

## Lived Forgiveness in a Finland-Swedish Laestadian Community

### *Introduction*

“Not seven times, but seventy-seven times”, Jesus answered (Matt. 18: 21–22, according to the New International Version of the Bible) when Peter asked him how many times a person should forgive the one who offended him. Forgiveness is also a central issue in the Christian prayer *Our Father* “forgiveness” (Matt. 6: 9–13). In many of the world’s religions forgiveness is important and, today, public and individual forgiveness is a means of reconciliation after war<sup>1</sup> or other kinds of abuse (for example Bishop Desmond Tutu after *apartheid* or the Pope for paedophilia). The concept of forgiveness is closely connected to other central religious ideas, such as purity, sacrifice, confession, salvation, and, consequently also mercy and wellbeing.<sup>2</sup> Christianity is founded on the idea of redemption, which is the result of a belief in the divine forgiveness of human sins. Forgiveness was also an object for research with psychologists of religion who maintain that forgiveness is vital to keep up a good and functioning life with other humans, with nature and with the spiritual world.<sup>3</sup> Here I want to investigate how forgiveness functions in praxis, or, in a more modern setting, what does lived

1 Basic 2013.

2 See, for instance, Heiler 1961, 501–514; McCullough, Bono & Root 2005, 397.

3 McCullough, Bono & Root 2005, 397.

forgiveness look like? The aim of this article is to investigate how a member of a Laestadian community related his experience of guilt, shame, and forgiveness in his interview with me. Was it possible for a believer within an authoritarian revivalist movement to take a subjective viewpoint? Did he find a way out of a situation where forgiveness was very hard to produce and how did he do it?

In 2012, I conducted interviews, the target of which was to see how some members of a Laestadian group in Finland expressed their thoughts about paedophilia. They were not victims themselves, but they had known the paedophile and/or his family. In the conversations, we touched on issues connected with committing sins such as paedophilia, and sinning in general.

Shame, guilt, forgiveness, salvation are perhaps the most central concepts in Christianity in general and, particularly, in many revivalist movements. Misheva<sup>4</sup> gives a thorough overview of the extremely complicated relationship between guilt and shame from a multidisciplinary perspective. It fascinated philosophers from Antiquity to contemporary sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists. Today, in pastoral counselling for the cure of souls<sup>5</sup> guilt is regarded as being connected with acts and deeds. A person feels guilty for what he or she has done or not done. Shame is a composite feeling and can be seen as the central problem of modern being. Shame concerns a person's complete self for a shameful person feels worthless, incompetent, and unable and cannot accept him- or herself. He or she is ashamed of existing. Certainly, in practice, the emotions of guilt and shame are felt as a mixture. However, a sound feeling of guilt can raise responsibility, whereas shame can paralyse a person. The feelings of shame and guilt help humans to identify with evil and make them aware of the fact that they are capable of doing evil deeds.

4 Misheva 2000.

5 Kettunen 2006; Kettunen 2014, 13–26.

I base my folkloristic investigation on a close reading of the empiric material<sup>6</sup>, an interview that lasted for more than an hour. I concentrate on the passages in which I can interpret the text in terms of guilt, shame, and/or forgiveness in only one interview in order to see a single individual's perspective on life, which is a typically folkloristic viewpoint.<sup>7</sup> My perspective is from the study of vernacular religion. This concept was created by Leonard Primiano. It covers subjective belief that contains ingredients from different religious systems mixed together into a whole. Personal and private dimensions of faith are regarded central. Primiano underlines how important it is to see "religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it".<sup>8</sup> Marion Bowman and Ülo Valk state that "the stress ... is on what people ... do, think and say in relation to what they believe about the way the world is constituted" and that these expressions are casually formulated.<sup>9</sup> The relevant methods shed light upon a person or persons interpreting or giving meaning to his or their religious experience in expressive forms.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the religious affiliation, a person's cultural context and life orientation<sup>11</sup> deliver ingredients for a personal belief.

In a scholarly context, such as here, to deal with vernacular religion means to interpret what people say and how they act when they narrate. However, their narrations are already interpretations of what they have experienced. Their interpretations are influenced by their presuppositions (*Vorverständnis*) just in the same way as, according to hermeneutic theory, the scholar's interpretation would be influenced by his or her cultural context and life orientation, or presuppositions.

6 Cf. Lentricchia & DuBois 2003.

7 Lennartsson 2010.

8 Primiano 1995, 44, here [Bowman & Valk] 2012, 5. Ketola (2007, 30) speaks about the subjective turn in religion.

9 [Bowman & Valk] 2012, 5.

