

The First Right

Freedom to religion
Freedom from religion



Jacob Rudenstrand

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The first right

Religious Freedom Series (IIRF)

Volume 10

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Freedom to religion. Freedom from religion

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Contents

Foreword	7
Preface	9
Introduction: A secular corridor of opinion	11
Part 1: Religious freedom in the world.....	21
Religious persecution and repression – a growing threat	23
Driving forces and motives.....	31
The West’s blind spot	35
The War on Christmas	37
Foreign policy without religious freedom?.....	43
Religious feelings and blasphemy bans	57
When Sweden did not recognize a genocide	67
Islamism and Islamophobia.....	75
Part 2: The history of religious freedom	85
Enlightenment idea or apostolic legacy?	87
Libertas Religionis – from Tertullian to Thomas Jefferson.....	93
Human dignity and the individual	103
From conventicle act to Sweden’s popular movements	113
Part 3: Freedom of religion in Sweden	121
Democratic values? The state and faith communities.....	123
From state church to an arena of partisan politics.....	137
The right to blaspheme	149
Catechism interrogations and governmental competence	159
The tug of war between the secular and pluralist world	169
Independent confessional schools – “poisonous cocktail” or democratic right?	177
Democratic drift	187
Freedom and friction.....	197
The last temptation of the liberation project	207
The first right and the open society.....	215

Foreword

This English edition makes Jacob Rudenstrand's reflections on religious freedom accessible to a wider audience. Although rooted in the Swedish experience, its themes – the transition from a state church to a secular state ideology, tensions between majority culture and religious minorities, and the global reality of religious persecution – speak to broader international debates. Few works address the Nordic contribution to discussions on freedom of religion or belief, making this translation a timely and valuable addition.

The translation followed a careful process: an initial machine translation was refined through proofreading and finalized in consultation with the author. All quotations were translated directly from the Swedish edition, even when the sources were originally in English. Readers should also note that some URLs referenced may no longer be current.

Dennis P. Petri

Director of the International Institute of Religious Freedom

Preface

THIS BOOK IS the result of more than ten years of thinking and writing about religious freedom. If the right to have or not to have a religious belief is a human right, how is it threatened at home and around the world? Which is the most persecuted group and why is it so difficult to talk about it in Sweden? How did the concept of religious freedom emerge? Is it the result of enlightenment thinking or is there a prehistory? And what challenges does Sweden face when it comes to religious freedom?

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the introduction of full religious freedom in Sweden. It became possible to leave the Church of Sweden without becoming a member of another registered religious community. Today we are seen as the most secular country in the world and freedom of religion is written into the constitution. At the same time, the fact that Sweden has become increasingly multicultural has led to a number of tensions between the majority culture and various religious minorities. In a short time we have gone from a state church monopoly to a secular state ideology with limited tolerance for dissenters. Politicians often claim that we live in a secular society where religion should be private. But are we all expected to adapt to a secular worldview that is hardly neutral? Should we not rather ask ourselves how can we live with each other's differences in our pluralistic society?

These are some of the questions that led to the book you are holding in your hand.

I have had discussion partners along the way, both people and books. Some of them appear in these pages, but already now I want to express gratitude to both good friends and opponents who have stimulated my thoughts and sharpened my pen. Your contributions illustrate the importance of being able to think freely and differently about some of life's most fundamental questions.

Stockholm early fall 2021
Jacob Rudenstrand

Introduction: A secular corridor of opinion

IN SWEDEN, WE WANT TO be the best in the world. We aim to be at the forefront of environmental and sustainability issues. We want to be a driving force in international aid work. We are in the lead in the digital market.

We are the most equal country in the world, have the most extensive welfare system, we endeavor to have the best schools and always send the best song to Eurovision. We are more open-minded, progressive, democratic and tolerant than other countries.

In Sweden we have a system.

But how good are we at religious freedom?

All Swedes born after 1951 have lived in a country with legislated freedom of religion. This is late compared to many other countries. Although the Freedom of Religion Act of January 1, 1952 has been repealed (freedom of religion is instead enshrined in the Constitution), it was an important milestone for democratic Sweden. It gave us the right to leave the then state church without becoming a member of another religious community, and you no longer had to be a member of the Church of Sweden to hold a government position.

In the second chapter of the Constitution on fundamental rights and freedoms, freedom of religion is currently classified under the so-called freedoms of opinion:

Everyone shall be guaranteed [...] freedom of worship: that is, the freedom to practise one's religion alone or in the company of others.¹

In the European Convention, which is also Swedish law following Sweden's membership of the EU, freedom of religion is defined in Article 9:1:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance.²

¹ Riksdag. Kungörelse (1974:152) om beslutad ny regeringsform, https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/kungorelse-1974152-om-beslutad-ny-regeringsform_sfs-1974-152/

² Parliament. Law (1994:1219) on the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, <https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/doku>

And Article 18 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights states:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or beliefs, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practise, worship and observance.³

Although the ECHR allows for some restrictions on freedom of religion⁴, it is absolute under the Swedish constitution. The restrictions on public gatherings during the Covid pandemic, such as how many people can attend a service regardless of the size of the venue, have raised a number of questions about how much religious freedom is “worth in times of a pandemic”,⁵ as PJ Anders Linder put it. After November 2020, churches, mosques and synagogues allowed only eight visitors at a service, regardless of the size of the premises. The fact that shopping centers and gyms trumped the right to “practice one’s religion or faith through worship”⁶ seemed somewhat contradictory.

In fact, the government’s proposal for the pandemic act of January 10, 2021, hardly discussed the consequences for religious freedom. Nevertheless, the law included far-reaching restrictions on fundamental rights and freedoms.⁷ Freedom of assembly, demonstration and enterprise were given considerably more space.

Yet, these rights and freedoms may be restricted under the Constitution, while freedom of religion is absolute.

In an editorial, *Expressen* noted that just in time for Easter 2021, the government allowed museums and art galleries to apply the same square

ment-och-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/lag-19941219-om-den-europeiska-konventionen_sfs-1994-1219/

³ Government. UN human rights conventions, <https://www.regering-en.se/informationsmaterial/2012/01/a11.017/>

⁴ Ibid. “Freedom to manifest religion or belief shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety or for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.” (ECHR Article 9(2))

⁵ Linder, PJ Anders. “Religionsfriheten inte mycket värd i pandemitider”, *Göteborgs-Posten*, <https://www.gp.se/ledare/gastkolumn/religionsfriheten-inte-mycket-var-d-i-pandemitider.3e889833-0ce3-41ad-a4eb-66f4a3ec1363>

⁶ Riksdag. Act (1994:1219) on the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-och-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/lag-19941219-om-den-europeiska-konventionen_sfs-1994-1219/

⁷ Government. “A temporary COVID-19 law”. Prop. 2020/21:79, <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/proposition/2021/01/prop.-20202179/>

meter rule as shops and gyms. Even outdoor markets and amusement parks were exempted. But not churches, mosques and synagogues. It was fine to go on the carousel at the first sign of lower infection, while a visit to a church would require absolute certainty. “The crux, of course, is that visits to Gröna Lund or Liseberg are not a human right, while religious gatherings are.”⁸

The freedom of religion in the Constitution has a very narrow scope, while it is much broader in the ECHR. The restrictions on worship gatherings were indeed based on the Constitution and may appear disproportionate under the ECHR. It is not certain that they would have survived a review by the European Court of Human Rights.

Religious freedom has strong constitutional protection in Sweden. Apart from the recent discussion on religious freedom during pandemic times, there is almost a consensus. All parliamentary parties agree that people should be able to practice their faith alone or in community with others.

Leading opinion makers are also speaking out against those who might propose restrictions on the right of minorities to practice their religion. In an unsigned editorial in *Dagens Nyheter* in December 2019, the newspaper writes that stronger criticism of immigration tends to make more and more people sceptical about religious freedom:

But restricting religious freedom is not an immigration issue. Restrictions risk affecting people of faith who have lived in Sweden for generations. It hits minorities the hardest, but also affects Christians. With sweeping blows, we risk eliminating freedoms that have been taken for granted for decades, even centuries.⁹

But what does this mean in practice in a multicultural and multiracial society where the conflicting goals of religious belief have become increasingly apparent? In a short time, Sweden has gone from a Lutheran state church system with little room for religious dissenters to what many describe as a secular and progressive society. Recent years have given us recurring examples of how what does not correspond to common democratic values is pointed out as problematic – often with well-intentioned motives. For example, the governmental expert committee Delmi, which reports to the Ministry of Justice, recently published a policy brief in which

⁸ *Expressen*. “How did Gröna Lund become more important than the constitution?”, <https://www.expressen.se/ledare/hur-blev-grona-lund-viktigare-an-grundlagen>

⁹ *Dagens Nyheter*. “Heliga dagar i religionshatets tid”, <https://www.dn.se/ledare/heliga-dagar-i-religionshatets-tid>

criticism of Islam and problematic ideas in certain Muslim contexts was described as racism.¹⁰ Even if the aim was laudable – to analyze racism in various forums – stigmatizing criticism of religion is hardly an expression of free and open debate about beliefs. A number of established Swedish newspapers and opinion leaders were also named and singled out. The Discrimination Ombudsman (DO) even considered it justified to open a supervisory case against Norrköping's pastorate after a job applicant claimed that the church was discriminating against her because she was neither a member nor believed in God.¹¹ It was obviously more important to legitimize a perception of discrimination rather than to establish a community's religious freedom to choose who to employ based on obvious criteria. The Swedish state secularism's expectation that religious beliefs are private could not be clearer.

In *The Secular Age*, the philosopher Charles Taylor says that secularism among other things is about the “retreat of religion from the public space”.¹² The public debate often gives the impression that religion will inevitably be marginalized in a modern world, he says, because that view is dominant among intellectuals and academics.¹³ The idea that religion should be private is thus very much a matter of ideological conviction.

When political scientist Henrik Ekengren Oscarsson coined the term “opinion corridor” in a blog post in December 2013, he touched on the notion that religious beliefs are expected to be private:

The opinion corridor – that is, the buffer zone where you still have some leeway to express an opinion without having to receive a fresh diagnosis of your mental state – is very narrow in Sweden. It is now enough to say that you believe in God (which, by the way, 45 percent of the population say they do) to be considered not in your right mind.¹⁴

Three months earlier, this had been clearly illustrated in the media. In September 2013, Elisabeth Svantesson, a Moderate MP with a background in Word of Life and pro-life work, was appointed as the new Minister of

¹⁰ Delmi. Interactive racism on the internet, in the press and politics, https://www.delmi.se/media/s40dgfqc/delmi-policy-brief-2021-8_web.pdf

¹¹ Zetterman, Jacob. “Kyrka DO-anmäld för jobbannons – sökande trodde inte på Gud”, *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/2021/04/14/kyrka-do-anmald-for-jobbannons-sokande-trodde-inte-pa-gud>

¹² Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007) p. 423.

¹³ Ibid p. 429.

¹⁴ Oscarsson, Henrik Ekengren. “Väljare är inga dumbommar”, *Politologerna*, <https://politologerna.wordpress.com/2013/12/10/valjare-ar-inga-dumbommar/>

Employment. Previously, newly appointed ministers had been criticized for everything from irregularities in company deals to unpaid TV fees, and in some cases had even been forced to resign. At a press conference with then-Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt, Svantesson's Christian background was instead mentioned. The result was that the newly appointed minister was subjected to a major media pushback. Speaking to *Swedish Radio's* English-language news, religious scholar Eli Göndör commented on the Swedish attitude towards religiously believing politicians: "I don't think that an openly religious person has the same chance to make a political career, or any other kind of career, as a secular person."¹⁵

Being openly religious – with all the values that go with it – seems to be one of Sweden's last taboos. This is despite the fact that we live in an increasingly multicultural society, where we pride ourselves on "liking those different from us".

The supposed tolerance for religious dissenters is simply mere lip service. In fact, unlike the world's oldest freedom of the press regulation, enacted in 1766, Sweden's freedom of religion law has only existed for a couple of decades.

Dagens Nyheter's claim that our "freedoms [...] have been taken for granted for decades, even centuries"¹⁶ is therefore only partly true. In relation to freedom of the press in Sweden it is correct, but when it comes to religious freedom, Sweden is a newcomer. "The sad truth is that the Swedes have distinguished themselves in intolerance rather than open-mindedness when it comes to religious freedom", says historian Dick Harrison.¹⁷

Swedish religious freedom has been handled with great carelessness in modern times. Established commentators, academics and politicians have even argued that religious freedom should be removed from the constitution, partly because they claim it is guaranteed by other statutory freedoms such as freedom of thought, freedom of assembly and freedom of association.¹⁸

¹⁵ *Swedish Radio*. "Minister's Christian faith causes controversy", <https://www.sverigesradio.se/artikel/5651063>

¹⁶ *Dagens Nyheter*. "Heliga dagar i religionshatets tid", <https://www.dn.se/ledare/heliga-dagar-i-religionshatets-tid/>

¹⁷ Harrison, Dick. "Svenska religionsfriheten är ett historiskt undantag", *Svenska Dagbladet*, <https://www.svd.se/a/L0eyX4/svenska-religionsfriheten-ar-ett-historiskt-undantag>

¹⁸ Tännsjö, Torbjörn, Sturmark, Christer, Ulvaeus, Björn et al. "Avskaffa lagen om religionsfrihet", *Expressen*, <https://www.expressen.se/debatt/avskaffa-la-genom-religionsfrihet/>. Zetterman, Jacob. "Hanif Bali (M): Avskaffa lagen om reli-

Ministers and leading opinion leaders repeatedly claim that Sweden is a secular society and religion is a private matter. Religious beliefs that clash with the views of the parliamentary majority may exist, but not be seen or heard – or be argued for in public. They belong in the private sphere. All religion is conflated and should either be controlled or restricted without clear distinctions between problematic and unproblematic expressions of religiosity.

