Alsike Kloster:

An Ethnographic Study of

Spiritual Activism as Daily Life

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Abstract

For nearly 40 years, Sister Karin and the nuns at Alsike Kloster have been giving sanctuary to refugees while also taking political, social and legal action to advocate for their rights. Every day they share their home with 60 men, women and children who are fleeing violence, persecution, looming threats and even death. Unlike many activists, the sisters of Alsike Kloster have turned spiritual activism into daily life. In this thesis, I immerse myself in the process of how the community of nuns and refugees do what they do. The purpose of this thesis is to paint an ethnographic portrait and open a window of understanding into the spiritual activism that this community lives as daily life. As I participate in this community of many faiths, many languages, and people from all over the world, I hope to gain an understanding of how they manage to share meals, chores, immigration hearings, birthday parties, fears, joys and sufferings with such cohesion and acceptance. Seeing how these sisters and refugees all live together gives me hope that we can all work for social change in our own small ways. Learning from these sisters how their faith translates into direct loving action for their neighbors from many countries gives me hope that something else is possible. Spiritual activism entails a worldview that resacralizes life which has implications for every aspect of our interconnected global world: not only religions, but also politics, economics, international relations, social awareness and our global responsibility for everything from climate justice to the refugee crisis.

Keywords: Alsike Kloster, Refugees, Sanctuary Laws, Spiritual Activism, Resacralization, Monastery, Nuns, Interfaith Community Living, Ethnography
Spiritual Activism:

“We love the story of the Buddhist monk who,

after staying for the night but having no money,

left for his kind hosts the next morning a piece of parchment with the words;

“The best place for meditation is in the mouth of the tiger.”

~ Alistair McIntosh & Matt Carmichael
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1 INTRODUCTION ~ DAILY LIFE OF ALSIKE KLOSTER

It’s the week before Easter and I am at Alsike Kloster for my first day of field research. I drove out to the old red and white parish school house in the countryside outside of Uppsala that is home to a small order of nuns and the large number of refugees they shelter. In preparation for Easter Sunday, the whole monastery is undergoing deep cleaning. Several women are scouring the kitchen, cleaning every nook and cranny, alternating between speaking Swedish and Albanian. A cheerful African man keeps the steady flow of dishes running through the commercial dishwasher. Several children run in and out, a mix of ages, a mix of skin colors, mixing their languages effortlessly back and forth. It’s impossible to tell in this moment who belongs to whom, as all the mothers and fathers watch over all the boys and girls. In the middle of the kitchen, in the middle of all the cleaning and children and noise, there are two babies fast asleep in their strollers. Sister Karin is on her way out to the immigration office with a young pregnant woman and her husband, whose passports went missing on their long trek north to Sweden. My own task today is to go down to the tiny basement chapel to clean the walls with Sofia, the live-in volunteer from southern Sweden, and Sister Rose, the postulant from Kenya. We bring our buckets, sponges and recycled towels-turned-rags downstairs and Sister Rose instructs us in how the Easter cleaning of the chapel is traditionally done. The three of us start cleaning without much ado, without saying much of significance or depth, but there is a shared joy and simplicity in our soapy scrubbing.

After we are done, we go outside on the grass in front of the chapel and a woman comes bounding up to me and Sister Rose with a big beaming smile on her face. Her name is Greta and she is a tall African woman from the Congo. She is dressed in a bright yellow shirt with an open turquoise and white sports jacket, peach denim pants and neon yellow sneakers. Over her braided hair she wears a red New York Yankees cap. She came to tell Sister Rose the good news: her husband is coming to visit tomorrow! Her children are coming to visit from Denmark on Sunday and her husband is flying
here from the Congo to surprise them! It will be the first time in 4 years the whole family would be together and Greta and Sister Rose must have hugged each other four or five times as they both beamed at each other with their wide bright smiles lighting up their beautiful African faces. Greta is smiling at me, too, even though it’s the first time we’ve met. In her disjointed Swedish she explains to me how her husband is still in the Congo. She says the Congo is not good, making a fist to indicate fighting.

Greta’s husband is a human rights lawyer and she was also active working for human rights before she fled with the children four years ago. Greta had been arrested and tortured. When she got out of prison, they paid a smuggler to get them to Europe, but the smuggler turned out to be a “not good person.” When they were to leave, he said he couldn’t take everyone. Her husband stayed behind in the Congo. She and the children left, but then the smuggler said he couldn’t take them all together, so the older children, around 10 and 12 at the time, had to go on their own while Greta and the two smaller ones came to Sweden. But the two older children didn’t make it to Sweden, the smugglers dropped them off by themselves in the middle of Paris. Greta called an uncle in Europe who drove to Paris and found the children. On their way up to Sweden they got stuck in Denmark, not allowed to cross the border. Sister Karin is working with the immigration authorities of Sweden and Denmark to reunite the family in one place or the other. Currently, Greta’s older kids are in Denmark while she is here with the two smaller children and her husband is in the Congo. It has been four years.

Several of the women from the kitchen have joined us out on the lawn in front of the house. They already knew that Greta’s children’s foster family was bringing them up to visit, but when Greta tells everyone that her husband will come from the Congo to surprise them, the women break out into ‘ooohs’ and ‘awws’ and give Greta big hugs. One of the women from Kosovo says she will bake a cake for them to celebrate on Sunday. All day at the monastery the whole community is abuzz with
the news that Greta’s family will be reunited for the first time in four years, even if it is only for a few days.

This is the daily life of Alsike Kloster. Based on their Christian faith, Sister Karin and the nuns at Alsike Kloster have been giving sanctuary to refugees for nearly 40 years while also taking social and legal action to advocate for their rights. This is not spiritual activism in the form of holding up placards in the streets on Saturdays or feeding the homeless every third Tuesday of the month. Every day they share their home with 60 men, women and children who are fleeing violence, persecution, looming threats and even death. Unlike many acts of activism, the sisters of Alsike Kloster have turned spiritual activism into daily life. This is what I hope to understand.

2 Purpose of Thesis

To further my overall purpose of bringing spirituality into action for peace and social justice, I am focusing my master’s thesis on spiritual activism. I am inspired by people who are using religion and spirituality as a form of direct action for radical social change. I want to immerse myself into their process and examine how they are doing what they do. I am not talking about spiritual groups simply teaching contemplation techniques to help sustain people in their stressful lives as activists (which is also valuable) – but people who are using prayer as protest and acts of faith as acts of revolution. We have always had spiritual activists in our world: from medieval St Francis initiating communities of friars to live among the people \(^1\), to 19\(^{th}\) century Rudolf Steiner changing science and education with his "co-evolution of spirituality and nature" \(^2\), to 20\(^{th}\) century Gandhi building revolutionary ashrams,

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\(^1\) Before St. Francis began his new order of Friars Minor, Monks were always sequestered in monasteries away from the world. The Friars Minor instead lived among the people and helped the poor. Even though St. Francis never challenged the authority of the Pope or the Church, this was in itself a revolutionary act.

\(^2\) Sponsel, p. 66
to the 21st century Standing Rock Sioux tribe establishing Oceti Sakowin Camp 3 in North Dakota to protest the Dakota Access Pipeline and inspire the world. For my 15 credit master’s thesis, I am focusing on one such community of spiritual activists – a community closer to home: Alsike Kloster.

To accomplish my purpose of immersing myself into the process of how the community does what they do, I decided to do an intimate ethnographic study of Alsike Kloster. The purpose of this thesis is simply to paint an ethnographic portrait and to open a window of understanding into the spiritual activism that this community lives as daily life. My long-term purpose is to gain a deeper understanding of what aspect of our spiritual beliefs it is that unlocks our faith into action and brings our daily life into integrity with our deeper values, so that we might unlock all the religious goodwill that exists inside human beings to be a force for social change in the world.

3 SPIRITUAL ACTIVISM

As I am focusing my ethnography on the spiritual activism in daily life of Alsike Kloster, I begin my thesis with an overview of what spiritual activism is and why I feel it is an important focus.

3.1 Connecting spirituality & activism

Spirituality is often seen as a lofty realm of soul, prayer, angels and after-life, or as theologian and key figure in spiritual activism, Walter Wink puts it “Science was handed physical reality, and religion kept as its preserve a spiritual world that has no interaction with the everyday world of matter.” 4 Activism, on the other hand, is seen as the work of socio-political engagement fighting for human rights and eco-justice against the corporate capitalist powers-that-be, knee deep in the everyday world of matter. This is why I put the Zen like definition of spiritual activism above the

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3 Oceti Sakowin, or Seven Fires Camp, at its peak had around 10,000 water protectors and Native peoples from as far away as the Maori in New Zealand have traveled to join the sacred protest. (Reuters)

4 Wink, Loc 2231
Table of Contents, quoted from renegade Quaker activist Alastair McIntosh and climate activist Matt Carmichael: “We love the story of the Buddhist monk who, after staying for the night but having no money, left for his kind hosts the next morning a piece of parchment with the words; ‘The best place for meditation is in the mouth of the tiger.’” Spirituality is not meant to be removed from everyday life, it is supposed to be lived in the mouth of the tiger! And spiritual activism is the integration of faith in the rightness of a more just and loving world with activism to create a more just and loving world. Spiritual activism attempts to make as many connections as possible between the spiritual and the social, political, economic and ecological – bringing in a holistic worldview to all our community relationships, bringing in a deeper understanding of the higher ideals that we need to bring into our humanity, bringing in consciousness-raising practices from many different traditions as tools for our activism. As Wink describes it, prayer becomes a force for deep social change: “Prayer is never a private inner act disconnected from day-to-day realities. It is, rather, the interior battlefield where the decisive victory is won before any engagement in the outer world is even possible. If we have not undergone that inner liberation in which the individual strands of the nets in which we are caught are severed, our activism may merely reflect one or another counter-ideology. Unprotected by prayer, our social activism runs the danger of becoming self-justifying good works.”

### 3.2 Spiritual activism ~ Digging deeper into the solution

Another important aspect of spiritual activism is that it asks the deeper questions that sometimes can be overlooked in other merely materialistic based approaches. History has shown us that when revolutions rise against oppressors without having any deeper values or guiding principles of higher meaning, the new revolutionaries often take their place as the new oppressors. As McIntosh and Carmichael point out, “We may perceive, for instance, how easily the French and Russian

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5 McIntosh & Carmichael, Pg 12
6 Wink, Loc 2203
revolutionaries slid into their oppressive ways without a spiritual underpinning that carried a deeper sense of purpose, meaning, values and tenderness. Victor Hugo, who lived through the aftermath of the French Revolution, observed that; ‘revolution changes everything except the human heart’”. 7 To truly change our systemic problems and find solutions that are long-lasting, we must change the underlying culture of meaning, and this is exactly what spiritual activism aims to do – to change our worldview to one that sees life on earth as a sacred interconnected whole rather than as a jumble of disconnected commodities and meat machines.

3.3 *Spiritual activism ~ Igniting the power of our collective faith*

For better or for worse, my assumption is that people are, at their core, good. And a general review of humanity’s religious, spiritual or even moral humanistic beliefs show that they generally lean towards a just and peaceful world. Yet despite what the majority of regular human beings believe to be right and good, the world is often not right and good. Our beliefs, be they religious, spiritual or humanistic, do not always translate into action and daily life. So, spiritual activism and the power of translating what we believe to be right into direct socio-political and economic action has a potential to create radical change. Our world religions are already set up for peace and justice. Jesus was a rebel for the poor and a socialist. Buddha renounced his princely palace to help alleviate human suffering. Muhammad taught that all humans were entitled to the same rights and privileges. Moses stood up for the oppressed. Hinduism teaches to see Self in everyone and in all of creation. Indigenous cultures see trees and rivers as their ancestors. Religion was meant to be the opposite of the opiate of the masses, it was meant to change society at the root. For the originators, it was not just about feeding the homeless or giving alms to the poor but changing the society that creates homelessness and poverty. Transforming our underlying cultural system is a socio-ideological job.

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7 McIntosh & Carmichael, Pg 3
and spiritual activism has the potential to ignite the connection between religious or spiritual faith and fundamental social change.

Therefore, I feel spiritual activism is critically relevant. The belief in justice and human rights is already there and the power of spiritual activism is in tapping into that already existing spiritual belief and turning it into activism for the good of humanity. In this way, instead of using our religions as simply a way for us to plead for help from God or to blame God for how terrible things are, we can use our religions to engage with God\(^8\) in the betterment of life on earth. In this vein, Walter Wink shared the following story: “My friend Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer once found himself walking through the streets of Calcutta, so enraged by the poverty that he wanted to scream at God, ‘How can you allow such suffering?’ Then he came to a painful realization: ‘In the suffering of the poor God was screaming at me, in fact at all of us and at our institutions and social systems that cause and perpetuate hunger, poverty, and inequality.’ We end, then, with that divine cry ringing in our ears, exhorting us to engage…in the strength of the Holy Spirit, that human life might become more fully human.”\(^9\)

4 ETHNOGRAPHY: TO SEEK ANSWERS WITHOUT A QUESTION

Ethnography as defined by the Royal Anthropological Institute is “the recording and analysis of a culture or society, usually based on participant-observation and resulting in a written account of a people, place or institution”.\(^{10}\) Even though in modern times ethnography has been adopted by PR firms and urban planners to answer specific questions, the original research method as intended here is based on “broad ethnographic description…in pursuit of what Mead enthusiastically endorsed as

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\(^8\) I feel strange using the word God even in a thesis at the School of Theology, but to clarify, I mean God in the broadest possible sense, however the individual spiritual activist chooses to define God for herself, by whatever name.

\(^9\) Wink, Loc 2412

\(^{10}\) Royal Anthropological Society Website
‘grasping as much of the whole as possible.’” 11 The responsibility of the ethnographer is to be a participant-observer and to pay attention. Only after open minded observation, you analyze and describe. Thus, even though I started out with not only a research question, but with many personal questions eagerly swirling around in my head, for the neutrality of my ethnographical field work I put these questions in the background.

For the purposes of formulating questions concerning religious ideology and activism for the semi-structured interviews, I did use my original research question: What are the key factors in using spiritual beliefs to encourage socio-political and cultural/ideological action for social change? Yet it is important to note, and it was important for me to learn, that this is not a framework for the overall ethnographic study. I found that with open-minded observation of the community of Alsike Kloster, there were both questions and answers that came forward that were beyond the limits of my original question, and had I only been looking through that lens, there is much I would have missed.

5 PROCESS & METHOD

For an ethnography about spiritual activism at Alsike Kloster, I will be using qualitative social science research methodology based heavily in Ethnographic field work, borrowing from Action Research and its close cousin Participatory Action Research (PAR), and drawing from an interfaith Literature review.

5.1 Ethnographic field work

As anthropologist Harry Wolcott explains the viewpoint of ethnographic research, “Fieldwork is a way of seeing, and fieldwork is the foundation of ethnography.” 12 For this reason, I spent as much

11 Wolcott, Location 473 (Mead quote from 1970:250,ff., quoted from Sanjek 1190:225)
12 Wolcott, Location 776
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time as I was able out at Alsike Kloster as a participant-observer, helping in any way I could – chopping vegetables, cleaning, sorting donated clothes, driving Sister Karin to pick up lamb for Easter dinner, taking minutes in a meeting with a government official and simply talking with the residents. The issue was raised if me “helping out” would interfere with the objectivity of me as a researcher, and I found the opposite is true, which is why ethnography is based on participant-observation. Participating in the community activities helped me observe the community objectively. Alsike Kloster has volunteers coming and going on a regular basis and there is nothing odd about a local helping in the kitchen, so the refugee residents felt quite comfortable. Me being there chopping veggies alongside everyone helps me blend in and observe people more as they naturally are. If I was there as a researcher with a clipboard passively observing, my presence would be more disruptive to the community and I would not be able to get an objective picture of their process.

