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THEORIZING FRIENDSHIP
On church and friendship in post-modernity

Abstract

This article proposes that a sociology of friendship may be used to explain the state of the evangelical church under post-modern conditions. Earlier studies on friendship have been coupled with a number of qualitative interviews made with members of three local congregations in Sweden. The findings include that a variety of friendships are developed and maintained in church. These however, need to be coupled with other friendships in order to make church life meaningful. The most important parameter in this effort is that of sameness and diversity.

Key words: modernity, friendship, church, sameness, diversity, volatility, permanence, evangelical, intimacy

Introduction

As the title shows, this article is about friendship and organized religion in a post-modern era. It might strike the reader that this is an odd combination – isn’t friendship something of the past, belonging to a traditional rather than a post-modern society? A reader initiated in sociological theory might ask herself if friendship isn’t one of those relationships, along with class and family that today are becoming less important. But as this article proceeds, it will become obvious that friendship as we conceive it is very much a relationship in touch with post-modernity.

Also, organized religion is said to lose ground to private religion: why bother about it? One answer to that question is that the associations of civil society, of which religious groups are an integral part, still perform important welfare services and that they help bring people together in meaningful relationships.

This article is an attempt to theorize friendship relations out of earlier studies and literature on friendship, and out of a number of interviews done with members from Evangeliska Frikyrkan, EFK – InterAct, a Swedish denomination in a Baptist tradition. This article is not about testing a hypothesis, but its ambition is to contribute to the development of a theory on friendship, and to show how such a theory can help us understand the state of organized religion. I wish to propose that the sociology of
friendship may be used to explain one aspect of the state of organized religion under post-modern conditions. The concepts proposed later on are to be considered findings of this study.

This article will proceed as follows: First something is said about research design and method. Thereafter follows a review of the sociology of friendship. After that I take a look at the research made up of the interviews. Last, there is a discussion where theory and empirical data are coupled to each other.

Research design and method

My method is to let theory and empirical data inform each other. I start out in theory and data at the same time and then go back and forth. There are some similarities here to the approach of grounded theory, although this is not a GT study (Glaser and Strauss 1967). After a while, a web of information takes form. From this I abstract key concepts that tell us something about the meaning and state of friendship relations within EFK.

In my doctoral thesis (Lundberg 2005), I conducted semi structured interviews with nine men and women, born 1968–77, and with an involvement within EFK - Evangeliska Frikyrkan (www.efk.se), a traditional Swedish free church denomination. Five of them are men, four are women. They live in three different locations, spread around Sweden where they are members of their local congregation. In the interviews I asked for the meaning they attach to their membership of a local church and what their friendships look like. I also asked them about friendships outside of their religious commitment to spot possible differences between friendship within and without church. In this article I reuse the interviews but set them in relation to a partly new set of theory.

EFK (www.efk.se) is a minority church with 30 000 members divided on 330 congregations in Sweden. It emphasises international mission and the local congregation, and describes itself as baptist, evangelical, charismatic and mission-oriented. I believe there is reason to consider the findings of this article valid for other churches with a similar emphasis on evangelisation and the local congregation.

When using the concept post-modern, I consider myself a sociologist of post-modernity, rather than a post-modern sociologist. That is, I am trying to understand the present era by using a more or less classical sociological toolbox (see Bauman 2001). Thus, I do not subscribe uncritically to the opinion (in line with the so called linguistic turn) that nothing can be said about social structures, social order or social class (See Lemert 1997; Maffesoli 1996). Rather, I consider it pivotal to look out for points in social life where still «a renewal of historical agency could start out» (Wagner 1992:485). What is valuable with the concept of post-modernity, as opposed to high or late modernity, is its strong emphasis on the notion of change and new preconditions for the ways people relate to each other (see Lyotard 1984; Bauman 1993; Maffesoli 1996; Fukuyama 1999; Touraine 2000).
Friendship


Friendship of utility has as its objective that which is useful: we make friends with those who can help us out with the things we need. A friend of utility is someone who helps us with the garden chores or helps us making career moves. According to Doyle and Smith (2002), friendship of utility seems to occur …

… most frequently between the elderly […] and those in middle or early life who are pursuing their own advantage. Such persons do not spend much time together, because sometimes they do not even like one another, and therefore feel no need of such an association unless they are mutually useful (Doyle and Smith 2002).

