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The State of Swedish Secularity: A Review of the Academic Literature

Jennifer Rebekah Knox

BA in RELIGIOUS STUDIES (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)

MA in THEOLOGICAL STUDIES (Regent College)

PhD Candidate in THEOLOGY AND RELIGION (Durham University)

ABSTRACT

In popular thought, Sweden is considered one of the most secular countries in the world. In order to explore the veracity of this claim, I review the literature (from both the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries) about secularization in Sweden. From this research, I argue that though the discussion is nuanced, Sweden is still arguably a secular country. Before reviewing the literature, a brief overview of recent Swedish church history gives context to the discussion. This work then surveys the twentieth-century scholarship on European secularization, with a specific focus on references to Sweden. I conclude by reviewing the twenty-first-century literature: both non-Swedish and Swedish.

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INTRODUCTION

It is often assumed that Sweden is a completely secular country.¹ Sources from the twentieth century seem to support this conclusion. Yet, the average Swede still belongs to the church, participates in various life rites, and celebrates most Christian holidays. Many Swedes claim to be Christians—even if they say things such as “I am a Christian atheist.” This reality, combined with low levels of both religious participation and expressed beliefs, is often referred to as the “Swedish paradox.” This study examines the state of Christianity in Sweden, aiming to paint a picture of the current reality by reviewing the recent findings of researchers both inside and outside of Sweden. Though there may be some evidence of a religious resurgence or a “re-sacralization,” my argument is that Sweden is, in fact, a secular country that is on a trajectory of increasing secularization.

My aim is to provide context to the contemporary Swedish situation and to summarize the pre-2000 scholarship. This analysis will then be combined with a presentation of the twenty-first-century scholarship. My study should help to update the trajectory projected by scholars at the end of the twentieth century.

This study is valuable because research, particularly research concerning cultural trends and viewpoints, needs to be updated as culture and society shifts. Since the late twentieth century there have been significant changes in the ways cultures and societies function resulting from the accessibility of the internet, the advancement of technology, and globalization. (Though the connection between these changes and religiosity in Sweden will not be explored directly, they impact the understanding of religion in contemporary Swedish society and highlight the need for continued analysis of the data and new sociological findings.) Sweden also experienced a significant shift with the disestablishment of the national religion when the Church of Sweden was separated from the state in 2000.

The question of secularization is also significant to the church in Sweden. A deeper understanding of the current situation should inform and assist Christians regarding how to better interact with and talk about faith at work, at school, and in society at large. In my experience in Sweden over the past decade, there is a general

1 “Map: These Are the World’s Least Religious Countries,” *Washington Post*, accessed December 8, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/04/14/map-these-are-the-worlds-least-religious-countries/>.

paralysis within the free churches about how to interact with the surrounding secular culture and a fear of talking about faith or even identifying as a Christian. Society is divided into clear spheres: it is rare to talk about your family at work, to talk about your job while at school, and to talk about God outside of “religious” contexts. Even within the church there is a strong secular/sacred split—God has little to say about how you spend your money, what you do with your free time, or how you think about “non-spiritual” topics. My aim is to provide a thorough overview of the contemporary situation to aid anyone thinking about how to interact with “secular” Swedish culture. This study also makes a number of scholars’ work more accessible to Anglophone readers.

Though I risk plunging into technical academic debate, I must add the caveat that the historic sense of the word “secular” as anything that is of the world is the foundation to the concepts of “secularity” and “secularism.” These latter terms have co-opted the generic idea of “secular” and morphed it into a particular trend and ideology that has been most prevalent in the last few centuries. In the original sense, the “secular” is and always has been a part of human existence, and is a good and important part of the world. However, with the modern prioritization of the secular and the rejection of the sacred, concepts such as secularity, secularization, and secularism have taken form. These concepts will be more fully discussed in what follows, but it should be acknowledged that they in their own rights affect society and Christianity in both positive and negative ways. Because the Christian message is not about inner piety, but is about the whole of human existence and human flourishing, the effect that secularism has on Christians and modern society is an important concern. As such, when referring to the secular or secularity in this study the sense is more conceptually related to secularism, than to the secular in the original and simplest sense of the word.

Overview of this study

In Section One, I give an overview of the recent history of Christianity in modern Sweden, beginning in the twentieth century. Section Two is a review the late twentieth-century studies of secularization in Europe and Sweden. This review will focus on the work of David Martin and Grace Davie. In Section Three, I will rely on the work of twenty-first-century non-Swedish scholars. Many of these scholars ascribe to the position that Sweden is secular. The Swedish scholars presented in Section Four are less inclined to accept the assertion that Sweden is secular. This synthesis will result in a more nuanced and updated view of secularization in Sweden than that initially purported by Martin and Davie. I will conclude by reviewing what can be learned from all of these scholars and summarizing how the contemporary situation in Sweden is best understood today.

Definitions

The definition of terms such as “religion,” “secular,” and “secularization” are often debated. In brief, the definitions I will use are as follows:

Religion: I use the terms to encompass both organizational forms and personal beliefs or convictions. When I use the term “religion” it refers to the “historic Trinitarian orthodoxy” of the Christian religion.² Christianity has been the dominant religion in Sweden for about a millennium and their geographical location resulted in an almost homogenous population until the post-war era of the 1950s. Consequently, when people in Sweden hear the word “religion” they traditionally have thought “Christianity.”³ Although there has been an influx of Islam and other religious beliefs in Sweden in recent years, I must leave detailed consideration of these religions to others. More attention will be given to a discussion of non-traditional religions because many other scholars discuss the possibility the Swedish society is moving towards some “vague” religiosity, in opposition to arguments for secularization.

Secular: The term comes from the Latin meaning “belonging to the age” though in the present time it has come to encompass anything that has no religious or spiritual basis.⁴ I will use this term to mean “anything which is not directly impacted by or connected to religious belief or practice.” While the qualifier “directly” leaves room for interpretation, to define the secular as “that which is not impacted by religion” is too vague—in a historically Christian nation, religion affects all parts of society to some degree. By “directly impacted” I mean that there is an obvious association—whether this is seen in the clear connection to religious services, transcendent beliefs, or historically religious positions.

Secularization: Peter Berger has defined secularization as “the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbol.”⁵ Secularization does not necessitate an antagonism against religion, but is often seen in indifference.⁶ Secularization is considered to be a modern phenomenon, resulting in part from the industrialization of society.⁷ Berger asserts, and I agree, that some of the roots of secularization were inherent in

2 Craig M. Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World Or, Why It's Tempting to Live As If God Doesn't Exist* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 25.

3 David Thurfjell, *Det gudlösa folket: de postkristna svenskarna och religionen*, Molin & Sorgenfrei akademiska (Stockholm: Molin & Sorgenfrei, 2015), 72.

4 Gay, *The (Modern) World*, 18.

5 Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 107.

6 Richard F. Tomasson, “Religion Is Irrelevant in Sweden,” in *Religion in Radical Transition*, ed. Jeffrey K. Hadden (Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co., 1971), 112.

7 Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 109.

Protestantism.⁸ This is important when considering the Swedish situation because Sweden was not “Christian” for long before the Protestant Reformation and their peaceful adoption of Lutheranism over Catholicism. I am not concerned with the classical understanding of “secularization theory” and all its various implications. I will broaden my definition (when compared to Berger’s), focusing my study on the removal of various aspects of Swedish *society* and *belief* from the influence of “religion.” In Sweden, this most often means removal from the influence of the church and the Christian faith. This is a complicated issue because of the intrinsic nature of the union of Church and state in Sweden for almost a millennium.

8 Ibid., 124.

SECTION ONE

A Brief History of Christianity in Modern Sweden

Sweden is an old country. Our government consisted, for hundreds of years, of a strong centralized kingship. The church and the king controlled every corner. It is not odd that during the 1800s, strong movements grew which cherished freedom for the individual. We learned to read the Bible anew in the free church circles. The temperance movement wanted to switch out the flask for the book and in the beginning of the labor movement it was man's individual voice that initially was the most important issue. No one will again try to castrate the free people in our land, not the king, the nobility or the Church, breathes the individual in Sweden. We would rather bear a greater loneliness than let some authority oppress us, whether it is father, mother, priest or king. Every individual stands on their own legs and wants to be regarded as their own independent entity.⁹

The Twentieth Century

The early 1900s were characterized by social change. There was a rapid increase in industrialization and more people moved to the cities.¹⁰ Sweden was neutral in the First World War and the period between the wars was one of significant economic and industrial growth.¹¹ Around 1900, roughly four-fifths of the population lived in rural areas, but by 1970 only a tenth of the population still made their living from the land.¹² Women were first employed by the Church in the early 1900s,¹³ and gained suffrage in 1921.¹⁴ The population of Sweden exploded during the 1900s, from five million at the turn of the century to eight million by 1970.¹⁵

9 Henrik Berggren and Lars Trägårdh, *Är svensken människa?: gemenskap och oberoende i det moderna Sverige* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 2015), 12–13. Translation mine.

10 Martin Berntson, Bertil Nilsson, and Cecilia Wejryd, *Kyrka i Sverige: introduktion till svensk kyrkohistoria* (Skellefteå: Artos, 2012), 301.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., 270, 301.

13 Ibid., 270.

14 Ibid., 301.

15 Ibid.

The free churches had become established social institutions and the connection between them and secularization is a debated topic. Historian Carl Henrik Martling disagrees with the proposition that the free churches contributed to the decline in religiosity in the early twentieth century.¹⁶ He argues that the society was already secularizing as evidenced by the rapid decrease in Church attendance, but that the free churches were ready to compensate for that and to continue Christian work in Sweden.¹⁷ Joel Halldorf, scholar of Swedish evangelicalism, argues that the relationship between the evangelical awakenings (contributing to the formation of the free churches) and modernity is best understood neither as reactionary against nor contributing to secularization.¹⁸ He explains the apparent ambivalence of the movement towards modernity by suggesting that there was a mixture of acceptance of certain modern ideas, such as science, while rejecting strict anthropocentrism coming from the modern framework,¹⁹ resulting in a neutral position with regards to the process of secularization. What is clear is that Church of Sweden attendance was dropping in the early twentieth century from 17% of the population in 1900, to 5% in 1927 to 3% by 1950.²⁰ Free church membership hovered around 5% of the national population during this same period.²¹ Richard F. Tomasson, whose academic publishing focuses on the Nordic nations, notes that, “The traditional opposition between the free churches and the Church of Sweden declined to the vanishing point over the twentieth century in the face of the common threat of advanced secularization.”²² They softened towards each other in the midst of growing secularization that opposed them both.²³

Pentecostalism arrived in Sweden in the midst of this general drop in Church attendance.²⁴ Though Pentecostalism started within the Baptist Church around 1907, by 1913 it became its own movement.²⁵ This movement multiplied in a short span of time and by 1940 there were upwards of 80,000 members throughout Sweden.²⁶ It was one of the largest free church denominations in Sweden within decades of its arrival.²⁷ In Sweden, Pentecostalism has often mixed with prosperity

16 Carl Henrik Martling, *Svensk kyrka: en historia* (Skellefteå: Artos, 2008), 263.

17 Ibid.

18 Joel Halldorf, “Den evangelikala väckelsen och moderniteten,” *Theofilos* 5, no. 1 (2013): 27.

19 Ibid., 28.

20 Berndt Gustafsson, *Svensk kyrkohistoria*, Handböcker i teologi (Helsingborg: Bokförlaget Plus Ultra, 1973), 251.

21 Eva M. Hamberg, “Christendom in Decline: The Swedish Case,” in *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000*, ed. Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 49.

22 Richard F. Tomasson, “How Sweden Became So Secular,” *Scandinavian Studies* 74, no. 1 (2002): 68.

23 Martling, *Svensk kyrka*, 316.

24 Berntson, Nilsson, and Wejryd, *Kyrka i Sverige*, 312.

25 Gustafsson, *Svensk kyrkohistoria*, 247.

26 Berntson, Nilsson, and Wejryd, *Kyrka i Sverige*, 313.

27 Ibid., 340.

theology.²⁸ The Word of Life Church in Uppsala, at one point the church with the largest attendance in the country, is a prime example of this. Today, there are aspects of Pentecostalism in all of the free churches.

The functioning of the Church of Sweden was increasingly politicized in the twentieth century. In the early 1900s, the Social Democrats argued that the Church of Sweden should be abolished and that religion was private and each citizen could practice as they desired.²⁹ Starting in the 1930s, the political party system was built into the Church;³⁰ in practice, this meant that the Church became a part of the welfare state and was run by politicians.³¹ This system continues today, and since the 1980s, there has been more distinctive evidence of party politics in the Church elections.³² It was not until 1951 that true religious freedom was granted and Swedes were allowed to leave the State Church without joining some other denomination.³³ This religious freedom did not uncouple the Church of Sweden from state however; it remained the official national Church until 2000.³⁴

Discussions about the continued relationships between the Church and the state characterized the second half of the twentieth century.³⁵ One key figure in this discussion was Ingmar Hedenius, a professor of practical philosophy, who published his seminal work *Tro och Vetande [Faith and Knowing]* in 1949. There were many subsequent discussions and debates which undermined Christianity among Swedish intellectuals.³⁶ Membership in the Church of Sweden went from 97% in 1970 to 82.9% in 2000 to 77% in 2005.³⁷ Between 1975 and 2000, the Roman Catholic Church's membership more than doubled and the Orthodox and Oriental Churches had almost doubled.³⁸ During this period all the free churches except for one, the Evangelical Free Church, decreased in membership, and even its increased membership was insignificant.³⁹ Since January 1, 2000, the Church and state have been separate, though the Church of Sweden is still privileged over other churches and religions.⁴⁰

28 Simon L. Coleman, "America Loves Sweden," in *Religion and the Transformation of Capitalism: Comparative Approaches*, ed. Richard H. Roberts (London: Routledge, 1995), 167-169. Prosperity theology, in short, is the theological position which has also been called the "health and wealth gospel." It suggests that all who follow Jesus will be giving material blessing.

29 Berntson, Nilsson, and Wejryd, *Kyrka i Sverige*, 325, 345.

30 Martling, *Svensk kyrka*, 289.

31 Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 229.

32 Martling, *Svensk kyrka*, 289.

33 Berntson, Nilsson, and Wejryd, *Kyrka i Sverige*, 325.

34 Martling, *Svensk kyrka*, 302.

35 Berntson, Nilsson, and Wejryd, *Kyrka i Sverige*, 329.

36 Ibid., 333.

37 Martling, *Svensk kyrka*, 317.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid., 318.

40 Berntson, Nilsson, and Wejryd, *Kyrka i Sverige*, 367.

In summary, the twentieth century saw rapid decrease in both the State Church and free church membership. Pentecostalism arrived and impacted the religious landscape through its teaching and ideas, but this did not contribute to a sharp increase in religiosity or renewed church membership. Rather, it influenced what already existed, becoming incorporated into a variety of established denominations. The Social Democrats promoted secularization, privatizing and marginalizing the place of religion in the public square. The second half of the century saw a sharp increase in secularization at both the institutional and individual levels, which will be discussed in greater detail in the coming sections.

Contemporary Sweden

Though the twenty-first century is still young, it is worth noting the reality of Christianity in Sweden since the year 2000. While a majority of the Swedish population still belongs to the Church of Sweden, what that means about the nation's religiosity or secularity is much debated, as will be evidenced in the rest of this work.⁴¹ Attendance at Church of Sweden services is less than five percent in any given week.⁴² There has been a significant decrease in number of baptisms and confirmations, as well as Church weddings and burials over the last decades.⁴³ By 2008, substantial immigration from non-Nordic nations resulted in over ten percent of the population being born outside of Swedish borders by 2008.⁴⁴ While interesting, the precise impact of this wave of immigration (and subsequent influx and influence of other religions) on the question of secularization falls outside the scope of my study. Today, the approximately five percent of the population who belong to the various free churches tend to be much more engaged in the life of the church than those who are members of the Church of Sweden.⁴⁵

In concluding this very brief historical overview, I note some general trends from the whole of Swedish church history, highlighting its distinctives when compared with the history of the church in other European nations. From the earliest arrival of Christianity around 1000 it has been unclear whether there was ever strong commitment to the official Church, whether Catholic or Lutheran. There is significant uncertainty about the strength of Swedes' religious convictions, and in some sense there have been aspects of secularity present throughout their history. There was initial resistance to Christianity and drawn-out period of conversion.

41 Ibid., 345.

42 Hugh McLeod, "Introduction," in *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750-2000*, ed. Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3.

43 Martling, *Svensk kyrka*, 317-318.

44 Berntson, Nilsson, and Wejryd, *Kyrka i Sverige*, 345.

45 Irving Palm and Jan Trost, "Family and Religion in Sweden," in *Family, Religion, and Social Change in Diverse Societies*, ed. Sharon K. Houseknecht and Jerry G. Pankhurst (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 114.

However, the post-Reformation era consists of waves of other, conviction-driven, movements: Pietism, the Moravians, the awakening movements, the free churches, and the success of Pentecostalism which all suggests that a portion of the populace had strong religious convictions throughout large periods of Swedish history. Whether or not there was strong affiliation with the majority religion at various periods in history, religious change and transition in Sweden lacks the violence which was pervasive in the rest of Europe. There has been a close, and peaceable, relationship between Church and state throughout most of the Church's existence resulting in an intertwining of national identity, politics, religion, and tradition. All of these factors contribute to the nature of secularization in Sweden, and complicate any discussion of that process.

This, then, is the background picture over and against which I will evaluate secularization in Sweden. Swedish history is not characterized by strong religiosity, yet, as will be shown in the following sections, there is a general consensus that the twentieth century saw a sharp increase in secularization. I am concerned with examining if secularity increased in the last one hundred years and exploring the more contentious issue of whether it is still increasing today.

