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# NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS AND ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITY AS AN ACADEMIC RESEARCH FIELD IN SWEDEN – SOME REFLECTIONS

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## *Introduction*

In the autumn 1980 I was asked by my teacher in the sociology of religion at Uppsala University, Ted Nordquist, if I wanted to assist in the research project about new religious movements in Sweden which he was about to begin. I was in my second semester as a student of the history of religion, and I was very happy to get an opportunity to work part time during my studies even if I did not know exactly what “new religious movements” was. Ted had a Ph.D. in sociology, and his doctoral thesis dealt with Ananda, a religious commune in the U.S. in the tradition of Paramhansa Yogananda (Nordquist 1978). Ted’s thesis was the very first dissertation dealing with new religious movements in Sweden. His supervisor was Carl-Martin Edsman, professor of history of religion at Uppsala, and Ted’s dissertation was published by the department of history of religion. Professor Edsman had just retired when I started studying history of religion, so I never came to know him, even if I occasionally saw him briefly in the local area.

The research project Ted was starting was the first research project in Sweden dealing with new religious movements. It was funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Fund). The aim of the project was very broad, with the intention of mapping what new religious movements there were in Sweden at that time and who the members were, but also to gain some knowledge about, for example, the conversion process and members’ backgrounds. My work for Ted meant helping him interview members. During the next three years, we conducted in-depth interviews with nearly 400 people who were

members of sixteen different groups. For me it was one of the most interesting experiences I had ever had. I met so many interesting people who had made unusual choices in their lives, and who talked very openly with me about their thoughts and ideas about different questions. When the time came to write an essay in history of religion for bachelor's degree, it was natural for me to choose the subject of new religious movements in Sweden, and Ted became my supervisor. But just before my essay was completed (already approved by Ted) a new professor of history of religion was appointed in Uppsala. This professor was very historically orientated, and he straightforwardly rejected my thesis on the grounds that my topic did not belong to the history of religion. He said that history of religion was supposed to deal with older religions, not new ones. Furthermore, the new professor did not see any point at all in studying "the pale reflections of the real religions," as he put it.

Eventually I wrote a new essay for my bachelor's degree to satisfy this professor, dealing with the sacred cow in Hinduism. This subject was certainly interesting, but what really interested me now was the new religious movements to which Ted Nordquist had introduced me. So a year later, in 1985, I began graduate studies at Åbo Akademi University (Turku, Finland) under the supervision of professor Nils G. Holm, who did not share the Uppsala professor's opinions (his own dissertation had dealt with Pentecostalism). I brought the material from our interview study with me to Turku, which Ted had by that time left to me, as his life had taken a new turn outside academia.<sup>1</sup> As my financial resources were limited because I was living and studying in between two countries (Sweden and Finland) and thereby had to navigate two financial systems, it took me until 1993 before I could defend my Ph.D. at Åbo Akademi University. My dissertation built on the interview material from Ted's research project, and dealt with new religious movements' relationship to society and discussed the themes of conversion and engagement.

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<sup>1</sup> Ted did not succeed in finding an academic position in Sweden and thus left the university.

Beginning in the autumn of 1994, I worked as a lecturer at Umeå University, a post I left in 1999 to become associate professor in history of religion at Dalarna University. This position was, interestingly enough, the first position in Sweden (and the only one up to that date) specializing in new religious movements. During the latter half of the 1990s I twice received funding from the Swedish Church for small research projects dealing with New Age spirituality, which became my new research interest.

My own personal academic history reflects the situation of the academic study of new religious movements and alternative spirituality in Sweden. In the early 1980s new religious movements were perceived as illegitimate in many parts of the academic world, uninteresting and nothing that academic research should deal with. And it was not until the mid-1990s that New Age spirituality or alternative spirituality received any academic attention or academic legitimacy whatsoever. In the late 1990s, however, the study of new religious movements in the subject of history of religion had become so accepted that even a lectureship in this academic specialization was established at Dalarna University.

In this article I will reflect on some trends in new religious movements and alternative spirituality as an academic research field in Sweden. I do not aim to carry out an exhaustive study, but I will make a few selections which I discuss in a little greater detail. There are many reasons it would be difficult to make a complete inventory of new religious movements and alternative spirituality as a field of research. A fundamental and difficult question is delimiting the field: which groups and orientations should be included and which should be excluded. There are difficult borders to research areas such as, for example, Western esotericism, Neo-Paganism or Neo-Hinduism. Further, research into new religious movements and alternative spirituality has been conducted in a diversity of academic disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, history of ideas and different religious studies disciplines, thus making it difficult to compile. Academic research is still very much classified

into the different academic disciplines within which it is performed, and the borders between them can be quite rigid.