Friendship of pleasure takes as its object that which is pleasant: we make friends with people whom we find pleasant or humorous or with whom we may drink beer or make music. According to Doyle and Smith (2002) friendship among young people is often considered to be grounded in pleasure since the lives of the young are regulated by their feelings.

But both of these friendships are impermanent. With the disappearance of the ground for friendship, friendship itself breaks up. To Aristotle the remedy is friendship of virtue, based on goodness: it exists between «good people and similarly merited individuals» (Aristotle 1967:225). Aristotle here emphasizes a similar character in men of noble birth, men born to leadership positions in the Greek polis. It is an intimate and exclusive friendship, possible only for a small (male) fraction of Greek society, which of course contrasts with a modern view of man. But there are some themes in Aristotle’s friendship of virtue that are of interest for our purposes.

First, there is the theme of sameness (and by inference its opposite: diversity). Ray Pahl (2000, 2002) speaks of friendship of virtue as a mirror; as an experience of seeing oneself in another person. This is to see oneself in a mirror and to be pleased with what one sees. Second, there is the theme of intimacy which in turn seems to match the modern ideal of a soul mate, someone to whom we stand close, maybe even closer than we are to a spouse or a parent. Third, there is the theme of permanence and volatility in friendship relations. Fourth there is the theme of utility or instrumentality.

More recent sociologists have picked up the theme of friendship and produced some interesting writing. Allan Silver (1989, 1990) is opposed to the idea that friendship as a theme belongs to a pre-modern era. Drawing on Scottish enlightenment thinker Adam Smith, Silver claims that friendship as we conceive of it is a uniquely modern phenomenon. He suggests the capitalist system is a sine qua non for the development of friendship relations: «Only with impersonal markets in products and services does a parallel system of personal relations emerge whose ethic excludes exchange and utility.» (Silver 1990:1494)

Pahl (2000, 2002) acknowledges Silver’s contribution and sets out to show the specifically modern functions of friendship relationships. Friendships are, according to
Pahl, the backdrop against which we tend to form our identities. In a pre-modern society, family and kinship relations informed us on who we were. Today, this task is taken over by friends. It is among his or her friends that a person becomes who he or she is. In Pahl’s words:

The crucial issue … is to know what … is replacing kinship obligations, civic responsibility and the mutual care and reciprocities engendered by being trapped in communities of fate. … Whether or not these contemporary social bonds are becoming more firmly based on friends and friendship is an issue of fundamental importance (Pahl 2000:5).

Friendship to Pahl (2000) is a matter of choice, which goes well with the more general conviction that individual autonomy is at the heart of modernity (see Taylor 1989). Even kin and family members seem to be a matter of choice when we make ourselves intimate with some of our kin and estrange ourselves from others (Fischer 1982; Pahl 2000).

But if the matter of choice seems to be uncontested, sociologists disagree on how friendship is related to social structure. There is a demarcation line between authors who consider friendship a purely dyadic relationship, and those who insist on considering friendship from a structural perspective, setting it in context.

Anthony Giddens (1991, 1992) emphasizes the private nature of friendship. He speaks of a transformation of intimacy, which allegedly leaves us with what he calls pure relationships. These relationships have a private nature:

In contrast to close personal ties in traditional contexts, the pure relationship is not anchored in external conditions of social or economic life – it is, as it were, free-floating (Giddens 1991:89).

To Giddens, at least in this text, friendship is a dyadic relationship, with no implications for social structure. Graham Allan disagrees. He has done extensive work on placing friendship in context, showing how friendship is dependant on social structures. Allan, together with Rebecca G Adams states that:

Individuals do not generate their relationships in a social or economic vacuum, any more than they do in a personal vacuum. Relationships have a broader basis than the dyad alone, they develop and endure within a wider complex of interacting influences which help to give each relationship its shape and structure (Adams and Allan 1998:2).