SECTION TWO

Review of Key Elements of Twentieth-Century Scholarship

In this section, I summarize the work of two key thinkers from twentieth-century scholarship on secularization in Sweden. This section focuses on David Martin and Grace Davie, two non-Swedish authors in an attempt to understand various “outsider” perspectives. My aim is to provide a general understanding of the older non-Swedish perspective on secularization in Sweden, which can then be updated by the discussion in the following sections.

The two scholars crucial to laying the groundwork for a discussion of European and Swedish secularization are David Martin and Grace Davie. Both began their academic writing on the topic during the years following the introduction of the secularization thesis, making them early contributors to the discussion. Unlike Peter Berger whose focus was global, Martin and Davie focused the discussion on Europe and the differences national religious heritage had upon the discussion. David Martin is a British sociologist who wrote one of the quintessential books on secularization: *A General Theory of Secularization*. This seminal work was published in 1978, and I will focus on it and his revision, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory*, published in 2005. Grace Davie, another British sociologist, has taken special interest in the differences between British and Scandinavian secularities. Her relevant work was published from 1990 to 2002. In addition to her own work, I will consider the book she co-authored with Peter Berger and Effie Fokas in 2008, *Religious America, Secular Europe?: A Theme and Variations*. In my conclusion, I will make passing reference to other scholars’ work to complement Martin and Davie and to provide a broader understanding of the general assessment of secularization in Sweden prior to and around the turn of the twenty-first century.

David Martin - Influence of Religious History on the Secularization Process

David Martin's seminal work, *A General Theory of Secularization*, sketches five patterns of secularization in the West, one of which is the Lutheran/Nordic pattern.⁴⁶ Characteristic of this pattern is the lack of political or spiritual revolution in the Lutheran lands.⁴⁷ This lack is unique given the significant upheaval and conflict over religion experienced in the majority of Western nations.⁴⁸ Those in the Nordic countries lack a "crucial historical event," and as a result, they experienced a particular type of religious development.⁴⁹

Martin notes that the Lutheran pattern lacks external dissent against the established Church, but is characterized by internal dissent evidenced in Pietism and Romanticism.⁵⁰ Strong Pietistic influences are one of the unique features of Nordic Christianity.⁵¹ Martin argues that Pietism slowed the rate of secularization in the Lutheran nations, contra the general understanding that Pietism privatized religion and thus facilitated secularization.⁵²

According to Martin, the Protestant nature of the State Churches in the Nordic countries allowed the Church to adapt to changes in the political situation, giving space for individualism and avoiding large-scale opposition and conflict.⁵³ In Scandinavia, "we find initially a much stronger state church system with pluralism operative only with respect to 'internal' dissent and (rather later) quite weak free churches."⁵⁴ Martin suggests that the Scandinavia pattern and Anglican patterns have much in common.⁵⁵ Grace Davie, and many other scholars, echo this idea. Individualism, a key aspect of Protestant Christianity, is often viewed as an important factor in secularization and the autonomy of the individual had the by-product of preventing the Church of Sweden from being elevated above the state.⁵⁶ The Church and state are peer organizations, both made up of a group of autonomous individuals. This equality facilitates the Church's adaptation to the state as the state goes through various transitions.⁵⁷ Martin concludes that in Scandinavia, "since religion was a matter of cultural sentiment not a metaphysic or an ecclesiastical theocracy it remained a tolerable repository of national and historic feeling, which remains expressed for example in a very high practice of the *rites de*

46 David Martin, *A General Theory of Secularization* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 8.

47 *Ibid.*, 4–5.

48 *Ibid.*

49 *Ibid.*, 4.

50 *Ibid.*, 7.

51 *Ibid.*, 8.

52 *Ibid.*

53 *Ibid.*, 23.

54 *Ibid.*, 33.

55 *Ibid.*, 23.

56 *Ibid.*, 33.

57 *Ibid.*, 34.

passage.”⁵⁸ He demonstrates how pluralism and participation correlate; showing that both are very low in the Scandinavian nations, with attendance at a maximum of five percent on any given Sunday in what is a predominantly monopolistic religious sphere.⁵⁹

Martin comments on the Swedish situation:

As is well known, Sweden is the least practicing of all western societies. The decline has been continuous ... At the same time the paradoxical relation of religion to the axial points of life is also clear: over 90 per cent are confirmed, baptized, and buried by the church; and ecclesiastical weddings *increased* in the 1960s from 64 per cent to 84 per cent of the total; presumably as an aspect of family ritual.⁶⁰

He notes that the Scandinavian countries are characterized by the variety found *within* the State Churches in parish particularism, a trend discussed in my own overview of Swedish church history.⁶¹ In spite of this variety, one almost-universal characteristic is the secular attitude of those belonging to the Church of Sweden.⁶² Martin says that this has allowed the Church to retain its role as a “service station” in the life of the populace, providing ceremonial rites of passage without necessitating religious devotion or practice.⁶³ This decline has left the Church as nothing more than a “voluntary association,”⁶⁴ akin to a football club or the Red Cross.

Martin continues his discussion, suggesting that the industrialization of society has impacted religion throughout all of the West, including Scandinavia.⁶⁵ He suggests that the first phase of industrialization resulted in voluntary associations⁶⁶—giving people options about where to spend their time and beginning the breakup of sociologist Peter Berger’s proposed “sacred canopy.”⁶⁷ Martin argues that the second phase undermined the typical societal models and has resulted in apathy towards official religion, and over time towards the voluntary associations themselves.⁶⁸ Contemporary people feel no need to be involved in or committed to anything besides their job, and even that can be quit if something more appealing presents itself.

Martin then discusses European culture and national identity, organizing this discussion around “the relation of religion to national awareness ... power ... [and] the tension between elite power in the nation state and independent structure of

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid., 35.

60 Ibid., 65.

61 Ibid., 68.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid., 71.

64 Ibid., 76.

65 Ibid., 91.

66 Ibid.

67 Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*.

68 Martin, *A General Theory*, 91–92.

religious loyalty or criticism.”⁶⁹ Regarding Swedish religion and national awareness, he says that “Sweden’s national myth became coextensive with the triumphs of its Protestant conquering hero, Gustavus [Vasa]” because Gustav (also Gustavus) Vasa both united the nation and ushered in Protestantism.⁷⁰ In other words, the lack of external dissent and the concurrence of the formation of the nation and the rise of Protestantism resulted in Swedish national identity being wedded to the Lutheran Church. Later, internal competition and dissent lead to elitism, elevating religion above the purview of the majority of Swedes, in the Scandinavian Churches which alienated the average person and resulted in low levels of religious engagement.⁷¹ This lack of external dissent combined with elitism gave rise to a unique apathy towards religious belief and practice in Sweden, which is more extreme than in countries where the nature of religious faith was more contested.⁷²

In conclusion, Martin asserts “Scandinavia is the area least tinged by religious practice.”⁷³ This lack of practice is demonstrated by low levels of interaction with the church, while a high percentage still say they believe in God (60 percent of the population) and prayer is still common.⁷⁴ Summing up, Martin says, “in one or two Protestant countries, Sweden, for example, the religious element is largely deprived of any tincture of commitment.”⁷⁵ He comments that “[f]ree churches are differentiated from society as a whole and often related to relatively localized sectors of a differentiated social system.”⁷⁶ In essence, Martin is making the point that the free churches of Scandinavia are not significant factors when considering secularization and religiosity. Many Scandinavians remain national Church members, but are apathetic and uncommitted. Even the more vivacious free churches have little societal impact. For David Martin in *A General Theory of Secularization*, Scandinavia and Sweden are secular places.

In his second major work, a book of essays titled *On Secularization: Toward a Revised General Theory*, published after the split between state and Church in Sweden, Martin updates some of his earlier analysis. Rather than seeing secularization as an irreversible, autonomous process, he views it as “successive Christianizations followed or accompanied by recoils.”⁷⁷ It is through this lens that he writes his compilation of essays.

69 Ibid., 100.

70 Ibid., 101.

71 Ibid., 118.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid., 151.

74 Ibid., 153.

75 Ibid., 157–158.

76 Ibid., 284.

77 David Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2005), 3.

Building on his theory of the “Lutheran pattern,” Martin adds that because of the Lutheran emphasis on the priesthood of all believers, most of the religious orders were disestablished.⁷⁸ The removal of any official “sacred,” i.e. monastic, work allowed the state to have greater influence on the Church, and religious work became just one among many jobs a person could hold in society.⁷⁹ As countless scholars have observed, this resulted in unintentional secularization of the sacred, rather than the intended sacralization of the secular. In a broader assessment of this pattern, Martin says, almost thirty years after his initial analysis,

Once the Church was pre-eminent, and the main source of legitimation, whereas the Lutheran Church of today, while retaining the passive adherence of an apathetic majority, is now a voluntary organization appealing to people of a charitable and liberal disposition. Even the revivalism of the nineteenth century tended to peter out in the twentieth. *Adding a further gloss, one might say Scandinavia has moved from a communal and binding faith to an individual and optional spirituality.*⁸⁰

He says, again, that the emphasis on personal piety within Lutheranism opened the way for Pietism to have a significant impact in the Scandinavian countries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, adding that this emphasis later opened the way for Pentecostalism in the twentieth-century.⁸¹

Martin argues that rather than secularization being an all-encompassing theory of the inevitable trajectory of society, it is better seen as one possible outcome of modernity.⁸² Noting the unique nature of European secularization, he states, “Maybe secularization was so vigorous and penetrating in Western Europe precisely because Christianity had been so long intertwined with the structures of power and because the Enlightenment needed so strong a thrust to undermine the status quo.”⁸³ He says that it is in this post-Enlightenment context that Evangelicalism, seen in Sweden in the free churches, made progress in the modern, post-1960s era.⁸⁴ However, compared to Evangelicalism in other parts of the world, its impact was still minimal in Scandinavia.⁸⁵

Martin asserts that Western Europe is the most secular area in the modern world “with exposure both to classical modernity and to an élite tradition of militant secularity capable of reproducing itself among the masses.”⁸⁶ He notes that though

78 Ibid., 5.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid., 126. Emphasis mine.

81 Ibid., 144.

82 Ibid., 23.

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid., 33.

86 Ibid., 32.

Pentecostalism has made some inroads, it is inhibited by social democracy.⁸⁷ Thus Pentecostalism (and other forms of Evangelical Christianity) are not aberrations of modernity. Rather, given their character as voluntary associations, they fit within the modern societal model, and by extension into secularization.⁸⁸ For example, Swedish Pentecostalism often focuses on an individual's relationship to God, their feelings about him, and the material benefits of following God. Pentecostalism requires little submission to a higher or unifying authority making it a voluntary association. While an individual's personal relationship with God is important, modernity and secularization are characterized by: individualism, "this-worldly" focuses, and a lack of a unifying narrative for the non-voluntary aspects of life. In this way, Pentecostalism typifies modernity, and to some extent secularization, rather than being an opposing force.

Martin notes that even in secular environments people are looking for religious experiences, aiming to affect change in practical hardships or to deal with the struggles of their souls.⁸⁹ He argues that even this desire, like all other aspects of "religious culture" cannot be understood apart from political, intellectual, and national culture—they are fused together and so one should take care before assuming that desire for a religious experience is evidence of true religiosity.⁹⁰ Martin gives an example of these links in a discussion about Scandinavia, saying that the former colonizers (i.e. Sweden and Denmark) are more secular than the colonized nations (i.e. Norway, Finland and Iceland).⁹¹ Even their historic roles as the "colonizers" versus "colonized" made a difference in their secularization processes. For Martin, the monopoly of social democracy replaced the former religious hegemony as the defining meta-narrative in society.⁹² It is noteworthy that on a practical level little has changed in Scandinavian society though it has transitioned from being under the umbrella of religion to being under the umbrella of secularization.

Martin's recent assessment supports the notion that Sweden is secular and secularizing. He says, "Throughout Western Europe the secularizing process has accelerated since the 1960s, following the post-war plateau, and that has been evident above all in the mainstream churches."⁹³ He does not develop this argument much further. Though he agrees with Grace Davie, in her assertion that the British "believe without belonging" whereas the Scandinavians do the opposite.⁹⁴ Further discussion of these ideas will be included in the following summary of Davie's

87 Ibid., 31.

88 Ibid., 41.

89 Ibid., 54.

90 Ibid., 55.

91 Ibid., 61.

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid., 86.

94 Ibid.

work. In conclusion, Martin says “A Western atheist is still a Christian atheist, and the modes of ‘secular’ society such as attitudes to the outsider and the victim of the solitary witness tried and tested or the vulnerable innocent child under threat of political violence are recognizable mutations of Christian themes.”⁹⁵ In other words, he acknowledges that there are still remnants of the influence of Christianity in spite of pervasive secularity.

Effie Fokas, another sociologist of religion, provides a helpful analysis of Martin’s work. She writes, “Patterns of religion, and therefore secularization, vary markedly across Europe—a point universally recognized among scholars of religion, but by none more so than David Martin.”⁹⁶ Martin acknowledges the necessity of a nuanced understanding of secularization, but affirms its presence and progress in Scandinavia nonetheless. He even questions if modern spirituality is truly evidence of religion.

Grace Davie - Comparative Secularization between England and Sweden

Grace Davie has authored or co-authored several articles and books that are relevant to the question of secularization in Sweden. Rather than assessing her views in the order of publishing, I offer a general overview, while saving her 2015 article, “Studying Religion in the Nordic Countries: An External View” for the end of my discussion.⁹⁷ In the book that she co-authored with Peter Berger and Effie Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe?: A Theme and Variations*, in 2008, each author composed different sections of the book though all three endorsed its entirety.⁹⁸ I focus my analysis on the sections authored by Davie, noting where I am drawing on sections authored by Berger or Fokas. Though this book was not published until 2008, the majority of it was composed between 2001 and 2003 and thus is more closely related to twentieth, rather than twenty-first, century scholarship.⁹⁹

Though Davie does not deny that Europe is more secular than the rest of the world, the thrust of her argument is that it is more accurate to say that Europe is unchurched, rather than secular.¹⁰⁰ She notes that in the larger discussion of secularization, data used to examine levels of religious affiliation falls into two categories: “those concerned with feelings, experience, and the more numinous religious beliefs, and those that measure religious orthodoxy, ritual participation,

95 Ibid., 174.

96 Peter L. Berger, Grace Davie, and Effie Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe?: A Theme and Variations* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2008), 36.

97 Her 2017 article will be discussed in a later section.

98 Berger, Davie, and Fokas, *Secular Europe?*, 7.

99 Ibid., 1.

100 Grace Davie, *Europe: The Exceptional Case: Parameters of Faith in the Modern World* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2002), 5; Berger, Davie, and Fokas, *Secular Europe?*, 11.

and institutional attachment.”¹⁰¹ She uses the term “believing” to describe this first category and “belonging” to describe the second.¹⁰² Her writing is often concerned with exploring the differences between the two when examining the rate of decline of religion in a society.¹⁰³ She finds that surveys are helpful in measuring the level of both “believing” and “belonging” because “[s]urvey data show up the difference both on the levels of institutional behavior and of expressed opinion.”¹⁰⁴

Davie coined the phrase “believing without belonging” in her 1990 article, “Believing without Belonging: Is This the Future of Religion in Britain,” to describe the British situation.¹⁰⁵ In her analysis, the British are not becoming less religious, but their religious beliefs are being redirected away from the established Church.¹⁰⁶ She suggests that religious broadcasting, which increased in popularity in Britain in 1990, is a prime example of this.¹⁰⁷ Religious broadcasting communicated religious information without any concept of “belonging” attached to its consumption.¹⁰⁸ Though this article is concerned with Brits “believing without belonging,” Davie posits that the phrase can be reversed and used to describe the situation in the Scandinavian countries.¹⁰⁹ She says,

Comparison can, of course, be made with other countries in this respect. It may well be that a large part of West Europe displays a similar imbalance between these variables [those of “believing” and “belonging”] though the precise way in which this is formulated may vary considerably. In the Scandinavian countries, for example, there is – almost – a situation of belonging without believing. Nominal attachment to the State Churches persists, but such attachment implies neither particular belief nor regular practice.¹¹⁰

Others, such as Norwegian political scientist Pål Ketil Botvar, affirm her analysis that the phrase “belonging not believing” describes the general state of the Church in Western Europe, and in Scandinavia.¹¹¹

101 Grace Davie, “Europe: The Exception That Proves the Rule?,” in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Peter L. Berger (Washington, D.C.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1999), 67.

102 Grace Davie, “Believing without Belonging: Is This the Future of Religion in Britain?,” *Social Compass* 37, no. 4 (December 1, 1990): 455.

103 Ibid.

104 Berger, Davie, and Fokas, *Secular Europe?*, 11.

105 Davie, “Believing without Belonging,” 455.

106 Ibid., 462.

107 Ibid., 466.

108 Ibid.

109 Ibid., 467.

110 Ibid.

111 Pål Ketil Botvar, “Belonging without Believing? The Norwegian Religious Profile Compared with the British One,” in *Religion and Modernity: Modes of Co-Existence*, ed. Pål Repstad (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1996), 119.

