

# **Reformation turning secular: How Social democracy and a strong Lutheran state church made Sweden the most secular nation in the world**

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In September 2017, Sweden held election in the Lutheran Church of Sweden. The debate before the election was extensive, although to a lesser degree dealing with theological, but rather party-political issues. The number of voters was the highest ever, and the voter turnout in percent rose from 12 to 19, the highest since the 1934. Winners by a landslide were the Social democrats.<sup>1</sup>

What may be the short-term and long term-reasons behind this in a nation with an internationally and historically very high degree of secularization? In the Inglehart/Welzel map of world values, Sweden stands out as the world's arguably most secular and individualistic nation. At the same time, Sweden is one of the nations in the world where the state has the strongest control over the people. How is this paradox possible? And more specifically: What significance could one of the world's largest Lutheran churches and its relationship with a dominating Social democratic party have had for this peculiar pattern?

## **Reformation and Protestantism in relation to secularization**

The reformation had its obvious centre in Luther's message that truth is found in Scripture, and Scripture alone. It seems astonishing that such a message could change into what can be described as more or less the exact opposite. The Reformation had a main, Bible-based route. But it also provided a possibility to leave this route through small gates, leading to two side-alleys where the increased focus on the personal relationship to God, and the weakened bonds to the Catholic church could give rise to a situation where politicians took control over the church, and where the individual took control over religiosity, leaving both Christ and Bible on the sideline. Coincidentally, both these two have taken place in Sweden, with an early beginning in early 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

Gustav Vasa, king of the newly independent Sweden, used the Reformation as a pretext to take over the Church and its assets. From then in, the Lutheran Church of Sweden continued to function as a state church up till year 2000. During the centuries, the direct connection to

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<sup>1</sup>Church of Sweden website *Rekordhögt valdeltagande i kyrkovalet 2017*  
<https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/default.aspx?id=1669622>

Martin Luther and the reformation became more diffuse. It was not, however, not until the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the direction started to deflect in a more serious manner, to a large part due to the vision from the Social democratic party to change the church in line with their political ideology. Church historian Daniel Alvunger describes the party's vision for the state church as a *secularized Lutherdom*. This vision they were able to reach by ridding the Church of some of Luther's ideas, while putting the emphasis on others: "Ideas that derived from Reformed principles, such as Luther's two-kingdom doctrine and the notion of free will, were subsumed into a system of secular ideas and norms", describes Alvunger.<sup>2</sup>

David Thurfjell, Swedish historian of religion, refers to the view of life that many Swedish people have come to adopt as a *protestant humanism*, a position he explains as a combination of "post-materialism, secular rationalism, relativism and, not least, individualism."<sup>3</sup> He goes on to state that this individualistic ideology during the 1960s came to include very different movements in society: sexual liberation, left-wing pathos, the struggle for women's rights, anti-fascism et cetera, all included under the wider anti-authoritarian movement, "while traditional Christianity was considered as an obvious opponent of this position".<sup>4</sup>

In 1951 the Church of Sweden lost its key connection to the state, when it became legal to leave the state church without entering another denomination. Up till then, being Swedish more or less included membership in the Lutheran church. In 2000, the Church of Sweden was separated from the state, and became a denomination among others. Still, even after this year, however, the Church of Sweden has kept a much stronger connection to the state than other Christian or non-Christian denominations.<sup>5</sup>

Several scholars argue that Protestantism provides key elements in the secularization of the West. Sociologist of religion José Casanova argues that Protestantism is "not only a secularizing force but a form of religious internal secularization, the vehicle through which religious contents would take institutionalized secular form."<sup>6</sup> Adam Seligman suggests that the creation of Protestant churches rests on the idea of the autonomous self, and hereby

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Alvunger *Nytt vin i gamla läglar. Socialdemokratisk kyrkopolitik under perioden 1944-1973*, Församlingsförlaget, Göteborg 2006, p 248

<sup>3</sup> David Thurfjell *Det gudlösa folket*. Molin & Sorgenfrei, Stockholm 2015, p 26

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* p 107

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid* p 19. It may be added that this political, particularly left-oriented vision of Christianity did not appear only in the Lutheran state Church, but also in free denominations. The possibilities of a political leadership over the church was however most prevalent in the Church of Sweden. The broader left-wing perspective from the 1960s and onward is covered in depth in Johan Sundeen *68-kyrkan* Bladh by Bladh, Stockholm 2017

<sup>6</sup> Casanova, José, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1994) p 22

“underpins the process of secularization through which heteronomous authority is ultimately lost”<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, though, when looking at the actual development around the world, particularly the growth of Evangelical and Pentecostal movements, it becomes obvious that Protestantism itself does not automatically lead to secularization. Some theologically liberal churches may have gone in that direction, but not Protestantism as a whole.

