A Tribute to Liselotte Frisk (1959–2020)

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with contributions from Susan Palmer, Mikael Rothstein, Ben Zeller, George Chryssides, Eileen Barker, Sanja Nilsson, Ted Nordquist, Massimo Introvigne, and Milda Ališauskienė

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The International Journal for the Study of New Religions owes a permanent debt to Liselotte Frisk (1959–2020), who was its founding co-editor with me. Jim Lewis, then at University of Tromsø, proposed that a journal devoted to the study of new religions be established with a professional body attached to it. Initially Jim and Liselotte were going to be the editors, but he introduced me to

George Chryssides, Liselotte and Susan Palmer during their visit to a Daesoon Jinrihoe temple in South Korea.

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Liselotte via e-mail and proposed that we work together to edit *IJSNR*. We divided the editor role into two distinct sets of tasks and what followed was a four-year tenure (2010–2013) that produced some excellent journal issues with wide-ranging content that encouraged new and emerging scholars and introduced Anglophone readers to work by European scholars that might otherwise not have made it into an English language journal. Working together meant that we developed a friendship that became stronger after we met in the “real world” at CESNUR in Taiwan in 2011. That conference is for me a happy memory overlaid with great sorrow. The event was organized by Clyde Forsberg (Aletheia University) who died in February 2021, the same month my partner Donald Barrett (who in 2011 aided Liselotte with booking her flights and accommodation in Taiwan) died in hospital in Sydney.

In between meeting Liselotte via e-mail in 2009 and her death in 2020 we collaborated in various ways. She was an extraordinarily generous person and created opportunities for me on several occasions. In 2014, while on research leave at University of Edinburgh, Liselotte invited me to give an undergraduate lecture on “Invented Religions” and a research seminar to her colleagues in Religious Studies at Högskolan Dalarna, where she held a Professorship. Unfortunately, she became seriously ill and was hospitalized in September when Don and I were in Falun. Tomas Axelson very kindly hosted us, and the visit was delightful. I returned to Högskolan Dalarna in 2019 and delivered a lecture on “Ten Years of Studying Invented Religions.” This time Liselotte hosted us, both in Falun and at her lovely farmhouse in Bollnäs, where we met her five beautiful cats. Don had hosted Liselotte in Sydney in late 2018 (my colleague Christopher Hartney had facilitated a small symposium and visit to the Twelve Tribes in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney with Liselotte and Susan Palmer), while I was in research leave in Norway and Scotland, and Liselotte wanted him, in particular, to see her home (as she had seen ours and marvelled at the four remarkable cats there).

Liselotte had a great respect, patience, and admiration for all animals; the choice of title and motif, “The Meditating Dala Horse,” for her project and book co-authored with Peter Åkerbäck on religion in contemporary Sweden was perhaps a small nod to this embedded in the cultural significance of this equine icon. But Liselotte’s love of cats was always in evidence at conferences; George Chryssides (York St John University/University of Birmingham), while reminiscing about meeting her at CESNUR on multiple occasions, their shared vegetarianism, and the
pleasure of visiting Falun when Liselotte organized the 2013 CESNUR conference, noted of their common interests: “One such interest was cats. We were both owners of multiple cats, and the coach journeys for field visits often provided an opportunity to examine each other’s feline photographs on our smartphones. There was a period in which Liselotte nursed several kittens whose mother had died, and who required hand feeding at unearthly hours during the night.”

The current editors of IJSNR, Fredrik Gregorius and Venetia Robertson, solicited memories of and testimonials to Liselotte Frisk from a range of colleagues to assist the writing of this tribute. Many scholars drew attention to her academic rigour, which was coupled with open-mindedness and curiosity, creating a formidable researcher into topics that were often controversial, sensitive, and fringe. Her field was the study of new religions, but later in her career she also worked on extremism and democracy; her excellent publications enjoyed an international audience. Eileen Barker (INFORM/ London School of Economics) recalled meeting Liselotte in the late 1970s when she was a PhD student: “In a coffee break during a meeting at which I was speaking in Uppsala in the late 1970s, I decided to go outside for a breath of fresh air. The only place to sit was a bench on which a young, rather mousy-looking student was looking through the programme. I asked if I could join her, and that was the start of one of the most enjoyable and rewarding friendships of my life. Liselotte told me that she was interested in yoga, New Age and various other spiritual movements. Once she realized that I was genuinely interested in her research, she crept out of her shell and opened up a whole new world for me, recounting all manner of (to me) fascinating details about the people whom she was studying—and this in her flat, matter-of-fact Swedish accent. The coffee break was not nearly long enough; I was not going to let her out of my life.”