5.2 Action Research & Participatory Action Research

Action Research and PAR are both closely related to Ethnography in that they are all carried out in the field. Rather than manufacturing a research environment, they observe the world the way it naturally is as it is happening. Andrew Johnson points out, “Action researchers observe messy, real-world events in which humans are mucking about. These humans are inherently and wondrously unpredictable and not at all inclined to exist in hermetically sealed worlds.” 13 PAR often goes into a community with the aim of collaboratively finding a solution to a problem, and while here I am only a participant-observer, I borrow from PAR two important aspects. The first aspect is that I am committed to incorporating participation into my research reciprocally: for me to participate wholeheartedly during my time of observation (and beyond), and for me to invite participation and feedback on my research process from the people of the community, particularly the sisters. This is

13 Johnson, Pg. 93
important for several reasons, not least of which are the ethical concerns of protecting the refugees, which I cover more in depth under that section.

The second aspect of PAR I borrow is its unabashed bias against unbiasedness. As Kindon, Pain and Kesby passionately argue, “Indeed a PAR-inspired understanding of social justice suggests that it is in fact unethical to look in on circumstances of pain and poverty and yet do nothing.” 14 I am not a clinical scientist attempting to do research that is completely unbiased or value-free. First, that is impossible, and even if it were possible, it would be wrong. Second, I contend that it is not even desirable. As Robert Coles explains, Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor did not try to assert any kind of “value-free” research as they humanized the effects of the Great Depression. “They were, rather, a man and a woman of unashamed moral passion, of vigorous and proudly upheld subjectivity, anxious not to quantify or submit what they saw to conceptual assertion but to notice, to see and hear, and in so doing, to feel, then render so that others, too, would know in their hearts as well as their heads what it was that happened.” 15 I’m sure that Einstein was passionate about physics and Jane Goodall was passionate about primates. Passion is equally important to empirical data, even in the sciences, as Abraham Maslow argued from his experience of studying biology, “Science can explain how the telescope or microscope reveals macro or micro space, but not the experience of the “wow” factor that happens in the inner spaces of the mind when we look through them. Yet it is this wow factor that motivates the love of science…Without love there would be no new knowledge.” 16 It is my experience that passion helps me to see other human beings not only with my eyes or my brain, but also with empathy, and therefore I contend that my passion for humanity is an asset in my research. However, I have certainly entered the research project with an open mind, with as much emptiness as I can muster, searching in earnest for real answers. As Johnson points out, I will “fairly represent all

14 Kindon, Pain & Kesby, Pg. 35
15 Coles, 1997, Location 1252
16 McIntosh & Carmichael, Pg. 44
aspects of what [I am] studying” and do my best to “avoid letter-to-the-editor syndrome.” 17 Here I am also following his advice: “Any biases you are aware of should be stated up front so that readers of your report are able to take this into account.” 18 So, be warned: I am on the side of the oppressed.

5.3 Research tools

The following is a list of specific tools and research techniques that I used in my process:

5.3.1 Field notes / Research journal

Using Evernote (synced between phone, iPad and computer), in the field I took abbreviated notes of my observations, people’s conversations with me or with each other, things I noticed or my own thoughts. I did this only when there was a break or lull in activity to be as unobtrusive as possible. I used my phone so that I did not have any kind of notebook or computer with me. Everyone out there has a smartphone, so to anyone passing by it looked like I was sending a text. That way, my role as “researcher” was less disruptive. Each evening when I went home, I filled in my brief notes while my memories were fresh with as much detail as possible.

5.3.2 Semi-structured interviews

To gain more in-depth understanding of the community, I conducted semi-structured interviews. I prepared a list of questions individualized to the interviewee, both to gain more insight about the community itself and to get a glimpse into the spiritual motivations underneath. I used the questions as a guide, but allowed the interviewee to share whatever they wanted to share. I made sure to cover my most important questions, but did not cover them all. I typed notes during the interview (I can type without looking and keep eye contact). With permission, I recorded the interviews to fill in the typed notes afterwards. I let them

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17 Johnson, Pg. 144
18 Johnson, Pg. 67
know no one else would hear the recordings. I researched the best free transcription software and found InqScribe to be very useful.

5.3.3 Triangulation

As Johnson points out in his guidelines to Action Research, “Triangulation means looking at something from more than one perspective...[It] ensures that you are seeing all sides of a situation. It also provides greater depth and dimension, thereby enhancing your accuracy and credibility.” 19 To add a broader dimension to this ethnography, I have collected data from sources outside of the community. I had some unique challenges in finding exactly who I might interview. I had at first contemplated including nearby residents and possibly the police who have been on the ‘other side.’ However, given the sensitive nature of hiding refugees, I asked Sister Karin who would be appropriate for me to talk to and let her guide me so I would not cause harm to anyone or the community. To exacerbate the already sensitive situation, a rejected asylum seeker carried out a terrorist attack in Stockholm on April 7th in the middle of my research, which made everyone, and I mean everyone, 100 times more sensitive. So, I did not speak to the police or other locals. I interviewed the parish vicar and a long-term outside volunteer for triangulation. I also sat in on a meeting with a government official as well as the local fundraising and support team for the monastery.

5.3.4 Literature review

To bring in a broader background to the subject matter, I researched spiritual activism in general as well as other faith traditions’ socio-political and cultural/ideological action for social change. The focus of my thesis is the ethnography of the Alsike community, not a broader study of research literature; however, to illustrate some aspects of their community, I will bring in comparison and connection.

19 Johnson, Pg. 93
6 ETHICS

6.1 Ethics for safety of the community

When working with a sensitive issue such as nuns sheltering refugees in a monastery, especially when some of those refugees are in hiding, ethics become of utmost importance. For some of the asylum seekers living at Alsike, if they were returned to their home countries, it could cost them their lives. Therefore, I was very upfront with Sister Karin, as the main person responsible for those under her care, that I would follow her lead and not do anything to jeopardize the safety of anyone involved. The following are ethical guidelines that Sister Karin and I jointly agreed upon:

* I have changed the names of all the refugees referred to in this report. Although most ethnographers when using aliases choose names from the person’s original culture, I chose to use stereotypical Nordic names to overcome the sense of ‘other’ and help the refugees feel like any ‘regular Sven.’ I chose to deviate from the ethnographic norm for the didactic effect of giving the reader a sense that these people could be your next-door neighbor or even yourself. I am using real names only for public figures who are openly connected to the monastery. A couple of volunteers did not want their last names used, as they had been contacted in the past when their names appeared in newspapers, so even for the Swedish volunteers, I am only using first names.

* I have taken photos only of buildings, rooms or property. I have not taken pictures of refugees. Some of the refugees are hidden awaiting appeals, some are simply in the asylum process. A few of the refugees are hiding from the authorities in their home countries who consider them criminal for speaking out against the regimes. Obviously, I do not wish to post any pictures in a university database that could put anyone at risk. Therefore, I am only using pictures of people that are already publicly available on line.
Sister Karin will be able to review my final thesis for factual accuracy and to make sure that there is nothing compromising the safety of the residents.

6.2 Ethics for my personal field work

There were also ethical concerns involved with me inserting myself into the home of these people who are already vulnerable. I did not want to be disruptive or intrusive, I did not want anyone to feel that I was prying, investigating or in any other way causing harm. These are the ethical guidelines I established for my field work:

* I would allow conversations to be natural and be sensitive to how much people wanted to share with me about their own stories. Sometimes people wanted to be heard, to share their story with me to have a voice. Sometimes people were shy or scared. Both were ok.

* For anyone I interviewed, I of course asked permission and I explained that I would be changing the names. I told them they could share as much or as little with me as they felt comfortable. I explained the purpose of my thesis, and assured them that I had no preconceived judgement or bias about anything they shared.

* I would not impose my own value system on anyone. I would remain neutral, except for being compassionate, of course. I did not tell people what I believed or what religion I was, unless asked. I refrained from wearing my favorite “A Little Veganism Never Hurt Anybody” T-shirt because I didn’t want anyone to think I was judging them because I am vegan and they are not. Of course, when I drove Sister Karin to pick up lamb for Easter dinner and we were standing in an actual butcher shop, it did come up, and I told Sister Karin I am a vegan! This didn’t stop me from driving her to the butcher shop, as I did my best to participate without judgment. And in general, I kept my beliefs to myself. I wanted to remain a neutral compassionate observer.
I did not want to become a burden on the sisters, who already have so much to do, so I remained as flexible as possible, talking to Sister Karin while driving her around on errands, going with the everchanging flow, and trying to be of service whenever I could.

I also felt that the less disruptive I was, the more natural, accurate and objective my observations of the community would be.

7 SPIRITUALITY, ACTIVISM & DAILY LIFE

7.1 “I am not an activist but the full consequences of faith is political”

One day, in the cozy living room of Alsike Kloster, as we are sitting at one of the tables after lunch, Sofia tells Sister Karin that they had dropped off ‘the picture.’ It seems from the conversation that ensues that it is a picture of Sister Karin. As Perpetua, the grey tabby cat, is licking the leftover salmon stew off Sister Karin’s plate, Sofia says “It says ‘activist’ on it.” Sister Karin ever so slightly rolls her eyes, half smiles, half smirks and sighs. “I know.” Sister Karin turned the plate around so Perpetua could get the little spot of salmon she missed, or was it Felicitas? I can never tell the two grey tabbies apart. Apparently, Sister Karin doesn’t like being called an ‘activist’ which is unfortunate for me and my thesis. The next day I had the chance to ask her about it. I told her that my thesis is a study in spiritual activism, so why is it that she doesn’t like being called an activist?

“What we are doing is living a life. It's a life. It's not activism. It is a result of a decision of committing yourself to the service of God. It's very simple like that. And of course, if you take that seriously, with your full heart and with your full body, in ordinary people's eyes, I look like an activist. But it's not an action of activism. It's just to take the full consequences of your life. It's very

20 On the day I had scheduled the SSI with Sister Karin, a refugee’s glasses had broken and he had to be driven into Uppsala to SpecSavers, so Sofia drove and I interviewed Sister Karin in the backseat of the car, typing notes on my iPad on the trip into and out of town.
simple.” I informed her that the title is ‘an ethnographic study of spiritual activism as daily life.’

“Yes, that's good. Exactly.” I feel very relieved.

In Ken Jones’ *The New Social Face of Buddhism*, he expounds how Buddhism (and I would add to that, all other religions, as well) must become socially engaged to bring about a more just and peaceful world. It is not enough to open the “third eye” through personal spiritual practice. Any person awakening to more compassion must also open the “fourth eye” of social responsibility.\(^22\) It’s not enough to be mindfully present as we make our tea, we must also be mindfully present as we make consumer choices. Catholic communities across Brazil and Latin America experienced a surge of this awareness in the 1960’s as Liberation Theology emerged to combat both economic and political poverty.\(^23\) These ecclesial communities came together and read the Bible in terms of what it had to say about the economic reality of their daily lives. In today’s modern society, religion has been removed to a lofty realm of the spirit life and few theologians think about economic policy, but perhaps they should. What the daily life at Alsike Kloster is teaching is precisely that religion is all

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\(^{21}\) Photo: Björn Lindahl  
\(^{22}\) Jones, Pg. x  
\(^{23}\) Cooper, Pg. 2
about simple every day matters, the details of living life that Liberation Theology calls attention to in its call for economic justice: “Theology has something to say to the economy precisely because this field is fundamental to human life and social relations.” 24

As Sister Karin shows me every day I spend out at Alsike, being Christian is not only about praying to Jesus with your hands neatly clasped together. Sister Karin elaborates: “I think, ordinary people have the idea of Christian people as going to church on Sunday, being very polite, very silent, well-behaving... a bit boring. And I think that is why people think this is very strange. But really, it ought not be strange. Because if you take the full consequences of being a Christian it will change your behavior.” This is what Sister Karin means by not being an activist. Spiritual activism is simply changing your daily life to live in integrity with your spiritual beliefs. Mindfulness or loving thy neighbor just become a part of the fabric of life and changes everything you do, large and small. It sounds simple, but as is clear from the sisters of Alsike, it is radical. “I think if you take your faith with full responsibility, then it will be a political action. Having a faith is not political action, it's just if you take the full consequences of your faith and follow that, then it will be.”

7.2 The first refugee family “sent by God”

The sisters of Alsike Kloster took in their first refugee family in 1978. Sister Marianne shares: “Yes, how did this come to pass, to suddenly become something we never could have dreamed of, to be ‘refugee hiders’? We got a call from the Quakers in Stockholm asking if we could hide a family. ‘Hide?!’ we said, ‘how so?’ Well, there was a family that was in danger of being deported after receiving a no to asylum status. ‘By the police? The Swedish police?!’ Our astonishment was total.” 25 The sisters were familiar with the Quakers, an international Christian movement with a strong history of social engagement, and had always admired their ability to find the most crucial cry for

24 Cooper, Pg. 26
25 Nordström, Pg. 21
human rights in any given era, especially against slavery in the United States. The Quakers told them the attorney needed more time to work on their appeal, but there was a death threat against the father and if the family was sent back it was a risk to their lives. So, of course, the sisters opened their doors first to this family, and then the next, and now it is 2017 and there are roughly 60 refugees staying at Alsike. Sister Karin explains, “It was nothing that we chose. We used to say that this is something that God sent to us, to tell us that it is something that you have to do. It was by a coincidence, not by a choice. It was given to us.”

Figure 2 ~ Sister Ella cooking dinner in the old Alsike kitchen

7.3 “What Jesus told us to do” ~ the many ways to serve

The sign in front of the convent reads “Alsike Kloster is a sanctuary for refugees in need” with bible verses listed on the bottom. The verse from the New Testament is Matthew 25:35, which reads:

“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat;
I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink;
I was a foreigner and you invited me in.”

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26 Ezpeleta, 2011
27 Photo: Sanna Sjöswärd
I can see what Sister Karin means when she says that what she and Sister Marianne are doing ought not be strange for any self-described Christian. I remember the first time I came out to Alsike Sister Karin had mentioned how Jesus himself was a refugee. I asked Sister Karin about this again. “It was not so much that Christ was a refugee, it's that Christ is love. In Matthew 25, it is very clear, ‘what you have done for the smallest and the poorest, for those in prison, you have done for me.’ I think it's more what Christ told us to do. And then of course, Jesus himself was a refugee, that is why you never know how Christ is coming to you today.”

Over the past four decades these three nuns have been called to serve in many ways for the sake of their faith. One particular day I spent out at Alsike began with Sister Karin leaving straight after morning prayers to pick up a Dutch immigration advisor from the airport, going straight to a meeting with the Archbishop in Uppsala, returning to Alsike for all of us to meet around the kitchen table with a political advisor to a government minister. After the meeting, Sister Karin was in charge of setting the tables for a fancy Maundy Thursday dinner, then she put on an apron to make dessert.