In the following study, I will examine the doctoral dissertations published in the discipline of history of religion at Stockholm University between the years 1970-2011, in religion and philosophy at Lund University 1981-2011, and in religious studies at the University of Gothenburg between 1986 and 2011. I have also investigated the research projects that received funding from Vetenskapsrådet (The Swedish Research Council) between the years 2001-2011 and from Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Fund) during the years 2000 to 2011. There are of course other Swedish universities and other funding possibilities for research in Sweden which are not covered here. New religious movements or alternative spirituality might also have been part of research projects or dissertations where this is not immediately apparent from the title.

#### *Dissertations in history of religion at Stockholm University*

The first thesis in the history of religion in Stockholm that can be related to new religious movements and alternative spirituality did not appear until 1995. My own thesis in history of religion was published at Åbo Akademi University in Finland a few years earlier, in 1993 (Frisk 1993). This may be considered quite late, as the new religious movements had attracted attention in society and in the media since the late 1960s. Ted Nordquist's early dissertation in sociology in 1978 is unique in the Swedish context, and after that nothing happened for many years. The university is a conservative institution, in which it takes time for new subjects to receive support and gain academic credibility. In countries other than Sweden, the dawn of the research field of new religious movements and alternative spirituality occurred earlier. In the U.S. and U.K. we have several dissertations from the mid-1980s, with names such as Eileen Barker, Roy Wallis, and E. Burke Rochford.

## Dissertations in history of religion at Stockholm University 1970-2011<sup>2</sup>

Mattias Gardell: *Countdown to Armageddon. Minister Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam in the Latter Days*. 1995.

Tina Hamrin: *Dansreligionen i japansk immigrantmiljö på Hawai'i. Via helbrägdagörare och Jodo shinshu-präster till nationalistisk millenarism. (The Dancing Religion in Japanese Immigrant Environment in Hawai'i. Via Healers and Jodo Shinshu Priests to Nationalist Millenarism.)* 1996.

Sten Skånby: *Den mystiske indianen. Schamanism i skärningspunkten mellan populärkultur, forskning och nyandlighet. (The Mysterious Native American. Shamanism at the Intersection of Popular Culture, Research and New Spirituality.)* 2005.

Peter Åkerbäck: *De obeständiga religionerna. Om kollektiva självmord och frälsning i Peoples Temple, Ordre du Temple Solaire och Heaven's Gate. (The Impermanent Religions. About Collective Suicide and Salvation in the Peoples Temple, Ordre du Temple Solaire and Heaven's Gate.)* 2008.

Thomas Karlsson: *Götisk kabbala och runisk alkemi. Johannes Bureus och den götiska esoterismen. (Gothic Kabbalah and Rune Alchemy. Johannes Bureus and the Gothic Esoterism.)* 2010.

From 1970 to 2011, forty-one doctoral dissertations in the history of religion were published at Stockholm University. Five of these dealt with new religious movements or alternative spirituality. The topic of religion is a vast subject, and five out of forty-one must be considered a pretty good figure, even if the exact number is small. Most of these five treatises are focused on organized new religious movements, and to a lesser extent on the less organized New Age or alternative spirituality. One dissertation is very historically oriented and would today be considered as belonging to the area of Western esotericism. An interesting fact is that three of the five treatises deal with new religious movements situated outside Sweden.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.erg.su.se/publikationer/avhandlingar/avhandlingar-i-religionshistoria-1.38941> (controlled 2012-10-08)

### *Doctoral theses in religion and philosophy at Lund University*

In Lund, 234 dissertations were listed under Religion and philosophy between 1981 and 2011. Fifteen of these relate to new religious movements or alternative spirituality, beginning as late as the year 2000. Here we find many dissertations dealing with the New Age, some of these in the sociology of religion and also the psychology of religion. This ratio reflects the academic interest in the New Age that was growing in the 1990s. The subjects are otherwise quite mixed. Some dissertations deal with Western esotericism, some with foreign religious groups – but some also deal with phenomena situated in a Swedish context. There are also theses dealing with movements from Buddhist backgrounds.

