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Preprint

This is the submitted version of a paper published in *Journal of Religion and Violence*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Frisk, L. (2018)

Spiritual shunning: Its significance for the murder in Knutby Filadelfia

Journal of Religion and Violence, 6(3): 328-345

<https://doi.org/10.5840/jrv20191961>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:du-29181>

“SPIRITUAL SHUNNING”: ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE MURDER IN KNUTBY FILADELFIA

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Abstract

This paper argues that the practice of "spiritual shunning," defined as deliberate isolation of one person from a religious group for alleged spiritual reasons, may have been a significant factor in a murder case which happened in Sweden in 2004 in a small religious group with a Pentecostal background. The material consists of interviews with four former members, who describe the process of spiritual shunning as it existed in the group before it started to fall apart in the autumn of 2016. The four interviewees describe the process of spiritual shunning in roughly four stages: how they began to fall out of grace; when the door to Jesus definitely closed; the process of working their way back; and finally having the mission to help others move back to grace again. The informants describe very clearly the desperation they felt when they faced the possibility that they would not belong to the chosen ones when Jesus would soon come back, but would instead be burning in hell. Many sources document that the perpetrator of the crime in 2004 was spiritually shunned by the core group at the time of the murder. The murder was presented to her by the pastor who was later convicted for instigating the crime, as a way to pay off her spiritual debts.

Key words: Spiritual shunning; Knutby Filadelfia; religious violence; religious purity; bride of Christ; Pentecostalism

Introduction

This paper will investigate a process, here termed “spiritual shunning” within certain religious groups.¹ In this context, spiritual shunning is defined as a process when one person is deliberately isolated from or shunned by a religious group for alleged spiritual reasons. The paper will discuss the practice of spiritual shunning in Knutby Filadelfia (1921-2018), a small religious group in Sweden with roots in the Pentecostal movement. Knutby Filadelfia became well known in Sweden in connection with a murder which took place in 2004, at which time

¹ This concept was first introduced by Sanja Nilsson (2019) in her doctoral thesis. For a further discussion of this concept, see Nilsson (2019).

the group's unusual beliefs and practices were brought to the public's attention. Knutby Filadelfia was excommunicated in 2004 from the Pentecostal Alliance of Independent Churches because of "deviant beliefs and life style."² In 2018, the group ceased to exist for reasons that will be explained below.

Spiritual shunning in a general sense is not unusual among religious groups. It is practiced, for example, by Jehovah's Witnesses towards persons ostracized for "unrepentant sins" (<https://www.jw.org/en/publications/books/gods-love/disfellowshipped-person/>). On Jehovah's Witnesses' website it is described that members should not have a social and spiritual fellowship with ostracized persons, should not receive them in their homes and are warned against even saying "hello" to the persons. The Jehovah's Witnesses describe three reasons for spiritual shunning: first, it is a question of loyalty to God (following what the Bible says on this matter); second, spiritual and moral contamination may result from contact with the shunned member, so withdrawing from the unrepentant wrongdoer protects the rest of the congregation; and, third, losing fellowship with others may make the sinner repent and come back to the group (<https://www.jw.org/en/publications/books/gods-love/disfellowshipped-person/>). Another group known for avoiding certain people for spiritual reasons, is the Church of Scientology which teaches its members to avoid so called "suppressive persons," who are described as persons actively working against any activity for improvement, especially against activities connected to Scientology. As there is a risk of being influenced by these persons, members are advised against being in contact with them (Hubbard 1989, 128).³ In both Jehovah's Witnesses and the Church of Scientology, however,

² For a discussion about excommunication in the Pentecostal Alliance of Independent Churches, see Frisk (2018).

³ In the case of Scientology, it could be disputed if the shunning is "spiritual" or not, as this group takes a position somewhat between religion and therapy (Frisk 2007, 20), and uses a terminology which is not clearly religious. I have, however, chosen to include the example here, because of the belief at the core of Scientology that the human being is a spiritual soul, a *thetan*, and spiritual development in Scientology means to restore the