Their friendship endured for more than forty years; in Sweden Liselotte introduced Eileen to Sami people, Anthroposophists, ISKCON, and a local Pentecostal church, Knutby Filadelfia, which she researched for many years. While in the United Kingdom, Eileen took Liselotte to visit the Exclusive Brethren, ISKCON, and the Unification Church. Her moving tribute concluded “I still cannot believe that she is no longer with us. Her uncomplicated, penetrating honesty, her quiet humour, and her loyal friendship meant she had become a very important member of the new-religion-scholars’ family. I mourn her passing, but am oh so grateful to have known her.”

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George has contributed to this memorial a wonderful photo of Liselotte, himself, and Susan Palmer from their visit to a temple during a conference in South Korea. Liselotte’s international travels and collaborations continuously piqued her interest in extending further her research, especially into religion and family experiences. As George recalls: “Both Liselotte and I had received invitations to attend a conference in Wuhan in China last summer, and thereafter another event in Poncheon, South Korea, organized by the Daesoon Jinrihoe (a new South Korean NRM) shortly afterwards. On two previous conferences in Korea conference attendees visited a Daesoon Jinrihoe temple, to which admission was only possible if we donned traditional Korean dress. Seeing everyone in unusual fancy costumes created a camaraderie that is not normally experienced in more conventional field visits and conferences. Liselotte had a serious expression which belied a sense of fun and willingness to participate in such events. One of many qualities I believe we can learn from Liselotte is the importance of enjoying good interpersonal relationships in the course of our academic work. Liselotte had hoped, since there was a gap of several days between the Chinese and Korean events, to arrange some interviews with NRM children. Unfortunately, the Covid pandemic thwarted such plans, and her untimely death leaves an important gap in NRM scholarship, which subsequent generations of researchers must fill.”

Susan Palmer (Concordia University) worked with Liselotte Frisk on a number of projects and they travelled together over the years. A fond memory of Susan’s included her experiences of Sweden’s occult scene: “We attended an Ásatrú ritual in the woods with pagans dressed as Vikings, drinking mead around a bonfire, and hailing wooden figurines of goddesses. We visited a Satanic temple on the island of Gotland, while staying at the family farm of Thomas Karlsson, founder of the Dragon Rouge. We toured the Viking grave mounds of Gamla Uppsala. Our tour guide was dressed as a Viking, and happened to be an old friend of Liselotte’s. Formerly the founder-priest of a pagan gathering, he told us stories about his relationship with the ‘little folk’; how they protected his farm, how he left them offerings, and what food they preferred.”

The research grant Liselotte held (2012–2015) from Vetenskapsrådet resulted in the book *Children in Minority Religions: Growing up in Controversial Religious Groups*, (Equinox Publishing, 2018) co-authored by Frisk, Sanja Nilsson, and Peter Åkerbäck. Susan was also involved with that project, with Eileen Barker and Amanda van Eck Duymaer van Twist.
(then of INFORM), and she attended a conference at Högskolan Dalarna that Liselotte organized on children in new religions. Liselotte was a collaborator on Susan’s project *Children in sectarian religions and state control* at McGill University in Montreal, Canada (www.spiritualchildhoods.ca). They also interviewed the controversial pastor Helge Fossmo (b. 1971) in Tidaholm, a high security prison, for two days in 2012. Fossmo was sentenced to life imprisonment for soliciting his wife’s murder in 2004. Susan Palmer reminisced that: “When I jokingly suggested we interview him in prison, to my surprise Liselotte went ahead and organized it. All I had to do was to be fingerprinted to prove that I had no criminal record ... We had to pass through elaborate security measures, such as a screening through body searches and metal detectors. The only materials we were allowed to bring in were notebooks, pencils, pens and a recording machine. Finally, we were ushered into a small nursery daycare center, then Helge appeared and we were bolted in.”

Ben Zeller (Lake Forest College, USA) met Liselotte at CESNUR in Taiwan, but bonded more closely during his time as a Fulbright Fellow at Åbo Akademi University in Turku, Finland, where Liselotte had studied. Ben recalled that Liselotte invited him to give a guest lecture at Dalarna and entertained him, and his family, with a tour of the Dalarna region. He noted that “as Liselotte was not available for part of the visit, she gave precise directions to visit the famous Dala horse factories, which we did on our own. The next day, she took us up to a preserved dairy farm in the hills where she had once volunteered. We had a lovely day exploring the Swedish countryside, and some tasty cheeses and breads that she hand-selected for us at various markets on the way. It was a lovely time. I will miss Liselotte.”

