

Necessary and Impossible

On spiritual questions in relation to early induced abortion

What happens to people's existential and spiritual needs in the most secularized country in the world?¹ Only one thing is sure: no matter how technically developed and medically sophisticated our society becomes, in the end we are all going to die. In other words, as human beings we are, from time to time, forced to deal with situations of existential significance. Existential and spiritual questions remain relevant—even in a country where most people have abandoned institutional forms of religion. But how do people deal with these questions?

Sweden continues to uphold an extreme position, from a global perspective, when it comes to religiosity and traditional values. No other country in the world has, to such a great extent, left traditional and survival values on the behalf of those based on rationality and self expression (Inglehart & Baker 2000: 35). Religious and ethnic minorities have brought new forms of piety to the Swedish scene, but secularization and religious privatization dominate. Ideas based on religious dogmas have a marginal place in the Swedish culture, whereas science and medicine are fundamental to the Swedish approach to life. In this situation, it is important to study people's ways of dealing with existential life situations. What do people think, feel, believe and do in the presence of the ultimate questions—when there exists no common ground for meaning-making?

If the term existential is defined as 'experiences and issues related to the meaning of life, and/or to the decisive situations and borders of life', abortion makes up one of the existential situations modern people are confronted with. In this article I will use abortion as a case study to discuss existential and ritual needs in contemporary Sweden. I will do this by presenting material from a pilot study on women's existential needs in relation to early induced abortion. This will include what could be called secularized examples of existential

1 Some parts of this paper are translated from an article published in the Swedish journal of Social Medicine: Liljas Stålhandske 2008.

confrontation, spiritual negotiation, and ritualization. The project works from a feminist perspective and aims at bringing a difficult question connected to female reproductivity into the arena of scholarly discussion.

I begin my article with an outline of the state of religion in Sweden, against the backdrop of the contemporary climate in Western culture. This is followed by an introduction to abortion in Sweden, and to abortion research of interest for this paper. Ritual participation is the next topic, leading to concepts of importance for the pilot study: existential homelessness and individualized rituals. In the rest of the article I focus on the pilot study and a discussion of its results in relation to the existential situation in Sweden at large.

Sweden—a religious outlier

The labelling of sociologists varies: late modern or postmodern—the Western context of which Sweden is a part is generally described as unstable and changing (e.g. Giddens 1990; Bauman 1993). The foundations of modernity are shaking, and it is increasingly up to each individual to find some firm existential ground to build one's life on. Existential and ritual issues are being moved to the private sphere, and there no longer exists a common meaning-making foundation (Palmer 2008; Bäckström *et al.* 2004; DeMarinis 2003; Hervieu-Léger 2000; Gustafsson & Pettersson 2000). At the same time the church—and predominantly the former Swedish State Church—retains some of its position, upholding a vicarious religious function, carrying the 'religious memory' for a people that does not want to be institutionally led (Davie 2000; Hervieu-Léger 2000). Discussing the British context, Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead distinguish between religiosity as 'life-as', focusing on transcendent sources of significance and authority—and spirituality as 'subjective-life', focusing on inner and individual sources of significance and authority. Talking about the subjective turn Heelas and Woodhead (2005: 5 f.) imply a cultural tendency where the spiritual forms of world view are growing, while the religious forms are declining. As their analysis also has a bearing on the Swedish context, I want to make use of their perspective for my analysis.

Heelas and Woodhead conducted their research project in the British town of Kendal. Here, theistic worldviews are declining, and more personally based or individual versions of spirituality are growing within an overall framework of secularization. Holistic spiritual milieus are growing, but not enough to compensate for the decline of the larger congregational arena (Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 48). The changes in the Swedish context are simi-

lar, and in a Swedish research project following the Kendal investigation—the so called ‘Enköping study’—the overall picture is that of a secularized people with little interest in religious or spiritual issues (Ahlstrand & Gunner 2008). Sweden, as Valerie DeMarinis (2008: 61) notes, is an outlier ‘representing the most extreme combination of both the secular-rational value dimension and the self-expression dimension’. In the World Values Survey, Sweden has one of the lowest response rates to the question of the importance of God, and in the RAMP study only 18 per cent of the Swedish population said that they believe in ‘a God with whom one can have a personal relationship’. However, 56 per cent indicated beliefs in some sort of spirit or life force (Bäckström *et al.* 2004: 64). Furthermore, in relation to other parts of Europe, the Nordic countries are special in that the populations, in Grace Davie’s terms, can predominantly be described as ‘belonging’ but not ‘believing’, when it comes to the Protestant (former) state churches (Davie 1994 and 2000).² Secularization is the overall picture, combined with a general sense of belonging to the Church. Simultaneously, the private beliefs of Swedes are moving from the theistic and churchly forms towards what could be described as a more spiritual direction.

