

Long and short term values: The different function of long-term church relationships and one-off experiences

A paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion, San Francisco, California, August 14, 2004

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Abstract

Main line churches are characterised by a life-long relationship with the church and a strong acceptance of the rites of passage (baptism and funerals). What happens – what logic comes into play – when people belong to this kind of church, but at the same time accept a variety of religious products from other providers? In a qualitative study of members of the Church of Sweden, two different sets of values emerged with respect to the life-long relationship on the one hand and occasional religious experiences on the other. Church belonging and participation in the rites of passage were motivated by long term collective values, while participation in worship and other one-off activities reflected rather more short term and individual values. This paper considers these differences from a theoretical perspective in order to understand increasing levels of religious choice alongside continuing acceptance of and adherence to the collective rites of passage.

Introduction: Majority religion in Sweden

The formal relationships between the state and the Church of Sweden have been continuously changing since the middle of the nineteenth century, from a situation of complete unity towards a separation of the church from the state, which was to a large extent completed on 1st January 2000. Relationships to the church have, even on an individual level changed through the increased privatisation of religion, a more commercial and market orientated attitude and a continuing decline in people's participation in the activities of the church. Relationships between society and church and individual and church respectively, have been broken up in a series of areas, while they remain and are further developed in some particular fields.

Nearly all Swedes have a, usually lifelong, relationship to the Church of Sweden and make use of the church's services at certain points during their lives, mainly in connection with baptism and burial. Statistic figures for 2003 shows that: 80 % of the Swedish population belong to the Church of Sweden, 86 % of all funerals take place within the Church of Sweden, 68 % of all Swedish infants are baptised in the Church of Sweden, 38 % of all 15 year old youth are confirmed in the Church of Sweden, 55 % of all marriages take place in the Church of Sweden (Church of Sweden 2003). Church of Sweden statistics show that only 1,3 % take part in Sunday service an ordinary Sunday. According to surveys 10 % of the population attend at least one Christian service per month (Gustafsson 1995). Most people are occasional users of the services of the church in view of their life perspective, but many are continuous users of the services of the church during a shorter or longer period of their lifetime.

When linking together all different sorts of contacts with the Church that an individual has during lifetime, it comes to several occasions for most Swedish people (figure 1). For some only children's baptisms and relatives burials, for others added with for example a period in a church choir or a period when their children participate in church activities.

Many people are regular consumers of church activities only during specific periods of life, being more passive in other periods without having an explicitly negative attitude to the Church. From the individuals perspective occasional service encounters and periods of more regular participation is forming a chain of services within a life long relationship with the Church.

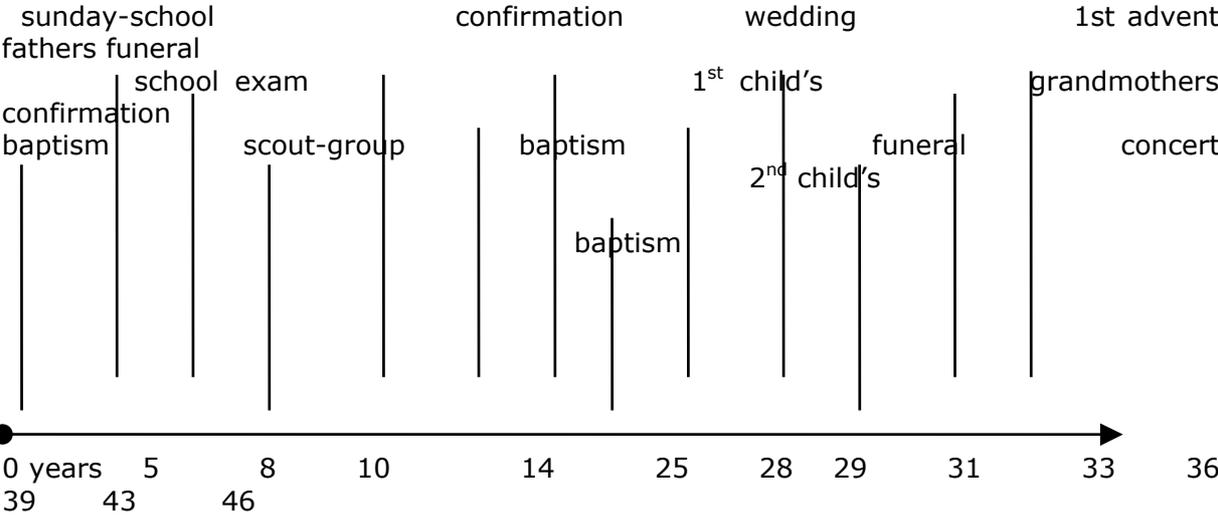


Figure 1: Sven Svensson 46 years old looking back. Relationship with the Church and the use of its services in a lifetime perspective, a fictive example.