If we look at the authors, we find that a couple of them are today academically active in Denmark. Sweden has thus exported researchers in the field of new religious movements and alternative spirituality southwards.

### **Doktorsavhandlingar i religion och filosofi vid Lunds universitet<sup>3</sup>**

Yvonne Petersson Bouvin. *Effects of Meditation on Respiration and the Temporal Lobes: An Exploratory and Meta-Analytic Study*. 2000.

Olav Hammer. *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age*. 2000.

Magnus Gudmundsson. *Tarot: New age i bild och berättelse. (Tarot: New Age in Picture and Story.)* 2001.

Lars Ahlin. *New Age: Konsumtionsvara eller värden att kämpa för? Hemmets Journal och Idag-sidan i Svenska Dagbladet analyserade utifrån Mary Douglas grid/group-modell och Pierre Bourdieus fältteori. (New Age: Consumer Goods or Values to Fight for? Hemmets Journal and the "Idag" Page in Svenska Dagbladet Analyzed by Mary Douglas' Grid /Group-model and Pierre Bourdieu's Field Theory.)* 2001.

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<sup>3</sup>[http://www.lu.se/o.o.i.s/12588?mode=advanced&optionalwords=&title=&author=&year=&isbnissn=&project=&funder=&research\\_group=&language=0&subject=phr&documenttype=dissertation&popularscience=showall&institution=&institution\\_display=0&submit=S%C3%B6k](http://www.lu.se/o.o.i.s/12588?mode=advanced&optionalwords=&title=&author=&year=&isbnissn=&project=&funder=&research_group=&language=0&subject=phr&documenttype=dissertation&popularscience=showall&institution=&institution_display=0&submit=S%C3%B6k) (controlled 2012-10-08)

Zenita Johansson. *Tron, ordet och nådegåvorna: En studie av Livets Ord i Tjeckien. (Faith, Word and Graces: A Study of the Word of Life in the Czech Republic.)* 2002.

Lena Löwendahl. *Med kroppen som instrument: En studie av new age med fokus på hälsa, kroppslighet och genus. (The Body as an Instrument: A Study of New Age with a Focus on Health, Physicality and Gender.)* 2002.

Sten Boinekow. *Erfarenheter av Zen. (Experiences of Zen.)* 2003.

David Dunér. *Världsmaskinen. Emanuel Swedenborgs naturfilosofi. (The World Machine. Emanuel Swedenborg's Natural Philosophy.)* 2004.

Ulrik Josefsson. *Liv och över nog. Den tidiga pingströrelsens spiritualitet. (Life in Abundance. The Early Pentecostal Spirituality.)* 2005.

Pernilla Liedgren Dobronravoff. *Att bli, att vara och att ha varit – om ingångar i och utgångar ur Jehovas Vittnen. (To Become, to Be and to have Been – On Entrances and Exits in the Jehovah's Witnesses.)* 2007.

Dagfinn Ulland. *Guds karneval. En religionspsykologisk studie av Toronto-väckelsens spiritualitet. (God's Carnival. A Study from the Psychology of Religion Perspective of the Toronto Revivalist Spirituality.)* 2007.

Lars Steen Larsen. *Western Esoterism: Ultimate Sacred Postulates and Ritual Fields.* 2008.

Fredrik Gregorius. *Modern asatro. Att konstruera etnisk och kulturell identitet. (Modern Asatru. The Construction of Ethnic and Cultural Identity.)* 2008.

Åsa Trulsson. *Cultivating the Sacred. Ritual Creativity and Practice among Women in Contemporary Europe.* 2010.

Katarina Plank. *Insikt och närvaro: akademiska kontemplationer kring buddhism, meditation och mindfulness. (Insight and Presence: Academic Contemplations about Buddhism, Meditation and Mindfulness.)* 2011.

*Dissertations in Religion at the University of Gothenburg 1986-2011*

Between the years 1986 and 2011 there were twenty-seven theses in religious studies

published at the University of Gothenburg. Only one, Henrik Bogdan's thesis from 2003 (Bogdan 2003), can be related to new religious movements. This dissertation is, however, rather focused on Western esotericism. Ferdinando Sardella also wrote a thesis on Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, but this thesis should rather be considered as belonging to the subject of modern Hinduism (Sardella 2010).<sup>4</sup>

*Research funded by the Swedish Research Council and the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation*

The Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet) and the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation (Riksbankens Jubileumsfond) are the two most important sources of funding for research projects related to religious studies in Sweden. It is possible to search for previous projects in different ways with respect to both foundations. It is also quite easy to miss potentially interesting projects for this study depending on how the project titles are interpreted. In this study I have focused on the funding form labeled "project"; other types of funding forms are disregarded.

