

LMK-stiftelsen Lund  
Stortorget 6  
223 23 Lund

2021-05-12

### **Ansökan om medel för forskningsinitieringsprojekt vid CTR**

Forskningsinitieringsprojektet syftar till uppbyggnad av forskningsmiljön ”At the Margins of Life: Existential Dimension to Technology, Health, and Death” vid CTR. Omkostnader samt del av löne-medel för de sökande upptas i denna ansökan. Till ansökan bifogas kostnads-kalkyl.

Med vänlig hälsning,

Erik Sidenvall  
Adjungerad professor i kyrkohistoria  
Tel. 070-6260165, 046-2229057  
E-post: [Erik.Sidenvall@ctr.lu.se](mailto:Erik.Sidenvall@ctr.lu.se)

Kristina Myrvold  
Gästprofessor i religionshistoria  
Tel. 046-2229741  
E-post : [Kristina.Myrvold@ctr.lu.se](mailto:Kristina.Myrvold@ctr.lu.se)

Lovisa Nyman  
Post-doc i systematisk teologi  
Tel. 046-2224916  
E-post: [Lovisa.Nyman@ctr.lu.se](mailto:Lovisa.Nyman@ctr.lu.se)

# **At the Margins of Life: Existential Dimension to Technology, Health, and Death**

Can religion provide valuable resources and insights to be used in the creation of future sustainable societies? By investigating the concept of *existential sustainability* from a religious studies' perspective, this research initiation project seeks to build a multi-disciplinary research environment by arranging activities for the exploration of three inter-related focus areas – technology, health, and death. The aim of this research environment is to provide a base for future project/program research applications within this field of enquiry.

**The point of departure for the research initiation project is the assumption that a critical reconsideration of the role of religion at the margins of life can contribute to rethinking life in a sustainable world. The following overarching research questions will be addressed:**

- How can ethical, philosophical, sociological, historical, and theological knowledge contribute to technological thinking and development to secure an existentially sustainable society?**
- How can religious communities and the major religious traditions add new layers to concepts and practices of equitable and existential health?**
- How can the various resources, historical and contemporary, found within the major religious traditions related to the end-of-life process be utilized in present day care of the mortally ill?**

The global *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDG) of the United Nation Agenda 2030 aim at alleviating human suffering in different ways and to create a sustainable society for all. Suffering in different ways has been a part of everyday life throughout history and people have often taken refuge in religion for explanations and support in order to transform human travails into something bearable, even meaningful. With new challenges in the contemporary global society the SDG are efforts to avert suffering and marginalization of humans and improve a number of social, economic, cultural, and political dimensions of human life and society.

In these discussions, the concept of *existential sustainability* has been identified as a new dimension to explore and develop in research and societal projects. In a Nordic context, previous studies have briefly mentioned the concept when describing what is missing in the late modern and secularized society in which technology, lack of time, and a sidelining of existential issues in the public have created a destructive situation for human beings (Kurkiala 2019).

Although research in multiple disciplines purports that a majority of people in the world continues to shape norms and behaviors after religion, there is a lack of national and international research that link existential dimensions to social sustainability and highlights the importance of religion. The multi-disciplinary academic study of religion, with its extensive experience of studying human suffering and existential conditions in past and present societies, offers advantageous points of departure for future research into this field.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this project is to initiate and develop the multi-disciplinary research environment “At the Margins of Life: Existential Dimensions to Technology, Health and Death” during the period September 2021 to December 2022.

This research environment will provide a hub for multidisciplinary and explorative collaborations across faculties within Lund University (including psychology, social work, health sciences, engineering sciences, communication and media) and dialogues with relevant stakeholders (i.e. civil society representatives, policy-makers, and health care institutions).

By focusing on processes of marginalization expressed in three interrelated focus areas, the objective of the research environment is to identify and develop academic discussions on existential sustainability in relation to historical and contemporary complexities of religion and spirituality on the assemblage of life. The focus areas – technology, health, and death – have been identified as being particularly valuable for the exploration of existential dimensions in relation to the global SDG. These thematic focus areas are intentionally kept general in order to encourage and include creative and explorative processes that will be achieved through various interdisciplinary and stakeholder collaborations.

At the end of the project period the project team will have formed a cross-faculty research group and developed project/program applications to be submitted to research foundations during 2023.

In order to attain to this purpose, the following academic activities will be carried out in this project:

(1) The organization of a thematic seminar series focusing on the concept of existential sustainability and on the focus areas of the project.

(2) The organization of an international exploratory workshop on the existential dimensions of technology, health, and death at Lund University. The contributions to this workshop will be published in a thematic issue of an open access journal or in an anthology.

(3) A part of the project is to form an international advisory group representing various scholarly fields whose members will be involved in formulating project/program areas, but will also contribute with seminar or keynote lectures.

