

Leaving the Faith, Preserving the Self

Identity Processes among Former Sweden-Finnish Conservative Laestadian Siblings

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This article examines how identity motives shape siblings' disaffiliation from the Conservative Laestadian revival movement in a Sweden-Finnish context, highlighting apostasy as a multifaceted identity process marked by renegotiation between inherited and emerging identities. Drawing on life-story interviews, the study shows that religious exit is influenced by age, motivational structures and family relations: adolescent departures were accompanied by destructive behaviour, while adult apostasy involved reflection and negotiation within the family. Although the siblings left Conservative Laestadianism, some retained elements of Christian faith, suggesting reformulation rather than outright rejection. By situating these narratives within Identity Process Theory and Motivated Identity Construction Theory, the article demonstrates how motives such as continuity, belonging and psychological coherence shape religious identity processes. The findings also reveal the risks of marginalization and the vacuum state described in role-exit theory, where individuals feel suspended between identities and struggle to establish new roles. By foregrounding sibling dynamics and motivational structures, this article contributes new insights into how religious disaffiliation unfolds as an ongoing negotiation of continuity and belonging.

Introduction

Building on previous research on Sweden-Finnish Conservative Laestadians (Niskanen 2025), this article explores how

identity motives shape siblings' religious disaffiliation and highlights apostasy as a multifaceted identity process.

Laestadianism is a Lutheran revivalist tradition within the Church of Sweden that originated in Karesuando in the mid-nineteenth century under the leadership of Dean Lars Levi Laestadius. The movement spread to Norway, Finland and the United States (Andreassen 2020, 92). It was marked by strict sobriety, confession and absolution, and ecstatic religious experiences. Over time, the movement developed an exclusive ecclesiology, emphasising salvation only within its fellowship, and remains characterized by large families, a familycentred lifestyle and devotional meetings led by lay preachers (Niskanen 2025, 42–43). In Sweden, it has been particularly influential in the northern regions, shaping both religious and social life (SOU 2023:68, 195–96). In Finland, it is the largest revivalist movement (van den Brandt and Rantala 2024, 227). The Conservative Laestadian branch, historically linked to the SRK (Suomen Rauhanyhdistysten Keskusyhdistys), is distinguished by a familyoriented and theologically conservative profile (Andreassen 2020, 92).

Recent scholarship has highlighted the scarcity of Swedish research on Laestadianism compared to the extensive Finnish literature (Andreassen et al. 2020). By focusing on Sweden-Finnish experiences, this article seeks to address this gap and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of Laestadianism as a Lutheran revival movement, particularly in relation to processes of disaffiliation. By examining sibling dynamics and motivational structures, the study demonstrates how individuals negotiate continuity, belonging and psychological coherence when leaving the religious group. Specifically, it investigates how siblings differ in their identity motives and in the consequences they experience following disaffiliation, thereby illuminating the layered and individualized nature of religious exit.

Theory

Identity motives are explored within the frameworks of Identity Process Theory (IPT) (Jaspal and Breakwell 2014) and Motivated Identity Construction Theory (MICT) (Vignoles 2011; 2018). According to Vignoles, there are at least six universal identity motives (2011, 412): self-esteem, distinctiveness, continuity, meaning, efficacy and belonging. Jaspal and Cinnirella propose a seventh motive, psychological coherence, defined as the experience of one's interconnected identities as compatible (Jaspal and Breakwell 2014, 176). This complements the six universal motives by emphasizing the importance of internal consistency across different aspects of the self. According to MICT, these motives are culturally universal and guide identity construction. They share three core properties (Vignoles 2011, 405): first, satisfac-

tion of these motives typically has a positive impact, while frustration tends to negatively affect psychological well-being; second, people generally desire and strive for identities that satisfy these motives and typically avoid those that frustrate them; and third, situations that temporarily or chronically frustrate these motives often lead to intensified efforts to fulfil them.

In this study, the interview material has been analysed through the combined lens of IPT and MICT, which facilitates a nuanced examination of how siblings negotiate their sense of self when leaving a tightly knit religious community. This analytical framework demonstrates that apostasy is not merely a rejection of belief, but a complex identity process shaped by motivational structures such as continuity, belonging and psychological coherence. Drawing on my previous study about Sweden-Finnish Conservative Laestadians (Niskanen 2025), the article introduces a distinct analytical focus on sibling dynamics and differentiated experiences of religious disaffiliation. Rather than framing religious exit as rupture, the article highlights how inherited beliefs and emerging perspectives coexist and evolve. In line with Streib's (2021, 139) view of deconversion as a dynamic life process, the narratives of the interviewed siblings demonstrate that religious exit often unfolds gradually through emotional and relational renegotiations. This perspective challenges binary notions of belief and non-belief and instead foregrounds the layered and biographical nature of identity transformation.

