Spiritual experiences and altered states of consciousness – Parallels between BDSM and Christianity

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Abstract
This article is based on a five-year qualitative ethnographic study of bondage and discipline/dominance and submission/sadism and masochism (BDSM) in Sweden. In-depth interviews were completed with 29 self-defined BDSM practitioners. In the article, I investigate spirituality in two different contexts, namely within BDSM practice and in the charismatic Christianity. With a focus on power dynamics, pain rituals, and altered states of consciousness, I discuss the questions: What meaning is given to the concept of spirituality in a BDSM context, and how does this spirituality resemble spirituality in Christianity? Which common denominators between BDSM practice and Christian belief can be found, and how should we interpret the parallels that the informants emphasize between practicing BDSM and having a Christian affiliation? The article aims to broaden our understanding for spirituality in different contexts, and thus contribute to both the research field of BDSM as well as to religion studies. And as such, I hope this study can bring some clarity to the different spiritual experiences individuals may encounter, whether it happens in a BDSM context or in a religious context.

Keywords
Bondage and discipline/dominance and submission/sadism and masochism, spirituality, Christianity, ritual, altered state of consciousness

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Introduction
The psychology researcher Jan Sinnott (2001: 199–200) distinguishes spirituality from religion and defines spirituality as “one’s personal relation to the sacred or transcendent, a relation that then informs other relationships and the meaning of one’s own life”. Religion, on the other hand, she sees as “practices and beliefs related to a particular dogma system”. According to Sinnott, spirituality can exist both within and outside a religious context. Previous studies have focused on spirituality and bondage and discipline/dominance and submission/sadism and masochism (BDSM) on the one hand, and spirituality within Christianity on the other hand. However, the intersections between spirituality within Christianity and BDSM still constitute an unexplored area. In this article, I investigate spirituality in two different contexts, namely within BDSM practice and in the charismatic Christianity. With a focus on power dynamics, pain rituals, and altered states of consciousness, I discuss the questions: What meaning is given to the concept of spirituality in a BDSM context, and how does this spirituality resemble spirituality in Christianity? Which common denominators between BDSM practice and Christian belief can be found, and how should we interpret the parallels that the informants emphasize between practicing BDSM and having a Christian affiliation? The article aims to broaden our understanding for spirituality in different contexts, and thus contribute to both the research field of BDSM as well as to religion studies. And as such, I hope this study can bring some clarity to the different spiritual experiences individuals may encounter, whether it happens in a BDSM context or in a religious context.

Rituals and altered states of consciousness
Victor Turner (2008) draws upon Arnold van Gennep’s (1909/1960) definition of the liminal, a space created during rites of passage (a transition from one stage to another) of being “neither here nor there” but rather “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed” (Turner, 2008: 95). According to Turner, rituals are “prescribed formal behavior” (2008: 19), through which participants enter the liminal. The individuals participating in a ritual will experience the liminal as a state of short-lived—but great—intensity. For Turner, ritual and liminality are associated with religious behavior (1989). However, the anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966/2002) argues that the ritual concept can be extended to secularized behaviors in societies, which means that the division between sacred and profane is also found in nonreligious contexts. According to Douglas (1966/2002), the absence of organized rituals and collective engagement in contemporary social contexts has left the individual without any structured way to manage stress and anxiety at different life stages. Religious beliefs, symbols, and practices are not relics of the past but continue to exist in more secular variations. From this perspective, modernity with its processes of rationalization and secularization does not, according to the British sociologist Mike Featherstone, lead to the eclipse of
religious sentiments, for “while formal religions may decline, symbolic classifications and ritual practices which embody sacred/profane distinctions live on at the heart of secular social processes” (2007: 119). According to the American social psychologist Roy Baumeister, the increased emphasis on individuality in modern society has increased the burden of selfhood. As a result, people may increasingly be drawn to forms of sexual plays based on powerful way of escaping the self. He argues that masochism provides a powerful method of removing high-level self-awareness and therefor can function as an effective deterrent to unwanted feelings of guilt, anxiety, or insecurity. Engaging in practices like masochism, along with others like drug use and spirituality, can provide relief from the burdens of contemporary life (see also Langdrige and Lawson, 2019).