The activities in the project will enable us to create a knowledge base that can aid researchers and stakeholders with the means to understand existential dimensions of technology, health, and death, and to create an awareness of the role of religion in prevention efforts related to social sustainability. Creating such a knowledge base can counteract many reductionist approaches to religion that may result in misunderstandings and missed opportunities to aid people in need.

Since the CTR accommodates research with various methodological approaches – historical, anthropological, sociological, philosophical, ethical, and theological – to the study of religious traditions, it is especially suitable for initiating research into these fields and for hosting a research environment focusing on existential sustainability. However, to make existential dimensions a fully relevant perspective on sustainability there is a need to identify and establish additional and long-term research collaboration across disciplines and faculties.

### **At the Margins**

The shared theoretical point of departure for this project is the assumption that lack of existential sustainability creates existential marginalization. “At the Margins of Life” in this project refers to the common metaphor for people who struggle with economic, physical, social, racial, and normative vulnerability in society, but also to processes of technologization in which fundamental human needs are set aside for economic gain and industrial rationality. Even if people generally live longer in the contemporary world, they still face ill health, crises, and can experience a deep lack of meaning and understanding of the human existence. This creates marginalization. These experiences cut across social and economic barriers; even

people with sufficient means may have the feeling of being existentially marginalized (Rüsen 2004; Tamez 2000).

### *Technology*

Technology permeates the life of people in the West and increasingly so in other parts of the world (Roitto et al. 2021). Technological advances have brought welfare, increased health, and longer life for many people. Technology can be regarded from the perspective of these concrete improvements of material conditions and standards (Lewin 2018; DeLashmutt 2009). Here the possibilities that technology in general create to alleviate suffering and lift people from the economic and social margins to sustainable lives is place in the focus. Other perspectives on technology emphasize its intervention in and transformation of reality (Niiniluoto 1993; Nordmann 2006). In this regard, a widely spread view of technology within the public at large is that technology per se is neutral, and that the moral, social, political, philosophical, and theological challenges we face when transforming the world is just a question of how we choose to use the technology that we have at our disposal.

Among philosophers though, the neutrality thesis is considered highly questionable (Franssen et al. 2018). Technology is always the outcome of a designing process that is inevitably normative (Vincenti 1990). This process consists of constant decisions between different options where trade-offs are made to reach the optimal solution to a problem. The primary criteria are economic and functional; gradually society has imposed sustainability criteria in terms of environment and climate. However, if the designing process neglects aspects of existential sustainability in favor of functional and economic values, technology runs the risk of marginalizing people, resulting in technology that is inhumane. Ultimately, this course leads to an exclusively technological understanding of reality (Heidegger 1977). Technological marginalization occurs on a day-to-day basis in for example the digitalization process, where certain social groups and the elderly are excluded from central functions of society. At its most extreme, lack of existential perspectives is represented by for instance the possible future use of weaponized microdrones which, with the help of face recognition, can eliminate specific targets.

This shows that strategies for implementing existential sustainability as a criterion for technological development is called for. In this focus area the aim is to create collaborations between engineering sciences, sociology, religious studies and theology to achieve a better understanding of such processes.

### *Health*

In the action plans that Sweden and many other countries have adopted to meet the global SDG one objective is to create conditions for equitable health for all from early life to old age. This presumes cooperation with various stakeholders that contribute to health work, and particularly the incorporation of the civil society, which provides voices to critical issues and vulnerable population (see e.g. Government Offices of Sweden 2018). Research purports a consistent influence of religion as a social determinant and resource for mental and physical health because of the existential dimensions it provides. Just as contemporary studies link societal stress, ill health, and mortality to the loss of social cohesion and spiritual values, others prove that people continue to seek the supernatural when facing illness and suffering (e.g. Chatters 2000; Jones 2004; Idler 2014). Critical lessons learnt from the Covid-19 pandemic and epidemic outbreaks in the past have highlighted the role of religion a pervasive force to either alleviate or aggravate a crisis and the need to accommodate religious beliefs, practices, and faith-based organizations of the civil society when health measures are implemented (e.g. Campbell 2020; Marshall 2020; Rodriguez-Dod et. al. 2016). Religious congregations can convey public health instructions in an appropriate religious and cultural

language and have social networks and capital of trust to identify and serve the most vulnerable populations. Not the least, they provide social and spiritual support and practices that aid resilience (Marshall 2017; 2020; WHO 2020). Previous studies suggest that religious communities of different faiths may respond to public health measures in diverse and contradictory ways: They may interpret governmental interventions as an infringement on their beliefs and practices, even as a violation of the statutory religious freedom, which can lead to distrust and undermine public health preventions (Rodriguez-Dod et. al. 2016). More often, however, religious communities comply with governmental interventions and perceive themselves to carry important civic duties (Faust et. al. 2009; Idler 2014). Religions generally accept or accommodate scientific explanations of diseases, often working side by side with medicine and health care, but may project ontological causalities to human suffering, address larger existential concerns, and offer holistic approaches to human health and suffering.