### **The market model**

It seems obvious that other ingredients have to be added to the stew, in order for secularization to take place. In secularization theory, a concept called “the market model” argues that secularization does not happen just as a result of a spontaneous weakening demand of religion. Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart describes: “The religious market model disregards the public’s ‘demand’ for religion, which is assumed to be constant, but focuses instead on how conditions of religious freedom, and the work of competing religious institutions, actively generate its ‘supply’”.<sup>8</sup> The larger discussion about this theoretical model indicate that *supply* in this sense may be understood as something more than just the number of congregations, or the competition between different denominations. It can also reflect the religious *content*, what theology or ideology that lies behind it, who provides it, and how this message is conveyed in Church and society.

In this case, Swedish clergy seem to have been more passive than in other nations when it comes to openness to liberal or *de facto* anti-Christian elements that politicians tried to plant into the church. Rodney Stark and Laurence Iannaccone even state that this process in Sweden was mutual, to the extent that many Swedish priests actually became positive towards such a process: “In fact - many Swedish clergy became strong supporters of state socialism. Moreover, they acquiesced when control of the Church passed into the hands of avowed atheists.”<sup>9</sup> Their rhetorical question concerning the Scandinavian example, in accordance with the market model goes like this: “What happens when only a few, lazy religious firms confront the potential religious consumer? More concretely, does the low level of religious mobilization in Scandinavia, for instance, reflect weak demand primarily, or an unattractive

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<sup>7</sup> Adam B Seligman *Modernity's Wager. Authority, the Self, and Transcendence* Princeton University Press, Princeton, p 126

<sup>8</sup> Norris, Pippa & Inglehart, Robert, *Sacred and Secular. Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011) 11ff

<sup>9</sup> Stark, Rodney & Iannaccone, Laurence “A Supply-Side Reinterpretation of the ‘Secularization’ of Europe” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Sep., 1994) p 238

product, badly marketed, within a highly regulated and distorted religious economy? [The concept “economy” here used as a reflection of the religious content in a particular society]”<sup>10</sup>

David Thurfjell suggests a supply-oriented explanation to Swedish particularism, that the dominance of the state Lutheran church resulted in a lack of competition, which gave the consequence of the “product” never really being adapted to demand, and therefore lost its attractiveness.<sup>11</sup> Still, for the market model to hold, we would have to find more concrete evidence of how the church was shaped in a certain direction. We find one in the political sphere.

### **Social democracy and church policy**

Few people would dispute that the long Social democratic hegemony has had a huge impact on 20<sup>th</sup> century Sweden. With the exception for a few brief periods, the Social democrats ruled Sweden for more or less a whole century, mostly alone, sometimes as the dominating party in coalition governments. One of their genial - their opponents might say devastating - ideas was to connect the individual so strongly to the state that all other bonds - to church, family, norms and traditions - fade away. Historians Henrik Berggren and Lars Trägårdh have labelled this ideology *the Swedish state individualism*.

When looking at the very high degree of Swedish secularization, the question arises how this could come about in a nation that 150 years ago was a very pious one, where Christianity played a central part in everyone’s life. My view is that the strong relationship between the Lutheran state church and the secular-oriented Social democratic party was highly influential in this development. Rather than opposing the secularizing forces, the Church of Sweden in some ways actually *enhanced* secularization, not least because of the strong pressure from the Social democratic party. This point of view is also reflected in international literature, where secularization scholar David Martin argues that this relationship in Scandinavia has had a crucial significance to secularization in Scandinavia, and states that this ”symbiosis of Lutheranism and Social democracy is a pre-eminent case”.<sup>12</sup>

The Social democratic vision towards the Church of Sweden was first to separate church from state. However, in the 1930s, influential Social democrats turned to another track to reach

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p 232

<sup>11</sup> Thurfjell. p 34

<sup>12</sup> Martin, David, *On Secularization. Towards a Revised General theory* Farnham: Ashgate (2005) p 78

their goals. Arthur Engberg, wished to “de-Christianise the Church through its connection with the state”<sup>13</sup>, and wrote that the Church should be transformed into “an atheistic general religiosity”<sup>14</sup>. Later, as minister of ecclesiastical affairs he suggested in a famous one-liner in parliament that the Church should be transformed into “the royal bureau of bliss” (“kungliga salighetsverket”). Vicar and Social democratic parliamentarian Harald Hallén presented a program for a democratic Folk Church - a *folkkyrka*, governed according to the same pattern as secular assemblies. This strategy seems to have worked out efficiently over time, hereby putting the market model into practice by changing the supply of the Church, building on a foundation quite different from what the Reformation was originally about.