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28 Photo: Rädda Barnen Uppsala Lokalförening
During the dessert making, someone comes in with a splinter and Sister Karin runs to get the first aid kit and removes the splinter, cleans the wound and puts a band aid on the poor woman’s finger (it was a nasty splinter). The sisters never know what form their activism will take, but their faith makes them fierce. Sister Karin explained at the Swedish Heroes award ceremony that when she sees the fear in a refugee family’s eyes, “all the questions if you can help or can’t help just disappear and you just help.” 29

7.4 *November 1993 ~ Police raid terrifies traumatized families*

During an upswing of ‘fear of the other’ in Sweden, on a November morning in 1993, in the middle of the nun's morning mass, around 30 police officers stormed Alsike Kloster looking for hidden refugees. Already traumatized men, women and children from war torn regions, who had fled police brutality in their home countries, were absolutely terrified. The police loaded roughly 40 people on a chartered bus amidst resistance, chaos, wailing and screaming. Panic stricken families barricaded themselves in their rooms, fearing for their lives, reliving terrifying memories of war and police violence. One desperate woman tried to jump from a second story window but was stopped by her sobbing children, all under the age of ten, clamoring onto her legs. Listening to the debate on the radio program about the raid, broadcast on national Swedish radio, Sister Marianne’s voice is shaking and intense, like she’s barely able to keep from screaming herself: "I also have a right, and that is to fight for peoples’ lives, where in my opinion the Swedish state is behaving like swine!" 30 This is not a soft-spoken shy little nun. This is a spiritual warrior protecting her family in Christ.

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29 Lindquist, 2015
30 Ezpeleta, 2011
7.5  *We are human beings. We only have one God.*

The sisters recognize people of all faiths and from all over the world as part of their family in Christ. In the very beginning of their journey with refugees they learned that essentially we are all the same. During the early 80’s, the monastery also had repeated visits from the police, so they didn’t dare to have too many refugees staying with them and instead found them places in church camps further north in Uppland. As they could no longer take care of food and shelter, in order to help they got involved in the asylum process, working with attorneys, politicians and immigration, and they would go up to visit the families regularly. Sister Karin tells me, “One day, two women were coming arm in arm towards us and the Christian woman said to us, 'I'm a Christian, she is a Muslim, in Lebanon we are enemies, here we are friends. You help me, now you help her.' Suddenly we realized, it was not a question of religion. It was very easy then. We are all the same. You can hear from both sides, good and evil things. We learned a lot by listening. In 1988, in this house, we had all the fighting parts from Beirut staying together in this house wanting peace. And all of them said that before the war,

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31 Photo: Malin Lundberg/Scanpix
we were living together in Lebanon.” Even though the monastery is one of very few Christian organizations in the very secular Sweden, acceptance of everyone’s religion is a given at Alsike. When I sat down and spoke with Anna, a Christian from Muslim majority Albania, she almost laughed when I asked her about religious differences in the community. “Here we also have Muslims and Christians, but Sister Karin or Sister Marianne have never said to anyone that they have to change. Never in your life! They respect each other, everyone. We are human beings. We only have one God. We have never had any problem here.”

7.6 Activism as a seamless stream of doing what is right

For the last several weeks I have been a tiny participant-observer, a witness to the daily lives of spiritual activism at Alsike Kloster. Some days it is the quiet activism of comforting a refugee mother worried about the safety of her children’s future. Some days it is the invisible activism of a private meeting with a government official to explain the reality of the refugee situation. Some days it is the loud activism of calling out the Swedish state as swine with quaking voice on Swedish radio. What I have observed that sets this apart from what we normally think of as activism is that it is not planned as an act. The sisters’ activism flows from their conviction as a seamless stream of simply

32 Photo: Björn Lindahl
doing what seems to be right in each moment, to live life, to give life. As Alastair McIntosh and Matt Carmichael write in *Spiritual Activism*, “Each of us must dig from where we stand. To be an activist is, at its most elementary, to be active, to be alive, to seek to use our lives to give life. Our calling is to be movers and shakers, the social salt and pepper that troubles the ‘Roman peace’ of those who seek a quiet life untroubled by injustice.”

However, it seems at least the local community is not troubled and has embraced the sisters and their activism on behalf of those seeking refuge in Sweden. When I ask Anders Johansson, the parish vicar, what the reaction has been of local people in the church and community of Knivsta to Alsike Kloster he tells me that 99% are supportive. “One or two persons I meet are more critical because they don't like monasteries or they have the view that the female should not be priests, and I say, ok, that is life.” Despite my goal of remaining free from opinions in my research, I cannot hide the perplexity on my face. I did not expect to hear that people object to the sisters on account of them being women. I specify my question: “I meant in terms of them taking in refugees?” Anders also specifies: “Yes. I've never met anyone in the church, people on the street or anyone in the community who is against them taking care of refugees. Never. In fact, now in Sweden, people on their tax forms can choose to enter or leave the Church of Sweden. I take care of those papers when they come through, and a couple of times, people write on the form ‘because of the nuns at Alsike Kloster and what they do for refugees, I will join the church and pay the church taxes.’”

By simply living their daily lives in accordance with their faith, accepting the full consequences of their spiritual beliefs, these sisters of Alsike Kloster have inadvertently lived revolutionary lives of spiritual activism. The impact can be seen in many aspects, which I will cover in the pages to come, and it all stems from small daily choices. It reminds me of Dorothy Day, the co-founder of the

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33 McIntosh & Carmichael, Pg 1
Catholic Worker Movement and instigator of countless hospitality houses that fed and housed thousands of urban poor during the Depression. She also kept her focus on her simple calling of faith and on what it meant for her daily life. “Nothing mattered more to Dorothy Day than the way she lived her life. She was interested in books and ideas, but for her the test of a life is its everyday moral texture – what ones does, finally, with all the hours of each day.” 34

8 COLLECTIVE LIVING: CHARACTERISTICS OF A COMMUNITY

8.1 A monastery as a warm country home

Usually one thinks of monasteries as big old grey stone medieval buildings, but this is not the case with Alsike. In 1964 Sister Marianne and Sister Ella moved in to an old parish school house right next to Alsike church in the countryside outside of Uppsala. 35 Sister Karin joined them permanently in 1983. It’s a typical Swedish-looking house, red with white trim, slightly larger than a single-family home. When I first walked up towards it I thought, ‘where is the monastery?’ It turns out, there was not a big looming stone structure hiding behind the quaint warm country house, that IS the monastery.

As I walked up towards the door, two refugee girls came out on the landing, one from the Congo in her early teens, the other from Kosovo just a couple of years younger and yet almost half her size. They quietly count together: “one, two, three” and then shout in unison “Do you want to jump on the trampoline with us?” Their question was directed to 3 or 4 other kids playing down in the big parking area in front of the house. I smiled, amazed, because even though some of these children have been through more trauma than most of us could even imagine, they are still just kids like any other kids, wanting to jump on the trampoline when they get home from school.

34 Coles, 1989, Pg. 111
35 Nordström, Pg. 14
Inside of Alsike Kloster it is warm and welcoming, though it might take a little bit getting used to for most of our neat and tidy Western sensibilities. In the living room, they still have the blackboards on one wall and there is a little stage where the teacher’s desk used to sit. The walls are painted a strange rusty mauve color that I can’t quite put my finger on: it’s not quite dark, it’s definitely not light, definitely not modern, but it feels very soothing. The floors are wooden and the room is filled with odds and ends, furniture here and there, nothing matching. Everything looks a bit chaotic, as if the furniture just haphazardly fell where it stands, yet after being there a while I realize it actually is well thought out and makes perfect sense – the tables are where they need to be for eating, for the kids to sit and play or watch TV, leaving aisles for walking through to the chapel. There are bookshelves all around the room filled with books, random stacks of booklets, postcards; one side has plates, glasses and tea pots. One of the refugees, who has been here for 8 years, is an artist and

36 Photo: Gert Ärnström
there are canvas paintings all around the living room, up on the tops of the book shelves, leaning against cabinets. There is an amateur but still painfully powerful recreation of the photo of the young drowned Syrian boy that made headlines and created an uproar, but sadly changed little. It is even more painful seeing a recreation of that photo in this room where these refugees live and that photo is all too real.

![Image of a canvas painting with text: "It happened so quickly - I just came home when I heard they were going to the sea - one wave and he was gone.

Figure 7 – A refugee's painting of a drowned refugee boy, leaning on top of a cabinet in the living room at Alsike 37]

### 8.2 A quadrupley blessed entry way

In the entry way, there are tons of jackets on hooks – I can’t tell who they belong to because whenever I see anyone come and go they go to their rooms to get their coats, yet there must be 70 or 80 jackets hanging in the entry way. There is a big wardrobe that has towels and linens, there is a bench for when you take shoes on and off yet it seems to always have stuff piled on top of it. For many days, there were big black trash bags of donated clothing. Then there were boxes of supplies. There is a small table that is by the window with two chairs. I sometimes see people eating lunch here, or people bring a laptop, sometimes kids sit here and play games on their phones. It’s a relatively quiet place, ironically, even though it’s an entry way where people come and go. There are

37 Photo: Shanti Grafström
exposed pipes up in the ceiling and the tops of the walls and by the pipes there are three pictures of Jesus and one Mother Mary with baby Jesus. It would make much more sense to have the pictures eye level; when you walk in, they would greet you and look aesthetically normal on the wall. But here, they are way up on the wall by the ceiling and the exposed pipes and it looks odd. It makes you wonder – are they covering holes in the walls or something? Or is it some feng shui theory that you should have a quadruple of Jesuses overlooking the entrance into a house from on high? Or are they trying to bless the pipes, because they certainly need it? Just below is a bathroom door with a crooked handwritten sign on it that says “Blocked.” As the vicar Anders told me, the house and its plumbing was not built to have 60 people living there.

8.3 The kitchen as the heart of the home

The Jesus pictures by the exposed pipes are odd but I kind of love it. It is part of the chaotic charm of the place. Nothing is typical or as expected, everything is a little bit off center but somehow that is exactly what makes it feel right. Like any self-respecting Swede, normally chaos and disorder bothers me, and when I first came out here I noticed how things were stacked in piles or how I

38 Photo: Shanti Grafström
wanted to organize this or that. But being out here, I realize that people work hard to keep things clean, they do their best to use what they have and don’t throw things away when they don’t look pretty, and it just feels so kind and loving that none of that stuff bothers me at all anymore. The kitchen at Alsike is, like in most homes, its heart, and it is a wonderful warm place. There are usually babies sleeping in their strollers, children running in and out, someone cooking, someone chopping. It is a large room centered around the great hearth with a stove unlike any I’ve ever seen – 4 big square iron plates laying right next to each other on which to cook. It looks like a cross between an olden wood burning contraption and some modern commercial griddle. It usually has a large pot with a delicious smelling stew or soup cooking for lunch or dinner. There is a large wooden table with a long bench under the windows and chairs all around. It only seats 10 or 12 people out of the more than 60 living here, but it feels infinitely welcoming. The most spick and span suburban kitchen straight from a magazine has got nothing on Alsike Kloster.

One day as I walk into the kitchen, Sister Karin was standing over the counter with a big hatchet cutting up a big chunk of lamb. Here is this little tiny nun in her grey nun's habit with an old red

Figure 9 ~ The Alsike kitchen 39

39 Photo: Shanti Grafström
floral apron holding a hatchet in one hand and a big lamb rib in the other, walking over to drop it into a pot of lamb stew on the stove. It’s quite a sight! She is so versatile; I never know what I will find her doing when I get to Alsike for the day. She's saying to the whole kitchen in general how it is so yummy when the lamb bones are used in the stew. “And it's healthy, too, the bone marrow" I say, even though I'm vegan. It's important to blend in, and I don’t want to be holier than... and I’m certainly NOT holier than a nun who has dedicated her life to serving God in the form of refugees by taking them into her home, feeding them, helping them with their asylum process, driving them to the dentist, fighting for their rights and making them a darn good lamb stew!

8.4 A community of sisters and their friends

I sat down and talked to Ingrid who has been here for 3½ years: “For me, when I first came, it was a little bit strange, because I didn't know anyone. But then I started talking with Sister Karin and a few people here, and then I started to feel that this is my home. For me, it has been, living here, very good. We are like a big family. There are people who help us when we need it. Sometimes I think, how can I go to live somewhere else? Here we laugh, we are together, we have been through so much together.”

The community consists of two nuns, one postulant, a temporary live-in volunteer, one dog, five cats and around sixty refugees, who the sisters refer to as their ‘friends.’ Sister Marianne and Sister Karin are the nuns who have been on the front lines for the rights of their friends from foreign nations. Sister Ella, who passed away last year at 92, was the one who took care of the home front, paying the bills and buying groceries. Sister Marianne is now in her 90’s and has retired from most activity, still coming down for prayers and mass or to sit outside in the sun for coffee with her friends. Anders, the vicar, told me, with both admiration and worry in his voice, “Now Sister Karin is the housekeeper and everything plus what she did before.” Sister Karin has been joined by a postulant from Kenya, Sister Rose. She has been here for two years and has learned a good deal of Swedish and she speaks
English. She will become a novice this summer and will hopefully stay here at Alsike Kloster when she takes her vows as a nun. There are other deaconesses in Kenya who are interested in coming to Alsike to test their calling. Sofia is a volunteer staying here for six months who heard Sister Karin’s summer radio program and followed her heart here to learn more about how she might help women and children in her life, and follow her faith instead of a career path.

As for the sisters’ friends, they come from many nations. Sister Karin explains, “We have had refugees from most continents and many religions. Christians from different churches, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, Atheists and if there is something we've learned through the years it is that we are all first and foremost human beings with the same need for love and care, joy and laughter and to be met with respect. We have celebrated festivals like the end of Ramadan, Hanukkah, we’ve been to a Hindu wedding and much else.” Currently, there happens to be quite a few people from Kosovo and a few families from Albania, who all speak Albanian, so there will be a lot of talking in Albanian, then switching to Swedish, sometimes English for those who don’t know a lot of Swedish yet. Some of the refugees speak Swedish well, some hardly at all. Some of them speak English well, though a few have a hard time communicating in any language. The kids all speak Swedish, they pick it up easily, and they often will learn a few extra languages, too, while staying at the monastery. The only truly common language of the community is charades - everyone uses exaggerated hand gestures and onomatopoeic noises; the person ‘listening’ often looks on in confusion until a light goes off and they smile and nod. Sofia says it’s just become normal now and she doesn’t even think about it anymore. When she goes out and is talking to other people not in the Alsike community, she ends up doing these exaggerated hand gestures and then realizes she must look kind of strange.

40 Lindquist, 2015
8.5 Local volunteers and vegetables ~ a connection to normal life

There are local volunteers who come by on a regular basis. They always seem cheerful and everyone is glad to see them. Once when I was sitting in the entry way, a Swedish man, Olof, stopped by to see Sister Karin with a refugee family who is staying with him in his guest house. He had just taken the father in to fix his front teeth. The father was a distinguished looking man in his 50’s, smiling to show off his new front teeth. If he was wearing a suit and tie he’d look like a CEO but he’s a paperless refugee who just got his teeth fixed and who fled to this country with nothing. His daughter is starting school and he beams at Sister Karin to express his gratitude, as he doesn’t know how to say thank you in Swedish yet. Olof talks to Sister Karin about his concern about his neighbors and if they should report him for having a paperless family staying with him. Sister Karin suggests just to say they are "waiting for asylum." It's true, and that way he’s not lying but not volunteering that they have been denied and are trying to appeal or find another way to stay.