10 [Bowman & Valk] 2012, 6.

11 Cf. Pargament 1997, 99–100, 114.

Consequently, the scholarly interpretation of a text, or an interview, does not only show the writer's or interviewee's view on a topic, but it also demonstrates or unveils the analyst's perspective based on his or her subjective life orientation and experience.<sup>12</sup> I do not try to explain how theologians understand the Laestadius message, nor do I try to illustrate how believers should relate to it. I am interested in seeing how a believer in his message today formulates his thoughts about guilt, shame, and, at last, forgiveness in order to obtain an insight into additional/alternative ways as regards how the message of Laestadius can be understood.

Belief is a very intimate matter. In this kind of research, the interviewee's individual way of formulating his belief is central. Consequently, my principle when interviewing was to remain as silent as possible, and instead let the interviewee speak freely. In this way, I can also see how he or she associates from one issue, such as paedophilia, to others, such as guilt, shame and forgiveness.<sup>13</sup> Certainly, I take the risk that my interpretation is too subjective.

The interviewee gave me his permission to quote passages from our conversation. I have tried, however, to hide his identity. For ethical reasons I will not present a detailed biography. I changed the spoken Swedish language into a reader-friendly text.

### *Laestadianism*

The founder of Laestadianism was the Swedish clergyman Lars Levi Laestadius (1800–1861) who worked in Lapland. Laestadianism is a Protestant revivalist movement influenced by Pietism and the Moravian Brethren and it spread throughout the Arctic area, and above

12 Inwood 2005, 367–368.

13 This seems to be a method of interviewing also used within forensic psychology, cf. Hägen 2014, 13.

all, to Finland. In Finland, it belongs to the Lutheran church and is divided into fractions, or meetings, called Associations of Peace (*fridsförening*). Laestadius worked against the drinking of alcohol, a general problem in the Nordic countries in the middle of the nineteenth century and the target for most of the revivalist movements. He accepted lay preachers, reading, and religious meetings in private homes and prayer houses as means to keep up faith. The rhetoric of his sermons should be read with the Sámi oral tradition in mind.<sup>14</sup> He proclaimed two main principles, namely the doctrine about the word of God, and the doctrine about confession and absolution. Confession should be public in front of a meeting. Absolution was reached only through the meeting. The meeting could also refuse absolution. Laestadius underlined the importance of realizing one's sins, but the tradition of confession was not institutionalized until after his death. He saw emotional or even ecstatic experiences as a sign of repentance.<sup>15</sup>

There were three ways of repentance.<sup>16</sup> A person could repent in front of a Christian, i.e. Laestadian believer, and receive ease of conscience. Every believer was allowed to forgive. Alternatively, the guilty person could publicly repent in front of other Laestadians and ask for forgiveness. Thirdly, it was the duty of the members of an Association of Peace to control their co-members' way of life, and to point out their shortcomings and demand public remorse. After repentance, a sinner might be publicly forgiven. The entire process was highly emotional and should consist of "regret, contrition, grief over one's sins,

14 Cf. Elgvin 2010.

15 B[ergqvist] 1911, 784–785. For an overview over nineteenth century Finnish Laestadianism, see Raittila 1976. Talonen, 1988 and 1993, handled the role of Laestadianism in the political life of Finland. For the early distribution of Laestadianism in North America until 1885, see Raittila 1982. For heterogeneous forms of Laestadianism in North America, see Palola 2014.

16 Brännström 1962, 107. Cf. Leivo 2001.

or remorse and heartfelt fear”<sup>17</sup>. In other words, not until guilt and shame had been raised to awareness in a socio-cultural context comprising one or more listeners, could forgiveness occur.<sup>18</sup>

Laestadius’ contemporary helper and lay preacher Johan Raattamaa (1811–1899) emphasized unconditional absolution and gave the movement a more evangelical tone.<sup>19</sup> The concept of key power became central. Every clergyman and lay believer had the key power to forgive, or liberate, a repenting sinner, or not to forgive him if his body did not show the right gestures or other emotional or physical signs of true remorse.<sup>20</sup> This image was certainly taken from John 20: 23<sup>21</sup> or Matt. 16: 19<sup>22</sup>. In Swedish, the verse is: “Jag skall ge dig nycklarna till himmelriket. Allt du binder på jorden skall vara bundet i himlen, och allt du löser på jorden skall vara löst i himlen.” In the English version *binda* and *lösa* are expressed by the help of “bind” and “loose”. This image of the keys of heaven was accepted at the Council of Trent in 1551 and concerned the *clavis ordinis*, which allowed the priest to give absolution, and the *clavis jurisdictionis* that allowed the priest, in front of a church body to exclude sinners or re-incorporate them. Martin Luther whose writings were important to Laestadius regarded the image of the keys of heaven as a kind of gospel.<sup>23</sup>

Still today, repentance and absolution in the name of Jesus Christ are central characteristics in the movement. Forgiveness is crucial within the Laestadianism of today.<sup>24</sup>

17 ”Ånger, ruelse, syndasorg, eller samvetskval och hjärteångest”, Brännström 1962, 110. See, also, Brännström 1962, 123.