In lieu of calling Europe a secular continent, Davie coined the term “vicarious religion” to describe the European situation.¹¹² People are willing to keep the Church alive through paying taxes, which perpetuates their cultural heritage, while for the most part allowing others to attend services and practice religion on their behalf.¹¹³ Peter Berger refers to Davie’s term “vicarious religion” saying, “This means that one does not want to be personally involved with the church, but wants it to be there for others or for the society as a whole.”¹¹⁴ Effie Fokas says that “vicarious religion” can be seen in a variety of ways: when clergy and church attendants perform ritual acts on others’ behalf, believe on others’ behalf, live moral lives on others’ behalf, and when they provide the place for debating unresolved issues in modern society.¹¹⁵ Fokas, in agreement with Davie, uses this concept of “vicarious religion” to question whether Europe is as secular as it seems.¹¹⁶ Davie suggests that one embodiment of “vicarious religion” is seen in the Nordic context through the willingness of the overwhelming majority to pay the Church tax.¹¹⁷ Other examples are the continuation of baptisms and church marriages while other church-related statistics are declining.¹¹⁸ It is interesting to note that in spite of Berger, Davie and Fokas’ hesitancy to see Europe as secularized, when Berger creates an analogy he makes Swedes the paradigm of “secularized” people.¹¹⁹

Davie returns to a broader discussion of secularization in Europe saying, “At one extreme can be found the Protestant cultures of Northern Europe, with their tolerant and well-funded state churches, co-existing with low levels of religious practice and only moderate levels of religious belief (Sweden especially epitomizes these characteristics).”¹²⁰ She argues that this decline is unique to Europe and is grounded in the historical relationship between Church and state.¹²¹ For Davie, the situation in the Scandinavian countries is unique because religious practice is declining much faster there than in the rest of Europe.¹²² Yet, she argues that there is still a positive relationship between the populace and the State Churches, as evidenced by the high levels of membership.¹²³ Davie agrees with Martin that the history of a country and their Church-state relationship affects the secularization

112 Davie, *The Exceptional Case*, 19.

113 Ibid.

114 Berger, Davie, and Fokas, *Secular Europe?*, 15.

115 Ibid., 40.

116 Ibid., 39.

117 Grace Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe: A Memory Mutates* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 39.

118 Ibid., 71–73.

119 Berger, Davie, and Fokas, *Secular Europe?*, 12.

120 Davie, “The Exception That Proves the Rule?,” 75.

121 Ibid., 78.

122 Davie, *The Exceptional Case*, 11–12.

123 Ibid.

process.¹²⁴ She says that European Churches fit into the structure of pre-modern society, but with the slow process of modernization and the advent of new ideologies, such as Enlightenment thinking, European Churches became irrelevant and inadaptable.¹²⁵ Davie notes that in the Protestant countries, including Lutheran Scandinavia, the Churches remained prominent in the midst of a secularized society by adapting various “characteristics of Lutheranism ... [in]to the secular sphere in the form of a social welfare economy.”¹²⁶ One example of this adaptation is the collective nature of the welfare state and its care for the poor and sick. Another is the elevation of all work, as opposed to placing higher value on the “sacred” occupations, which resulted in a devaluing of those same sacred occupations, and over time led to a marginalizing of religion itself.

Davie agrees with Martin that another contributing factor in European secularity is the lack of voluntary association with the Church—both historically and in the contemporary period.¹²⁷ As Fokas phrases it, “Populations ‘belonged’ to a church if they lived in a particular place; indeed in many respects, they still do ... [this tendency is present] in the Lutheran churches of the Nordic countries ... [where] national churches are a source of pride for their populations and remain implicit markers of identity.”¹²⁸ Davie says, “Membership of the national church, denoted by baptism, remains despite everything a central plank of Nordic identity.”¹²⁹ She says that with the loss of the official State Church and the shift in individual identity, religion has moved from the category of “obligation to consumption.”¹³⁰ Rather than choosing another form of religious practice, most Europeans are becoming passive about their religious affiliation,¹³¹ remaining members in the national Churches, but doing little else.

Despite these findings, Davie will not concede that Europe is as secular as it seems.¹³² Davie argues that in Europe a decline in “religious practice and *strictly Christian* beliefs ... does not lead either to a parallel loss in religious sensitivity ... or to the widespread adoption of secular alternatives.”¹³³ Per Davie, the founders of sociology posited that religion would cease to exist over time and thus “the re-emergence of religion in public life in Europe, and indeed anywhere else, was not anticipated.”¹³⁴ Her characterization of the situation is that, in Europe, a secu-

124 Berger, Davie, and Fokas, *Secular Europe?*, 130.

125 Davie, *The Exceptional Case*, 142.

126 Ibid.

127 Ibid., 36.

128 Berger, Davie, and Fokas, *Secular Europe?*, 25.

129 Ibid., 116.

130 Davie, *The Exceptional Case*, 147.

131 Ibid., 139.

132 Berger, Davie, and Fokas, *Secular Europe?*, 125.

133 Davie, *The Exceptional Case*, 8.

134 Berger, Davie, and Fokas, *Secular Europe?*, 54.

lar elite directs an indifferent, but officially “Christian,” populations who will again practice religion if the situation warrants.¹³⁵ In part, this return to religion is seen through the influx of Islam and the questions it raises—as well as their responses.¹³⁶ Islam is growing throughout Western Europe, but more detailed exploration of this topic lies outside of the scope of this study. Noticing this “resurgence” of religion, Davie and others began referring to contemporary Europe as being “post-secular.”¹³⁷ Davie’s concept of “post-secular” is that society is moving past a comparatively “secular” era and into an era that involves a mixture of religion and secularity.¹³⁸ However, even with the increased presence of Islam in Western Europe, I argue in what follows that seeing Europe as post-secular may be premature.

Finally, Davie wrote a relevant article in 2015 entitled “Studying Religion in the Nordic Countries: An External View.” In this article, Davie asserts that religion is returning to the public square throughout Western Europe, including in the Nordic countries, though levels of religious practice are still decreasing.¹³⁹ “It is abundantly clear that indices of religious activity are falling ... , but—simultaneously—religion as such is rising in terms of public attention ... religion is becoming more rather than less prominent ... including in those [societies] in the North which traditionally have been considered some of the most secular.”¹⁴⁰ Much of her experience is with the Swedish situation and that bias is present in the article.¹⁴¹ She attributes the increased amount of public discussion to the influx of people from other faiths.¹⁴² Davie affirms the appropriation of her phrase “belonging without believing” by various Nordic scholars, and notes that this has described the Nordic situation for most of the twentieth century.¹⁴³ She admits that “the Nordic countries appear as some of the most secular in the world on conventional measures of religiousness.”¹⁴⁴ She says, “One point, however, remains abundantly clear: the religious scene in the Nordic countries is changing fast. All five countries are not only becoming more secular, they are also becoming more diverse.”¹⁴⁵ Though this statement in part contradicts her earlier assertion that there is a resurgence of religion, it is an acknowledgement that the situation is complicated and requires a nuanced understanding. She says of the Nordic countries, “Seculariza-

135 Ibid., 67.

136 Ibid., 131.

137 Ibid., 137.

138 Ibid.

139 Grace Davie, “Studying Religion in the Nordic Countries: An External View,” *Nordic Journal of Religion & Society* 28, no. 2 (July 2015): 102.

140 Ibid.

141 Ibid., 101.

142 Ibid., 102.

143 Ibid., 105.

144 Ibid., 106.

145 Ibid., 107.

tion undoubtedly continues alongside increasingly intense debate regarding the place of religion in a modern democracy—as indeed is the case right across West Europe.”¹⁴⁶ The question is whether this debate is evidence of an opposing force to secularization or if it is an intellectual exercise with no actual connection to increased religiosity.

In summary, Grace Davie has coined many phrases which describe the Scandinavian situation: “belonging without believing,” “vicarious religion,” and the shift from “obligation to consumption.” She has studied the British and Nordic situations in depth, comparing and contrasting them throughout her career. She agrees with Martin that a nation’s history must be considered when looking at their current social climate and religiosity. She concludes that despite apparent secularization in the Nordic nations, labeling them as secular might be premature. She prefers descriptions such as “unchurched” or “not traditionally religious” to “secularized.” In the same way that Martin’s work provides a benchmark analysis referenced by countless sociologists in the West, Davie’s work serves a similar function for scholars studying secularization or religious change in the Nordic nations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the scholars writing prior to the turn of the twenty-first century were undecided about how secular Sweden actual was. This is exemplified in the works of Martin and Davie. Martin highlighted the impact that a nation’s religious history has on its process of secularization, and concluded that Scandinavia was secular. Davie argues that Swedes were part of the Church in great numbers, but though their level of belief was more questionable she was unwilling to call them “secularized.” The scope of this study precludes in-depth discussion of other scholars. But, from my reading, it can be said that these scholars held a variety of perspectives both in favor of and opposing the idea of secularization.¹⁴⁷ There is a list of factors that various scholars argue have contributed to the current situation in Scandinavia: population shifts, industrialization, the social changes of the 1960s, unity between religious membership and national identity, the influence of social democracy, and the rise of new religious movements and the influx of those from Islamic nations. Other factors such as the early indifference in Scandinavia, questions of whether they were ever more than nominally religious, the continuance of state control of religion in spite of official religious freedom, and discussion of whether the Churches themselves have secularized are important aspects when

146 *Ibid.*, 109.

147 Key among them are Andrew Greeley, Adolf Keller, Richard F. Tomasson, Hugh McLeod, Roy Wallis, Steve Bruce, Callum Brown, Robin Gill, Rodney Stark, Laurence Iannaccone, John T.S. Madeley, Simon L. Coleman, Peter Beyer, Andrew S. Grenville, Irving Palm, Jan Trost, Jeffrey Cox, Yves Lambert, Jim McDermott, and Bryan R. Wilson. Their relevant works are listed in my bibliography.

considering secularization in Scandinavia. What is clear is that the question of how secular Sweden is is far from simple. This assortment of factors has contributed to much debate about whether these nations are secularized or whether terms such as “religious change” or “resacralisation” better describe the situation. Having reviewed the key elements of the scholarly opinion at the close of the twentieth century, I now turn to more recent analyses.

SECTION THREE

Twenty-First-Century Non-Swedish Scholarship

In the remainder of this study, I examine the twenty-first-century perspectives on secularization in Sweden. Before proceeding to a survey of Swedish authors, I will review a few non-Scandinavian authors who have written about the topic of secularization in recent years. This section and the next focus on scholars' main and recurring question: is Sweden, and Europe in a broader sense, experiencing secularization or is the current reality better described as religious change? By religious change, scholars mean that religion is as common today as it has been in previous eras, but that contemporary expressions no longer fit into traditional religious categories. According to my definition of religion, this could be viewed as having religious belief without religious practice. Undergirding this primary question are several related questions whose answers contribute to our overall understanding: What is the best way to describe the current situation regarding religiosity in Sweden (and in Western Europe)? Can it be argued that people today are as religious as before but in a non-traditional manner? The merits or issues with secularization theory aside, has any secularization occurred? It is helpful to remember, at the outset that as Bryan Wilson, a key secularization theorist, says, "The completely secularized society has not yet existed."¹⁴⁸ When considering the Swedish situation, the question is not whether it is or has ever been completely secularized, but rather if we see evidence of continued secularization, and if so, to what degree?

Arguments Supporting the "Sweden is Secular" Position

Based on data from the World Values Study and the European Values Study, Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel developed a culture map to chart various cultural values and compare countries. They looked at traditional versus secular values and survival versus self-expression values and plotted results on an x-y axis. Sweden is consistently located in the furthest top-right position indicating that it holds

148 Bryan R. Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society: Fifty Years On*, ed. Steve Bruce, Reissue edition. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 212.

extreme secular values and self-expression values together.¹⁴⁹ This suggests that, at least on a comparative scale, Sweden is very secular.

Phil Zuckerman's *Society without God* explores the questions above. Zuckerman is a sociologist from the United States who specializes in the sociology of secularity. He spent over a year living in Denmark and while there conducted 150 formal interviews with both Swedes and Danes. He asked each interviewee about their beliefs and lives in these two nations which are often considered to be among the world's most secular societies.¹⁵⁰ According to Zuckerman, many studies of secularization "don't examine secular life as it is actually lived by nonbelieving men and women in the here and now, or the nuances of the secular worldviews of actual individuals who are irreligious."¹⁵¹ This focus on the individual makes his study unique.

Zuckerman summarizes his findings, stating:

For the vast majority of Danes and Swedes that I spoke with, when they said they were Christian, they simply meant it in terms of cultural heritage and history, and when I asked them what the designation "Christian" meant to them, they almost invariably all stressed the same things: being kind to others, taking care of the poor and sick, and being a good and moral person. They almost never mentioned God, Jesus or the Bible in their explanation of Christian identity.¹⁵²

Further, their level of belief in some form of god, whether Christian or not, seemed to be rather insignificant.¹⁵³ Zuckerman goes on to say:

Of course, there are nonbelievers in every society, even the most fundamentalist. And yet only in Scandinavia is non-belief considered normal, regular, mainstream, common. Thus, to be a nonbeliever is one thing, but to be a nonbeliever in a society that thinks nothing of nonbelief and considers it typical and normative—that is something sociologically significant.¹⁵⁴

He consolidates the results from both Sweden and Denmark into one study, arguing that they are as similar as two different countries can be—their languages are "mutually intelligible," they have similar histories, and similar political, economic, and legal structures.¹⁵⁵

Zuckerman concludes that there are three main trends in Scandinavian secularity: "reticence/reluctance" to discuss religion, "benign indifference" towards religious topics, and "utter obliviousness" from a minority who had never thought about such

149 "WVS Database," accessed May 18, 2021, <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp?CM-SID=Findings>.

150 Phil Zuckerman, *Society Without God: What the Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us about Contentment* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 3.

151 *Ibid.*, 96.

152 *Ibid.*, 10.

153 *Ibid.*, 4.

154 *Ibid.*, 14.

155 *Ibid.*, 24.

questions.¹⁵⁶ These three together show how little interest there is in religion and provide ample evidence of secularity. Many people stated that religion was a private matter, but when pressed about what they meant Zuckerman found that “religion wasn’t really so much a private, personal issue, but rather, a *non-issue*.”¹⁵⁷ This all led him to conclude that Denmark and Sweden are indeed very secular.¹⁵⁸

When attempting to explore why these nations are so strongly secular, Zuckerman notes the presence of their national Lutheran Churches, mean they conform to Rodney Stark’s model of secularity which argues that lazy monopolies result in religious disinterest among the populace.¹⁵⁹ There are two other explanatory theories Zuckerman finds plausible. The first is that the level of physical security in Sweden and Denmark contributes to secularity.¹⁶⁰ The second is that statistically women are more religious than men worldwide and as a significant number of women entered the Scandinavian workforce, they had less time for religion. As a result, their religiosity—and thus the nation’s—decreased, which accelerated the secularization process.¹⁶¹ For Zuckerman, other contributing factors to Sweden’s secularization are the low need for “cultural defense” since these nations were ethnically homogenous until recent decades, the high level of education, and the influence of the Social Democrats throughout much of the 1900s.¹⁶²

Looking at Scandinavian history, Zuckerman notes that though it is hard to tell how committed people were to religion in the past; it is possible that Sweden and Denmark were never deeply religious.¹⁶³ Even if they have never been nations of deep conviction, according to Zuckerman, Sweden and Denmark are indisputably secular and have been experiencing a clear decline in religiosity since the advent of sociology in the 1900s.¹⁶⁴ He concludes that being “Christian” in Scandinavia is much like being a modern Jew—that one participates in cultural religion defined as “the phenomenon of people identifying with historically religious traditions, and engaging in ostensibly religious practices, without truly believing in the supernatural content thereof.”¹⁶⁵ The cultural religion of Swedes and Danes is manifested in their willingness to participate in religious “life rites,” their positive view of the Bible, and their reluctance to say that they are atheists even if they do not believe in God.¹⁶⁶

156 *Ibid.*, 97–109.

157 *Ibid.*, 102.

158 *Ibid.*, 111.

159 *Ibid.*, 111–112.

160 *Ibid.*, 115–117.

161 *Ibid.*

162 *Ibid.*, 117–119.

163 *Ibid.*, 120–121.

164 *Ibid.*, 126.

165 *Ibid.*, 154–155. Original italics removed.

166 *Ibid.*, 161–162.

Zuckerman stands in strong contrast to many of the Swedish authors that will be discussed in the next section—both in his methods and his conclusion. Using a more in-depth interview model, he was able to question people further about their answers. He concluded that in Sweden and Denmark there is a general disinterest in religion and a thorough-going secularity. Many Swedish scholars argue that the trend of participation in life rites while expressing personal indifference indicates a religious change (which, according to them, has been incorrectly interpreted as secularization) or they suggest a more nuanced position regarding the current situation rather than arguing, as Zuckerman does, that Sweden has undergone secularization.

Richard F. Tomasson, another non-Scandinavian author who spent significant time studying Scandinavian society, argues that Sweden “became so secular” over time.¹⁶⁷ He describes the attitude of most Swedes as “indifference bounded by a vague feeling that the Church usually stands for decent values.”¹⁶⁸ Tomasson notes that in Sweden only the Pentecostal Church was able to maintain its membership levels from 1960 to 2000, and that there is no cultural support for belief in something higher, much less God.¹⁶⁹ He acknowledges that there is little “active atheism;” the percentage of atheists is less than the percentage of those he says express “active piety.”¹⁷⁰ Tomasson argues that Pietism and Enlightenment rationality were significant contributors to Swedish secularity, while noting that Swedish Lutheranism has never been a vivacious religious form.¹⁷¹ He asserts that the Church itself was secularized by 1850.¹⁷² The question of the secularization of the Church is interesting and will be discussed by other scholars in this section, and the next. Tomasson concludes by suggesting that there are six main factors contributing to the secular nature of contemporary Sweden: the autonomy and lack of oppression throughout their 1000 year history, religious homogeneity, the Church’s alignment with conservative values during modernization around 1900 (thus alienating progressives), the academic and rational nature of Swedish Lutheranism, the rise of value nihilism in the mid-1900s, and the influence of the Social Democrats and their active implementation of secularization.¹⁷³ In summary, Tomasson has no problem asserting that Sweden is secular without seeking to qualify his position.