It is from this perspective that one should understand the outrage over, among other things, traditional religious views on ethical issues and openly religious politicians. When Anna Kinberg Batra resigned as leader of the Moderate Party and there was speculation about who would succeed her, two possible candidates were mentioned, Ulf Kristersson and Elisabeth Svantesson. A T V feature listed their respective advantages and disadvantages. On the minus side for Svantesson, who is a practicing Christian, her faith was again mentioned. No deeper analysis was given, no explanation of what was problematic in her Christian beliefs.

When Svantesson was appointed Minister of Labour in Reinfeldt's government, her view of humanity was described as "frightening" and she was required to publicly distance herself from "religious fundamentalism in favor of women's rights".¹⁹ What was problematic about her background from a democratic perspective was not apparent. The fact that health care issues, including abortion, were not part of Svantesson's portfolio did not seem to matter. Similar outrage about religiosity linked to a political office was evident in the debate about Omar Mustafa, a Muslim and active in the Swedish Muslim Council, and his candidacy for the Social Democrats' party board. Here too, it was not clear what it was about his Muslim beliefs that was problematic. Initially, the criticism was about how he, as chairman of the Islamic Association in Sweden invited speakers who were known to spread anti-Semitic propaganda,²⁰ which is of course deeply problematic, but gradually some of the criticism turned into anti-Muslim statements.

The above illustrates how the political debate tends to put all religion and different religious beliefs in the same pot. Instead of distinguishing

gionsfrihet", *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/2017/07/07/hanif-ba-li-m-avskaffa-lagen-om-religionsfrihet/>

¹⁹ Schedvin, Jessica. "Svantesson måste ta avstånd från abortmotståndarna", *SVT Opinion*, <https://www.svt.se/opinion/svantesson-maste-ta-avstand-fran-abort-motstandarna>

²⁰ Swedish Committee against Anti-Semitism. "The Mustafa affair – or how legitimization of Jew-hatred became 'fight against antisemitism'", <http://skma.se/blogg/2013/06/mus-tafa-affaren-eller-hur-legitimisation-of-judehat-blev-kamp-mot-antisemitism/>

between specific religious beliefs, as is done with political beliefs, religion itself is described as a problem for the ideal of Sweden as a secular society.

It is true that the state should be secular in the sense of being neutral to beliefs, but society is always larger than the state and cannot be purged of beliefs. Friction and conflict over religiosity will always exist in an open and free society.

The Catholic priest Richard John Neuhaus once coined the term “the naked public square”²¹. He was referring to a public sphere stripped of all religious interference. But in a democratic society, all people have the same right to participate in public discourse according to their own beliefs. Here it is important to point out that the state should be neutral when it comes to the place of beliefs and religious convictions in the public sphere. In cases concerning, for example, the theological convictions of communities, the existence of independent schools, the wearing of religious clothing and converts in the asylum process, state actors have repeatedly taken a stand for stricter regulation or gone beyond their area of competence and had their own theological views. In a democracy where the church is separate from the state, this is a problematic development.

In most cases, however, it is the culture, the public discourse, that limits religious expression. One can of course wonder why this would be wrong. Isn't it simply a consequence of what the majority of people in Sweden think? Religious people are hardly entitled to a given space in the public discourse; it should be earned. At the same time, the public debate in recent years has shown that there is a tendency to prevent opponents from expressing their opinions, rather than responding to them.

In the media, culture and academia, there is talk of both rejection and deplatforming of people with dissenting or disagreeable, perhaps contagious, views. This is particularly noticeable in relation to religious beliefs, not least in the political world. The lack of knowledge among Swedish journalists about religion and everyday religiosity, which has been studied repeatedly,²² and which affects editorial priorities and leads to inadequate reporting, is also significant. Anna Lindman, a Swedish TV presenter who has been making programs about religion and beliefs for several years, tells the industry magazine *Journalisten* that Swedish journalists generally

²¹ Neuhaus, Richard John. *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Eerdmans 1984).

²² Andersson, Johanna. “Okunskapen är stor om religion”, *Göteborgs-Posten*, <https://www.gp.se/ledare/gastkronika/johanna-andersson-okunskapen-ar-stor-om-religion.d4b54a82-6994-408b-8fad-287ab0f40b1b>

neglect religious issues and have “an ignorant attitude” towards religion.²³ For example, the major Swedish newspaper editorial offices lack reporters with religion and beliefs as a specific area of coverage. At the same time they are expanding services in other areas of coverage. When I studied journalism with a specific focus on religious studies in the early 2000s, one of the lecturers likened an award-winning journalist who had thanked God for his success to “urinating in public”. The same is true of the attitude to religion in the world of education, where an atheistic world view is often seen as the norm in teaching and religion is presented as something outdated or odd.²⁴ In such a milieu, where what is reasonable and sensible is understood in purely secular terms, it is not surprising that the right and freedom to express dissenting views based on religious beliefs is seen as irrelevant. After all, these are outdated and alien views in a modern and secular country.

The British sociologist Os Guinness, who studied at the University of Oxford under Peter Berger, have, in *The Global Public Square: Religious Freedom and the Making of a World Safe for Diversity* (2013), described the importance of religious freedom for human identity as fundamental, as it ultimately concerns the right and freedom to pursue the truth and that this has practical consequences in the public sphere:

Freedom of religion and belief affirms each person’s dignity, worth and freedom of action by freeing us to align ‘who we understand ourselves to be’ with ‘what we believe ultimately exists’, and then think, live, speak and act in accordance with those beliefs.²⁵

There is legitimacy to the American motto that religious freedom is *the first freedom*,²⁶ the first liberty or right. It is not only a right, but also the “duty

²³ Lundquist, Hanna. “Jag är självkritisk om Knutby”, *Journalisten*, <https://www.journalisten.se/profilen/jag-ar-sjalvkritisk-om-knutby/>

²⁴ University of Gothenburg. “Teachers and students often talk about religion as something outdated and alien”, <https://www.gu.se/nyheter/larare-och-elever-talar-ofta-om-religion-som-nagot-foraldrat-och-frammande>

²⁵ Guinness, Os. *The Global Public Square: Religious Freedom and the Making of a World Safe for Diversity* (IVP Books 2013) p. 69.

²⁶ Freedom of religion is the first right mentioned in the First Amendment of the American Bill of Rights, which also lists the freedoms of speech, press and assembly. This recognizes the special place of freedom of or from religious beliefs in relation to other rights. The full text of the First Amendment reads: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right

which we owe to the Creator [or that to which we attribute ultimate authority over our lives] This duty is precedent, both in order of time and in degree of obligation, to the claims of Civil Society”,²⁷ as James Madison, the father of the Bill of Rights and later the fourth President of the United States, put it in one of his most famous texts. In this way, the rights to speak, to teach, to marry, to have a family, to work and own property, and so on, are not unimportant, but secondary to what it really means to be human.

Even for the main author of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, diplomat and philosopher Charles Malik, religious freedom was a priority as it underpinned the other rights:

Without the full and unimpaired right to think and believe freely, the value of rights pales into relative insignificance. One enjoys these other rights precisely in order to be free, and being free means nothing if it does not mean freedom to think and believe and change in your belief from the good to the better and better as the truth progressively reveals itself to you. The right to be free inwardly is the end and justification of all other rights.”²⁸

The freedom to believe and live according to one’s conviction of ultimate existence must not be limited to religious people either, but must apply to all Swedes – even secular ones. It is not just a freedom for the “religious”. Freedom of religion is the freedom to search for answers to those big metaphysical questions: What is nature like? Does God exist? What is man’s place in the universe? What is the meaning of life? What is the basis of human identity? Religious freedom “it goes to the heart of what it means to be human – to think freely, to follow our conscience, to change our beliefs if our hearts and minds lead us to do so, to express those beliefs in public and in private”,²⁹ as US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken has put it.

In *On Democracy in America* (1835 and 1840), Alexis de Tocqueville writes that “the greatest advantage of religion is to inspire diametrically contrary principles. There is no religion [or worldview that does not place the object

of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” (source: Wikipedia)

²⁷ Madison, James. *Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-08-02-0163>

²⁸ Malik, Charles Habib. “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” in *Free and Equal: Human Rights in Ecumenical Perspective*, ed. Otto Frederick Nolde (World Council of Churches, 1968) p. 11.

²⁹ US Department of State. “Secretary Antony J. Blinken on Release of the 2020 International Religious Freedom Report”, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/secretary-an-antony-j-blinken-on-release-of-the-2020-international-religious-freedom-report/>

of man's desires above and beyond the treasures of earth and that does not naturally raise his soul to regions far above those of the senses. Nor is there any which does not impose on man some duties towards his kind and thus draw him at times from the contemplation of himself. This is found in the most false and dangerous religions."³⁰ Therefore, freedom of religion – and all that it implies in terms of freedom of assembly, expression and conscience – is important and must not be merely private. It teaches us to live with each other's deepest differences.

As Swedish religious freedom is celebrating seventy years this year, something that is mainly ignored with silence, I want to take the temperature of the right to believe and think freely in Sweden by examining the importance of religious freedom for an open and free society. What areas of conflict arise between a dominant secular view of life and different religious beliefs? How is this expressed in the international commitment to persecuted minorities? What about Sweden's blind spot for vulnerable Christians? And how did the Christian faith, contrary to popular perceptions of a backward church, lay the foundation for the right to think and express oneself freely?

Before going into this, however, we should stop at an even more fundamental question: why is religious freedom a human right and what are the manifestations of religious persecution in our time?

³⁰ de Tocqueville, Alexis. *Om demokratin i Amerika*, bok 2 del 1 (Bokförlaget Atlantis AB, 1997) p. 43.

PART I

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE WORLD

Religious persecution and repression – a growing threat

ON AUGUST 22, 2019, ON THE occasion of the newly established UN Memorial Day for Victims of Religious Persecution, UN Secretary-General António Guterres described the sharp increase in religiously motivated violence:

Jews have been murdered in synagogues, their gravestones scrawled with swastikas. Muslims have been shot in mosques and had their religious sites vandalized. Christians have been killed while praying and had their churches burned.³¹

From 2007 to 2018, religious freedom has declined sharply across the world. According to the independent Pew Research Center, which measures the degree of restrictions on religious practice, 56 states – including populous countries such as China, India, Pakistan and Indonesia – apply “high” or “very high” levels of restrictions on religious life.³²

Social unrest has also increased, and with it harassment, violence, and persecution of various groups. In 2018, 53 countries were assessed as having ‘high’ or ‘very high’ levels of social unrest leading to the restriction of religious freedom for individuals, organizations, or communities.³³ The year before, a majority of the world’s population (83%) was found to live in countries with ‘high’ or ‘very high’ levels of religious restrictions, mainly targeting religious minorities³⁴ – and not much has changed since then.

Pew’s latest survey in November 2020 showed that Christians are harassed in 145 countries. This is the highest number for any religious group, followed by Muslims, who are harassed in 139 countries.³⁵

³¹ UN News. “World must stamp out persecution of religious groups, Guterres declares on new UN Day”, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/08/1044751>

³² Pew Research Center. “Government restrictions on religion around the world reached new record in 2018”, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/10/government-restrictions-on-religion-around-the-world-reached-new-record-in-2018>

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Jackson, Griffin Paul. “Global Religious Freedom Takes Its Biggest Hit in Over a Decade,” *Christianity Today*, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2018/june/global-religious-freedom-christian-persecution-pew-research.html>

³⁵ Pew Research Center. “Government restrictions on religion around the world reached new record in 2018”, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/>

Christians and Muslims – who are the largest faith groups globally and are more geographically dispersed than other groups – experienced harassment in the most countries (145 and 139 countries respectively). Jews make up only 0.2 percent of the global population, but were harassed in the third highest number of countries (88). People with no religious affiliation – defined as atheists, agnostics, and those who do not identify with any religion – saw the largest decline in harassment of any group. These ‘nones’ were harassed in 18 countries in 2018, down from 23 countries a year earlier.³⁶

When Pew talk about harassment, it refers to “crimes against a religious group or person because of their religious identity, and may include being physically coerced or singled out with the intent of making life or religious practice more difficult. The degree of severity ranges from verbal or written harassment to physical violence and murder”.³⁷

On Christmas Day 2018, the then UK Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt commissioned an independent report on the persecution of Christians. *Why Christians?* According to Hunt, “the persecution of Christians was a telling early warning of the persecution of every minority”.³⁸ The main author, the Bishop of Truro, Philip Mounstephen, presented the report in July 2019 along with a number of foreign policy recommendations, such as the possibility of sanctions against countries that persecute Christians.³⁹ Among other things, the report described the extent of the persecution:

Persecution based on religious belief is a global phenomenon that is growing in scale and intensity. Reports, including from the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, claim that religious persecution is on the rise and is an ‘ever-growing threat’ to societies around the world. While it is impossible to know the exact number of people persecuted for their faith, it is estimated, based on reports from various NGOs, that one third of the

10/government-restrictions-on-religion-around-the-world-reached-new-record-in-2018/

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Pew Research Center, “Harassment of religious groups steady in 2017, remaining at 10-year high”, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/07/15/harassment-of-religious-groups-steady-in-2017-remaining-at-10-year-high/>

³⁸ BBC News. “Jeremy Hunt orders review into persecuted Christians’ plight”, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-46682411>

³⁹ Sherwood, Harriet. “UK government urged to take steps to prevent persecution of Christians”, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/08/uk-government-urged-to-take-steps-to-prevent-persecution-of-christians>

world's population suffers various forms of religious persecution, with Christians being the most persecuted group.⁴⁰

The European Parliament's analysis is also bleak. The 2019 Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World and the EU's policies in this area states that

Christians are the most persecuted religious group in the world, accounting for 80% of all persecuted believers. This persecution ranges from routine discrimination in education, employment and social life to restrictions on all forms of expression and even physical attacks on Christian groups. This almost meets the international definition of genocide adopted by the UN.⁴¹

The same point has been made in previous annual reports. But this time, freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief is specifically mentioned. The opening paragraph includes persecution and oppression of both religious believers and atheists. At the same time, it emphasizes that Christians are the group most discriminated against, subjected to violence and murdered:

Expresses its dismay at the number of executions, attacks and acts of persecution, discrimination, harassment and incitement of antagonism, and the number of restrictions on rights that took place or were introduced in 2019, targeting individuals and groups on the basis of their religion, belief, atheism or agnosticism; reaffirms its support for victims of religious or belief-based violence and its commitment to ending such violence; reaffirms its support for victims of violence based on religion or belief and its commitment to ending such violence. Emphasizes the need to pay particular attention to the situation of persecuted religious groups in the world, who are subject to discrimination, intimidation, laws against blasphemy and conversion, destruction of places of worship, violence, enslavement, rape, enforced disappearances, executions and genocide. Stresses the need to pay particular attention to the situation around the world of persecuted Christians, who

⁴⁰ Bishop of Truro's Independent Review for the Foreign Secretary of FCO Support for Persecuted Christians Final Report and Recommendations, <https://christianpersecutionreview.org.uk/storage/2019/07/final-report-and-recommendations.pdf>, p. 15.

