



BRILL

JOURNAL OF RELIGION, MEDIA AND DIGITAL CULTURE

14 (2025) 45–67



brill.com/rmdc

Introducing Religious Deconstruction: Critical Conversations about Religion in a Swedish Podcast

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Received 30 June 2023 | Accepted 2 January 2025 |

Published online 21 March 2025

Abstract

In the past few years, a new networked public has emerged in Sweden, bringing together individuals from a conservative Christian background who have left faith and/or religious communities. Podcasts on religious deconstruction have played a crucial role in the formation of this network. This study is the first to explore the emerging phenomenon of religious deconstruction podcasts in Sweden. Specifically, the article focuses on the podcast *Exvangeliet* and examines deconstruction as a *communicative project* (Linell, 2011a, 2011b). The study aims to gain insight and a critical perspective on these podcast conversations' underlying patterns, norms, and expectations. Three main organization sequences within the deconstructive conversation are identified: *the personal narrative*, *joint processing*, and *joint reflection*. The conversations are highly collaborative, emphasizing cooperation rather than competition, and lack significant internal conflict. Instead, any conflict exists focuses on the external context, encompassing both the church and the secular majority society.

Keywords

Religious deconstruction – podcast – conservative Christianity – Sweden – leaving religion – apostasy – conversation analysis

Published with license by Koninklijke Brill BV | DOI:10.1163/21659214-BJA10127

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This article serves as an exploratory study highlighting the emerging phenomenon of religious deconstruction podcasts in Sweden. It is the first study to examine this new form of religious critique in the region. Specifically, it focuses on the first season of *Exvangeliet* and examines deconstruction as a *communicative project* (Linell, 2011a, 2011b). The aim of the study is to gain insight into and understanding of the underlying patterns, norms, and expectations that characterize these conversations. Consequently, the study contributes to deepening our understanding of religious deconstruction as a form of religious critique, while also drawing attention to a new and vibrant (non)religious podcast scene.

In the spring of 2019, the artist Hanna Larsdotter published a debate article in the Swedish newspaper *Metro* titled “I Left the Free Church,¹ Today I Feel Better Than Ever”² (Larsdotter, 2019). The massive response inspired Larsdotter to soon thereafter launch the podcast *Exvangeliet*. The explicit aim of the podcast was to create a forum for people in Sweden who are doubting and questioning their faith or undergoing a process of “deconstruction,” as she refers to it. The launch of *Exvangeliet* marks a starting point for an active and ongoing networked public in Sweden that unites both those who are grappling with particular aspects of religion and those who have left their faith altogether. What sets this network apart from other networks and organizations in Sweden, also invested in a public critique of religion, is that it draws together people who have a background in the Swedish minority churches. That is to say, a group of churches that can generally be described as representing a more conservative and/or charismatic form of Christianity in Sweden.

Although the final episode of *Exvangeliet* was released in May 2021, the forum and its conversation on “deconstruction” has continued through several other Swedish podcasts and on various social media platforms.³ An interesting feature of this podcast scene is that the critique of religion put forward is mainly based on lived experiences and almost exclusively from the perspective of the women producing the podcasts. In the wake of *Exvangeliet*, a network appears that offers an approach to handling problems of faith and doubt quite

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- 1 In Swedish “frikyrkor.” The Free Churches in Sweden form a collective of churches rooted in the revival-Christian tradition. They are distinguished by several key aspects, including an emphasis on biblical authority, having a personal relationship with God, and fostering active and dedicated participation within their congregations. Nevertheless, it is important to note that within this diverse group of churches, there exist notable differences, encompassing various denominations such as Baptist, Pentecostal, Evangelical, and Neo-Charismatic.
 - 2 In Swedish “Jag lämnade frikyrkan, idag mår jag bättre än någonsin.”
 - 3 The podcasts, Facebook-groups and/or Instagram-accounts, in question are primarily associated with *Vinhaggornas Hämnd/Vinhaggorna 2.0*; *De kallar oss avfälliga*; *Hela mig-en existentiell podcast*; and *Rätt-färdig*.

different than that found in relation to the new atheist movement, which has been male-dominated and driven by an underlying conflict between religion and science (LeDrew, 2015).

Before presenting our findings, we will provide a brief background to religious deconstruction, describe the Swedish religious landscape, and introduce the study's methodology, namely Conversation Analysis (CA).

1 Background for Religious Deconstruction

The phenomenon of religious deconstruction podcasts first appeared in the US almost a decade ago and is closely connected to the ex-Evangelical movement (Fekete & Knippel, 2020). This movement found momentum with Blake Chastain's 2016 introduction of the hashtag #exvangelical and the launch of the podcast *ExVangelical*. According to Chastain, the main purpose of the podcast was to create "a safe space for people to find solidarity with others who have gone through similar experiences" (Onishi, 2019). A year later, Chris Stroop launched the hashtag #emptythepews with the purpose of leading people to leave churches in protest to Evangelical churches in the US offering political support of the then-presidential candidate, Donald Trump (Tsuria, 2021). The hashtags #exvangelical and #emptythepews, among several others, connected like-minded individuals through social media and in many ways formulated an online identity of resistance and refusal.