Within the growing and multidisciplinary field of “existential health” there is an increasing awareness of this multidimensionality of health, including physical, mental, social, and spiritual dimensions, but also a recognition that wellbeing is not merely a measure between disease and health but how humans experience and relate to these measures with reflexive attitudes (e.g. Melder 2011; Sigurdson 2016). Studies have argued that moral justifications for the pursuit of equitable health make it an ethical mandate to include deeper understanding of religion as a significant determinant of health (Idler 2014).

### *Death*

On a global scale, humanity is ageing. This fundamental shift occurs at the same time as traditional societal patterns of care and support for the elderly are changing in most parts of the world (WHO 2011). The expansion of health care services has resulted in an institutionalization and a professionalization of the process of dying. This has entailed that the process of dying, has become a lonely, marginalized experience for the individual, increasingly rendered invisible within society at large (Rasmussen 1999; Dahlborg Lyckhage & Lindahl 2013). These trends suggest an increased need to face matters related to all aspects of the human experience of end-of-life.

A number of studies have pointed at the complexity of the questions facing terminally ill patients that include, among other issues, matters of “spirituality.” With an emphasis on diagnostics and curative treatment, a health care environment has a tendency to leave other issues aside in its encounter with the dying person (Kaut 2002; Pentaris 2018). As indicated by research in the Swedish context, medical institutions and practitioners find it difficult to deal with matters of faith and meaning of life in day-to-day care-giving practices. When palliative care institutions have attempted to cater to the existential needs among end-of-life patients this issue has been approached from a secular vantage point, ignoring the possible impact and resources for coping found within religious traditions and communities of faith (Nordin 2018; see also Hinshaw et al. 2011).

In other words, there is a need for a constructive and creative re-engagement with the ways in which the major religious traditions offer resources to understand and cope with the end-of-life process. Generally speaking, religious traditions offer a range of practices, rituals, texts (both historical and contemporary) and spaces that are aimed at alleviating processes of dying and grieving. Acknowledging the secular framework of most medical institutions, there is, nevertheless, a need to pose the question: can religion be re-conceptualised as providing resources for end-of-life patients and for palliative care and hospice institutions? If so, what are the pre-conditions for such a fundamental shift to occur?

### **Planned activities and budget specification**

The project will be carried out at the CTR by a project team consisting of Prof. Kristina Myrvold, Prof. Erik Sidenvall, and Dr. Lovisa Nyman. Myrvold is guest professor of History of religion and a renowned authority in the field of contemporary Indian religious traditions. Sidenvall is adjunct professor of Church history with main research interests in the fields of social and cultural history of European religion. Nyman is post-doc researcher in Systematic theology with an expertise in the field of Christian feminist theology.

Sidenvall and Myrvold will have the overarching responsibility for establishing the research environment and for planning and preparing research proposals, whereas Nyman will be responsible for arranging the seminar series, initiating research collaborations across faculties, building contacts with significant stakeholders, and administrating the explorative workshop.

A provisional timetable for the various academic activities is as follows:

- September–December 2021: A preparatory phase that involves planning the seminar series, identification of cross-faculty partnerships, and possible collaborative links to significant stakeholders. Nyman is the researcher in charge of this part.
- January–December 2022: The project initiates a seminar series in January 2022 that will include monthly thematic seminars until December 2022.
- January–June 2022: The project team is instrumental in forming interdisciplinary research clusters around the focus areas of the project. Each cluster will contribute with sessions/roundtables at the explorative workshop.
- Autumn 2022: The project organizes an explorative workshop on the thematic focus areas for invited researchers and representatives of stakeholders. The results from the workshop will be published in a thematic open access journal or an anthology to be published during 2023.
- Autumn 2022: Based on the activities of the project, the project team will plan and prepare a project or program proposal to be submitted to national and international research foundations in 2023.

In order to carry out these activities funding is applied for from the LMK Foundation to cover salary and direct costs related to the academic activities according to the following budget specification:

<b>Budget</b>		
<i>Salary costs:</i>	2021	2022
- 20 percent worktime for Dr. Lovisa Nyman, postdoctoral researcher in Systematic theology, between 1 September 2021 and 31 December 2022.	56,500	169,000
- 10 percent worktime for Prof. Kristina Myrvold between 1 January and 31 December 2022.		123,500
- 10 percent worktime for Prof. Erik Sidenvall between 1 January and 31 December 2022.		123,500
<i>Direct costs:</i>		
- Seminar series from spring 2022, including costs for travel and accommodation for national and international scholars.		80,000