The Swedish Research Council supplies complete listings on their website for project grants awarded in the humanities and social sciences in 2010 and 2011. In 2010, 125 such projects were granted, none of which appear to be related to new religious movements or alternative spirituality.<sup>5</sup> In 2011, 128 projects were granted. One, my "Children in Cults: Religious Upbringings in Minority Religions in Sweden," concerned new religious movements. Another project possible to classify within new religious movements dealt with the African Pentecostal Charismatic Churches, a project conducted by Mika Vähäkangas at

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<sup>4</sup> <http://lir.gu.se/forskning/publikationer/avhandlingar/relvet/> (controlled 2012-10-08)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.vr.se/forskningsfinansiering/bidragsbeslut/humanioraochsamhallsvetenskap/storautlysningen/aldrbidragsbeslut/beslutstorautlysningen2010.4.12276aba1326e7bd62a8000896.html> (controlled 2012-10-09)

Lund University.<sup>6</sup> A search in the total project data base revealed 1,203 projects granted in the humanities and social sciences between 2001 and 2009.<sup>7</sup> A handful of projects which could potentially be related to new religious movements or alternative spirituality were found. In 2008 Motzi Eklöf was granted a project entitled “Medicine, Religion and Culture: Seventh Day Adventist Health Care in the Swedish 1900s”; in 2007 my project “The Meditating Dala Horse: Globalized Contemporary Religiosity in Local Design and on New Arenas” received funding; in 2001, Mattias Gardell was granted a project on “Mysticism and Politics: A Survey of Political Dimensions in New Spirituality”; and in 2004, Galina Lindquist’s project in anthropology, “Healers, Leaders, and Entrepreneurs: The Cultural Revitalization of the Political Economy in Southern Siberia,” was funded.

The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation granted fourteen projects in religious studies during 2000-2011. Only one of these dealt with new religious movements, my “New Religious Movements’ Development over Time: A Contemporary Study of Five of the New Religious Movements Originating in the 1960-70s” in 2003.<sup>8</sup> Searches in subject areas such as sociology, psychology and history of ideas revealed no additional projects.

Competition for grants is very intense at both the Swedish Research Council and the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation (at the most about 10 % of the applications are normally granted). We can, however, conclude that the topics of new religious movements and alternative spirituality do not seem to have been favored for receiving grants.

*Academic trends in Sweden concerning new religious movements and alternative spirituality:  
some reflections*

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<sup>6</sup>[http://www.vr.se/forskningsfinansiering/bidragsbeslut/humanioraochsamhallsvetenskap/storautlysningen/aldreb\\_idragsbeslut/beslutstorautlysningen2011.4.ead945b11f699b5085800025026.html](http://www.vr.se/forskningsfinansiering/bidragsbeslut/humanioraochsamhallsvetenskap/storautlysningen/aldreb_idragsbeslut/beslutstorautlysningen2011.4.ead945b11f699b5085800025026.html) (controlled 2012-10-09)

<sup>7</sup> <http://vrproj.vr.se/default.asp?funk=as> (controlled 2012-10-11)

<sup>8</sup> [http://anslag.rj.se/sv/lista\\_amnen/Religionsvetenskap](http://anslag.rj.se/sv/lista_amnen/Religionsvetenskap) (controlled 2012-10-09)

With the notable exception of Ted Nordqvist's thesis in sociology from 1978, research on new religious movements began late in Sweden. For a long time research on new religious movements and alternative spirituality was also a marginalized and stigmatized area internationally. Elisabeth Arweck (2006) writes that the new religious movements posed a challenge for the study of religion, as they conflicted with the traditional sect theories. It is clear that there were many in the religious studies establishment who held ideas about what "real" and "authentic" religion was, and who felt that it was the "authentic religions" which could and should have the attention of academic research. New religious movements were regarded with the same suspicion from scholars as they received from society at large. There was a similar situation with New Age spirituality, which offered even greater challenges for the envisioned prototype of religion as a Christian church. In New Age spirituality there were problems with boundaries, mostly no clear organizations and questions about how "religion" as a concept should be defined.

