

Script for the **Disability and lived religion in the past -podcast season**

Episode 24

The religious lives of people with disabilities in Early Modern Sweden, with Riikka Miettinen & Mari Eyice.

Riikka: Welcome to 'Research and Circuses – a podcast on premodern times'. In this podcast series, researchers from the Tampere Centre for Classical, Medieval, and Early Modern Studies, otherwise known as Trivium, discuss different themes related to their research. If you want to follow our activities, please follow us on Instagram or X @trivium_Tampere. We welcome feedback about the podcast!

This season of the podcast, titled 'Disability and lived religion in the past', discusses how disabled people experienced religion, particularly in their daily lives; it also considers how religion shaped their lives and how their lived experience influenced their beliefs.

Riikka: Hello everyone. In this episode we will discuss the connections between disability and lived religion with a focus on a specific historical context, time and area: early modern Sweden. I'm Riikka Miettinen, a senior research fellow at Tampere University, working on madness and disability in early modern Sweden. I'm interested in the everyday lives and care of different disability groups, especially those of peasantry, living in villages and rural settings. Today I will be talking with a fellow historian and colleague from Sweden, from Stockholm University. Hello Mari and many thanks for joining this podcast episode!

Mari: Thank you, I'm happy to join. My name is Mari Eyice and I'm also interested in disability in the early modern period. I have a special focus on disability and emotions in my research and I examine which roles emotions played in experiences of physical disability in 16th and 17th century Sweden.

Riikka: In this episode, we are going to first present some general background about this time and society, including the Lutheran context, and then we'll move onto talking about lived religion. In particular, we're going to discuss how religion gave ideas how to live with disabilities, and healing and medicine related to religion, and lastly, the religious participation of disabled people.

Mari: And along the way, we are going to mention different types of sources where one can find information about disabled people's lives, and about the connections between disability and religion. People with disabilities have often been considered absent from historical sources, but in fact, there are many different materials from which we can find information about them, for example in letters and other ego documents, juridical- theological- and medical treatises, and in all kinds of court records.

Riikka: So we are now taking a look at early modern Sweden, roughly the 300-year-period from the sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth century. First, to provide the setting and some context: at the time, Sweden was a very large but sparsely populated realm, covering areas of modern-day Finland as well as, at its largest, parts of the Baltics, Norway, Russia and Northern Germany. Given the limitations of medicine and health care systems at the time, the numbers and proportion of persons who had disabilities were significant and relatively high.

Mari: Yes, and also the fact that most people lived off manual labour with high risk of getting hurt, and the prevalence of epidemics, contagious diseases and wars, meant that many - if they survived such ordeals - lived with disabilities. Epidemic diseases, such as plagues, and ordinary contagious diseases, like measles, reaped many lives throughout this whole period and left many with lasting disabilities. Sweden was also almost constantly at war during this period, which meant that many people lived in environments where illnesses were grazing, or got injured in battle.

Riikka: Also, very few of those who had some physical or mental impairments lived in any institutions, such as hospitals or poorhouses, as there was simply not enough room in them, even for all those in dire need. Instead, most resided at home and supported themselves by work, at times relying on community, typically family, support.

What do you think it meant to be impaired in this type of society?

Mari: On the one hand, illnesses and all kinds of impairments were very common and visible in the communities and I think there was a general expectation that illnesses or injuries might occur even to those who were born healthy. Moreover, because of how very common it must have been in society, I think we can expect that in everyday life, many disabilities might have been less stigmatizing than we tend to believe, given how much more stigmatized it got later on in history. Families and households were probably also used to the occurrence of disabling illnesses and injuries and expected to take care of their kin in times of sickness and work disability.

Riikka: But on the other hand, very severe, disabling impairments, like serious mobility impairments, full blindness or debilitating types of insanity, could pose a great threat to the individual's survival. Any impairment causing disability to work was a major risk - especially to those of peasantry and the landless, who had less means and wealth to support themselves or their disabled family members. After all, typically, all hands were needed for the household sustenance in the agrarian working life.

Mari: Yes, and it is clear from the juridical framework of the time that those with severe disabling impairments had clearly defined rights to poor relief and the right to beg in their local communities, which I think means that the authorities recognised severe disability as a real threat to survival. If we look at how this played out in practice, it is noticeable that not only the severity (or degree) and the type of disability mattered in these cases, but I think also for example gender did. In the support of the poor in Stockholm in the end of the 17th century that I have been looking at, it is noticeable that women were over-represented among the beggars who got support from the city.