- Explorative workshop in autumn 2022, including costs for travel and accommodation for invited participants and the workshop venue.		150,000
- Open access publication of the results from the workshop.		150,000
<i>Overhead costs:</i>		
- Part of overhead costs for hosting the project at the CTR.		307,125
Total costs included in this application:		1,185,625 SEK

## References

- Campbell, H.A. (ed.). 2020. *Religion in Quarantine: The Future of Religion in a Post-Pandemic World*. Digital Religion Publications. Available at: <https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/bitstream/handle/1969.1/188004/Religion%20in%20Quarantine-PDF-eBook-final-2020.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y>.
- Chatters, L.M. 2000. "Religion and Health: Public Health Research and Practice." *Annual Review of Public Health*, Vol. 21: 335–367.
- Dahlborg Lyckhage, E. & B. Lindahl. 2013. "Living in Liminality-being Simultaneously Visible and Invisible: Caregivers' Narratives of Palliative care." *Journal of Social Work in End-of-Life & Palliative Care*, Vol. 9 (4): 272–288.
- DeLashmutt, M. 2006. "A Better Life through Information Technology? The Theological Eschatology of Posthuman Speculative Science." *Zygon*, Vol. 41 (2): 267–288.
- Faust, H.S., C.M. Bensimon and R.E.G. Upshur. 2009. "The Role of Faith-Based Organizations in the Ethical Aspects of Pandemic Flu Planning: Lessons Learned from the Toronto SARS Experience." *Public Health Ethics*, Vol 2 (1): 105–112.
- Franssen, M., G. Lockhorst and I. van de Poel. 2018. "Philosophy of Technology." In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/technology/>.
- Government Offices of Sweden. 2018. *Sweden's Work on Global Health – Implementing the 2030 Agenda*.
- Heidegger, M. 1977. *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Hinshaw, D.B., et al. 2011. "Spiritual Issues in Suffering: Creating a Dialogue between Clergy and Palliative Care Providers." *Progress in Palliative Care*, Vol. 19 (1): 7–14.
- Idler, E. (ed.) 2014. *Religion as a Social Determinant of Public Health*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jones, J.W. 2004. "Religion, Health, and the Psychology of Religion: How the Research on Religion and Health Helps Us Understand Religion." *Journal of Religion and Health*, Vol. 43 (4): 317–328.
- Kaut, K. 2002. "Religion, spirituality, and existentialism near the end of life - Implications for assessment and application." *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 46 (2): 220–234.
- Kurkiala, M. 2019. *När själen går i exil: Modernitet, teknologi och det heliga*. Stockholm: Verbum.
- Lewin, D. 2018. "Technology." In *The Oxford Handbook of Theology and Modern European Thought*, N. Adams, G. Pattison and G. Ward (eds.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Marshall, K. 2017. "Roles of Religious Actors in the West African Ebola Response." *Development in Practice*, Vol. 27 (5): 622–633.
- Marshall, K. 2020. "What Religion Can Offer in the Response to COVID-19." *World Politics Review*, May 26.

- Niiniluoto, I. 1993. "The Aim and Structure of Applied Research." *Erkenntnis: An International Journal of Analytic Philosophy*, Vol. 38 (1): 1–21.
- Nordmann, A. 2005. "Noumenal Technology: Reflections on the Incredible Tininess of Nano." *Techné: Research in Philosophy and Technology*, Vol. 8 (3): 3–23.
- Pentaris, P. 2018. "The Marginalization of Religion in End of Life Care: Signs of Microaggression?" *International Journal of Human Rights in Healthcare*, Vol. 11 (2): 116–128.
- Rasmussen, B.H. 1999. *In Pursuit of a Meaningful Living Amidst Dying: Nursing Practice in a Hospice*. Umeå: Umeå University.
- Rodriguez-Dod, E.C., A.M. Marty and E.M. Marty-Nelson. 2016. "Tears in Heaven: Religiously and Culturally Sensitive Laws for Preventing the Next Pandemic." *Catholic University Law Review*, Vol. 66 (1): 117– [i].
- Roitto, R. and S. Wigorts Yngvesson. 2021. *Teknoteologi: AI och människans villkor*. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Rüsen, J. 2004. *Berättande och förnuft: Historieteoretiska texter*. Översätt. J. Retzlaff. Göteborg: Daidalos.
- Sigurdson, O. 2016. "Existential Health: Philosophical and Historical Perspectives." *LIR-journal*, Vol. 6. Available at: <http://ojs.uib.no/ojs/article/download>.
- Tamez, E. 2000. *When the Horizons Close: Rereading Ecclesiastes*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Vincenti, W. 1990. *What Engineers Know and How They Know It: Analytical Studies from Aeronautical History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- WHO. 2011. "Global Health and Aging."
- WHO. 2020. "Practical Considerations and Recommendations for Religious Leaders and Faith-based Communities in the Context of COVID-19." Interim guidance, April 7.