167 Tomasson, “Sweden Became Secular,” 61.

168 *Ibid.*, 64.

169 *Ibid.*, 68.

170 *Ibid.*, 64.

171 *Ibid.*, 76.

172 *Ibid.*, 77.

173 *Ibid.*, 83–85.

Proponents of Differentiated Secularization

There are a few other scholars who agree that the Swedish situation evidences secularization, though they begin to talk about it in terms of about multiple, or differentiated, secularities. One, Alfred Stepan, a political scientist, divides up patterns of secularization in Europe, much as David Martin did, and classifies Scandinavia as part of the “established religion pattern.”¹⁷⁴ He notes that while the Church of Sweden could prevent religious pluralism in the pre-democratic era; this is no longer the case.¹⁷⁵ The Church of Sweden remains a societal establishment and it co-exists with the modern welfare state which is inclusive of all religions, though the national Church is still treated preferentially.¹⁷⁶ Norwegian-based theologians Rosemarie van den Breemer and Tyygve Wyller, and Spanish sociologist Jose Casanova explored these questions alongside other scholars in their co-edited book *Secular and Sacred?: The Scandinavian Case of Religion in Human Rights, Law and Public Space*.¹⁷⁷ They begin from the assumption that there are multiple varieties of secularity.¹⁷⁸ They acknowledge the ambiguity of the situation and suggest (with some disagreement from contributing authors) that the contemporary situation is best described as a nuanced secularity which retains an “intertwinement” of the Church in public life.¹⁷⁹ Casanova, in his independent article, suggests that the Nordic pattern is one of “soft deconfessionalisation,” i.e. that people have secularized without leaving the Church and that the Church itself has become “an administrative unit of the secular (sacred) State.”¹⁸⁰ Another contributor, director of Emory’s Law and Religion Center’s, John Witte Jr., argues that the Lutheran “theology of the two kingdoms” (i.e. the worldly and the spiritual) contributed to the

174 Alfred Stepan, “The Multiple Secularisms of Modern Democratic and Non-Democratic Regimes,” in *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan Van Antwerpen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 115.

175 *Ibid.*, 121.

176 *Ibid.*, 123–128.

177 I have chosen to classify this book in the “non-Swedish/Scandinavian” section of this study because of the variety of authors originating from a variety of countries both within and outside of Scandinavia, and because its most well-known editor, Jose Casanova, is from outside of Scandinavia.

178 Rosemarie van den Breemer, José Casanova, and Tyygve Wyller, “Introduction,” in *Secular and Sacred?: The Scandinavian Case of Religion in Human Rights, Law and Public Space*, ed. Rosemarie van den Breemer, José Casanova, and Tyygve Wyller, vol. 15, *Research in Contemporary Religion* (Göttingen: Vadenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 9.

179 *Ibid.*, 9–10.

180 José Casanova, “The Two Dimensions, Temporal and Spatial, of the Secular: Comparative Reflections on the Nordic Protestant and Southern Catholic Patterns from a Global Perspective,” in *Secular and Sacred?: The Scandinavian Case of Religion in Human Rights, Law and Public Space*, ed. Rosemarie van den Breemer, José Casanova, and Tyygve Wyller, vol. 15, *Research in Contemporary Religion* (Göttingen: Vadenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 27–28.

distinctive nature of the Northern European and Nordic brand of secularization.¹⁸¹ Norwegian theologian Dag Thorkildsen argues that even within the Nordic states there is a difference between East and West (Sweden, and to some degree Finland, as opposed to Norway, Denmark, the Faeroe Island and Iceland).¹⁸² For Thorkildsen, this difference began with the Reformation and Pietism, but was cemented in World War II.¹⁸³ Thorkildsen finds that compared to other Nordic nations, the Swedish situation shows less intertwinement because the Church of Sweden was a High Church and has always had more independence from the state.¹⁸⁴ According to Thorkildsen, Sweden suppressed Pietism to a greater degree than the other Nordic states which led to the rise of free churches, whereas in Norway and Denmark Pietism stayed, and thrived, within the State Church.¹⁸⁵ He also notes the strong trend towards leaving the State Church in Sweden even before atheist philosophers Axel Hägerström and Ingemar Hedenius began to attack the Church, though their critique caused a significant rise in atheism and prompted the de-confessionalization of academic theology in Sweden.¹⁸⁶ For Thorkildsen, this history explains some of the discrepancy in the data about secularization when comparing Sweden to its less secular Nordic neighbors. Knut W. Ruyter, another contributor who is a medical ethicist, echoes some of the earlier-mentioned twentieth-century scholars, suggesting that the Lutheran Church itself “functions on secular premises.”¹⁸⁷ This assertion suggests that the Nordic areas are, in fact, secularized and not just experiencing religious change, in spite of the intertwinement between religion and secularity. Van den Breemer, Casanova, and Wyller conclude by saying:

Without overstating the case (Scandinavian countries are secular and secularized by a variety of dimensions), the existing fusion between public institutions and religious bodies are not simply the relics of a bygone past, but the results of active modern political choices ... Being the result of modern political choices and modern Scandinavian ways of being, they testify to the need to rethink our con-

181 John Witte, Jr., “‘God Is Hidden in the Earthly Kingdom’: The Lutheran Two-Kingdoms Theory as Foundation of Scandinavian Secularity,” in *Secular and Sacred?: The Scandinavian Case of Religion in Human Rights, Law and Public Space*, ed. Rosemarie van den Breemer, José Casanova, and Tyygve Wyller, vol. 15, *Research in Contemporary Religion* (Göttingen: Vadenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 79–80.

182 Dag Thorkildsen, “West Nordic and East Nordic Religiousness and Secularity: Historical Unity and Diversity,” in *Secular and Sacred?: The Scandinavian Case of Religion in Human Rights, Law and Public Space*, ed. Rosemarie van den Breemer, José Casanova, and Tyygve Wyller, vol. 15, *Research in Contemporary Religion* (Göttingen: Vadenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 85–88.

183 *Ibid.*

184 *Ibid.*, 85.

185 *Ibid.*, 87.

186 *Ibid.*, 92.

187 Knut W. Ruyter, “Space for Religion in Public Hospitals: Constructive Coexistence Can Be Negotiated,” in *Secular and Sacred?: The Scandinavian Case of Religion in Human Rights, Law and Public Space*, ed. Rosemarie van den Breemer, José Casanova, and Tyygve Wyller, vol. 15, *Research in Contemporary Religion* (Göttingen: Vadenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 198.

ceptions of secularization and secularity and to incorporate the Lutheran Nordic variant of Protestantism into the international discussion on the secular.¹⁸⁸

Their assessment aligns with my conclusion that Sweden is secular, though they do not fully develop an alternative understanding that relates the situation in Scandinavia to the wider discussion on secularity. I agree that this is an important question and one that requires further research and lies outside the scope of this study.

Grace Davie's Response to the Idea of Religious Resurgence

In contradistinction to those who argue that there is continued evidence of secularization, a common argument is that religion is returning, both worldwide and in Europe, with some people (a few of whom will be discussed in the next section) suggesting that we are now in a post-secular era. Though the term is used in a specific way by Davie, Berger, and Folkas (see page 25), Grace Davie cautions against the generic usage of the term in her 2017 chapter “Religion, Territory, and Choice: Contrasting Configurations, 1970–2015” in *Secularization and Religious Innovation in the North Atlantic World*. She argues that many who think religion is making a comeback are incorrect because, in her view, religion was never absent from most of the world.¹⁸⁹ Rather, she advocates in this article that the European situation is unique, and that its exceptional character is seen in the way that Churches have affected, and still do affect, people even if they no longer have as much power as they once did.¹⁹⁰ Davie suggests that the loss of religious monopoly has caused increased religious interest in Europe, conceding that in other parts of the world increased pluralism caused decreased interest.¹⁹¹ Europe remain, in her view, the exception—it is still “relatively secular,” though it might be on a post-secular trajectory, but its secularity results from its European-ness rather than from secularization being a universal inevitability.¹⁹² In summary, according to Davie, Europe is more secular than other places because of its history and it might be becoming post-secular, but scholars should be cautious before jumping to conclusions.

188 Rosemarie van den Breemer and Tyygve Wyller, “Conclusion,” in *Secular and Sacred?: The Scandinavian Case of Religion in Human Rights, Law and Public Space*, ed. Rosemarie van den Breemer, José Casanova, and Tyygve Wyller, vol. 15, Research in Contemporary Religion (Göttingen: Vadenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 313–317.

189 Grace Davie, “Religion, Territory, and Choice: Contrasting Configurations, 1970–2015,” in *Secularization and Religious Innovation in the North Atlantic World*, ed. David N. Hempton and Hugh McLeod (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 312. This source was saved for this point in my discussion because of its recent publication date.

190 *Ibid.*, 314.

191 *Ibid.*, 318.

192 *Ibid.*, 323.

Attempts to Describe the Contemporary “Religious Change”

Up to this point in the section, I have reviewed the arguments of those who affirm secularization, those who promote differentiated secularization, and Davie’s hesitancy regarding the idea of “post-secular” societies. Other non-Scandinavian authors have tried to come up with different paradigms for explaining the current religious situation—seeking to nuance the concept of “religious change.” These fall into the categories of: “fuzzy fidelity,” “cultural religion,” “implicit religion,” “civil religion,” or a “spiritual revolution.” Each will be discussed in turn.

David Voas, a quantitative sociologist, coined the term “fuzzy fidelity” to describe the European situation regarding religion.¹⁹³ This “fuzzy fidelity” is seen as uncommitted loyalty to the traditional religion lacking significant participation or devoutness.¹⁹⁴ Voas examined data from the European Social Survey, and combined religious affiliation, attendance, and affirmation of belief to determine an individual’s level of religious commitment.¹⁹⁵ He found that in most European countries only a small percentage of people are secular, and a smaller percentage religious, while the majority are part of the “fuzzy” middle.¹⁹⁶ Voas disagrees with the conclusion that this is a sign of religious change.¹⁹⁷ Instead, he thinks that once the secular percentage exceeds the religious percentage, those in the fuzzy middle will become increasingly secular, resulting in the growth of the secular category.¹⁹⁸ He cites Sweden as an example where this trend is already apparent.¹⁹⁹ In conclusion, he says, “Fuzzy fidelity is not a new kind of religion, or a proxy for as yet unfocused spiritual seeking; it is a staging point on the road from religious to secular hegemony.”²⁰⁰

Another attempt to nuance the idea of “religious change” is the argument that Sweden exemplifies “cultural religion.” Zuckerman uses this term, though for him “cultural religion” was the same as secularization. Sociologist N.J. Demerath discusses the idea of “cultural religion” and uses Sweden in his case study. He says that Sweden’s national religion is about nostalgia and cultural heritage which is similar to Zuckerman’s concept.²⁰¹ He finds that Sweden ranks near the bottom of industrialized nations when looking at almost any measure of religiosity.²⁰² Demerath

193 David Voas, “The Rise and Fall of Fuzzy Fidelity in Europe,” *European Sociological Review* 25, no. 2 (2009): 155.

194 *Ibid.*, 161.

195 *Ibid.*, 157.

196 *Ibid.*, 166.

197 *Ibid.*, 167.

198 *Ibid.*

199 *Ibid.*

200 *Ibid.*

201 N. J. Demerath, “The Rise of ‘Cultural Religion’ in European Christianity: Learning from Poland, Northern Ireland, and Sweden,” *Social Compass* 47, no. 1 (January 1, 2000): 134.

202 *Ibid.*

sees “cultural religion” as the new trend in the West and views it as among the final vestiges of religiosity before complete secularization.²⁰³ Both Demerath and Voas use nuanced terms to describe the current situation, but accept that society in Sweden is continuing to secularize and with time they believe that these terms will become obsolete.

Another sociologist, Isabella Kasselstrand looks at a “cultural religion”. She examines the relationship between “religious *beliefs* and *belonging* in a secularizing society,” which, in her view, provide evidence of “cultural religion.”²⁰⁴ She suggests that the national Church in Sweden fulfills secular roles and thus retains its relevance in society despite the general lack of belief.²⁰⁵ She problematizes ‘belonging,’ arguing that it is more complicated than noting membership and participation in rituals.²⁰⁶ Kasselstrand argues that the Lutheran character of the national Church in Sweden, as well as the monopoly held by the Church, are the most significant factors in understanding Swedish religiosity.²⁰⁷ Though Kasselstrand notes that few members of the Church believe in traditional religious doctrines, she finds that most adhere to vague spiritual concepts.²⁰⁸ Church members hold to these spiritual beliefs to a greater degree than those who have no religious affiliation, yet, personal belief does not appear to correlate with Church attendance.²⁰⁹ Kasselstrand concludes that as Sweden secularizes, belief in God or a higher power will continue to decline, but that affirmation of the supernatural in general will replace more traditional beliefs.²¹⁰ She thinks that the Church itself might participate in this change, increasing their affirmation of a non-specific supernatural power because its contemporary role in society is as a preserver of cultural heritage rather than a purveyor of Christian dogma.²¹¹ Of note is Kasselstrand’s agreement with Tomasson that the Church of Sweden plays a part in secularization, and can itself be considered secular in many ways. While Demerath finds cultural religions to be a step on the path to secularity, Kasselstrand believes religion and the Church will continue to hold a significant place in society by preserving cultural heritage, while allowing for religious expression to take place in new arenas and different forms. She concludes her article, saying:

203 Ibid., 136–137.

204 Isabella Kasselstrand, “Nonbelievers in the Church: A Study of Cultural Religion in Sweden,” *Sociology of Religion* 76, no. 3 (September 1, 2015): 276.

205 Ibid.

206 Ibid., 280.

207 Ibid., 283.

208 Ibid., 287.

209 Ibid., 287–290.

210 Ibid., 291.

211 Ibid.

As Sweden is becoming more religiously pluralistic and as belonging is becoming an increasingly active choice, Swedes may, to an extent, adopt new ways to believe and participate. It is also highly likely that the bonds that Swedes have to their national churches will continue to fade ... Ultimately, only time will tell if Demerath is right in his assertion that a non-religious attachment to a church is the final remnant of religion in Sweden. However, this suggests that now is the right time to study the connection between religion, state, and culture in Sweden as, in not too long, this opportunity will vanish.²¹²

Edward Bailey proposes another concept to describe the current religious situation in the West, calling it “implicit religion.”²¹³ This term encompasses both official and unofficial religion as well as “folk religion,” which Bailey defines as distinct from traditional religion, though not evidence of secularity.²¹⁴ According to Bailey, this concept broadens sociologist Thomas Luckmann’s famous concept of “invisible religion” and is more descriptive than the term “religious change.”²¹⁵ Bailey thinks that everyone is “implicitly religious” in the sense that most people or communities have a sense of something “sacred” which is seen in their “commitment” to something greater than themselves, whether it is connected to the transcendent and established religion or not.²¹⁶ This definition avoids the question of secularization by defining “implicit religion” so broadly that everyone fits into the category.

Another term that has been suggested to describe the current situation is “civil religion.” Pétur Pétursson, an Icelandic scholar, evaluated whether this term, coined by American sociologist Robert Bellah, can help explain the situation in Scandinavia. Pétursson defines “civil religion” as concerning a number of things: the nation’s role in history, the purpose of national allegiance, and the sacred character of belonging.²¹⁷ It also includes examining values of a society while observing the relationship between religion and public life and the answers both those spheres give to questions about life, death, and the purpose of suffering.²¹⁸ He concludes that although the Nordic countries demonstrate elements of civil religion, evidenced in the centrality of both the Church and state in national identity, the concept of civil religion does not fully describe the situation.²¹⁹ For Pétursson, “civil religion” does not help us understand the current reality better, and does not fit into Robert Bellah’s model which explores the American situation.²²⁰

212 Ibid.

213 Edward I. Bailey, *Implicit Religion in Contemporary Society* (Peeters, 2006), 8.

214 Ibid., 27–41.

215 Ibid., 39.

216 Ibid., 272–273.

217 Pétur Pétursson, “Civilreligionen--ett svar på de yttersta frågorna,” *Svensk teologisk kvartalskrift* 67, no. 4 (1991): 170–171.

218 Ibid.

219 Ibid., 181.

220 Ibid.

Another common idea is that a “spiritual revolution” is occurring—i.e. that holistic spiritualities are not declining, but instead are actually growing and replacing other religious forms. The question of alternative spiritualities is becoming an important concern in the studies by contemporary Swedish academics. The most in-depth study concerning the idea of a “spiritual revolution” was conducted by two British scholars, Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead. They conducted a “locality study, charting the face-to-face holistic activities over time” in a British village that had comparable demographics to the nation as a whole.²²¹ They found that:

talk of a ‘spiritual revolution’ can easily give the misleading impression that sacred activities are growing overall. To the contrary, our findings show that even if a spiritual revolution is underway, it is taking place within a realm of associational activities which is in decline. For the growth of the (relatively small) holistic milieu is not compensating for the decline of the (considerably large) congregational domain.²²²

While the British and Swedish situations are not the same, my earlier discussion has shown that scholars tend to compare them. There are more studies conducted in Britain and some of them can help fill in the gaps in our understanding of the Swedish situation. Later in their book, Heelas and Woodhead make this connection, saying, “... the scenario of the continued decline of the congregational domain as a whole must be taken seriously. Attendance in Great Britain continues to plummet, and in countries like Sweden where attendance has already fallen to a considerably lower level, there is no evidence of overall bottoming out.”²²³ They conclude that there is no “spiritual revolution.” Further study is needed to explore the presence or absence of a “spiritual revolution” in Sweden, but Heelas and Woodhead’s study suggests that the presence of such a revolution is doubtful. Though they do not use the term “secularization,” their conclusion suggests that they believe it is occurring.