With the formation of an ex-Evangelical movement, podcasts addressing the transition away from American Evangelicalism have seen a sharp rise (Fekete & Knippel, 2020). These podcasts are commonly coupled with different social media platforms, thereby forming a foundation for dynamic, online communities that allow listeners to become participants in the movement. Most of the groups emerging in relation to podcasts start off with a marketing effort, in order to increase the number of listeners. However, in their study of religious deconstruction communities in the US, Steven Fekete and Jessica Knippel (2020) found that these groups often turn into thriving communal spaces and thus take on a life of their own. Although various reasons were cited for joining these online communities, a main reason expressed by many members was that they had found "a safe space in which they can be honest and authentic" (p. 177).

While the terminology of religious deconstruction takes inspiration from the work of philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) and theologian John D. Caputo (1940–), in that it involves critical analysis and reflection, ex-Evangelical deconstruction may more properly be understood as a process of breaking down or critically dismantling of one's faith. This process is related

to questioning doctrines, creeds, and beliefs, as well as processing experiences and events connected to participation in religious communities, including dealing with religious traumas. The outcome of a deconstruction process in this context varies. Commonly, it involves disconnecting from one's former religious communities and previously held beliefs. However, according to Fekete and Knippel (2020), "for a growing number of individuals, this breakdown is followed by a new process of reconstruction and reconciliation of a new system of belief on the other side" (p. 166).

In the opening episode of *Exvangeliet*, the host Hanna narrates the experience of listening to various American podcasts on topics related to religious deconstruction and specifically mentions *Life after God*, a podcast hosted by former pastor Ryan Bell between August 2015 and November 2020.⁴ She further describes how she has been inspired by the religious deconstruction communities in the US to create a similar, safe space for individuals in Sweden, where one can find support and process experiences of leaving faith together with others. Accordingly, *Exvangeliet* may be rightly understood as a direct offshoot to the American religious deconstruction and podcasting scene, as well as connected to the ex-Evangelical movement.

The utilization of podcasts as a medium for religious deconstruction is not surprising. The affordances of podcasting – including the flexible format, low production cost, and the possibility to operate outside regulated structures – make it an ideal medium for niched and specialized content (Berry, 2016, 2020). Additionally, unlike traditional radio broadcasting, limited by time constraints, contemporary podcasts offer the opportunity for long-form content, allowing for the sharing of narratives and in-depth discussions of complex and sensitive topics. Previous studies have demonstrated that podcasts serve as forums for unpoliced conversations, providing a platform for minority and marginalized voices to represent themselves in the public realm (Cory & Boothby, 2021; Florini, 2019; Vrikki & Malik, 2019). In the discussion section of this article, we will further explore the affordances of podcasting as a medium for deconstruction.

2 Religion in Sweden

While Sweden may be described as the most secular country in the world when looking at the World Value Survey (Haerpfer et al., 2022), it is a description

4 In the debate article, mentioned above, Hanna also recommends the podcasts *The Atheist Experience*, *Godless Bitches*, and *The Thinking Atheist*.

that poorly captures the diversity and complexity of the Swedish religious landscape. In addition to the 52.8% of the population belonging to the Lutheran majority church, the Church of Sweden (Svenska Kyrkan, 2022), eight percent are affiliated with a Christian minority church, two percent have Muslim affiliation,⁵ and around two percent belong to some other religion (Wikander, 2019). In fact, Sweden scores among the highest European countries on the Pew Research Center's (2014) *Religious Diversity Index*.

Moreover, recent research on religion in the Nordic region has shown that “the contemporary Nordic religious landscapes are characterized by religious trends that seemingly go in different directions” (Furseth et al., 2019, p. 78). Among these trends are the decline of the majority churches, the growth of religious minorities, and the move towards more individualistic and holistic forms of spirituality. Thus, while “secular values” measured by the World Value Survey are generally strong in Sweden, there is also another side of the story.

There are four main groupings of Christian churches in Sweden, namely, Lutheran churches, Orthodox and Eastern churches, Roman-Catholic churches, and the Free Churches. The Free Churches is a diverse group including, among others, Baptists, Methodists, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and the Word of Faith movement. Apart from the four main Christian groupings, one will also find in Sweden Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and non-denominational migrant churches. The minority churches, generally speaking, are more conservative than the Church of Sweden, and have a stronger focus on community building. The members of the network around religious deconstruction in Sweden mainly have a background in these conservative churches.

As previously mentioned, the decline of membership in the Church of Sweden is one of the trends in the Swedish religious landscape. When the church and state separated in 2000, 82.9% of the Swedish population were members of the Church of Sweden. In 2022, the number of members is down to 52.8%. According to a recent report from the government, membership in the minority churches has remained stable during the last decade (Wikander, 2019, p. 86). Of note, is that the Free Churches have experienced a decline during the last decades, while Catholic, Orthodox, and migrant churches have gained members, mainly due to migration.

According to a survey from the Church of Sweden, the main reason for leaving the church is that one does not believe in God (40%), followed by not feeling that being a member is meaningful (18%), and economic motives

5 Pew Research Center 8%.

(17%)⁶ (Svenska Kyrkan, 2020). There is no similar survey data available on why people leave the minority churches. However, a report from the Institute of Pentecostal Studies (IPS) indicates that important factors in why young people leave the Free Churches are the failure of the church to respond to doubts and critical questions (which in turn lead to alienation from the church), the experience of feeling pressure to be religious in a particular way, and the churches' stand on various ethical and moral issues (Sennehed, 2022, pp. 34–38). Therefore, the reasons for exiting the Free Churches seem to partly differ from those for leaving the Church of Sweden.