⁴¹ European Parliament. Texts adopted: Human rights and democracy in the world and the European Union's policy on the matter – Annual Report 2019, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0014_SV.html?fbclid=IwAR-1qbj0XLLCR8iQtBvano2-GsKJ9En5_vM0lGwg7MUrCqA-IZIwXhk_P8EY Wednesday, January 20, 2021.

constitute a clear majority of the religious groups discriminated against, subjected to violence and killed.⁴²

All over the world, people are persecuted for their religious or non-religious beliefs. Many are persecuted by the same groups and individuals who persecute Christians. These include Baha'is and Jews in Iran, Ahmadiyya Muslims and Hindus in Pakistan, Tibetan Buddhists and Falun Gong followers in China, Rohingya Muslims in Burma and atheists in Saudi Arabia.

According to the Christian missionary and human rights organization Open Doors' *World Watch List*, which since 1993 has listed the fifty countries where persecution against Christians is at its worst, the situation has worsened due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the countries on the list, around 309 million Christians are persecuted and discriminated against. Globally, however, the number exceeds 340 million.⁴³ This means that every eighth Christian in the world faces persecution because of their faith. Open Doors' forecast for the 2020s is bleak. The 2021⁴⁴ and 2020⁴⁵ reports describe how militant Islamism is spreading to weak sub-Saharan African states and Southeast Asia. As a result of the pandemic, Islamist attacks against sub-Saharan Christians have increased by around thirty percent compared to the previous year. According to Open Doors, eighty percent of the more than one hundred thousand Christians in India now being assisted by their partners, have reported being denied food distributed during the lockdowns in the country. In China, the surveillance state is on the rise. New technologies are being used to control and repress Christians and other minorities, which has intensified as COVID-19 has been allowed to legitimize tighter restrictions. For example, the Communist Party has started using facial recognition technology and an app to track the whereabouts of the Muslim minority group Uyghurs. The state has equipped churches with surveillance cameras that can identify faces, a method that is now being exported to other countries.⁴⁶

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Open Doors Sweden. "Worse persecution due to the corona pandemic – WWL 2021", <https://www.mynewsdesk.com/se/open-doors-sverige/pressreleases/vaer-re-persecution-due-to-the-corona-pandemic-wwl-2021-3064167>

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Open Doors Sweden. "Persecution against Christians worse every year since 2006", <https://www.mynewsdesk.com/se/open-doors-sverige/pressreleases/foerfoeljel-sen-mot-kristna-vaerre-foer-varje-aar-sedan-2006-2960014>

⁴⁶ Grogan, Courtney. "China's technological controls keep Christians under constant surveillance", *Catholic Voice*, <https://www.catholicvoice.org.au/chinas-technological-controls-keep-christians-under-constant-surveillance/>

China also uses a points system that rewards individuals who conform to the state's norms, with the result that Christians' access to education, employment and travel is restricted. Today, the most downloaded app in China is created by the Communist Party and is intended to help users earn more points under this system.⁴⁷

The same gloomy picture is given by the Catholic organization *Aid to the Church in Need* in its Religious Freedom Report 2021, covering 196 countries. The report's executive summary clearly states that digital technologies, cyber networks, surveillance (including artificial intelligence) and facial recognition technologies were "primary causes of increased persecution in many of the countries with the worst religious freedom records".⁴⁸ The organization speaks of a "free fall" of religious freedom in several countries and that "religious freedom is violated in almost one-third of the world's countries (31.6 percent), with two-thirds of the world's population".⁴⁹ In the last year, kidnappings of young girls from minority religions in Pakistan have both increased and been highlighted, as *Aid to the Church in Need* (ACN) specifically points out in its report. According to available statistics, every year "up to a thousand young Christian and Hindu girls and young women between the ages of 12 and 25 are abducted by Muslim men. The studies, which suggest that Christians make up seventy percent of these cases, found that the scale of the problem 'is likely to be much greater as a number of cases are never reported and do not proceed through the legal system'. Many of the girls are victims of rape, forced prostitution, human trafficking and domestic violence."⁵⁰

In the context of the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan, the situation for Christians and other religious minorities has deteriorated. In 2020, the country was ranked second on the *World Watch List* – just behind North Korea – and the number of Christians in Afghanistan is estimated at between 10 000 and 12 000 people.⁵¹ The majority of these have converted from

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ *Aid to the Church in Need*. Religious Freedom in the World Report 2021: At a glance findings, <https://acnuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/At-a-glance-summary.pdf> p. 4.

⁴⁹ Ibid. p.2

⁵⁰ *Aid to the Church in Need*. Religious Freedom in the World Report 2021: Executive summary, https://www.churchinneed.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/RFR_2021_Executive-Summary.pdf. p. 34.

⁵¹ Stark, William. "Fear and Uncertainty Dominate Thoughts of Afghanistan's Christians Living Under Taliban Rule", *International Christian Concern*, <https://www.perssecution.org/2021/08/17/fear-uncertainty-dominate-thoughts-afghanistans-Christians-living-taliban-rule/>

Islam and practice their faith in underground churches, as a change of religion is strictly forbidden and in practice leads to a constant threat of death. At the same time, public executions by stoning, flogging and hanging under the previous Taliban regime between 1996 and 2001 are still fresh in people's minds. Kelsey Zorzi, head of the UN NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion and Belief, wrote shortly after the takeover:

Some Christians on the ground have expressed that with the takeover of Kabul, they expect to be killed mafia-style. Meanwhile, some reports claim that the Taliban are already carrying out targeted killings of Christians and other minorities found on public transport, as well as executing anyone found with Bible programs on their mobile phones.

Christians also fear for the safety of their children as the Taliban have already announced plans to 'eradicate ignorance of religion' by capturing non-Muslim women and girls as sex slaves and forcing boys to serve as soldiers.⁵²

ACN notes in its 2021 report that "Christianity is seen as a Western religion and alien to Afghanistan"⁵³ and adds that the "military presence of international forces has increased general distrust of Christians". This has led Christians to worship in secret and in small groups. Already in its report, published about four months before the Taliban takeover, ACN warned that the situation in the country was getting worse. Thomas Heine-Geldern, head of the ACN, commented shortly after the takeover: "Anyone who does not embrace the Taliban's extreme Islamist views is in danger, even moderate Sunni Muslims. Shia Muslims (ten percent), the small Christian community and all other religious minorities already under threat will be subject to even greater repression."⁵⁴

He added that as a number of countries have already expressed their support for the new Taliban regime, this will "encourage authoritarian regimes all over the world, especially in the region, leading to increasing violations of religious freedom in their own countries".⁵⁵

⁵² Zorzi, Kelsey. "Afghanistan's Christians are turning off phones and going into hiding", *The Hill*, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/568992-afghanistans-christians-are-turning-off-phones-and-going-into-hiding?rl=1>

⁵³ *Aid to the Church in Need*. https://acninternational.org/religiousfreedomreport/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/AF_FBR_ReligiousFreedom_EN.pdf p. 25.

⁵⁴ *Aid to the Church in Need*. "Aid to the Church in Need sees a black future for religious freedom in Afghanistan", <https://acninternational.org/aid-to-the-church-in-need-sees-a-black-future-for-religious-freedom-in-afghanistan/>

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

It is clear that this is only the tip of the iceberg of the growing problem of religious persecution and oppression, where Christians are repeatedly among the victims. Former CNN analyst John L Allen argues that there are good reasons to speak of a global war against Christians:

We are talking about a massive and global pattern of violence and oppression directed against a specific group of people [...] If human rights and religious freedom mean anything, its primary defense must be shaped by strong support for the fate of these Christians.⁵⁶

The organization *Human Rights Watch* estimates that the Chinese state has imprisoned around one million Muslims belonging to the Uyghur ethnic group and placed them in “re-education camps”.⁵⁷ This has received considerable, legitimate and important attention in Sweden as well. In proportion to its scale, however, very little attention has been paid to the even larger group of vulnerable Christians.

On the occasion of the submission of the report commissioned by Jeremy Hunt on persecuted Christians to the government, the Foreign Office gave a press conference. Mr. Hunt commented on the silence surrounding the plight of Christians: “Perhaps it is because of a misguided political correctness – or an instinctive reluctance to talk about religion – that British governments have not always wanted to deal with this problem.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Allen, John L. *The Global War on Christians: Dispatches from the Front Lines of Anti-Christian Persecution* (Image 2016) pp. 8-9.

⁵⁷ *Human Rights Watch*. “Eradicating Ideological Viruses”, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/china0918_web.pdf

⁵⁸ Hunt, Jeremy. “Speech: Persecution of Christians review: Foreign Secretary’s speech following the final report”, Foreign & Commonwealth Office, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/persecution-of-christians-review-foreign-secretarys-speech-following-the-final-report>

Driving forces and motives

THE MOTIVES BEHIND THE PERSECUTION OF Christians are many. In *Persecuted: the Global Assault on Christians* (2013), Nina Shea, Lela Gilbert and Paul Marshall of the Hudson Institute Center for Religious Freedom identify three key drivers:⁵⁹

1. The quest for total political control that characterizes the communist and post-communist states (e.g. China, North Korea, Cuba, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Russia), where most Christians are persecuted, as they have the largest Christian populations. North Korea, which according to Open Doors' regular surveys is the country where it is most dangerous to be a Christian, also belongs to this category. Here, owning a Bible can mean imprisonment. In a report from the fall of 2020 by the London-based *Korea Future Initiative*, 273 victims of religious persecution, imprisonment and torture were identified in the country.⁶⁰ The majority (215 people) were Christians from the age of three up to the age of eighty. All were sent to prison camps: "They put us all in handcuffs [...] As an adult, it was heartbreaking to see children being handcuffed. Our [child] was only thirteen years old",⁶¹ according to one survivor. The report also describes how Christians could be tortured by being forced to sit in electrified steel cages for 12 hours at a time. In China, Christians have a general opportunity to worship – under state control. However, free churches are forced underground. In post-communist countries, despite officially renouncing communism, the state often maintains repressive control over churches and other religious communities. In some cases, there are favored communities, such as the historic Orthodox Church, which openly support the state.
2. In countries like India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bhutan, much of the persecution is characterized by Southeast Asian religious nationalism. Extremist Buddhists and Hindus, who link their religious beliefs to national identity, see other religions as a threat. Both Christians and Muslims are subjected to persecution, as they are seen as foreign elements. In the Indian state of Orissa, in 2008, more than fifty Christians were murdered

⁵⁹ Shea, Nina et al. *Persecuted: the Global Assault on Christians* (Thomas Nelson, 2013) pp. 9-11.

⁶⁰ Korea Future Initiative. "Persecuting Faith: Documenting religious freedom violations in North Korea Volume I", https://static1.squarespace.com/static/608ae0498089c163350e0ff5/t/60a688ad49971408112a995c/1621526791430/Persecuting_Faith_Eng.pdf p. 3.

⁶¹ *Ibid* p. 38

and fifty thousand were driven from their homes, which were then burned down.⁶² In January 2014, ex-extremist Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka initiated attacks on two Christian churches and set fire to a prayer center.⁶³ In addition to violent attacks, repressive legislation, such as bans on changing religious beliefs, has also been introduced. The stated aim is to prevent “forced conversions”, but often peaceful missionary Christian churches and pastors are accused of engaging in coercion or manipulation.⁶⁴ Since the ruling party BJP came to power in India in 2014, persecution of Christians by radical Hindus has increased. In 2019, the *Evangelical Fellowship of India* reported 366 incidents of harassment, intimidation and attacks.⁶⁵ The year before, the country’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke at the World Economic Forum in Davos about how India had “proved itself” by respecting pluralism and different religious beliefs,⁶⁶ a message that hardly reflects reality.