David Hempton, a British historian of Evangelical Protestant Christianity, sees all of these attempts to describe the current picture—“believing without belonging,” “fuzzy fidelity,” etc.—as failing to take into account the importance Europeans verbally place on religion.²²⁴ Hempton thinks Europeans still carefully choose their religious positions and have “cohesive expression of lived religiosity,” even if they no longer conform to specific religious beliefs or practices, that they are not

221 Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality*, Religion and Spirituality in the Modern World (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 42.

222 *Ibid.*, 47–48.

223 *Ibid.*, 141.

224 David Hempton, “Organizing Concepts and ‘Small Differences’ in the Comparative Secularization of Western Europe and the United States,” in *Secularization and Religious Innovation in the North Atlantic World*, ed. David N. Hempton and Hugh McLeod (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 352–353.

just holding onto old traditions that are slowly fading.²²⁵ He finds that as a result “religion and secularization” are inadequate categories to use when evaluating the current state in Europe.²²⁶ Though they may be inadequate, “religion and secularization” remain, for Hempton, the best options for discussing the contemporary situation.²²⁷

Scholars Who Argue that Sweden is Not Secular

A few scholars from outside Scandinavia have tried to argue that Sweden is not that secular, albeit without seeking to find another explanatory model. Matthew J. Milliner, an assistant professor from Wheaton College, who attended a symposium of Swedish theologian from a wide variety of backgrounds, argues from this anecdotal experience that Sweden is “not so secular.” A recent *Crux* article discusses the growth of the Catholic Church and how it is thriving in secular Sweden.²²⁸ This growth is in large part attributed to immigration, as well as to the increased interest in Christianity among those who grew up in a secularized context and have little background with the faith.²²⁹ Both Milliner and Glatz’s arguments leave something to be desired, but the view that Sweden is not secularized will be presented more thoroughly and academically by several Swedish scholars. Its introduction here serves to round out the picture of the non-Swedish discussion on the question of secularization in Sweden.

Summary

In summary, most contemporary non-Swedish authors fall into two categories: those who think Sweden is, in fact, secular and continuing to become more so, and those who argue for differential secularities or use some other term to describe the situation (such as “fuzzy fidelity,” “civil religion,” “implicit religion,” or “cultural religion”). Even in this latter group many are hesitant to suggest that this means there is an ongoing re-sacralization or that Sweden will veer from its secularizing trajectory, though they leave the door open to this possibility. In the next section, many of these views will be purported by Swedish scholars, while other views from this section will serve as comparative and contrasting positions to their “insider” positions. The general, though not unanimous, consensus from non-Swedish scholars is that Sweden should in fact be considered both secular and secularizing. The analysis of the contemporary situation by Swedish scholars has a different flavor.

225 *Ibid.*, 353.

226 *Ibid.*, 373.

227 *Ibid.*

228 Carol Glatz, “Sweden’s Catholic Minority Shows Church Can Thrive in Secular Society,” last modified December 7, 2017, accessed April 8, 2018, <https://cruxnow.com/global-church/2017/12/07/swedens-catholic-minority-shows-church-can-thrive-secular-society/>.

229 *Ibid.*

SECTION FOUR

Swedish Scholarship

In this section, I focus on Swedish scholarship, much of which was conducted after 2000. I suggest that Swedes, like all people, have unique insights into their own culture. My aim is to present their research, much of which has previously only been presented in Swedish, in a way that is accessible to a wider academic audience.

Eva Hamberg

Eva Hamberg is among the most prolific Swedish authors on the topic of secularization. Much of her work was published before the year 2000 and she is considered part of the second wave of Swedish sociologists of religion. The studies conducted by her (and her frequent co-author Thorlief Pettersson²³⁰) serve as the benchmark for much other research, so one must begin here to understand the Swedish perspective on secularity.

Eva Hamberg, a retired professor from Lund University, believes that the European Values Study (EVS)²³¹ is not the most helpful metric of *Swedish* secularization because it does not distinguish between more traditional religious positions and positions that fall into the category of “private religion.”²³² She believes there is a weakness in basing evaluations on affirmations or rejections of various belief statements.²³³ Hamberg emphasizes the importance of evaluating the significance of such beliefs in respondents’ lives, which is hard to measure and must be studied

230 I refer the interested reader to the bibliography for a wider selection of his work.

231 From the website (<https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu>): “The European Values Study (EVS) is a large-scale, cross-national, repeated cross-sectional survey research programme on basic human values. It provides insights into the ideas, beliefs, preferences, attitudes, values and opinions of citizens all over Europe. The European Values Study covers a wide range of human values. The main topics concern family, work, environment, perceptions of life, politics and society, religion and morality, national identity.” It is the most comprehensive and longest running survey (with waves conducted every nine years since 1981) of contemporary European values and is often referenced in the sociological literature.

232 Eva M. Hamberg, *Religiös tro och religiöst engagemang: En analys av material från projektet Livsåskådningar i Sverige*, vol. 1988:6 nr. 32, Religion och samhälle (Stockholm. 1986) (Stockholm: Religionssociologiska institutet, 1988).

233 *Ibid.*, 1988:6 nr. 32:9.

indirectly.²³⁴ Thorleif Pettersson, a professor of sociology at Uppsala University, also questions the usefulness of the EVS.²³⁵

Instead of using the EVS, Eva Hamberg prefers to look at a worldview survey she conducted among a randomly-selected group of Swedes in the 1980s. She attempts to gain an accurate picture of Swedish secularization and to evaluate whether there was a rise in “private religion” while there was a simultaneous decrease in traditional religion.²³⁶ According to Hamberg, based on the low levels of adherence to the Christian faith and minimal participation in religious services, Sweden could be considered secular.²³⁷ Hamberg’s survey added nuance, allowing respondents to affirm that they were: a confessing Christian, “Christian in their own personal way,” or not a Christian.²³⁸ About 63% chose the middle option, “Christian in my own personal way,” but Hamberg cautions against equating this with “private religion.”²³⁹ Hamberg found that the majority of the 63% were uncertain about whether there was a God or a transcendent power at all; few denied it outright, but most were unwilling to affirm the idea either.²⁴⁰

The question becomes how should “private religion” be defined? Hamberg evaluates the merits of several different definitions, viewing the survey results through these different lenses. Based on respondents’ answers to other questions about 10% of those choosing “Christian in my own personal way” could be described as holding traditional Christian beliefs while living out their religious convictions in private as opposed to in their public life.²⁴¹ Choosing this definition means that about 6.3% of the total population are private Christians, but tells us nothing about the more general concept of private religiosity. When testing a more narrow definition of “privately religious,” Hamberg limited her concept of “religion” to worldviews that expressed some form of belief in a transcendent power.²⁴² Furthermore, a respondent had to express belief in a transcendent power and hold to convictions different from those held within established religious institutions in order to be considered “privately religious.”²⁴³ Using this as her metric, Hamberg concludes that a very low percentage of those surveyed, if anyone at all, could be considered “privately religious.”²⁴⁴ This definition was too narrow and thus was

234 Ibid., 1988:6 nr. 32:16.

235 Thorleif Pettersson, “Kyrkofolket, den gode medborgaren och demokratin,” *Svensk teologisk kvartalskrift* 67, no. 4 (1991): 162.

236 Eva M. Hamberg, *Kristen på mitt eget sätt*, vol. 1989:10/11 nr. 48/49, Religion och samhälle (Stockholm, 1986) (Stockholm: Religionssociologiska institutet, 1989), 6.

237 Hamberg, *Religiös tro och engagemang*, 1988:6 nr. 32:21.

238 Hamberg, *På mitt eget sätt*, 1989:10/11 nr. 48/49:10.

239 Ibid., 1989:10/11 nr. 48/49:11.

240 Hamberg, *Religiös tro och engagemang*, 1988:6 nr. 32:22.

241 Hamberg, *På mitt eget sätt*, 1989:10/11 nr. 48/49:56–57.

242 Ibid., 1989:10/11 nr. 48/49:58.

243 Ibid.

244 Ibid.

unhelpful in understanding the Swedish situation. Hamberg then expands this definition to include those who practiced any form of religion in their private lives while not practicing in public.²⁴⁵ The number climbs to 9% of those who affirm that they are “Christian in [their] own personal way.”²⁴⁶ Hamberg contemplates two other definitions of “private religion”: anyone who affirms a belief in some form of God (roughly 41% of the “Christian in my own personal way” group), or those who found religious questions interesting but were agnostic or unsure themselves (3–14% of the same group).²⁴⁷ These definitions either resulted in numbers that were too insignificant, or too broad (with too great a margin of error), to be helpful.²⁴⁸ Though a defined group of the “privately religious” cannot be determined from this worldview survey, Hamberg concludes that Swedes are not as secular as thought because two-thirds affirm that they are “Christian in their own personal way” plus the small minority of people who affirmed that they were confessing Christians.²⁴⁹ The result is that more than two-thirds of the populations expressed some form of religious leaning. The group of “Christians in their own personal way” was heterogeneous and held a diffuse position, affirming a position that is less than religious, but that can be summarized as: “I believe in something, I don’t really know what.”²⁵⁰

Hamberg also argues that membership in the Church of Sweden is not a valid measurement of Swedish religiosity.²⁵¹ She cautions against interpreting the external decrease in religious engagement and belief as evidence that faith is less important, arguing that high levels of participation recorded in earlier times resulted from people’s conformity with societal norms, not personal faith.²⁵² Hamberg says:

Not only can Sweden be described as a very secularized country, in the sense that low proportions of the population acknowledge the Christian faith or participate in public worship. In addition, available evidence may be taken to indicate that an increasing share of those who still adhere to the Christian faith tend to do so with a low degree of personal commitment.²⁵³

245 Ibid., 1989:10/11 nr. 48/49:57.

246 Ibid.

247 Ibid., 1989:10/11 nr. 48/49:58–61.

248 Ibid., 1989:10/11 nr. 48/49:62.

249 Ibid.

250 Ibid., 1989:10/11 nr. 48/49:63. Translation mine.

251 Hamberg, *Religiös tro och engagemang*, 1988:6 nr. 32:34.

252 Ibid., 1988:6 nr. 32:36.

253 Eva M. Hamberg, “Secularization and Value Change in Sweden,” in *Scandinavian Values: Religion and Morality in the Nordic Countries*, ed. Thorleif Pettersson and Ole Riis, vol. 10, *Psychologia et sociologia religionum* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1994), 183.

Another argument in favor of secularization is from the EVS data. In spite of her hesitation about the EVS, Hamberg affirms that when comparing EVS data from Sweden to other countries, Sweden is secularized.²⁵⁴

In her article, “Stability and Change in Religious Beliefs, Practice, and Attitudes: A Swedish Panel Study,” Hamberg analyzed results from a survey about Swedish religiosity conducted in 1955 and 1970.²⁵⁵ The study surveyed a randomly-selected group of Swedes which conformed to national demographics.²⁵⁶ Fifteen years later the same group of individuals was surveyed, with those who had died since the first wave being replaced by a similar number of people who were part of a younger birth cohort.²⁵⁷ The survey examined whether people affirmed five different traditional religious views.²⁵⁸ The study found that the number of people affirming the various tenets declined over the fifteen-year gap, particularly among the “younger birth cohort.”²⁵⁹ This survey suggests the pervasiveness of secularization.

In summary, Eva Hamberg does not fall into either the category of scholars accepting secularization or those advocating for the “religious change” interpretation. She is in the middle. She says,

While the changes discussed here involve a decline in the prevalence both of religious beliefs and of religious activities, it seems to be reasonable to expect the decline to be more pronounced in regard to religious activities than in regard to religious beliefs: to the extent that belief in God becomes less important to individuals and/or is replaced by a vague belief in a transcendent power, people would be less likely to engage in religious activities. In addition, these developments may be mutually reinforcing: while declining religious commitment results in declining religious practice, a decline in religious practice may contribute to a development where traditional religious beliefs are replaced by less orthodox beliefs, which may in turn further contribute to declining practice, etc.²⁶⁰

Hamberg acknowledges that there is a decline in overt religious practice, but prefers evidence of diffuse belief as tentative support for the idea that Sweden is undergoing “religious change,” and not secularization. She is hesitant to draw any firm conclusion on this point.

Religion and Politics in Contemporary Sweden

While Eva Hamberg takes a sociological approach to secularization in Sweden, several other scholars explore the idea of secularization through the lens of the

254 Hamberg, *Religiös tro och engagemang*, 1988:6 nr. 32:41.

255 Eva M. Hamberg, “Stability and Change in Religious Beliefs, Practice, and Attitudes: A Swedish Panel Study,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 30, no. 1 (March 1991): 67.

256 *Ibid.*, 65.

257 *Ibid.*

258 *Ibid.*, 75.

259 *Ibid.*

260 Hamberg, “Secularization and Value Change,” 183.

contemporary engagement between religion and politics. They are: Per Pettersson, a researcher of religion and society, Göran Gustafsson, a member of the second wave of Swedish sociologists, and political scientist Magnus Hagevi.

Per Pettersson explores the continued entwinement between Church and state in Sweden, i.e. the role the Church plays in the state. This intermingling has continued in spite of the secularization process spanning the 1900s which freed the individual and the government from the hegemony of the Church.²⁶¹ Per Pettersson argues that Sweden experienced the privatization of religion and the secularization of the public square at the same time during the twentieth century.²⁶² Yet, preferential treatment of Christianity in society continued.²⁶³ Sweden has become more pluralized in the 2000s.²⁶⁴ In spite of this increased plurality and the official split between state and Church in 2000, Pettersson argues that the Church of Sweden still functions as a government agency, or public service organization.²⁶⁵ Though Petterson does not say that the Church is devoid of religious or spirituals functions, his emphasis on its role as a government agency within the secularized state suggests it would be more accurately described as a secularized Church. Göran Gustafsson approaches this topic from a different direction: the politicization and secularization of the Church of Sweden before the official split. Gustafsson notes that among the Nordic Churches, the Church of Sweden is the most politicized, demonstrated by the significant influence political parties have within the Church. Both Pettersson and Gustafsson assert that the political sphere is secular and that the Church is under the direction of the political sphere. Thus, the Church is secularized.

Magnus Hagevi has a particular interest in the intersection between politics and religion in Sweden. Hagevi accepts the terminology “privately religious” to identify those who have religious beliefs or who participate in religious practices, but are not connected to any established religion.²⁶⁶ He notes that though church attendance is low, there is not a corresponding lack of religiosity; over half of Swedes have religious beliefs or pray and can thus be considered “privately religious.”²⁶⁷

Hagevi also discusses the so-called “return of religion.”²⁶⁸ He edited a book entitled *Religion och politik* (Religion and politics) which explores this question as it connects to politics. In general, his research suggests that secularization is coming

261 Per Pettersson, “State and Religion in Sweden: Ambiguity Between Disestablishment and Religious Control,” *Nordic Journal of Religion & Society* 24, no. 2 (November 2011): 120–121.

262 *Ibid.*, 129.

263 *Ibid.*, 130.

264 *Ibid.*, 129.

265 *Ibid.*, 132.

266 Magnus Hagevi, “Beyond Church and State: Private Religiosity and Post-Materialist Political Opinion among Individuals in Sweden,” *Journal of Church and State* 54, no. 4 (2012): 499.

267 *Ibid.*, 510–513.

268 Magnus Hagevi, “Sekulariseringens slut?,” *Sociologisk Forskning* 42, no. 4 (2005): 35.

to an end.²⁶⁹ He notes that this trend can be seen, even in Sweden, but it is “often sporadic and scattered ... [though] it is possible to note a religious change in post-modern Sweden which is the direct opposite of secularization; a sacralization.”²⁷⁰ Sacralization is the idea that religion is growing in importance for more people in more arenas of society.²⁷¹ One example of sacralization is the change seen through a multi-year study on the importance of the concept of “salvation” for Swedes.²⁷² This study is the focus of several articles by Hagevi. It looked at four generations during the years 1986-2006.²⁷³ Almost 20,000 people participated in this study and the most recent wave showed no substantial difference in the importance of the term “salvation” between generations.²⁷⁴ Hagevi begins to use the language of “post-secular people” to refer to the generations that grew up in a society that was “already secular” or those who had little to no contact with or influence from religion, i.e. those living in an extremely secularized society.²⁷⁵ This is different from the common usage of the term “post-secular” which refers to the period after a secular period that is characterized by increased religiosity. After 2000, these “post-secular generations” began to affirm that “salvation” was important to them, and the level of importance in both younger and older cohorts equalized.²⁷⁶ Prior to the year 2000, the older cohorts ranked the importance of “salvation” higher than the younger cohorts did.²⁷⁷ Hagevi suggests that this shows that the “post-secular” generations are “craving” religion after growing up in society more or less devoid of it.²⁷⁸ Though it is unclear what people understood by the term “salvation,” Hagevi argues that it is reasonable to conclude that for most respondents it was a religious idea, and they may have even associated it with Christianity.²⁷⁹ In spite of the increased interest in religion, Hagevi notes that there does not seem to be an increase in religious activity or participation among the “post-secular generations” which, for him, begs the question: “Why do more people not come when the church bell rings?”²⁸⁰

In another article, “Sekulariseringen, vila i fred” (“Secularization, Rest in Peace”), Hagevi ponders the concept of progressive secularization in Sweden. He

269 Ibid., 39.

270 Ibid., 39–40. Translation mine.

271 Magnus Hagevi, “Att förena religion med politik,” in *Religion och politik*, ed. Magnus Hagevi (Malmö: Liber, 2005), 19.