spiritual shunning is practiced against people who are outside the group, in the first case against people who have been with the group and have been excommunicated, and in the second case against people who are outside the group – former members or not – who are campaigning against it. In Knutby Filadelfia, however, spiritual shunning was used towards current members in the core group, who were perceived as being spiritually out of grace for shorter or longer time periods.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the process of spiritual shunning in Knutby Filadelfia, based on interviews with four ex-members. The research followed general ethical guidelines: the four interviewees were informed of the purpose of the interview, that participation was voluntary, and of their right to anonymity. The interviews, conducted in 2017-2018, were heard, transcribed, read and reread several times. It was found that the process of spiritual shunning (and reinstatement) could be structured in five stages: (1) falling out of grace; (2) closing of the door to fellowship; (3) working one's way back into fellowship; (4) enjoying grace again; and (5) helping others back into grace. All five stages did not happen for all four informants, mainly because some succeeded in working their way back and some did not. In some cases, the stages were more vaguely described, and the borders between them were blurred. The different stages will be discussed below. Finally, the paper will suggest that the practice of spiritual shunning may have played a significant role in the murder in 2004.

Worthy of note is that the term “spiritual shunning” is an etic term, constructed by doctoral student Sanja Nilsson in consultation with the author of this paper after interviewing the ex-members, and is not a term which was used inside the group. The term used in the

thetan to its original state, which is not influenced by mental patterns or *engrams* (Frisk 1998, 129-130). Hubbard writes that suppressive persons in the terminology of Scientology are persons who suffer from a concealed fear of other people (Hubbard 1989, 116), which I interpret as a kind of *engram*, contaminating the spiritual soul.

group, in straightforward translation from Swedish, is that the individual is “being wrong,” meaning being wrong in a spiritual sense. This expression, as an emic term, is sometimes used in the text below, as well as the expression “being out of grace,” which is now and then used by the informants. Another important matter to note is that while the group was functioning as a religious group, none of the members talked to the author or her collaborators about the process here called “spiritual shunning.” As researchers and observers of the group while it was functioning, however, we did notice that there seemed to be a fluctuation in how close some members were to the inner core of the group. Asking about why some people were no longer part of the core group, we got quite evasive replies. In hindsight we realized that they were spiritually shunned.

In the first part of this article, Knutby Filadelfia as a religious and social group is described with special attention to its specific religious construction of reality. In the second part, the process of spiritual shunning is described through the lens of the interview material. Lastly, spiritual shunning as a phenomenon and its possible significance in the murder in Knutby Filadelfia is discussed.

Knutby Filadelfia – History, Ideology, Life Style

Knutby Filadelfia was founded as a Pentecostal congregation in 1921. The group derived many of its characteristics from mainstream Pentecostalism – for example, belief in divine signs and prophecies, and the expectation of the very imminent return of Christ. During the 1980’s, Knutby Filadelfia was influenced to some degree – as many Pentecostal congregations in Sweden at the time – by Neo-Pentecostal teachings and practices (cf. Moberg 2013; Moberg and Skjoldli 2018). The congregation was structurally part of the national Pentecostal Movement until 2004 (Frisk 2018).

In 1992, Åsa Waldau (b. 1965) moved to the village of Knutby (around 600 inhabitants), and began to impact the community in her own unique way. The congregation had forty members in 1991 and, in a few years' time, the number more than doubled to around one hundred members, a number which was consistent until 2016 (Lundgren 2008, 55). Around the year 2000 there was a strong expectation shared by the Knutby pastors and members, that Jesus would return to usher in the millennium very soon. A belief developed concerning Knutby Filadelfia's special role in coming global events: that God had a special purpose for the congregation, and a special role for Åsa Waldau as the bride of Christ. Other beliefs and practices which they held which differed from Pentecostal congregations in general were, for example, that they questioned the Trinity, and also that they accepted a (moderate) use of alcohol. The belief that Waldau was the bride of Christ was not shared to the outside or even known by the whole congregation, but was considered a kind of esoteric knowledge, available only to some.

There were different levels of membership in the group, wherein a core group was closest to Waldau and in this group everyone knew about the bride of Christ. The life style of this core group differed from the rest of the congregation. Many in this group spent a lot of time with Waldau, serving her in different ways, at times living separately in varying degrees from their spouses and children. As the second coming of Christ was imminent, mundane relations were not considered important for this group of people. Members had to be purified, consecrated and to avoid sin in order to come closer to God, which meant that they were prescribed different ordeals than were Waldau and the pastors, in order to grow spiritually.⁴ The life style was semi-communal. Some families lived in shared housing, which often also included single members, and the children sometimes slept with families other than their own.