At the same time as the church has almost completely lost its formal societal functions, the Church of Sweden's spiritual, caring and ethical services are being asked for in a new way within many areas of society, for example in schools and health care. Thus the development of relationships between individual and church are in many ways contradictory.

Aim and theoretical perspectives

This paper is built on a study with the aim to clarify the social mechanisms which affect people's relationships with the Church of Sweden. In the study interest was primarily focused on the majority of the Swedish population who belong to the Church of Sweden, but who rarely make use of its services. The aim was to understand the way in which members of the church understand and evaluate their relationships with the church and the services provided by the church, which they have made use of.

In the study and in this paper the relationship between the individual and the Church of Sweden is analysed from a service theory perspective. Theoretical concepts and research methods from service theory are applied in the church context, and related to sociological theory of religion. The concept service focuses on the receiver/customer, and her/his experience of church activities, especially the subjectively perceived quality.

Method

The empirical material has been collected using a qualitative case study method to understand individuals' experiences of their relationships to the Church of Sweden and the church's services. In the case study several qualitative methods complement each other through triangulation. Life perspective analysis and the Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan 1954) have been used within the framework of qualitative semi-structured face to face interviews. In the life perspective analysis the individuals' contacts with the Church of Sweden during their lifetime, have been mapped out. According to the Critical Incident Technique particular attention has been given to experiences of the church which in a negative or positive manner differ from what the individual expected (Stauss 1993). As a tool for this design a special interview guide has been constructed with open questions at the beginning and more structured questions at the end.

29 interviewees were chosen through a strategic selection process. Four municipalities with differing social characteristics and church tradition were chosen. Four groups of informants were selected from these four areas; people who have recently taken part in an infant baptism in their role as parents, people who have recently taken part in a funeral service as next of kin, people who have recently joined the Church of Sweden and people who have recently left the church. A wide spread has been sought after within the group of informants with respect to gender, age and education/profession. All interviews have been recorded on tape and written out in their entirety. A special model for analysis has been created according to which the interviews have been analysed from three different and yet complimentary perspectives; (A) inductive analysis with construction of categories, (B) analysis of the informants' answers to the structured questions at the end of the interview and (C) analysis with the use of service theoretical concepts as interpretative tools.

Main result

The main result of the study can be summarised as a number of clarified social mechanisms, which have influenced the informant's relationships to the church and their use of its services. In line with the viewpoint of critical realism, the concept mechanism is used to mean in social reality inherent tendencies, structures, powers and generative mechanisms. Since the qualitative methods used in the study does not allow generalisation, the mechanisms discovered can only be regarded as tentative and preliminary theories. The eventual possibilities for the generalisation of the mechanisms must be tested in quantitative studies or confirmed through a larger number of similar case studies.

One major notion from the interview analysis is that there is an interaction between the quality of the perceived separate service encounters with the church and the quality of the lifetime relationship (Figure 2).

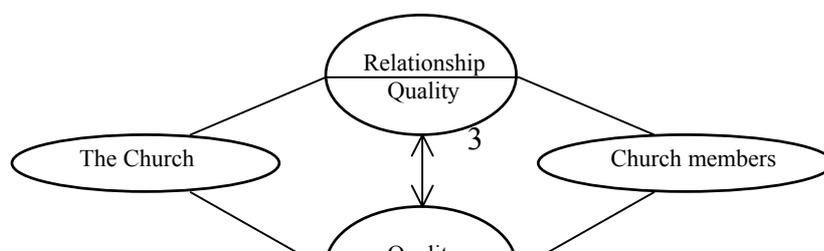


Figure 2: Model of the interaction between episode quality and relationship quality in the service relationship between Church members and the Church.

Quality experiences of service encounters interact with the experience of the quality in the church relationship when analysed from the life perspective of the informant. The importance which service research has given to negative and positive critical incidents in connection with service encounters has been shown to have relevance even as regards service encounters in the context of the church (cf Edvardsson & Strandvik 1999). The analysis shows further that different experiences of the church are connected with and compared to one another; service encounters with the church, the image of the church in the media etc. Occurrences and experiences from as far back as childhood can remain with a person until after retirement and can even after decades influence the perception of the church. Decisions to leave the formal relationship to the church as well as decisions to join are in most cases the result of a chain of positive and/or negative experiences in connection with encounters with the church. These experiences are usually spread out over a period of at least ten years. Informants that have changed their formal relationship usually cites one particular experience as the decisive one, but supports the reasoning behind a decision to leave or join with reference to further negative or positive experiences.