Phil Zuckerman (2012) conducted an interesting study that addresses the experience of leaving one's religion. The study compares irreligious orientations in the US with Scandinavia. Zuckerman argues that a major difference between non-religious Scandinavians and Americans is that for the former the experience of apostasy (the process of losing one's religion) was not "a big deal," while for the latter, apostasy was an intense experience involving excessive personal struggle (Zuckerman, 2012, pp. 9–10). For the Scandinavians that Zuckerman interviewed (which were Danes and Swedes), religion was most often never outrightly rejected. Rather, religion was something simply left behind in the process of becoming an adult. The leaving of religion was something hardly memorable and of little personal significance. In contrast, the American informants tended to recall key events and detailed specific causes for leaving their religion. Zuckerman argues that a key explanation accounting for this difference is that religion plays vastly different roles in Scandinavia and the US. Religion is not only more widespread and public in the US, but there is also more social pressure to be religious. For instance, to be non-religious in Scandinavia is the default position and need not be explained.

While there is no doubt that there are different ways of being irreligious and that the cultural context plays an important part in framing what that means and the experience of leaving a religion, the stories told in the podcast *Exvangeliet* (and other similar podcasts) give a radically different picture of what it might mean to leave a Christian community in Sweden. The stories narrated are full of anger, bitterness, anxiety, loneliness, and grief. As listeners, we get to hear about periods of depression, divorces, religious traumas, and the feeling of being lost between two worlds. Similar experiences are reported in Espen Gilsvik's (2023) study of disaffiliates from charismatic communities in Norway. Gilsvik argues that "binaries of religion and non-religion miss large parts of the disaffiliation experiences" of his informants (p. 33), who were

6 Members of the Church of Sweden pay ca. 1% of net income, in so called church fee (sv. "kyrkaavgift"). Cf. Skatteverket, 2024.

involved in a hard work of dismantling faith and trying to figure out whether there were parts of that faith worth keeping.

It might be true that there is no external pressure from the secular majority society to be religious in Sweden, podcasted stories highlight that it is also the case that the “secular Swedes” have little understanding of religion and the struggle of leaving a religious community. In fact, on May 25, 2023, a debate article was published in *Aftonbladet*, one of Sweden’s biggest newspapers, claiming that thousands of people in Sweden have experienced religious trauma and these people do not get the support they need from the health care system (“Tusentals har trauma,” 2023). The article called for the launch of a religious-trauma-day, for creating societal and political awareness about these, largely neglected, experiences. The debate article was signed by 89 people that in various ways are part of the networked public described above, including several podcast hosts (including *Exvangeliet*, *Vinhaggorna 2.0*, *Hela mig*, and *De kallar oss avfälliga*).

While this study focuses on religious deconstruction as a *communicative project*, we would also like to bring attention to the different experiences of what it might mean to leave a Christian community in Sweden. This is an area of study that is in pressing need of more research.

3 Exvangeliet

The podcast *Exvangeliet* was active between October 2019 and May 2021, with a total of 43 episodes. The podcast’s main host was the ex-Pentecostal artist Hanna Larsdotter, who was often accompanied by co-host and ex-Mormon, Anna Palm. Each episode lasts around an hour and generally includes either a discussion between Hanna and Anna or an interview and discussion with an invited guest. The focus of this study are the 9 episodes and an additional bonus episode of the first season of *Exvangeliet*. The guests of Season 1 represent different perspectives and experiences of various forms of minority churches in Sweden, including the Catholic Church, the World of Life, the Pentecostal movement, and the Evangelical Free Church. Season 1 of the podcast probes several themes, including purity culture, religious control, the challenges of leaving a religious community, life after death, and matters concerning LGBTQ+ issues.

The critique of Christianity in *Exvangeliet* is characterized by its adoption of a highly dialogical and empathic approach. From this end, the stance toward Christianity resulting from this podcast is critical without being dismissive. While there are earlier examples of Swedish Christianity-critical podcasts (e.g., *Mellan Svart och Vitt*), *Exvangeliet* is unique in its tone, style,

and most importantly perhaps, its impact. Drawing on English-speaking, American predecessors, *Exvangeliet* conveys an appraisal of charismatic and conservative Christianity with a specific vocabulary of *deconstruction* and *ex-Evangelical*. *Exvangeliet* accomplished the feat of instigating not only a wave of podcasts employing the same vocabulary and extending its dialogical critique of Christianity, but also a network for deconstruction. The formation of a deconstruction network serves as a strategic approach, in line with international precedents, characterized by encouraging interaction between hosts and listeners, by referring them other social media channels and the podcast's website.