Summing up their analysis and pointing towards future research areas, Heelas and Woodhead make another interesting point: while the subjective turn is clear within the private areas of contemporary Western life, within work and public life the culture seems (still) to be dominated by life-as regulations, through the demand for efficiency in the modern workplace. This, Heelas and Woodhead (2005: 128) point out, makes up a ‘fundamental clash of values’: a strictly targeted and standardized working life, combined with the cultivation of unique subjectivities in private. This might also be one of the factors behind the declining interest for life-as forms of religion, the authors reflect, since people prefer to seek liberation from externally imposed targets when out of the office.

In their research in Kendal Heelas and Woodhead focused on activities of a more or less spiritual character. The abortion research I want to present here works from a different angle. The common Western citizen of today is generally not active in any spiritual or religious community. She lives her life with other things first and foremost in mind. Swedish culture places an emphasis on the material and rationalistic aspects of life, and people are most of all

2 Membership in the Church of Sweden is, by Swedes in common, still to a large extent understood as being an aspect of being a Swedish citizen, which both Bäckström (2000: 142) and Sundback (2000: 17) point out.

concerned with their health, family, working life and economy—rather than existential or spiritual experiences and practices. The Enköping study shows, as have other Swedish studies, that only a small minority of Swedes regularly engages in explicitly religious activities (such as church services, prayer, worship etc.). Finding that only 2–3 per cent take part in ‘other religious activities’, Jonas Bromander (2008: 92) in the Enköping study also concludes that new forms of ritual do not exist to any larger extent. However, is it possible to detect private ritualizations through a question about ‘religious activities’, when people in common do not describe themselves as religious (which is true of 80 per cent of the population in this study)? Would it not be more likely to find new forms of existential activity outside the frames of religious, or for that matter spiritual, organizations and formulations?

The idea behind this study of abortion is that it might be possible to detect movements relevant for religious studies by studying situations where people are more or less forced into the existential domain. Situations when the individual needs to take care of those questions that the overall culture mainly ignores. In these situations, the idea is, it might be possible to discover personal attempts at meaning-making that arise at the moment of the subjective turn. Outside the frames of both traditional religion and alternative therapies people are still hit by life and death. In the absence of overarching spiritual references the individual is forced to make meaning out of the bits and pieces that lie at hand. Thus, in the research presented here the focus is not on specifically religious, spiritual or ritual activities, but on a situation that existentially challenges the individual, in order to see how she handles this, where she goes to find support, how she interprets the situation and expresses her sense of meaning.

Abortion—necessary and impossible?

What is abortion? Before using the situation as a case for religious studies, it is necessary to get a glimpse of it from the clinical, legal and political perspective. It is also important to place the discussion within the frames of current psychological and sociological abortion research. To begin with, induced abortion is, in Sweden, mainly understood as an uncomplicated operation. About every fourth pregnancy in Sweden is ended through abortion. According to the Swedish abortion law of 1974, abortion is free up to gestation week 18. Until this point it is up to the pregnant woman herself to decide whether she will carry the pregnancy to full term or not. More than 90 per cent of the

abortions are labelled ‘early’, which means they are executed before gestation week 12, and later abortions are often carried out for medical reasons.

To study abortion from an existential perspective, or from the point of view of the psychology of religion, is not commonplace, and research in the area is limited. Although it might seem obvious that the abortion situation involves an existential decision, the political, ethical and historical sentiments around the issue have made the existential aspects very difficult to approach. In the Swedish cultural climate existential questions are easily connected to confessional religiosity, at the same time as religion to a great extent is associated with abortion resistance—while free abortion is commonly understood to be a self-evident right in a modern society. The right to termination of pregnancy has been understood as an important tool to safeguard women’s sexual liberation and emancipation. Thus, the existential and emotional issues surrounding the operation have disappeared from the public discussion, where abortion has been portrayed mainly from a clinical point of view. This has resulted in creating a climate where it can be experienced as risky to make feelings of grief, regret and loss visible in relation to abortion, since this could be used in arguments against the right to have an abortion.³