Method and data collection

In the preceding study, a novel method in religious studies, Faith Q-Sort, was

employed alongside 26 life-story interviews. Faith Q-Sort (FQS) is a qualitative tool that allows participants to rank statements about religion and spirituality along a continuum of agreement. FQS captures subjective viewpoints on religion, spirituality and life views (Wulff 2019; Nynäs et al. 2021; Nynäs 2022).

The analysis in the previous study suggested that close relationships significantly shaped participants' subjective viewpoints (Niskanen 2025, 139). However, the results from the FQS are not presented in this article, which instead focuses on identity motives rather than life views.

Life-story interviews were conducted between 2020 and 2022, with participants recruited through snowball sampling. One family, comprising four siblings, one in-law and two parents, was featured in a dedicated chapter of my dissertation (Niskanen 2025, 138–68). This article focuses specifically on the siblings and the in-law, all of whom have left the Conservative Laestadian revival movement. It extends the analysis of the interviews by examining the consequences of religious disaffiliation through the lens of identity motives and age-related differences.

Ethical considerations were central to the study design. All participants provided informed consent, and pseudonyms are used throughout the article to protect anonymity.

The siblings: narratives of exit

During data collection, efforts were made to select closely related participants to explore whether kinship influenced religious perspectives. The findings suggested that siblings and married couples often expressed similar views (Niskanen 2025,

139), which may reflect shared experiences and relational dynamics.

This article focuses on a family where most of the siblings had left the Conservative Laestadian movement. Four siblings and the husband of one of them participated in the study. The parents, who remain members of the religious group, were also interviewed in the previous study but are not included in this article. The siblings' pseudonyms are Anne, Piia, Aki and Petri, and Piia's husband is referred to as Erkki.

Anne: continuity and rediscovered faith

Anne was the first to be interviewed. Her responses indicated a continued engagement with personal faith, while her siblings expressed more critical perspectives on religion. During the interview, Anne described how she gradually rediscovered her personal faith after stepping away from it following her departure from Conservative Laestadianism:

Anne: And to discover my own conviction, my personal belief, really, and then to reconnect with God again, the connection I've always had, though it was on hold at the time. (Niskanen 2025, 140)

Although Anne left Laestadianism as a young adult, she retained the Christian faith from her childhood:

Anne: Mm, I am, I still have my inherited faith. I believe that if I hadn't been born into the family I was, it's hard to imagine I would have become a believer, a Christian believer. (Niskanen 2025, 141)

She was critical of the Conservative Laestadian revival movement. Nevertheless, her interview statements indicate that continuity remained essential to her, as shown by her claim that she still holds onto her innate faith. Even after pausing her spiritual engagement and despite a shift in perspective, she retained the core beliefs of her childhood, even outside the Laestadian movement. This suggests that the continuity motive (Vignoles 2011, 412) was significant for her. The motive of belonging, however, seemed less prominent. Still, she did seek out another religious community after leaving the Conservative Laestadian congregation, indicating that belonging remained relevant.

Piia and Erkki: the impact of family

Among the siblings, Anne was the one who most clearly self-identified as a religious believer. Her brothers Aki and Petri also expressed some form of religious belief, even though all the siblings interviewed had left the movement. Her sister Piia and Piia's husband Erkki were the most vocal in rejecting Conservative Laestadianism, despite Erkki showing a need for continuity and belonging through maintaining ties with his family and attending events hosted by the congregation. In contrast to Piia, who left first, Erkki comes from a family in which most siblings remain within the movement. This may have made it more difficult for him to follow Piia (Niskanen 2025, 142):

Piia: Yes. I was... I was more... I was more... or rather, I dared to take the step before my husband. He stayed, even though I left.

Erkki stated that his decision to leave was due to no longer living in accordance with Conservative Laestadian teachings (Niskanen 2025, 144–45):

Erkki: No, it was that I didn't live as a Laestadian, and then I thought... I was cowardly for not leaving earlier, I don't know why I was afraid or what I was thinking, but I didn't live as a Laestadian and thought it was just better not to be involved.

Interviewer: Yeah. How do you feel about it now, a few years later?

Erkki: It feels good, absolutely.

Interviewer: What feels good about it?

Erkki: You don't feel that pressure, that you have to go to meetings and please everyone. How do I explain it? But I still go sometimes, to bazaars and things like that.

Interviewer: Do you keep in touch with your parents and siblings who are still involved?

Erkki: Yes.

Interviewer: So you still see each other?

Erkki: Yes, absolutely.

Erkki had told his parents directly that he was leaving the religious group. They were not surprised, as his wife had left earlier. Later in the interview, he reflected on their reaction (Niskanen 2025, 146):

Interviewer: How did your parents react?