When Swedish secularization is being discussed, it is somewhat telling that Berggren & Trägårdh in the first edition of their book *Is the Swede human?* somehow forgot to include the role of the Lutheran state church in Swedish individualism. In the second edition, though, they pay back by adding an extra chapter on the Church of Sweden. Here they go as far as to say that “the Swedish alliance between state and individual has its roots in the interaction between a local interpretation of Luther’s theology, the development of the Swedish state from 16<sup>th</sup> century and onwards, plus the challenge against the state church which came from the 19<sup>th</sup> century revival movements.” These threads, they argue, end up in the ambition in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to reform the state church to a *folkkyrka*.<sup>15</sup>

Generally, a Lutheran church does not have the same strongholds against sudden changes as the Roman Catholic church, which relies heavily on tradition. On the other hand, a Lutheran church ought to have its own strong bulwark in form of Scripture. In Sweden, though, the secular state could overrun any foundation in Scripture by introducing this secular Lutherdom, where the purpose of the Church was no longer necessarily to glorify God and preach the Gospel. Instead, church historian Daniel Alvunger describes that the Social democrats created “a *folkkyrka* programme that was intended to transform the Church of Sweden into a *democratic and open and tolerant national church*.”<sup>16</sup> These are the keywords in Social democratic church policy.

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<sup>13</sup> Urban Claesson *Folkhemmets kyrka: Harald Hallén och folkkyrkans genombrott. En studie av socialdemokrati, kyrka och nationsbygge med särskild hänsyn till perioden 1905-1933* p 424

<sup>14</sup> Arthur Engberg in *Arbetet* 1922, quoted in Maciej Zaremba “En fri kyrka: För folklig för sitt eget bästa” *Dagens Nyheter* 1999-12-03

<sup>15</sup> Henrik Berggren, and Lars Trägårdh, *Är Svensken Människa? Gemenskap Och Oberoende I Det Moderna Sverige*. 2nd edn (Stockholm: Norstedts, 2015) p 379

<sup>16</sup> Alvunger 252

There were several steps during the 20<sup>th</sup> century which pushed the Church in this direction. In 1930, church governance changed into a more secular system, much like secular city council elections. Church historian Oloph Bexell describes the content of these changes as something "in an international perspective truly unique: *the connection between the worshipping congregation and the ecclesiastical governing body disappears*."<sup>17</sup>

The question of what ought to be the purpose and mission of the church hereby became open for political, rather than theological debate. One important decision from the Social democratic government was in 1949, when the General Synod was changed into more of a political body, where secular politicians were put in majority. The explicit argument for this was that "the Church of Sweden shall be a *folkkyrka*, not a priest church"<sup>18</sup> This move had the expected result, that the Social democratic ability to place their members in the General Synod increased during the 1950s.<sup>19</sup> This version of a secularized Lutherdom took shape in this manner, according to Alvunger: "The government wanted to pave the way for a church in which elected lay representatives, with party affiliation, took decisions that were intended ultimately to transform the Church of Sweden from within."<sup>20</sup>

The ideology of a politically governed church became a new basis for the Church of Sweden, and over time it also spread to other political parties. Not only Social democrats, but also a short-lived liberal government had some impact on the new Church legislation of 1982, which was in effect until the separation of church and state in year 2000. This law stated that priests were no longer to elect delegates to the General Synods, and simultaneously, the bishops lost their right to vote in these Synods.

To summarize: The direction of the church from functioning as the body of Christ to a more general "democratic, open and tolerant" organization was set, and has continued to this day. Contemporary development also shows this quite clearly. The remarkably high voter turnout and success for the Social democrats in the church election in September 2017, Sweden held church elections. was to a large extent due to the Social democrats turning the election into a dress-rehearsal before next year's general elections. In particular they awoke a political battle

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<sup>17</sup> i internationellt perspektiv alldeles unikt: *sambandet mellan den gudstjänstfriande församlingen och den kyrkliga beslutsförsamlingen försvinner* Oloph Bexell, "Om Svenska kyrkan under 1900-talet. Några rapsodiska årtal på vägen till idag" *Svensk PastoralTidskrift* 1:2017

<sup>18</sup> Karl Sandegård and Rickard Lindström "Svenska kyrkan skall vara en folkkyrka" 1944 Proposition in Swedish parliament, quoted in Bexell.

<sup>19</sup> Alvunger p 255

<sup>20</sup> Alvunger p 258

versus the nationalistic Sweden democrats. While several political parties have left church politics since the separation of church and state, prime minister Stefan Löfven declared in a highly debated interview a few months before the election: “The church will continue to be an interesting arena for the Social democratic party for the foreseeable future. I cannot see an end to this engagement.”<sup>21</sup>

The prime minister’s strategy seems to have worked out well, and in the election the Social democrats became the largest nomination group with a landslide victory. This also meant that the party solidified their hold over the former state church for at least the next four years. Therefore, the strategy for the Lutheran Church of Sweden continues – and it is not based on Christ alone, not on Scripture alone, but on politics alone.

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<sup>21</sup> Kajsa Söderberg ”Stefan Löfven: ’Alla präster ska viga samkönade par’” *Kyrkans Tidning* 22 June 2017