However, current Swedish abortion research points to the fact that women themselves often experience the abortion situation in existential terms. This is shown in the strong as well as contradictory emotions that women connect to the situation. Positive experiences are for many women mixed with feelings of apathy, grief, emptiness and pain. It is not unusual that women experience conflicting feelings—such as relief and regret—simultaneously, which put them in a particularly vulnerable situation (see e.g. Mattsson 2003: 25–9 and Kero 2002: 33 f.). However, and this is important to note, the painful experiences women can have around the experience do not have to be connected to a questioning of the right to have an abortion. Even when the abortion decision appears obvious for the woman to make, the abortion does not have to be easy to go through—from an existential or emotional point of view. A young woman from my research material gives voice to this complexity. She became pregnant at the age of 24. The pregnancy was not planned, and she immediately decided to have an abortion. She supposed the whole thing would be quickly and easily dealt with. Soon, however, she experienced the situation as much harder than she had imagined it would be. Although she is fully convinced that she made the right decision when she chose to have the abortion,

3 Both Anneli Kero (2002: 37) and Yvonne Terjestam (1991: 13–14) point out this complication.

she can still today, four years later, feel that the decision making process was extremely difficult—although it was necessary: ‘. . . this is . . . beyond what one really can demand of a human being to be forced to make such a decision’ (Liljas Stålhandske 2006: 56).

To discuss abortion from the perspective of the psychology of religion is not about engaging in its ethical aspects—and certainly not about questioning the Swedish abortion legislation. Rather, the interest lies in listening to experiences like this one, and trying to understand its implications for women’s well-being in relation to the abortion situation. More specifically, the aim of this research is to investigate what meaning-making experiences and practices can be found in Swedish women’s stories about their abortions. The overarching interest is to see how secularized people’s health is affected by the lack of common expressions and interpretations for the existential aspects in life, and here the abortion situation works as a case study.

Swedes—belonging but not believing

Although Sweden easily can be described as the most secularized country in the world, it is also a much more pluralistic country than it used to be. When it comes to a small Swedish town like Enköping, this plurality is not visible in terms of different forms of confession, which Bromander (2008: 76 f.) points out—here the culture is still, on the surface, rather homogeneously Christian. However, in terms of beliefs and relationship to the Church of Sweden, even a town like Enköping presents a great diversity. In order to discuss and interpret people’s existential and ritual needs within the Swedish culture it is necessary to point out the dimensions that determine an individual’s existential and ritual approach. Here I would like to develop the model of ritual context, presented in 2005, by making use of Davie’s terms ‘belonging’ and ‘believing’.⁴ In this model I use two dimensions to describe the different existential positions, possible in the Swedish context, focusing on the portion of the Swedish population that are still members of the Church of Sweden (which in 2007 represents 74 % of the population).⁵ The first dimension concerns what I label churchly believing, and the second dimension ritual belonging (figure). Churchly believing represents the aspect of a churchly identity.

4 For the original model, see Liljas Stålhandske 2005: 122.

5 All statistics about the Church of Sweden is collected from its official homepage: www.svenskakyrkan.se.

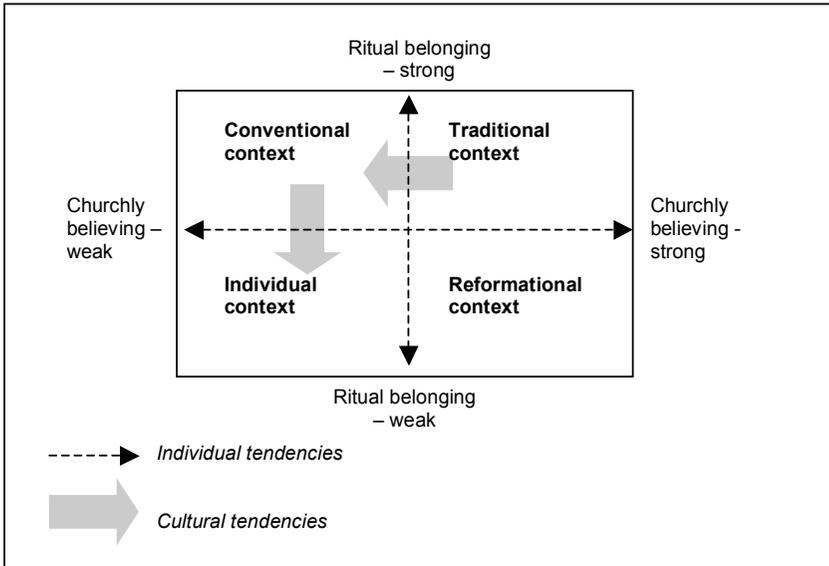


Figure. Churchly believing and ritual belonging. Model over ritual contexts through the individual's relation to the Church of Sweden and its rituals within late modern Sweden.