Riikka: On the other hand, for structural reasons, women generally lived longer, to an older age, and were more likely poorer - which can explain why they were more represented among beggars and other absolute poor than men? But do you think that women who were disabled to support themselves by work, be it due to old age or any impairment, were more likely granted some type of poor relief?

Mari: I'm not really sure about why it looks like that in my sources, but I think there could be several factors contributing to this picture. As you say, women got older and were in general poorer than men, but it could also be that there was a higher expectation that men should be able to support themselves regardless of physical or mental abilities, which made women more likely to be granted support.

Riikka: But in general, for the vast majority of people who had disabilities, also those who were to a great extent disabled to work, there were not much poor relief available - because the funds collected for poor relief were in most areas very scant and limited.

Riikka: Let's now move to an important feature shaping society and everyday life in early modern Sweden: religion. At this time, Sweden became a Lutheran kingdom. The Reformation in the beginning of the 16th century meant that Sweden left the Roman, or Catholic, Church and instead created its own state Church which worked in close vicinity to the Crown. What did this mean in practice?

Mari: Researchers debate about how much this change affected ordinary peoples' everyday lives, but I think it is safe to say that over the course of the early modern period, the Lutheran Church became a very central feature in Swedish society that affected both its institutions and its mentalities. And of course Christianity as such was hugely influential for the way people understood themselves and the world they lived in. For ordinary people, the church was also probably the most important institution in the early modern period – in it, they baptized their children, women got taken back into the congregation after childbirth, they got married, buried, etc. Everyone was also expected to regularly go to church and take communion, etc, throughout the course of their lives. Moreover, the church had judicial authority, since it decided who was allowed to get married or divorced, and handled the prosecution of certain crimes, such as adultery and other crimes related to sexuality, and moral and religious matters.

Riikka: This shift to Lutheranism also meant that the state, or the Crown, took over the lead and responsibility over poor relief, including the organization of aid and care for those who were poor, which were typically those who were unable to take care of themselves due to disabilities or old age. For example, monasteries were abolished and thus no longer providing care for those ill and impaired.

However, of course the Christian duty of helping the sick and disabled, as prescribed in the Bible, continued - all 'good Christians' were expected to help those in need. But the significance of alms and charity changed - because giving alms and donations were considered useless in relation to salvation within the Lutheran framework. The Crown now organized the collection of funds for poor relief increasingly in the form of taxes.

Nevertheless, the church and the clergymen continued to be important figures in the care of disabled people, in many ways.

Riikka: So as religion was so significantly present in this society, it is important to look closer at the ways religion influenced views on disability and the lives of disabled people.

To start with, we know that Christianity entailed many guidelines on how to approach, endure and live with impairments and disabilities. What did religion, and the Swedish Lutheran Church teach or say about these things?

Mari: Firstly, religion provided a framework for thinking about one's situation and things that happened in life. Disabilities, injuries or other things that were considered misfortunes could be interpreted as trials, planned and set by God, to overcome or be endured. By thinking about a disability as a cross to bear, it was made meaningful in a Lutheran context, and

endurance was proof of one's high morals and piety. You can see this line of thinking in many ego documents, such as letters and diaries, from the early modern period.

Riikka: Also, a great deal of popular spiritual literature discusses this aspect: the necessity to accept God's will, to endure worldly pains, including impairments, and the importance of keeping trust and faith in God also during such hard times. People were encouraged to remember how Christ had borne his sufferings on the cross, and taught to patiently await that they would regain health again by God's will, or at the latest in the Resurrection when they would be completely free from pains, infirmity and impairments.

Mari: Another feature, within the Christian normative framework was the idea or belief that a disability or some other hardship could be a punishment from God for sin. In the Old Testament, for example blindness, madness, plagues and other illnesses were at times God-sent punishments, usually implied to encourage repentance and seeking forgiveness and faith. This association between sin and disablement can be seen, for example, in some medieval and early modern theological writings. However, it is my impression that this is less common as an interpretation in everyday life than one might think based on more theological or normative sources, or what do you think?

Riikka: I've also found only a few cases that explicitly mention the interpretation that some particular sin, or the general sinfulness, of a person was the reason for her disablement or impairment. In practice, it was much more common to refer to some 'natural' causes, as conceived at the time - in particular, injuries, and imbalances of the four bodily humours caused by some natural things like weather conditions, foods, or strong passions. But still, one's morals and sinning affected the condition of one's soul - which itself was thought to also affect one's bodily humours, and thus body and health.

Mari: Thus, the idea was certainly there, inherent in popular and scholarly medical thought and views on health - that sinning could potentially cause illness and impairments?