Altered states of consciousness can be defined as “subjective alterations of ordinary mental functioning” (Lee et al., 2016: 1). According to Lee et al. (2016), there are different types of altered states of consciousness, for example meditation, hypnosis, mental absorption, drug-induced states, spiritual possession, and religious ecstasy. The religion theorist Robert S Ellwood (1980) has devised an analysis tool to understand powerful experiences, or what he calls “mystical experiences”. These experiences are equivalent to altered states of consciousness and are not limited to religious contexts. Ellwood (1980: 69) describes three steps involved in many “mysterious” or “inexplicable” experiences. The first step he calls “trigger” or “background influences”. The second step is the most intense point in the mystical experience: “a sudden, seemingly spontaneous flash of absolute power or ecstasy. It does not last long in its intense phase, but it imparts enough intensity to leave the experiencer shaken yet enraptured for minutes or even hours afterward”. Ellwood (1980: 69) describes the last step as the time after the experience, which is “rather an associative state, when the experiencer begins the work of relating the experience to other experiences or ideas, particularly those that give meaning to the experience and his or her life”. The conditions that Ellwood describes may have great impact in both charismatic Christianity, for example regarding spirit baptism (see Cox, 1996; Moberg, 2013a), and in BDSM practice when it comes to the so-called sub-space experiences (see Beckmann, 2009; Klement et al., 2017).

Here follows a research review, focusing on altered states of consciousness, rituals, and rites of passage in the two different contexts.

**Spiritual experiences in a BDSM context**

Various studies have investigated spiritual experiences in relation to BDSM and the spiritual aspects of BDSM activities (see for example, Baker, 2016; Beckmann, 2009; Norman, 1991; Westerfelhaus, 2007). BDSM in relation to tantra and Paganism has to some extent been examined (Fennell, 2018; Mueller, 2018), as well as the ritual aspects of BDSM (Hébert and Weaver, 2015; Klement et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2016; Mains, 2002; Sagarin et al., 2015). In Baker’s (2016) phenomenological study, the participants were asked to answer the question: “Can you describe, in detail, a specific time when you had a spiritual experience while
engaging in a BDSM scene?” The key constituents discovered vary from an embodied sense of an energetic force, a sense of spiritual presence, to a self-surrendered/transcended state of consciousness and a deeply personal and lasting transformation. These expressions were also found by Klement et al. (2017). They investigated “The Dance of Souls”, an extreme ritual within a BDSM context that involves temporary piercings where weights are attached to the piercings. The participants then dance to music provided by drummers. The participants reported feeling high, seeing visions, and feeling connected to a higher power. Results suggest that this group of BDSM practitioners engage in the dance for a variety of reasons, including experiencing spirituality, deepening interpersonal connections, reducing stress, and achieving altered states of consciousness. The data challenge the prevailing academic perspective that links sadomasochism inextricably to sexuality, and the study provides insight into a number of nonsexual motivations for extreme rituals and sadomasochistic activity. In line with this, Myers (1983) notes that the individual and group dynamics of rites of passage—rituals and initiatory practices in traditional non-Western cultures—are strikingly similar to those of the BDSM community. He means that some people are instinctively driven to undergo a rite of passage to the point that they will invent one if society does not already provide one. Althaus-Reid (2000: 149) highlights the connections between Christianity and fetishism:

Sexual stories of fetishism are in proximity to Christian theology: there is a familiarity and conviviality between them, but also a criss-crossing and dissent which unveils and produces a revelation of theological camouflage. The neighbourhood fences between fetishism and Christianity do not separate them but point towards a common flow between them.

In the book *Urban Aboriginals*, Mains (2002) writes about spirituality in the leather community and depicts the participation as a journey marked by “fetish and mana, shaman, ritual, and trance” (2002: 15). He describes the dichotomy that the men of leatherspace encompass. Some have strongly religious backgrounds and/or current affiliations, and some have no connections to religion and tend to see religious authority as dogmatic and repressive. Despite these differences, Mains argue, the leather community is “hardly rocked with religious dissension” (2002: 145). He continues:

For the religious, this spirituality is a natural complement of both the symbolism of the play and of the deep emotions and trust that move it. For the distrustful, this spirituality is an important element of the scene that conventional religions have seemed unable to provide. The spiritual meanings of leatherspace are not surprising; many of its element are shared in common with religious experience. (2002: 146)

Mains describes how the participants reach altered states of mind or trance. These states have not only spiritual qualities but are also characterized by a strong
sharing experience. Bean (2004) explores the spiritual dimensions of bondage and points out that bondage can “touch regions of ourselves and of reality that can only be spoken of in spiritual terms, regions beyond the turf of general pastoral teachings” (2004: 259). Furthermore, Cahana (2012) highlights similarities between ancient gnostics (early Christians active in the Greco-Roman world of the first centuries) and modern queer BDSM practitioners. He focuses on the rituals employed by both groups, the motivation in each case to take part in the ritual, the transcendence towards which each ritual aspires, and the positioning of the subject performing the ritual in relation to the ritual objectives and efficaciousness.