On another day, Peter, an older Swedish man with grey hair and beard, comes by to pay a visit. He doesn't appear to do anything to “volunteer” on this day except to join them for lunch (though I’m

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41 Photo: Östra Aros brödraloge
sure he does much to help the community on other days). But I can sense how much it helps just to provide a sense of being connected to the outside world, so that the Alsike community doesn’t feel isolated or too different. In terms of the day to day cooking and cleaning, they don't need that much ‘help’ because there are many able-bodied and capable people living here. It's more that they need a connection to ‘normal life’ outside of the asylum-seeking process of paperwork, struggle and frustration and not being able to work or plan or live life the way you and I take for granted.

They ring a big bell first at the front of the house and then the back so everyone comes to the kitchen. There is a wing of rooms that has their own small kitchen, so those families generally eat on their own and there are never 60 people in the kitchen at once. Today, Sister Karin is not here, so Sister Rose leads prayer before the meal, a short simple prayer, thanking God, that is all. Sister Rose first makes a plate for Sister Marianne to take upstairs. Then everyone grabs plates and food, serving themselves from the big pots on the stove; guests go first, they insist, pushing me and Peter to the front of the line. People sit around the kitchen table, others eat standing in the kitchen, bring their food outside or into the living room. One refugee, who has lived here for 13 years without papers, tries to encourage 5-year-old Lars to eat his vegetables, just like in any other home in the world.

Figure 11 – Sister Karin picking up bins of donated food from Willys

42 Photo: Kyrkans Tidning
8.6  *Disposable food & disposable humans all find a home at Alsike*

The community receives a large amount of donated food from the local Willys supermarket. They give nearly expired food and produce they can’t sell anymore to the monastery. There is a chore board in the living room with names for who makes breakfast, lunch, dinner, who does dishes, and who sorts through the donated Willys food each day. Next to the kitchen there is a pantry, locked with a padlock, with a nifty fridge room inside it - a regular closet room that has an AC unit that cools it down to fridge temperatures for storing large quantities of milk, cheese, eggs, meats and the like. One day when I was helping to unload groceries and came walking up with five and half kilos of cheese in my arms, Sofia smiled and said "this week’s cheese." The first day I was helping in the kitchen I was asked to chop carrots and I picked up the bag and saw carrots that were sprouted and a bit old and would have been thrown out by ‘most people,’ but once I peeled and chopped them, they were perfectly delicious and nutritious. Even the knife I used had a chip in it and would have been thrown away in a ‘normal’ household. So, the community at Alsike is not just fighting our society’s ‘disposable’ mentality when it comes to human beings, but carrots and kitchen gadgets, as well.

![Figure 12 ~ Chopping sprouted carrots with a chipped knife](image)

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43 Photo: Shanti Grafström
Ingrid shared with me how she arrived, a lone 19-year-old pregnant woman running away from so-called honor violence in Kosovo, rejected by the Swedish immigration. “I came here, I knocked on the door. I waited. I knocked again. Then Stina opened the door,” she laughed at the memory of Stina being a complete stranger, “and she is now my sister. So, she got Sister Karin and she came and asked me why I had come here and things like that and then she said, ‘Yes, you are welcome, you can stay here, I will help you.’ I came to Alsike Jan 11th, 2014.” I’ve noticed that people seem to know the exact date they came to Alsike and when I ask how long they’ve been here they often say “Jag fyller...” and the number of years, the Swedish term for having a birthday. I don't know if it’s something they celebrate, but it is something that is very special to most who live here, the day they came to safety. Sister Karin told of a young boy who arrived the day before his 5th birthday. After his birthday party on his second day, he told his mother "This is a good place. The people are nice here. Let's stay here." 44

8.7 The good news and bad news of living in community

One day when I arrive there is good news: one of the families has found an apartment in Knivsta. It's small, only 42 square meters, but that is more than the 12 square meters the family of four have now. Another family has been waiting for their papers at Alsike for eight years, much longer than this family. Three years ago, Ulf and Margareta almost lost their son, Eric, then 14, when the Swedish immigration decided he should be deported back to a country he had left when he was five. The family fled from Kosovo after Eric’s grandfather put a gun to Ulf’s head in front of the boy because Ulf had dishonored the family by marrying his high school sweetheart, Margareta, even after she had been raped several times during the Balkan wars. After being denied asylum, the family has stayed at Alsike for the past 8 years and they are all living with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. They are on

44 Lindquist, 2015
the verge of maybe getting legal status, and Sister Karin has found that this can sometimes make it even harder. It’s like the last months of waiting gets even more tense. The news of other families moving on while they are still in limbo is hard and the father and seventeen-year-old son have a big blow up. Sister Karin goes down and sits with them until she thinks things have calmed down, but she finds out that Eric got on a bus and went into town still upset. It’s Valborg, a big Swedish drinking holiday, and Sister Karin doesn’t want a frustrated paperless young man wandering around town on his own, so she gets in the car and drives in to find Eric and bring him back home.

One of the challenges of living together in community is that sometimes there will be people who might be “difficult.” This could be simply because of their personalities but here, it can also be because of the traumas they have been through and the emotional scarring they are carrying. Vicar Anders told me “Sometimes, when Sister Karin has problems, she calls me, then I can go and help her. Sometimes it's a conflict and it's good that I am a priest and a man, to address those who have an argument or a conflict. It's awesome I think, the work they do. Many of the refugees are in deep stress from wars or criminal activities or have been threatened as a people and abused in several

\[\text{Figure 13 – In the middle of winter, a resident brings food down from the main house to the make shift rooms set up in the garage}\]  

\[\text{Photo: Sanna Sjöswärd}\]
ways, so they have a psychologist and doctors working with them, voluntarily. The nuns have good connections with helping people. But this group, coming with their problems, from different parts of this tragic world, living together – of course, there is stress with that.” This is an issue that other spiritual activist communities deal with rather crudely known as “God gets what man rejects”, wherein, because their underlying inclusive beliefs, these communities accept people that more mainstream groups have rejected. 46 A calling for love and acceptance can bring healing to many of these traumatized people, however, it is important for the community to be able to set clear boundaries and have clear supports. “At the GalGael Trust in Glasgow, there is a poster on the wall that says; ‘I will wash your feet, but you may not wipe your feet on me.’ In other words, mutual respect is of the essence.” 47

Sister Karin and I talked about how she sees making Christ’s call to ‘Love thy neighbor’ part of daily life here at Alsike? “I think it's to take every day and accept every day as it is. And in that way, it's very simple, it's not so complicated. It's just to meet every day with everybody's question as patiently as you can. Because it's not easy to come to a country like Sweden that is very well organized when you are coming from cultures without structure, countries that have been in chaos for generations. Accepting, that is part of the love. It doesn't mean we don't want to teach them. We want to teach them. But to try to understand and have patience that this is something very strange and very difficult. And to show people that this is the way for the future, to ask for forgiveness, to forgive and forget. That is also a question of love.” Sister Karin looks up at me with earnestness in her eyes, “That is also what we are training in as sisters living together. It's not easy to live together as sisters, too. We live very tight. There are problems. We are different and sometimes it's not easy. But I think this is the way of living together with other people.”

46 McIntosh & Carmichael, Pg. 7
47 McIntosh & Carmichael, Pg. 7
8.8 Living in community ~ training us in our peace making

One day I’m in the kitchen with Sister Karin and Anna Karin, a local woman who helps as an advocate and has been very involved for 20 years. She is a teacher and brings her classes here. She has half-dreaded half-blond half-long hair. I'm not sure if she tried to do dreads from a belief in natural hair or if she just forgot to brush her hair for a really long time because she was focused on more important things like refugees and human rights, but she exudes a no-nonsense passion for humanity. She's here with her daughter and a friend, both around 7 years old. Anna Karin and Sister Karin are talking to the two young girls. The visiting friend is commenting on how Alsike is messy, and Sister Karin says, “Yes, it is because there are so many kids and grown-ups, too.” She explains that it's a collective. The girl asks what that is and Anna Karin explains that is when many people all live together. Sister Karin says it's when kids have a whole football team to play with. She tells the story of a family who had been living here and when they finally got an apartment and the son got his own room, which is what he had wanted for such a long time, now that he had it, he said, "yeah, but before I had a football team." So, really, living in a collective is perhaps a better way to live, even

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48 Photo: Natanael Johansson
if it weren't for the state of the asylum seeking process in Sweden. Are we meant to live in such
isolation as we do in Western society? Are traditional cultures where we live in extended families
and villages that are connected to each other perhaps happier in many ways? Is that also an aspect of
spiritual activism? Is this also an aspect of what Alsike is showing us?

I ask Ingrid if, when she gets her papers, she wants to move away from Alsike? “Sometimes I think
no, but sometimes I think, you have to go because someone else needs help. But if I get papers and I
move somewhere else, I will come here. I cannot forget how much the sisters have helped us. And
the children, they cannot forget Sister Karin and the place where they are born. When they grow up,
they must remember their whole lives and be grateful.”

Sister Karin talks about what you learn, living in community: “You learn a lot about yourself. What
is good, it's a little bit of training of living in the whole world, I must say. You have to accept others,
the other people that you are living together with, as they are. They are not angels and you are not an
angel, you will really soon realize that you are not an angel. We are human, we have good things and
bad things. But I think it's something that is training us in our peace making. This is what it's all

49 Photo: Sanna Sjöswärd
about: if we want peace in the world, we must accept each other, so in a way this is peace work.” In this daily acceptance of each other’s flaws and differences, both the nuns and their friends are receiving training in world peace skills. Choosing love over anger in these small every day interactions is a clear example of Buddha’s quote from the Dhammapada, famously paraphrased by Martin Luther King, Jr.: “Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world; by love alone is hatred appeased. This is an eternal law.”

9 SOCIAL ACTIVISM & DIRECT POLITICAL WORK

9.1 Refugees on the doorstep

The first time I went out to Alsike Kloster I remember Sister Karin saying that they have to turn people away all the time because they just don't have room, they can't fit any more families, and they have people showing up with their children, lonely boys or desperate people who are being ignored or pushed around and who just don't know how they are going to survive. They show up and Sister Karin must say no - and it's heartbreaking. She told me she wants to give them the address of the Prime Minister or the head of the Immigration authority so they can knock on their doors so they have to be the one who tells them no!

When I spoke with Vicar Anders, he spoke of the steady flow of refugees seeking help from the sisters, more than they are able to help. They receive around ten requests per week via phone, email or text that they have to refuse. “The word has spread out in the church and among the refugees. We have a continued problem with coming too many, they cannot take care of them. Now and then, not very often, but it happens that they call me in the night and say, ‘we have a family here and we cannot take care of them.’ I go down to them and set them on the train and give them some money

50 Jones, Pg. 146
and say, ‘we cannot take you in, you must go back.’ Often they come from other churches in other parts of Sweden and they think the Alsike monastery has lots of rooms and they know they take in hidden refugees. But it’s very small and they simply can’t take in everyone.” So, giving refugees food and shelter, and even helping the 60 refugees they can house with their papers is not a long-term solution. The sisters also work directly on the political system to change the way the asylum process and the Immigration department is run.

9.2 Politics, because you have to save lives

Sister Karin talked to me about their political work: “We try to have contact with politicians all the time. We are not so active in demonstrations. I think, that of course yes, it's good, but you can't do everything. I have been to so many demonstrations, and yes, temporarily perhaps it has done something. If there is a project you want to get accomplished, then you can collect lots of people and get something done, that is good. But for the long run, that is not the way of solving the problem, not for changing the big system.” In On Peace, Trappist Monk Thomas Merton also warned of the dangers of this type of demonstration that is more concerned with press and public attention than with “the meaning of [their] impact.” Is the protest just adding a plethora of witty signs to the

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51 Photo: Örjan Björkedahl
52 Jones, Pg. 147
google-sphere or is it changing the quality of people’s lives in a positive direction? What are the concrete goals? Are there policies or procedures that will change for the better? How does this activism hope to change daily life on earth? Sister Karin continues: “I think it's better to talk to the politicians, the good politicians who want to listen and tell them about reality, that will give more results. Because most people, they don't know. Really, they don't know.”

Sister Karin had to take a call in the middle of our interview to help advise Sofia what kind of supplies to buy at the hardware store to fill in the hole they found in the stone and mortar floor of the pantry. A rat, or what Sister Karin thinks must only be a smallish mouse, had gotten in. During our interview, several of the men and women were busy in the kitchen throwing away the food that was half eaten while Sofia had run out on errands, and while she had turned off her ringer for the interview, she had to take this very important call. I, of course, completely understood. This is an example of how politics, activism, rats (or mice) and our daily bread is all intertwined in Sister Karin’s world. She hangs up, and seamlessly continues: “Albania and Kosovo are officially ‘safe’ countries, so there is no political asylum from there, even if your life is under threat, even if women are fleeing ‘honor killing’ and will be killed if they return. The Swedish government just says that is a ‘family issue’ and send them back to be killed. There are several women and children hiding at Alsike under those circumstances. And nowadays we have very strict laws. And that means you have to find other solutions also, like working permits, because you have to save lives.”

9.3 **Terror attack ~ being proactive, calling in reinforcements**

During my study at Alsike Kloster, there was a terror attack in Stockholm. On April 7th, an Uzbek man, a rejected asylum seeker, drove a highjacked truck down a pedestrian street, killing 5 innocent people. When I returned to Alsike, people were very nervous. In the kitchen, Anna was talking about how “this one guy was just crazy, it has nothing to do with refugees, he just went wrong in the head.” It's scary for them. One government official said something bigoted about “rooting out
illegals,” as if that would have stopped it. Everyone knows there are hidden refugees at Alsike. Sister Karin is scared about a witch hunt mentality, so she called the Uppsala police chief and he said he doesn't want to come out here, says they won't unless they are ordered to from higher up. I point out to Sister Karin that the sisters were awarded a “Swedish Hero” award in 2014, 53 so it might not be good PR for the police to raid the place again, it was really bad press for them when they did it before. She agrees that it does give them some protection, but she takes nothing for granted. And the community is nervous, the refugees talk about being more careful, not going into town unless absolutely necessary, they are scared more people will get stopped and detained now.

Sister Karin wants to be politically proactive after the Stockholm attack, so she has invited John van Tilborg, the director of the INLIA foundation in the Netherlands to come up the next day to meet

53 Nilsson, 2014
54 Photo: INLIA Foundation
with the Archbishop and someone from the government. Sister Karin also wants to get in to speak with people from the parliament (she says it’s the first time she really has a strong desire to do so), and it’s important that it includes people from the Democratic Socialists, the majority party. Anna Karin, who has been volunteering out at Alsike for 20 years, comes out to help Sister Karin plan for the meetings the next day. Anna Karin is a teacher at Färnebo folkhögskola, a type of community college with a focus on human rights and ecological justice, who came out to Alsike in November of 1993 when she heard about the violent police raid on the radio. “For me, it was that reaction that this should not happen in Sweden. This is a country where we have rights for refugees, we have human rights. We don't treat people like this. This is not ok, not in my country. That was the starting point.” Once she got to know the three sisters, who are so special, and the refugee families living here who are special as well, they just starting feeling like friends and you naturally want to help friends, so Anna Karin has been a steadfast supporter of Alsike ever since.