When working with material available on the internet, it is ethically important to determine whether the data is public or private. In the case of *Exvangeliet*, it is a podcast that has been publicly accessible since its launch in 2019. The podcast has no paywall and has a clear agenda of reaching a wide audience. Additionally, the associated Instagram account remains active, continuing to assist people in discovering the podcast's catalogue. We have, therefore, determined the data to be public. Nevertheless, prior to commencing this study, we reached out to the host and producer, Hanna Larsdotter, who expressed no objections to our pursuit of this research. It should also be noted that both Hanna and the co-host Anna Palm are public figures in the network connected to religious deconstruction in Sweden, and they continue to participate in podcast episodes within the network and share their stories and experiences through various media channels.

4 Religious Deconstruction as a *Communicative Project*

This study draws on Conversation Analysis (CA), which is a research methodology that focuses on analyzing the structure and organization of conversations. Specifically, CA supplies a method to study how people use language in social interaction (Liddicoat, 2011). It seeks to uncover the patterns and norms of communication and understand how communication functions to accomplish social action, establish relationships, and convey meaning. This method is based on the premise that language is context-dependent and that meaning is constructed in the flow of interaction.

CA involves a detailed examination of the features of conversational interactions, such as turn-taking, repair, topic management, and sequential organization (Norrby, 2021). The data collected is transcribed and analyzed systematically through transcription notation and analytical tools. CA aims to uncover the underlying structure and organization of conversation and to

reveal the ways in which communication works to achieve particular social functions. It can be applied to a wide range of social contexts including workplace interactions, educational settings, and parent/children interactions.

There are multiple forms of CA (Antaki, 2011), and in this study we build on Per Linell's (2011) approach presented in his two-volume work titled *Samtalskulturer 1* and *Samtalskulturer 2*. According to Linell, when engaging in interactions in various contexts, such as dropping off our kids at school, having a drink with a friend, or chatting with the cashier at the grocery store, not only does the activity itself differ but also the way we communicate in these diverse contexts changes. Distinct *communicative activity types* are shaped by specific patterns, norms, and expectations that participants need to consider. However, this doesn't imply that conversations necessarily follow predetermined patterns as the dynamic nature of dialogue accommodates for novelty in different ways, for instance, by allowing spontaneous and unexpected elements to emerge.

There are various local *communicative projects* within every communicative activity type. These communicative projects can range from simple greetings to more extensive exchanges, spanning multiple turns. A central characteristic of a communicative project is dependence upon dialogue and, thereby, its collective execution by the participants. In this study, we approach the podcast *Exvangeliet* as a communicative activity type and religious deconstruction is viewed as a specific communicative project. Through our analysis, we will examine the three most prevalent forms of organizing sequences that constitute deconstruction as a communicative project in *Exvangeliet*.

A notable distinction between conventional CA and Linell's approach is that the latter considers the influence of an external context (Norrbj, 2021, pp. 85–88). Consequently, in the analysis one examines not only the conversation per se, but also its relationship with broader contextual factors that can potentially impact the conversation in various ways. The analysis unfolds in two steps. The first step is devoted to a detailed examination of the conversation itself. This step is followed by an interpretation, in light of its activity type, as well as the broader context. The objective is not solely to understand how conversations function generally, but rather to grasp the patterns and norms of conversations within a specific communicative activity type.

In our analysis, we will investigate the most prevalent forms of organizing sequences that contribute to the development of deconstruction as a communicative project. In the presentation of our findings, we emphasize specific details along with the conversations' relation to an external context. While the analysis itself is based on Swedish transcriptions, we have translated the extracts into English in the article to make them accessible to an international readership.

4.1 *Transcription Symbols*

There exist multiple approaches to transcription within CA and the type we use can be described as *simplified transcription* (Norrby, 2021, pp. 99–103). This implies that our transcription does not offer the same level of intricate detail found in a traditional CA transcription. However, it adheres to the fundamental principles of not polishing the conversation, as well as including details such as micro pauses, extra linguistics signals, and overlapping speech. We choose this form of transcription as our analysis focuses on understanding the main organizing sequences rather than the particulars of each turn and turn-taking. In our transcriptions, we have followed Catrin Norrby's (2021) notation system (pp. 110–111). The main symbols we use are:

- (.) – a micropause
- word** – bold indicates emphasis
- [word] – show where speech overlap
- *word* – word uttered while laughing
- [LAUGHTER] – everybody laughs
- [LAUGHING] – the speaker is laughing

5 Organizing Sequences

5.1 *Personal Narratives*

A common organizing sequence in *Exvangeliet* involves the host prompting the guest to share personal experiences related to specific subjects or incidents. In these sequences, the host steers the conversations toward a predetermined topic and assumes the role of the empathetic listener. At times, the host, Hanna, follows up with additional questions (as in the extract below), while at other times she encourages the speaker to continue by utilizing back-channels such as “mhm,” “yeah,” “wow,” and “uh-huh.” Within CA, back-channels are categorized as *continuers*, verbal cues that signal to the speaker to keep speaking and demonstrate engagement, understanding, or support during a conversation (Bennett & Jarvis, 1991; Norrby, 2021). Additionally, they assist in maintaining the flow and interactional dynamics of the conversations. Both the host and most of the guests in *Exvangeliet* extensively employ back-channels throughout their conversations.