Erkki: They were sad, but they accepted me too.

Piia comes from a family in which most siblings have left Conservative Laestadianism. This probably made it easier for her than for Erkki to leave. But even among her siblings, not everyone found it easy. Her brother Aki, who left as a teenager, had a much more difficult experience, as did Anne and Petri, who also left early.

Aki: distinctiveness and identity enactment through rebellion

In the interview, Aki described what it was like when he left Conservative Laestadianism as a teenager. Most interviewees referred to it simply as “Laestadianism”, particularly those who had left the movement (Niskanen 2025, 147).

Aki: I left, I consider that I left fairly early, around age thirteen.

Interviewer: Thirteen. Was it a conscious decision?

Aki: Yeah, I'd say so. It was really a lot of conflicts in the family... And I absolutely didn't want to remain in Laestadianism, so it turned into a huge conflict. I think part of the reason I started using drugs was just to show, in every possible way, that I didn't want that life.

Interviewer: So it was a kind of protest?

Aki: Yeah. Drinking, drugs, fighting. Doing everything the opposite way, basically.

Interviewer: Like defiance?

Aki: Yes, exactly. Today I'm outspoken, but back then I couldn't express things in words.

Aki was not the first in his family to leave; two older siblings had left before him. Still, his parents seemed particularly affected by his rejection, perhaps out of concern for him. After middle school, he attended a Laestadian folk high school in Finland for a year. He described that time positively:

Aki: Yeah, I mean, it was kind of exciting and stuff like that, but I didn't get any schooling at all, really. I liked being there, though I'm not sure why, maybe because I didn't feel at home back where I lived either.

Upon returning to Sweden for high school, things escalated. He began using drugs, social services got involved and he was placed in treatment facilities, with little success. Eventually, Aki himself asked for help and entered a 12-step programme. He became drug-free around age 20 (Niskanen 2025, 148).

In the interview, Aki said his rebellious behaviour was a form of identity expression, trying to show that he did not want to be a Conservative Laestadian. This reflects identity enactment (Vignoles 2011, 412) and a public rejection of a former identity (Ebaugh 1988, 123). When I asked about his current faith, he said (Niskanen 2025, 148–49):

Aki: I think some of it came from my addiction and the treatment programmes, especially the 12-step programme. I don't know the foundations, but I believe a lot of it draws on Christianity somehow. They talk a lot about higher powers. At first, when they said "higher power", I wanted to throw chairs at them. Not again! So they really had to explain a higher power as *you* understand it. And somehow, I feel that the Christian higher power is mine, that I identify with it. To the level that I personally feel. That it can come to a certain point, but then I think it goes too far. And that's where it kind of, if I got some of it back, in a way, like I started to believe in my own way anyway. That it was connected to that.

Interviewer: What does that belief mean to you today?

Aki: It means quite a lot. I can absolutely talk about Christian things with my kids. I don't feel ashamed anymore, but earlier, I felt deep shame. If someone said the word "God", I'd turn and walk away. Now I feel secure in it, on my own terms. It feels good.

Interviewer: What about your siblings? How do they view faith now?

Aki: Among us who have rejected it? Most (of them) probably feel the same, when someone says "God", they walk away. But my younger brother has gone through a similar journey to the one I have. We've talked and we think pretty similarly.

Aki explained that he now regards the Christian higher power as his own and that he has come to terms with it and feels secure in it in his own way. That may be interpreted as an indication that the continuity motive holds significance for him. Although he distanced himself from Conservative Laestadianism in every conceivable way during his youth, he is now able to express Christian ideas to his own children. This indicates a desire to pass on the Christian tradition, but in his own way, outside the religious movement, which suggests that the distinctiveness motive (Vignoles 2011, 415) has also played a role for Aki.

Petri: marginalization

The brother (Petri) whom Aki refers to in the quotation above has also been interviewed. This took place at their sister Pii's home. It happened after the interview with Aki, who had told his siblings about it (Niskanen 2025, 149). Participants talking to one another about the interviews was something that could not be avoided during the data-collection process. It is also inevitable in studies where participants are in some way related to each other.

Petri's views aligned more closely with Pii's than with Anne's or Aki's, which is not particularly surprising given their close relationship and the fact that the interview was conducted at Pii's home. These siblings appeared to have a strong bond, and Pii was the one who suggested that Petri participate in the study (Niskanen 2025, 149).

Aki mentions in his interview that Petri also holds a personal form of belief, which is confirmed when Petri describes his experiences of beginning to work within

a congregation of the Church of Sweden (Niskanen 2025, 150–51):

Petri: Then I suppose I realised, well, I gradually noticed that it's just an ordinary church, not like the one I grew up with. So no, I felt that it's... it's a healthier relationship to faith and religion, at least.