⁴ The ordeals ranged from painting one's house with disagreeable colors, to not having sexual relations with one's spouse.

Meals were often taken together with other members, and work like painting, cleaning, or repairing houses was often a collective project.

In January 2004, a tragic crime put Knutby Filadelfia in the spotlight of the national media. Alexandra Fossmo, the young wife of one of its pastors, Helge Fossmo, was killed by gunshot, and a young male member was seriously wounded. The pastor Fossmo was found guilty of conspiracy to murder and sentenced to life in prison.⁵ The investigation revealed that the man who had been shot was the husband of one of the pastor's mistresses. A female member, Sara Svensson, was convicted as the perpetrator of the shootings. She too had an intimate relationship with the pastor. The court, however, ruled that Svensson had committed the crimes due to criminal influence from the pastor, who had been sending anonymous text messages to her cellphone, urging her to commit the crime, messages she believed came directly from God. Svensson was committed to a psychiatric ward, from which she was released in 2011.

The community survived the 2004-murder, lawsuit, and subsequent media hunt, and the number of members remained at a level of about one hundred during the following years. The group's unconventional beliefs were officially downplayed and became next to invisible to the external public. Waldau withdrew from her position as pastor in 2008, to pray and await the return of Jesus, but she still functioned as the charismatic leader of the group. Her artistic works – paintings, artistic photos, music and interior design – were present everywhere in the community, in private as well as in communal settings.

Beside Waldau, there were some pastors who also had a certain charismatic authority in the group. Prominent among those, after 2004, was one pastor (called Pastor X in this article) who gradually took on the role as a "vessel for Jesus" in the community, and who was

⁵ The Swedish term is *anstiftan till mord*, which means that someone persuades or forces another person to kill (incitement to murder). The closest equivalent in the English legal system is "conspiracy to murder."

very close to Waldau.⁶ In 2016, it became clear to the members that he had abused a small number of female members sexually, allegedly motivating the relationships spiritually, preparing the way for the return of Jesus. This pastor also had a sexual relationship with Waldau as a representative for Jesus. This information was not known by the members prior to 2016. Then, in response to a feeling of “failed prophecy”⁷ and frustration with this failure on both the leader and member level, plus a degree of mental and physical exhaustion, the community started to fall apart in the autumn, at which time the members defected. In 2018 the congregation ceased to exist organizationally. Former members accused Waldau of physical violence (mostly slaps across the face intended as punishments or wake up calls, but according to the accusations there were also more serious instances of physical assault and the male pastor was accused of sexual abuse; these accusations were reported to the police in 2017 and are currently (December 2018) under investigation.

Spiritual Shunning in Knutby Filadelfia

Interviews were conducted with three women and one man, here called Anna, Beata, Cecilia, and David. Anna, Beata, and David are in their early forties and were members for twenty years or more. All three belonged at times to the core group around Waldau. Cecilia is a young woman in her twenties who grew up in the group. While she did not herself belong to the core group around Waldau, her father did.⁸ Her mother, however, was spiritually shunned for several years, and Cecilia was told not to spend time with her mother in order not to fall out of grace herself.

⁶ As the case is under investigation, his name is here not revealed.

⁷ See Festinger, et al., for explication of this term (1956).

⁸ The core group around Waldau had several layers, and Cecilia’s father was not in the innermost group.

During the interview Anna talked at great length about the background of “spiritual shunning.” She pointed out that spiritual shunning never was a system or a teaching. Instead, she emphasized the importance of challenging members to overcome their shortcomings," and to grow spiritually. If someone was talented and liked to sing, for instance, s/he was initially subjected to the ordeal of not being allowed to participate in the choir. If someone was afraid of darkness, s/he was sent out to walk in the dark to overcome his/her fears. The overriding purpose for all members was to learn to be consecrated, to obey God and to suppress one's ego. The members had an important mission, they lived to honor God and do his will. Time would soon end and with the return of Christ, everyone had to be prepared. If one listened and obeyed, the inner voice would be clearer and one would understand how to act. If, however, one did not listen and obey, finally the small voice within would be silenced. Anna thought that no one ever intentionally meant that someone should be “out of grace”; it was intended that everyone should “be right” and act in the right way. But when members continuously did the wrong things, did not obey, did not develop in the right direction – then the grace ran out, and spiritual shunning was a fact:

Jesus would now close the door to Åsa. She should not need to deal with this kind of problem. People did not obey, did not listen, did not care. She had been singing in the services, she had been teaching the highest love, and people were unthankful. Now he would close the door. It was like there was a wall around [Åsa] and a door which closed, and it was impossible to pass it. Only some people could pass. This is a terrible teaching, these people who chose not to obey were lost – this is what I heard when I was inside. [...] Pastor X [the accused pastor 2016] said that if these people would understand the punishment which was waiting for them, then it would be impossible to make them work. And we needed to keep the machinery going. [...] People went to service, they prepared cream cakes and worked with different things, and I knew that

these people were lost. [...] They missed the train: the train left and the door closed and they did not even notice. [...] So it was essential for me to keep my mind sharp so I would not become one of the lost people. And I worried [...], am I good enough? [...] I was chasing faults within myself to be able to find them before anyone else did. [...] It was an enormous stress.⁹

The Five Stages of Spiritual Shunning

The five stages of the process of spiritual shunning in Knutby Filadelfia will be outlined below and illustrated by information and quotations from the four interviews. The interviews sometimes cover different stages, as Anna and David succeeded in working their way back “in grace” after being spiritually shunned, while Beata and Cecilia did not.

Stage 1: Falling Out of Grace The process of falling out of grace could vary. Anna and Beata, who had both belonged to the inner group and were out of grace for five and six years respectively, describe a period before they were shunned when the ground under them became increasingly unstable:

One month things were shaky for me. I came to Åsa at the appointed time. She stared angrily at me. And I looked insecure. And [pause]she became more angry. And I became more insecure. “No, things are not well with you today either. You have not repented since yesterday.” And I [...] was desperate. I would be going back tomorrow and a difference had to be visible. Something had to happen before tomorrow.

⁹ Interview with Anna 2017-12-09.

Something in my heart was not good, something to do with a spirit, she reacted to something. And I did not know what. I did not even know what!¹⁰

Anna learned to confess things she had not done. If Waldau said she had a certain thought, at the time she accepted that she must have had it, even if she was not aware of it herself.

For Beata, the process was a bit similar. Beata had just had her second son, and Waldau scolded her for having a life of her own:

She told me continuously for a long time that I had a life of my own. “You have not given everything to me and God, you go home and you have a life of your own at home.” [...] There was a certain truth in that. [...] Y [oldest son] would start school at that time. I was with Åsa from the time she woke up around two in the afternoon until late evening. And I understood that when Y started school, I would not meet him anymore. He would go to school at nine in the morning and finish school at a quarter past two. And at that time, I would already have left home. Every day, also Saturdays; on Sundays we were sometimes at home. I panicked over that. [...] Around that time, I became more and more wrong. [...] She was often irritated with me.¹¹

David was out of grace many times, but for very short periods at a time. He did not talk about longer periods of gradually falling out of grace, but rather about smaller incidents occurring often, making daily life with Waldau difficult:

Åsa came down and we five [names] were there. We always had to figure out how to greet her. Sometimes she might think we did not give her enough attention, which was bad, and sometimes we gave her too much attention, and then that was wrong. So we had to intuit the situation. Then she might not greet Z. Then Z became insecure. And then she became angry because he was insecure. [...] And then that became a problem.

¹⁰ Interview with Anna 2017-12-09. Sometimes Anna referred to spirits during the interview. When a person did not obey, evil spirits were believed to gain entrance to the person.

¹¹ Interview with Beata 2017-12-09.

Or she might really be angry with Z for something. And then she could turn to me and say: “Do you see what I mean?” And I had to quickly decide what to reply. I never saw what she meant. And sometimes it worked to say that, and she would explain. But sometimes it could be like: how is it possible that you do not see this? Go away both of you. [...] Go and seek God and come back tomorrow.”¹²

Cecilia’s situation was quite different from the others. Having grown up in the group, she said that she was always out of grace for one reason or the other ever since she was a child:

There are no logical explanations as to why I was wrong. I was just wrong. [...] No one greeted me, no one talked with me, I did not get any confirmation from home or from anyone in the congregation. And if you are sixteen, seventeen, you take the confirmation from where you get it, from guys or friends at school who say you are beautiful.¹³

Cecilia had been associating with boys, smoking, drinking, and sometimes skipping school. She said that she lived a kind of double life, where she was active in the congregation, but also had her very different school life. It was very hard for Cecilia that her father and siblings had another status in the group:

Once I told my father: “I find it hard when Saturday comes and you go to the hill to eat dinner and my brothers are with the youth group, but I am not allowed to join” pause and then he said that I should be happy for their sake. “Just continue as you do and you will probably be able to join soon.” So, I just nodded and then I went into my room and broke down and threw a vase at the wall.¹⁴

¹² Interview with David 2017-12-09.