Guests' responses to personal questions are typically extensive, often ranging from 200 to 600 words, and occasionally even reaching up to 800 words. This means that the respondent's turn can last several minutes. To provide some perspective, the average turn in everyday conversations tends to consist of nine words (Tannen, 2005). An outcome of these long turns is that

they slow down dialogue. The host very rarely interrupts someone during these turns; instead, she allows the guests to share their stories without questioning or disrupting them.

The sequence below follows a prior discussion about the terminology used to describe oneself after having left faith. Hanna, the host, then redirects the conversation towards a specific experience that both she and the co-host, Anna, associate with being an apostasy—namely the experience of being caught between two worlds and not feeling at home anywhere. Hanna asks Anna to share her own experience in this regard:

Hanna: You and I both share an experience of (.) being caught between two worlds. What is your experience with that?

Anna: I actually have a quite strong feeling of bitterness about it, that one has, that somehow, I feel like a stranger in my own country. Sometimes I have felt [mhm], being raised in (.) a community and context that has its own very particular culture and a lot (.) of it, is different from typical *Svensson society*⁷ in a way, which I haven't been part of. Like, growing up completely sober. Not going through that teenage *rebellion maybe* [LAUGHTER] that most people go through. One has not (.) watched certain movies, listened to certain music, you know [mhm]. There are many things like that which one hasn't **done**, because they were considered **wrong**, you know [mm]. And now, having left all that behind, and I had, like, a whole life based on those premises, so to speak, and now I'm supposed to be out there (.) in regular Sweden [LAUGHING] and, you know, living, working, being with (.) people who have a completely different upbringing. It has taken a lot of energy for me, I feel, somehow, to assimilate into regular Sweden, I can say that.⁸

When Anna is asked about her experience of being caught between two worlds, she opens-up and shares a deeply personal perspective. She expresses a strong feeling of bitterness, describing how she became a stranger in her own country due to her divergent life experiences compared to most Swedes. This glimpse into the outer context reveals a significant influence on the conversations within the podcast. It highlights the limited understanding within Swedish secular society regarding what it means to be part of a religion or to leave

7 "Svensson" is a common Swedish surname; the term is used to refer to a typical Swedish person, behavior, or phenomenon.

8 Exvangeliet S01E01. 00.14.10–00.15.22.

one. In this sequence, as in many others, it becomes evident that finding one's place as an apostasy within this secular context is a struggle. As a result, the conversations not only challenge the church but also face tensions with the prevailing secular majority society.

In the book *Performing Atheists Selves in Digital Publics*, sociologist Evelina Lundmark (2023) argues that the YouTube videos she has studied, focusing on deconversion, serve as practices of place-making and space-making. They enable individuals to promote visibility for atheists and challenge the stigma associated with being an atheist in the US (Lundmark, 2023, pp. 127–128). Similarly, the podcast *Exvangeliet*, as a communicative activity type, shares a similar space-making agenda. It aims to create a space for people to deconstruct and to reconstruct their faith while helping them come to terms with their reconstructed or non-religious identities. While there is no stigma related to being an atheist in the Swedish secular majority society, there is a peculiarity of being an apostasy. In the personal narrative sequences, listeners are invited to, like Hanna, assume the role of an empathetic listener and try to understand the struggles and experiences that apostates in Sweden face.

5.2 *Joint Processing*

Another common organizational sequence within the deconstructive communicative project in *Exvangeliet* is when Hanna, and guests jointly engage in processing a shared experience. In these sequences, it becomes evident that Hanna transcends the role of a traditional host merely facilitating the conversation as she actively contributes her own experiences and struggles to the dialogue. These sequences require a mutual sense of trust as both parties open-up and candidly share their challenges. The speaking time is more evenly distributed in these sequences, compared to in the personal narratives, and, while not as lengthy, they still allow both speakers the time and space to fully articulate their experiences.

Laughter is a non-linguistic element that is important in the joint processing sequences and in the podcast in general. As pointed out within previous CA studies, laughter should not simply be understood as a response to humorous stimulus but as a multifaceted phenomenon that organizes talk and serves to, among other things, relieve tension, signal agreement and understanding, and promote rapport (Glenn & Holt, 2013; Holt, 2020). An important difference between talk and laughter is that while speakers often try to avoid overlapping talk, it is acceptable, even often desirable, to laugh together. In the *Exvangeliet* conversations, it becomes evident that laughter serves a significant purpose in fostering a bond between conversational partners beyond its role as a response to humor.

The following excerpt is a segment of a longer processing sequence that delves into the hosts experience regarding how individuals within the church perceive those who have left and the life that follows. The excerpt begins with Hanna asserting that it is a misconception to view the “wide road”⁹ as an easy path to follow. Anna validates Hanna’s perspective and offers her insight based on her personal experiences:

Hanna: Exactly, but also this, the fact that, even if you choose, even if you choose to take “the wide road” [yes] that “leads straight to hell” [yes [LAUGHING]]. It’s not easy. I mean, there’s this idea that that road should be *easy* to take

Anna: Yes, but they do say that, that it is the “wide” road.

Hanna: Yeah, then you should go out (.) getting drunk [yes] and sleep around and [yes]. But it’s not, it’s not like that, that’s not how it plays out in *reality*. Leaving a, a religion, a belief system, especially when you, like you and *me*, have been in it since you were a *child* [mhm]. It’s a huge upheaval [yes]. It’s really difficult, and it’s not really choosing the (.) easy way [no, no, I mean]. It really isn’t [LAUGHING]

Anna: Well, I saw this meme, like, that, like, those who leave their belief system, we should, like, celebrate those as the bravest ever because (.) they leave with the threat of hell, and still do it, you know.