Interviewer: In what way is it different?

Petri: It's more everyday.

Interviewer: More everyday?

Petri: No... no finger-wagging, and you're allowed to have your faith just the way you want, I think.

Interviewer: Right. So no one tells you how you're supposed to believe or anything like that?

Petri: Yeah, well, I suppose they do... in principle, in the Church of Sweden, they encourage you to try to live as a Christian, but it's not like... no, I don't really know. I... I mostly just sit there... in the church during services and things, so yeah.

Interviewer: Okay, okay, okay. So... you don't really take part in that way?

Petri: Not actively, no.

Interviewer: No, not actively. But you listen?

Petri: Yes, I do. I mean, I find it a bit... quite... or well, it's interesting to... no, I

suppose I'm still trying to understand [laughs] ... still trying to understand what religion's all about, really. I don't think I... I think I had blinkers, or ear-plugs, on when I was little, at least [laughs].

Interviewer: Okay. Do you remember having to listen to sermons when you were a child or teenager?

Petri: Yeah, no, I just remember it as a kind of mumbling that was filled with anxiety.

Petri was highly critical of the Conservative Laestadian Association for Peace, of which he was a member in his youth. Nevertheless, the quotation above suggests that he does not reject religion entirely; rather, he is seeking to grasp its meaning. He perceives the congregation in which he works as healthier, with less moralising and greater scope for forming one's own view of faith (Niskanen 2025, 150–51).

The older brother, Aki, said that Petri has had more or less the same journey in life as himself. Yet what Petri shared differs in part from his brother's life story. While Aki claims that he tried in every possible way to show that he did not want to be a Laestadian, including drug use, Petri described a different experience when he left the movement as a teenager (Niskanen 2025, 151–53):

Petri: I mean, it hasn't exactly been easy leaving the church. It's been... I mean, you believed certain things, like if you're not religious, then you'll burn in hell for all eternity and stuff like that. And then you've just had to... I

mean, I've realised that's not actually true, but somehow you did believe it. [...]

Interviewer: Did it take a long time to get rid of that thought?

Petri: Yeah, I think so. I mean, I don't know. I tried... I did other things to maybe avoid it.

Interviewer: Okay.

Petri: Yeah, it ... I mean, it ended up being way too much alcohol and, yeah. I mean, things pretty much spiralled out of control straight away, really... a... after that.

Björkmark et al. describe how alcohol use may increase after leaving a religious group: "Some mentioned that they had tried to suppress their pain with alcohol and ended up drinking excessively, for a period of time" (2022, 4729). When asked what might have caused the excessive drinking, Petri answered it was because of frustration:

Interviewer: Yeah. About what?

Petri: Well, it was like... even though it was bad, it was still a kind of security. And then when you didn't have that, it felt like you were just floating out into the air.

Interviewer: Yeah. A sense of security...

Petri: I mean, you... you completely lost your stable foundation [...] I mean, I didn't really have a solid

ground to stand on, I think.

Interviewer: Yeah. Was it hard to know who you were, like in terms of identity and all that?

Petri: Yeah, I think so. I wasn't Laestadian any more, and I wasn't like other Swedes either, so... I was something entirely my own.

Interviewer: Yeah. How... how do you feel today, who are you today?

Petri: I'm much calmer and more secure in myself at least, but I still don't really know who I am [laughs].

Petri's response suggests a marginalized identity: he describes himself as neither Laestadian nor like other Swedes, but rather as something entirely different. He does not appear to have adopted any alternative identity after leaving the movement, which may have contributed to a sense of disconnection and rootlessness.

His sister Piia and her husband Erkki, by contrast, became members of a secular Finnish cultural association after leaving the revival movement (Niskanen 2025, 268). This suggests that they were able to adopt a secular Sweden-Finnish identity as a replacement for their previous identity as Conservative Laestadians with a Finnish background:

Interviewer: And are you both active members of the Finnish association in [...]?

Piia: Yes. And as I said, all our children were involved too.

Interviewer: Yeah. Is it easier to feel a sense of belonging with other Sweden-Finns who aren't Laestadian than with Swedes?

Piia: Yes.

Interviewer: What do you think that's due to?

Piia: I think it's the Finnish language, there's something about it that makes you... you feel a connection in a strange way.

Interviewer: Yeah. Exactly.

Piia: Because the people we sing with, we're the youngest, and they're all 70 to 80 plus. And what do we really have in common with them? [laughs] But it's the Finnish language and yeah.

Piia stated that it was easier to feel connected to other Sweden-Finns who were not Laestadian than to Swedes, which indicates that the identity of "Swede" was not available to her as an alternative. This may help explain why Petri described himself as "not like other Swedes" in the quote above. Former cult members who have left a minority culture can be described as migrants or strangers in their own country, as the culture within the cult often differs markedly from mainstream society across multiple areas of life (Hadding 2023, 12). Since Petri and his siblings are part of the national minority of Sweden Finns, their sense of difference may be heightened.