As an example, Allan has shown how different social groups order their friendship ties in differing ways (Allan 1996). That is: the way people live their lives together is deeply formed by their place in class hierarchies.

Political scientist Bruce Cronin (1999) points out the other side of the coin in his study Community under Anarchy. He shows how common social identities among political elites create trans-national identities through which deeper and more cohesive forms of cooperation between nations may come to pass. Thus, friendship relations are able to carry implications for the world order: common identities are important for all of us, even for the greatest of our leaders.
Anders P. Lundberg: Theorizing friendship

Probably the best known of friendship theorists, Robert Putnam (1993, 2000) shows how the trust and generalized reciprocity that arise in voluntary associations help to make a society healthier, richer and happier. The concept of trust, or social capital, has been influential in political philosophy during the last 15 years and has given rise to a multitude of studies among scholars ranging from such different disciplines as epidemiology (Szreter and Woolcock 2004) and economics (Cooke 2007). The Swedish debate on civil society has (sometimes reluctantly) confirmed the importance of networks and friendship relations in producing welfare services and a general sense of well being (Zetterberg 1997; Berggren and Trägårdh 2006; Jeppson Grassman and Svedberg 1999). One important part of civil society is organized religion. Even though religion has been somewhat neglected in general Swedish sociology, there may be reason to believe that it will attract more attention in the future as it comes to play a larger role as «community and identity shaping life forms, not to mention them as […] producers of education and social service» (Svedberg and Trägårdh 2006:17).

Michael Eve (2002) speaks of the necessity for sociology to learn from social anthropology and to begin seeing how friendship and kinship relations are at the bottom of social structure. Eve mentions the work of Mark Granovetter, a well known study on how people get jobs (Granovetter 1973, 1974). In his study Granovetter finds that it is not the closer ties, such as family and kin that help get a job, but rather what he labels weak ties. The implication of Granovetter’s study is that

… the experience of individuals is closely bound up with larger-scale aspects of social structure, well beyond the purview of particular individuals» (Granovetter 1973:1377).

Eve (2002) agrees with this conclusion, but remains critical of Granovetter’s tendency to study exchanges and the manipulating of personal ties in order to achieve a goal of one’s own. In Eve’s view this focus on the exchange per se, the point where «something valuable passes hands between individuals», easily distracts from the relationship itself and the interaction which makes this exchange possible. Rather, Eve suggests that sociology should direct its attention to the question

… what kind of ties constitute the substratum making the individual exchanges possible. In other words, to the various relationships of personal and organizational relationships which form the backcloth to exchange. It is in the knitting and maintenance of these ties that friendship (as also other kinds of relationships) may have its greatest significance (Eve 2002:395).

As with Aristotle, the more recent writers present us with some central themes of friendship. One is that friendship may be considered a modern phenomenon, intimately related to capitalist society. A second theme is how friendship is related to social structure. A third theme is that of identity: as Pahl (2000) claims, friendship relations seem to have taken over the task of telling us who we are. A fourth theme is that of trust.

This gives us a number of themes drawn from Aristotle and his more recent colleagues. These are: sameness/diversity, intimacy, permanence/volatility, utility, modernity, identity, trust, and effect upon social structure. It is my intention to use these themes as building stones when proposing a more elaborate definition of friendship. In
my view, it is a problem that so far we haven’t been able to advance our definition of friendship beyond that of Aristotle. Even though the attempts of Allan, Pahl, Eve, etc., have been promising in the pursuit of showing that friendship should be studied in relation to social structure, and that it is important to study friendship in its own right, the question remains: who is to be counted as a friend? When speaking of friends, do we think of those two or three soul mates that one may have, or do we mean every acquaintance, everyone that one may «know» or every person that is part of one’s individual network?