272 Hagevi, “Sekulariseringens slut?,” 40.

273 Hagevi, “De postsekulära generationerna,” 59.

274 Hagevi, “Sekulariseringens slut?,” 41.

275 Hagevi, “De postsekulära generationerna,” 63.

276 Ibid., 69.

277 Ibid.

278 Ibid., 67.

279 Magnus Hagevi, “Sekularisering, vila i fred,” in *Religion och politik*, ed. Magnus Hagevi (Malmö: Liber, 2005), 216.

280 Hagevi, “De postsekulära generationerna,” 72. Translation mine.

admits that it is unclear why the “at one point obvious concept of progressive secularization has had problems.”²⁸¹ He says that one possible answer is that the pervasiveness of secularization was exaggerated or discussed by those who had a vested interest in promoting it.²⁸² Another possible reason that some take issue with the concept of progressive secularization is that people misinterpreted the move away from traditional religion as secularization.²⁸³ In this study, Hagevi is more cautious about whether the apparent sacralization is a new trend, whether it will be co-existent with continued secularization, or if it is only a temporary exception or break in the continuing secularization of society.²⁸⁴ He hesitates to draw conclusions about the future, but argues that some form of meaningful religious change is occurring.²⁸⁵ However, his leaning is that secularization is coming to an end in Sweden.

While Pettersson and Gustafsson conclude based on their study of politics and Church that the Church of Sweden has been secularized, they make no claims about the overall national trend. Hagevi, takes a similar approach, but pursues the question from a broader angle, asking more whether trends of religion’s interactions with politics shine a spotlight onto wider cultural realities. He concludes that there seems to be an increase in religiosity (especially evident in his use of surveys) and that as such there is an increase in the presence of religion in the political sphere. He argues that Sweden is no longer on a secularizing trajectory, but is sacralizing instead.

Scholars Discussing or Supporting “Religious Change”

From the EVS

Another significant contribution to the conversation about secularization in Sweden is a study of Scandinavian values which was edited by Thorleif Pettersson and Danish sociologist of religion Ole Riis and published in 1994: *Scandinavian Values: Religion and Morality in the Nordic Countries*. Most of the articles in the book are based on data from the first two waves of the EVS reports. All of the authors originate in the Nordic lands except Loek Halman, a Dutchman, who was asked to participate because of his role as one of the leading researchers in the EVS study.²⁸⁶

281 Hagevi, “Vila i fred,” 220. Translation mine.

282 Ibid.

283 Ibid.

284 Ibid., 221.

285 Ibid.

286 Thorleif Pettersson and Ole Riis, “Preface,” in *Scandinavian Values: Religion and Morality in the Nordic Countries*, ed. Thorleif Pettersson and Ole Riis, vol. 10, *Psychologia et sociologia religionum* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1994), 9. I saved my discussion of this book until now because of the co-authoring of many articles by Swedish and non-Swedish scholars, and because of Thorleif Pettersson’s role as editor.

In this book, the choice was made to use the term “religious change” rather than “secularization.”²⁸⁷ The scholars and editors chose this term because “religious change” is more neutral than secularization and because the contributors did not want to pre-suppose that the changes observed necessarily involved the weakening of religion and religious institutions.²⁸⁸ Halman notes that the common European belief in a spirit or life force, or the more traditional belief in a personal God, are not as common in Scandinavia as in Southern Europe or other parts of Northern Europe.²⁸⁹ He says that Sweden and Denmark are more extreme in their lack of religiosity than their neighbors Norway and Iceland.²⁹⁰ All the data suggests that the Scandinavians are seldom outright atheists.²⁹¹ Rather, Ole Riis says, “For the typical Scandinavian, religious questions have a low degree of saliency.”²⁹² In spite of the desire to discuss “religious change,” Riis asserts, “The general impression is therefore that Scandinavia forms an extreme case of secularization in the sense that religious attitudes are of low intensity, religious beliefs are rather vague, religious behavior is infrequent, and religious authorities have little practical influence on the opinions and ethics of most Scandinavians.”²⁹³ Though they begin by discussing “religious change,” they conclude that this change is secularization.

Andreas Bäckström

Another key Swedish author is Andreas Bäckström, a sociologist of religion at Uppsala University. Bäckström explores the contemporary Swedish situation through the lens of “religious change.” He thinks the expression “secularization” should be problematized for three reasons: that in earlier eras religiosity was not as unified as is suggested, that the 1900s saw a rise of new ideas which have contributed to religious change, and that the move away from Christianity has not decreased the human need for religion.²⁹⁴ He argues that though the institutional Church might be losing its societal power, the individual believer will still have significant influence in society.²⁹⁵

287 Göran Gustafsson, “Religious Change in the Five Scandinavian Countries, 1930-1980,” in *Scandinavian Values: Religion and Morality in the Nordic Countries*, ed. Thorleif Pettersson and Ole Riis, vol. 10, *Psychologia et sociologia religionum* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1994), 13.

288 Ibid.

289 Loek Halman, “Scandinavian Values: How Special Are They?,” in *Scandinavian Values: Religion and Morality in the Nordic Countries*, ed. Thorleif Pettersson and Ole Riis, vol. 10, *Psychologia et sociologia religionum* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1994), 66.

290 Ibid., 79.

291 Ole Riis, “Patterns of Secularization in Scandinavia,” in *Scandinavian Values: Religion and Morality in the Nordic Countries*, ed. Thorleif Pettersson and Ole Riis, vol. 10, *Psychologia et sociologia religionum* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1994), 99.

292 Ibid., 126.

293 Ibid.

294 Anders Bäckström, *Från institution till rörelse*, vol. 1989:12 nr 50, Religion och samhälle (Stockholm. 1986) (Religionssociologiska institutet, 1990), 20–21.

295 Ibid., 1989:12 nr 50:44.

Bäckström co-authored a book with Per Petterson and another Uppsala professor Ninna Edgardh Beckman, professor of practical theology, with the title *Religiös förändring i norra Europa: en studie av Sverige: "Från statskyrka till fri folkkyrka": slutrapport (Religious Change in Northern Europe: A Study of Sweden: "From State Church to Free Folk Church": Final Report)*. This book looks at the progressive change in the relationship between the Church of Sweden and the state until their official split in 2000.²⁹⁶ They argue that the 1900s were characterized by the gradual freedom of the state and the populace from the dominance of the Church.²⁹⁷ Bäckström, Petterson, and Edgardh Beckman based their book on a Nordic sociological study called RAMP and use it to compare the Swedish situation to the other Nordic nations.²⁹⁸ The survey shows that traditional religion is strongest in Finland, while the populations of Sweden and Denmark are characterized by uncertainty.²⁹⁹ Their observations, though not their conclusions, agree with several other studies (e.g. David Thurfejl's and Phil Zuckerman's interviews [discussed in Section 3]). All of these studies note that: faith, if present, is privatized, that there is high participation in life rites and a desire to maintain the Church buildings, and that there are high membership numbers and a sense of cultural belonging from being connected with the Church.³⁰⁰ Bäckström, Petterson, and Edgardh Beckman add that Swedes have a stronger sense of the transcendent while in nature.³⁰¹ This sacralization of nature has been noted by other scholars such as scientists Fereshteh Ahmadi and Nader Ahmadi. Their study of Swedish cancer patients revealed that being in nature was their most important coping strategy giving it a measure of "sacrality," above any religious activities or rituals.³⁰² Bäckström, Petterson, and Edgardh Beckman have noted, in agreement with other scholars (e.g. Hamberg and Zuckerman), that belief in Sweden is often vague and without significant content.³⁰³ From the data, they conclude that "it is better to speak of religious change than secularization ... in the Nordic context."³⁰⁴ They, in their own words, have moved a step further than Grace Davie and no longer speak of secularization as the European exception, but rather they question whether secularization ever occurred and note that contemporary society is seeing the growth of a variety of

296 Anders Bäckström, Ninna Edgardh Beckman, and Per Pettersson, *Religiös förändring i norra Europa: en studie av Sverige: "Från statskyrka till fri folkkyrka": slutrapport* (Uppsala: Diakonivetenskapliga institutet, 2004), 9.

297 *Ibid.*, 19.

298 *Ibid.*, 55.

299 *Ibid.*, 65.

300 *Ibid.*, 72.

301 *Ibid.*

302 Fereshteh Ahmadi and Nader Ahmadi, "Nature as the Most Important Coping Strategy Among Cancer Patients: A Swedish Survey," *Journal of Religion and Health* 54, no. 4 (August 1, 2015): 1188–1189.

303 Bäckström, Beckman, and Pettersson, *Religiös förändring*, 72.

304 *Ibid.* Translation mine.

new European religious forms.³⁰⁵ They believe that the Nordic Folk Churches (i.e. national Churches) still have a significant role to play in contemporary society; though they have been reduced to giving people general direction and purpose rather than transmitting a religious worldview.³⁰⁶

Bäckström continues to hold this position in an article from 2014, arguing that though religion is becoming more visible in society, this should not be heralded as the return of religion because religion has never left the Nordic states.³⁰⁷ He thinks the earlier privatization, not secularization, of religion in the Nordic countries, resulted from the liberal secular view of a neutral government and the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms.³⁰⁸ (The significance of the doctrine of the two kingdoms was discussed earlier in relation to John Witte Jr.). Bäckström acknowledges that this contemporary increase in visibility is not related to a statistical increase in religiosity, which further supports his position that secularization never occurred.³⁰⁹

David Thurfjell

Another important work is the book *Det gudlösa folket: de postkristna svenskarna och religionen* (*The God-Less People: The Post-Christian Swedes and Religion*) by David Thurfjell. David Thurfjell is a professor of the history of religion who combines his historical knowledge with an analysis of in-depth interviews conducted in a Stockholm neighborhood, aiming to explain the religious position of the contemporary middle-class Swede.³¹⁰ His oft-repeated goal is to explain why a group of people, himself included, who think the term “religious” applies to others, still take part in religious celebrations and rites, give their children Biblical names and belong to the Church.³¹¹ He terms this group the “post-Christian secular Swedes.”³¹² From the interviews, Thurfjell found that most people expressed that they had a vague approach to religion, both in thought and language, which did not hold to any identifiable tradition.³¹³ This vague adherence affirms what has been observed by countless other scholars and studies. Thurfjell’s historical analysis looks at three trends that have contributed to the contemporary situation: Christianity and the Church of Sweden, secular religious criticism, and what Thurfjell terms “esoterism” which is concerned with the intuitive and experiential connection to

305 Ibid., 157–158.

306 Ibid., 163.

307 Anders Bäckström, “Religion in the Nordic Countries: Between Private and Public,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 61.

308 Ibid., 63.

309 Ibid., 69.

310 Thurfjell, *Gudlösa folket*, 11.

311 Ibid., 9.

312 Ibid.

313 Ibid., 11.

the supernatural and mystical spheres.³¹⁴ In addition to being de-Christianized, Thurfjell says that most Swedes think they live in the world's most secular country.³¹⁵ Thurfjell is not as confident as the average Swede about Sweden's secularity. He reviews the data and notes that there has been a decrease in participation in life rites, but that the low levels of church attendance are not a recent development.³¹⁶ He problematizes secularization by questioning the accuracy of using belief as a key criterion.³¹⁷ He acknowledges that the numbers in Sweden are lower than in most of Europe, but he asserts that what is meant by various responses is not always clear and caution must be exercised before interpreting these responses as demonstrative of secularization.³¹⁸

Thurfjell ascribes to the religious change position, sharing many of his conclusions with Bäckström.³¹⁹ For Thurfjell, one example of this religious change is Swedes' willingness to combine tenets from various religions and their affirmation that everyone can create their own truth.³²⁰ The creation of one's own truth is an indication of a strong individualism that is almost a "sacralization of the individual's rights."³²¹ Thurfjell argues that the rhetoric of secularization is biased, by both the religious people who view it as a negative development and by the secularists who promote it.³²² In contrast, his interviews show a more conflicted view, suggesting that the language of thoroughgoing secularity expresses people's self-perception, rather than their realistic situation.³²³

Having argued that the perception that Sweden is very secular is exaggerated, Thurfjell examines the first trend which informs post-Christian secular Swedes' view of religion: their Christian inheritance.³²⁴ He argues that the Church was not only a symbol and proponent of faith, but served as a guardian of what was good and honorable.³²⁵ From this review, Thurfjell concludes that over time the Church of Sweden lost the power to explain what Christianity was in the face of the nineteenth-century revival movements and secular religious criticism's push to make religion personal and concerned only with abstract beliefs, rather than embodied practice.³²⁶ The Church remains as a shell from which holidays, life rites, and

314 Ibid., 12.

315 Ibid., 17.

316 Ibid., 23.

317 Ibid., 24.

318 Ibid.

319 Ibid., 25.

320 Ibid., 27.

321 Ibid. Translation mine.

322 Ibid., 37.

323 Ibid.

324 Ibid., 38.

325 Ibid., 39.

326 Ibid., 65.

children's names are gathered, but which has lost deeper meaning in people's lives and whose members no longer call themselves Christians.³²⁷

Thurfjell then examines the role of secular religious criticism. The interviewees criticized religion in different ways: some expressed what Thurfjell termed the—"weak view," i.e. that religion is irrelevant or uninteresting; others held the stronger view that religion in itself had negative effects.³²⁸ Thurfjell argues that for most Swedes "religion" refers to Christianity because it is their cultural heritage and historic framework.³²⁹ In Sweden, the stronger forms of religious criticism were popularized in the 1950s by practical philosopher and opponent of organized Christianity Ingemar Hedenius, and by political scientist and newspaper publisher Herbert Tingsten.³³⁰ Hedenius and Tingsten did not say anything new, but presented European religious criticism in a way that was attractive to Swedes.³³¹ This popularization of atheism, in combination with the subsequent feminist critique of the Church, was a significant contributor to contemporary Swedes' religious criticism.³³² Thurfjell concludes this section of his book suggesting that these factors contributed to post-Christian secular Swedes unwillingness to describe themselves as religious, while the privately religious are more comfortable using the term "spiritual" to describe themselves.³³³ While I agree with most of Thurfjell's assessment to this point, his assertion that people often see themselves as spiritual is a common assumption made of Swedes by opponents of secularization, but Thurfjell does not provide much evidence to confirm this assertion.

Thurfjell's third line of reasoning is that post-Christian secular Swedes are open to "esoterism" which is his umbrella term for New Age, mysticism, the occult, and vague openness to, or experience of, the supernatural.³³⁴ He notes that according to statistics few Swedes put themselves in this category, but that does not mean that esoterism is an insignificant religious mode in Sweden.³³⁵ Thurfjell follows this statement with a second definition of "esoterism": any European variety of religion (from any part of the world) that is not a traditional religion (i.e. Christianity, Judaism or Islam), defining it by what it is not, rather than by what it is.³³⁶ Thurfjell says that these esoteric beliefs have influenced post-Christian secular Swedes subversively, though media and cultural personalities, more than through

327 Ibid.

328 Ibid., 67.

329 Ibid., 72.

330 Ibid., 95.

331 Ibid.

332 Ibid., 101.

333 Ibid., 112.

334 Ibid., 116.

335 Ibid., 120.

336 Ibid., 124.

official healing courses or New Age bookstores.³³⁷ I question whether the presence of these trends can be considered “influential”—or if it is better seen as evidence of “exposure” with unclear evidence regarding the subsequent impact on adherence, not to mention appropriation. According to Thurffjell, not many people hold to these types of beliefs, but they have influenced Swedish thought and views on religion. Anne-Christine Hornborg, a religious historian who focuses on religious anthropology, disagrees, arguing that in Sweden the practices or rites associated with these forms of spirituality are nothing more than “techniques” which have been “detached from the religious traditions from which they were derived.”³³⁸ A study by Kim Löfqvist, who studies theology and religious science with a focus on interpretation of Asian religions, looks at the use of yoga in Swedish schools, showing how the religious content of yoga has been removed in the mind of Swedes and that it should be considered a secular phenomenon.³³⁹ The question arises whether this reappropriation of other religious traditions is a continuation of secularizing trends or if “they are introducing new ways of re-enchanting the secular world.”³⁴⁰ Thurffjell sees them as continued evidence of religiosity, but I agree with Hornborg and Löfqvist that these trends are secular, as they have been divested of their spiritual elements. This process is akin to the secularization of the Church of Sweden which, though it is an official religious entity, lacks emphasis on the transcendent.

In conclusion, Thurffjell argues that in spite of their lack of overt religious affirmation, practice, or self-understanding, the contemporary Swede retains an evangelical Christian filter.³⁴¹ He suggests that the longings filled by religion (religion being equated with Christianity in Sweden), such as philosophical pondering and questions about the deeper dimensions of life, are articulated through non-religious language.³⁴² For the post-Christian secular Swedes, “religion” is something that applies to others, but according to Thurffjell, they are not as secular as they believe and they should be viewed as experiencing “religious change.”³⁴³ When using the definition of “secular” as not relating directly to religion (its beliefs and intentional practices), or seeing secularization as indifference towards religion, then even from Thurffjell’s analysis Sweden should be considered “secular.”

337 Ibid., 139.

338 Anne-Christine Hornborg, “Designing Rites to Re-Enchant Secularized Society: New Varieties of Spiritualized Therapy in Contemporary Sweden,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 51, no. 2 (2012): 404.

339 Kim Löfqvist, “Yoga i skolan: Hinduisk utövning eller sekulariserad rit för avslappning och rörelse?,” *Svensk Teologisk Kvartaskrift* 89, no. 2 (2013): 95.