Piia and Erkki were able to connect with others in the secular cultural association, suggesting that their Finnish background

and language were crucial to their sense of belonging. Petri, by contrast, may not have found a similar group where he could feel connected, which could have contributed to a marginalized identity (Niskanen 2025, 151–53).

Hadding suggests that individuals facing marginalization are at greater risk of poor mental health. When someone leaves a context shaped by a specific culture, certain aspects of that culture may no longer be accessible or may lose their significance and meaning. This can lead to a disruption in the individual's worldview. If the exit is linked to difficult experiences or trauma, the person becomes more vulnerable. Certain patterns of thought may also be deeply tied to identity, making change more difficult (Hadding 2023, 12–13).

Exiting the movement and the vacuum state

In *Becoming an Ex: The Process of Role Exit*, Helen Rose Ebaugh (1988) writes that three-quarters of the exiters in her study experienced a sense of being in a vacuum, suspended in mid-air, or in a rootless state. The interviewees had left various roles, both secular and religious, but many shared similar experiences (Ebaugh 1988, 148). What Petri described as "it felt like you were just floating out into the air" and "you completely lost your stable foundation" aligns closely with the feelings expressed by Ebaugh's interviewees. This suggests that the experience is not solely about leaving a religious group, but rather about exiting a role without having found another.

Interviewees in Ebaugh's study who had built bridges to new roles before leaving the old one, such as a new job or new friends, found it easier to emerge from the vacuum state and form a new identity, compared

to those who lacked such connections. However, all those who entered the ex-role state faced similar challenges in establishing a new role identity that also acknowledged their status as an “ex” from the previous role (Ebaugh 1988, 148).

Petri stated, “I wasn’t Laestadian any more, and I wasn’t like other Swedes either, so ... I was something entirely my own” and “I still don’t really know who I am.” This suggests that he has struggled to establish a new role identity, as no alternative identities appeared to be available in the context in which he found himself. In contrast, Piia and Erkki seemed to have found a new role as secular Sweden Finns within a Finnish cultural association.

According to Björkmark et al. (2021), feelings of having lost one’s identity can arise when someone leaves a religious congregation, especially if they have grown up within it since childhood. Letting go of a deeply rooted identity can bring about a profound sense of disconnection and inner confusion. It may feel as though one’s very sense of self has vanished, leaving a person adrift and uncertain. In the beginning, life is often marked by insecurity and a lack of orientation (Björkmark et al., 2021, 5–6).

Ebaugh argues that the experience of a stable identity can be disrupted when an individual leaves a role that has been incorporated into the self-structure, or when a new identity is adopted. She suggests that self-identity is gradually built through internalized meanings and expectations of the roles people occupy. Leaving a role or entering a new one is closely related to self-identity, as the roles people play in society become part of their self-definition. When a role is exited, self-identity is threatened and elements from the new or previous role

must be negotiated and reintegrated into the self-concept before stability and security can be re-established (Ebaugh 1988, 22). This reflects the uncertainty and insecurity described by Björkmark et al. (2021) and concerns the limbo state that arises after an internalized role identity has been abandoned, regardless of whether the role is religious or secular. If no alternative role identity is available, the uncertainty persists and may result in marginalization (Niskanen 2025, 153).

The experience of leaving the Laestadian congregation that Petri describes also corresponds with what is outlined in Björkmark et al.’s article “Living between Two Different Worlds’: Experiences of Leaving a High-Cost Religious Group” (2022). The study explores the experiences of individuals who have left religious groups in Finland that are considered “high-cost religious groups”, including Laestadianism. These groups are defined as demanding and costly, both theologically and culturally exclusive. The article describes how, for example, alcohol use may increase after leaving the religious group, and how those who leave may experience feelings of emptiness and emotional numbness (Björkmark et al. 2022, 4729).

Petri’s account offers a poignant insight into the emotional consequences of leaving the Conservative Laestadian community. He describes a profound sense of emptiness and the loss of a stable foundation, experiences that closely mirror Ebaugh’s (1988) concept of the vacuum state, in which individuals feel suspended between identities after exiting a deeply internalised role. His narrative also reflects several dimensions of deconversion identified by Streib and Keller, including emotional suffering, the loss of religious experience and

disaffiliation from a tightly knit community (2004, 191). Rather than a purely intellectual shift, Petri's experience underscores the complexity of deconversion as a process that disrupts existential orientation, fractures relational bonds and destabilises one's sense of self.