¹³ Interview with Cecilia 2018-03-24.

¹⁴ Interview with Cecilia 2018-03-24.

Thus, the process of becoming spiritually shunned could vary – from gradually falling out of grace which could last for several years or daily incidents which could result in being spiritually shunned for shorter periods of time, to just being out of grace from childhood, for no apparent reason at all. A common factor in these different processes is the element of insecurity: none of the subjects knew what s/he had done wrong, which made it very difficult both to avoid this situation, or to amend it when it happened. The reason for shunning, however, was understood to be spiritual in character. Each was advised to seek God and spend time in prayer.

Stage 2: The Door Closed

The door to Waldau – and Jesus – could close in different ways. Sometimes the members did not get a clear notification. They just did not receive any more invitations, or their gifts were sent back. Or they did not get Waldau's new telephone number (Anna). For most members close enough to Waldau to have a relationship with her, it was normal to be spiritually shunned for shorter periods of time (Beata).

In the cases of Anna and Beata, who were spiritually shunned for several years, they both were given a clear message that the door had closed. Anna told about how Waldau's maid called her to tell her that the door was closing for her:¹⁵

[She said] "We are so disappointed in you. Do you understand what you have done? You had everything! And then you do this?" [...] They [the group around Waldau] were not my friends any more. It was not just that you could not meet Åsa, but

¹⁵ A few women had the status of "maid" in relation to Waldau, with the special assignment to take care of her daily needs.

everyone who had been my family was cold and hard and rejecting. And then it was up to me to find out what I had done which was wrong.¹⁶

Anna spent one year at home in her bed just crying. She felt that everything was lost.

For Beata, the process developed in a similar way:

It all escalated, until the day I was so wrong that [Åsa said] “go away from here.” I think I felt that if I left now it would be irreversible. I did not, however, fully understand the price to pay. I know she told me that if you leave now you will never be able to come back. She had said that before, but it felt much more real this time.

But she also said that I could not stay, so I left.¹⁷

It would take six years before Beata got a new chance.

Stage 3: Working your Way Back

Being spiritually shunned meant continuous struggle in order to return. Members out of grace were perceived to have a debt to God, and it had to be paid off. One way of paying the debt was through work. Cecilia tells:

You should slave and pay the debt in some sort of way. There were always teachings that the grace would soon cease and you would have to settle things with your sins and with God. You should just continue to struggle. And that was what I did – I worked in the spa, in the kitchen, I cleaned the church, I baked cakes, I cleaned my brother’s apartment, I built the church¹⁸

Also, Beata worked:

¹⁶ Interview with Anna 2017-12-09.

¹⁷ Interview with Beata 2017-12-09.

¹⁸ Interview with Cecilia 2018-03-24.

There was a need to paint somewhere, so I had to paint there all day long when the others had dinner together. It was terrible when they came out from the dinner at night and I was standing there painting. I did not want to meet anyone, I was ashamed because I was out of grace. And there they came, wearing their best clothes, laughing, hardly looking at me. They were cold and distanced.¹⁹

Anna tells about hard work too, but also about other consequences of being out of grace:

I was wrong for five years. It was five years of total panic. [...] I worked like an idiot. Day and night. You did not have any rights. People who were wrong should not eat good food. People who were wrong should not buy new clothes. [...] Your children were not yours. [...] Pastor X [accused pastor 2016] explained that you are like in debt for millions of crowns [Swedish currency]. And what you had to pay with was just cents. [...] In that position you were prepared to do anything. There were many people who paid huge amounts of money. [...] I gave a lot of gifts.²⁰

Anna says that the money was given to Pastor X, and that it is unclear how much money reached Waldau. She also believes that the possibility of sexual abuse originated in connection with paying off spiritual debts. Pastor X was seen as a vessel for Christ. Anna thinks that he might have told the women that there was another way to pay off debts, a possibility that existed through God's grace (sexual favors). Anna bought a lot of gifts for Waldau, but often got them back or learned that Waldau had given them to someone else, as Waldau did not want to receive gifts from Anna.