3. The most common driving force behind the persecution of Christians is Islamism and certain interpretations of Islam. The threat to Christians in the Muslim world also represents the most widespread and growing religious persecution globally. The persecution is carried out by states, terrorist groups or mobs – or a combination of these. One of the most common expressions is suicide attacks against places of worship and churches, such as in Sri Lanka on Easter 2019, when almost three hundred people were murdered. The attack in Sri Lanka, whose majority religion is Buddhism, also illustrates how Islamic-motivated persecution – unlike the other drivers mentioned above – can be exported. Another expression has long been blasphemy and apostasy laws, which punish

⁶² Chamberlain, Gethin. “Convert or we will kill you, Hindu lynch mobs tell fleeing Christians”, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/oct/19/orissa-violence-india-christianity-hinduism>

⁶³ Agenzia Fides. “Christians took to the streets for religious freedom: 18 Buddhists on trial for attacks against churches”, http://www.fides.org/en/news/35125-ASIA_SRI_LANKA_Christians_took_to_the_streets_for_religious_freedom_18_Buddhists_on_trial_for_attacks_against_churches#.U1-c21JZphE

⁶⁴ Smith, Samuel. “India: Christians warn against law raising punishments for ‘forced’ religious conversions”, *Christian Post*, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/india-christians-warn-against-law-raising-punishments-forced-religious-conversions.html>

⁶⁵ *Evangelical Fellowship of India*. RLC Report. “Hate and Targeted Violence against Christians in 2019”, <https://efionline.org/2020/03/15/rlc-report-hate-and-targeted-violence-against-christians-in-2019-2/>

⁶⁶ Government of India. “Prime Minister’s Statement on the subject ‘Creating a Shared Future in a Fractured World’ in the World Economic Forum”, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/29378/Prime+Ministers+Keynote+Speech+at+Plenary+Session+of+World+Economic+Forum+Davos+January+23+2018>

criticism of Islam, Muhammad or the Koran and, by extension, restrict religious debate. More recently, the Islamic State's war against Christians and other minorities in Syria and Iraq has been an expression of this form of persecution, although some commentators have sought to downplay the link between IS and Islam.⁶⁷

There are other reasons for the persecution of Christians. In states such as Eritrea and Burma, repression is often justified on the grounds of 'national security'. What these countries have in common is their high level of military power and low tolerance for opposition forces. Christians have repeatedly asserted their independence from the state, but in Eritrea unregistered churches live under severe repression. Even approved churches are tightly controlled. The country's Orthodox state church has even been accused of spying for the regime and using mafia-like methods against fellow countrymen.⁶⁸ The Eritrean state church is not recognized by other Christian communities and has not been granted membership in the Christian Council of Sweden.

Interestingly, religious freedom scholars such as Open Doors have begun to talk about aggressive secularism as an additional challenge. This differs in its manifestations from the global persecution of Christians. Instead, it is described, at least in public debate in the West, as a dominant worldview with little room for dissent.

It is difficult to give an exact figure of how many Christians are murdered each year. Reference is often made to the *Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary* in Massachusetts, which has estimated the number of murdered Christians over a ten-year period, giving an annual average of nearly one hundred thousand victims.⁶⁹ However, the figure should be problematic, as it does not only include believers who die in situations of persecution. For example, the civil war in Congo-Kinshasa – where around four million people died between 2000 and 2010 – has been included in the calculations. In the past, the 1994 genocide in Rwanda has also been included.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Dyer, Geoff. "Isis is not about Islam, says Obama", *Financial Times*, <https://www.ft.com/content/d2977822-b85c-11e4-b6a5-00144feab7de>

⁶⁸ Zetterman, Jacob. "Kyrkan i Eritrea använder maffiametoder", *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/dokument/kyrkan-i-eritrea-anvander-maffiametoder/3360866>

⁶⁹ Johnson, Todd M. "Christian Martyrdom: Who? Why? How?", *Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary*, <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/blog/christian-martyrdom-who-why-how>

⁷⁰ Alexander, Ruth. "Are there really 100,000 new Christian martyrs every year?", *BBC News*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-24864587>

Thomas Schirrmacher at the *International Institute for Religious Freedom*, whose organization reviews *Open Doors World Watch List*, has estimated the number of Christians killed for their faith at around ten thousand annually.⁷¹ In the Open Doors' report published in early 2021, there are 4,761 confirmed deaths, of which 3,530 are in Nigeria.⁷² There is obviously a number of unreported cases here, and the number of victims is only the tip of the iceberg, as women in particular are subjected to rape or sexual harassment, often behind closed doors.

In light of this, Paul Marshall of the *Hudson Institute Center for Religious Freedom* recommends avoiding death numbers altogether and instead talk about how many people are at *risk of* persecution. The best statistics show that Christians are the most persecuted religious group in most countries and on the largest scale.

Since 2009, the Islamist terrorist group Boko Haram has killed thousands of Christians in Nigeria. In the fall of 2013, I conducted research at the *Hudson Institute* think tank in Washington DC, inviting the Nigerian Christian Adamu Habila. He was the victim of an assassination attempt in 2012, when Boko Haram supporters shot him in the face. "They asked me if I was ready to die as a Christian. My wife was crying but I could not deny Christ," he said. Fortunately, he survived and was able to testify to the cruelty and extent of the persecution. Many did not survive to tell their stories.

⁷¹ *World Watch Monitor*. "'90,000 Christian martyrs annually' claim disputed", <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/01/90000-christian-martyrs-annually-claim-disputed/>

⁷² Open Doors UK. "World Watch List 2021: The persecution of Christians: Key facts. Key trends. Key actions", <https://media.opendoorsuk.org/document/pdf/World-WatchListreport-2021.pdf> p. 5.

The West's blind spot

WHEN JOURNALIST KLAUS WIVEL wrote an open letter to Denmark's Minister for Foreign Affairs asking what the government intended to do for the thousands of Egyptian Christians fleeing their country, he received no response. To understand the lack of commitment, he traveled to the Middle East. The result was the reportage book *The Last Christians* (2015), in which he describes how Western religious criticism combined with post-colonial guilt created a blind spot for the issue of Christians as a persecuted minority. "In the West we are perceived as Arabs, in the Arab world we are seen as Christians. We are losing on both fronts",⁷³ a Christian man in Bethlehem tells Wivel. In the West, Christians have historically been the majority religion and many countries have had a dominant state church. The persecution of Christians therefore does not fit into the Western media image.

Today, however, about three quarters of the world's 2.2 billion Christians live outside the West.⁷⁴ China will soon be – if it is not already – the most Christian country in the world. Latin America is the region and Africa the continent with the most Christians. *The report The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050* predicts that by 2050 four out of ten Christians will be living in sub-Saharan Africa.

"Over the past century, the center of gravity of the Christian world has been relentlessly shifting southward to Africa, Asia and Latin America. Already today, the largest Christian groups on the planet are in Africa and Latin America. If we wish to imagine a 'typical' contemporary Christian, we should think of a woman living in a village in Nigeria or in a Brazilian *favela*", writes historian Philip Jenkins.⁷⁵

The image of Christianity as a historically Western religion is also misleading. It is true that the Christian mission in the 19th century was in some places closely intertwined with Western colonialism, but research shows that the Christian mission was often in strong opposition to colonialism and pushing for democratic reforms.⁷⁶ In fact, several

⁷³ Wivel, Klaus. *The Last Christians* (Marcus Verlag, 2015) p. 15.

⁷⁴ <https://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>.

⁷⁵ Jenkins, Philip. *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 2007) pp. 1-2.

⁷⁶ E.g. Woodberry, Robert. *The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy* (American Political Science Review 2012), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/235503063_The_Missionary_Roots_of_Liberal_Democracy

Christian groups have a thousand-year history in countries where they are now being persecuted.

In *The Lost History of Christianity* (2009), Philip Jenkins explains how Christianity spread in the ninth century to the Arabian Peninsula, Iran, Afghanistan, Tibet, India, Sri Lanka and as far away as China. The Coptic Church in Ethiopia traces its foundation to the Ethiopian official baptized by Philip in Acts 8:26-39. The oldest churches in India claim to be founded by Jesus' disciple Thomas.⁷⁷

According to the World Value Survey's value map, where a vertical axis runs from secular to traditional attitudes while the horizontal runs from survival to self-fulfillment, Sweden always ends up in the top right corner of the most secular and individualistic countries. This is reflected in Swedish politics and media, which usually portray religion as a private matter, rather than a public sphere of its own. Perhaps this is why the global persecution of Christians is mainly highlighted in Christian media. One example is how the cold-blooded execution of the Coptic businessman Nabil Habashi Salama in Egypt, which went viral on social media in April 2021, was barely noticed by non-Christian media.⁷⁸ This despite the fact that the ISIS-affiliated Islamist group Sinai Province, which claimed responsibility for the act, targeted the country's already vulnerable Christian minority: "As for you Christians in Egypt, this is the price you pay for your support to the Egyptian army"⁷⁹.

Erik Helmersson, editorial writer for *Dagens Nyheter*, is one of the few in the major media organizations that annually pays attention to Open Door's list of countries where Christians are persecuted. He notes that "anyone who tries to find Swedish reporting on the World Watch List, as usual, has to make an effort".⁸⁰ The reason: "Many still see Christianity as a matter for white Westerners"⁸¹.

Against this background, it is not difficult to understand why the freedom to practice one's religion is considered a non-issue in Sweden. This makes it even more relevant to highlight today's religiously motivated persecution and the global challenges to religious freedom.

⁷⁷ Jenkins, Philip. *The Lost History of Christianity* (HarperOne, 2009).

⁷⁸ Alestig, Inger. "Islamister bakom mord på kristen kopt", *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/2021/04/19/islamister-bakom-mord-pa-kristen-kopt/>

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Helmersson, Erik. "Fortfarande skamligt tyst om våldet mot kristna", *Dagens Nyheter*, <https://www.dn.se/ledare/erik-helmerson-fortfarande-skamligt-tyst-om-valdet-mot-kristna/>

⁸¹ Ibid.

The War on Christmas

IN SRI LANKA ON Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019, 320 people were killed and 500 injured after eight coordinated bomb attacks on churches and hotels. Six bombs went off almost simultaneously in the morning, and two hours later two more bombs were detonated. A few days later, it was reported that ISIS had claimed responsibility for the attacks.⁸² The group behind the execution was the *National Towheed Jamaat*, a local terrorist group close to the Islamic State.⁸³

The bombings in Sri Lanka were soon described as unexpected and shocking. German Chancellor Angela Merkel:

It is shocking that people who gathered to celebrate Easter together were deliberately subjected to this vicious attack.⁸⁴

A wide range of world leaders expressed their sadness at the shocking attacks. Surprising? The attack had in fact been preceded by a number of threats against churches in Sri Lanka. According to a report by France's AFP, ten days before the Easter attack, the country's police leadership warned that suicide bombers were planning attacks against "prominent churches".⁸⁵ The AP news agency described how Indian police had intercepted information that the *National Towheed Jamaat* was planning an attack and had therefore alerted the Sri Lankan authorities.⁸⁶ A few days before the attacks, journalist Ruki Fernando wrote on Twitter how eleven Christian services on eleven consecutive Sundays, from February 3 to April 14, "have been subjected to some kind of

⁸² Eriksson, Carl-Fredrik. "Attackerna i Sri Lanka – detta har hänt", *Dagens Nyheter*, <https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/bombattackerna-i-sri-lanka-detta-har-hant/>.

⁸³ TT. "Spänt i Sri Lanka – extremister pekas ut", *Aftonbladet*, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/3J1RbM/spant-i-sri-lanka--extremister-pekas-ut>

⁸⁴ AFP. "Germany's Merkel condemns 'religious hate and intolerance' after Sri Lanka attacks", *The Local*, <https://www.thelocal.de/20190421/germanys-merkel-condemns-religious-hate-and-intolerance-after-sri-lanka-attacks>

⁸⁵ AFP. "Sri Lanka explosions: Police chief warned of suicide attack threat days before blasts", *The Straits Times*, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/sri-lanka-police-chief-had-warned-of-suicide-attack-threat-before-blasts>

⁸⁶ Schmall, Emily and Mallawarachi, Bharatha. "Indian police uncovered a plot, but Sri Lanka didn't act", *ABC News* <https://why.org/articles/indian-police-uncovered-a-plot-but-sri-lanka-didnt-act/>

disruption in Sri Lanka. Will it stop this coming Easter Sunday?”⁸⁷ In retrospect, his post had an eerie foreboding.

Overall, it seems clear that there were clear indications of an upcoming attack.

The attacks in Sri Lanka follow a well-known pattern occurring during the major Christian holidays. In this respect, the attacks cannot be described as surprising. The journalist John L Allen, author of *The Global War on Christians* (2016), wrote in a comment on Angela Merkel’s statement: “What’s shocking is that it’s not shocking – it’s part of a nasty, predictable global pattern.”⁸⁸ According to Allen, and most other observers, acts of violence against Christians in connection with the major holidays have become part of an almost recurring tradition. The killing of Christians during Easter or Christmas should simply not come as a surprise. Moreover, it is when Christians celebrate the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus that larger groups of Christians gather in one place.

Some examples from recent Easter celebrations:

In 2015, on Maundy Thursday, April 2, the Islamist terrorist group Al-Shabaab attacked the *University of Garissa* in Kenya. More than 140 people were killed before the military stormed the building where the terrorists had barricaded themselves. According to some reports, suicide vests were also used in the attack. The target was Christian students. The terrorists divided the hostages by religion. “If you were a Christian, you were shot immediately”, said one witness.⁸⁹

In 2016, on Easter Sunday, March 27, some 70 people were killed and another 300 injured when a Taliban group carried out a suicide attack on several families at an amusement park in Lahore, Pakistan. According to the group, the attack was aimed at Christians celebrating Easter.⁹⁰

In 2017, on Palm Sunday, April 9, Islamic State supporters attacked two places of worship in the Egyptian cities of Tanta and Alexandria. More than 40 people, including many children, were killed and around 100 injured. In

⁸⁷ Ruki Fernando’s twitter account (@rukkitweets) at 10:58 on April 19, 2019, <https://twitter.com/rukkitweets/status/1119163337407774721?s=20>

⁸⁸ Allen, John L. “Sri Lanka bombings part of ugly anti-Christian pattern around globe”, *Twin Cities*, <https://www.twincities.com/2019/04/25/john-l-allen-jr-sri-lanka-bombings-part-of-ugly-anti-christian-pattern-around-globe/>

⁸⁹ Svanberg, Nina and Bergmark, Rebecca. “Terrorists killed 147 in hostage drama at school”, *SVT Nyheter*, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/utrikes/gisslandrama-paskola-i-kenya-tog-147-liv>

⁹⁰ Bengali, Shashank. “Taliban says it targeted Christians in a park on Easter Sunday, killing 70”, *Los Angeles Times*, <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-pakistan-blast-20160327-story.html>

December, a few months earlier, the Church of St. Peter and Paul in Cairo was bombed. The attack was the most serious in several years against Egypt's Copts, and targeted the heart of the Christian minority, as it took place right next to Cairo's great St. Mark's Cathedral.⁹¹

In 2018, on Easter Monday, April 2, four Christian relatives were shot dead in the Pakistani city of Quetta, where there is a large Christian community. A little girl, believed to be the daughter of one of those killed, was injured in the attack. Even before the Easter celebrations, security had been tightened around several churches.⁹² During Christmas a few months earlier, ISIS supporters carried out a suicide attack on a church in Quetta. Nine people were killed and 56 people were injured.