In Zussman and Pierce’s (1998) study of Northern California BDSM practitioners, many participants describe having “transcendental experiences” through BDSM. Norman (1991) likens BDSM to sexual rituals of the Eastern tantric religious tradition and investigates experiences that relate to altered states of consciousness in a BDSM practice. In her ethnographic study, Beckmann suggests that: “Consensual ‘SM’ can satisfy the longing for religious and spiritual experiences for some practitioners and further provide them with the possibility of self-actualization” (2009: 193). Another striking testimony to the sacred character of BDSM for its practitioners is presented by Taylor and Ussher, whose informants describe BDSM as “a revelation” and as a “spiritual conversion”. One of them claimed that “SM was credited almost with the status of religion” (Taylor and Ussher, 2001: 306).

The occurrence of having an affiliation in both BDSM and Christianity has not been investigated in previous studies, to the best of my knowledge. However, when Fennell (2018) conducted an online survey on FetLife,1 in which more than 1100 American and Canadian BDSM practitioners participated, she found that 16% defined themselves as Christians. Her main focus is Paganism, and she explores the role that Paganism has come to play in the mainstream BDSM scene by asking: “How do members of the BDSM subculture construct and practice a lived religious experience of ‘spiritual BDSM’?” She points out that BDSM has become a vehicle for people to have profound spiritual experiences while rarely invoking religion. As such, Fennell states that “it has become yet another piece of an emerging complex social pattern of lived religion, where personal spiritual journeys are valued above traditional religious structures” (2018: 1065).

**Spiritual experiences in charismatic Christianity**

The World value survey indicates Swedes as extremely secular and rational in their values compared to people in other nations, and the liberal attitude towards sexuality is sometimes described as a result of the secular society. However, this secularization hypothesis has been questioned by several researchers (see for example, Thurfjell, 2015) who point out that the Lutheran Church of Sweden (the country’s state church until 2000) is one of the largest Christian congregations in the world with 5.9 million members. In addition to the Lutheran Church of Sweden, there is a strand of charismatic Christianity, gathered in congregations usually referred to
as free churches. It is mainly this strand of Christianity that I focus on here. The charismatic Christianity is characterized by its emphasis on spirituality, embodied in songs of praise, baptism, personal conversion, and the practice of charismatic gifts such as glossolalia (speaking in tongues), healing, and prophesying (Moberg, 2013b). Salvation can be described in terms of rebirth and as a rite of passage from a (sinful) phase to another (pious) phase. When a person is saved, it means surrendering to God and being fulfilled by the Holy Ghost. The Swedish theologian Nils G Holm (1996) is studying spirituality and altered states of consciousness within Christianity with a focus on glossolalia. Within the Pentecostal movement and other Christian groupings, spiritual gifts have an important meaning, such as the gift of healing, the gift of wisdom, the gift of interpretation, and glossolalia. When practicing glossolalia, the individuals speak in an incomprehensible language over which they claim to have no control. Yet, they perceive speaking in tongues to have great personal meaning (Holm, 1996).

The American theologian, Harvey Cox, suggests that this form of spirituality provides answers to the spiritual emptiness (1996). According to Cox, tongues speaking is an ecstatic experience that suspends the cognitive so that the speaker can open themselves to “deeper insights and exultant feelings” (1996: 86). Newberg et al. (2006) highlight the neurophysiological correlates of glossolalia. Their result showed that there were changes in several brain structures which lead the researchers to the conclusion that there is complex brain activity during the practice of glossolalia. The researchers point out that, originally, glossolalia had been linked to psychopathology by the biomedical community. However, later studies show that people who speak in tongues show no differences in personality traits from other population groups.