Riikka: Yes, and another manifestation of this logic and conception is that the Church taught and many people seem to have believed that God could, and did, punish communities, villages, and even entire kingdoms, with pestilence or epidemics, crop failures, wars and such because of people's sinful ways of life.

Mari: Also, in early modern Sweden, like elsewhere at the time, there were many other beliefs about the causes of impairments and disablement that come from religion. For example, it was believed that the Devil, and his minions, caused impairments in some cases

- the Devil could, for example, interfere with the person's bodily humours, or inflict damaging accidents or madness.

Riikka: And at times illnesses and other impairments, like someone becoming blind or mad, falling sickness, and injuries were explained by witchcraft. Especially before the eighteenth century, many people were accused of having caused ailments and disabilities by sorcery. Besides that, there were other supernatural forces and beings that were believed to inflict impairments. For example, in the Finnish-speaking areas such forces usually resided in natural sites, or in objects and locations connected to death, and could invade or infect especially those who disrespected them with diseases and such.

Riikka: As we have seen, religion and the supernatural were at times understood to cause disabilities, but religious beliefs and religious practice were also very much present in the early modern ideas about how illnesses and impairments could be cured and healed. As it was believed that God ultimately had the power over people's lives, including their health, it was only natural, and expected and highly encouraged, that people would then turn to God to seek alleviation and cure.

Mari: Yes, the acceptance and endurance I mentioned before was one part of the way Lutheranism shaped people's understanding of disability, but the other part was of course to put faith in the divine as a way of overcoming or healing. As you said, it was only God that had the power over people's lives, but practices such as praying or meditating on scriptures were nevertheless very important ways of dealing with hardships in life, not the least because it could help with accepting and putting one's faith in God.

Riikka: It seems that prayer in particular was the key here. The Lutheran Church had rejected turning to saints, pilgrimages, offerings and such Catholic practices that were earlier turned to in healing. Ill and disabled people were prescribed to pray, and they were prayed for by local clergy, by their families and friends, and even by the entire congregations at church. Besides prayer, all sorts of religious practice, like church-going, communions and hymn-singing, were recommended to and practiced by some in seeking alleviation and God-sent cure for their conditions.

Mari: Did the clergy participate in all this? In the Catholic times, and in the Catholic world, priests, monks and nuns had intermediary and advisory roles in healing and healthcare. How did this participation develop in the Lutheran areas?

Riikka: The clergy continued to have an important role also in the Protestant and Lutheran areas. In Sweden, the clergy visited the impaired, prayed with them and offered them spiritual consolation and advice. Clerical guidelines and manuals include advice about how they were to visit, pray with, console and guide those who were ill, infirm and impaired in their parish.

We can at times find descriptions of these in preserved journals, letters and even court records. For an example from the last source type I mentioned, lower court records: one described how in 1695 a peasant wife named Anna demanded a great deal of attention from the local clergy. She was described as a highly devout woman who suffered from major 'weakness in the head' - an illness referring to madness. The local pastor visited her on several occasions and consoled her both at her home and in the vicarage. He also organized public, joint prayers for her at church, leading the prayer from the pulpit, praying for 'God to help and strengthen' Anna, during or after every sermon for over a month.

Mari: We also know that scholarly medicine, with educated physicians and apothecaries, were slowly gaining more ground in health care and healing at the time. I think it is important to remember that this idealized faith in God's power over people's lives didn't make people passive when facing illness or disability. Early modern medicine was very proactive, with a great number of practices aimed at alleviating or curing. There were various avenues to turn to, such as medicaments, like herbs, and practices such as diets, purges, baths, cupping and blood-letting. These were things that people regularly made use of. But these were embedded in the religious framework, also - medicine was at the time inherently mixed with religion and religious beliefs.

Riikka: Indeed, medicine was by no means 'secular' like in the modern Western world but entangled with religion. It was widely accepted that the efficiency of any treatment was still in the hands of God, and required faith and some religious practice. These ideas can be seen in many scholarly medical treatises printed at the time. To give an example, Swedish medical treatises about the use and healing powers of mineral waters emphasized how they received their beneficial capacities from God, and that their curative force and the patient's recovery ultimately depended on God's will. Thus, we can presume that as people sought cure for their illnesses and all sorts of disabilities by bathing in and drinking these popular mineral waters, they also turned to God and prayer.

Mari: Besides descriptions about people praying God and practicing religion in attempting to heal themselves or others, there are also descriptions of people giving thanks to God for recovery in many types of sources, like personal letters.