Not even the pandemic prevented Easter attacks on worshipping Christians. On Palm Sunday 2021, the cathedral in Makassar, Indonesia, was subject to a suicide attack.⁹³ Nineteen people were injured, but the only fatalities were the two perpetrators, a man and a woman, who were prevented from entering the church and therefore detonated their explosive device at the main entrance.⁹⁴

Christmas is also a target. On Sunday, December 1, 2019, an Advent service in Burkina Faso was attacked and fourteen people were shot dead by Islamists.⁹⁵ In Nigeria, which has seen violence against Christians almost every Christmas since 2010, seven people were killed by Boko Haram on Christmas Eve that year.⁹⁶ On Boxing Day, also in 2019, Islamic State supporters executed eleven Christians in the country.⁹⁷

In Sweden, the persecution of Christians in Nigeria and human rights organizations' warnings of genocide have been almost invisible. When TT,

⁹¹ TT. "Mange döda efter explosion i kyrka i Egypten", *SVT Nyheter*, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/utrikes/explosion-i-egyptisk-kyrka>

⁹² Brennan, David. "ISIS Claims Easter Killing of Pakistani Christian Family Ambushed In Rickshaw By Militant," *Newsweek*, <https://www.newsweek.com/isis-claims-easter-killing-pakistani-christian-family-ambushed-rickshaw-869947>

⁹³ Alestig, Inger. "Catholics in Indonesia continue Easter celebrations despite bombings", *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/2021/03/30/efter-bombdad-kato-liket-fort-satter-paskfirandet/>

⁹⁴ BBC News. "Indonesia bombing: Worshippers wounded in Makassar church attack", <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56553790>

⁹⁵ AFP. "Armed assailants kill 14 in attack on church in eastern Burkina Faso", *France 24*, <https://www.france24.com/en/20191201-armed-assailants-kill-more-than-10-in-church-in-eastern-burkina-faso>

⁹⁶ TT. "Boko Haram angriper julfirande by", *Aftonbladet*, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/70MxxW/boko-haram-angriper-julfirande-by>

⁹⁷ Catholic News Agency. "11 Christians executed by IS in new video", *Signum*, <http://signum.se/11-kristna-avrattade-av-is-i-ny-video/>

Aftonbladet and a number of other Swedish newspapers wrote about an attack in Kogi State in the summer of 2020, there was no mention that the victims were Christians. Instead, it was reported that the motive could have been a “long-standing dispute over land rights”.⁹⁸ Nor did the Swedish media report the motive behind the killings when five aid workers were executed by Boko Haram in July of the same year,⁹⁹ even though one of the killers said in a recording that the mass murder was a warning “to all those who are used by infidels to convert Muslims to Christianity”.¹⁰⁰ When Minister for Foreign Affairs Ann Linde (S) was asked a parliamentary question about the situation of Christians in Nigeria, she avoided mentioning either genocide or the systematic persecution of Christians.¹⁰¹ Instead, she wrote that the conflict is “often given a religious character”, but that it is “rooted mainly in the lack of access to increasingly scarce resources, such as water and grazing land” between nomadic Fulani herdsmen and settled farmers.¹⁰² Of course, natural resources are a cause, but the religious dimension cannot be ignored. This is shown, for example, in a 2019 report to the British Foreign Office on persecuted Christians:

The exact motives behind a growing wave of attacks by nomadic Fulani herdsmen in Nigeria’s middle belt have been widely debated, but targeted violence against Christian groups in worship contexts shows that religion plays a key role, alongside other factors such as clashing lifestyles exacerbated by climate change.¹⁰³

During Christmas 2017, the organization *International Christian Concern* documented twenty-five attacks against Christians in India.¹⁰⁴ The list could be longer.

⁹⁸ TT. “13 persons in the same family killed in Nigeria”, *Aftonbladet*, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/b5yoRk/13-personer-i-samma-familj-dodade-i-nigeria>

⁹⁹ TT. “Nigeria’s president condemns aid worker murder”, *Barometern*, <https://www.barometern.se/nyheter/nigeria-kidnappade-hjalparbetare-dodade-4c8ff804>

¹⁰⁰ David Högfeldt. “Islamister filmade mord på kristna hjälparbetare”, *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/utrikes/islamister-filmade-mord-pa-kristna-hjalparbetare/3807178>

¹⁰¹ Parliament. Written question 2019/20:1695 by Björn Söder (SD), ‘Genocide of Christians in Nigeria’, https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/written-question/genocide-of-christians-in-nigeria_H7111695

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Bishop of Truro’s Independent Review for the Foreign Secretary of FCO Support for Persecuted Christians Final Report and Recommendations, <https://christianpersecutionreview.org.uk/storage/2019/07/final-report-and-recommendations.pdf> p. 32.

¹⁰⁴ Zaimov, Stoyan. “Christians attacked 25 times over Christmas in India; pastors dragged, bloodied by mob”, *Christian Post*, <https://www.christianpost.com/>

In much of the Western world, 'The War on Christmas' has become an established expression, not least in the United States. The term is part of the culture war and the downplaying of the Christian content of Christmas. It is often about the ambition to include those with different beliefs. However, canceled Lucia celebrations, removed nativity scenes or "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas" are at best important topics of debate. But it is not war. Especially when you compare it to the conditions of Christmas and other Christian holidays where the majority of Christians live – in the two-thirds world.

Foreign policy without religious freedom?

Sweden is often DESCRIBED as a humanitarian superpower. We are one of the world's largest donors of humanitarian aid and have an active policy in this area. We are happy to take the lead where the needs are greatest. In recent years, religiously motivated persecution has become an increasingly prominent focus in the foreign policy, while there is a noticeable ambivalence about the persecution of Christians. The government recently published 29 new country reports on human rights in, for example, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Nigeria and Somalia.¹⁰⁵ Analyses of the state of freedom of religion and belief are included in all the reports, which is welcome as it is a prerequisite for other freedoms and rights.

At the same time, the sections on religious freedom in the country reports are too brief given the urgency of the topic. In addition, country report accounts of the situation of Christians vary when compared to other vulnerable minorities. Looking at a country like Iran, the country report states that Christians and other groups “enjoy some minority-specific rights”, but that “discrimination occurs”.¹⁰⁶ The report states that “Christian converts and house churches are persecuted in Iran”.¹⁰⁷ It states that ‘up to two-thirds of Iraq’s Christian population and 90 per cent of the Sabaeen-Mandaeans have left the country since 2003. According to data from the faith communities themselves, the trend of emigration continues as minority groups feel threatened, harassed and discriminated against.’¹⁰⁸

The Syria report also talks about the oppression of Christians, among others.

¹⁰⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “UD publishes 29 new country reports on human rights, democracy and rule of law”, <https://www.regeringen.se/press-releases/2019/12/ud-publishes-29-new-country-reports-on-human-rights-democracy-and-rule-of-law-principles/>

¹⁰⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “Iran – Human rights, democracy and the rule of law: situation as of June 30, 2019”, <https://www.regeringen.se/4af9e4/contentassets/f56966ed54374bdba4fc504b09534526/iran--human-rights-democracy-and-the-rules-of-law-situation-as-of-30-june-2019.pdf>

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “Iraq – Human rights, democracy and rule of law: situation as of June 30, 2019”, <https://www.regeringen.se/4af5f2/contentassets/a9e7029ea9ad40459cc7590ecca99264/iraq--human-rights-democracy-and-rule-of-law-principles-situation-as-of-30-june-2019.pdf>

Perhaps the most striking reading concerns Nigeria.¹⁰⁹ We saw earlier how the persecution of Christians in the country has been relativized and toned down in Sweden. However, human rights organizations have been talking about the genocide of Christians in the country for a long time. On January 30, 2020, the human rights organization *Christian Solidarity International* (CSI) warned the UN Security Council that “the conditions for genocide have been met in Nigeria”.¹¹⁰ According to the Nigerian human rights organization *Intersociety*, 32,000 Christians in the country have been murdered by various Islamist groups since 2009.¹¹¹ In the first 200 days of 2021 alone, between January 1 and July 18, jihadists killed 3,462 Christians in Nigeria.¹¹² That is an average of seventeen people killed every day.

The organization *Genocide Watch*, whose analysis tool is described as a genocide alarm clock has been talking about genocide in Nigeria since 2012. Its statistics show that Boko Haram, ISWAP, and Fulani jihadists combined have killed more people in Nigeria than the combined victims of ISIS in Iraq and Syria.¹¹³ The organization’s chairman, Professor Gregory Stanton, said in the summer of 2020 that “every single person of the 7,600 people killed by the Fulani militia since 2015 has been a Christian. That is genocide. It is a fully or partially deliberate extermination of a religious group”.¹¹⁴ Although Stanton’s statement was made after the Swedish Foreign Ministry published its country report on Nigeria, the situation has

¹⁰⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “Nigeria – Human rights, democracy and rule of law: situation as of June 30, 2019”, <https://www.regeringen.se/4af8d1/contentassets/1ae76027ddd54ac5ad1ceefd36f6a833/nigeria--human-rights-democracy-and-rule-of-law-principles-situation-as-of-june-2019.pdf>

¹¹⁰ Christian Solidarity International. “CSI Issues Genocide Warning for Christians in Nigeria, Calls on Permanent Members of the UN Security Council to Act”, *PR Newswire*, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/csi-issues-genocide-warning-for-christians-in-nigeria-calls-on-permanent-members-of-the-un-security-council-to-act-300996274.html>

¹¹¹ Zetterman, Jacob. “Dödandet av kristna i Nigeria kan röra sig om genmord”, *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/dodandet-av-kristna-i-nigeria-kan-rora-sig-om-folkmord-1.1730450>

¹¹² Molin, Angelica SN. “Nigeria now the country where most Christians are murdered for their faith”, *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/nigeria-nu-landet-dar-flest-kristna-mordas-for-sin-tro/2968686>

¹¹³ *Genocide Watch*. “Genocide Watch map of genocidal massacres: Nigeria and the Sahel 2010-2020”, <https://www.genocidewatch.com/single-post/2020/06/26/genocide-watch-map-of-genocidal-massacres-nigeria-and-sahel-2010-2020>

¹¹⁴ *Genocide Watch*. “Press Briefing on Christian Genocide in Nigeria”, <https://www.genocidewatch.com/single-post/2020/06/29/Press-Briefing-on-Christian-Genocide-in-Nigeria>

been known for a long time. At the same time, the country report mentions other vulnerable minorities and describes specific cases of abuse and attacks. Given this, it is remarkable that the report mentions the word “Christian” only once, and then only to describe the distribution of religions in the country. Sweden’s foreign declarations, which summarize the government’s annual foreign policy priorities, are thin on the ground when it comes to freedom of religion. From 2006 to 2014, when Carl Bildt was Minister for Foreign Affairs, the priority of religious freedom was downplayed. The 2007 declaration talked about “religious groups in Iraq” and “increased fundamentalist violence and exploitation of religion for extreme political purposes”.¹¹⁵ In 2008, there was no mention of religious freedom or religious persecution.¹¹⁶ In 2009, it was highlighted how “Sweden supports the UN’s ‘Alliance of Civilizations’ and its work to promote interfaith dialogue”.¹¹⁷ In 2010, it was again silent.¹¹⁸

Only from 2011 and onwards are there clearer indications: “Religious freedom is central to an open society. The increasing trends of growing intolerance and abuse of religious minorities are a cause for concern.”¹¹⁹ The following year, the centrality of religious freedom was also highlighted. It was said that violence against religious minorities was not only “worrying”, but that it must be “counteracted”.¹²⁰ In 2013, Carl Bildt also emphasized that the government “works for an equal world [...] A world in which freedom of religion and belief prevails always and everywhere”.¹²¹ Similar formulations were repeated in 2014.¹²²

The foreign declarations of the Moderate-led Alliance government thus show how religious freedom was gradually given an increasingly prominent role. At the same time, there appear to have been a number of

¹¹⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “Utrikesdeklarationen 2007”, <https://www.regeringen.se/>

¹¹⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “Utrikesdeklarationen 2008”, <https://www.regeringen.se/tal/2008/02/ud-08003/>

¹¹⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “Utrikesdeklarationen 2009”, <https://www.regeringen.se/tal/2009/02/ud-09009/>

¹¹⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “Utrikesdeklarationen 2010”, <https://www.regeringen.se/tal/2010/02/utrikesdeklarationen-2010/>

¹¹⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “Utrikesdeklarationen 2011”, <https://www.regeringen.se/tal/2011/02/utrikesdeklarationen-2011/>

¹²⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “Utrikesdeklarationen 2012”, <https://www.regeringen.se/tal/2012/02/utrikesdeklarationen-2012-/>

¹²¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “Utrikesdeklarationen 2013”, <https://www.regeringen.se/tal/2013/02/utrikesdeklarationen-2013/>

¹²² Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “Utrikesdeklarationen 2014”, <https://www.regeringen.se/tal/2014/02/utrikesdeklarationen-2014/>

shortcomings in practice, not least within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' unit for human rights, international law and treaty law (FMR). The Swedish Mission Council (SMC), which among other things works to ensure that Swedish foreign policy better integrates freedom of religion and belief in its work, writes in a report in 2014 – after the work for religious freedom had been mentioned a number of times in the Statement of Foreign Policies – that “responsibility for the issues has often been transferred between officials at FMR, which [...] makes continuity in the work more difficult”.¹²³ There is also no comprehensive picture of the work at the embassies: “The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has no comprehensive information about Sweden’s actions on these issues at embassy level”.¹²⁴

Regarding other parliamentary parties, SMC writes that “[...] few Swedish parliamentary parties [have] developed their rhetoric, political positions or proposals on issues of freedom of religion and belief in foreign policy”.¹²⁵ The assessment is, however, that “Sweden is working more on the issue of freedom of religion and belief now than before”,¹²⁶ but that the work should be more systematic. Among other things, a number of measures are proposed to develop foreign policy:

- Thematic initiatives to pay particular attention to repression of women’s right to freedom of religion and belief at the UN, OSCE and EU level, as well as in bilateral relations.
- Geographical focus on strengthening freedom of religion and belief in three countries where Sweden can make an impact through enhanced diplomacy and support for research and civil society.
- Skills development in the foreign service to increase the capacity to respond to threats to freedom of religion or belief.
- International development cooperation initiatives.