Hanna: Did we just elevate ourselves? [LAUGHTER]

Anna: Yes, exactly. Yes, sorry, no. But still, everyone who’s listening and all, like (.) [it’s brave]. This is how I *feel*, when I left, I feel like I ended up in hell, you know [mm]. It’s like this, yes, it is true what they say [mm], you end up in hell. It’s *terrible*, this journey that you go through [mm]. But there’s another side [mm] like, you come out of that hell, it’s not a permanent state.¹⁰

As seen in the above excerpt, the host and the guest typically confirm each other’s experiences in the joint processing sequences. This takes place not least with relation to instances of laughter and humor. The fact that Hanna and Anna come from different Christian backgrounds (Pentecostal and Mormon), with distinct experiences, is set within brackets. The tension does not arise within the conversation itself but in relation to the external context, which in this case is the church. Hanna describes the challenges she encountered

9 Matt. 7:13–14 par.

10 Exvangeliet S01E02, 00:40:38–00:42:03.

in choosing “the wide road” and leaving the church, which is reinforced by Anna’s account of feeling like she “ended up in hell” after leaving her faith. Characteristically, the joint processing sequences focus on shared experiences rather than highlighting differences.

As stressed in Tsuria’s (2021) study on the use of Twitter in constructing and performing ex-Evangelical identity, the act of sharing and validating stories has become crucial for the ex-Evangelical movement in creating a *sense of sameness*. Sharing and validating stories is a practice that serves to amplify a joint narrative and establish a common identity. The podcast format takes this a step further by enabling the host and her guests, to not only share, like, and repost brief anecdotes, but delve into various forms of shared experiences. Through joint processing of challenging aspects of these experiences, the podcast facilitates the creation of a strong sense of sameness.

It is important to note that the extracts discussed thus far present a fundamentally different perspective on the experience of leaving the church compared to what was presented in Zuckerman’s (2012) study. Zuckerman argued that being a Christian and leaving the church in Scandinavia is an undramatic undertaking. In *Exvangeliet*, we repeatedly encounter individuals who have undergone a truly difficult process when leaving their faith or community in Sweden. While the secular majority society tends to be supportive rather than judgmental about the decision, these individuals face various challenges such as identity crises, the need to reorient their entire lives, and tensions with family and friends. Although Zuckerman’s article does not specify the Christian background of his interviewees, it is plausible that they have a background in the Church of Sweden and the Church of Denmark, rather than in the minority churches. This could account for the contrasting viewpoints on the experiences of leaving the church between his findings and the stories told in *Exvangeliet*.

5.3 *Joint Reflection*

A third common type of organizing sequence in the podcast is when Hanna and guests engage in reflective discussions about specific topics or experiences. The primary objective here is not to create a sense of sameness, but a critical examination of purported problematic aspects or modes of reasoning within Christian communities. In these sequences, the conversation often culminates with a conclusion that the teachings in these church settings are (in some cases) built upon false dichotomies, contradictions, and oversimplified reasoning that fails to acknowledge the complexities of human existence. Similar to the joint processing sequences, the joint reflection sequences build on a dialogue that involves long turns, allowing the speakers to elaborate on their points.

The following excerpt is taken from episode 3, where the host, Hanna, and her friend and guest Magdalena (an ex-Catholic) discuss the documentary *Give Me Sex Jesus* by Matthew Barber and their experiences with purity culture. The excerpt forms part of a longer sequence, in which Hanna and Magdalena discuss how purity culture within Christian communities often leads to unhealthy and problematic attitudes towards sexuality. For instance, as mentioned in the opening sentence, the sexualization of breastfeeding women. Hanna then proceeds to reflect upon and question a common dichotomy highlighted in the documentary that she has encountered in the church:

Hanna: Because I also think that, I mean, now it was about a breast-feeding woman, but they also talked about pornography in this (.) documentary. Like this (.) awful, either you wait until you get married or you become addicted to porn and you go out and sleep with every person you find, basically. There is such an incredibly, this kind of, false dichotomy that divides it into either/or. This is also, I just want to call for a healthy view of sexuality, which exists somewhere in between. Not just, either you wait until you get married to even think about sex, or you go out and sleep with everyone you can see. I mean, most people (.) find themselves somewhere [LAUGHTER] in between. Right?

Magdalena: Yes (.) I would probably claim that [LAUGHTER], without too much evidence [LAUGHTER]. So, I don't think we have people who live in complete celibacy [uhm] until they get a ring on their finger, or people (.) who, yes, loosely speaking, suffer from nymphomania [mhm] or a self-destructive behavior [exactly] related sex, you could also say.¹¹

In the above excerpt, Hanna and Magdalena reflect and challenge a simplistic understanding of sexuality presented by church leaders and members of Christian communities in the documentary. They highlight that the options for unmarried individuals extend beyond celibacy or indulging in hedonistic behavior. They advocate for a more nuanced and balanced approach to sexuality, more grounded in how people actually navigate their sexual lives. Like in the joint processing sequences, there is no tension or conflict between the conversational partners in this reflective sequence. Instead, they work together to establish a shared understanding of the subject matter.