Beata did not pay any money to Waldau, and was not allowed to give gifts other than flowers – and only as long as she did not reveal that the flowers came from her. She did,

¹⁹ Interview with Beata 2017-12-09.

²⁰ Interview with Anna 2017-12-09.

however, try other strategies: “During one period I slept in the car outside her house to show her how close I wanted to be. It did not help at all.”²¹ Beata found that the only way she could show her love for Waldau was to keep her home perfectly neat. Her neighbor – who was in the core group – always criticized her about everything. For instance, if her drawers were not in order, or if there were spots on the newly washed clothes or she did not iron the clothes fast enough, she was criticized.

David recounted the problems which one could encounter when being out of grace and trying to find a way back:

When you were wrong you were sometimes allowed to send text messages to Åsa, and it was a great problem how to formulate them. She was so sensitive. You should not apologize. You should not write “I.” You were not allowed to write anything about her, like she is fantastic ... because who was I when I was wrong to say anything like that? As if my words mattered? At the same time, I had to express something which elevated her and explained how fantastic she was.²²

David also talked about an incident when he and three other members were trying to work their way back to Waldau:

Åsa would be taking a bath and we four [out of grace] would have the privilege to serve her. We were going to serve something to eat and drink and handle everything. And there was this feeling that now things will turn for us, we would not be wrong any more. [...] And then when we had prepared her bath her maid came to tell us that we were not allowed to come close to her after all, she did not want to see us. I remember I became so frustrated at that time that I went to the second floor and just screamed

²¹ Interview with Beata 2017-12-09.

²² Interview with David 2017-12-09.

and hit the walls. I felt that it did not matter what I did, I was wrong anyway. [...] I had bought her a very expensive crystal vase, to show that I loved her. [...] So I gave it to her maid, asking her to give Åsa the gift and tell her that I love her. And I was told afterwards that this meant something for my status.²³

The different narratives all manifest the desperation the informants felt about being spiritually shunned, and how much they were prepared to do in the hope of becoming in grace again. It is clear that spiritual shunning was not simply a way of raising money from the members. Some of the informants did not pay anything at all, and some were not allowed even to give gifts. All of them, however, reported the awkward feeling of being rejected by the former friends, and their preparedness to perform more or less desperate acts in the hope of becoming in grace again. Not all of them succeeded.

Stage 4: In Grace Again

Two of our four informants, Anna and David, made their way back to grace.²⁴ As described above, Anna did many things to become in grace again, but the key for her when everything turned was when she started taking care of Waldau's old father, visiting him, cleaning up for him, and sometimes inviting him for coffee. Anna was very careful that no one should come to know about this, because if Waldau would have been informed it would have looked like Anna tried to gain points by virtuous actions, which would have been bad for her position with Waldau. But after a few years, news of her actions did reach Waldau and as it was clear

²³ Interview with David 2017-12-09.

²⁴ One of the informants mentions Beata being taken into grace again just before the group broke down. According to this informant, she was told by Waldau that now Beata was in grace again, that she had become strong by the spiritual shunning, and that God really had had an opportunity to work with her. Beata herself did not talk about this incident during the interview. Asked about it later, she said that this was for a very short period of time and that she, also at the time, did not see it as significant, as everything in the congregation was confusing at that point.

that her actions had been unselfish, Anna got to know that now she had indeed started to pay off her debt:

Finally I came to a point where I had started to pay the debt. And it started to be worth something. So, then I continually increased the pace, and worked harder and tried to do everything which was wanted. "Yes. Of course, I will do that. Immediately."²⁵

David thought that it really was nothing he did which helped him back in grace:

I did make my way back to Åsa. Which really just meant that she let me find the way back. It was just because it pleased her to do that. There was not a system that meant that I really did it.²⁶

The reasons for coming back in grace seem often to have been formulated in a vague spiritual language (David), and for the shunned members the reasons were unpredictable. For Anna, however, it was her good actions and efforts which improved her situation.

Stage 5. Helping Others Back in Grace

Some people in the vicinity of Waldau were appointed to help those out of grace by talking to them. From the perspective of being out of grace, Beata explained:

I would have to become right again, which meant I had to talk with Pastor X [accused pastor 2016]. He was terrible. He just yelled at me, it did not matter what I said, everything was wrong. [...] I also talked with R – or she talked to me – and I was supposed to understand, say things the right way and show remorse. And I knew that what I said afterwards would be judged by Åsa.²⁷

²⁵ Interview with Anna 2017-12-09.