When I contacted the Swedish Mission Council about what support it has received for its proposed measures, it was reported to me that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has not directly accepted any of them. Although they currently experience an interest at the official level, including the opportunity to participate in the training of diplomats, the interest from politicians is perceived to be weak.

¹²³ Swedish Mission Council. “Freedom of religion for all – how to strengthen Sweden’s foreign policy” (2014), <https://ihs.smc.global/documents/63C330B3-9E72-4C5F-B06C-F9DF460BFD6E/Religionsfrihet%20f%C3%B6r%20alla.pdf>

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

In connection with the change of government in the fall of 2014, direct references to religious freedom were again omitted from the 2015 Statement of Foreign Policy. Sweden's Minister for Foreign Affairs was then Margot Wallström. In addition to the change of government, 2014 was marked by the proclamation of a caliphate by the Islamic State (IS). The terrorist group gave the Christian population of Mosul in Iraq the ultimatum to convert to Islam, pay *jizia* (a special fee for non-Muslims) or flee. But in her first foreign declaration as Minister for Foreign Affairs, Margot Wallström instead talked about how Sweden was part of the military coalition against ISIS. There was no mention of the victims' identity.

"Abuses should be called by their proper names. ISIS's violence and terrorism are of the most widespread and heinous kind. Such crimes must have consequences",¹²⁷ Wallström said. There were expectations that she would also categorize the systematic abuses as genocide. The wording came to be: "accountability must be demanded and the guilty punished, regardless of whether it is genocide." Apart from these indirect references, work on religious freedom was not mentioned as a priority.

Nor was the identity of the Islamic State's victims mentioned. A mention would not only have given the victims recognition that their suffering had been acknowledged, but also sent a signal to the rest of the foreign policy complex on which vulnerable groups are in need of international support.

In the 2016 Statement of Foreign Policy, religious freedom was not mentioned either, except in the form of dialogue work among religious leaders in Cyprus.¹²⁸ One of the new initiatives was that the government would appoint a special ambassador to promote human rights work. In a commentary on the declaration, the Swedish Mission Council described the omission of religious freedom as "unfortunate":

Since freedom of religion and belief is closely linked to other universal rights, such as freedom of expression and the rights of children and women, freedom of religion and belief should also be a valuable and prioritized part of a feminist foreign policy, which the government actively pursues.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Utrikesdeklarationen 2015", <https://www.regering.se/se/tal/2015/02/utrikesdeklarationen-2015/>

¹²⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Utrikesdeklarationen 2016", <https://www.regering.se/se/tal/2016/02/utrikesdeklarationen-2016/>

¹²⁹ Olofsson, Johanna. "Kommentar till utrikesdeklarationen 2016", *Svenska Missionsrådet*, <https://press.smc.global/news/utrikesdeklarationen-2016-157651>

While various vulnerable religious and ethnic minorities were highlighted in the Statement of Foreign Policy, there was no specific mention of persecuted Christians:

Safeguarding every person's right to protection against discrimination is our shared responsibility. This includes anti-racism and efforts against, for example, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, Afrophobia and anti-Gypsyism. Sweden is a global voice for sexual and reproductive health and rights, and for every human right regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.¹³⁰

These remarks by the government illustrate the point that mentioning victims also shows that their suffering is noticed. It also shows that the protection of these groups is a priority, as it is done in the context of a foreign declaration. Jews, Muslims, black persons, Roma, and LGBTQ persons belong to vulnerable groups that are affected in different ways by religious persecution, racism and hate crimes. At the same time, Christian minorities and Yezidis had at this time been disproportionately affected by the Islamic State's war, and should therefore also have been given attention in light of the fact that Christians are the most persecuted religious group in the world. The fact that this is not mentioned also sends a signal to the Christian minority groups that have fled to Sweden and have family ties to people living in areas with ongoing persecution of Christians: that Sweden turns a blind eye to their vulnerability.

In June 2016, a few months later, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced the appointment of a Special Envoy against antisemitism and Islamophobia. A press release described that the fight against anti-Semitism and Islamophobia was 'a priority for the government'. The position involved coordinating the Foreign Ministry's efforts on these issues, including through the EU and the UN.¹³¹ Once again we are faced with the same important decision, that no one should be persecuted because of their religious, ethnic or sexual identity. The question remains why the world's most persecuted group – Christians – were not included in the envoy's area of responsibility. Even if the then envoy Joachim Bergström has given verbal assurances that he highlights persecuted Christians in his work, the journalist and human rights activist Nuri Kino has described in an article in *Dagen* (2018) how difficult it has been to obtain

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Foreign Minister appoints Special Envoy against Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia", <https://www.regeringen.se/artiklar/2016/06/utrikesministern-appoints-special-envoy-against-antisemitism-and-islamophobia/>

any concrete information about what the special envoy has done for persecuted Christians.¹³²

The year 2016 brought further foreign policy news linked to freedom of religion. The Swedish Mission Council conducted a survey of how 14 Swedish embassies dealt with issues of religious freedom. It showed, among other things, that only a few embassies worked consciously with these issues. In many cases, there was no focus on religious freedom, which was instead generally included in the concept of human rights. Five out of the 14 embassies did not work on religious freedom at all.¹³³ This can be compared to the reports on religious freedom that US embassy staff submit each year from the countries where they are represented, detailing legislation, incidents and national debate. These are then compiled in *The International Religious Freedom Report*¹³⁴ in accordance with specific legislation from 1998 and have been published regularly for more than twenty years.

Niklas Eklöv, editor of the SMC report, commented on the survey in the newspaper *Dagen*:

“Despite having the same mission and being in contexts that are equally serious in terms of violations of these rights, there were several embassies that did nothing. They do not seem to understand the situation. This is worrying and remarkable.”¹³⁵

This suggests that since the SMC’s 2014 report, political interest in religious freedom has remained low.

On December 14, 2016, the European Parliament adopted its 2015 annual report on human rights and democracy in the world. It stated, among other things, that “Christians are currently the religious group most exposed to harassment and threats in countries around the world [...] and that some of the oldest Christian communities are at risk of disappearing, especially in North Africa and the Middle East”.¹³⁶ The report was not commented on by the Swedish government.

¹³² Kino, Nuri. “Sveriges regering är tondöv för kristofobi”, *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/debatt/nuri-kino-sveriges-regering-ar-tondov-for-kristofobi/3119230>

¹³³ Alestig, Inger. “Svenska ambassader dåliga på religionsfrihet”, *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/svenska-ambassader-daliga-pa-religionsfrihet/3796735>

¹³⁴ US Department of State. “International Religious Freedom Reports”, <https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-reports>

¹³⁵ Alestig, Inger. “Svenska ambassader dåliga på religionsfrihet”, *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/svenska-ambassader-daliga-pa-religionsfrihet/3796735>

¹³⁶ European Parliament. ‘Annual report on human rights and democracy in the world and the European Union’s policy on the matter 2015’, https://www.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2016-0502_SV.html

However, earlier in December 2016, the Government published the document *Human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Swedish foreign policy* (Skr. 2016/17:62), which included a section on freedom of religion. There, Minister for Foreign Affairs Margot Wallström stated that they intended to strengthen this work in several ways:

- to systematically raise awareness of the freedom of religion or belief and the ways in which this right can be violated¹³⁷.
- to highlight the importance of religious freedom as an integral part of broader efforts to strengthen respect for human rights.¹³⁸

In practice, however, very little of this has been applied. When Wallström referred to the letter Skr. 2016/17:62 in the 2017 Statement of Foreign Policy, there was no mention of the ambition to “highlight the importance of religious freedom”¹³⁹ in human rights work. The country-specific reports that followed in the spring were instead about “discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, religion ...”¹⁴⁰ However, freedom of religion is about more than just protection from discrimination, which is also expressed in Skr. 2016/17:62.

In the 2018 Statement of Foreign Policy, freedom of religion was mentioned only once and then indirectly: “We never accept attacks based on ethnicity or religion.”¹⁴¹

In a debate article in *Svenska Dagbladet*¹⁴² later that year in the middle of the election campaign, Minister for Foreign Affairs Margot Wallström listed the initiatives that the government had decided on for the Foreign Ministry’s work on religious freedom. Among other things, after strong criticism, the title “envoy against anti-Semitism and Islamophobia” was changed to “envoy for intercultural and interreligious dialogue”. This title is now held by Ulrika Sundberg, former Consul General in Mumbai, India, following the appointment of Joachim Bergström as Ambassador to North Korea in the summer of 2019. It has also been announced that an internal

¹³⁷ Government. “Human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Swedish foreign policy”. Skr. 2016/17:62, <https://www.government.se/legal-documents/2018/03/skr.-20161762>

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. ‘Foreign Affairs Declaration 2017’, <https://www.regeringen.se/tal/2017/02/utrikesdeklarationen-2017/>

¹⁴¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. ‘Foreign Affairs Declaration 2018’, <https://www.regeringen.se/tal/2018/02/utrikesdeklarationen-2018/>

¹⁴² Wallström, Margot. “Måste säkra religionsfriheten”, *Svenska Dagbladet*, <https://www.svd.se/a/Kv9JWX/wallstrom-maste-sakra-religionsfriheten>

working group has been created “to better coordinate our various actors working in different ways to support religious minorities”.¹⁴³

In 2019, there were no direct concrete initiatives in the area of religious freedom – apart from an campaign to spread support for democracy. In what was to be Margot Wallström’s last foreign policy statement, she described how “persecution of religious minorities in many parts of the world is unacceptable”¹⁴⁴ and that the relationship between Iraq’s “different ethnic and religious groups [...] is crucial for long-term peace and stability”.¹⁴⁵ Two days later – on Friday, February 15 – Wallström emphasized in an interpellation debate on the persecution of Christians that freedom of religion and belief “must be an integral part of what we do”.¹⁴⁶ In the debate, she mentioned a number of initiatives, including the democracy campaign presented in the Statement of Foreign Policy. According to Wallström, understanding of religion and religious freedom would thus be included as key areas. What the democracy campaign would mean in practice, however, has been unclear. In November of the same year, the newly appointed Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ann Linde, together with the then Minister for International Development Cooperation, Peter Eriksson, presented the Government’s priorities in the democracy initiative to the parliament, the Riksdag’s Committee on Foreign Affairs: *Drive for Democracy*.¹⁴⁷ Once again, there was a lack of concrete measures to strengthen religious freedom.¹⁴⁸ The concept of freedom of religion and belief, which according to Wallström would be an “integral part”¹⁴⁹ of the work and play a central role in the democracy campaign, was not among the priority areas that included strengthening free and independent media, equality, and the democratic engagement of women and youth. What remained was an

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “Utrikesdeklarationen 2019”, <https://www.regeringen.se/tal/20192/02/utrikesdeklarationen-2019/>

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Parliament. Interpellation 2018/19:65 by Désirée Pethrus (KD). “Persecution of Christians in the world”, https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/interpellation/persecution-of-christians-in-the-world_H61065

¹⁴⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “Demokratisatsningen tar form”, <https://www.regeringen.se/artiklar/2019/11/demokratisatsningen-tar-form/>

¹⁴⁸ Malmstigen, Anders. “Hotet mot religionsfriheten måste tas på största allvar”, *Göteborgs-Posten*, <https://www.gp.se/debatt/hotet-mot-religionsfriheten-m%C3%A5ste-tas-p%C3%A5-st%C3%B6rsta-allvar-1.20947474>

¹⁴⁹ Parliament. Interpellation 2018/19:65 by Désirée Pethrus (KD). ‘Persecution of Christians in the world’, https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/interpellation/persecution-of-christians-in-the-world_H61065

important point about promoting and strengthening civil society. In reality, it is religious actors, mostly churches, that account for a significant part of civil society and constitute voices for democracy. The lack of focus on religious freedom in the democracy campaign is therefore problematic. Religious freedom through civil society lays an important foundation for other freedoms and rights.