Riikka: Yes, and for example, some of the wealthier donated money or items to churches as thanks for recuperation. Even if the Lord might not return a lost limb, or restore one's full sight or health, it was believed that he still could - and might have - intervened, for example, by alleviating the pain or improving one's lost or weakened sense.

Mari: And there were also other spiritual and Christian elements in healing practices.

Riikka: Yes, although not accepted by the Church, Christian prayers, gestures and objects were also used in healing magic - and it was not uncommon for disabled people to turn to such practices, provided by folk healers, or the 'cunning folk', some of whom were perceived as witches.

Mari: The use of holy wells was another common practice for people with disabilities throughout the early modern period, although the Church was against it after the Reformation. Although the Lutheran Church declared that the use of holy wells was ineffective, people continued to travel long distances to visit holy wells, pray by them, sacrifice objects such as crutches or hair, and make use of the water in efforts to be healed from disabilities or illnesses/injuries. These practices are so interesting because they show how religious healing practices were very complex and not always in line with what the Lutheran Church prescribed.

Mari: What about the usual, everyday practice of religion? How did disabled people participate in religious practice, such as praying, confessions, communions and church-going?

Riikka: We certainly have examples of very pious and devout individuals fervently practicing religion. However, we can assume that not everyone was as religious - and that many simply accepted their lot and lived on with their condition, at least if it wasn't too disabling and painful.

But then, there is also the question WHO was allowed to participate in religious practice and rites? The Swedish Lutheran state Church, as well as all the branches and Churches, Catholic, Protestant and others, have in the past set down some restrictions that limited the religious rights or access of certain disability groups.

Mari: We could say that in particular, cognitive and mental disabilities as well as mutism and deafness were problematic in the Lutheran context. This has to do with the Lutheran emphasis on understanding as a basis for faith. In the Lutheran church, every Christian needed to understand basic Christian knowledge, the Ten Commandments, The Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer, and a bit later also the other main sections of Luther's Small

Catechism to be allowed to perform Christian rites such as taking communion or being married.

Riikka: And this knowledge about the basics of Christianity was tested, which meant that the person not only had to learn and memorize certain things but also be able to express them to a clergyman. Passing this examination was a requirement for confession and confession for communion - which in turn allowed access to other religious rites as well as many legal rights.

Mari: So firstly, the Church put much emphasis here on people's cognitive and mental faculties. For example, The Church Law of 1686 explicitly prohibited confession and communion for those who did not learn the main pieces. Also, the insane or mad and those who were considered to suffer from "mental weakness" were not allowed into confession and communion "until they come to their senses". (Learning the necessary Christian knowledge could also be difficult for those who were deaf, if they were not able to read – and for the blind if they could not memorize these by listening.)

Riikka: Moreover, the person was to express that he knew and understood the basics, and be able to somehow communicate this knowledge, as well as repentance over sins?

Mari: Yes, there are many cases in which people with certain disabilities had difficulties to express or manifest their knowledge to the clergy. To give an example, there is a case from the visitations that were held by archbishop Abraham Angermannus in the end of the 16th century, which shows the complications that could arise. In the case, a woman was accused of having led a man hiding behind her in church in order for him to get communion. The problem was that the man was mute, which meant that he had difficulties proving that he could understand the Christian teaching. However, the court judged that if they could trace any fear of God in him, he should be allowed to take the communion. In this case then, it is obvious that not only the ability to understand, but also to prove one's understanding was crucial to be let into the Christian community.

Riikka: And the reason why it was so important to pass the examination of their Christian knowledge and to partake in communion was that it was a requirement for the rights to get engaged and married. This means that a severe mental disability or communicative difficulties could actually hinder people from following the expected life paths.

Mari: But otherwise, there were not many official restrictions concerning religious rites, like marriage. In 1757 legislation was issued that prohibited marriage among people with disabilities: this ordinance prohibited those who had congenital falling sickness to get

married. But in general, it was not until more modern times that marriage was prohibited from certain disability groups. Nevertheless, some disabilities allowed the annulment of engagements and marriages, and also, later, divorces.

Riikka: To wrap up, we have tried to show how religion played a role as an interpretative framework and served both as a supportive and as a restrictive force in the lives of people with disabilities in early modern Sweden. The Lutheran framework certainly affected disabled persons' lives but, in the end, it's good to remember that many adapted to or dissented from religious norms in ways that worked for their own life situations, and that there was religious diversity even in a seemingly homogeneous Lutheran state like Sweden.

Thank you very much for this discussion, Mari!

Mari: Thank you.