As John arrives, he says hello and recognizes people from when he was last here 2 years ago. He gives hugs and asks how people are doing, where they are in their asylum process. He speaks English, some people can’t talk to him but smile and recognize him with warm eyes. He’s a very tall man, balding with a salt and pepper beard, a round belly, kind face and smiling eyes. He’s casually dressed in a button up shirt with top button open, but he’s able to put on a tie and look very official very quickly as needed. He’s very warm and present and I can tell he feels Alsike is a very special place. He goes upstairs to pay his respects to Sister Marianne before the meeting.

9.4 Government meeting at the kitchen table

Sister Karin and Anna Karin have arranged for John van Tilborg to meet with a political advisor to the Minister of Education, who has been a friend to Alsike in the government. The political advisor came to Sweden himself as a refugee from Syria when he was a boy. We sit down around the kitchen table and John starts explaining the background of INLIA, an organization of churches throughout
Europe that work to help asylum seekers. "States make decisions and they have the right to do so, the churches recognize that. On the other hand, we are called, because we are churches, if someone is laying in a ditch, the bible tells us you can’t pass by and do nothing, you have to do something."

For the rest of the meeting, John talked about the work they do in the Netherlands with local city governments to take care of refugees and refused asylum seekers. “For the municipality of Groningen, we shelter over 300 people who were rejected by government authorities, so the city is paying 3 million Euros for this year to make sure we will shelter them 24 hours a day, guide them, help them, to take care of these people. We work with 60 municipalities in the Netherlands. The cities are paying for these shelters, also for the rejected asylum seekers. If they are rejected, they end up on the street and then it is our problem. If the government throws them out, they throw them out,

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55 INLIA - International Network of Local Initiatives with Asylumseekers website
56 Photo: Shanti Grafström
but we take care of them so they are not on the streets. And we work with them to look for a solution. Maybe it’s getting status, maybe it’s them going back, but the solution is not the street.” Sister Karin also explains how over the years, the people they have sheltered would otherwise had nowhere to go. They can’t go back to their countries because they could get killed, so they would end up on the street and a problem for Swedish society. Hiding refugees is not part of the problem. John again shared his experience: “The people in Groningen now accept us as the people who help them. Ten years ago I was guarded, my life needed to be protected. People were threatening us, because of me helping refugees, extremists, nationalists and racists, so badly that my mayor didn’t dare to let me go alone. Now, not one threat the last years.”

The government man agrees. “It’s a shame for a country to have these people on the street. We’re not poor countries, it’s countries that have so much money and we can take care of these refugees.” Sister Karin takes this one step further. “Yes, and it's not a question of affording it or not affording it. It's a question of not looking at these people as a burden. We must look at them as a possibility and a challenge. Of course, in the beginning they need some help, but very soon, much sooner than we think, they will be helping us.” As we finish the meeting, Sister Karin asks to set up a meeting to talk to some members of the government. “We have been working with refugees for 40 years. Not many in Sweden have had that much experience with refugees and I think we have some expertise that can be helpful. All our families have succeeded in Sweden.” Here is a nun sitting at her kitchen table explaining to a government official about the reality of refugees in Sweden, despite that many people think religion has no place in politics.

9.5 **Sanctuary laws, because the authorities are not infallible**

After the police raid in 1993, nine men were deported back to their countries. The fathers called to Alsike to talk to their wives and children to say their goodbyes. The Archbishop wrote to the police and immigration to ask for more time for the attorneys to prepare appeals so the fathers would not be
sent away from their families. The Archbishop’s appeal did not work. He was admonished by the authorities that he should instead help to talk some sense into Sister Marianne. 57 The sisters say that the basis for the sanctuary is not to break the law, it is to give those who have been treated wrongly by the law a new chance. Sister Marianne explains: "The old sanctuary law that we used to have, it was open to anyone. It only required that the person themselves felt that they had received an unjust verdict and the monastery was convinced that the person had received an unjust verdict and deserved to have their case reheard. It was that simple. You didn't have some sense that the authorities are infallible. Now we have some strange belief that the authorities are infallible." 58

Figure 19 – The police returned two fathers and their babies after they had been detained in winter 2017 59

Several of the men deported were sent back to Bangladesh where they were immediately arrested upon landing. All the men eventually ended up coming back to Sweden after being tortured; one man had one of his eyes poked out in a Bangladeshi prison. 60 There might have been some fallibility there and the legal process might have needed a second chance to work properly.

57 Ezpeleta, 2011
58 Ezpeleta, 2011
59 Photo: SVT Nyheter
60 Ezpeleta, 2011
Over the years, the sisters have seen plenty of cases to convince them that sanctuary laws are needed. They once received a boy who had fled forced conscription as a child soldier. All the other boys he had arrived with swiftly received their asylum, but this boy’s paperwork was lost. On his second application, he was assigned an incompetent alcoholic attorney. By the time his case was finally heard two years later the official status of his home country had changed and he was denied asylum, but his home country considered him a deserter and a traitor. Another family was denied asylum because the immigration worker who interviewed the family didn’t ask the right questions. The family had undeniable political asylum claims, but the family did not know enough about the process to bring those issues forward and they were never asked. And because of the initial denial, they had to wait four years to reapply. It is enough to turn anyone into an activist.

In many cultures, it is deemed appropriate for churches to engage in charity, but not activism. That is, they can feed the homeless or collect money for starving children in Africa, but don’t rock the boat or ask us to change our socio-economic or political systems. But the sisters of Alsike Kloster have realized that no such distinction exists. You cannot just keep feeding people but never address the reason they are hungry. From *Spiritual Activism* we learn “An activist is one who acts to bring change in the way our relationships are structured, that is, change in community, often taking one to a point of discomfort. Dom Hélder Câmara, a Brazilian archbishop who practised liberation theology, said; “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.” 61 For Sister Karin, her act of faith in giving hospitality to foreigners, as Jesus asked her to do in Matthew 25, is not separate from talking to politicians on behalf of those foreigners’ rights, even if it makes some people uncomfortable.

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61 McIntosh & Carmichael, Pg 1
But Vicar Anders tells me that for many people, they are not uncomfortable. The local municipality government of Knivsta, it turns out, were instead uncomfortable not providing an education to hidden refugee children. “Even before it was recommended by the government, the municipality has always said that these kids, they come to the school, we know they are hidden, but they must come. So Knivsta has been open minded for these hidden people.”

9.6 Humanizing a dehumanizing system

One afternoon, Sister Karin gets back after spending hours waiting at Immigration with a family. She tells me how they have no toys in the waiting area. Sister Karin didn’t know why, so she had brought down a big bag of stuffed animals and offered to donate them but she was told the Immigration office had taken the toys away because people get so frustrated in the waiting area and they don't

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62 Photo: Maja Ekström
want them to have anything they can throw or hit people with. Sister Karin pointed out that she only had stuffed animals and said she'd rather get hit with a stuffed animal than a fist! Sofia and I agree that we’d much rather get hit with a nice soft fuzzy bear, in fact, the three of us decide then and there that all future wars will be fought with stuffed animals. But the receptionist wouldn't let her leave them there, so the poor kids sit there for hours with nothing to do. It's torture for the children, not to mention their parents, and just another layer of inhumanity added into the process.

Perhaps that is one of the most intangible lessons I’ve gleaned from my time at Alsike Kloster: the exhausting dehumanizing effect of being deemed an ‘illegal’ person, somehow not allowed to validly exist. Like some Kafka novel or dystopian teen trilogy, the government authorities seem to lose their sense of humanity and that is perhaps one of the most transformative political actions the sisters could take: to teach officials to see refugees as human beings, to teach all of us to see each other as human beings. Sister Karin and Sister Marianne simply treat each person with respect and full humanity. During the first couple of weeks I was out at Alsike, the police caught two fathers with their babies in town and detained them. They said they were going to come out for the mothers, so the monastery prepared; even Sister Marianne came downstairs to help defend her friends. Anna Karin shared with me about that day: “It's really good to have a chapel in the house. When we thought the police were coming, they said ‘Everybody to the chapel!’ Everyone was hiding in the chapel when I came out, and when I went into the house Sister Marianne was sitting by the front door in her chair with her walking stick, saying ‘Let them come.’ And I thought, yeah, the convent is safe, nothing will happen here. No one will pass this 92-year-old nun with a stick in her hand. She can still be strong when she needs to be.” In the end, the sisters speaking up for the humanity of their refugee friends, for the mothers and fathers of babies, was enough to remind the police of their own humanity as well, and the families were reunited, back safe in the refuge of Alsike Kloster.
PUBLIC EDUCATION AS SOCIAL ACTIVISM

10.1 Education IS activism

In another spiritual activist circle, LaDonna Brave Bull Allard is the historian and genealogist for the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and in the last year she suddenly found herself on the forefront of the fight against the DAPL at Oceti Sakowin Camp. She said in an interview with Teen Vogue: “I keep the history of all our chiefs. I always tell people, ‘I never was an activist.’ I never thought of myself being in the front lines, protesting. My idea was going out into the community and educating people. And then I realized it's the same thing.” 63 My first visit to Alsike Kloster was on a field trip with fellow university students on a snowy winter day. One spring day when I arrive, there is a class there from Färneboskolan, there earth justice and human rights focused community college where Anna Karin teaches. Anna Karin had told me “When I started working at Färneboskolan, I made a promise to myself that all students that come to this school should know about the refugee rights and asylum rights in Sweden and how we actually treat people here, and they all have to go to Alsike. So, that has been part of my job as well, and it has created a lot of activist and volunteers.” There is a group of young students, 18 or 19 years old, who have been studying development, feminism and human rights, and they have come out for the day. They spent the morning talking to Sister Karin about the monastery, the refugees, and the work they do here. We all had lunch together and I swap study stories with a few of the students. One of the students is doing a presentation for her high school up North and has gotten permission from the artist refugee to use some of her paintings, including the one of the drowned Syrian boy. They are spending the afternoon doing some deep cleaning, they’ve been divided into teams along with some of the residents. All of them looked so young and earnest and they are so passionate about being socially engaged, being vegan and changing the world. It made me very hopeful for the future and made me realize what an important role Alsike Kloster also

63 Halpin, 2017
plays in educating people in our society and helping to create a culture that is more understanding and compassionate.

Figure 21 – Sister Karin speaking at an event in Jönköping

Figure 22 – Sister Karin speaking at an event in Jönköping to a full house

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64 Photo: Nilla Lind
65 Photo: Nilla Lind
10.2 Peace starts within, but it doesn’t end there

Sister Karin says that people must seek her out, she never advertises, but that education is very important to her. “If all of us are changing ourselves in the right way for peace and love, then it will be political action and we will change the world.” We talk about how many people get caught up in the idea that world peace is about inner peace, but then they never leave their yoga mat. And it’s true that world peace is absolutely connected to inner peace, but if you find inner peace, then love will cause you to act in the face of injustice. Love cannot sit idly by. As Sister Karin thinks further she adds, “In a way, I think it is very important that when we should make peace we must start with ourselves and to make peace with all the people around ourselves. Because, why are people looking upon us now seriously? It's because we are living this. It's not what we are saying, it's what we are doing in our lives. That is why people trust us.” I find that to be true, because as much as the things Sister Karin says to a gathering of students or to me in a semi-structured interview are insightful, it’s seeing daily life in action that is the real education. How can you explain how important it is for children who come from violence and uncertainty to have an adult be fully engaged playing Uno?

Figure 23 ~ Sister Karin going all in with refugee children in a game of Uno  

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66 Photo: Sanna Sjöswärd
Part of the education that society is desperately in need of, that the sisters can offer us, is to understand how global political forces end up effecting the lives of very small and vulnerable people, which will be painfully evident in the stories told below. On my first field trip Sister Karin told us how important it is that people make connections with refugees as real people. She spoke about this one little Swedish child whose parents were against immigrants, but he had made an immigrant friend at school, so he ended up saying "Send them out, all of them, but not Ali, he is my friend." When we’re talking policies and immigration reforms, we need to remember it's about human beings, not simply statistics.

10.3 Deeper education ~ values & our understanding of doing ‘good’

Yet the education goes deeper still. Spiritual activists work on changing the deeper underlying consciousness of a culture, our beliefs and our value systems. This is where spiritual activists like Sister Karin and Sister Marianne can be living examples for all of us, Christian, Muslim or atheist. Often people confuse the whole separation of church and state with a separation of ethics and state – when we desperately need higher values in politics. This was a topic that Vicar Anders was very passionate about. “We must have ethical values as a springing point to everything we do, but in Sweden you can't have it religious, or political, maybe not even philosophical as a ground and I say, what value is that? Those are the basis for meaning. You must have a foundation to stand on. It can be a foundation of collecting stamps or being a socialist or being a Buddhist or whatever, it's fine. But you must know what your foundation is to have a human interchange with each other. That is where we get our values from and we must have our values as part of everything we do.”

But it’s important that we look deeper. One of the easiest acts of “doing good” in our society is donating our old stuff to charity. The monastery receives bags and bags of clothes, old toys and miscellaneous odds and ends. In fact, six such bags had been clogging up the entry way bench for
days, so I offered to sort through them. Sister Karin told me that usually they have all the clothes they need, but jackets or warm things for the kids would be useful. So, I go through all six big trash bags to pull out what is practical. The majority was rather gaudy stuff from cheap fashion stores from a very small sized woman: spaghetti strap mini dresses, a sequined sleeveless top, a see-through floral billowy thing, a bright red miniskirt – nothing I could see any of the refugees wearing. There were also sweaters with stains on them, a jacket with the sleeve torn, used underwear and sweat-stained camisoles that elicited an involuntary "ew." There were a few practical items that I set aside on a table: some children’s clothes, scarves and winter items. But sadly, it was mostly unpractical clothing made in sweatshops in third world countries that someone gave to refugees so they would feel ok about buying more cheap consumer goods. On our field trip in February, Sister Karin had made a comment about people giving broken toys, and that no matter who a child is or if they are a refugee or not, they at least deserve to play with toys that are not broken. Whether I’m supposed to be a neutral researcher or not, I admit I felt sad going through what this person meant to be a good deed, but was just "giving" to not feel bad about buying more stuff; it wasn’t truly wanting to share or help. It’s a strange system of "charity" we have set up. It's meant to be "good" but it's twisted in some weird way. And I know this is part of the deeper moral education that Sister Karin is engaged in because her words have been ringing around in my head since she spoke them on our field trip several months ago. I have avoided pointless shopping. It changed my behavior. Maybe other students present that day have also been thinking about this? How many students have come to Alsike and heard something similar over the years? What type of effect can this have on our cultural understanding of what true charity is? Like many spiritual activists, Sister Karin is teaching our deeper interconnectedness. Or as Jones frames it from a Buddhist perspective, “For engaged
Buddhists, there is a link between the violence of others and our own anger, between oppressive economic systems and our own greed.”