Over the past few years, Sweden's international commitment to gender equality has increased, not the least in its Statement of Foreign Policy. Gender equality as an idea is important and emphasizes the importance of equal conditions and rights. Freedom of religion can rather be said to emphasize the right to be different and the tolerance of dissenters. In practice, these two ideals can create a tension between religious freedom and women's rights. In the report on Sweden's *feminist foreign policy* (Skr. 2019/20:17) from September 2019, the government reports on this work, stating, among other things, that in October 2014, Sweden became "the first country in the world to declare a feminist foreign policy".¹⁵⁰ In the 2015 Statement of Foreign Policy, Margot Wallström declared that "a feminist foreign policy shall permeate the work of the entire foreign administration" and aim to "strengthen women's rights, increase women's access to resources and increase women's representation".¹⁵¹ What is the relationship between the work for gender equality and religious freedom? A report by the SMC on the links between the shrinking democratic space and the negative development of freedom of religion and belief in 29 countries notes that the lack of religious freedom has a particularly strong impact on gender equality and women's rights.¹⁵² Open Doors also explains that Christian women are doubly affected, as they are persecuted both because of their faith and their gender. "Christian men are particularly vulnerable to economic harassment through business, work or access to jobs, while Christian women are particularly vulnerable to sexually violent attacks.

Researchers found, based on several field interviews in combination with the detailed reports from over 60 countries, that the experience of Christian men of religious persecution globally is characterized as focused,

¹⁵⁰ Government. "Sweden's feminist foreign policy". Skr. 2019/20:17, <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/skrivelse/2019/09/skr.-20192017> p. 4.

¹⁵¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 'Foreign Affairs Declaration 2015', <https://www.regeringen.se/informationmaterial/2015/02/utrikesdeklarationen-2015/>

¹⁵² Swedish Mission Council. "New report shows: religious freedom overlooked in work for democracy", <https://press.smc.global/pressreleases/ny-rapport-visar-religionsfrihet-foerbises-i-werk-foer-demokrati-3045825>

severe and visible. In contrast, religious persecution of Christian women globally is characterized as complex, violent and hidden.”¹⁵³

Without freedom of religion, women and other vulnerable groups cannot assert their rights, as much of the violence and discrimination against them is religiously motivated. However, in the Government’s letter on feminist foreign policy from 2019, religion is only mentioned as a cause of human rights restrictions.¹⁵⁴ Freedom of religion and belief is not mentioned either as an end in itself or as an instrument for democratization and gender equality. In summary, it can be noted that the picture that emerges of Swedish foreign policy in relation to the global challenges to religious freedom is ambivalent. Politicians signal a number of measures and initiatives, but when it comes to implementing them, there is often a lack of action.

In contrast to our commitment to religious freedom, Sweden is an important voice in the work for global equality and the climate issue. In an article in *Svenska Dagbladet* (2019), Nuri Kino wonders why Sweden is so silent when it comes to the most persecuted women – those who suffer from religious persecution. Among other things, he questions the reluctance of Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs to refer to the Islamic State’s persecution and killing of Yezidis, Christians and other indigenous peoples in Iraq and Syria as genocide.

On August 16, 2014, ISIS entered the village. They had ordered the Yezidis living there to convert to Islam or die. The terrorists took the Kochobans to a school and divided them into groups. A group of only younger women and girls, a group of little boys, a group of middle-aged and older women, and a group of men. Men and women who could not be sold on sex markets were massacred.¹⁵⁵

In his article, Kino tells how he contacted the Ministry of Foreign Affairs since Sweden did not join the then newly formed *International Religious Freedom Alliance* (IR FA), which was started by the U.S. together with countries such as the Netherlands, Albania, Austria, the UK, Estonia and Hungary.

¹⁵³ Open Doors. Fisher, Helene and Lane Miller, Elizabeth. “WWL 2019 Gender-Specific Religious Persecution: Analysis and Implications”, https://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/WWL-2019-Analysis-of-Gender-specific-religious-persecution_FINAL_WITH_policy_recommendations.pdf p. 3.

¹⁵⁴ Government. “Sweden’s feminist foreign policy”. Skr. 2019/20:17, <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/skrivelse/2019/09/skr.-20192017> p. 10.

¹⁵⁵ Kino, Nuri. “Bryr sig Sverige inte om de mest förföljda kvinnorna?”, *Svenska Dagbladet*, <https://www.svd.se/bryr-sig-sverige-inte-om-de-mest-forfoljda-kvinnorna>

I contacted the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to find out why. Cecilia Tamm, Permanent Secretary at the Ministry, replied: ‘Our general approach is that it is better to deal with religious freedom issues in the established multilateral forums that already exist, such as the UN Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly’s Third Committee. Sweden participates actively in this work and also cooperates closely with the United States.’¹⁵⁶

Given Donald Trump’s notorious rhetoric and tendency to turn important international issues into domestic politics, it is reasonable to question whether the launch of the IRFA was constructive. At the same time, the countries of the UN Human Rights Council Saudi Arabia, Cuba, China, Venezuela, Qatar and now Pakistan – are hardly known for their constructive approach to human rights.

But you don’t have to look across the Atlantic. Just cross the Öresund to our neighboring country Denmark for inspiration on how to include religious freedom in foreign policy. In the new Danish strategy for development cooperation, published in the summer of 2021, the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the first time specifically mentions religious freedom and the role of religious actors in democracy. This is an initiative supported by both the government and the opposition. Among the marginalized groups targeted are Christians, non-believers, LGBTQ people and people with disabilities.¹⁵⁷ “In Denmark, it is no longer taboo to talk about the persecution of Christians. But we must help all faith-based minorities, including Christians”,¹⁵⁸ said Minister for Development Cooperation Flemming Møller Mortensen.

When the time came for Margot Wallström’s successor, Ann Linde, to present the Swedish Statement of Foreign Policy for the second time in February 2021, freedom of religion and belief was once again missing, despite her predecessor’s promises that this right would be a natural part of Swedish foreign policy. The Statement of Foreign Policy of the previous year, 2020, mentioned vulnerable religious minorities in one sentence. It may be the case that what is not mentioned is still implied. The concept of human rights, where the right to freely exercise one’s faith or beliefs is a foundational right, was mentioned nine times. Nevertheless, an exchange

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “Sharing the world: Denmark’s development policy strategy, <https://um.dk/~media/um/danish-site/documents/news/development-strategy.pdf?la=en>

¹⁵⁸ Mortensen, Flemming Møller et al. “Det er en dansk värdeikamp at beskytte kristne forfulgte”, *Kristeligt Dagblad*, <https://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk/debat/det-er-en-dansk-vaerdikamp-beskytte-kristne-forfulgte>

of lines between Linde and MP Lars Adaktusson of the Christian Democratic Party gave an indication of the importance of freedom of religion and belief in Swedish foreign policy. Adaktusson highlighted religious freedom as a foundation for democracy and the genocide of Christians:

Today, half a billion of the world's 2.3 billion Christians are denied the free exercise of their religion. Although not mentioned in the Statement of Foreign Policy, Christians are the most persecuted group in the world, and the situation has worsened as the world has been plagued by the pandemic.

In the Middle East in 2014, we saw how religious persecution turned into genocide against Assyrians/Syrians and Chaldeans. Despite the enormity of what happened, the Swedish government refuses to recognize this genocide. Similarly, the government chooses not to recognize Seyfo, the Armenian genocide of 1915, despite a stated promise from Stefan Löfven.¹⁵⁹

Ann Linde's response was aimed at Adaktusson's stance on abortion and the vulnerability of LGBTI people:

We all know Lars Adaktusson's opposition to abortion and how he voted against it 22 times in the European Parliament.¹⁶⁰

This issue is of course worth discussing, but Linde chose to ignore the main point of Adaktusson's speech. Instead of explaining what the government is doing in general and globally for vulnerable religious minorities and the importance of religious freedom, the Minister for Foreign Affairs chose to focus the debate on an individual MP's opinion on the question of the balance of power between the EU and its member states. If you turn the rhetoric around, it would mean that those who fight for safe abortions and vulnerable LGBTQ people would not care about burned churches, beheaded Christians and kidnapped priests, which would of course be a terrible and wrong conclusion.

Less than a month earlier, the European Parliament had adopted its latest annual report on human rights and democracy: "Christians are the most persecuted religious group in the world, representing eighty percent of all persecuted believers."¹⁶¹ Moreover, the Parliament had emphasized

¹⁵⁹ Parliament. Foreign policy debate 24 February 2021, https://riksdagen.se/sv/webb-tv/video/foreign-policy-debate/foreign-policy-debate_H8C120210224ud

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ European Parliament. "Texts adopted: Human rights and democracy in the world and the European Union's policy on the matter - Annual Report 2019", https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0014_SV.html?fbclid=IwA

“the need to pay particular attention to the situation around the world of persecuted Christians, who constitute a clear majority of religious groups that are discriminated against, subjected to violence and killed”.¹⁶² This could hardly have been unknown to Minister for Foreign Affairs Ann Linde when she prepared the Statement of Foreign Policy or replied to Lars Adaktusson’s speech.

R1qbjoxLLCR8iQtBvano2-sKJ9En5_vM0lGwg7MUrCqA-IZIwXhk_P8EY Wednesday, January 20, 2021.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

Religious feelings and blasphemy bans

IN AN ARTICLE IN *Newsweek* in 2012 on the persecution of Christians in the Muslim world, former Dutch parliamentarian Ayaan Hirsi Ali criticizes Western governments for turning a blind eye to intolerance in Muslim-dominated countries and focusing only on intolerance in their own countries.¹⁶³ Muslim minorities should be protected from discrimination and intolerance, she writes, but drawings, films and texts are something else than knives, guns and grenades. Some of Hirsi Ali's proposals are that Western governments should, in addition to diplomatic pressure, make aid and trade agreements with countries that violate religious freedom conditional. Sweden's then Minister for Foreign Aid, Peter Eriksson (MP), touched on something similar related to Tanzania because of the country's negative development. "Shrinking democratic space, tougher measures against LGBTQ people and in terms of human rights and also shrinking space for journalists", were reasons he mentioned on *Swedish Radio*.¹⁶⁴ The question, however, is whether there is a political interest in similar measures against Iraq, where the Christian minority is persecuted, or trade partners such as India (with which Sweden are working closely together on climate issues) where the persecution of Christians and Muslims has increased markedly since the ruling party BJP came to power.¹⁶⁵

One of the most obvious manifestations of a shrinking global democratic space is the application of various forms of blasphemy laws. In Europe, this has historically involved state churches seeking to restrict criticism of the state-imposed faith, which has affected everything from freethinkers to free churches. But even today, this type of legislation is still in place in countries such as Greece, Ireland and Italy, albeit not as draconian as blasphemy laws in other parts of the world.¹⁶⁶ Recently, Denmark

¹⁶³ Ali, Ayaan Hirsi. "The Global War on Christians in the Muslim World", *Newsweek*, <https://www.newsweek.com/ayaan-hirsi-alithe-global-war-christians-muslim-world-65817>

¹⁶⁴ Ridderstolpe, Erik. "Sverige sänker biståndet till Tanzania", *Sveriges Radio*, <https://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=83&artikel=7399032>

¹⁶⁵ Wallen, Joe. "Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalism gives rise to vigilante attacks on Christians", *The Telegraph*, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/02/16/narendra-modis-hindu-nationalism-gives-rise-vigilante-attacks/>

¹⁶⁶ Theodorou, Angelina E. "Which countries still outlaw apostasy and blasphemy?" Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/29/which-countries-still-outlaw-apostasy-and-blasphemy/>

abolished a blasphemy law that was more than three hundred years old and had not been applied since 1938.¹⁶⁷ Sweden's blasphemy law was abolished in 1949, but was replaced by the peace of faith act, which in turn was abolished in 1970. A 2017 survey by the *U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom* (USCIRF) of 71 countries with blasphemy laws found that 94 percent of these states "criminalize the expression of views that may be contrary to a religion or belief".¹⁶⁸ And in 92 percent of these states, the law could "limit religious discourse".¹⁶⁹

I will limit myself here primarily to the Muslim world, but will return below to the Western sphere, which is also in need of discussion.

According to religious freedom experts Paul Marshall and Nina Shea, the demand for blasphemy laws and restrictions on religious criticism, specifically criticism of Islam, has increased internationally since Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa on Salman Rushdie in 1989 in connection with the publication of *The Satanic Verses*. It has further intensified after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001.¹⁷⁰ In their book *Silenced* (2011), Marshall and Shea have mapped blasphemy legislation and its consequences in some twenty Muslim-dominated countries:

Our research shows that in Muslim-dominated countries and areas, restrictions on freedom of religion and expression through blasphemy bans, apostasy, and 'insults to Islam' are pervasive, curtailing freedom and causing suffering for millions of people.¹⁷¹

Reporters Without Borders has also warned about the spread of blasphemy laws. The report *Blasphemy Information sacrificed on altar of religion* (2013) describes how half of the world's countries have laws that prohibit criticism of religion or "traditional values".¹⁷² The report also points out that blasphemy laws can be justified in different ways, such as punishing criticism of religious dogma or dealing with attacks on "religious sentiments".¹⁷³

¹⁶⁷ TT-NTB. "Fritt fram att häda i Danmark", *Aftonbladet*, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/senastenytt/ttnyheter/utrikes/a/Onegw1/fritt-fram-att-hada-i-danmark>

¹⁶⁸ Fiss, Joelle and Kestenbaum, Jocelyn Getgen. "Respecting Rights? Measuring the World's Blasphemy Laws", U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Blasphemy%20Laws%20Report.pdf> p. 23.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Marshall, Paul and Shea, Nina. *Silenced - How apostasy and blasphemy codes are choking freedom worldwide* (Oxford University Press, 2011). pp. 3-4.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, p. 308.

¹⁷² Reporters Without Borders. "Blasphemy - Information sacrificed on altar of religion", <https://www.reportrarutangranser.se/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/blasfemi.pdf>

¹⁷³ Ibid.