18 Cf. Meier 2013, 63–71.

19 Boreman 1953, 130; B[ergqvist] 1911, 784.

20 Brännström 1962, 153–163.

21 According to Boreman 1953, 126–127.

22 According to Brännström 1962, 153, footnote 2.

23 A[ulén]n 1912, cols 292–293; Heiler 1961, 375.

24 Snellman 2011, 93–97, cf. Ventin 2013, 60–62. My interest in Laestadianism is professional. I do not belong to the movement.

*The Cultural Context*

In 2009, in Pietarsaari (Jakobstad), a town in western Finland it transpired that a highly respected lay preacher was a paedophile. Some forty years before he had had sexual relationships with his grandsons, at that time small boys. It was not until twenty years after the man's death that his secret was revealed. Certainly, it was impossible to handle such a topic carefully or discretely. In the newspapers, the event was firmly condemned because it had happened in a Christian group that should have higher morals than others. The fact that the man was a respected and beloved preacher and Sunday school teacher also contributed to the shock.

My interviewee, Bengt, a man in his fifties, remembered the day of revelation very well. His way of telling was filled with emotions. We met in the prayer house of his Association of Peace. It was closed and empty. He unlocked the door and we entered the hall. He wanted to meet me exactly there and he picked the bench next to the pulpit. I felt uneasy sitting there in a holy room and speaking about paedophilia. The contrast was enormous but still I could imagine that Bengt wanted to lessen the pain of the terrible memory.

*Guilt*

Bengt referred to guilt from three perspectives. He burdened himself with guilt, he burdened others with guilt, and he felt burdened with guilt by others.

He struggled with his experience of not being a faithful Laestadian. His first reaction when he heard the rumour about a paedophile in his Association of Peace was a wish to deny his personal membership in the Association. Negation was his first reaction in the same way as apostle Peter had denied Jesus:<sup>25</sup>

25 Cf., for instance, Matt. 26.

U: So you didn't know anything, you didn't suspect anything?

B: No, nothing. It is such a, it is such a tremendously difficult matter hereafter, to, to, for, one doesn't really want, one should confess one's belief, and step up, but then, well, one doesn't want to step up to say: "I am a Laestadian, that I belong to that movement that has such a", one doesn't want, one doesn't want to do that, well, it goes against the grain for me, one is totally, well it, there are no more words after that. [Sighs deeply!] (IF mgt 2014: 002).<sup>26</sup>

The quotation contains a subject called *man*, which is Swedish for a third undefined person, "somebody", "anyone". It is possible to interpret the text as a generalisation: when somebody feels threatened, he prefers not to stand up in person, but to blur his relationship to the event by using a more inexact subject. However, in this case *man* refers to Bengt himself. This becomes clear from *härefter* (hereafter) which points to Bengt's individual perception of time. To me he said that he still struggled with the problem that he had denied Laestadianism. In this quotation, the *jag* (generally meaning the first person, I) referred to a fictive person, as an example.<sup>27</sup> In this way, Bengt placed his experience of denial outside himself, although he still kept a relationship to it in his personal struggle for peace.

However, being a believing Laestadian, Bengt was also fully aware that every human being was filled with sin. He used words such as

26 U: Du visste ingenting, anade ingenting?

B: Nä, ingenting. Och det är ju en, det är ju en så jättesvår bit härefter, att, att, för inte, man vill ju inte egentligen, man skulle ju behöva bekänna sin tro, och stiga fram, men i det skedet, alltså, man vill ju inte stiga fram och säga: "Jag är laestadian, att jag hör till den rörelsen som har sån där", man vill inte, man vill inte det, alltså, det kommer nog emot, man är totalt, alltså det, det är nog slut med orden efter det där. [Suckar djupt!] (IF mgt 2014: 002.)