In the early 90's we finally see a reversal and dissertations begin to appear, both in terms of more organized new religious movements and the vaguer New Age spirituality. These research areas begin to be perceived as important – the mass suicides of certain religious groups in the 1990s certainly contributed to this change. The creation of a lectureship in the history of religion in 1999 with a particular focus new religious movements at Dalarna University also demonstrates a completely new setting for the academic study of new religious movements. As in the rest of society, also in academia there is a change towards the normalization of new religious movements. They are gradually perceived as religions like any other. This probably relates to the fact that in recent decades society has become more pluralistic, and multiculturalism has become accepted as a normal condition. The Swedish state investigation, *I god tro (In Good Faith)*, which was published in 1998, has probably also

played an important role. Compared with other international state investigations into new religious movements, the Swedish investigation must be considered sober and sensible, and to a great extent expressed the importance of dialogue and the toleration of multiculturalism. It advocated that a new center for research and information on new religious movements be formed. This was unfortunately never realized due to lack of economic resources. Internationally, however, there are such centers, as, for example, Inform in the U.K.

Dissertations and projects funded by the Swedish Research Council and the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation are nevertheless relatively few. Research on new religious movements and alternative spirituality is not perceived as particularly important, albeit it is at least as an integral part of the academic field. Compared with the other Nordic countries, it must be noted that in Sweden there has not been any large research projects about new religious movements as there have been in Denmark, Norway and Finland.<sup>9</sup>

Swedish research on new religious movements and alternative spirituality exhibits some independence and originality compared with international research, but on the whole follows international trends. Several theses treat conditions abroad. In line with international standards, over time the field of new religious movements or alternative spirituality has developed into independent subfields, such as Western esotericism and Neopaganism.

Since 2001, research, positions and resources in religious studies have increasingly been devoted to Islam, and this has meant that many other areas within religious studies have been marginalized. Both in academia and in the larger society, new religious movements currently receive little attention. The situation for alternative spirituality is a little better.

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<sup>9</sup> In the beginning of 2000s Mattias Gardell applied for a bigger project about new religious movements and alternative spirituality at the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation, but it was rejected.

## *The role of Finyar*

Finyar (The Academic Network for Research and Information on New Religiosity) was founded in Sweden in 1997 and restarted in 2003. In 2010 we moved from being a national to a Nordic network. Academically speaking, we are successful. We have arranged academic conferences every year or every other year, sometimes funded by the research councils. At big international conferences (IAHR, EASR), we often arrange independent sessions. Several years back we started a yearly journal, *Aura*, in which academic articles about new religious movements and alternative spirituality are published in Nordic languages. Between 2010 and 2012, Finyar received a network grant from the Swedish National Bank which was used partly for network meetings, but also for a publication and for improving the association's web site.

Finyar has, however, had problems with visibility in the public and the media. The academic study of new religious movements has not really had a human academic face in Sweden, such as Mikael Rothstein in Denmark. The anticult movement has also spread rumors that Finyar is not objective, but rather favors the new religious movements, which at times and in certain circles has led to problems with legitimacy. Elisabeth Arweck (2006) suggests that academics may have problems of legitimacy as we often use the new religious movements' own language to explain their religious worlds, instead of using terms such as "bizarre," "strange" and "sick." In that way we may be perceived as being in favor of the groups we study, or lacking a "critical approach," as "critical" has come to mean evaluating in a negative way.

However, anticult groups have also received little public notice during the last few years in Sweden. The theme of new religious movements is losing currency, and the

critics of alternative spirituality are leveling criticisms different than those used by the anticult groups (for example, criticisms of non-rationality and superstition instead of brainwashing and manipulation). As indicated, to the extent that the mass media attention is interested in religion, it is today rather occupied with different aspects of Islam.

### *Conclusions*

Research on new religious movements and alternative spirituality was established in Sweden in the 1990s, but has not been favored by the research councils in granting funds for research projects. In Sweden, we have not had problems with, for example, suicidal new religions, which has contributed to the fact that new religious movements have not been recognized as a major threat and therefore not of great importance. The research field has, however, a clear alignment with different established lines of research, and has over the last two decades won academic legitimacy in terms of established research networks and publications.

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