Her colleagues from other Scandinavian universities were generous in their praise of her energy, curiosity, and scholarly and personal integrity which were clearly manifested in all aspects of life. Mikael Rothstein (University of Southern Denmark) met Liselotte in the early 1990s, and noted that while they were very different, the difference was productive and valuable: “She was sociologically inclined in her scholarly orientation, I was rooted in comparative religion and phenomenology of religion. We had a lot in common, however, and our exchanges turned out to be of mutual scholarly importance. Liselotte was always open, good at listening, interested and willing to share whatever she had learned. She was a very serious scholar, and her sense of responsibility towards the people she engaged with during fieldwork, was remarkable. She was
always loyal and she did her best to understand people, even if they were very different from herself.”

Massimo Introvigne, the founder of CESNUR, had a close working relationship with Liselotte, and testified to her uncompromising scholarly stance which was tempered by an empathetic interest in the experiences of members of new religions and spiritualities. He invited her to do research with him on MISA, the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute, a Tantric/sex magical group whose founder, Gregorian Bivolaru, had been accused of sexual abuse. In Helsinki, Massimo noted that Liselotte was careful yet precise in her questioning of the women in MISA, and “although she concluded that nothing that had happened in the ashram there can be characterized as a crime, she ended up being told by women in the movement details about their experiences with ‘sacred sexuality,’ not all of them pleasant, they had probably not revealed to anybody else before. One later told me she felt she can trust Liselotte like she would trust an older sister.”

Milda Ališauskienė (Vytautas Magnus University), a former president of the International Society for the Study of Religions, published a tribute to Liselotte in Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions which praised her book co-authored with Peter Åkerbäck, New Religiosity in Contemporary Sweden: The Dalarna Study in National and International Context (Equinox Publishing, 2015). This volume emerged from their research project, “The Meditating Dala Horse,” and Milda complimented the way local manifestations were linked to national and global contexts, and how the “nice combination of theoretical and empirical material of this study added to the theoretical discussions of the way that new religious movements have changed the field of religion and spirituality.”

Sanja Nilsson was Liselotte Frisk’s doctoral student as well as a collaborator on a number of projects. They become close friends: Sanja married another student of Liselotte’s and Liselotte took a keen interest in their children. She actively encouraged Sanja to participate in the global new religious movements scholarly community and urged her to continue her researches, hoping that Sanja might have an easier path now that the study of NRM s was more established in Scandinavia. Sanja wryly observes that “Liselotto was the head supervisor for my PhD, but she was more as a friend to me. She invited me along to visit all kinds of movements all over the globe she was always very keen to present me to other researchers, she was very generous with her knowledge and it
took me a couple of years to realize that not all supervisors invested that much time in their students.”

Liselotte’s own experiences as a postgraduate researcher at Uppsala University had not been so easy. Ted Nordquist (formerly of Uppsala University) was on the supervision team for Liselotte’s PhD on the Ananda Marga. The department was conservative and her topic did not find favour, so Ted arranged for her to complete her research under Niels Holm, Professor of Religion at Åbo Akademi, Finland, who was more open to such subject matter. Ted Nordquist contributed the following poem to the IJSNR tribute to Liselotte Frisk:

To my Dear Friend Liselotte

Kindness flows from the Heart
Warming emotions among friends
A generous glow lights the way
As if from Heaven sent

There is no custom or rule to make
That shows the way of Love
For this talent comes from within
Anointed from above

These things cannot be taught
For their roots lie in Being
Only the wise tempered by time
Have the clarity for Seeing

Beyond the common social norms
There are those who have a gift
We bow to them with graciousness
For giving our lives a lift

May the Universe shower its Blessings
Upon your life and times
And Peace envelop your Being
In comfort sublime

There are many other things I could say about Liselotte. She was a yoga teacher and a vegetarian, she enjoyed good coffee and dark chocolate, she had chickens whom she loved, she was a devoted mother to her two adult children (a mathematician and a medical doctor), and she was self-contained and uncomplaining in her illness, which had first struck in 2001 and been successfully treated, returning in 2018. All her colleagues and students, family and friends will miss her greatly. Liselotte’s
scholarship will continue to appear for some time after her death, and Susan Palmer’s forthcoming book, *Hiding from Herod: Children in Alternative Religions and State Control* (to which she contributed a chapter) will be dedicated to her. Ave atque vale, my friend.