Describing oneself as Christian, in a religious and theistic sense, represents a strong churchly belief in this model.⁶ Ritual belonging represents the use of traditional life cycle rituals within the Church of Sweden. An individual who makes use of all the churchly life cycle rituals (baptism, confirmation, wedding and funeral), in their traditional form, constitutes a person with a strong form of ritual belonging.

The model visualizes the point that Grace Davie makes—belonging is not necessarily related to believing. While the British population to a larger extent are believers but not belongers, the Swedish context is marked by the opposite. The largest ritual context in Sweden is thus the conventional context. Although the majority of the Swedes, as presented above, do not describe themselves as religious or Christians (in a stronger sense)—nor as believing in a personal God—the majority still make use of churchly rituals like baptism and funeral. In 2007, 62 per cent of all newborn children were baptized and 83 per cent of all the deceased were buried within the Church of Sweden (table). However, the statistics are rapidly changing. The trend that has been

6 For the difference between more or less religious Christians, see Bromander 2008: 75 f.

	1970	1997	2007
Baptized according to the order of the Church of Sweden, of all newborn	80.6%	77.8%	62.3%
Confirmed according to the order of the Church of Sweden, of all 15-year-olds	80.7%	48.4%	35.0%
Weddings according to the order of the Church of Sweden, of all weddings	79.3%	61.6%	46.2%
Funerals according to the order of the Church of Sweden, of all deceased	95.5%	89.4%	83.4%

Table. Ritual participants in the Church of Sweden.

mostly discussed within secularization theories is of course the decline in believers, but although the numbers are still high, the Church of Sweden is also losing its ritual participants, as the table makes clear. Within only the last ten years, the Church of Sweden has lost about 15 per cent of its ritual participants in all its life cycle rituals, except for the funeral. Moreover, many of the ritual participants that remain do not interpret the churchly rituals from a confessional point of view, but understand them as ceremonial and festive ways of celebrating important steps in life (Bäckström 200: 151).⁷ This means that while the conventional context has been growing during the last decades, because of the decline in believers, today it is possibly the individual context that is growing most rapidly, a change visualised by the block arrows in the figure.

Bromander (2008: 87) also speaks about a ‘ritual turn’, when discussing the declining use of churchly life cycle rituals. In the Enköping study half of the citizens had no contact with the traditional Christian practice that has dominated the Swedish country for centuries. Bromander continues: ‘Since other types of ritual do not seem to replace this loss, there is reason to believe that fewer and fewer people will go through life cycle related rituals’ (2008: 92, my translation).

This is what defines the individual context, where people neither believe in nor belong to the Church in ritual terms, although they might still be members. Some of these people find more adequate ritual forms elsewhere—for example in one of the new religious movements. But, as Bromander points out, most Swedes are reluctant to take part in organized forms of spirituality.

7 Only 32 per cent of the Swedish population motivates the churchly wedding in specifically churchly or religious terms.

As existential issues are increasingly referred to the private domain, quite a few people stand outside the support and stability that a functioning ritual framework can offer. It is thus possible today to speak of a growing existential homelessness. While this homelessness might spell 'freedom' for some, others might rather experience it as existential marginalization or confusion. These changes are also something Valerie DeMarinis makes clear through her Existential Worldview Typology in Postmodern Sweden. This typology, developed from David Wulff's reasoning, relates the transcendent dimension to the dimension of symbolic versus literal interpretation, resulting in four worldview categories. What is new with DeMarinis's typology is that it includes two more categories, specifically developed for the postmodern Swedish context: the mixed existential world view—which represents a conscious rejection of a single meaning system; and the lack of functioning world view (DeMarinis 2008: 66; see also DeMarinis 2003). Both Bromander and DeMarinis point out that for many Swedes there is a deficit of a world view since childhood, leading to a lack of structuring operational narratives and health-promoting ritual expressions. Or, as DeMarinis (2008: 67) puts it: 'There is a crisis of meaning in terms of access to cultural knowledge or existential resources.'

In relation to the Enköping study, Brian Palmer (2008: 281) describes one of the main experiences in the current Swedish context as a mixture of exhaustion and worry—people constantly need to develop personal strategies to keep going, and are constantly worried that these strategies will fail. Almost all of the interview subjects in the Enköping study expressed a constant lack of time, and a workload experienced as too heavy. This makes up the background for Palmer's interpretation of private explanations and examples of spirituality in the Enköping population. Organized forms of spirituality are not common, but when people are asked about their own examples of spiritual moments and experiences in their lives, another picture emerges. Spirituality, in this sense, is the moment when you are alone and free from the pressures of everyday life. It is to walk alone with your dogs in the woods; to rest with the cat in your lap in your favourite armchair; to get out onto a lake in your boat with nothing else to do but exist for a moment. Acts like these seem to work as important breaks in a stressful world—moments of individualized rituals. In other words, to be spiritual in terms of individualization, Palmer (2008: 289) argues, means 'to stop'.