This paper is focused on one summarising result of the integrated interview analysis. It shows that the informants have more individualistic consumer behaviour with regard to certain services provided by the church, while consumer behaviour regarding other services is anchored in collective values. One and the same individual has for example often completely different attitudes to rites of passage as to regular worship activities. Participation in the rites of passage is motivated by reference to collective values, while participation in regular worship and other church activities is considered from the perspective of personal preference, interest, feelings, taste, etc. According to Andersson et al. (1997) there are different types of mechanisms that affect short term and long term consumer decisions respectively, as regards goods and services (figure 3). For example the need of security and a sense of coherence is strongest with regard to long-term decisions, while individual preferences take over regarding decisions of a short-term character. Social mechanisms at an individual level, like preferences, interact with social mechanisms like fashion and trends at a collective level.

The result of the study shows similar patterns concerning religion. Different religious consumer behaviour can correspondingly correlate to the time dimension that the particular service or religious value, for example belonging, is set within.

| Social mechanisms that affects the individuals religious consumption behaviour | | |
|---|--|---|
| | <i>Time dimension: short perspective</i> | <i>Time dimension: long perspective</i> |
| <i>Social mechanisms at an individual level</i> | Preference (e.g. individual taste) Individual demand | Needs (e.g. sense of coherence) Values (e.g. historic anchoring, importance of tradition) |
| <i>Social mechanisms at a collective level</i> | Fashion (e.g. religious symbols such as pieces of jewellery) Trends (e.g. the health trend) | Life style (e.g. active relationships with family and relatives) Ideology (e.g. cultural identity, religious, philosophical, ideological and political traditions) |

Figure 3: Social mechanisms that affects the individuals religious consumer behaviour (development of Andersson et al 1997:24)

The high adherence to the rites of passage fits with the needs and values that are important in a more long-term perspective. These have to do with history, relatives, the individual lifetime perspective and future generations. When it comes to participation in different forms of more time constrained short-term religious activities, for example ordinary Sunday services, individual preferences tend to take over. Thereby religious trends, for example different forms of eastern techniques and New Age spirituality, can be combined with the more long term motivated adherence to traditional religion expressed through membership of a mainstream church and participation in rites of passage in a traditional way. These two patterns of consumption complement each other in a similar way regarding religion as they do regarding other forms of consumption. The different consumer decisions are inserted into different time dimensions with different types of in built social mechanisms. These differences in consumer behaviour can act as a key to understanding the development towards an increasing level of individual choice regarding certain types of services provided by religious organisations in combination with a general adherence to the collective rites of passage.

The two different social mechanisms linked to different time dimensions was in different ways found in the content of the interviews. In the interview below a combination and interaction of the two time perspectives linked to different types of values was explicitly expressed by the informant.

The life time perspective of a 52 year old female shoe shop assistant (Figure 4)

She is single, divorced, has one child, emigrated from Finland to Sweden thirty years ago, was brought up in a Pentecostal parish in Finland. During her upbringing she and her parents belonged to both the Pentecostal church and the Evangelical-Lutheran church. When she moved to Sweden she became a member of the Church of Sweden but didn't find the same type of small family like Pentecostal parish to link to as a member, but she participated in the services of the local Pentecostal parish. After twenty years in Sweden she left the Church of Sweden and became a member of the Pentecostal parish. She says it was because of the fact that she participated in services in the Pentecostal church, but she never used the services in the church of Sweden. She was actively pushed to this decision by her aunt, who was very active in the Pentecostal parish.

