lot, helping and supporting each other to make sense of their experiences (interviews and informal conversations 2017-2018). The preliminary enquirer report supports the findings suggested by several sociologists in previous research, such as Cheryl Mattingly, Eileen Barker, and Stuart Wright, that several of the ex-members had help and support by therapists, who seem to have encouraged the “Victim” role-taking. Striking is the absence of the “Heroe role,” suggested by Streib et al, which is characterized by the ex-member taking on the role as an active agent, as well as the perspective that much could be learnt also from negative experiences if approached from mature frames of mind.

The role of the therapist is prominent in the narrative constructions of the ex-members of Knutby Filadelfia, as they came forward in the preliminary enquirer report. As suggested by Cheryl Mattingly and Eileen Barker, the therapist and the ex-member co-create a narrative, with the explicit goal of helping the client construct a new reality with which he/she can live, as part of the healing process for the client. As Stuart Wright notes, however, anti-cult therapists typically help the victim to understand his or her victimization in the cult, thereby contributing to the construction of the victim role for ex-members. One of the ex-members of Knutby Filadelfia says in the preliminary enquirer report that she “got her memories back” by therapy, which leads to the question of to what extent memories are “coming back,” or are “created” or “altered” with the help of the therapist. Memories typically change and are subject to selective choices and interpretations when told and retold, but also naturally change as time passes.

There are as well examples in Knutby Filadelfia of the “Apostate role.” Several of the Knutby Filadelfia ex-members have come forward in the media, most of them emphasizing their passive role in the group and asserting that they had been “brainwashed by the cult.”⁹² Most prominent here is the previous female pastor mentioned above, who could additionally be said to occupy the role of “the Ignorant” and the “Cult Expert,” depending on context. She performs mainly in “The

⁹² There are some exceptions with more balanced narratives, mostly from members of Waldau’s closest family.

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Cult Podcast,” but additionally in many other media contexts in Sweden. In the pastor’s identification with the apostate role, the role of her therapist and close friend, Rigmor Robèrt, is prominent. The anticult therapist Rigmor Robèrt is often hired by the media as an expert, and occupies a charismatic role, as Wright quotes J. David Brown as writing, in relation to at least the ex-pastor, but she is also mentioned with great affection and admiration by other ex-members in other contexts. As Stuart Wright writes, exit-counseling enterprises could function as charismatic communities for resocialization and therapeutic transformation, as well as recruiting, cultivating, and promoting apostates.

It could, however, be questioned whether the new identities and roles of ex-members are the most constructive ones for the individual when constructed as “Victims” and “Apostates.” I would like to suggest that an alternative for the therapist might be to help ex-members to construct a more active and empowered role in relation to the religious groups, such as “the Heroe role” suggested by Streib et al. As a sociologist knowing the members/ex-members for many years, it is striking to note that the Victim role seems to lock the individual into bitterness and passivity, with very limited possibilities of changing to other mental states. Likewise, the Apostate role contains the danger of locking the individual into a role not unlike the cult role but instead defending anticult values. To the observer, both roles seem unfortunate, at least in the long run, and that there must be other more mature ways to approach new identities for ex-members. From my point of view, the therapist should rather help the ex-member to construct a narrative which empowers the ex-member and gives him/her self-confidence to continue his/her life in a constructive manner. The role of the therapist should definitely be to help the ex-member come to terms with his/her time in the religious group, and continue his/her life in a constructive way. From this point of view, the Hero role is definitely a role which could be more explored and developed by the therapists.

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Interviews and informal conversations

Interview 1. Interview with Åsa Waldau, May 28th, 2014.

Interview 2 (two informants). March 24th, 2018.

Interview 3. November 11th, 2019. (ändrat från 5)

Informal conversation 1 with Pastor Peter Gembäck 2011-2015. Notes were taken and the content has been checked with the Pastor.

Informal conversation 2. August 14th, 2018.