What do people seek through the individualized rituals, or private spiritual moments described in the Enköping study? Palmer (2008: 288) sums up the characteristics that people seem to look for in these situations:

- To get away from people, media and information into a secluded space.
- To get away from scheduled time.
- To find a refuge from people's expectations and demands.
- To alternate from responsibility to passivity and receptivity.

This, indirectly, can also explain why churchly services attract so few of the churchly members today, Palmer points out. If you seek time of your own outside the scheduled frames of everyday life, it is not likely you will give priority to organized and regular church visits. Palmer's results also confirm Heelas and Woodhead's speculations about the clash of values, and people's need to get away from the increasing demands of public life.

Can abortion be ritualized?

What about abortion? Can an event like abortion initiate activities that might be understood as spiritual or ritual? The examples which will be presented here are based on the results of a qualitative pilot study conducted at Uppsala University 2005–6. The data consists of ten semi-structured qualitative interviews, supplemented with data from two Swedish websites about abortion experiences. Six of the interview respondents were personnel who in their profession meet women considering and going through abortion, four of the respondents were women who had had early induced abortions. The personnel were recruited partly with the aim of interviewing professionals with a specific focus on the decision process or existential issues connected to abortion. Thus three women working with abortion counselling were interviewed, and three women working within the Swedish Hospital Church (the Health Care Chaplaincy in Sweden). Two hospitals in different parts of Sweden were involved, and one non-profit organization partly working with abortion issues. The research material of the pilot study is thus in no way representative. Instead, the main purpose of the pilot study was to establish whether existential issues could at all be understood as a part of a woman's abortion process, and what the kinds of existential issues that might be relevant in relation to abortion.⁸ It is important to make clear initially that a lot of women experience the abortion decision as easy to make, and that the existential thoughts,

8 For a closer description of the pilot study and the data collected, see Liljas Stålhandske 2006.

doubts and practices that the study detects only represent some of the many ways in which abortion can be experienced and handled.

The main result of the pilot study, including a thorough research overview, is that women's experiences in relation to abortion are extremely diverse, and that this also is true for existential experiences. Although the material of the pilot study is limited, the interview stories include a number of interesting examples of how women are confronted and deal with existential issues as they go through abortion. The results indicate that the need for existential and/or ritual processing is dependent upon the degree to which the abortion decision was experienced as difficult or ambivalent by the woman. When ritualizations of the event occur, they also seem to take different forms depending on how the woman relates to the aborted foetus. In the following I will present some examples of this, focusing on issues of labelling, making meaning and ritualizing the abortion event, beginning with the first of these.

The labelling of the abortion seems to be of great importance. This fact is the first to indicate the existential character of the situation. In the pilot study, two of the personnel and two of the women choose to speak about that which is aborted as a 'foetus', while the rest mostly use the word 'child' or 'baby'. The choice of labelling is far from arbitrary. A middle aged woman from the study, who is satisfied with her abortion, uses the word 'child' when she is talking about the event, and reflects about how old 'that child' would have been today, if she had not had the abortion. For a younger woman, also satisfied with the abortion, such a labelling is unthinkable: 'I think I'd rather not think about it. Or . . . it would be very difficult if I made it into a human being because . . . it would only make it worse.'

The difference in attitudes towards that which is aborted also becomes clear when you look at ideas and acts related to the abortion. One meaning-making theme that appears in the interviews, as well as on websites about abortion, is exactly that which the middle aged woman in the example above mentions: thoughts about the child that might have been. Some women fantasize about the foetus as a child, and have inner images of it—in more or less concrete forms. A few women give the aborted foetus a name and regularly think about it—especially when the time of the calculated delivery is getting closer, or on the anniversary of the abortion.

Another thought that appears in the interviews is connected to some sense of reincarnation. In this case, the woman believes that the foetus might return in a future pregnancy. An older woman, looking back at an abortion she went through when she was young, might view one of the children she later had as exactly the foetus that she aborted. As an example, one of the interviewed

women believes that the foetus 'returned' as one of her sons, because it absolutely wanted to 'have her as his mother'. For a younger woman the same kind of thought can be expressed like a wish, directed to the foetus itself—as in this example from the website Abortkyrkogården (The abortion cemetery): 'My Little Angel Child! . . . I hope you want to come back to me one day, Soon! OK? . . .'