Kavan (2004) examines the prevalence of altered states of consciousness among Christian tongue speakers in New Zealand and compares it to experiences of glossolalia among meditators in a yoga-based group named the Golden Light. The Christians reported an altered state of mind more seldom when speaking in tongues than did the meditators. Though, 67% of the Christians reported that they experienced an altered state during their baptism of the Spirit, where members sometimes fell to the floor and appeared ecstatic. Almost half of them considered this the greatest experience of their life. The experience of transcendence and altered state of consciousness in relation to baptism has been noticed by other researchers as well. Williamson and Hood (2011), for example, investigate the spiritual effects of spirit baptism. Their informants testify to feelings of “rush” that surged through their bodies, that the body was “going a hundred miles an hour”. One likened it with “thousand bolts of energy come through me” and “a fire that burns from the inside out”, and others as “a weakness that sometimes leaves the body unable to stand”. One described the feeling of “my body was floating” (2011: 549). The researchers conclude that the participants experienced spirit baptism in such a way that it “energised their bodies with a liveliness and vigour beyond its usual state” (2011: 550). All their participants described an awareness of various body sensations related to spirit baptism.
Method

This article draws on some of the findings from a five-year research project resulting in my doctoral thesis *BDSM – Paradoxernas praktiker* (BDSM – The practices of paradoxes, Carlström, 2016). For the research project, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork within different BDSM communities in Sweden. The fieldwork included interviews, observations, and participation in meetings, workshops, pub evenings, and club ventures. I searched for participants in different ways, for example by becoming a member of Darkside where I advertised my research project. I also advertised in a sex shop, and contacted nonprofit organizations working with sexual issues and for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, and informed them about the research project. The criterion for participating in the study was an experience of practicing BDSM and being over 18 years of age. In total, 29 persons, defining themselves as practitioners, were interviewed. For some practitioners, the BDSM positions are limited to sexual roleplay, while for others the positions are constant. My contact with informants varied: some of them I met only once for an interview, and others several times in different contexts for repeated interviews. Each interview lasted 1–4 h. They were recorded, then transcribed verbatim.

In this article, the empirical material is based on the interviews with 14 of the 29 interviewed informants. The 14 informants were selected since they, in the interviews, were reflecting on religiosity and spirituality in relation to BDSM. A few of the informants are part of a Christian congregation and reconcile the faith with BDSM, and some have a previous background in a congregation but have left the church. The majority describe situations and experiences that they see as spiritual when practicing BDSM. During the interviews, I did not ask specific questions about spirituality and religion, but the topics were raised by the informants. The fact that many reflect on BDSM in relation to charismatic Christianity may be due to the fact that some informants lived in areas with a high influence of Christian free churches. Data were analyzed using a qualitative analytical method inspired by thematic analysis, as described by Hammersley and Atkinson (1983). Each transcribed interview was read several times. Through the process, various themes eventually emerged that described different but related aspects of the participants’ experiences. One prominent theme was spirituality in relation to BDSM practice. In the analysis, I repeatedly modified the use of the theoretical concepts in a dialectical relationship with my observations and the stories of the informants. The citations were translated from Swedish into English by the author and the article in its entirety was language edited.

All persons included in the study have been made unidentifiable. Their names are fictitious, and some facts have been withheld or changed if they were able to identify the person. The project complies with the Swedish Research Council’s ethical guidelines (Codex, 2012) and was reviewed by the Regional Ethical Review Board. As a researcher in sexuality studies, rather than a theologian, I am in no position to determine what is or is not spiritual. Throughout the article,
I rely on previous research by renowned theologians and religious scholars to describe and interpret what the informants referred to or framed as spiritual.

**Result and analysis**

Spirituality and Christianity in relation to BDSM has been a recurrent topic both in group discussions and in individual interviews during my ethnographic fieldwork within Swedish BDSM communities. Several of the interviewed BDSM practitioners have or have had a Christian faith and an affiliation in a Christian congregation. They discuss BDSM practice in relation to Christian faith and highlight various religious rituals and experiences within Christianity that parallel with BDSM. In the analysis, I have chosen to focus on two overarching themes that are prominent in charismatic Christianity and BDSM, as well as in the narratives of the informants, namely power and pain rituals and altered states of consciousness. I take the departure point in the informants’ stories and analyze them with the help of previous research and theoretical concepts.