10.4 Sharing not just on our own terms ~ selflessness & happiness

In our interview, I get a chance to talk to Sister Karin about this issue. “I think we want to keep control, so we do as much as it pleases us. We are very scared of losing control and very scared of letting people close to us, so this is something that we have to train people in. And that is REAL sharing: not sharing on your own terms, but to try to share on other’s terms, too. That is difficult. And we very much like to collect money. We collect lots of money, it's easy for us in Sweden. We want to be good. And I will not say that it is something bad, but…” she pauses for a while to figure out exactly how to phrase it. “We are doing this to have less bad conscience for our lifestyle. Because the only way of getting rid of the social problems of the world is that we share even more so that we don’t have this consumerism lifestyle. We have to change our lifestyle if we want to make a real difference in the world. And we don't want that. We want to have our villas and our cars and phones and computers and our boats and holiday every year.”
In Hinduism, the Bhagavad Gita speaks of freedom through renunciation, and most people recoil and think, who wants this kind of freedom? People think of wandering sadhus and say no, I want my gadgets and gizmos. But as Hindu scholar Eknath Easwaran points out, “This is not at all what the Gita means. It does not even enjoin material renunciation, although it certainly encourages simplicity… It pleads, in a word, for the renunciation of selfishness in thought, word and action – a theme that is common to all mystics, West and East alike.” 69 The same is true for the sisters of Alsike. No one here is asking anyone to live in austerity, quite the contrary. One day Sister Karin was talking to one of the refugee mothers about her daughter’s upcoming birthday. Inga has braces on her legs to walk, but Sister Karin wanted to buy her some really pretty shoes for her birthday. The mother started telling Inga’s shoe size with the braces, but Sister Karin said, ”No, not orthopedic shoes, without the braces. I want to give Inga some pretty shoes, just to sit in, just some regular pretty shoes, like a princess. That would make her so happy." The sisters are only talking about renunciating selfishness and learning to share not just on our own terms, but to share on other’s terms as well; to live with more simplicity to ease suffering for others in this world. And perhaps to our surprise, learning to truly share with selflessness will make us happier as well!

Sister Karin continues: “I don't think that the lifestyle makes us happier. Even the refugees are much better at being happy than Swedish people with small things. I told this funny story about this boy from the war in Lebanon on the radio program. When he was coming back from school happy, and he was chewing a chewing gum, and when he came to me, he gave me a big hug and then he took the chewing gum out and split it in half and put half in my mouth. So I was chewing a little bit and then he smiled really big and said ‘I found it at the bus stop!’ But this is sharing. This is giving love. I like

69 Easwaran, Pg. 51
this story: that you are sharing everything. And I couldn’t do anything about it. I couldn't spit it out.

He was sharing his happiness. And divided happiness is double happiness.”

11 STORIES: A HUMAN BEING IS WORTH A THOUSAND STATISTICS

11.1 This is a living person; it could have been me

There are approximately 60 refugees staying at Alsike. It’s intentionally an approximate number.

Sister Karin explains, “Normally, we don't talk about numbers. Because we just say that some people have permission, some people are within the procedure, some people are without the procedure on different levels, so we have everything.” This is for obvious safety reasons, so that no one can come and say, ‘OK, it says here there are 58 of you and 11 hidden refugees, come forward!’

However, what is important is for each of those approximately 60 refugees to be a very specific individual person. “It's very important to make that somebody become someone. That is the work away from ‘they and us.’ It's just a big WE. It's very important to show that we are all of us human beings. We have the same needs, we have the same rights, and we have the same need of love and trust and friends and we have the same pain, same sufferings. That is why I am sometimes telling stories. This is a living person; it could have been me.”

This is a key aspect of Critical Discourse Analysis. In the media or public discourse, we are not given humanizing details for people we are meant to dislike. Machin and Mayr illustrate this point using this jarring example: “Terror suspects, both fathers of two daughters, were killed today by a car bomb.” 70 Terror suspects are not usually humanized with any kind of personal detail; they are not made into ‘someone’ because we are not meant to think of them as human beings. We also see this in the general treatment of refugees. Machin and Mayr provide several examples of British media depicting refugees and asylum seekers using metaphors of natural disasters: “In these examples,
asylum seekers are described in terms of a ‘flood’. No actual flood is involved, but this metaphor brings with it connotations of a natural disaster rather than a social matter, from which terrified people are seeking refuge. Foreigners overwhelming a country like a flood removes any sense of the needs of these people or the possibility of compassion on our behalf.” 71 To counter this cultural narrative of dehumanization, it is part of the sisters’ spiritual activism to humanize their friends seeking asylum in Sweden, to help their fellow citizens understand that these people are just like you and me. The following are a few of these stories.

**11.2 Johan, a boy with the politics of the world in his body ~ Uganda**

Sister Karin tells me of a boy who was at Alsike a while ago. “We had a boy here, he was almost 5 years old when he was here, he came from Uganda together with his parents. And this boy, he didn't have any language, he didn't talk and he didn't play. A 5-year-old child, normally they are talking machines, but he was very quiet. His father, he was very strong and very big, he had been a lifeguard to a high military person, a general or something. Their military group was transporting weapons when they were attacked by a guerrilla group who stole their weapons. The authorities accused them of having relationship with the guerilla, so they were put in prison, without a trial, as political prisoners. This was during the time when Museveni was president in Uganda. And Museveni was a refugee here in Sweden when Idi Amin was in Uganda and then he went back when Idi Amin was gone, and he became the president. So, Sweden had lots at stake, because he had been a refugee in Sweden then he must have been a very kind person and a very good person. So, they didn't believe that there were any real refugees coming from Uganda.

So, in this group of refugees, we had a nursery school for the small children in the mornings. Very easy, we were sitting together, singing some songs, playing something, doing something. We always

71 Machin & Mayr, Page 169
started in the same way by singing a name song.” Sister Karin sings it for me as she continues, 

“Now we're going to sing the name song, it is easy and it is fun, my name is Karin, what is your name?” And Johan, he was not sitting with us, he didn't dare to do that, but he was standing beside me at the window, and he came closer and closer to me, at the end he was just behind me. So, I was singing at the end, "My name is Karin, What is your name?" and I touched his heart, and when I did he started to shout and to scream, terrible! Terrible! At the end we managed to calm him down.

We had been to a psychologist with this boy because he didn't talk. The psychologists and the doctors, they were going to do some sort of thorough examination because they thought that perhaps he was autistic or something else. Well, on our way home, suddenly, the mother said, ‘Karin, Johan hasn't always been quiet.’ And I was so surprised. When you talk and you're going by car, you don't look right at each other, you're looking straight ahead, and sometimes that is easier. So, she told me, when her husband had been in this well-known political prison in Uganda, some human rights groups were helping to get people out, so this military person and the husband, the father, got the possibility to run away and they were running. And at the time, six soldiers came to the house of the mother. They took this boy, Johan, who was 2 1/2 at the time, put him on the floor. The solider put his boot on his chest, he put his weapon pointed over his heart while the other five raped the mother one by one. And Johan didn't dare to scream, he was quiet. And after that, he didn't open his mouth. So, when I came and pointed with my finger over his heart, it was the weapon. It was the weapon. So, he screamed! He screamed 2 1/2 years of being scared. He was screaming it out of his body. We continued with the boy and told the psychologist, but it took time, he still didn't talk for a while. But one day he came to me with a book and on this book, he had put some wood blocks, one big and two small and he said "Would you like some coffee?" That was the first thing he said.

And why do I tell this story? In Uganda at this time, there was a lot of proxy fighting between many different countries. It was the whole world involved in this little boy's problems. And at the same
time, he was a human being reacting as you ought to react to abnormal things. And at the same time no one got political asylum from Uganda in Sweden because the president had been a refugee here and we gave a lot of aid to Uganda, we had lots of projects going to Uganda. So, we can't allow refugees to come from Uganda, because if there are refugees, then the country is not good, and of course, the country must be good now. So, it’s our economy, our trade market, our politics – these are the things that decide who is a refugee and who is not a refugee. The whole world is in this child; the problems of the whole world are in this little child’s body. In each refugee, you can see the problems of the whole world. That is why you are learning a lot working with the refugees. And at the same time, you also learn that we are all human beings. And Johan was a victim of their stupid political war in the world. I think this is important to learn.”

11.3 Ingrid & Björn, caught between officialdom and ‘honor’ killing ~ Kosovo

Ingrid arrived in Sweden pregnant and alone almost 4 years ago at the age of 19. Björn came to visit her a few times, but then went back again. She explains, “I had problems in my country so I can't go back there. He came and he said to me, ‘Look, we'll try to solve the problems,’ but I said, ‘I know my family and I don't dare go back there.’ So, then he came here. We are never going back there again, and we are not going to be apart again. We are going to be together. He is staying here now.” Ingrid and Björn met in high school, they started talking a little bit, then after a few months, “we started to like each other, or we started to feel love.” After a while of being together, Ingrid became pregnant and she worried about telling her parents. “In Kosovo it is another tradition. We cannot marry whoever we want, we have to wait until our father finds a man, whoever he wants. But I didn't do what he wanted, I wanted to marry the one I love.” When she finally told her parents, they forced her to have an abortion at 7 months. Then they kept her home from school so she could no longer see Björn. She never finished high school. “After that, I spoke in secret with Björn. I would go out if my dad was not home. Then I became pregnant with my son. So I said, I will not let anyone take my
children out of me. I decided that we should get married, I would not ask my father, nothing, I wanted to save my children. So, I married Björn, and they started to provoke us saying, ‘NO, we're going to kill you, we're going to kill your children.’ So, I said, I have to do something to leave here.”

Ingrid had a sister in Finland who could send her a visa so she could leave Kosovo, she couldn’t do much else to help, just the visa, but Ingrid said that is enough. She flew to Finland, and a week later came to Sweden. In Kosovo, she could not go to the police. Her father told her it wouldn’t matter, that the police wouldn’t do anything, that he would do what he would do anyway for the honor of his family. But the Swedish Immigration authorities deem Kosovo to be officially a safe country and told Ingrid that her case is a ‘family issue.’ Sister Karin has seen these types of cases many times, and the governments in some of these newer states, formerly Soviet bloc states or dictator states do nothing to protect its citizens, especially when it concerns women or children and ‘family issues.’ Ingrid and Björn now have two beautiful children, a boy and a girl, and have started the asylum process again. They both work hard helping to take care of the monastery, the garden, the chickens and the community. They both speak Swedish and are making every effort to learn all they can to do well in their new home. “We have decided that we are going to stay in Sweden and we hope, we hope that we will get papers so I can be here with my children, with my husband and live a normal life.”

11.4 Sven, the incomprehensible example ~ Iran

Often, when you arrive at Alsike, Sven is one of the first people to greet you. This is because Sven is in a wheel chair and he often sits in the entry way, in front of the linen cabinet, or in the kitchen by the dishwasher, looking out the window over the sink. If it’s not too cold or windy, someone can help him out in the sun by the front of the house. His room is the only room on the first floor and it adjoins the kitchen. It seems that it used to be used as a work room before he arrived with his need for a handicap accessible room, because when they were searching for linens, Sister Rose went in to search in Sven’s room where there are still piles of supplies that they had nowhere else to store when
they put a bed in the corner to convert it into a bedroom. The room has glass doors that they’ve covered with curtains for privacy. Sven speaks very limited Swedish. Sofia is giving him lessons, but it’s difficult because he also doesn’t speak any English. Sven is from Iran and speaks Persian. There is one other man staying at Alsike who speaks a similar enough language that they can talk, but he has a work permit and is not there during the days. Sven seems very isolated. Whenever I arrive he smiles and says “Hej, Shanti.” He takes my hand, holds it up to his cheek. I ask how he’s doing and he usually says something like “Hard. Waiting. No papers.”

Back in Iran, he was interested in Christianity. Sven was watching a movie about Christ when the police showed up and arrested him. He was sentenced to 150 lashes. The result of his punishment was they had to amputate one of his legs. He has a sister in Stockholm, so after his whipping and amputation he came here to visit her three years ago and applied for asylum. As part of the application he was supposed to get a medical certificate from a certain kind of doctor but he and his sister missed that and never went to the doctor, so because of that his application was denied. For the past year, Sister Karin has been fighting to be able to get Sven his medical certificate so he can reapply for asylum, in which case it would be granted. He was whipped 150 times for being a Christian which caused him to have to amputate his leg! If he goes back, he will still be persecuted for being a Christian but he's denied asylum because of missing paperwork! Anna Karin says she can’t believe it, “He’s in the wheelchair because they whipped him for being Christian and he’s supposed to go back. It can’t be true.”

One day I sat in the entry way talking with Sven, using a lot of gestures and make-shift sign language. He tells me he is a Christian. He seems very proud of this. I can't imagine what that is like for him. For us, it's a given, a cultural thing, something that is assumed unless we decide NOT to be. For him, it cost him everything. It literally cost him his leg. He looks at me and says "Jesus" and then reaches up his hands towards the ceiling and looks up, then touches his heart, indicating that he loves
Jesus. Wow. I love Jesus, too, but it's hard for me to imagine what that means to him. I really have no idea what it is like to sacrifice so much for your faith. Is not freedom of religion a human right? I hide the tears that are coming to my eyes because I’m not sure if Sven would be comfortable with me crying or not, I’m not sure how I’m supposed to be with this refugee from Iran. All I can feel is that Sven should be honored. He should not be treated this way.

11.5 Anna, a mother protecting her children ~ Albania

Anna has an adorable 5-year-old son named Lars who runs around talking a mile-a-minute and a 3-month-old boy who mostly sleeps and gurgles. She is an Albanian citizen so she has a temporary work number and has gotten a job as a substitute teacher. Anna is applying for asylum again in September. It’s been 4 years since she was denied so that means she can start the process over again. I ask if it will help her prospects now that she has a job, but she doesn’t think so as it’s not permanent, they only call her in to substitute as needed. But she is very grateful for the job. “It helps me so much, to help my children if they need something extra. It doesn't feel good for me to go all the time to Sister Karin and say, ‘we need this.’ She buys everything, Sister Karin never leaves us without. We have a roof over our heads, we have food, that is enough for me and my children. Sister Karin buys diapers, milk, medicine, the hospital, everything. But for myself, I don't feel good to always go and ask for things that the children need. So, anything extra we need, I do have a little extra from the job.”

Anna fled to Sweden under death threats. She had heard that Sweden helped women and children, but her case fell outside of political asylum guidelines, even so-called honor killings, so she fell between the cracks of the system. “In 1998 my mother died, a man stabbed her. From prison, he wrote many letters to me while I was at an orphanage, and he wrote, ‘I will kill you, too, I will do the same as I did to your mother.’ When he got out of prison, the only choice I had was to hide. I hid in Kosovo for 10 years, I hid with friends or with relatives, I had to keep moving around. Then I met
my children's father, and I had Lars and it became too hard to hide with a baby. I couldn’t have a real home. Lars’ father tried to help me, but he couldn’t and he said, ‘Sweden can help you, they will help you if you come alone with your child.’ From what I have gathered from Sister Karin, the Kosovo government offers no protection for her if she goes back, so sending her back would be a death sentence. This is why Anna is at Alsike and why she is scared to go into town. After the Stockholm truck driver attack in April, Anna was talking to me about how they have to be more careful now and I could feel how scared she was. Yet Lars goes to day care and Anna takes the bus in to pick him up every day. Can you imagine what it feels like taking a bus into town with the thought weighing over you that if a cop stops you and asks for ID you could end up getting detained, deported and then killed? Can you imagine having that at the back of your mind every time you pick your son up from daycare?