Petri described how he continued to experience emotional numbness, a lingering effect that he associates with having left the congregation (Niskanen 2025, 154–55):

Interviewer: Do you think it has affected your identity in some way?

Petri: I think so, absolutely. Mm. No, I don't know if it's that, but I think maybe it comes from there, yeah, I mean from this whole process, maybe I've become a bit more... what's the word? Indifferent.

Interviewer: Yeah. Indifferent to what?

Petri: Things in general. I mean, what can you say? Yeah, a bit emotionally cold, I think. At least I believe it came from there.

Interviewer: Okay. What do you think caused that? Or what might have made it happen?

Petri: Hm. Hard to say really.

Interviewer: Did you have to shut off certain feelings?

Petri: I have.

This enduring numbness suggests that the psychological consequences of role exit

are not confined to the immediate aftermath but can persist over time, particularly when the exited role was deeply embedded in one's identity from childhood. Petri's experience aligns with Björkmark et al.'s (2021, 6) findings that individuals raised within religious congregations may face a profound sense of disconnection and inner fragmentation upon leaving. The absence of a clear alternative identity, coupled with the exclusivity of high-cost religious groups like Conservative Laestadianism, may contribute to prolonged marginalization and emotional detachment.

Different identity motives

Petri had to shut off his emotions and had tried to cope with the emptiness he experienced after leaving the congregation, most notably through heavy drinking. In contrast, Aki more actively demonstrated his rejection of Conservative Laestadian norms by deliberately doing the opposite of what was expected. He also used alcohol and drugs, but likely not out of a sense of inner void. Rather, his substance use seems to have been a way to create distance from the Conservative Laestadian lifestyle. They seem to have had different motivations, and it may be that Petri had a greater need for belonging and/or continuity than Aki, which made it harder for him to leave the movement. When asked whether it might be harder to leave Laestadianism if many siblings remain in the movement, Petri responded (Niskanen 2025, 155):

Petri: I definitely think so, because... I don't know how it is for others, but for me, family is really important. I think they're the ones I'm closest to. So I definitely think it can be really hard... you

might hear little digs and things.

Interviewer: Yeah. Could that make it harder to leave as well?

Petri: I think so.

The belonging motive (Vignoles, 2011, 412) seems particularly strong in Petri, and it is possible that his decision to leave was influenced by the fact that most of his siblings had already left. In a family where all or most siblings remain within the movement, Petri might not have made the decision to leave. Aki, by contrast, does not appear to be driven as strongly by the motive of belonging and might have left regardless of his siblings' choices. He seems more influenced by the distinctiveness motive (Vignoles, 2011, 412), which became especially clear during the interview when he described his behaviour at a confirmation camp in Finland (Niskanen 2025, 156):

Aki: Back then, I had already started to rebel a bit, so I dressed completely differently, for example. Some looked at me with maybe a bit of contempt, and some looked at me with curiosity, that I really stood out from the crowd.

Interviewer: How did you dress?

Aki: If you think of today's youth, maybe those who live in a suburb or want to express themselves more through clothing, yeah, it was like that.

It is possible that Aki adopted the role of "the different one" before he left Laestadianism and therefore did not experience the same level of emptiness or identity loss as Petri. In contrast, Pii's decision

to leave the congregation may be explained by the motives of self-efficacy and psychological coherence. She stated clearly that she was not living as a Laestadian: "Why should I pretend to be something I'm not?" (Niskanen 2025, 143).

According to Jaspal and Cinnirella, the psychological coherence motive refers to the experience of interconnected identities as compatible. Identity is perceived as threatened when the social context prevents the satisfaction of identity motives. One way of managing such an identity threat is to deny an identity element that is incompatible with another, more central identity element (Bardi et al. 2014, 176; Niskanen 2025, 156).

When Pii chose to leave Conservative Laestadianism, she had already recognised that she was not truly part of the movement but had merely pretended to be. This may explain why her departure was easier compared to Petri's, who expressed greater emotional difficulty, possibly because he lacked a bridge to a new role identity at the time of his exit. His younger age may also have contributed to the emotional hardship. Pii left the movement later in adulthood and appears to have done so after reflecting on her identity (Niskanen 2025, 156).

Pii's husband Erkki may have left for similar reasons, guided by the psychological coherence motive. However, his stronger need for belonging may explain why he found it more difficult to leave the congregation (Niskanen 2025, 156–57):

Interviewer: And what does RY (Rauhanyhdistys/The Peace Association) mean to you... or what did RY mean to you?

Erkki: Well, meeting friends.

Interviewer: So you were involved mostly for the social aspect?

Erkki: Yeah. I mostly got tired of the preaching [laughs].

Interviewer: So would you say that being involved for so long was really about meeting people, or...?

Erkki: Yeah... yeah, exactly. And then there was not wanting to let mum and dad down, and just... a whole bunch of stuff like that on your mind.