27 Throughout the interview Bengt switched between "one" and "I" and filled the concepts with different meanings. The situational context only made it possible for me to understand his choice of terminology.

dust, ashes, doubt, or rust when he tried to tell me what he meant. There was no human exception, he himself included. He clearly expressed his knowledge as a person for whom the recognition of sins and remorse was central. There were also cases when he singled out guilty individuals.

B: OK, they [some influential members of the association], or else they understood it in a completely wrong way, for Christianity itself and our belief, they have made it difficult, they have, they have made it so tremendously difficult to wander, to wander along such a way, it doesn't work, there is no human being that can walk so that he would be able on the Last Day to show that "I have been good". (IF mgt 2014: 002.)<sup>28</sup>

*De* (they) refers to the powerful, dominating persons in the Association who decided what kind of life the members should lead. They also controlled the members' living. Again, Bengt used the first person *jag* in his generalising example, but his message was that the people who steered the Association had made demands on the members that were too great, so that nobody could fulfil them. A generalising interpretation of his statement might be that on doomsday there will be nobody anywhere good enough for the last judgement.

Bengt had also had the experience of being blamed by others. He had offered to take on a more responsible role in his Association of Peace, but he was seriously criticised for he owned a technical device that was not approved of by the dominating members. My interpretation is that his blamers thought the profane world would become a

28 B: OK, de [några dominerande föreningsmedlemmar], eller så har de uppfattat det fullständigt fel det är, för att kristendomen själv och vår tro, de har ju försvarat det, de har, de har lagat så fruktansvärt svårt att vandra, att vandra på en sån där väg, det går inte, det finns ingen människa som kan vandra så att han skulle kunna visa på sista dagen att "jag har varit bra" (IF mgt 2014: 002).

threat to the leaders of the Association. Too much of the secular life would influence him in wrong way. However, although he had done something that was forbidden for believers he did not admit to me that he had failed. By this means, he classified two grades of guilt: to deny his Laestadian identity had given him at least two years of remorse, but to own a forbidden apparatus was not serious enough for him to be accepted as a sinner although, on the other hand, he saw every human being as a constant sinner.

Bengt's cultural context, as a person very familiar with Biblical tradition, influenced his deep feelings of guilt,<sup>29</sup> but his life orientation, derived from the secular milieu in which he lived as a person, working among other people, also made him feel unjustly treated. He felt unjustly treated even though the persons accusing him of wrong behaviour belonged to his Association, the norms of which they should share as they are common to them all. In this way, he was partly within and partly outside the Association.

### *Shame*

Shame was also part of Bengt's experience, and he still struggled with it when we met. He was ashamed of himself and of other people. He also felt that these other people should be ashamed. He even mentioned other people's shame. He repeatedly spoke about his denial of Laestadianism so that I could see that it was a serious matter for him. He said: "Well, it is like this, I was ashamed to be a Laestadian, it was, it was the worst thing, I thought, what an idiot I am who, who is part of such a crowd" (IF mgt 2014: 002).<sup>30</sup>

29 Cf. Sundén 1959.

30 "Det är ju så alltså, man skämdes ju att vara laestadian, det var, det var det värsta, man tänkte, vilken idiot man är som, som är med i en sån där flock" (IF mgt 2014: 002).

Bengt did not only express his shame through the word *skämdes* (was ashamed) but he underlined his opinion about himself with *idiot* (idiot) and *flock* (crowd, pack). His choice of words indicates stupidity in the same way as sheep moving in a flock, or cruelty as wolves moving in a pack. Consequently we can see that he was really disappointed with himself. He felt cheated by his community members who probably knew something about the paedophile. His pride was wrecked: “It is tremendously difficult, indeed, to enter this prayer house and think that I was cheated so” (IF mgt 2014: 002).<sup>31</sup> Bengt was a self critical and extremely reflective person. He constantly compared himself with the wrongdoers, for instance in the following sentences:

B: I wouldn't come here even for one day if I'd be doing such things, why should I? But it is only in order to keep up appearances and show to others that I am good [that the sinners gather in the prayer house]. It is the worst thing man can do. (IF mgt 2014: 002.)<sup>32</sup>

He also stated:

B: And I just stayed aside and thought, now I keep my mouth shut, for this is, in such a group one doesn't want to be a part, for I have regarded myself as a person who wants to behave and this [paedophilia] is indeed, they are indeed things that, that we totally, it is against the law, well, no matter what we say it is against the law. (IF mgt 2014: 002.)<sup>33</sup>

31 ”Det är jättesvärt, nog, att komma in i det här bönehuset och tänka att, att man har blivit bedragen så där” (IF mgt 2014: 002).