When I ask Anna what her dreams are for the future if she gets her papers and can stay in Sweden she first answers that she wants her children to be able to go to school, go to University. “I want to be a teacher. I thought for a while about becoming a nurse, but if I see blood I die, so I can't do it. But it’s good to help people.” Then she looks at me with a tiny spark of hope in her eyes, “And to buy a house. I have been my whole life hiding. I've never had a house. Not a big house, just a little house.”

11.6 Lena & Hans, starting a new family amid the unknown ~ Kosovo

Lena and Hans are two of the newest members of the Alsike family. They are also fleeing what the Immigration office calls ‘family issues,’ where Lena’s father does not approve of Hans and has threatened violence. Lena is 33 weeks pregnant. Sister Karin is worried because the baby is not growing due to the emotional stress Lena is under: the Swedish authorities are threatening to send her back. Sister Karin says the airlines won't allow anyone to fly after 36 weeks so they only have to make it three more weeks. Sister Karin doesn't think they will send them back with her this pregnant.
It will be harmful to the baby. Hans has to check in at the police twice a week. On one such trip I accompany Sister Karin, Lena and Hans to the police station in Uppsala, as this is a normal everyday part of life at Alsike as much as meals or prayers or chores.

On this day, Lena and Hans also need to file a report that their passports are lost. Their passports went missing on the German-Hungarian border and they need the police report so the embassy will issue them new passports. The husband, Hans, barely speaks any Swedish at all. Lena speaks a little bit but not very much either. We walk up to the counter at the police station and Sister Karin does all the talking to the receptionist. Hans takes out folded-up copies of their passports from his jacket pocket and holds them forward towards the police woman, doing his best to help take care of his family, even though he can’t speak the language. The receptionist smiles at him but shakes her head, those aren’t needed. Instead, the lady gave us a form to report the passports as lost or stolen, and Sister Karin gestures to Lena and Hans that we would go over to a table to fill them out. They nod. Then the receptionist had a better idea and said that they were behind in typing in the info from the paper forms, but if you call and report a passport lost or stolen, they type it into the computer right away, so that would be faster. The receptionist gave Sister Karin a card with a phone number to call and then we started walking out of the police station. Sister Karin tried explaining to Lena and Hans that it wasn’t worth filling the forms out, that it would be quicker to go home and call. She spoke and gestured 2 or 3 times, then I tried once or twice, and they looked at us and tried to follow along. As we finally just started walking away from the police station I saw how Hans looked at Lena and with an expression asking her “did you understand?” and she subtly shook her head “no” and he just shrugged his shoulders. Here they are seeking safety in a new land, at a police station, knowing that at any moment they could get sent back into danger, she’s pregnant, people are talking back and forth about very important matters concerning their future and they have no idea what is going on.
Faith & Prayer: It Really Is a Monastery Amidst It All

12.1 Monastery on the first hand, sanctuary for refugees on the second hand

Behind the main monastery building is a small trailer, the size of a regular truck you’d see traversing along the highway transporting goods, in which two families live. On the back wall of this trailer is a mural done by a former refugee resident of Alsike, who also happens to be a graffiti artist. Many other refugees added their own words of meaning and even Sister Karin tried her hand at the spray paint. The mural says: “Alsike Kloster – God’s Kingdom's Embassy.”

It’s true that, while the day to day activity of Alsike Kloster often revolves around refugee rights and struggles, the foundation to everything lies in faith and prayer. The sisters come together six times per day for prayers in the chapel. Sunday, Tuesday and Friday mornings they have communion. Sister Marianne started the first monastery in the Church of Sweden since the reformation and adopted the Benedictine rules and prayers. Sister Marianne explains, “We are part of one of the smaller groups in the Swedish Church who live a communal life, so this is one way we are a

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72 Lindquist, 2015
73 Photo: Åsa Furuhagen, SR
monastery on the first hand, and a sanctuary for refugees on the second hand." They celebrate all the events of the Christian calendar, they have long days in the church for Long Friday, Easter, Christmas and all holy days. They have quiet zones for work and focus, prayers over their meals, and they keep all the holiness of an order of nuns going in the midst of 60 people crashing on the couch, so to speak. In many ways, it's the chapel that helps them have the strength to do what they do.

12.2 Tuesday morning Mass in a consecrated basement

One Tuesday morning at 8:30 I joined the sisters for mass in their chapel down in the basement. There were a few locals who came for mass – longtime friends of the monastery and the church music director, his wife and their toddler. Sister Marianne came down and she sat down through most of the service. Sofía and Sister Rose were there, of course, as well as a few of the refugee residents and a priest who came to preside over the communion. The regular prayers the sisters do themselves. As the monastery is in an old school building, the chapel used to be the gym and they’ve repurposed the gym equipment to be benches. Three windows behind the altar have been

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74 Ezpeleta, 2011
75 Photo: Shanti Grafström
transformed into colorful stained glass and the side windows let in soft natural light. The tiny chapel is very simple and peaceful. The mass follows the same format I’m familiar with from the American Episcopal church. Sister Karin reads sections from the Old Testament, New Testament and the Gospel. We all say the Our Father. The priest blesses the bread and the wine and bestows communion to the few who are gathered in this consecrated basement. Like most churches, they have little booklets so you can follow along with the service. Unlike most churches, the booklets are kept in a repurposed mashed potato box. Everything is thrifty and recycled which somehow also makes it more beautiful and holy, much more so than an engraved silver booklet holder ever could be.

No matter what is going on, when it is time to pray, the sisters and whoever else would like to join them convene down in the chapel. To Anna Karin, who is a humanist and has been volunteering at Alsike for 20 years out of her passion for human rights, this sometimes seems crazy, but she recognizes how much the sisters gain from it. “They would never have lasted this long without their faith, no way. The strong faith the sisters have will take them through the day, the week, the year. And that is different when I see people who are working with these things from just a political

76 Photo: Shanti Grafström
aspect, because then you get tired, your burn out. But the sisters have been doing this for 39 years, and no one has burned out, and they live with this, every day. Because there is something else, someone else, who is helping, and they…” Anna Karin pauses and moves her hands out repeatedly from her heart, “I don’t know how to say it, they spread it, some kind of calmness. I think what makes them work is that they have this deep faith. And it will take them through the whole thing.”

12.3 Spiritual ritual & love for God quietly intertwined in daily life

I have spent my entire adult life in so-called spiritual circles: everything from Episcopal churches to Hindu ashrams to Buddhist chanting sanga to Interfaith ministries to New Age crystal bowl chakra activation events! I have never seen the spiritual so quietly and seamlessly intertwined into daily living as I have the past several weeks at Alsike Kloster. The sisters never call attention to their holiness, they never make a big deal of their prayers or their faith, nor do they ever expect anyone else to believe as they believe. They simply go about their lives as nuns and quietly observe the daily rituals that ground them in their life in Christ. Sofia followed her faith here as a live-in volunteer for six months and she says to be able to work every day with prayer is very important to her. “It is very good for my life and for my spiritual life. We have very much to do, and when you have very much to do, it can be hard to prioritize your prayers. But here it’s given to you: now is the time we go to the chapel. It gets much easier. And when you get your routine of prayer, you also get a bigger longing to pray.” As Sofia is in her gap year after high school, wanting to find out what her calling is in life, this has become a very important gift for her. “I am more focused on living the life that God wants me to live, and I think that is something that I can learn about by coming here very much.”

The rituals also take on many celebratory forms. One Thursday afternoon, when Sofia and I get back from dropping massive amounts of recycling off in Uppsala, Sister Karin is in the kitchen making the dessert for Easter dinner, some sort of orange cream custard. It's a tradition; Alsike is big on traditions. This is the same dessert they always have for Easter. Before Sister Karin made it, Sister
Ella used to make it. Sister Karin tells of how the last years when Sister Ella was older she had forgotten how to do it, so the gelatin would get stringy and it wasn't very good. Sister Karin is careful to melt the gelatin, then mix it with some warmed up egg mixture, so it doesn't go in too cold – that is the secret. I whip up whipped cream and then egg whites. Sister Karin folds in the custard and meringue and cream, though she says it's too large a batch to fold it in as delicately as is needed, but for so many people, it will have to do. We then go in to set the tables in the living room for people from the church who signed up for Maundy Thursday dinner, only nine attendees this year. Again, all tradition, Sister Karin pulls out the nice white table cloths, smoky crystal wine goblets and the silver silverware that one of the refugees has polished for the occasion. Sister Karin starts to show us how to fold the cloth napkins and Anna suggests folding them a different way, but Sister Karin says, “no, we always fold them this way,” then she has to remind herself how to do it, and when she has it done, she smiles and shows how there are three folds for the Trinity, “the Father, Son and Holy Ghost,” she says with childlike delight. It’s hard to imagine that it was just this morning we met with John from the Netherlands and a government official about terrorist attacks and witch hunts. No matter what is going on, Sister Karin never does seem stressed. And when she is talking about God and Christ and napkins folded in honor of the Trinity, she glows like a newlywed in love.
12.4 *Hope for the future ~ Alsike Village, new faith, new prayer*

Despite the fact that there are only two nuns, and Sister Karin is the only one who is really active these days, the sisters of Alskie have faith in their future. Instead of entertaining any thoughts of shutting down the monastery, they are making plans to expand! They have purchased the neighboring piece of land and have plans for a Alskie Kloster Village. Sister Marianne shares, “Here there is also planning and the beginnings of our Kloster Village, yes, even a piece of land that is under cultivation with our own compost and an expanded chicken coup. And just as important: the growing hope of several interested novitiate candidates from Kenya.” Along with Sister Rose, there are other women from Kenya who want to come to Alskie to try their calling, and one never knows who might be inspired, even in a secular society such as Sweden. Anna Karin shares with me how deeply touched she is by the sisters: “For me, this is to be a Christian. It is to do this kind of work; this is what I learned that Jesus was saying and what Christianity is all about. So, it is also a way to show that religion somehow is political. This is how you change the world. And I think, in our society, so many Christians are preaching something and doing something else. These sisters are living and preaching the same thing. So, it's very important work that they do, even for the religion. Because, for me, this I understand. I think it's good advertising, to be Christian is cool.” And Christian or humanist, there is something intangibly special about Alskie that inspires such loyalty and devotion from so many that you cannot help but feel that the future is bright. After being away for a little over a week for some obligatory book learnin’ and thesis writing, I’m met by Sofia and plenty of good news. Two families have moved into their new apartments, one in Uppsala, one in Knivsta. A third family just found out they got an apartment for June 1st right here in the village of Alskie. Not all the news is good, though. When Björn was out on rat patrol the other evening, he found 15 rats in the traps. Sofia shivers and gives a little shriek. She quickly returns to happier

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78 Nordström, Pg. 28
thoughts, though. “Oh, I talked to the vicar, and the parish is going to be able help me with a stipend for next year, so I’m going to be able to go to Bible school in Uppsala and come here to help every week.”

![Image: The sisters bowing in their prayers five times daily in the Alsike Kloster chapel](Photo: Sanna Sjöswärd)

12.5 The chapel as the center of Alsike Kloster

The chapel is the center of Alsike Kloster in many ways. It is a refuge on a spiritual level, and it is a refuge on a physical level, too, and somehow there is no difference between the two – love of God and love of our neighbors from foreign lands mingle and become one. After the 1993 police raid, the police had promised to respect the chapel, so all the families moved into the sister's place of prayer. Sister Marianne shared about that time: "The remarkable thing was with all these people who were laying in the chapel with their mattresses all the way around, even behind the altar there were families. And we prayed with our daily prayers and our masses and everything in the middle of this. So, that was a really remarkable experience, I must say! Here we were with all this suffering and in

79 Photo: Sanna Sjöswärd
the middle of this, we had Christ and the mass. That is the positive memory of this time that we have."

Yet the chapel’s sacredness is not limited to only one religion. Sister Karin told me the story about a young boy who came to Alsike very sad. “It was a boy, he was sent to us by the hospital, he was very sad, he was crying all the time. And we realized after some time, he was longing for his grandmother, that is why he was crying. But he also wanted to pray and he wanted to go to the mosque. But he couldn't leave the house because he was scared. So, he asked 'May I go down to the chapel?' 'Yes, you can.' I said. 'Can I go down there alone?' ‘Yes, you can.’ I told him. So then he went down and he was away for half an hour or something and he came back up and he was soooo happy. And he said, 'It's the same God.' That was very beautiful. In the church, we have had Christians and Muslims coming to church in a mixture. God is God.”

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80 Ezpeleta, 2011
81 Photo: Björn Lindahl
13 CONCLUSION

As I come to the end of my ethnography, I am required to leave my open mind of participant-observer and enter the analytical mind of an ethnographer and form some sort of conclusion. I therefore remind myself of my purpose: to open a window of understanding into the spiritual activism that this community lives as daily life. Sister Karin tells me “What we are doing is living a life. It's a life. It's not activism. It's just to take the full consequences of your life. It's very simple.” And I have witnessed that it is simple. Yet that simple decision to do what is spiritually right in each moment has implications for every aspect of our interconnected global world: not only our religions and spirituality, but also our national and local politics, our international and interfaith relations, our social awareness and global responsibility, and the future of our modernity.

13.1 Spiritual activism & religion or spirituality – Reconnection

Dorothy Day and fellow activist Peter Maurin founded the Catholic Worker Movement in the 1930’s to both feed the poor and advocate for their rights. Like the sisters of Alsike Kloster, they used their faith to reach into the lives of people in need. Then, as now, the church and religion was often removed from poverty, hunger and the stuff of life in general. Theologians sit around arguing if Adam had a belly button or not \(^{82}\) and American Buddhists discuss if a table is really a table when to a termite it would be dinner, \(^{83}\) and then they wonder why religion is losing popularity, why Western society is creating atheists left and right. Dorothy Day explains the Catholic Worker’s simple technique for reconnecting religion with the people: “Peter liked to talk of making a message

\(^{82}\) This was a raging argument in the Victorian Era after the discovery of dinosaur fossils older than the biblical age of the earth. Biblical purists argued that God had created the earth with the fossils already in it, thus he would have created Adam with a belly button, even though he had not had an umbilical cord.

\(^{83}\) The first time I attended a Buddhist sanga in Florida, we were supposed to break up into small groups to discuss this fascinating topic. I had nothing to say. I did not go back.
dynamic, and that meant with him putting it into practice. There was simple common sense in his argument that if you wanted to reach the man in the street, you must go out on the street.”

Spiritual Activism can reconnect religion to real people, to the real suffering and joy that religion is designed to be a part of. For far too long, religion and spirituality has been shoved into the private realm, only for Sundays or quietly praying late at night in your bedroom where no one can see you. But Sister Marianne and Sister Karin have shown not just me, but anyone who is paying attention, that their faith gives them incredible strength to fight for human rights in the nitty gritty of everyday life. As Anna Karin has witnessed over the last 20 years, God has given these nuns a perseverance and power that few of their secular counterparts could sustain. There is no need for our religious institutions to be out of touch or backwards. Our society needs the core principles of love and compassion at the core of our religions, and our activists can use the reinforcement of faith. As Anna Karin says, “This is what Christianity is about… and these nuns are cool.”