340 Hornborg, “Rites to Re-Enchant,” 416.

341 Thurffjell, *Gudlösa folket*, 223–228.

342 Ibid., 255–257.

343 Ibid., 258.

Ann af Burén

Ann af Burén wrote her doctoral dissertation under David Thurfjell, and some of the same interview material used in his book was a source for her dissertation.³⁴⁴ She is hesitant to call Sweden secularized. af Burén explores the discord between “the supposedly far-reaching secularity of Sweden on the one hand, and the incongruence and inconsistency of lived religion on the other.”³⁴⁵ She studied the interviews of twenty-eight Swedes from one Stockholm neighborhood who she termed “semi-secular,” i.e. they neither described themselves as religious or as indifferent to religion, though they regarded themselves as secular.³⁴⁶ According to af Burén, this group makes up the majority of Swedes.³⁴⁷ She admits that this study cannot be extrapolated as representative of the whole of Sweden, but argues that it contributes to scholars’ understanding of contemporary Swedes.³⁴⁸

af Burén explored the “simultaneity,” i.e. the “both-and” approach many Swedes have to religion.³⁴⁹ She contests the view that Sweden is secularized based on high church membership statistics, the continued participation in life rites, affirmation of spiritual beliefs even if there is no explicit belief in God, and the acceptance of the paranormal or other forms of non-institutionalized religiosity.³⁵⁰ As mentioned by Bäckström, Pettersson, Edgardh Beckman, and Ahmadi and Ahmadi, af Burén also emphasizes the importance of nature in Swedes’ “religious experience and thoughts.”³⁵¹ From her study, she concludes that most Swedes are neither religious (even when including the practicing of alternative spirituality), or non-religious, but live in the “fuzzy” middle ground.³⁵² While not using the language of “religious change,” there are many similarities between the proponents of that position and af Burén. She argues that scholars must change their understanding of the term “religious” in order to see “the religious meanings, interpretations, and imaginations of the people whom we think of as secular.”³⁵³ She finds that the flexible nature of Swedes’ beliefs and opinions is a part of the current religious concept.³⁵⁴ A similar position is asserted by Stefan Gelfgren, another sociologist of religion, who says that if one thinks secularization means that individuals are led by pure scien-

344 Ann af Burén, “Living Simultaneity: On Religion among Semi-Secular Swedes” (Södertorns Högskola, 2015), 99.

345 *Ibid.*, 3.

346 *Ibid.*, 16–17, 36.

347 *Ibid.*, 15–18.

348 *Ibid.*

349 *Ibid.*, 21–29.

350 *Ibid.*, 85–88.

351 *Ibid.*, 103.

352 *Ibid.*, 207.

353 *Ibid.*

354 *Ibid.*, 213.

tific reason and do not believe in a non-specific transcendent power, then Sweden cannot be considered secularized.³⁵⁵

Concurrent Secularization and Religious Resurgence

In a book entitled *Religionen tur och retur* edited by historian Jenny Björkman and historian Arne Jarrick, another group of scholars write about the potential return of religion in Sweden. The book consists of articles exploring whether religion is making a comeback in modern society. It suggests that secularization is not self-evident, but that there seems to be a return of religion in Sweden, and the world, which is concurrent with the movement of religion back into the public square.³⁵⁶ They note that this movement does not necessarily correlate to increased religiosity within the population.³⁵⁷ The books draws a few general conclusions, suggesting that the increased visibility of religion does not necessitate an increase in religiosity, that the high level of disbelief in God is an exception when compared with the rest of the world, and that over six million Swedes still belong to the national Church.³⁵⁸ They determine that faith is elusive and hard to measure, and that it is unclear if secularization (defined as a reduction of faith) is growing or decreasing.³⁵⁹

The “Almost Religious”

Katedralens hemlighet: sekularisering och religiös övertygelse (The Cathedral’s Secret: Secularization and Religious Conviction) by theologian Bengt Kristensson Ugglå.³⁶⁰ He problematizes the concept of secularization, as many others have done.³⁶¹ Kristensson Ugglå believes part of the problem is that religion today is understood as something intolerant and narrow, as opposed to being an open and tolerant concept.³⁶² He finds that this view has led to people becoming “almost religious,” making the study of true religiosity more difficult.³⁶³ “Almost religious” is his preferred description of the contemporary Swede. Kristensson Ugglå explores whether it is “possible to highlight an alternative interpretation of how one can

355 Stefan Gelfgren, *Kristendom och den moderna världsbilden: norra Europa 1500–2000* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2005), 138, Adobe Digital Editions PDF.

356 Göran Blomqvist, “Förord,” in *Religionen tur och retur*, ed. Jenny Björkman and Arne Jarrick, vol. 2017/2018, RJ:s Årsbok (Göteborg: Makadam förlag, 2017), 7.

357 Jenny Björkman, “Religionen- en fråga om tro. Ett rundabordssamtal med Mohammad Fazlhashemi, Hellen Klein och Åsa Wikforss,” in *Religionen tur och retur*, ed. Jenny Björkman and Arne Jarrick, vol. 2017/2018, RJ:s Årsbok (Göteborg: Makadam förlag, 2017), 184.

358 Ibid.

359 Ibid.

360 Bengt Kristensson Ugglå, *Katedralens hemlighet: sekularisering och religiös övertygelse* (Skellefteå: Artos, 2015), 13–14.

361 Ibid., 9.

362 Ibid., 23.

363 Ibid., 30.

look at the relationship between secularization and religious conviction, or rather, what it could mean to be secularized and at the same time to have a religious conviction.”³⁶⁴ He draws attention to a Sweden-wide debate about where the line should be drawn between what is considered religious and faith-based and what falls in the category of tradition and holidays and is thus accepted in the public sphere.³⁶⁵ As a result of the historical intertwinement of Christianity in all aspects of life in Sweden, Kristensson Ugglå believes that those who want a “purely secular” society underestimate how difficult dividing religion from tradition will be.³⁶⁶ He says, “We will never, within the foreseeable future, be done with Christianity—in the same way that we cannot free ourselves from our own history.”³⁶⁷ Even with the persistence of Christianity, Kristensson Ugglå acknowledges that a secularization process has occurred, which resulted in the average Swede being simultaneously secularized and shaped by religious traditions.³⁶⁸ There are even some people who characterize themselves as “Lutheran atheists.”³⁶⁹ Kristensson Ugglå argues that this mixing of secularization and religious conviction is beneficial to religion because it fosters critical thinking and humble re-evaluation, and he says it should be welcomed.³⁷⁰ Not only should it be welcomed, but he adds that it is “an inner necessity and a clear part of [the religious person’s] identity.”³⁷¹

Kristensson Ugglå further argues that there are hidden aspects of the secularization story that must be exposed.³⁷² One of these hidden aspects is that secularization was, originally, as much about establishing a position for science in modern society as it was about opposing religion.³⁷³ Another aspect is Christianity’s contribution to secularization,³⁷⁴ which is a point mentioned by Peter Berger, David Martin, and Ola Sigurdson, just to name a few. In order to determine if secularization is equivalent to de-Christianization, or if it is a result of the Christian faith, Kristensson Ugglå says that we have to explore the “return of religion.”³⁷⁵ He does not mean the return of Christianity, but asserts that there are re-enchantment and re-sacralization processes occurring.³⁷⁶ He is skeptical about whether the “secularization story” was truly descriptive of the reality and the social change

364 Ibid., 31. Translation mine.

365 Ibid., 41.

366 Ibid., 44.

367 Ibid., 54. Translation mine.

368 Ibid.

369 Ibid., 64.

370 Ibid., 69.

371 Ibid., 106. Translation mine.

372 Ibid., 107.

373 Ibid., 108.

374 Ibid., 115.

375 Ibid., 115.

376 Ibid., 117.

in the 1900s.³⁷⁷ Kristensson Uggla cites the folk awakenings of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as the Pietistic emphasis on individualism, as catalysts for Swedish modernization and society's partial secularization.³⁷⁸ For Kristensson Uggla, these movements impacted the Church of Sweden by provoking changes within the Church and leading to divisions in Christianity.³⁷⁹ The folk religious movement paved the way for other popular movements, such as the workers' movement, which drove much of modernization.³⁸⁰ Kristensson Uggla argues that the universities and hospitals were founded by the Church, and so, even though secularization is said to reign in academia and healthcare, it can be argued that both are still "more Christian than [people] believe."³⁸¹ The Christian vestiges of many "secular" trends undermine a simple understanding of secularization for him.

As with almost every author who talks about secularization in Sweden, Kristensson Uggla must address the issue of, what he terms, the "Swedish/Scandinavian paradox," i.e. the fact that so many Swedes belong to the Church and participate in religious activities, while considering themselves non-religious.³⁸² He suggests that explanations of hypocrisy or double morality are too simple.³⁸³ Kristensson Uggla references explanations attempted by Thurffjell and Grace Davie, as well as an argument made by Henrik Berggren and Lars Trägårdh in their book *Är svensken människa?: gemenskap och oberoende i det moderna Sverige (Is the Swede Human? Community and Self-Reliance in Modern Sweden)*, which explores the intensity of Swedish individualism and its relationship to Lutheranism.³⁸⁴ Kristensson Uggla agrees with scholars such as Martin that the Lutheran character of the State Church is a significant factor in explaining the Swedish paradox, noting the "simultaneous sacralization of the world and a secularization of the Church" that was a by-product of Lutheranism.³⁸⁵ He argues that "the 'Lutheran secularity' or 'secularization's hidden sacrality' opens the way for two completely different paths: either a Lutheran unified society, or a secular, religiously-diverse society."³⁸⁶ He says that society's future will be determined by how we think theologically about the relationship between secularization and religious conviction.³⁸⁷

Religion's return is taking place according to Kristensson Uggla, in the sense that we can observe "the 'return' [of] mythopoeic language" rather than the return

377 Ibid., 121.

378 Ibid., 122–124.

379 Ibid., 133.

380 Ibid.

381 Ibid., 145. Translation mine.

382 Ibid., 149.

383 Ibid.

384 Ibid., 149–153.

385 Ibid., 153. Translation mine.

386 Ibid., 155. Translation mine.

387 Ibid.

of Christianity or any other specific religion.³⁸⁸ In conclusion, he says, “The cathedral is the bearer of a memory from an open, generous and inclusive Christianity that has since been lost. Why do we find it so hard to take seriously the openness, hospitality and tolerance that stand in line with the memory the cathedral ‘carries’?”³⁸⁹ This question supports his overall suggestion, that the cathedral “harbors” both secularization and religious conviction together and that we should be able to do so as well; for Kristensson Ugglå the conflict between religion and secularity is a misunderstanding of true Christianity.³⁹⁰

Mattias Martinson, professor of systematic theology, uses the term “almost religious,” borrowed from Bengt Kristensson Ugglå to describe the majority of contemporary Swedes.³⁹¹ He, alongside Kristensson Ugglå, discusses the role of the cathedral in the discussion of secularization. Martinson says the “almost religious” should be the focus of study and “proper theological attention,” and that even though their position is vague, it does not mean that it lacks content.³⁹² Martinson argues that religion has never been gone from society and so though we are seeing an increased resurgence of religion, he believes we are seeing the simultaneous and reactionary resurgence of atheism.³⁹³ He suggests that even if contemporary religious norms are often indistinct from non-religious norms, the Church is not secularized and its presence in society still “charges the common secular norm in Sweden with a certain theological energy.”³⁹⁴ He thinks that doubt, indifference, and agnosticism should be interpreted as “practical atheism” which resulted from direct opposition to belief in God and that this opposition is returning to prominence today.³⁹⁵ This resurgence of atheism is even seen in the writings (and thoughts) of many believing Christian theologians, not just critical intellectuals, because they too have rejected supernatural categories which were givens for theologians like Luther and Calvin.³⁹⁶ Martinson concludes that in the same way that the cathedral (or church) still stands in the center of many towns, Christianity as a concept still has “central” influence in Swedish society.³⁹⁷ For Martinson, this influence is seen in the reciprocal resurgence of both religion and atheism.³⁹⁸ Thus, for Martinson, “secularized” is not an applicable term for contemporary Sweden.

388 Ibid., 117. Translation mine.

389 Ibid., 234. Translation mine.

390 Ibid., 240.

391 Mattias Martinson, “Nästan religiös: Katedraler och sekulära teologier,” *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 92, no. 1 (2016): 36.

392 Ibid. Translation mine.

393 Mattias Martinson, *Katedralen mitt i staden: om ateism och teologi*, Arcus teologi (Lund: Arcus, 2010), 9.

394 Ibid., 10.

395 Ibid., 15.

396 Ibid., 19.

397 Ibid., 29.

398 Ibid.

He does not advocate for “religious change” either. He is content to observe the continued presence of religious concepts, the resurgence of religion, and the resurgence of outright atheism, without coming to any firm conclusions about the presence or absence of secularization. Though Kristensson Uggla did not express it in the same terms, Martinson’s ending point aligns with his.

Atheism in Sweden

Johan Lundborg, a scholar of faith and worldview science at Uppsala University, and Ola Sigurdson, professor of systematic theology at Gothenburg University, are two scholars who have examined the history of atheism in Sweden and its contribution to secularization. The title of Lundborg’s book is *När ateismen erövrade Sverige: Ingemar Hedenius och debatten kring tro och vetande* (*When Atheism Conquered Sweden: Ingemar Hedenius and the Debate about Faith and Knowing*). In 1949, Ingemar Hedenius published a book called *Tro och vetande* (*Faith and Knowing*), which in many ways was like lighter fluid on the already smoldering fire of atheism in Sweden.³⁹⁹ Hedenius was influenced by Bertrand Russell, as well as other Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophers.⁴⁰⁰ Hedenius’ book was of great interest to Herbert Tingsten, a political scientist and editor of an influential Swedish newspaper.⁴⁰¹ Tingsten had begun to describe Swedes as “name Christians” or in better English as “nominal Christians.”⁴⁰²

In the words of Lundborg, “Hedenius’ book was, for Tingsten, a welcome contribution in the attempt to support the thesis of religion’s death.”⁴⁰³ Lundborg does not think Hedenius’ critique was as impactful as people assume.⁴⁰⁴ This myth of the devastating impact of Hedenius’ religious criticism was propagated through: Tingsten’s promotion of Hedenius in the main Swedish newspaper, the fact that

399 Magnus Hagevi, “De postsekulära generationerna,” in *Det nya Sverige [Elektronisk resurs]: trettiosju kapitel om politik, medier och samhälle: SOM-undersökningen 2006*, ed. Sören Holmberg and Lennart Weibull (Göteborg: SOM-institutet, Göteborgs universitet, 2007), 69, accessed April 24, 2018, <http://hdl.handle.net/2077/26520>.

400 Johan Lundborg, *När ateismen erövrade Sverige: Ingemar Hedenius och debatten kring tro och vetande* (Nora: Nya Doxa, 2002), 14.

401 Lars Johansson, “Ateismens historia,” *NOD: forum för tro, kultur och samhälle* 4 (2006): 12.

402 The full quote from Tingsten, as cited in Hugh McLeod’s *Religion and the People of Western Europe, 1789-1989* is: “Christians-in-name-only (*namnkristna*), indeed the phrase Christian-in-name-only seems almost too strong even when used to designate total indifference bounded by approval of tradition and convention. They say they believe in God, yet do not accept the doctrines that distinguish Christianity. They want to keep education in Christianity, yet do not go to church. Baptism, confirmation, marriage, and burial—these are the contacts these people have, not with religion (for there is no reason to have such contact!) but only with the church. The holy sacraments provide a setting for festive occasions. A necessity for this state of affairs is that they do not listen, do not understand, or at least do not pay any attention to what is said. They enquire as little into the meaning of these things as they ponder electricity on a journey by tram. This we all know, and this we all say—but convention is so well established that it is considered a trifle unbecoming to say so publicly.”

403 Lundborg, *Ateismen erövrade Sverige*, 33. Translation mine.

404 *Ibid.*, 300.

Hedenius' thoughts concurred with the spirit of the times, and by Hedenius himself through his biased record of the history of the "faith and knowing debate."⁴⁰⁵ It was further promoted by Hedenius' need to be right and his rhetorical dominance over his opponents, at times frightening them into silence.⁴⁰⁶ As a result, contemporary people assume that Hedenius' critique was devastating. However, Lundborg argues that the content was not problematic for theologians, but that Hedenius won the debate on the popular level and this myth of his devastating critique has been disseminated throughout society because of his rhetorical tricks.⁴⁰⁷ In sum, whether Hedenius was intellectually persuasive matters little because of his reception in society and its subsequent contribution to the secularization of Sweden.

Theologian Ola Sigurdson also discusses the development of atheism in Sweden. His main contributions to the present discussion are a study of five key Swedish writers from the 1900s (Axel Hägerström, Herbert Tingsten, Alva and Gunnar Myrdal, and Ingemar Hedenius) writing on topics such as philosophy, political science, and national economy,⁴⁰⁸ and a presentation of the current "post-secular condition."⁴⁰⁹ All five well-known thinkers, who are the focus of his book, *Den lyckliga filosofin* (The Happy Philosophy), were concerned with the relationship of faith to politics, knowledge, and science.⁴¹⁰ All five are associated with the development of the "Swedish model," were proponents of modernization⁴¹¹ and, by extension, have contributed to the current secular situation. Several other authors, such as David Thurfjell and Johan Lundborg, have mentioned the importance of Hedenius and Tingsten, and Sigurdson continues to develop the picture by incorporating the other three into his analysis. Sigurdson notes that, in contrast to sociologist and philosopher Max Weber's pessimism about the coming of modernity, the "disenchantment" of society, and the privatization of religion, most of these Swedish thinkers heralded modernity as the beginning of something new and wonderful.⁴¹² Tingsten was the exception to this optimism.⁴¹³ Since these five individuals contributed to the creation of the "Swedish model" (i.e. the welfare state), either by their philosophy or direct role in policy formation, and were influential in Sweden's modernization process, their open-armed welcome of modernity

405 Ibid., 301-302.

406 Ibid.

407 Ibid., 300.

408 Ola Sigurdson, *Den lyckliga filosofin: etik och politik hos Hägerström, Tingsten, makarna Myrdal och Hedenius* (Stockholm: Brutus Östlings Bokförlag Symposion, 2000), 7.