I suggest we use two polarizations, taken from Aristotle, to create a four square giving us four types of friendship. First there is a separation between sameness and diversity. Then let us separate between permanence and volatility. This will give us four types of friendship which I will call friendship of character; friendship of trust; friendship of life style; and friendship of instrumentality.

1. Friendship of character is a democratized version of Aristotle’s friendship of virtue. It represents the image of the ideal, intimate, genuine and everlasting friendship; similar to the ideal of the soul mate of post modern society. It is a relationship based on sameness, and it is a lasting, permanent relationship. We may find such friendship a few times during our life course. But it may also remain an unattainable ideal. Generally speaking, friendship of character may be more important as an ideal, or the dream of the ultimate relationship in post-modern society, than it is as a real phenomenon in itself. But to understand this ideal is to understand something vital about post-modern man.
2. Friendship of trust is a permanent relationship and one of diversity. It is not something we can find with Aristotle. Rather, it is a modern phenomenon and related to the discussion about civil society. Alexis de Tocqueville (2001), after his trip to America in 1831 speaks of the popular associations of the country: «Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions, constantly form associations.» In Richard Heffner’s (1956:19) words, these associations gave «individual men strength and substance in minor matters, prepare them for larger responsibilities, and perform functions that government would otherwise assume». Friendship of trust arises in such associations where people although different in many ways, learn to know each other. This lies close to Robert Putnam’s (2000) idea of social capital as mutual reciprocity or – trust. Friendship of trust is the same phenomenon as that which I elsewhere have labelled stable community. I describe it as a permanent relationship since it is based on an organizational structure where people meet regularly over time, and since the group share a common ethic that goes beyond the group itself (Lundberg 2005, 2006).

3. Friendship of life style is a volatile relationship and one of sameness. It is a genuinely post-modern phenomenon and one that is becoming increasingly accentuated during post-modernity. As post structuralism has taught us, social structures no longer can be taken for granted: as to the question «who am I?» post-modern man no longer finds any natural or obvious answers. Rather, we need to find out for ourselves. In this process, we tend to align with, and find security among others whom we perceive to be of our own kind; people who seem to be living lives similar to our own lives. As Pahl says, this is the friendship that tells us who we are. It is a matter of search-for-identity. Or we might say, with Robert Bellah et al. (1985) that the groups that form around friendship of life style are life style enclaves. This may also be called the homophily principle: as McPherson et al. (2001) say: «similarity breeds connection». Friendship of life style is the same as elsewhere I have labelled casual community (Lundberg 2005, 2006).

4. Friendship of instrumentality likens Aristotle’s friendship of utility and friendship of pleasure. It is a friendship that is based on diversity and it is volatile. At the centre is instrumentality. One could say there is a strand of rational choice in this relationship, usefulness in one way or another is at the core. We have large groups of friends like this. These are the weak ties that Granovetter (1974) speaks of in his study on getting a job. We use other people for our purposes, but we also let ourselves be used. This friendship is volatile, it is weak, but it is also practical and useful. Utility may focus on practical issues as well as on cognitive, emotional or meaning-creating issues.

Analysis of the interviews

The local EFK congregation seems full of friendship ties. Måns, 32, studies to be a pastor: he is overwhelmed by the sense of fellowship in his congregation. He recently moved with his family to live in a new housing estate. In the area he joined a very lively church. He says:
It is as if I’ve been living here for ten years – good relations with I don’t know how many people, families and stuff. It’s the congregation that does it. If I had moved in here and there hadn’t been a structure for it, it would have been totally different. […] But now there is a congregation here […] and you get right in there, into a context, and within a year you can feel that ‘I’ve been living here for a long time’.

All of the informants claim they have most of their friends within church. Emma, a nurse of 28, speaks of church as a «home to go to» and of her fellow members as «brothers and sisters». She says: «It may sound like a cliché, but the congregation is my spiritual family.»

Still, there are different qualities to the friendships within church. According to Emma there are some people that she can share more freely with than with others; these are people with whom she has had time to develop a trustful relationship. She also says there is «only room for so many in our daily life».