Erkki seems to have been involved in the congregation primarily for social reasons and out of a desire to please his parents. This suggests that relationships are important to him and can be interpreted as a strong belonging motive. He has shown a need to be included and accepted by those who matter to him (Vignoles 2011, 412). His greater difficulty in leaving may also be linked to challenges in establishing a new role identity (Ebaugh 1988, 148).

As for Anne, although she left the congregation, she stated that she did not want to say she had renounced her faith:

Anne: And I didn't want to say that I had denied the faith, because I've never denied my faith. I've only denied the way of "practising my faith", but I've never denied my belief.

During the interview, Anne mentions several reasons for leaving the congregation, but what recurs is that she did not want or was not able to live according to Laestadian rules:

Anne: In my opinion, it was so difficult, such pressure to be Laestadian. Almost like torture, sometimes it felt that way.

Anne believed that it has now become easier and more flexible to be Laestadian, for example, regarding contraception, as fewer children are being born among members. She is critical of this shift, as she is accustomed to a more rigid framework where there was no middle ground (Niskanen 2025, 158):

Anne: In my view, or I'm used to it being either you're Laestadian or you're not... That there are no in-betweens... Or we always said, either you're a believer or a non-believer. That there are no middle grounds.

Anne's sister Piia did not live according to Conservative Laestadian rules during part of her teenage years. She recalls facing a choice when she met her husband, who also had a background in the congregation: the choice between marrying and having children or living a different life. She ultimately chose to marry him, which may explain why she remained in the congregation for so long. The fact that Piia chose to marry young to a man with a Conservative Laestadian background, even though both had experimented with different lifestyles in their youth, suggests that the continuity motive may have been stronger in Piia than in Anne, who did not make the same choice. Piia explained her decision this way (Niskanen 2025, 159):

Piia: I think I had a... a moment before I got married. Like, "Yeah, should I

go into this?” and then yeah, I kind of chose which direction my life would go, roughly.

Interviewer: And what did you choose?

Piia: That I would... that I married... I broke up three times and thought, “Maybe I should go to Finland for a bit or travel and just live life” [laughs]. Mm. Because it... yeah, it was almost like, “Should I become a mum... a mum even?”, like have... have kids or something, and I did want that.

Interviewer: Yeah. How old were you when you... when you got married?

Piia: 20, I think.

Interviewer: Yeah. And that’s when you made the choice to stay, so to speak, was that it?

Piia: Stay in the faith?

Interviewer: Yeah, exactly. Was that the choice you think you made?

Piia: Yeah, kind of.

The continuity motive seems to have influenced Piia’s decision to marry young and remain in the congregation, even though the family may not have lived a strictly Conservative Laestadian life. This may be because both Piia and her husband had lived differently before marriage. They inhabited a middle ground that, according to Piia’s sister Anne, does not exist. Perhaps the ambivalence about not living “the right

way” eventually led Piia to want to leave the congregation, an example of the psychological coherence motive (Niskanen 2025, 159).

Anne, Petri and Aki have not verbally renounced their faith, unlike Piia, who declared she no longer believes. Petri and Aki “drifted away” from faith during their teenage years but did not claim to have explicitly renounced it, even though Aki expressed his rejection in other ways. Anne says she never wanted to say she renounced her faith, as she has never denied her belief in God. She has therefore opposed the idea of renouncing faith (Niskanen 2025, 159–60). This supports the view of apostasy as a fluid and sequential process without a pre-determined destination (Enstedt 2020, 300). Apostasy does not necessarily mean rejecting belief; it can instead involve distancing oneself from religious practice, as Anne said she did when she left Conservative Laestadianism. Likewise, for her brothers Aki and Petri, the endpoint has not been non-religiosity, as both express some form of religious belief despite distancing themselves from the Conservative Laestadian revival movement (Niskanen 2025, 160).

For the siblings, the consequences right after leaving varied, possibly depending on age. For Aki and Petri, breaking away from the Laestadian movement during their teenage years had destructive consequences, such as family conflicts and substance abuse. Piia, who left later in life, reports that she did not receive any reactions at all, at least not from her own parents, although her mother-in-law questioned the decision (Niskanen 2025, 142–43). Anne, who left the movement as a young adult, did receive reactions from those around her, which may have been

because she openly demonstrated her exit from the Conservative Laestadian lifestyle (Niskanen 2025, 160):

Anne: But I was open about leaving. And I know, for a fact, that many lived like I did, but they hadn't openly left Laestadianism, and they were greeted in shops and invited home, and they were considered good people, even though we were the same...