**Power, discipline, and pain rituals**

Anders, a dominant man, shares his view on the connection between religion and BDSM. He highlights the hierarchical power structures and the attraction to power which according to him, exist both within Christianity and BDSM:

> I am fascinated by this thing with religion and BDSM, I would like to reflect more on that. For me it is not a big thing in itself but… I am a kind of atheist, I have become that. I struggled so much with my childhood faith, but now, I have freed myself from it. I was indoctrinated as a child that there was a divinity, which introduced a lot of guilt in me as a child. You were not allowed to say swearwords, you were not allowed to do this and that. I felt bad when others swore and used offensive words because I thought terrible things could happen. I felt observed, and now as a grown up, I reflect on how this has affected my sexuality (…) I remember that I was turned on by these positions of power in religious contexts. Religion is such a clear power structure, a hierarchical structure in which the leaders are attracted to power, and the followers like to be led.

Anders talks about how power permeates both religion and BDSM and reflects upon whether his childhood faith has influenced his sexuality. Simon is reflecting upon the rituals of power that he finds are obvious aspects of both BDSM and Christianity:

> I think of those who are believers and belonging to a church, it’s just the same as BDSM though not sexual, but religious. There are so many similarities between religion and BDSM. It’s the same thing really. There are so many BDSM people who practice rituals, and the church is built on rituals. There is someone who is the
dominant, who is a priest, there is a structure, there is a sermon, and when the priest wants the assembly to sing, the assembly sings. It becomes a joint experience of power and the highest power is God, but in a BDSM context, there is someone acting submissive, and someone dominant.

Simon highlights the important role of rituals and the joint experience of power in both contexts. Per, a dominant man, tells me that he used to be an active member in a Nonconformist congregation. He was a reverend and had missionary assignments all around the world. Leaving church, he describes as one of his life’s greatest and most difficult choices. After the exit, he began to take an interest in BDSM and when visiting clubs, he was struck by how many had a similar background as himself. A few days after the interview, I received an email in which he writes that he has been thinking a lot after our conversation about the connection between BDSM and Christianity. He proceeds:

On my first visit to a fetish club, one of my big questions was about the link between God and BDSM. Almost all the girls I talked with that evening told me that they had a religious background. One of them delivered a clear as a bell answer that I have thought a lot about since. She said: ‘If you are brought up within the church walls, you have been brainwashed that God is the supreme power, with total control, total domination, since breast milk. If you release your grip on God, you still long for releasing control. And if you allow yourself to explore how you function, you will explore how extreme sexuality you really like. That might make you both bisexual, into BDSM, and someone who loves group sex!’

According to Per, an important key to understanding why so many people who practice BDSM also have a connection to Christianity, is the importance of power and the ability to release control. His reasoning about how well BDSM and the Christian faith marry is in line with Kim’s, a nonbinary submissive practitioner who has left church. Below is an extract from the interview with Kim:

I come from a free church family. I was a believer until I was 19, 20 something. Now I am 22 years old (…) There is also so much that I thought about afterwards; how well they marry, BDSM and the Christian faith. I am very much appealed to this … leaving myself in someone else’s hands, worshipping, having a god who knows better, who has the control and keeps me in his hand and that there are many parallels to draw to be submissive as in my case. The free church and BDSM fulfil some form of function and it can be about the same kind of function. (…) It has a lot to do with the feeling of being accepted and loved. To come to God and be loved for whoever you are, with all your faults and shortcomings. But in practice, for me, it felt like God would prefer me without some aspects, as if I were straight, it would be even better. But it is such stories that I have heard, to be seen for who you are, but still be loved.
Kim talks about surrendering themselves to someone else, to release control, an experience in which the emotional part is central. Kim’s quote is in line with Baumeister’s reasoning (1988: 29) when describing masochism as a “locus of immediate sensations”, that may be classed with psychical exercise, intoxication, meditative techniques, all of which facilitate escape from self-awareness and everyday burden. To understand what social and psychological mechanisms lie behind religious beliefs and what a spiritual experience can consist of, I have turned to religious philosophical theorists. Rudolf Otto (1924) was a German philosopher and theologist who described spirituality as an inherited feeling for the sacred, a numinous quality of experience, which arises in the encounter with something at once both frightening and appealing. Another German theologian, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1799/1996), who has been of great significance for the formation of Christianity, saw the feeling of absolute dependence as the root of religion. The spiritual experience is affective—one has a feeling in relation to God; it is cognitive—one believes that God gives some kind of meaning; and it is social—you relate yourself, together with others, to the divine. The sacred is described as three things: fascinosum, tremendum, and mysterium; it is fascinating, you tremble in front of it, and it is a mystery. These three components are not reducible to intellectual explanatory models. The spiritual experience is in many ways reminiscent of experiences within BDSM. Several of the informants in this study compare BDSM with religious experiences, and through their stories we can indeed understand their experiences as affective, cognitive, and social. Feelings of fascination, trepidation, and mystery recur in their stories. The practice is based on emotional interactions; Kim talks about surrendering themselves to someone else and releasing control, with the emotional part of the experience being central. Natalie, a submissive woman, compares BDSM to meditation and says “as soon as someone grabbing my hair or grabbing my neck everything becomes quiet. It gets quiet and calm and I’m just here and now. It’s such a liberation”. Anne and Sofia, both dominant women, tell about the strong focus directed towards the submissive person during a session:

**Anne:** It is a great experience to guide people to subspace and see them lose themselves in some way. To go from being a person who just plays a little to start shaking and not being able to talk (…) Put blankets around them and say that everything will be fine, take care and really make sure that the person is in the best possible place. That you end up in this incredibly strong rush so you just don’t have control anymore, it’s awesome. It is really awesome to be a part of.

**Sofia:** To be in domspace means that you are hyper observant. That you take in all impressions and flow away (…) you are high on adrenaline and excitement (…) You reach a flow (…) When I whip, it’s kind of rhythmically, I focus entirely on the submissive and that he or she is feeling well during the session, my focus is entirely there.
Sofia describes a condition of flow (see Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) in which all her attention is directed towards the submissive. In line with Sofia’s depiction, Newmahr (2011) describes that tops achieve flow through mental focus most often when engaged in activities that require intense concentration. Sagarin et al. (2015: 51) define flow as a “highly pleasurable and satisfying mental state involving intense absorption and optimal performance on an activity such as sports or music”. Magnus, a sadist and dominant man testifies to similar experiences as Sofia and Anne. He describes what he calls a power-rush to usher someone into subspace, an act also associated with feelings of trust and gratitude:

I feel like I’m holding her brain in my hand. It’s like a little lump of jelly and she’s really given everything to me. She’s so far into subspace and she’s so excited and has lots of endorphins in her body and has actually no control at all. You should not joke about it, especially not with people who haven’t experienced it themselves. But in that situation, you could honestly ask the person ‘I’m cutting of your leg now, is that okay?’ And she would just say yes (…) It’s like a power-rush. I hold this person in my hand. Some people would say that ‘then I am God’ but I have never likened myself to God, but it is a huge power-rush. A sense of trust, of gratitude.

In Sagarin et al.’s study (2015), BDSM tops and ritual piercers reported high levels of flow, meanwhile the BDSM bottoms and nonpiercer ritual participants reported what the researchers referred to as transient hypofrontality, a temporary impairment of the brain’s executive function capability (2015: 52). The researchers underline the importance of safety within BDSM. As the condition of subspace can make it more difficult to recognize personal limits, the dominant needs to take great responsibility for the well-being of the submissive, which is evident in the citations above.

According to Fennell (2018), the most common framework for connecting BDSM and religion is through rituals of catharsis, ordeal, and atonement. In a Christian context, the body constitutes a channel for spiritual growth, for example by enduring pain. Using pain in BDSM practice can have several meanings. Josef, who has grown up in a charismatic Christian context tells that he uses to whip himself: “When I whip myself, it is the pain and massage I want. I usually whip with two whips and make quite distinct patterns, and it becomes a form of physical meditation”. Even if Josef does not associate this as a religious practice, it resembles self-flagellation, which historically has been a common practice in Christianity as a practice of mortification of the flesh. For example, the reformer of Protestantism, Martin Luther, regularly practiced self-flagellation as a means of mortification of the flesh (Wall, 1999). Baldwin highlights the passion and suffering when comparing Christianity with S/M in his book Ties that bind (1993: 35). He states:

It is not surprising that many people with a fervent Christian background end up at least sniffing around the leather and S/M scene. After all, many Christian sects urge
their followers to be like Christ, and they all learn about his passion and suffering. Ever wonder how a crown of thorns may feel, or had fantasies about crucifixion?