Jenny, a pre-school teacher of 32, also speaks of a varying intimacy among the friendships she has in church. She stresses that in the different places she and her husband have been living, and in the churches where they have been participating, they have always had some other couple that they feel they have been especially close to; she calls them «blood brothers».

As we shall see, my informants speak of all four kinds of friendship that I have mentioned in the four square. Above, Emma and Jenny allude to the intimate friendship of character, but this is the type of friendship that is spoken the least of. Instead, more is being said of friendship of trust, friendship of life style, and friendship of utility.

**Diversity**

Generally speaking, friendship of trust may be considered an exception. As I have pointed out earlier (Lundberg 2005), a more typical form of post-modern friendship is friendship of life style where aesthetics, consumption and identity are in focus (Featherstone 1994). Similarity and volatility are sometimes considered the hallmarks of post-modern friendship (Maffesoli 1996; Bauman 2000).

Still friendship of trust is to be found among the interviewees. Some of them state quite clearly that diversity is an integral part of the positive experience of being a church member. Others turn the argument around and say that diversity ought to be the rule in for example cell groups: that is, there is an ideal of the church as place of diversity, but this diversity is not always felt to be present.

Peter, a high school teacher of 33, speaks of the church as a unique constellation. To him it is a place where people who are actually quite different from each other meet. He says:

I have given it a lot of thought, and I’m attracted by the congregation, as an idea, as a fellowship, as the thought of a group, a number of people of different ages and different parts of life, who try together to find and create that which God wants. There’s an incredible dynamic in it that I’ve chosen to believe in.
Jenny has an image of the church that is similar to Peter’s. She points out that there is a difference between being part of a church and being part of just any voluntary association, like for example a sports association. The difference to Jenny consists in the quality of fellowship:

You have like a deeper fellowship … a deeper common denominator in the congregation, because it’s about life and death so to speak. I’m sure that there are people that are so deeply involved that it becomes a matter of life and death, but to me all of my wellbeing, all of my existence, what I can think about afterlife, everything; one has like a deeper common denominator.

The difference between church and the sports association is to Jenny a matter of similarity and diversity. Jenny claims that in a sports association, everybody wants to make sports, and so they do. In church on the other hand, people want to believe in Jesus; «But how should this be done, and what kind of activity should it be?» She says: «It is so much more difficult to get it together since you are dealing with so many [different] people.»

Magnus, a project leader of 30, is the chairman of his congregation. The members of the board range in age from 30 to 75. This isn’t always easy. Still he says:

And just about the best part is, when the oldest person on the board – and he has done this on a couple of occasions when we sit there discussing – says that ’Now I understand how you’re thinking.’ Because it isn’t that self evident that you’re thinking the same way. Since you don’t have the same outlook when you’re 30 as when you’re 75. But to find it, is a lot of fun.

Peter, Jenny, and Magnus sense there is diversity at the bottom of the relationships among the members of their churches. This in turn creates a special dynamic, depth and joy.

**Similarity**

But even if there is an element of diversity in the relationships within church, to a large extent members still tend to group up according to life style. Hanna is 30 and works at a Christian mission organization. She just had a son, who requires most of her time during the day. Still she finds the time to meet other mothers at home with their children. She says «There are quite a few from the congregation who are at home with their children». Hanna has most or all of her friends in church, but more specifically the ones she sees at the present are the other mothers with small children.

Mats, a student of 26, tells a similar story. It was the everyday fellowship in his church that convinced him to move to the housing estate where his church was active. He experiences this fellowship as «genuine and honest» in a way that he had not experienced before. His best friends, and the people he spends the most time with, are a group of other young men from church who all share his specific passion for music and children’s ministry. He says:

I see myself as a very active person. I’m on the board for one: that’s not really where my heart is at, but I do it, I’m the secretary. Then I do music, worship […]. Then also, I’m in the children’s
ministry: I hold children’s meetings with a group of other guys … It’s me, and X, Y and Z. … We go to other churches where we hold children’s meetings. […] We have a lot of fun together, a really good time. We have our band, and we have the children’s meetings. And it all came out of our fellowship in some way.