32 B: Jag skulle inte komma hit en dag jag om jag skulle hålla på med sånt där, vad skulle det vara för vits? Men det är ju bara för att hålla uppe en fasad och visa för andra människor, att jag är bra [som syndarna kommer till bönehuset]. Det är det värsta man kan göra (IF mgt 2014: 002).

33 B: och man höll ju sig bara åt sidan och tänkte, nu håller man nog käften, för det här är, en sån där grupp vill man ju inte vara med i, för att man har

He could not see the point in concealing such a cruel action as paedophilia. The only explanation for hiding was, according to him, to demonstrate and underline one's own qualities as a perfect Christian. This was to him not only a violation of the secular law, it was even one of the worst sins. Boasting does not belong to good Lutheran Christianity.<sup>34</sup>

Bengt's solidarity was challenged. Due to his cowardly reaction in denying Laestadianism we might regard him as a loser. However, the feeling of shame was difficult to live with. Consequently, he tried to unburden himself and find a way out. One way was to leave his religion, for instance. Therefore, he pondered over the concept of Laestadianism and compared his faith with Islam and Jehova's Witnesses:

B: and I don't think, for there are so many religions as ever in this world, but I don't want to start being a Moslem, for, for [laughs], indeed, there are some Moslems that are OK fine, but, but, but, no, it doesn't feel good, and Jehova's witnesses, they interpret the Bible completely in a way that I don't understand, the believe that this earth will continue at the same time as the Bible says that He shall create a new heaven and a new earth, so in that I don't believe for five pence. (IF mgt 2014: 002.)<sup>35</sup>

ju själv uppfattat sig som att en mänska, som vill uppföra sig och det här [pedofilin] är ju, det är ju såna saker som, som vi helt totalt, det är ju det är ju lagbrott, alltså oberoende vad man säger så är det mot lag (IF mgt 2014: 002).

34 Wolf-Knuts 1991, 63.

35 B: Och jag tror inte, för det finns ju hur mycket religioner som helst i den här världen, men inte vill jag börja vara med muslimerna, för, för [skrattar] det finns ju vissa muslimer som är OK bra, men, men, men inte, det känns inte bra, och Jehovas vittnen, de tolkar ju Bibeln fullständigt som inte jag riktigt förstår mig på, de tror ju att den här jorden ska fortsätta samtidigt som det står i Bibeln att Han ska skapa en ny himmel och en ny jord, så jag tror inte fem penni på det (IF mgt 2014: 002).

Bengt did not explain to me why exactly he chose these two religions, but I imagine he knew them from his hometown as contrasts to the dominating Lutheran Christianity. Either he did not manage his pangs of conscience or he did not want to be ashamed and thus found the solution, as he says, in not wanting to call himself a Laestadian. To him the “title” Christian would do. Subsequently he drew a line of demarcation between himself and other Laestadians. He defined himself as being out of the group to which he had belonged for almost his entire life. Should we regard Bengt as a martyr? Perhaps not, for becoming a martyr demands oppression from outside. Bengt’s experience is of the kind that is not serious enough for such a categorisation, because he deliberately chose his way out of his dilemma.

Bengt’s shame as regards other people concerned those who act against the Finnish law, liars, hypocrites, and those who are sexually different, such as incestuous and homosexual people. However, Bengt also referred to man in general. His experience of paedophilia in his Association of Peace had made him disappointed in every human being. Only God was trustworthy to him. He reached this goal, an acceptable kind of faith, by a “process of grieving”<sup>36</sup>, an expression that underlined how serious and difficult Bengt found the situation.

According to Bengt the victims of the paedophile were ashamed, too:

B: Sure, innocent small children, but they have grown, you know, many, many years ago, and carried, twenty, thirty years, but they did not manage, and then they start, then they start. So. When you have been abused, that a person doesn’t stand his whole life, he is damaged. (IF mgt 2014: 002.)<sup>37</sup>

36 IF mgt 2014: 002.

37 B: Absolut, oskyldiga små barn, men de har växt upp, vet du, många, många år sedan, och hade med sig, tjugo, trettio år, men de har inte klarat av det, och så börjar de, och så börjar de. Så. När man har blivit utnyttjad, så det håller inte en mänska hela livet, du är skadad (IF mgt 2014: 002).

This kind of shame was different from the one he felt and the one he wanted the perpetrators to experience. In the interview, he had solved his problem by reflecting over his religious belonging, he had left those that had committed the crime by telling them of his contempt for them, but concerning the victims he was fully aware of the fact that their experiences would influence their entire lives. I interpreted his wording as sympathy and compassion. To him, shame did not only lead to negative consequences, such as pain or disdain, but also to pity and a perspective on the future.