Those who did not publicly declare their exit were not perceived as non-members, which suggests that public disclosure plays a significant role in leaving a role identity (Ebaugh 1988, 123). Vignoles argues that presenting one's identity to a real or imagined audience is a key part of the social process through which individuals claim a particular kind of identity (Vignoles 2011, 412). Although Anne did not verbally renounce Conservative Laestadianism, she did so through her lifestyle, and was therefore perceived as non-Laestadian, unlike those who did not openly demonstrate that they lived outside Laestadian norms (Niskanen 2025, 160–61).

There are also notable differences between the siblings in terms of identity motives. Aki appears to have been driven by the distinctiveness motive and possibly also the self-efficacy motive, while Petri seems to have had a stronger need for belonging. It is possible that Petri wanted to feel connected to his older siblings and that this influenced his decision to leave, since several of them had already exited the movement. He may have experienced an emotional conflict in deciding which side to feel aligned with: the religious group or the non-Laestadian friends and the siblings who had left.

For Piia, the psychological coherence and self-efficacy motives seem to have guided her decision to leave the movement. This may also be true for Anne, although it is more difficult to assess, as she left a long time ago. Anne was clear that she did not want to renounce her faith, a stance that some found problematic, given that faith and the practice of faith were perceived as synonymous within the group (Niskanen 2025, 161):

Anne: And that, mm, many wondered about, why I didn't say it. But I said, I don't deny my faith. I believe, but I don't want ... I don't want those ways, those behaviours, that, I want to get rid of that. And that, they couldn't understand, because to them it's the same thing.

Interviewer: Mm. That they're kind of inseparable?

Anne: Yes, it was one and the same.

Anne's distinction between personal faith and communal religious practice reflects a desire to maintain agency over her own beliefs. This aligns with the self-efficacy motive: she sought to define her faith on her own terms, rather than conform to externally imposed behaviours that no longer resonated with her. Her stance suggests a need to feel competent and in control of her identity, even in the face of social pressure. The distinctiveness motive, which involves a desire to maintain a unique identity, is also evident in Anne's insistence on retaining her faith while rejecting behavioural expectations, an effort to resist being absorbed into a singular group identity.

The quote above illustrates that the Conservative Laestadian lifestyle appears to be central to belonging within the movement. What happens when an individual cannot, or does not wish to, live according to the lifestyle promoted by the movement, yet remains driven by the motives of continuity and belonging? In Anne's case, she sought out another religious context. Pii and her husband Erkki, by contrast, became members of a secular Sweden-Finnish cultural association after leaving the movement (Niskanen 2025, 268). The brothers Aki and Petri, however, ended up in destructive environments involving substance abuse right after leaving the religious revival movement in their youth, highlighting the importance of understanding identity processes not only on an individual level but also within broader societal structures.

Conclusion

This article has explored how Sweden-Finnish Conservative Laestadian siblings manage religious disaffiliation as a gradual process of identity renegotiation. While distancing themselves from doctrinal norms, they maintain cultural and familial ties, reflecting a complex interplay between tradition and transformation.

Identity motives such as continuity, distinctiveness and psychological coherence shaped how the siblings redefined themselves. Petri's need for belonging, Aki's drive for distinctiveness, Pii's pursuit of coherence and Anne's emphasis on self-efficacy illustrate how individual trajectories vary within the same family context.

This study has explored how former Conservative Laestadian siblings navigate the psychological and relational

complexities of religious disaffiliation. Their narratives reveal that leaving the faith is not merely an act of rejection, but a gradual reformulation of self in response to conflicting identity motives. As Streib emphasises, deconversion should be understood as a process of biographical change, involving emotional suffering, loss of religious experience and disaffiliation from community (2021, 139). This perspective aligns with the findings presented here, where apostasy emerges not as a moment of rupture, but as an unfolding negotiation of belonging. By situating these individual trajectories within a broader theoretical framework, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of religious exit as a dynamic and identity-driven transformation.

While the empirical focus of this article is on one Sweden-Finnish family, the findings have broader implications for the study of religious disaffiliation. The case illustrates how identity motives operate in contexts where religious identity is deeply intertwined with ethnic and cultural heritage. Thus, the article contributes to a more general understanding of religious exit as a dynamic and identity-driven transformation, relevant to scholars of religion, psychology and minority studies.

The siblings' narratives illustrate that religious disaffiliation is best understood as a layered identity process shaped by motivational structures, family dynamics and cultural contexts. Among the identity motives, continuity emerges as particularly decisive: even when individuals reject Conservative Laestadianism, some retain elements of inherited faith or cultural belonging that provide a thread of stability across time. This underscores that apostasy

is not merely a rupture but a reconfiguration, in which old and new aspects of identity coexist. Ultimately, continuity stands out as the crucial motive, enabling individuals to preserve a stable sense of self while renegotiating belonging beyond religious boundaries. ■



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