Emma shares the ideal of church as a place of diversity. But when speaking of the cell group that she leads together with her husband, she complains about how similar the members of the group are:

And even if often times I can feel like ‘Oh…’ … because we only have young people in our cell group … ‘…the dream would have been to have different ages and different interests’, but it has turned out to be a youth [group] … maybe from high school age and up to 35.

The ideal thus seems to be that church should be a place of diversity. To some extent this is the case. But the local congregation also is a place where diversity and similarity meet; where different friendships meet and sometimes blend. Church seems to be a mixture of friendship of trust across diversity lines on the one hand, and friendships of life style on the other hand, where people group up according to their age, sex, marital status and maybe social status. It is actually quite complex, but there is room both for diversity and similarity.

But while my informants appreciate the friends they have in church, there is frustration over a sense of being isolated or caught up in a subculture. The informants express three things: a desire for life style friends outside of church; a desire for friends who think differently about life, and who they believe can enrich their lives; and a desire for friends to whom they can be of assistance. The two last points I will call friendship of instrumentality.

Similarity from outside

Emma speaks of her desire to engage with people who are not necessarily members of the same church but with whom she shares a situation in life. She speaks of the cell group that she heads together with her husband:

We’ve been leaders for a long time now. … We’ve had to deal with people who are new believers, or people who are on their way back, or who are about to leave us. Sometimes I long for being in a group of normal people. … No, that’s not what I mean, absolutely not, but still where you can feel that … We’ve grown as leaders now, and it has been really good, but I would like to grow as a Christian too. Maybe I should just have fellowship with other mothers, and kind of grow as Christian mothers.

Emma is careful to point out that the cell group is a place to provide church members with a sense of being part of a smaller group than the church at large. Ideally, this should be a place where people are made visible among others, where friendship is possible. Still, it doesn’t seem to work as well as Emma would like. As a complement to friends in church, she craves for friendship with other «normal people», that is, other mothers and women in her position: people like herself.
Jenny has a similar experience. She tells the story of getting married and moving to the countryside in northern Sweden. Coming from a large congregation she had been associating exclusively with other members of that church. Now things changed:

Since I moved here [...] I would say I associate with more people who do not belong to church than with people who do. And it has been so rewarding. [...] In such a small village where I live, you are referred to others in your own situation. [...] You can have a really good time together, because you do the same things. Quite simply, you lead the same life and you have a wonderful exchange.

To Jenny it was a relief to have friends from outside church, friends with whom she shares a life style. Just as in Emma’s case, the group of friends that Jenny speaks of are a group of mothers at home, taking care of their small children, as does Jenny.

Besides Jenny, Magnus is the other person who actually says that a large part of his friends comes from outside of church. These friends are a group of former work mates that have kept contact. They have a stock club «as an excuse to get together» and they have a sauna together every once in a while. These friends of Magnus «are people that are approximately my own age, and about the same situation in life; young families and stuff.» When I ask him what these friends bring him that he doesn’t feel he can get in church, he answers quite frankly that:

Without associating with people outside of church, you’d go under! [...] It scares me when it becomes too introvert. [...] For my part, I very much would like to have friends who are not raised in church.

Several of the interviewees express that as they were younger they associated exclusively with friends from church. Jenny says that as a teenager she never did anything outside of church. When her class mates went dancing or drinking, she stuck to her Christian friends whom she felt more alike.

David says of his teens:

I couldn’t see the value in hanging with those who were not Christians. I don’t know if I was afraid of meeting them, if I was afraid of being affected in a negative way, and that that risk was bigger than me affecting them.

But this polarization during the teens, where similarity was felt with church people and not with outsiders, is something they say they have grown out of. Jenny now has more friends outside of church, people with whom she lives a common life. This even affects her religious faith:

It feels like faith is much easier now; it is everyday. There is no demand to do things outside of my own life style. My faith, it is me now, the way that I live.