²⁶ Interview with David 2017-12-09.

²⁷ Interview with Beata 2017-12-09.

But in the end, Beata was even more distanced from everyone. She did not even meet Pastor X any more, and could do even less to influence her situation:

It became even worse when people lost hope in me. [...] There was no attempt to help me any more, I was considered a hopeless case. All my friends stopped talking with me. Even those who earlier just yelled at me and were unpleasant – it was at least some kind of attention, they did something for me, it was a way of showing that they wanted to help me. But then they stopped doing even that and I was left to myself. I became very lonely.²⁸

Anna and David said that members who found their way back should help others to find it as well. Anna was told:

You have cleared a path which no one has tread before you. You worked yourself back. [...] You are an example in love. You have opened a door which was not possible to open. [...] Those wanting to go back to Åsa should walk your way.²⁹

Anna was asked by Waldau to help her get other people in order as well. Waldau said that she had had to be very hard on Anna to make her repent, and that Anna would have to be as hard on these other members as well. Anna said that in this way Waldau made the members commit acts of abuse on others, and she admitted that she herself had been very hard on other members, believing she would save their lives:

Åsa said, “You have to be tougher with sin. You have to react with more anger to these people, because they are going against me, you are not angry enough with them. [...] You have to be harder. There is no other way. It has to finally end. If you do not put an end to it, you let these spirits loose and allow them.”³⁰

²⁸ Interview with Beata 2017-12-09.

²⁹ Interview with Anna 2017-12-09.

³⁰ Interview with Anna 2017-12-09.

David told about similar events, when he had been asked to help Waldau to set another person straight and was told that he had to be very tough. He also said that abuse and physical violence occurred in some of these cases.³¹ As mentioned earlier, some of the cases of physical violence have been reported to the police.

Discussion

Below, some aspects of the phenomenon of spiritual shunning will be discussed, based on the interview material from Knutby Filadelfia. Second, the question of spiritual shunning as a contributing factor to the murder in 2004 will be investigated.

Spiritual Shunning as a Phenomenon

From the interview material, it is clear that spiritual shunning was firmly grounded in and part of the world view construction of Knutby Filadelfia. Structurally, there are many similarities between the core religious construction in Knutby Filadelfia and religious constructions in other contexts. There was, for example, an ideal for a human being to be sacralized and purified in order to become closer to God. Specific to Knutby Filadelfia were also some factors that provided a fertile ground for spiritual shunning: a sense of urgency for the religious mission; the belief that Jesus would come back very soon to claim his bride; that he would come only when the ground would be prepared, so that personal weaknesses had to be quickly overcome; and that if members failed to be the chosen ones they would burn in hell for eternity. Members of the core group who failed to live up to the necessary expectations,

³¹ Interview with David 2017-12-09.

found themselves temporarily “being wrong” or spiritually shunned, and thus faced with the task of working their ways back into the group.

An important factor in the case of Knutby Filadelfia was the strong power of the charismatic leaders, especially Waldau as the bride of Christ and Pastor X as the vessel for Jesus. Waldau had the sole power to determine if a person was spiritually in good standing or not. The spiritual nature of the problem, and its solution, was located in a nonempirical sphere to which only the spiritual leaders had access. The informants typically did not, according to the interviews, understand what they had done wrong and how they should amend this wrong. They were advised to seek God and to immerse themselves in prayer, but with no further direction at all. This disorientation created a vagueness and insecurity, which strongly exacerbated the problems for the person in question. The informant Anna mentions in passing “spirits” as possible reasons for spiritual problems; however, no established methods of exorcism or spirit-identification seem to have existed. The notable teaching about paying off debts was addressed by, for example, working day and night, sleeping in the car, paying sums of money, or buying expensive gifts.³²

As noted before it is, however, interesting that some of the members who were spiritually shunned were not allowed to pay money or present gifts. This undermines the suspicion that the process of spiritual shunning was implemented only for reasons of economic benefit. The process of spiritual shunning was, for the informants, deeply located in the whole religious construction of reality and understanding of the world of Knutby Filadelfia. None of them used words like “manipulation” for this process but understood the shunning as an effect of the common world view.