Moving to women's meaning-making practices and ritualizations, the pilot study also gives several interesting examples that illuminate the complexity of the abortion situation. The study used the concept of meaning-making practice, with the definition: 'activities that are emphasized and rendered a specific value by the woman, in relation to existential experiences'. This includes, but is not synonymous with, the concept ritualizing. That meaning-making practices or ritualizations could be important for some women's recovery after abortion is suggested by results of the questionnaire that was distributed to the women who had had abortions, in addition to the interview. These show that three of the four interviewed women had felt a need to do a special act to mark/manifest, close, make public, grieve and/or thank for that which had happened in relation to the abortion.⁹

Although there are no traditional forms for ritualizing abortion, the pilot study also shows that some women find and create different forms of expressions for their experiences. Furthermore, the material indicates that it might be relevant to distinguish between two different types of practice: foetus-centred and woman-centred. This implies practices through which the woman focuses on the foetus and her experience of, for example, grief or loss, or practices where the woman focuses on herself, her decision and her experience around this. The distinction is sometimes ambiguous and some women seem to employ practices of both forms. Yet, the characterization is important, since it becomes clear that women can react in very different ways to different modes of relating to the situation.

The most explicit example of a foetus-centred practice is of course some form of funeral. The preliminary results of the pilot study indicate, through the interviews with abortion personnel to no surprise, that regular funerals

9 This result can be compared with the result from a pilot questionnaire study, which is part of a larger ongoing abortion study at Uppsala University, presented below. In this pilot study 8 of 23 respondents indicated that they wanted to do, or had done, a specific act to mark, close, grieve (etc.) the abortion experience. The percentage is not significant in either of these pilot studies. What the study makes clear is that it is relevant to pose the question: to what extent and how do women need and develop meaning-making practices in relation to abortion?

of aborted fetuses are very rare, even if they do occur. However, the idea of a funeral can exist in other forms, for example when one of the women tells about a symbolic funeral she carried out several years after the two abortions she had had. This woman describes how she created little figures of clay representing the fetuses. In relation to a bigger life crisis she travels out to the countryside to 'bury old stuff', and the clay figures are buried together with other items. In this woman's story the burial practice appears as an important part of her attempt at recovery after abortion experiences that in her case were partly traumatic. The woman-centred practices that appear in the data are of more diverse character. Some are examples of emotional abreactions, as when a young woman tells about how she broke furniture and decorative objects in her despair over the situation, and how important it was for her to do this. Other practices are examples of symbolic acts, like embracing a tree for gaining strength, sending out a basket on the sea with items connected to the pregnancy, or anonymously throwing a rose into the corridor at the clinic where the abortion had taken place.

Let me return to the distinction between the fetus-centred and the woman-centred practices here, and point out why it might be highly relevant to reflect on the distinction. A woman who expresses a need of a woman-centred practice can experience a fetus-centred practice as highly provocative. One of the young women in the pilot study makes clear that the thought of some kind of funeral feels horrible to her, since she believes it would make her into 'a murderer'. A funeral would 'make the fetus human', and this woman strongly resists such an interpretation. The complexity here is thus also connected to the issue of labelling. From a psychology of religion perspective what is important here is not the status of the fetus. While the ethical discussion around abortion has mainly concerned the question of when the fetus should be understood to be a human being with human rights, the discussion within the psychology of religion must focus the woman's viewpoints and the importance of these for her handling of and recovery after the abortion. From this perspective, what the pilot study suggests is, simply but significantly, that while some women want to avoid both notions and acts that humanize the fetus, such notions and acts seem to be central and even necessary for other women.

The importance of the secularized context becomes specifically clear in parts of the data. Two of the women—one older and one younger—point out the lack of an existential community, and describe this as problematic in relation to a situation like abortion. These women feel the lack of an arena where the experience of abortion can be shared and expressed. They also lack both

the ability and possibility to express experiences of life in a symbolic way. The young woman expresses it in the following words: 'In some ways, maybe, I would like there to be something, because when difficult things happen in life one would, if one could, turn to something that wasn't human . . . it would feel safe . . . and I don't feel I have that kind of safety.'