While church life seems to be enough as a life style and identity marker during a person’s teens, things change when that person grows older. There may be a need to stick to one’s own age group and sex even in adulthood, but as life develops in different
directions, friendships need to follow suit. The local congregation sometimes consciously arranges this, through cell groups where church members are grouped together according to age and interests. This may partially be a successful strategy, but it is not enough.

More diversity
Besides similarity the informants speak of a desire for diversity of thought and of lifestyle. This is a friendship of instrumentality in that diversity is found not with people belonging to or even potentially belonging to EFK, but rather with outsiders who most probably will remain outsiders. The relation itself is not in focus, but rather on acquiring something through it.

Hanna says she feels she is getting isolated. When asked whether she would like to change anything in her life, she answers:

Yes, in that case it would be to get to know a few people who are not Christians. As I work at a Christian place and since we have a lot of fellowship here, you don’t get to know that many non-Christians. So you get isolated, you don’t know how other people think.

David says the same thing. When he is asked what he would like to change in his life, he says he would like to put more priority on relationships. To whom? David says:

Since I meet mostly other Christians, then [I would like to meet] more non-Christians; people with different opinions. I have a neighbour who is politically active on the left, I have just talked a little bit to her.

Pia, 31, is a pre-school teacher. She works at a Christian school but has her doubts about whether it is a good thing for a child to go to such a school. She says about her own son that it is important that he meet children outside of the Christian world:

I want him to know that others don’t always think the way we do. I think it is important that he sees that as a child.

Emma says it is a «tragic thing» that most of her friends are Christians. She speaks of a friend that she used to study with. He works as a journalist, and according to Emma, he «has a lot of views that differ from mine». This she feels, sharpens her intellect, and even sharpens her religious faith. Lately she has been talking to her husband about the possibility of catching up with her friend again. Emma says:

What I can’t test is not worth believing in. That’s the way I function. I enjoy it when Jehova’s witnesses knock on the door, because it really makes me push my brain. … I am surrounded by people who constantly agree with me, because I am surrounded by people who think and feel like I do. … This weakens my intellect.

Peter too says he wishes he had been associating more with people who did not have a clear opinion on God and the church, or who at least had one that differed from Peter’s
own. According to Peter it is a value in itself to meet people who view things differently; «in order to confront one’s own view of things»:

Somehow that’s the point of living: when you stop thinking, reflecting, when you stop learning new things … somewhere there’s a line where life almost stops itself.

Besides the desire for friends who think differently, the informants speak of a wish to meet with people who live different lives. When asked whether there is anything in his life that he would like to change, Mats says he would like to take more time to meet spontaneously with other people. He wishes for his home to be a place where people are free to visit. When asked specifically what people he has in mind, he says he thinks of people who need someone to talk to or who need being taken care of. He says:

I long to meet people, to show God in deeds, in deeds of solidarity, to share, to help people, to meet them, to come outside of the walls of church. Hadn’t I been active in church, I think I would’ve been politically active.

Måns who lived in Turkey for several years enjoys associating with Muslims, especially Turks. He says he wants to get outside of his «inward life» with family and church, and meet other people. Specifically, he would like to take the time and go once a week to the Muslim café where he lives. He says:

First of all, I would like to meet some non-believers; you meet, sit down and have tea, get to know each other. And it’s a part of me that I want to share my conviction, my faith. … And to be there in a social way; maybe someone needs help with the social authorities, I would love to do such things.

To Måns, there is a wish to be part of a bigger picture, «not only to live my own little life and live in my own comfortable little world». Peter says the same thing. He feels he is partly responsible for other people’s well-being and that living for other people is «the only way to a life that is meaningful». Peter has a wish «not only to see myself as the centre of the universe, but to live as a part of something bigger».

Magnus relates his friendship with a group of old work mates to a desire to be a Christian witness. He says he loves to «win people for God»: «Not that I press it down their throats; it’s rather the other way around, that they ask me questions.» To Magnus, it is the greatest satisfaction in life to share with other. He says: «Without these contacts, there is no natural way to pass it on.»