¹¹ Exvangeliet, S01E03. 00:24:45–00:25:59.

In studies examining conversation styles between females and males, it has been suggested that women generally display a more collaborative approach, whereas men's conversations often involve a higher level of competition and focus on establishing status (Leaper, 2019; Muthia et al., 2021; Nordenstam, 1990). In *Exvangeliet*, the conversations and discussions represent a predominantly feminine style in this regard. The conversational partners rarely express disagreement and they never put conflicting arguments against each other to reach a conclusion. Throughout Season 1, there is only one instance where the host and guest explicitly take opposing positions and engage in an argumentative discussion. This occurs in episode 9 when Hanna and her close friend Matilda, who is still a believer, discuss the purpose of prayer. As the discussion draws to a close, Matilda openly acknowledges the disagreement and suggests the need to process their different perspectives before revisiting the topic. The two friends then burst into laughter together. Hence, once again, laughter is employed as a means to alleviate tension.

Another noteworthy aspect of the joint reflection sequences and resulting critique is that it hardly ever culminates in a constructed tension between religion and science, which is a common occurrence in new atheist discourse. As pointed out by Stephen LeDrew (2015), critiques from the new atheist movement often stem from the assumption that religious beliefs and scientific explanations are fundamentally incompatible, with the primary aim being to prove the fallacy and falsehood of religious belief. In *Exvangeliet*, the issue with religion lies not in its lack of scientific basis but rather in its failure to fully consider the complexities of human existence, which result in a rigid and inflexible approach to life. The critique is primarily rooted in a lived experience, rather than purely logical reasoning.

6 #NotAllChristians

While a deconstruction as a communicative project aims to make space for critical discussions about religion, *Exvangeliet* is not a podcast inherently opposed to religion nor does it view religion as an adversary to reason. Hanna and her guests make a conscious effort to maintain a somewhat nuanced approach and try to refrain from making sweeping statements about religion. The speakers tend to be cautious in acknowledging that their personal experiences are not universally applicable to all individuals who have been part of a Christian community. The host also makes an effort to create a space that facilitates conversations transcending faith boundaries, which is exemplified in Season 1 by inviting two guests that self-identify as Christians and actively participate

in Christian communities. In fact, Hanna seems to take pride in deconstruction as a nuanced critique of Christianity. This commitment becomes evident in episode six when Hanna inadvertently violates this unspoken rule by making a generalizing statement about how Christians perceive truth:

Hanna: For me (.) then, if I may speak [mm], I think that Christianity as a whole, in some way [mm], is like that, people do think [mm] “we have Jesus, and that’s the only true way to God.”

Lena: Well, but not all Christians think that [not all Christians think that]. Not even all members of Free Churches.

Hanna: Thank you for saying that.

Lena: Not “all members of Free Churches” [LAUGHTER]. Hashtag!

Hanna: No, no, it’s just me thinking that [yes]. No, no, but you’re absolutely right. And I have actually discovered that now [mm]. There are actually many who are very humble about it as well [mm] and I find that really great [mm]. But it’s actually me (.), it probably has to do with, that I have, it has to do with my own experience [mm] of Christianity. That, well, “it’s either this way or that way [mm], and then it’s over” [mm]. And it is important to, to notice, that not everyone thinks or reasons like that [mm].¹²

In the above excerpt, Hanna is corrected by her guest, who highlights that “not all Christians,” including members of the Free Churches, hold a categorical belief regarding salvation. To repair her mistake of trespassing the unspoken rule of coming across as nuanced, Hanna immediately retracts her statement and acknowledges that her guest is indeed correct. She further suggests that her initial viewpoint may have been influenced by her personal experience while expressing appreciation for the existence of many Christians who approach matters with humility and diverse thinking.

7 Discussion

The term “podcasting” was first used by *The Guardian* journalist Ben Hammersley in 2004 when reporting on “a new boom in amateur radio.” In his article, Hammersley predicted that “the low cost of producing audio for the internet means that more interesting stuff can be done” (Berry, 2016). Fast forward two decades and podcasting has evolved into an immensely popular

¹² Exvangeliet S01E06, 00:07:44–00:08:33.

platform and firmly established form of audio content. With the allowance for off-agenda stories, the podcast serves as a stage for marginalized groups to present their perspective, showcasing content that rarely is featured in mainstream media outlets. Through podcasts like *Exvangeliet* and others, neglected or otherwise marginalized narratives and discussions on leaving religion that were previously seldom heard in Sweden have now become accessible to a wider audience. Consequently, these podcasts on deconstruction have provided a public window into a form of religious experience that expand our understanding of both religious and non-religious perspectives in Sweden.