³² The accusations of sexual abuse are still under investigation.

An essential component in the ideology of spiritual shunning is the significance of belonging to the in-group and the consequences of being excluded from it. In spiritual shunning, belonging has both social and spiritual significance. The sociologist Meredith B. McGuire writes that the we-they dichotomy, which is central for human beings, is both a structural and cognitive framework. It relates to how people think about themselves and others, and implies distancing oneself from outsiders (McGuire 2002, 215). Joan Grusec and Maayan Davidov, researchers of socialization, write that the desire for group affiliation or belongingness is basic to human being, to which also feelings like pride, loyalty, and perceived superiority may relate closely (2007, 297-298). The spiritual core group of Knutby Filadelfia functioned partly as a social-in-group with strong social and psychological consequences for the one who was excluded from it, but had much stronger implications for the individual because of the spiritual consequences. It mattered greatly if one was part of the group which would welcome Jesus back, or would burn in hell for eternities - which explains the desperation of the people spiritually shunned, and the readiness to do almost anything to return to good spiritual standing.

William E. Paden writes that religions draw lines, and that the polarization of two kinds of behavior – pure/impure, right/wrong, appropriate/inappropriate, good/evil, holy/sinful – is a fundamental structure of religious systems. Some behavior enhances the status of the sacred, while other behavior diminishes or contradicts it. Every system has its own moral compass. Paden writes, in connection to holy objects, that such objects must be surrounded with requirements that regulate access to it. Only the pure may approach the pure (Paden 1994, 145).³³ This might also be applied to people considered holy, like the bride of Christ in Knutby Filadelfia. It is clear from the interview material that the members of Knutby Filadelfia struggled with purity or, in their terminology, with “being right.” It was spiritually

³³ See also Nilsson (2019).

significant to be allowed proximity to the bride of Christ. She should only be surrounded by members in good standing, in order to avoid pollution and be prepared for Christ to come back. Purity was also an essential reason for members of the core group to avoid those who were spiritually shunned.

Spiritual Shunning as a Factor in the Murder in Knutby Filadelfia?

There are several sources documenting that Sara Svensson, the murderer, was spiritually shunned at the time of the murder. Professor of sociology Eva Lundgren writes, for instance, that Waldau from the beginning was very loving towards Svensson, but that she distanced herself after some time (Lundgren 2008, 202). Anna, Beata, and David all emphasize that they did not know everything about Sara Svensson's situation; she was under the influence of the pastor who instigated the murder she committed, and had a secret sexual relationship with him. But they all agree that Svensson seemed to be in bad shape during the months before the murder and confirm that she was spiritually shunned by the core group. David tells that when Svensson joined Knutby Filadelfia, she was seen as a strong, wonderful and fantastic human being. Not until the pastor who instigated the murder claimed that God had told him that he would marry Sara Svensson, did she fall out of grace. Waldau thought that Svensson had been tempting the pastor, and she was allowed to stay with him only so that the pastor could overcome that temptation. So, from once having a significant position in the spiritual warfare of Helge Fossmo, Svensson fell to being seen as a temptress. David said that Svensson was desperate and miserable, and talked with him about not being able to get grace, not being able to be forgiven, but that she did not tell him what the specific problem was.

From the perspective of the world view of Sara Svensson, who was spiritually shunned, “wrong,” out of grace, and accustomed to God transmitting messages through signs,

dreams and visions, it is conceivable that she interpreted anonymous text messages on her cell phone to be messages from God. The text messages were vague and open for interpretation, but included demands to commit an action, to help “him” to freedom, and that “coming home” (meaning to die) would be a grace (Lundgren 2008, 356-358). Considering the desperation expressed in the interview material, and the usual actions taken by members to attain good spiritual standing, it is not difficult to imagine that such actions in a specific case might have been stretched to committing murder. It is apparent that some of the informants spoke harshly towards the members who were “wrong,” and eventually their verbal abuse seems to have evolved into physical violence.

In conclusion, the spiritual shunning of Sara Svensson may have been one of the significant factors in the murder in Knutby Filadelfia in 2004. As illustrated in this article, spiritual shunning might be an effective weapon to affect a person’s inner and outer world. . A comprehensive understanding of religious groups’ constructions of reality is thus necessary to fully understand the potential of religion to contribute to violence and other destructive actions.

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