Through friendships of instrumentality, the informants feel personal growth and an expansion of their thinking. Also, these relationships are opportunities to live their faith, to set faith in action. Also important is that these friendships are a reality check (Shibutani 1987) and a way to keep the balance in post-modernity.
Discussion

There is in post-modernity a contradiction between similarity and diversity.

On one hand, diversity is hailed. Post-modern theory teaches us there is nothing inherently natural about social structures such as class, nationality, sex, etc. Rather, these are historical and social constructions. Man, in this view, is thought of as a subject with no natural or self evident grounding in social structures. With this in mind, Touraine (2000) says we have to let go of, or «lose our identity», and he calls for a retreat to a «personal life project» in order to safeguard man from being torn apart by the contradicting demands of post-modernity (Touraine 2000:3, 13). In the end, we are thought to have become a multitude of diverse human beings who can only live together if we recognize and tolerate this diversity.

On the other hand, similarity seems to be the way people actually handle the stress of post-modernity. This has given rise to a new focus on communities. Touraine (2000) and Bauman (2001) claim this is where the new totalitarian communities surface: the religious or the nationalist groups who seek to force their way of life upon others. The communitarians like MacIntyre (1988) or Putnam (2000) on the other hand, say communities are the remedy for a society that leaves humans isolated from each other and that has forgotten how to speak of common interests and obligations. According to Putnam the trust that arises in associations is what makes a complex society work, in spite of the diversity of its inhabitants.

My informants reflect this contradiction of diversity and similarity. Members of EFK have various friendships, presupposing diversity or similarity. On one hand I find there is an amount of friendship of trust in the local congregations of my informants. The informants are fascinated by these friendships: they may be difficult to manage, but they can also be rewarding when they work. On the other hand there is a tendency to come together in groups of life style friends, people sharing the specifics of age, sex, marital status etc. Church is a place where different kinds of friendship mix, and sometimes blend.

Considering this result, one may think that all is well with EFK. It seems to be an environment where friendship of trust can grow, and where at the same time friends of life style may confirm each other in their common identities.

But this is not the whole picture. Rather, there is a sense of being trapped or isolated in church. The informants claim they need the outside world or they will, as one informant says, go under. In their teens, church seemed enough in providing friendships of life style, nothing else was needed. But as they grow older and life becomes more complex and diversified, they have a need for friends of life style outside of church.

It seems that some of the informants expect too much from their friends in church. There is an effort to make church, and the cell group, into a place where the participants have a sense of belonging: «family» is a frequently used metaphor. This becomes a problem when members expect to have all their relational needs fulfilled in church. Rather, there is a need for the confirmation of life style friends from outside church.

But there is yet another side to this, the wish for friends who think and live differently, or friendship of instrumentality. These friends are not the close friends of char-
acter and not the friends of life style that tell a person who he is. Rather these are friends that challenge us to see new aspects of life. Also they make us step momentarily out of the narrow worlds in which we feel we live. Friendship of instrumentality is where the informants learn about a bigger reality and where their own convictions and life style is checked against this reality. It makes them feel part of a bigger world. These friends of utility are wanted in order to give witness and in order to live one’s faith; there is a desire to pass on what one has received. Instrumentality is a word with negative connotations, but instrumentality often goes two ways when both parties benefit from a relationship (Simmel 1978).

Some final notes: It is important for churches who wish to be a community to their members, to enable these to have different kinds of friendship inside church and outside church. The cell group is one effort to enable friendship, but it isn’t enough.

Also, I would like to say that friendship of trust is a potentially important factor in civil society. Where people bond with others of diverse life styles, there is still hope for common action based on longer term interests than narrow life style concerns. I would say that friendship of instrumentality is potentially one way for a community of diversity to reach out and affect other parts of society. Now, from the informants I gather this is more of an ideal than it is a reality. But maybe there is hope. Maybe it would be one place to look for points in collective social life where still «a renewal of historical agency could start out» (Wagner 1992:485).

References


Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.