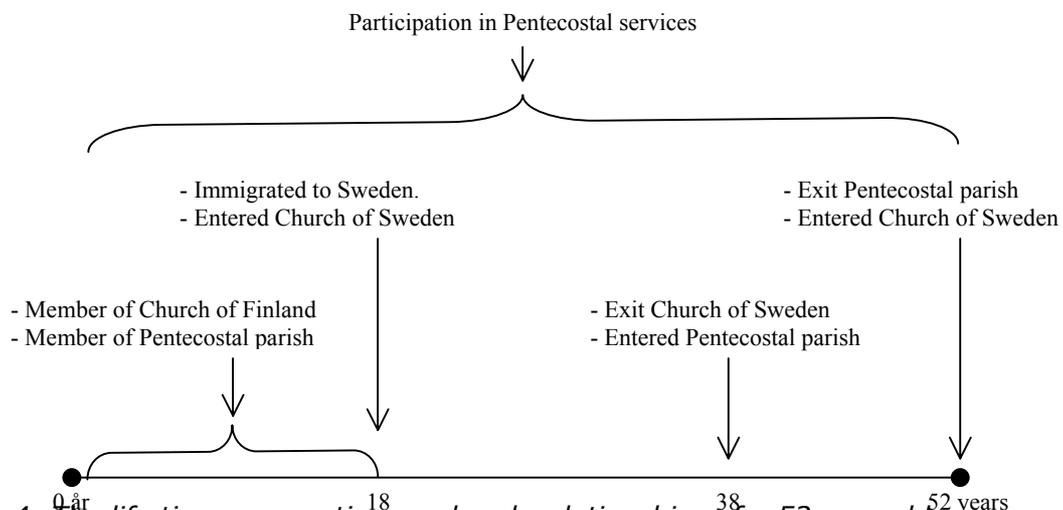


Figure 4: The life time perspective on church relationships of a 52 year old woman.

But today, after 14 years as a Pentecostal formal member, she feels that the Pentecostal parish direct too heavy demands on her when she is a member. Because of that she decided to leave the Pentecostal parish. Instead she has re-entered the Church of Sweden as a member. She says that it is important to belong somewhere, to be a member of a church. That gives a sense of belonging and peace within yourself. But when she has the need to participate in services, she still goes to the Pentecostal parish and its church hall. Thus she is a member of the Church of Sweden, but participant in the Pentecostal services. She says that the services of the Church of Sweden are too formal and impersonal. But she also refers to positive experiences of the Church of Sweden in connection with the burial ceremony for her previous husband.

She says that she would leave the Church of Sweden only if she then would enter as a member of another church. She stresses the importance of belonging somewhere.

Discussion

In a majority church system, such as in Sweden, one and the same church organisation provides a social system for a common belonging for most people. This social system inherits buildings, symbols, historic and cultural artefacts and different other resources that can link the individual to something bigger, "transcendental", than her/himself (Durkheim 1912/1995, Bellah 1970/1991, Hervieu Léger 2000, Davie 2001). Thus having a church relationship gives access to a series of further relationships (figure 5).

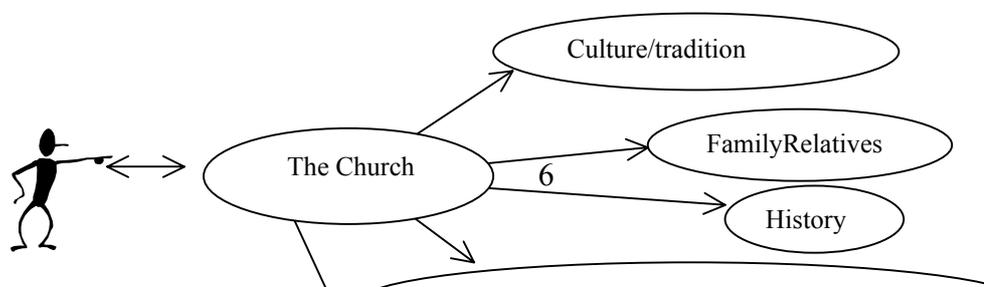


Figure 5: The relationship to the Church as a distributor of different other relationships to collectively related values.

The relationship to the Church gives access to:

- A relationship to culture and tradition
- A relationship to family/relatives
- A relationship to history
- A relationship to the transcendental/a higher power/God
- A relationship to other Christians around the world (a global community)

This is a part of the explanation of the fact that several of the informants perceive the relationship itself, through church membership as a service. Church membership gives access to a series of surplus values in the form of relationships with collective transcendental values and links the individual to the collective. In a simplified manner it could be said that many Swedes 'believe' in church membership. Davie (1994) characterised the relationship of the English population to the church with the expression "believing without belonging". Botvar (1996) reverses this formula in his description of the religious situation in Norway, which according to him is characterised by "belonging without believing". Starting from the same type of word game, with emphasis on the meaning of membership one could describe the relationship of the Swedish population to the church as "believing in belonging" (Bäckström 1993).

Many people understand the integrative function of the Church of Sweden as a form of welfare factor. People do not want to be without the security, anchorage and sense of coherence which membership of the church and the services of the church give. This is manifested in the persisting high figures in church membership and adherence to the life rites, especially baptism and funeral. But when it comes to services that are linked to more short term individually oriented values the church competes in a market with many different actors. From the individuals point of view this type of more occasional, differentiated and often specialised church supply (activities for children, special services, discussion evenings etc.) is valued differently since it is linked to other types of quality parameters.

Conclusion

In order to better understand divergent religious patterns the notion of different religious consumer decision mechanisms linked to different time dimensions needs to be further investigated.

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