The results of the pilot study show that the need for symbolic acts or ritualizations exists, and that some women also enact specific practices to deal with their experiences of abortion. As this was a qualitative pilot study, the data are of course far too limited to say anything about how common these needs are among women going through an abortion. The data are also not detailed enough to give a clear picture of what forms of meaning-making practice might be part of a woman's coping process, and what forms might be detrimental to it. The stories told by these women, both those who have gone through abortions themselves, and the personnel who have encountered many women in the same situation, only point out that existential issues are an important part of the abortion process for some. The relation between meaning-making practices and the woman's coping and recovery after abortion needs to be further examined, and thus a larger qualitative and quantitative study on abortion experiences is presently under way at Uppsala University, as is described below.

Private solutions to an existential challenge

Before I leave the pilot study, I would like to return to my main question in this paper: What do people in a highly secularized context think, feel, believe and do in the presence of the ultimate questions? In relation to the abortion research presented here I want to deal with this question through the following four sub-questions:

- What can we learn about abortion from the perspective of the psychology of religion?
- What can we learn about individualized forms of meaning-making from the case of abortion?
- How can the issues discussed here contribute to the understanding of religiosity in contemporary Sweden?
- How can the pilot study inform further studies in the field?

As the two first questions are intertwined, I will present my discussion about them together, and move to the last two questions in the concluding parts of this article.

Looking at abortion from the perspective of the psychology of religion brings out aspects of the event that are not obvious from the clinical perspective. First of all it makes clear that there exists no common existential understanding of abortion. Instead, the medical point of view prevails. This is not a surprising result in a secularized and welfare-focused country like Sweden. But what the pilot study makes clear is that the clinical perspective cannot be understood as sufficient for understanding all the aspects that the abortion experience can involve. The situation includes making a serious decision, and many women experience strong emotions in relation to this. Today women have to find private forms of understanding and handling the event, and they mainly do this alone.

In the pilot study the word 'spirituality' is not used. However, looking at the study from Heelas and Woodhead's perspective, it becomes clear that when trying to create and express meaning out of the existential experiences related to abortion, the subjective life attitude completely dominates. All the examples of meaning-making in relation to abortion in the pilot study are of the subjective kind. Furthermore, neither the women who had had abortions nor the personnel interviewed referred to some overarching (life-as) meaning system in order to understand and interpret the event. Instead, the personnel displayed a subjective focus in following the labelling and interpretation of their patients or clients, not trying to force any kind of perspective on them. The same is true for meaning-making practices, and the examples in the study are thus both private and diverse in character. Let me point out also that the importance of the ideas and practices to the women that the study displays does not seem to be related to their proximity to the medical understanding of abortion, or their ability to otherwise rationally explain what happens when a woman goes through an abortion. Rather, ideas such as reincarnation, or practices such as a symbolical funeral seem to function as attempts at bringing comfort and existential comprehensibility to a complex situation—irrespective of their rational quality. The situation is thus rather paradoxical: we have here a rational culture that includes a high degree of religious privatization—which seems to lead to irrational forms of private meaning-making.

In the Enköping study Palmer found that to be spiritual in the individualized Swedish context could mean 'to stop'. His interviewees expressed a need to get away from people, information, schedules, expectations and responsibility. This is also discernible in most of the examples of meaning-making

practices in the pilot study. The practices that are described are carried out by the woman alone, or at the most, together with her partner. It is difficult to say, however, how much this is because the women want to get away from people, and how much it is a question of having no other options. Since public abortion rituals do not exist, and since abortion is a highly private experience, which is not easy to share for everyone, women probably have little alternative but to ritualize individually. In the Enköping study, Brian Palmer (2008: 291) points out that one effect of individualization is that we are forced to find private solutions to problems that have collective, as well as individual, roots. This, it seems, is also true for women going through abortion—in more than one sense.

The examples of meaning-making practices that the pilot study offers provide support for Palmer's understanding of individualized rituals. In order to get away from the everyday spaces of people, media and time schedules, the women describe how they go out to the countryside to hug a tree or bury figures of clay, or how they travel to the seashore to send out a basket over the water. They seek a secluded space of some kind and find a moment apart from scheduled time where they can focus on what they have gone through. One example is different in this sense: the woman who threw a rose into the clinic corridor. The space she chose was not secluded, but public, and she seems to have been compelled to quickly 'do her thing' and get off before being observed. Instead of getting away from scheduled time, she seems to have been performing her act in a rush. This example gives a picture of how public spaces can be employed for private meaning-making ends, perhaps because of the lack of better options. Individual forms of ritualization seem to exist in the tension between the power and the burden of ritual creativity. On one hand, individual ritualization opens up for a focus on ritual function in relation to the individual's experience and taste. On the other hand, individual ritualization also depends upon the creativity of the individual, who might be quite uncertain of how and where to express herself. The practice becomes an isolated event and if the individual lacks energy, so also in all probability will the act she performs.