We have already mentioned several of the affordances of podcasting that seem to make this medium ideal for niche content, such as religious deconstruction. These include low production costs, the possibility to operate outside regulated structures, and the absence of time constraints that allow for in-depth discussions (Cory & Boothby, 2021; Florini, 2019; Vrikki & Malik, 2019). However, when considering the personal nature of these conversations in *Exvangeliet*, a few additional points can be added to the list. Firstly, podcasts, more so than written or visual texts, offers specific ways of selective exclusion of content. Only the title and certain keywords in show-notes (i.e. the brief descriptive summary and other important information often found in relation to the audio file) are searchable, and listening to these often-lengthy episodes requires time and effort. As a result, podcasts are more resistant to intrusion and provide a safer space for discussions on sensitive topics. This characteristic makes podcasts an advantageous medium for communities and networks aiming to reach a broader audience while maintaining a relatively safe space for participants.

Secondly, the possibility to cut and edit a conversation or interview, which is not possible to the same extent in live broadcasting, further enhances a sense of safety which may encourage people to participate and talk freely about these very personal matters. If a participant in the podcast feels they have revealed too much about a topic, or regrets their choice of words, these aspects can be rectified during the editing phase of an episode. In this case, Hanna, as the podcast's main host, can remove parts of narratives or discussions that guests do not want to include, as well as eliminate segments that do not align with the podcast's agenda.

Regarding the communicative project of deconstruction in *Exvangeliet*, this study has identified several characteristics of how religion is criticized. These include an approach that does not position itself against religion but rather aims for a relatively nuanced understanding and limited emphasis on theological questions or attempts to scientifically disprove Christianity's validity. Instead, critique is rooted in lived experiences, focusing on the impact

of living under religious customs and norms rather than in relation to abstract reasoning. As mentioned before, this critique differs from the new atheist perspective, which often pits science against religion from a perspective of dogmatic or doctrinal dissonances rather than personal experiences.

However, *Exvangeliet* also distinguishes itself, to some extent, from a common critique related to certain feminist circles. This type of critique highlights religion's manner of constraining women's lives by opposing birth control, abortion, or divorce, and by assigning women's significance primarily to their roles as wives and mothers (Mahlamäki, 2012). In short, how religion in various ways restricts the freedom and rights of women. While Hanna and several of her guests explicitly identify as feminists and approach many topics from a feminist perspective, *Exvangeliet* seldom includes direct claims that religion is particularly detrimental to women. Instead, Hanna and guests argue that aspects, such as purity culture and the enforcement of heterosexual norms, are harmful regardless of gender.

It is important to note that while differences exist among the minority churches in Sweden, the Free Churches generally do not teach *against* birth control, abortion, or divorce in an absolutist manner. Moreover, it is the norm (within Swedish society at large as within churches in general) for women to be engaged in work, while men take on responsibilities in the household and childcare. Furthermore, there are Free Churches in Sweden that accept openly homosexual leaders and pastors, and have embraced or are actively discussing the possibility of affirming same-sex relations and/or marriage. Therefore, while there are noteworthy differences between conservative churches in the US and those that are regarded as conservative churches in Sweden.

The form of the deconstructive communicative project in *Exvangeliet* is characterized by a highly collaborative approach that relies on shared processing and reflection. The speakers rarely position themselves against each other. Instead, hosts and guests work together and build momentum to amplify the other's points. In addition, during the personal narrative sequences, speakers are given ample space to elaborate on their experiences. Guests are consistently encouraged by supportive back-channels that motivate them to continue sharing their stories. Follow-up questions are used to inspire a line of reasoning rather than challenging individuals' experiences. Furthermore, laughter is used to relieve the tension arising from discussing difficult topics, and humor functions to promote rapport.

The conversations themselves are, on an internal level, almost conflict-free. The real tension and conflict lie in the external context, encompassing both the church and the secular majority society. The conversations can be said to thrive by resisting this external context and finding strength and energy

in doing so. As a result, the organization of these conversations creates a safe space for those involved, contributing to the candid and deeply personal nature of the discussions.

8 Conclusion

In this article, we have explored religious deconstruction as a communicative project within the Swedish podcast *Exvangeliet*. We understand this project as space-making for individuals who have experienced major challenges when leaving religion and/or a religious community in Sweden. It serves as a platform for discussions and stories rarely featured in mainstream media and offers new insight into the world of living as an apostate in a highly secular society.

We have identified three main organization sequences within the deconstructive conversation: the personal narrative, joint processing, and joint reflection. The conversations are highly collaborative, emphasizing cooperation rather than competition, and they lack significant internal conflict. Instead, conflict resides with the external context, which is both the church and the secular majority society. The host and guests are granted extended speaking turns, allowing for the exploration of complex and difficult experiences. Further, the podcast format, which offers relative technological candidness through the ability to edit content in post-production, contributes to the creation of a safe space where the host and guests can engage in personal and candid discussions.

The deconstructive conversation in *Exvangeliet* provides a critique of religion that is neither antagonistic nor ranting. The podcast avoids pitting religion against science and women's rights. Instead, *Exvangeliet* is rooted in the lived experiences and struggles of individuals who have been part of conservative and charismatic Christian contexts in Sweden, as well as their journeys of leaving these communities.

In future studies, it would be valuable to examine the evolution of this female-driven deconstructive podcast scene and networked public, as it is emerging as a (non)religious counterpublic in Sweden. Exploring the discussions and narratives presented in these podcasts would provide material for gaining a deeper understanding of the process of leaving religion, as well as religious trauma, within a predominantly secular context.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the Åke Wiberg foundation [grant number H22-0011].

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