Bengt's life orientation as a person who preferred a life according to the law and good morals helped him to place himself in relationship both to the wrongdoers and to the victims. His cultural context as a Christian helped him to find a solution to his emotion of shame at being a Laestadian when he changed his perspective and approved of a more generous form of belief. To him Laestadianism was the norm and a belief which he wanted to live, but he kept his right to define how he wanted to perceive it. With regard to shame, he expressed his own position as a person outside the Association rather than inside it, although he did not break the contact with the Association completely.

### *Forgiveness*

Forgiveness starts with a feeling of remorse: "If I [somebody] sin and do something and it feels like, I get no peace" (IF mgt 2014: 002).<sup>38</sup> Remorse gave Bengt a feeling of uneasiness. In this case, he was very personal. He even used the first pronoun *jag* (I) referring to himself.

He also stated that not only would he have to regret his false steps but everybody would finally arrive in such a situation. He also mentioned a specific case of remorse:

38 "Om man syndar och gör nånting och det känns, jag får inte nån frid och ro" (IF mgt 2014: 002).

B: Well, but then there was, there emerged another [preacher] and had the same, the same, but in a smaller scale, but, but has abused a couple of children

U: and this is not the son [mentioned earlier in the interview]

B: no, no, and, and it came from the side which I trusted, which I really trusted

U: It was the second time [unclear] cheated

B: but he did get up in this prayer house and told, and, and, and he was forgiven for it. (IF mgt 2014: 002.)<sup>39</sup>

I interpret this piece of the conversation as Bengt being especially disappointed as this case of paedophilia revealed that the problem of abuse was not limited to the most severe faction in the community, but also existed among the more liberal participants whom Bengt had respected. This member of the community, a preacher, officially formulated his remorse in front of his co-members. *Stiga upp* means stand up and avow something. Bengt's reaction to the event of this confession was disappointment and once again he stated that he could no longer trust in human beings. Remorse, then, is not necessarily a positive occasion, at least not to those who witness it. However, thanks to this preacher's public revelation of his failing he received forgiveness.

The above analysis of the interview demonstrates Bengt's emotions of guilt, shame, and remorse. Interestingly enough, he admitted

39 B: Så, men sen har det varit, det kom ju upp att en annan [predikant]... också haft samma, samma i mindre skala, men, men har utnyttjat några barn

U: och det är inte den här sonen [som nämnts tidigare i intervjun]

B: nej, nej, och, och det kom ju från den sidan då, som man hade förtroende för, som man hade riktigt förtroende för

U: Det var andra gången [oklart] sviken

B: Men han har nog stigit upp i det här bönehuset och berättat och, och, och han har fått förlåtelse för det (IF mgt 2014: 002).

his failings but, in the first place, he did not mention forgiveness as a logical or even a matter-of-faith consequence. Only much later did forgiveness become an issue. When speaking about forgiveness, certainly in concealed terms, he described how sinning felt as being in a situation without peace and rest. According to Bengt and also to Protestant theology, conscience is God's voice in man.<sup>40</sup> Accordingly, Bengt referred to conscience as an agent, and it made him feel uneasy. In other words, God was with him, or even *in* him, and used Bengt's body, his feelings, as a channel for communication. The way in which Bengt thought that somebody could divest themselves of a bad conscience was to verbalise the feelings: "If a person sins and does something and it feels like, I get no peace before one has told it for somebody else and one can put it aside." (IF mgt 2014: 002).<sup>41</sup>

He said to me that anyone in whom a person has confidence would do as a listener and a forgiving human. He exemplified this person with his wife, or his brother, or even his children – if he had been very angry with them. Children valued as targets for forgiveness is interesting because a characteristic trait within the Laestadian Associations of Peace is the supremacy of the father. God himself is the prototype and model for the father.<sup>42</sup> Considering this opinion, it was a surprise to listen to Bengt saying that he, the father, could turn to his children and ask them for forgiveness. God never asked humans for forgiveness.

Bengt used the Swedish word *berätta* which means "to tell, to narrate". The quotation is not clear on this point. On the one hand, Bengt may have meant that it helped him to verbalise his feelings of

40 Cf., for instance, Lemberg 2005; <<http://www.svenskakyrkan.se/stensjon/4e-sondagen-efter-trefaldighet-andra-arg-2007>>; Kahl 1990, 598.