409 Ola Sigurdson, *Det postsekulära tillståndet: religion, modernitet, politik* (Göteborg: Glänta, 2015), Kindle, Loc 75.

410 Sigurdson, *Lyckliga filosofin*, 29.

411 Ibid., 190.

412 Ibid., 254.

413 Ibid.

contributed to the pervasiveness that modern values (including privatization of religion) have in Swedish society today. It seems that, among those working at the highest levels of social reorganization in the 1900s, there was no voice of caution to question the movement towards a secularized society. Instead, most, if not all, of these thinkers were opposed to organized religion in any form, and were happy to see it decrease in popularity and adherence.

In his more recent book, *Det postsekulära tillståndet: religion, modernitet, politik* (The Post-Secular Condition: Religion, Modernity, Politics), Sigurdson begins to explore the question: what is coming back when people talk about religion's return?⁴¹⁴ His position is that whether it is "religion's return" or a renewed visibility of religion, religion is an inseparable part of public life alongside politics, economics and culture.⁴¹⁵ He is not sure that "religion's return" is the most helpful description, since he does not believe religion was gone in the way that proponents of secularization have suggested.⁴¹⁶ This does not mean that he denies all evidence of secularization. His thesis is that current society is "post-secular,"⁴¹⁷ i.e. society is experiencing a change in self-understanding characterized by a mixture of the religious and the secular, and that religion is an important dimension of modernity and cannot be ignored when studying modern society.⁴¹⁸ Sigurdson suggests that the belief that religion exists in its own societal sphere is mistaken: rather, he thinks that it interacts with and impacts other social spheres.⁴¹⁹ Sigurdson is hesitant to accept the differentiation of society and argues that each part affects the others. He acknowledges that there has been a move away from the language of traditional religion towards more vague terms: from "belonging" and "religion," to "belief" and "spirituality."⁴²⁰ For Sigurdson, the contents of the new and old terms are equivalent.⁴²¹ He explores the voice of theology in society and its contributions to discussion of freedom, tolerance, universality, and human rights.⁴²² These are all good, and Christian, ideas. They are also key tenets of modernity and Sigurdson argues that theology has, by extension, played a significant role in modernization.

Sigurdson asserts that man is a created being and as a result "humanity's spirituality is not a type of divine mistake, but is exactly how God envisioned people."⁴²³

414 Sigurdson, *Postsekulära tillståndet*, Loc 42.

415 Ibid., Loc 57.

416 Ibid., Loc 5129.

417 It is interesting to note at this juncture that each scholar who uses the term "post-secular" means something different by it. So when they assert that Sweden is "post-secular," it may not mean that Sweden has moved through its secular phase of history or even that Sweden is no longer secular.

418 Ibid., Loc 75-81.

419 Ibid., Loc 294

420 Ibid., Loc 421.

421 Ibid., Loc 421.

422 Ibid., Loc 1772-1884.

423 Ibid., Loc 2336. Translation mine.

He agrees that secularization results in the privatization of religion, but sees this privatization as beneficial because it removed “unquestioned association with a certain religious community.”⁴²⁴ He argues that de-sacralization and individualization were essential for the progress of modernity.⁴²⁵ The privatization of traditional religion (which historically served as one of the cohering factors in society) is not the disappearance of religion, but rather, the appearance of other unifying factors that are replacing the functions religion served in the past.⁴²⁶ In conclusion, Sigurdson says that a “post-secular condition” must admit three things: that modernity has a religious heritage, that church and state should not be viewed as equivalent, and that both the religious and secular voices should be heard in public dialogue.⁴²⁷

To summarize Sigurdson, he questions whether religion was ever gone, arguing instead for the continued presence of private religiosity with public secularity.⁴²⁸ He takes the position, also held by Peter Berger, that individualization has led to the de-sacralization of the public sphere, but in contrast to Berger, Sigurdson argues that this is a positive development.⁴²⁹ He notes that the Lutheran character of the Church of Sweden is important when exploring the trajectory of religion and secularization in Sweden.⁴³⁰ He concludes that, in the modern post-secular society, the religious and the secular co-exist.

Owe Wikström - A More Holistic Approach

Owe Wikström, longtime priest, psychotherapist, and professor of religious psychology at Uppsala University from 1984–2012, wrote two books that explore the theological and psychological aspects of the current religious situation in Sweden. Like Eva Hamberg who stands alone at the beginning of this section, Owe Wikström stands alone at the end. His psychological bent results in books that are existential as well as analytical, reminiscent of the neighboring Dane, Søren Kierkegaard. This more holistic approach serves as a fitting end point to my survey of the scholarship. It sets the tone for my conclusion: a summary analysis combined with a few suggestions about an embodied, holistic way forward.

Wikström’s relevant books are entitled *Det bländande mörkret* (The Glaring Darkness) and *Till längtans försvar eller vemodet i finska tango* (In Defence of Longing or Melancholy in a Finnish Tango). Wikström argues that the use of spiritual terms has increased since 2000 and that there is a concurrent increase in

424 Ibid., Loc 5372. Translation mine.

425 Ibid., Loc 5420.

426 Ibid., Loc 5486- 5495.

427 Ibid., Loc 6000.

428 Ibid., Loc 5259.

429 Ibid., Loc 5420-5600.

430 Ibid., Loc 5420-5600.

openness to discussing deeper questions, Christian faith, and spirituality.⁴³¹ He noticed, through participation in various seminars and discussions about the intersection between social life and existential questions, that there is increased interest in non-European spirituality, and a renewed interest in Christian spirituality.⁴³² Wikström sees these phenomena as signs of a re-sacralization and suggests that “the modern world is secularized, demystified, and technological” yet is experiencing the resurgence of opposite tendencies.⁴³³ Though European and Swedish cultures are impregnated with the tradition of Christianity, Wikström argues that true knowledge of Christianity is disappearing and that there is growth of the “individual ‘micro-holiness’” of privatized faith which lacks actual knowledge of historic Christian spirituality.⁴³⁴ He thinks the aging generations rejected Christianity because they were taught that God was very strict either from strong Lutheran orthodoxy, or from the free churches’ moralizing and shaming wrong doing.⁴³⁵ The younger generations have not experienced this and Wikström argues that they are more open to Christian spirituality and beliefs as a result.⁴³⁶ He asserts that humanity’s innate feelings of melancholy are at the core a longing for the holy and for connection with the divine, which could explain why many Swedes participate in various Church life rites and holiday celebrations despite their disbelief.⁴³⁷ He admits that this may not be the full explanation since in contemporary life these practice have profane aspects and, to a certain degree, are only traditions.⁴³⁸ He argues that existential melancholy’s three main characteristics are homelessness, finitude and spirituality, and that contemporary Swedes are looking for ways to fill melancholy’s longing and to “come home.”⁴³⁹ For Wikström, these attempts to fill these longings are evidenced in an increase of spirituality.

Summary

In summary, all of these Swedish scholars acknowledge that Sweden is thought to be secularized (often as the most secular in the world) and that survey data and other studies, to varying degrees, support this position. Most scholars believe that this view is too simplistic and ought to be nuanced. After some discussion, Per Petterson and Göran Gustafsson argue that the Church is secularized. Ole Riis, Loek Halman, and Thorleif Petterson prefer the term “religious change” but have a

431 Owe Wikström, *Det bländande mörkret* (Örebro: Libris, 2007), 16–19.

432 Ibid., 20.

433 Ibid., 231. Translation mine.

434 Ibid., 244. Translation mine.

435 Owe Wikström, *Till längtans försvar eller vemodet i finsk tango* (Stockholm: Natur och kultur, 2008), 144.

436 Ibid.

437 Ibid., 173–176.

438 Ibid.

439 Ibid., 189.

hard time denying that Sweden is secularized. Anders Bäckström, Per Pettersson, Nina Edgardh Beckman, David Thurffjell, and Ann af Burén support the “religious change” position outright. Eva Hamberg holds to the middle route—neither denying secularization nor ascribing without reservation to “religious change”—she cites evidence of both. Others such as Mattias Martinson, and the editors of *Religionen tur och retur*,⁴⁴⁰ tend to argue for the simultaneous processes of secularization and renewed religiosity in Sweden. Magnus Hagevi is conflicted, seeing some evidences of secularization, but he points out levels of private religiosity as well as evidence of the return of religion without an increase in participation. Ola Sigurdson thinks that Sweden is in a “post-secular” period, he does not deny the presence of secularization though he does question its pervasiveness and its continued presence. Ove Wikström and Bengt Kristensson Ugglå argue for the simultaneous presence and growth of both secularization and religion. Both Wikström and Kristensson Ugglå find evidence that Christianity in general, and Lutheranism in particular, has contributed to the current Swedish situation regarding religion and secularization. The general sense is that “religious change” is the best description of the contemporary Swedish situation, rather than secularization, even if everyone acknowledges there is some evidence of secularizing trends. There is almost unanimous denial that Swedish society is as secular as most people assume it to be.

In conclusion, this overview suggests that most Swedish scholars do not accept the one-dimensional position that Sweden is continuing to secularize. Each scholar tends to use different definitions of religion, secular, and secularized, and even when using less-common terms, such as “private religion,” they do so in subtly different ways. They almost all begin by citing the data that suggests Sweden might be secularized, and may even say it is the most secularized country. They seek to nuance the conversation through further studies, altered definitions, and reviews of history. Their input is insightful and interesting. The few non-Swedish or Scandinavian scholars who wrote in the last twenty years tend towards different analyses. As discussed, these scholars from outside Sweden/Scandinavia find that either Sweden is very secular, or that the current position is unclear and more time must pass before a statement can be made about this nation’s religiosity or lack thereof. This amount of conflict suggests that, whatever else can be said, the situation in Sweden is not self-evident or lacking complexity.

440 This generalization applies to their view on the Swedish situation specifically, when looking more globally they see greater evidence of a resurgence of religion with less of the accompanying secularity.

CONCLUSION

What can be said about the contemporary situation regarding religion and secularization in Sweden? The general consensus is that Swedes are generally apathetic and indifferent towards religion, yet they are still members of the Church of Sweden with relatively high participation in life rites. Much of Swedish culture is still infused with reminders of their Christian heritage: many names are biblical in origin, holidays are Christian (with time-off still granted for Ascension Day and other minor religious holidays), and in general their laws (and values) are informed by biblical principles. In spite of the subconscious cultural influences, there seems to be an increase in the rate of the decline of religion—regarding both beliefs and practices—in the last one hundred years. Most contemporary scholars, especially non-Swedes, accept the assertion that Sweden is secular.

I began with a review of Swedish church history, followed by a discussion of various twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholars. My survey of Swedish history suggests that levels of passionate adherence to Christianity have been low throughout all eras, with brief periods of increased commitment that are the exception, rather than the norm. Since its founding, the Lutheran Church has been the hegemonic religious institution in Sweden. Many scholars, David Martin for one, argue that the nature of secularity in Sweden can be connected with the cultural and social nuances resulting from Lutheranism. David Martin's seminal work *A General Theory of Secularization* analyzes the key aspects of Lutheranism and their connections with secularization. Other twentieth-century scholars, namely Grace Davie, have coined terms like "belonging without believing" and "vicarious religion" which accurately describe the Swedish situation. Martin, Davie, and many other twentieth-century scholars believe that Sweden is secular.

The twenty-first-century scholars take a variety of approaches as they seek to describe the situation: some assert that the general perception of "Sweden as secular" is accurate (e.g. Phil Zuckerman). Others create terms to describe the present situation, such as "fuzzy fidelity" or "cultural religion" (David Voas and N.J. Demerath, respectively), suggesting that currently Sweden is not completely secular, but arguing that it has been secularizing and will continue on this trajectory. A few propose the idea of "religious change" as the best explanatory model (e.g. Isabella

Kasselstrand and David Hempton). The general consensus of non-Swedish scholars is that if Sweden is not already secular, it is moving in that direction.

Swedish scholars, on the other hand, find it difficult to accept that Sweden is secular. Eva Hamberg tries to find evidence of “private religion.” Though she does not identify a workable definition, she notes that many Swedes express some form of religious belief. She concludes that more time must pass before scholars can determine if Sweden is experiencing secularization or religious change. Rather than approaching the question of societal secularization, Per Pettersson and Göran Gustafsson attempt to demonstrate that the Church itself is secular. They argue that the Church’s secularity undermines the idea that continued membership in the Church or participation in life rites is evidence against secularization. The majority of Swedish scholars advocate for using the term “religious change” (e.g. Andreas Bäckström, David Thurffell, and Ann af Burén). These scholars believe that Sweden is moving away from traditional religiosity and Christianity. Yet, they argue that Swedes are still impacted by religion and that religion remains an important part of their lives—there is still sacrality and the on-going development of new religious forms. Hence, they conclude that the best term to describe the situation is “religious change.” Some suggest that contemporary Sweden is experiencing the simultaneous, if opposing, processes of secularization and religious resurgence; they are trying to accommodate the evidence suggesting that both of these processes are occurring into one explanatory model (e.g. Mattias Martinson, Jenny Björkman, and Arne Jarrick). Other scholars advocate for the idea that what is occurring is best described as “religious resurgence” (e.g. Magnus Hagevi and Owe Wikström). While Ola Sigurdson and Bengt Kristensson Uggla believe that the future will be characterized by the co-existence of religion and secularity in modern society.

Looking at the history of Sweden, the social changes in the last one hundred years, and the current scholarship, I do not believe the evidence seeking to disprove the idea that Sweden remains on its secularizing trajectory is compelling enough. While there are shifts and changes, I think the overall trend points towards continued secularization in Sweden. This does not mean that there is no increased interest in religion, presence of different faiths in the public square, or openness to religious practices. Rather, these hints of religion constitute a minimal element in Swedish society, while the rest of society is moving in the opposite direction. Continued scholarship as we move into this next decade of the twenty-first century will

be helpful in determining if my conclusion is accurate.⁴⁴¹ Based on the currently available information, it is difficult to argue that religion is resurging to any significant degree in Sweden.

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Two of the many questions facing Sweden's Christians consider today are: "How does the church respond?" and "What role do individual Christians play in this response?" Detailed answers to these (and similar) questions are outside the scope of this study, but I will venture a few thoughts. First, becoming aware of how Christians, as individuals or as churches, are either continuing to promote the secular/sacred split (as mentioned in the Introduction) or making their expression of Christianity more secular will allow for change and will slow the move towards secularization. Particular concern is warranted regarding the "materialistic" aspects of the "prosperity gospel" or the subtle acceptance of modern values the conflict with the biblical worldview. Second, several scholars including Ola Sigurdson have pointed out the benefits of modernization and its Christian roots. If people acknowledge what these beneficial contributions are and continue to promote them, not being afraid of modern society, but working within it towards the fuller expression of biblical values and the renewal of creation, then I believe society will be more open to hearing about Christ and the beliefs of these individuals.

Craig Gay, professor of theology and interdisciplinary studies at Regent College (who has written frequently on the subjects of secularization, modernity, and theology), articulates what I believe to be the most helpful response to secularization. Gay says, "If there are solutions to the perplexing problem of the secularization of (post)modern society and culture, I will conclude, they are to be found in historic trinitarian orthodoxy."⁴⁴² The ultimate response for Christians in Sweden is not new programs, better graphic design, or even rejecting all that is "modern." Rather, it is two-fold. The church in Sweden needs to continue to emphasize the aspects of Christian truth, as proclaimed throughout the centuries, which it currently expresses and embodies. The church also needs to evaluate where it has wandered from those same truths, and return to affirm them where they have been forgotten or marginalized.

441 It must be admitted that what my study does not account for is the advent of unforeseen social changes which could affect Sweden's religiosity. The recent waves of Muslim immigration will be an influential factor in future social and religious development. Some posit that this influence will result in increased religiosity. However, the impact of this change is still unknown, and more time must pass before it can be factored into an analysis of Sweden's secularization, or future socio-religious trajectory.

442 Gay, *The (Modern) World*, 25.

In summary, I find that knowing more of the historical background, understanding how Sweden became secular, and identifying what unique factors contribute to Swedish secularity will help to form and transform the Christian response to a secular society. Increased insight aids the response and the re-affirmation of “historic trinitarian orthodoxy.”⁴⁴³ More study and thought are required regarding the practical aspects of the way forward, but my hope is that this study synthesizes the relevant information, analyzes the current reality, and encourages more contemplation about how to live and love Christ and others in contemporary Sweden.

443 Ibid.

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VITA

Jennifer grew up in Virginia and North Carolina. She graduated in 2010 with a BA from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in Religious Studies with a Biology Minor. After graduation, she moved to Uppsala, Sweden to work with Agape Sverige (a student organization). She lived there from 2011- 2019, beginning her degree at Regent College as a distance student and then enjoying a year's hiatus from Sweden to live in Vancouver and study full-time (2016-2017). After completion of her MA in 2019, she moved to Durham, UK to begin doctoral work in Theology and Religion.