Sanja Nilsson
“Performing Perfectly: Presentations of Childhood in Knutby Filadelfia Before and After the Dissolution of the Congregation.”


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The village of Knutby, a few miles to the north west of Uppsala, hit the headlines not only in Sweden but also in the popular media throughout the Western world when, in January 2004, it emerged that the pastor, Helge Fossmo, of the Knutby Filadelphia congregation had persuaded his former mistress, Sarah Svensson, that God had sent email messages instructing her to kill both Fossmo’s current wife, Alexandra, and his current mistress’s husband, Daniel Linde. Svensson did what she believed was God’s wish and shot both the targeted victims. Alexandra died, but Linde, although seriously wounded, survived the attack. Svensson confessed and was sentenced to institutional psychiatric care; Fossmo was sentenced to life imprisonment for instigated murder and an instigated murder attempt.

This gruesome story provides a backdrop to Dr Sanja Nilsson’s research, but her focus is on the situation as it subsequently developed – according to the children’s “performances” at different stages.

Knutby Filadelphia had enjoyed relatively unremarkable beginnings. Founded in 1921 as a Pentecostal congregation with about 15 members, it had become an Autonomous Swedish Pentecostal Congregation, with charismatic leanings, when a young woman, Åsa Waldau, joined the congregation in 1992. Five years later, Helge Fossmo and his first wife, Helen (who was to die in suspicious circumstances), came to Knutby, and within two years Fossmo was the congregation’s pastor, with Waldau playing an important role in guiding the spiritual and secular life of the congregation, and considered by the inner core to be the Bride of Christ.

Following the events of 2004, Knutby Filadelphia was excluded from the Pentecostal Alliance of Independent Churches and became increasingly stigmatised and isolated in the face of intense media interest, for whom a bad story is a good story – particularly one that combines sex, murder and religion. Towards the end of 2008, Åsa Waldau ‘withdrew’ from interactions with all but a chosen few, but continued to wield considerable power over the lives of the congregation. Then, in 2016, to the shock of the congregation, Waldau divorced her...
husband and left Knutby with one of the pastors, an episode that Nilsson refers to as the Fall. This, it would seem, was the last straw, and by May 2018 the congregation had broken up and Knutby Filadelphia had ceased to exist.

Nilsson first visited Knutby in 2011, seven years after Fossmo’s imprisonment, by which time the congregation had arrived at a mutually acceptable understanding of the events by which the outside world still defined them. Although suspicious at first, the leadership eventually agreed to give her access to some of the children (whom they selected) and she was able to conduct around 30 semi-structured interviews with children and young people aged 7 to 27 as well as to spend some time in participant observation, watching the members going about their daily lives, eating with the families, attending services and being accommodated in one or other of their homes. She also spent a weekend in the spa the community ran and was able to meet with Waldau on a couple of occasions. On some of her visits she was accompanied by Professor Liselotte Frisk who also conducted a few interviews.

One of the features Nilsson observed was that although many of the congregation had outside work, all their spare time was taken up in working for the community in building projects and other activities. There was a clear hierarchy, with Waldau at the top and immediately below her the chief pastor(s), followed by the other pastors and elders, then the team leaders and, finally, the rest of the congregation. There were, however, also those who seemed to be outside the system, who had done something that displeased Waldau and were being shunned for days or, sometimes, years, often having no idea what their sin had been. Rejecting concepts such as cult because of its pejorative connotations, Nilsson decided to categorise the group a High-Demand New Religious Commune (HDNRC).

Heavily influenced by the sociologist, Irving Goffman, his concept of role playing and the metaphor of life as a theatrical performance, Nilsson was interested in discovering how the young people would ‘perform’ in presenting her with the ‘Grand Narrative’ they had been taught, explicitly and implicitly by their elders, comparing how the stories of social reality constructed by the congregation were then presented by the children to her, the visiting researcher, as social reality – both before and after the Fall.

Although there are always individual differences in perception (due to such factors as one’s personality, past experiences and status within the group) Knutby Filadelphia’s Grand Narratives unambiguously distinguished the goodies from the baddies (within and without the group), and clarified a number of otherwise confusing anomalies. What struck Nilsson was not only the internal coherence of each Grand Narrative, but also the differences between Grand Narratives before and after four major events: the 2004 murder; Waldau’s 2008 “withdrawal”; the 2016 Fall; and the 2018 disbanding. The Narrative presented to Nilsson in the interviews before the Fall was of happy children in a loving community with Waldau as a charismatic leader who served as an unachievable role model. These original presentations portrayed their relationships (a) with their parents (who might be perfect, shunned or stand-in parents), (b) with the other children and the “youth group,” and (c) with outsiders such as their extended family or defectors. In the second series of interviews she conducted after the Fall, however, an underlying resentment, guilt and regret came to the foreground and, with hindsight, she could detect the fear that had been evoked at both spiritual and emotional levels in the production of earlier performances.

This is a finely nuanced, ground-breaking study of children in a small religious group. If I have one disappointment, it is that Nilsson did not use her already considerable knowledge to include comparisons with children in other minority religions – she has already studied several such cases (Frisk, Åkerbäck, and Nilsson. Children in Minority Religions. 2017). But
perhaps that will be her next venture? The methodology chapter provides an excellent article for students wanting a discussion of many of Goffman’s ideas, but could be skipped without loss by the general reader as the other chapters are perfectly comprehensible in context. I would like to see an index in the next edition, but this is a minor quibble in a book that is eminently readable, informative – and believable.