41 "Om man syndar och gör nånting och det känns, jag får inte nån frid och ro, förrän man har berättat om det för någon och man får lägga bort det där" (IF mgt 2014: 002).

42 Snellman 2011, 107.

uneasiness. On the other, he may have referred to his failings, i.e., he may have wanted to tell me that if he formulated his sin in front of some trustworthy person he would feel relief. However, Bengt did not clearly state that “telling” implied forgiveness.

According to Bengt, forgiveness becomes real after the relating or confessing of what has caused the person’s concern and it is a performative utterance by the trustworthy listener:

B: One tells that one did this and that, it went wrong, and according to the Bible it says that, that he who is a Christian and believes has the right to preach and then they preach that “you shall believe that all your sins are forgiven in the name and blood” of Jesus, and I, as far as I have experienced these fifty years, it is forgotten, it is forgotten, it doesn’t annoy you any longer. (IF mgt 2014: 002.)<sup>43</sup>

Provided my interpretation is plausible *berätta* comes very near to “confess”, and I think we should understand his language in this way. In this situation of confessing, according to Bengt, the power lies with the person to whom he confesses his mistakes provided this person was a Christian, i.e., a believing Laestadian. The reason for this belief was a quotation from the Bible. Bengt remembered it as “you shall believe that all your sins are forgiven in the name and blood of Jesus”. Although this is not a biblical text, its content has a biblical background. The expression might refer to John 14: 13: “And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son.” The message is that the name of Jesus is efficient. God’s name is powerful. The blood of Jesus mentioned in this connection has

43 B: Man berättar att man har gjort och så, det har gått snett, och enligt Bibeln så står det att, att en som är kristen och tror har rätt att förkunna och så förkunnar de att ”du ska tro alla dina synder blir förlättna i Jesu namn och blod” och jag, vad jag har erfart de här femtio åren, det är bortglömt, det är bortglömt, det irriterar inte en något mera (IF mgt 2014: 002).

connotations of the influence from the Bohemian Brethren<sup>44</sup> but it is also an important and powerful symbol in the Lutheran Protestantism, for instance, in connection with the Holy Communion. In a situation of forgiveness, when mentioning the name and blood of Jesus, a link was created between the world of the miserable sinner and the supernatural world, where Jesus was a helper.

The combination of the name and the blood of Jesus is a formula and functions, performatively, like a spell. On the one hand, we can interpret it so that what is said is supposed to come true and change the social status of the confessor from a sinner to a “clean” person. On the other hand, we know that to formulate and verbalise what is on a person’s mind helps to give the person the feeling of control. It is a therapeutic act.<sup>45</sup>

Bengt’s words also have associations with the criminal on the cross (Luke 23: 32–43). In the same way as his belief and remorse helped him to enter heaven together with Jesus, implying that Jesus forgave him his sins because of his faith, Bengt believed in forgiveness as an effect of “telling”, of confessing. Moreover, forgiveness was given to the criminal not as a result of his deeds or his way of behaving, but out of God’s will. Again, we can see how without further ado Bengt has created a bridge between worlds. He connected his own personal experienced world with the supernatural world, the holy landscape. We might also say that he combined these two worlds with the historical Golgotha. To him the historical Calvary and the symbolical Calvary merged, due to his literal belief in the Bible.

A synonym to receiving forgiveness was “to put it [i.e., the sin] away”, as quoted above from Bengt’s conversation. Bengt said that if he committed a sin and he was distressed, he would not have peace until he had admitted it to someone and put it away. In this interpretation, he himself is the agent. It seems that he is the one to decide

44 Cf. Boreman 1953, 26–27.

45 Cf. Ingemark 2013, 7–17. Cf. Leivo 2001.

whether he will talk about his problem and, moreover, he is the one to discard it. However, there is also another interpretation. The quotation says namely: “before one has told it to somebody and one is allowed to put it away” (IF mgt 2014: 002).<sup>46</sup> Here I point at *får lägga bort*. Swedish *får* means “be allowed to” and now the prerequisites for forgiveness change. There must be somebody who allows Bengt divest himself of his bad feeling. This agent could be the one who received his confession, which means that this person made use of one of the celestial keys, i.e., the key of loosening, of forgiveness. The agent might also be God if the receiving person is regarded as his representative.