This leads onto the case of existential homelessness of which the pilot study also gives examples. Needing some form of meaning-making practice does not necessarily lead to creating it. In relation to an existentially challenging event such as abortion, some women express a lack of direction and knowledge. Yes, some form of ritual to end this process would be a great idea, but how do you do it? Where do you go? The pilot study gave examples of ritual homelessness in the following three aspects: (1) a lack of ritual com-

petence, (2) a lack of comforting beliefs, and (3) a lack of a meaning-making community.

The effects of existential homelessness have not been studied, but an interesting topic for further research would be to look into the relationship between late modern medical phenomena such as stress-related disorders and the lack of meaning-making competence and possibilities in dealing with them.

Is there a spiritual revolution in Sweden?

How can the issues discussed here contribute to the understanding of religiosity in contemporary Sweden? Here I would like to return to the Enköping study, and Heelas and Woodhead's discussion of a spiritual revolution, and give some input to it out of my experiences from the pilot study, and my continuing research in the area.

Reporting the results from the Enköping study, Bromander argues that Enköping presents a picture of a religiously and spiritually disinterested Sweden, where the Christian tradition still keeps its dominant position. Bromander thus dismisses the idea of a spiritual revolution in the terms of the subjective turn. He continues to point out how what he calls an immanence religiosity—where spiritual beliefs have changed from the belief in a personal God to the belief of God as something within—has grown relatively strong (Bromander 2008: 76). However, Bromander (2008: 100) argues that this immanence religiosity does not seem to have made any particular impact on the lives of the Swedes. In the light of other parts of the Enköping study, as well as the abortion research presented here, this conclusion seems to be a bit premature. To begin with, although few of the Enköping citizens characterize themselves as 'religious' (only 6.5 %), about half of them report having had an experience outside the everyday forms (for example spiritual experiences in nature; experiences of answers to prayers, or experiences of contact with a deceased person). Erika Willander (2008: 268) also points out that there is a crucial difference between identifying oneself as spiritual and having spiritual experiences. What I want to argue here is that the subjective turn in Sweden should be understood in terms of two vital changes: (1) the change in beliefs—to more immanent forms of religiosity, and (2) the change in loyalty when it comes to organized meaning-making, both in terms of traditional religion and newer forms of spirituality.

In other words: more than half of an average population in Sweden still believe in something, and the same amount have had experiences that go beyond the ordinary ones. However, most people do not believe in a personal God and few want to describe themselves in either religious or spiritual terms. Especially if Willander's and Palmer's analyses are correct, and Swedish spirituality first and foremost should be understood as searching for moments to get away from the everyday rush, I believe there is good support for at least parts of Heelas and Woodhead's theory—the subjective turn is happening in Sweden. In spite of Bromander's analysis, I also want to argue that the immanent form of religiosity holds a tremendous importance in the lives of Swedish individuals. Believing in a God that reigns within, or an impersonal universal power gives little reason to take part in organized religious and spiritual practices. The best way to connect to what is sacred in life, if you uphold an immanent version of belief, is to turn inward—and thus what you need most of all is 'to stop', and to shut out other forms of input. I understand this as a kind of silent revolution—but an important one. It is a revolution that has great impact on people's lives—not so much in terms of new and exotic forms of spirituality, as in terms of what is being abandoned and why.

Future research

Finally, how can the pilot study presented here inform further studies in the field? The abortion field, as well as other existentially significant fields, presents numerous questions and possibilities for future research. My main interest after the pilot study was to investigate the representativity of the results, as well as collect more data to create a fuller picture of what forms meaning-making in relation to abortion can take.

Today, thus, a larger abortion project, organized as a cross-disciplinary collaboration between three institutions is being realised at Uppsala University. The institutions taking part are the Centre for the Study of Religion and Society, the Department of Women and Children's Health and the Department of Public Health and Caring Sciences. The project is also a part of the larger Impact of Religion programme at Uppsala University, involving several other faculties and institutions. The project is designed as a mixed method study with a qualitative interview study with 20–30 female patients from the Student's Healthcare Centre in Uppsala, combined with a quantitative questionnaire study including 1,500 abortion patients from 13 Swedish public abortion clinics. Hopefully, this project will provide a better

picture of women's experiences of abortion, as well as new insights into how people make meaning out of existentially demanding situations in a highly secularized society.

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