Christianity has long traditions of pain rituals with the aim of purifying, atonement, and cleansing the soul (Bastian et al., 2011). Bastian and his colleagues (2011) took their departure point in religious pain rituals and explored the psychological consequences of experiencing bodily pain. They found that experiencing pain reduced people’s feelings of guilt, and the effect of the painful task on ratings of guilt was greater than the effect of a similar but nonpainful task. The researchers conclude that since people interpret pain within a judicial model of pain as punishment, pain has the ability to resolve guilt.

### Spirituality and altered states of consciousness

The combination of ritual with S/M, and the use of strong sensation and sometimes opening the skin to achieve transcendent states, have led to a potent combination of S/M practice with spiritual seeking. (Sagarin et al., 2015: 35)

Similarly to what Sagarin et al. depict in the quotation above, several of the informants in my study attest to a pursuit of reaching transcendent states in a BDSM practice and refer to BDSM as a spiritual and religious experience. In this part, I focus on altered states of consciousness to analyze how spirituality within BDSM can resemble spiritual experiences in a Christian context. The community in both BDSM and Christianity can be understood by Collins’s (2005) description of the emotional energy that arises from interaction rituals. Through the strong energy that arises in the common focus that is directed at an object, an activity, or a person, the participants become well aware of the delimited lines and who is inside the boundaries and who is outside. In a Christian context the shared focus is a pastor, a priest, or God. In Moberg’s study (2013b), the participants turn their focus to God during the song of praise, expressing their gratitude and love for him. Several researchers have explored the song of praise in relation to altered states of consciousness (see for example, Hovi, 2011; Moberg, 2013b; Ulland, 2007). Through physical techniques such as closed eyes, waddling repetitive movements, and arms stretched out toward the sky, Hovi (2011) describes how the participants in her study enter altered state of consciousness. Some of my informants testify to extraordinary experiences that cannot be explained in a rational way. Adam, a masochistic man, describes his experiences of needle play, making evident the strong emotions and sensations these practices can bring forth:

I get high. I go into what is called subspace, you turn yourself inward and disappear. In the beginning, I’m very talkative and happy, but as I get the endorphins, I stop talk, and just moan and make guttural sounds. It is almost that I lose consciousness. Not that I get tired but I give up. This will of struggle disappears, I just accept.
The experience that the informant speaks of is often referred to as “subspace”. With Fennell’s words (2018: 1060), it can be described as “giving up control experiencing a sense of floating, or a kind of profound and divine loss of self”. Similarly to the descriptions of subspace, these activities are expressed in strong terms. Kent, a submissive man, describes it “like a dream world ... I don’t know much about it, but I would describe it as an out-of-body experience”. The practitioners who have experienced altered states of consciousness often find it difficult to render the feelings and experiences in words. Below is an extract from the interview with Adam, who describes his first experience of subspace:

Adam: I experienced it as seeing myself in a third person, that I was floating outside. And it was really scary.
Charlotta: What were you thinking?
Adam: I thought, what is this? I did feel joy but ... what is happening? No one had explained it to me. It is not until later that I have realized that ... wait a second, that was subspace, and that was the first time.

Integrating these experiences into consciousness often requires processing as it gives rise to different interpretations. Adam continues by saying: “Sometimes I have not been able to sleep all night but just pondered and walked around and around in the apartment going through what I have experienced”. Ellwood’s aforementioned analytical steps to understand a mysterious experience can be related to the sociologists Cohen and Stanley’s (1976/2002) notion of reality slips. By reality slips they refer to occasions when we are suddenly overwhelmed by a strong force or feeling, either coming from inside our body or outside, which causes us to revise and re-examine the very essence of the world, the society, and ourselves. When comparing the experiences of altered states of consciousness in a BDSM context with studies that examine the spiritual experiences in Christianity, such as glossolalia and salvation, it becomes clear that these reality slips occur within both BDSM and charismatic Christianity. Comparisons between subspace and glossolalia have been made by several practitioners I have interviewed. Erik, for example, says:

It is easy to compare subspace with the Christians in free churches speaking in tongues, how they speak to God. How they move in ecstasy. They actually are in subspace. They no longer have an overview of the outside world, they have a strong tunnel vision. They are completely focused on the God they worship. As BDSM and love can release endorphins, so can intense worship. In addition, speaking in tongues can be created in a state of subspace during a BDSM session, caused by pain.