According to Bengt, the effect of forgiveness is security. Without doubt, the need for security is crucial for man.<sup>47</sup> Security comes from confidence and reliance, not to say love. Bengt referred to his family as partners with whom he could confess his failures. After having received forgiveness, Bengt said he felt peace and tranquillity, for he had “put it away”, i.e., his feeling of guilt was eradicated. Moreover, he underlined that the evil deed was forgotten: “It is forgotten, it is forgotten, it doesn’t annoy one any longer” (IF mgt 2014: 002).<sup>48</sup> An other interviewee said that forgiven lies in “the ocean of abysmal mercy”<sup>49</sup>, which means that it is and should remain impalpable. Forgiveness was the beginning of something new, *man går vidare* (“one can continue”), Bengt said.

In a good family, the members trust one another and forgiveness can become an efficient factor to maintain good relationships. However, families or communities do not often function in a secure way. I asked Bengt if there might be someone who could obtain advantages, in a wrong way, by the help of what he knew through confession.

46 ‘Förrän man har berättat om det för någon och man får lägga bort det där’ (IF mgt 2014: 002).

47 Cf. Maslow 1970, 39.

48 ‘Det är bortglömt, det är bortglömt, det irriterar inte en något mera’ (IF mgt 2014: 002).

49 IF mgt 2014: 003.

In his answer he almost swore: “Det vete fåglarna” (which means Lord knows, but which also is a euphemism for The Devil knows, *fåglarna* (the birds) starting with an f like *Fan*, the Devil). However, he did not elaborate on such treachery, and his explanation for this was that he had lost confidence in man after the paedophile scandal occurred.

There is also another explanation for Bengt’s feeling of security after having received forgiveness. He is a profound believer. He believed that Jesus had taken his sins once and forever, and therefore he could not be completely reprobated. In a way he felt that he had received an overarching forgiveness that stemmed from mythical actions in a mythical world and a mythical time. In this way security was always there to have for Bengt, provided he followed God’s voice and asked for forgiveness in his earthly everyday life. The illogical fact of receiving eternal forgiveness as a believer and the feeling of insecurity in his daily life was not relevant in Bengt’s and my conversation.

Forgiveness was an issue that Bengt associated with death. He remembered his brother who died without anxiety as a relatively young man. To Bengt it was clear that everybody has to leave his or her earthly life, but since he witnessed his brother’s security in his belief Bengt did not feel any fear. To Bengt, forgiveness was there for man to be able to believe and to go on with life (*orka tro, orka leva vidare*) as a Christian. Forgiveness was not mainly a means to reach heaven. This was his strategy until we had our conversation and this strategy was to continue:

B: I have participated here for 48 years now and I will continue till I die, and then I have tried my best, and I believe that He has taken away our sins, I believe in Him and I cannot do anything more. (IF mgt 2014: 002.)<sup>50</sup>

- 50 B: Det här har man varit med nu 48 år och jag kommer att fortsätta tills jag dör och då har man försökt och jag tror att Han har tagit bort våra synder, jag tror på Honom och något mera kan jag inte (IF mgt 2014: 002).

To Bengt tradition was important and he had the resourcefulness to live according to it.

### *Conclusion*

What does lived forgiveness look like? In this article, I analysed one interview in depth to find out how a member of a Laestadian Association of Peace experienced forgiveness. Guilt and shame were important issues. Guilt and shame were also important ingredients in the cultural context that created the religious store from which he drew his knowledge in religious matters. Guilt and shame were related to his personal ability to recognise a sin, and his will to classify sins; even if this classification was according to a different scale than that applied by the dominant persons in the Association. It was clearly possible for a believer within an authoritarian revivalist movement to take a subjective viewpoint. My interviewee formulated his emotions and thoughts in an individual way after negotiations with himself about how to find a solution to the fact that he was critical towards Laestadianism. He did not mention the pair of celestial keys, but he believed in a performative formulation that referred to the sacred world. In this case, words were more important than behaviour. My interviewee created a personal variant of Christian religion that functioned for him.<sup>51</sup> Certainly, he always stayed within the framework of Christianity, even when he widened his perspective, through both history i.e. from the crucifixion to his own situation, and when he scrutinized recent religious movements. His way of creating a suitable kind of Laestadianism was a highly individual action depending on his agency that was founded in his self-esteem and his ability to think critically. He crafted a personal worldview and, moreover, he crafted an identity that hindered anxiety from dominating and limiting his life – but instead made it meaningful. Postmodern ideas about

51 Cf. McKeough 2013, 104–105.

individualism as a norm and about man's opportunities to create and re-create what is important in life had influenced my interviewee.<sup>52</sup>

However, interestingly enough, he limited himself in the issue of receiving forgiveness. He never mentioned the fact that he could reach a situation where he would be the trustworthy person the task of whom was to forgive. Perhaps it is more important to receive forgiveness than to forgive.

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