Figure 31 – Sister Karin out taking care of supplies for daily living: toilet paper for 60 people

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84 Day, Pg. 60
85 Photo: Sofia Axelsson
Spiritual Activism can also offer a depth of understanding that is needed when dealing with complex issues that religious leaders try to put into simplistic moral terms. Sister Karin explains: “Very often people say, well, you have to take responsibility for your own life. In a way, that is true, but for some people the world is not fair, it doesn't give you any choices, so it's not so easy. I'm sorry to say, I think very often among believing Christians we make very easy answers to very difficult questions. It's not black and white. It's very grey. That is why you have to be very careful when you answer very difficult questions. It's very easy to give a model of life as it should be, but that is not the real life.” The only way for religions to know about real life, of course, is to go out on the street, to reconnect to real life.

The same is even more true for the modern versions of spirituality that are supposed to be ‘new and improved’ – yoga teacher training, self-improvement workshops at luxury resorts, and prosperity consciousness. These free-floating versions of spiritual thought can become entirely focused on self-centered attainment and lose all connection to real life. The former Trappist monk James Finley, who spent 6 years with Thomas Merton in Kentucky, told this story: “Martin Buber, the Jewish scholar and mystic, said that one morning he had a mystical experience and then went to his office in the university still in the aura of this mystical experience. A student came to talk to him and he half-listened to the student and then the student went up to his dorm room and committed suicide. And he left a suicide note and said he had tried to talk to Martin Buber but he could tell he was preoccupied, so he killed himself. And Martin Buber realized that he had been preoccupied with his ecstasy, and he said ‘I have given up on the God that delivers me from the incarnate preciousness of life, I recognize God in the concreteness of the human person.’” 86 Martin Buber being preoccupied with his own spiritual ecstasy kept him from being present with a human soul in suffering who came to him for help, just as for centuries, religion being preoccupied with what name to call God or what

86 Finley, 2014
words to believe in has kept us from simply living the full consequences of loving God and loving our neighbor. This is what I see as I’m surrounded by the nuns and refugees living with each other at Alsike. Their spiritual activism has their religion integrally connected to life. God is coming to these nuns in the concreteness of the human person in these asylum seekers, in Muslims from Kosovo, Christians from Iran and tortured human rights activists from the Congo.

13.2 Spiritual Activism in National & Local Politics ~ Rehumanization

Politics is about governance and organization of a human community, with the key word being "human." Too often in our national policies and our local politics, we lose sight of the fact that people are people. This is one of the most basic principles that I witnessed time and again as part of the spiritual activism of Alsike Kloster – each human being is an individual person and is treated as such. If our local politicians could come out and observe and learn just that one lesson, it would transform the entire system. New laws would pass; police policies would change and the immigration office waiting room would be filled with stuffed animals. Greta’s older children would not be kept in Denmark away from their mother, Eric would not be faced with deportation alone and afraid at age 14 and Sven would not be sent back for more whipping and religious persecution. Spiritual activism has a profound capacity to rehumanize our politics.

When I look back at how I saw this rehumanizing effect at Alsike, I realize it happened on several levels. On one level, it’s simply how the sisters see their fellow human beings and how they naturally treat them in daily life – with love. It’s not something they do for effect or activism. On another level, I see how consciously Sister Karin will share stories of individual refugees with politicians, police officers and local officials. The sisters clearly know that when the teachers and principals get to know the individual children and parents, school policies change. When the police understand the situation of individual people and their appeal process, they understand the purpose of sanctuary laws as Sister Marianne explains it: to give these people a second chance. This is what reunited the
detained fathers and babies with the mothers at Alsike during my first weeks of field work. The sisters of Alsike have decades of experience in humanizing people who are otherwise seen as societal problems. Sister Karin is passionate in her calls for us not to see her friends as burdens, but to see them as human beings who very shortly will be helping our society and our economy. Dorothy Day also saw this need for dignity and humanity: “The poor who come here feel there is little they have to offer anyone, and yet they have a lot to offer. The giving and the receiving is not only going on in one direction.” 87

The nuns’ work with refugees as human beings and the insights they have gained from this perspective is invaluable to our government agencies. Anna Karin shared with me how much she wants to get Sister Karin out to talk to people: “Sister Karin has so much knowledge, so much good things to say about ways to do things, how the government could do it, how the churches could do it, how there are ways to work together instead of the way it is now. And people will listen to her. They respect the sisters. They can't say, ‘You don't know what you're talking about,’ they've been doing this too long.” The refugees who have come through Alsike Kloster who have stayed in Sweden have

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87 Coles, 1989, Pg. 18
88 Photo: SVT Play
all succeeded. Anna Karin bumps into them in her neighborhood, traumatized children she knew when they came from Libya or the war-torn Balkans are now working in Uppsala, well-educated and well-adjusted adults in our society. For all the talk in the news about immigration politics, Alsike could teach Sweden about integration, cultural adjustment and support for success. And above all, as Sister Karin and John from INLIA both attest, it is when we humanize the process that we avoid criminalization and radicalization. All politicians can benefit from this expertise and they could even take a hint from the sisters that doing what is right is popular! Vicar Anders sees people joining the church because of Alsike’s work for refugees and the Swedish Heroes award brought even more public support. As citizens, we would perhaps be wise to heed the lesson gained from four decades of spiritual activism: policies about people need to be humanized.

13.3 Spiritual Activism in International & Interfaith Relations ~ Interconnection

One of the most powerful lessons that the sisters’ spiritual activism taught me in my time at Alsike was seeing how real the connection is between international politics and tiny human beings. When we see headlines about trade deals or read about government leaders at some summit, it feels very far removed from me or my life, yet it is not. Seeing how a 5-year-old little boy like Johan can be caught up in games played between world powers in Uganda and how his safety is then compromised because of Sweden saving political face in the international community, you quickly realize that we are all more interconnected than we realize. And seeing Sister Karin and Sister Marianne open their home to people regardless of nationality, race, ethnicity or religion, you get a sense that these man-made borders and distinctions are meaningless. Per the United Nations' World Food Program, “one and a half times the amount of food needed to provide everyone in the world with a nutritious and adequate diet is already being produced.” 89 We do not need to decide between feeding Swedish people or feeding Syrian people. It's not a question of physical or material lack - it's a question of

89 Jones, Pg. 169
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cultural priorities, it’s about applying Sister Karin’s lessons on real sharing to our trade policies, international aid and the immigration process. To put it in the simplest terms, no one should be in government making decisions on wars or refugee status without first going out to Alsike Kloster to meet Johan, Ingrid or Sven, so they can understand the interconnections and what the consequences are in real human terms.

![Figure 33 ~ The back of Alsike Kloster seen from the church yard](Photo: Bredenbergs Kyrkor)

Alsike is also a great lesson in living together as one big interfaith family. Sister Karin referred to living in community as training in peace making, and I witnessed this to be true. It was not always easy and there were days when some people had a harder time, but the acceptance at the core of spiritual activism carries the community through and fosters respect. Oftentimes the refugees come from areas of the world where political leaders pit religions against each other, yet here they live in harmony. 23-year-old Ingrid explains it very simply: “I am Muslim. But for me, it doesn't make any difference what religion you have. If I sit here and talk with you and you are nice to me, that is important. The religion is not important. We all have God.” Essentially, it is how we treat each other that is important in most religions. The Abrahamic religions all have some form of ‘do unto others as you would have them do unto you’ and the Eastern religions of nonduality all describe “the liberated

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90 Photo: Bredenbergs Kyrkor

As delighting in the welfare of all.” 91 As a Christian completely devoted to her faith, Sister Karin feels passionately about the compassion in all the world’s religions: “I think that is very important. When people say, religions are creating lots of wars, I say no. If you look at them, it's not the religions that make the wars. It's the social circumstances and the stupid leaders and the question of power that creates wars, and that has nothing to do with religions.” The sisters of Alsike Kloster have seen firsthand, in Beirut and in the former Yugoslavia, Christians, Muslims and Jews all lived together peacefully until politicians with other motives started wars. Then as the refugees fled the violence, they all lived peacefully side by side again in the monastery. As Anna put it: “We are human beings. We only have one God.” And in this special international interfaith community, Alsike shows us our interconnectedness.

13.4 Spiritual Activism in Social Awareness & Global Responsibility ~ Compassion

One of the greatest impacts that I saw of the spiritual activism in daily life of Alsike Kloster was how much it touches those who come into contact with the community. So often, churches try to instill ‘family values’ or ‘moral do’s and don’ts’ for young people and worry about the state of society, but because it is surface morality, it has very little effect. At Alsike, by their example, the sisters are teaching social values that are based on character. How many field trips have been through these doors? How many students have been inspired to be kinder, to shop less, to volunteer more or to speak up for the rights of others? How many people have those students spoken to in turn and inspired to rethink our cultural assumptions about refugees or race? Sister Karin has also spoken on the radio, been interviewed on TV and has spoken to large auditoriums to bring awareness not only to refugee rights, but to encourage true sharing, social responsibility and compassion. This is exactly how new ideas spread through a cultural landscape and form new ideology, and how we can best solve our global problems. As NRDC founder Gustave Speth said: “I used to think the top

91 Rambachan, Loc 1505
environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address those problems. But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy…and to deal with those we need a spiritual and cultural transformation.”  

Figure 34 – Sister Karin being interviewed on Swedish television in 2014

It is true for the environment and the same can be said for our problems of global poverty, inequality and the ongoing refugee crisis. Transforming our underlying cultural system and reevaluating our ideologies of consumerism and nationalism is part of the public education that Sister Karin offers: “To me, solidarity for poor people, even from my childhood, was very important. I was very small and tiny when I was a child, I had lots of problems with my lungs so I went to the doctor a lot. And my doctor had been to Libya and in his office he had a big photo of the children from Biafra starving. And that picture, it was, for me very important and I thought that the world was not fair when I had so many toys and people were starving. So, I always wanted to share. But it became even more important when I became a Christian. That is why, if you call it activism, it was more like a result of seriously becoming a Christian. When you receive so much love you must share it.” It might

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92 Crockett, 2014
93 Photo: Aftonbladet
be a dishonest oversimplification to say “All you need is love,” however, witnessing the very real effect of love being applied to asylum appeals and work-around work permits by these very real nuns shows that love makes a big difference. And their love in action shows anyone willing to pay attention how we, too, can apply the values of human dignity and human rights that our Western culture professes to believe in. For the sisters, love is a practical daily life matter that helps them prioritize their daily schedule and figure out what needs to be done to help those in need standing on their doorstep. Franciscan friar, teacher and author, Richard Rohr speaks of using love as the way to see solutions more clearly: “The central practice of Franciscan mysticism, is that we must remain in love. There is no secret moral command for knowing or pleasing God, beyond becoming a loving person in mind, heart, body and soul yourself. Then you will see what you need to see.” 94 By example and through public engagement, Sister Karin and the community of Alsike are teaching us that bringing compassion into our public discourse is a big part of the answer to social awareness and global responsibility.

**13.5 Spiritual Activism in Modernity & the Future ~ Resacralization**

What all this points to is world view. The sisters, whether you consider them nuns, spiritual activists, women or just plain human beings, see the world in a certain way and this way of seeing the world can be useful. Their world view can be useful to revive and reconnect religion, rehumanize the political process, deepen our international interconnectedness and raise our public awareness to a more compassionate level. What is the key element I see in all of these interactions – small daily moments with the monastery cats, the desire to buy Inga some pretty shoes to sit in, the determination to explain to politicians what refugee’s lives are really like, the glee in folding napkins to honor the Trinity, the joy of making a really yummy lamb stew for your family of sixty people from all over the world? The common ingredient I see is living life with a sense of the sacred.

94 Rohr, Pg. 10
Modernity views humans as statistics, refugees as problems flooding our borders, rivers and forests as resources and the earth as territories. Alsike Kloster offers an alternative to that world view, as McIntosh and Carmichael point out spiritual activists do all over the world: “The cracks in the modernist project now sundering ecosystems and societies everywhere are partly related to its own intellectual weaknesses, especially the tendency to fragment wholes. Spirituality values wholes as sacred. Sacredness is not a capitulation to superstition. Sacred is the appropriate adjective for whole things that cannot be taken apart and put back together again, and therefore cannot be valued in material terms: healthy forests, snow leopards, clean rivers, starry nights, daughters and brothers and lovers and friends. If nothing is sacred, nothing is safe from the mechanizers of life and calculators of profit; and until we find ways to resacralize our world appropriately, there can be no end to the carnage.”

This past year, as part of that resacralization process, the Standing Rock Sioux tribe has spread their world view that the Missouri River is sacred: “Understanding the natural world as more than just a resource for energy gives moral weight to the effort to contain catastrophic climate change. Imagine if Energy Transfer Partners planned to drill underneath Jerusalem.”

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95 Photo: Sammanlagt.se
96 McIntosh & Carmichael, Pg. 25
97 Erdrich, 2016
wholeness as sacred is not only appropriate, but what I have learned while at Alsike is that it is needed. Each refugee is a whole and a sacred life, and that sacredness is not dependent on religion – it is simply the dignity of a human person. I witnessed Sister Karin driving Ulf in to fix his glasses right away, not because he couldn’t go another day without them, but because his asylum process and his PTSD had him in such a high level of emotional anxiety that she knew he needed to feel loved and cared for. I saw Sister Karin and Björn excitedly going over the tomato seeds, different organic varieties and colors to bring beauty and fun to the garden. I heard the joy as the women celebrated Greta’s family reunion. I saw the quiet devotion not just in the sisters, but in Sofia and Ingrid and so many others. All around me at Alsike Kloster, life was treated with sacredness. So, whether you are a nun working in service to God or a humanist working for human rights, resacralization will help with everything from climate justice to the refugee crisis.

13.6 Alsike Kloster ~ Something else is possible

When Dorothy Day writes about beginning the Hospitality Houses in the 1930’s, she says: “Peter and I saw those people standing at corners, or sitting on park benches, and we felt that something had to be done, and right away. We never expected to solve the nation’s problems, but we thought we ought to try to do all that we could do, and we thought that if more and more of us tried harder and harder – well, a step would have been taken, and that’s what I think Lord wants from us, as many steps as we can manage.” 98 This is also the sense I get from my time at Alsike Kloster. When the Quakers called Sister Marianne, Sister Ella and Sister Karin and asked if Alsike Kloster could take in a refugee family, they did not set out to solve the world’s problems. They simply said yes. They accept each day as it is with as much love and patience as they can. They treat each person with humanity and each moment with sacredness. And in so doing, they inspire, educate and create change. But honestly, it’s not just the sisters who have inspired me. So many of the refugees touched

98 Coles, 1989, Pg. 112
me, as well. They are not religious scholars or devoted nuns. They have taken no vows, many of them have not even finished high school. They are just regular people who aspire to nothing more than to live normal lives. Yet, these people who have been through so much, many of them young, have hard-won wisdom. And sitting down among them, seeing how the sisters and refugees all live together gave me hope that we can all change the world in our own small ways after all. As Anna Karin sat sipping her coffee, she told me: “It’s such a special place, somehow it gives you hope that you can do things in another way, that something else is possible.”

Figure 36 – Sister Karin at midsummer

99 Photo: Mattias Ahlm
14 SOURCE MATERIALS

- INLIA - International Network of Local Initiatives with Asylumseekers website
- Lindqvist, Anna-Britta. ”Syster Karin” *Sommar & Vinter i P1 Radio*. July 24, 2015.


• Royal Anthropological Society Website