Adam also makes these connections when describing subspace: “It was almost like a religious experience ... Word of Life Centres, and those who speak in tongues and such things. We are probably dangerously close to them”. Holm (1996) likens the behavior of a person speaking in tongues with an ecstatic
condition. The person directs all their attention to a certain direction, loses the perception of time and space, and is filled with strong feelings of happiness and of being subject to immediate attention from God. This condition often excites the person experiencing it, who reaches out in a feeling of liberation. The spiritual experience makes the person feel a strong affinity with the group and gain strength in their Christian faith. Kavan (2004) examines the prevalence of altered states of consciousness in relation to spirit baptism among Christian tongue speakers. She found that “41% of the tongue speakers reported recurring spiritual experiences, including visions, feelings of rapture, levitation, empowerment, transcendence and illumination” (2004: 177). As we have seen, these concepts are common also among BDSM practitioners, when describing experiences of subspace. Further, the emotions connected to the experiences deriving from altered states in both BDSM and Christianity resemble each other. Fabian describes “a sense of strong intensity that I cannot achieve otherwise”, Kent describes a “total happiness”, and Linn says that she is “very happy for the fantastic things she can feel through her body”. In Williamson and Hood’s study (2011: 550), all participants described emotions of intoxication, love, peace, and happiness/joy during spirit baptism.

**Conclusions**

In this article, I have conveyed how the informants recurrently compare the spiritual experiences in BDSM with the spiritual experiences in Christianity. As we can see, rituals of power and pain and experiences of entering altered states of consciousness are evident in both a Christian context and in BDSM practices. Various studies show that participants experience intense emotions and reach altered states of consciousness through glossolalia, salvation, songs of praise, and spirit baptism. In the narratives of my informants there are several descriptions of pain and power rituals and conditions of subspace where the practitioners testify to reaching altered states of consciousness.

So how can we understand these intense experiences, described by both BDSM practitioners and Christians and in similar terms? What significance do they have for the individuals? Sagarin et al. (2015) conclude their study of parallels between BDSM and extreme rituals by stating that individuals “appear to pursue BDSM and extreme rituals, in part, for similar reasons, and they appear to anticipate similar benefits from both” (2015: 53). Their conclusion is in line with the results of this study as the experiences seem to fill a void that everyday reality cannot fill. If the practices of BDSM are seen as secular variation of spirituality, rituals within the BDSM community can be regarded as “substitutes” to the rituals of traditional societies. Beckmann (2009: 183) notes:

The lack of areas of spirituality that were formerly satisfied by religious rituals left a void in Western consumer societies. The filling of this void might be one of the
broader social meanings that the increased motivation to engage in the ‘bodily practice’ of consensual ‘SM’ in contemporary consumer culture signals.

In line with Beckmann, the increased interest in BDSM can be interpreted as a need to fill the void of the former religious rituals. Based on empirical material, Fennell (2018) notes that mainstream American religions have failed to provide her informants with spiritual satisfaction. For example, one of her informants, a Christian BDSM practitioner, said that he got more spiritual fulfilment from BDSM than from his religion. This view is in line with Douglas (1966/2002: 63) when she states: “As a social animal, man is a ritual animal. If ritual is suppressed in one form it crops up in others, more strongly the more intense the social interaction”. In this way, practicing BDSM can, for some, be understood as an approach to fill an existential void in Western society where religious rituals no longer play an important part in many people’s lives and constitute a secular, but spiritual, alternative to religion and belief systems.

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1. FetLife is an international website (with headquarters in Canada) with over seven million members, serving people interested in BDSM, fetishism, and kink.
2. Darkside is the largest Swedish BDSM community on the Internet, with more than 260,000 members.

References


**Charlotta Carlström**’s research interests concern religion, power, gender, body, norms and sexual practices, and expressions. Her thesis, *BDSM – The practices of paradoxes* (2016) is an ethnographic study about BDSM (bondage, discipline/dominance, submission and sadomasochism) in Sweden. She teaches in the master’s program in Sexology at Malmö University. Her ongoing postdoc project investigates contemporary perspectives on sexuality and LGBTQ in Swedish Christian free church congregations and explores LGBTQ persons experiences of reconciling religious and sexual belonging.