Even though the Swedish blasphemy law has been officially abolished, the debate on whether blasphemy and mockery of religious beliefs should be restricted is far from over in Sweden, as illustrated in connection with the Koran burning in Malmö in 2020. It has long been known that Pakistan's blasphemy law is one of the strictest in the world. For example, under Section 295 B and C of Pakistan's Penal Code, insulting comments about the Koran and Islam's prophet Muhammad are criminalized and lead to life imprisonment and the death penalty, respectively.¹⁷⁴ When the Pakistani mother of five Asia Noreen went to work at the local farm on June 19, 2009, she had no idea that she was about to be known all over the world. In a discussion with her fellow workers, she allegedly insulted Muhammad, according to those who reported her to the police. Later the same day, she was charged with blasphemy, which in Pakistan means the death penalty.

In November 2010, the local court sentenced Asia Noreen – better known as Asia Bibi – to death by hanging. The case was appealed and since 2019 Asia Bibi is a free woman. However, the process came at a very high price. Not only because of the years she spent in prison, but also because people like the governor Salman Taseer and cabinet minister Shahbaz Bhatti were murdered for opposing Pakistan's blasphemy laws and defending Asia Bibi. In the former case, Taseer was murdered by his own bodyguard, Mumtaz Qadri, who was hailed as a hero by activists.¹⁷⁵ While Pakistan is a member of the UN Human Rights Council, it has a number of people imprisoned for blasphemy.

For years, Pakistan has tried to ban criticism of Islam through the UN Human Rights Council. To achieve this it has used the *Organization of Islamic Conferences* (OIC) – a body of Muslim states. The OIC adopted the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam in 1990, which, according to the member states, conveys a Muslim approach to human rights. Among other things, the declaration prohibits the dissemination of views contrary to Muslim norms. Article 22 A states that “everyone has the right to express his opinion freely in such a way as not to [contradict] the principles of Sharia”.¹⁷⁶ The Cairo Declaration also does not guarantee the right to change one's religion from Islam.

¹⁷⁴ Wikipedia. *Blasphemy in Pakistan*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blasphemy_in_Pakistan

¹⁷⁵ Reuters. “Salman Taseer murder: Pakistan hangs Mumtaz Qadri”, *BBC News*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35684452>

¹⁷⁶ University of Minnesota Human Rights Library. “Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam”, <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/instree/cairodeclaration.html>.

In *Silenced*, Shea and Marshall point out how the OIC was instrumental in protesting the Muhammad cartoons published by *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005:

The OIC and several of its member states engineered much of the Muslim outrage, most of which began four months after the cartoons appeared. They aroused Muslim anger and gave legitimacy to the issue, ensuring that it received wide and sustained attention [...] The OIC voted to condemn the cartoons, made a diplomatic intervention against Denmark, and initiated a boycott of Danish private companies.¹⁷⁷

In this way, the organization has exported blasphemy laws and calls for prohibition to other countries. For example, on March 25, 2010, the OIC succeeded in getting the UN Human Rights Council to pass the Resolution on *Combating Defamation of Religions* with twenty votes in favor, seventeen against, and eight abstentions.¹⁷⁸ Later that year, it was passed by the UN General Assembly.¹⁷⁹ The resolution is not binding for member states, but gives legitimacy to blasphemy laws. However, these laws still face criticism from the UN's independent experts. Frank La Rue, the former UN rapporteur on freedom of expression, has stated that the right to freedom of religion does not include "the right to have a religion or belief that is free from criticism or ridicule. In fact, the right to freedom of expression includes the right to examine, debate openly, make statements that offend, shock and disturb, and criticize belief systems, opinions and institutions, including religious ones".¹⁸⁰

Against this background, it was remarkable that in 2012 the then EU foreign affairs representative, Catherine Ashton, wrote a joint appeal for "peace and tolerance"¹⁸¹ together with the Arab League and the OIC, in

¹⁷⁷ Marshall and Shea 2011, p. 309

¹⁷⁸ Humanists International. "Gap closing on 'Defamation of Religion'", <https://humanists.international/2010/03/gap-closing-defamation-religion/>

¹⁷⁹ International Service for Human Rights. "Support for 'defamation of religion' continues to decline; draft resolution passes by only 12 votes", <http://www.ishr.ch/news/support-defamation-religion-continues-decline-draft-resolution-passes-only-12-votes>

¹⁸⁰ La Rue, Frank. Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression. "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression", United Nations General Assembly, <https://undocs.org/en/A/67/357>

¹⁸¹ European Union. "Joint statement by the European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, OIC Secretary General, Arab League Secretary General, and Chairperson of the Commission of the African Union", Brussels, September 20, 2012. A 412/12, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/132512.pdf

which Pakistan is a prominent player. Instead of focusing on freedom of religion and belief for people of different faiths, the call was about promoting respect for prophets and religions.

Terrorist researcher Magnus Norell commented: “No serious observer can reasonably take statements such as: “We share a profound respect for all religions. We are united in our belief in the fundamental importance of religious freedom and tolerance. We condemn any advocacy of religious hatred that constitutes incitement to hostility and violence”, with any seriousness when they come from the OIC countries and the Arab League.”¹⁸²

On the same day as the appeal was launched, the OIC described the “systemic abuse” of freedom of expression as a threat to “global security and stability”.¹⁸³ At the same time, the organization’s own Human Rights Commission argued that the “growing intolerance against Muslims” must be controlled and called for “an international code of conduct for media and social media not to allow the dissemination of inflammatory material”.¹⁸⁴ It is interesting to note the silence of the Pakistani government regarding the more than one million Muslim Uighurs in China’s re-education camps across the country’s border in the Xinjiang province. When Pakistan’s Prime Minister Imran Khan was recently pressed by journalist Jonathan Swan on why he campaigned against what he perceived as Islamophobia in the West, but remained silent on the genocide of Muslims in China, he denied China’s atrocities¹⁸⁵ despite overwhelming evidence in the form of reports, pictures and testimonies. That the unwillingness to criticize China is linked to Chinese investments and loans in Pakistan is not a bold conclusion.

Allegations of violating Pakistan’s blasphemy laws have been ranging from children allegedly burning pages of the Koran to people allegedly sending derogatory text messages about the Prophet Muhammad. In many cases, the allegations are loosely based and the accused could be released on bail. However, it is not uncommon for people to take the law into their own hands, which in many cases has resulted in the killing of innocent people.

¹⁸² Norell, Magnus. “Obegripligt att EU inte står upp för yttrandefriheten”, *Svenska Dagbladet*, <https://www.svd.se/a/29f4a2a7-35ba-3540-b771-d69f368f9c91/obe-gripligt-att-eu-inte-star-upp-for-yttrandefriheten>

¹⁸³ Evans, Robert. “Islamic states to reopen quest for global blasphemy law”, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-protests-religions-blasphemy/islamic-states-to-reopen-quest-for-global-blasphemy-law-idUSBRE88I1EG20120919>

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ Axios. “Pakistan PM mum about China’s crackdown on Uyghur Muslims”, <https://www.axios.com/pakistan-imran-khan-china-uyghur-muslims-e0b791b8-86f8-49ff-9e14-40311388082e.html>

In 2014, Shahzad and his pregnant wife Shama were murdered. After the Christian couple was accused of burning a copy of the Koran, a group of mullahs led a mob to exact revenge. The couple was beaten with sticks and thrown into a brick kiln. According to a report by the Anglican Church of Pakistan, “the [perpetrators] stripped them of their clothes and paraded them naked around the brick kiln twice before beating them until they were almost dead ... [then] they were thrown into the fire and burned alive”.¹⁸⁶ The report states that the murder was actually about an unpaid debt and that the blasphemy charge was a pretext. The couple had three children who are now freed from slavery and attending school. In November 2016, five men were sentenced to death for the murders; according to a 2019 report the sentences was made in the higher court.¹⁸⁷

The murders of Shahzad and Shama are one in a series that can be linked to Pakistan’s blasphemy law. According to USCIRF, around sixty people have been murdered since 1990.¹⁸⁸ In March 2013, one hundred and fifty Christian homes were destroyed in the village of Joseph Colony after similar allegations.¹⁸⁹ Instead of trying to stop the attack, the local police ordered the residents to flee. So far, no one has been held accountable for the incident. In 2020, two hundred people were prosecuted under the country’s blasphemy law, the highest number since the law took its current form in 1983.¹⁹⁰

Pakistan’s blasphemy laws combined with widespread corruption have devastating consequences for minorities. A 2016 USCIRF report analyzes Pakistan’s school textbooks. These encourage discrimination and distrust of non-Muslims and teaches that they sympathize with the country’s

¹⁸⁶ Gryboski, Michael. “Church of Pakistan Confirms Christian Couple Was Burned Alive by 1,500 Muslims Over Rumor They Ripped Pages From Quran,” *Christian Post*, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/church-of-pakistan-confirms-christian-couple-was-burned-alive-by-1500-muslims-over-rumor-they-ripped-pages-from-quran.html>

¹⁸⁷ Jalil, Xari. “They have burnt Mummy and Papa’: What happened to the children of Shama and Shahzad Masih?”, *Dawn*, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1456442>.

¹⁸⁸ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. “Pakistan Chapter – 2019 Annual Report”, https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier1_PAKISTAN_2019.pdf

¹⁸⁹ Walsh, Declan. “Attack on Christians Follows Claim of Blasphemy in Pakistan”, *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/10/world/asia/explosion-rips-through-mosque-in-peshawar-pakistan.html>

¹⁹⁰ Sayhoon News. “Pakistan reports a record 200 blasphemy cases in 2020: Report”, <https://sayhoon.com/post/19186/english>

enemies.¹⁹¹ Pakistani Christians are seen as Westerners or equated with British colonial oppressors. Hindus in the country are equated with Indians and thus identified with the other side in the long conflict between Pakistan and India. The country's blasphemy law is regularly used to fuel personal vendettas, with individuals and groups taking the law into their own hands. Not only can what is described as blasphemy result in retaliation. Critics of the legislation itself are also targeted.

But it is important to note that blasphemy laws also affect Muslims. Nina Shea and Paul Marshall point out that the majority of those accused of "defaming Islam" or hurting "religious feelings" are themselves Muslims. These include those who have condemned stoning (Sudan), set up girls' schools (Bangladesh), criticized clerical rule (Iran), refused to engage in jihad (Sudan), called for interpretation of the Koran based on its historical context (India) or demanded a ban on child marriage (Yemen). These have been imprisoned, abused or killed by people who have taken the law into their own hands.¹⁹² This illustrates USCIRF's 2017 survey, that blasphemy laws often "contain ambiguous or vague language"¹⁹³ and are thus basically open to subjective interpretation and application depending on the individual's beliefs, religious views or cultural norms. The OIC points to the "abuse" of freedom of expression, but it is rather the blasphemy laws that are arbitrarily abused.

Marshall and Shea also highlight similar threats to Muslims in the West. Belgian politician Mimount Bousakla was threatened with "ritual slaughter" because of her criticism of the role of women in her own Muslim culture.¹⁹⁴ The first Muslim in the German parliament, Ekin Deligoz, was threatened with death and given police protection after saying that Muslim women should "take off their veils [...] [and] show that you have the same civil and human rights as men".¹⁹⁵

This illustrates not only how blasphemy laws and restrictions on religious criticism strengthen extremists and silence dissenting voices, but

¹⁹¹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, <https://www.uscirf.gov/reports-briefs/special-reports/teaching-intolerance-in-pakistan-religious-bias-in-public-school>

¹⁹² Marshall and Shea 2011, pp. 311-312.

¹⁹³ Fiss, Joelle and Kestenbaum, Jocelyn Getgen. "Respecting Rights? Measuring the World's Blasphemy Laws", U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Blasphemy%20Laws%20Report.pdf> p. 24.

¹⁹⁴ Marshall and Shea 2011, p. 259.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 274.

also how the first to be silenced are usually Muslim religious and political activists seeking religious and political reform.

According to Muslim scholar Nasr Abu-Zayd, who fled Egypt because of his interpretation of the Koran, accusations of insulting Islam are “key weapons in the fundamentalists’ arsenal that are strategically deployed to prevent reform in Muslim societies. Instead, the world’s Muslim population is confined to a pale, colorless socio-cultural prison of political conformity”.¹⁹⁶ According to a Pew Research Center survey, about a quarter of the world’s countries have some form of blasphemy legislation.¹⁹⁷ The consequences range from fines to the death penalty. A related piece of legislation is the apostasy law which prohibits leaving the majority religion (in most cases Islam) and exists in twenty-five countries.¹⁹⁸

But while support for blasphemy laws is strong in the Muslim-dominated world, it is not a law of nature. Abdurrahman Wahid, leader of Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama, the world’s largest Muslim organization, and the country’s first democratically elected president writes:

Silencing criticism and debate through legislation only encourages Muslim fundamentalists to impose a spiritually empty, harsh and monolithic understanding of Islam on the world. Instead, Western governments should firmly defend freedom of expression, not only in their own countries, but also globally.¹⁹⁹

The democratic space is not only challenged in countries where religious freedom and other human rights are strongly restricted. It is very much an issue that is being discussed in the Western world. Just as support for restrictions on religious freedom in the form of blasphemy laws is not a natural law in the Muslim world, the freedom to practice one’s beliefs in our part of the world is not self-evident. We have already seen several political debates concerning demands for restrictions on religious beliefs and limitations on religious criticism. As Sweden distances itself more and more from being a homogeneous society, these debates will probably become even more prominent. Thus, the need to explain and defend religious freedom will become even more urgent. The concluding words of Nina Shea and Paul Marshall in *Silenced* should be taken seriously:

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 293.

¹⁹⁷ Theodorou, Angelina E. “Which countries still outlaw apostasy and blasphemy?”, Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/29/which-countries-still-outlaw-apostasy-and-blasphemy/>

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Marshall and Shea 2011, p. xxi.

When politics and religion intertwine, as they necessarily do in debates about blasphemy and insults to Islam, banning religious criticism also means banning political criticism. Conversely, without religious debate there is no political debate; without religious dissent there is no political dissent. And without religious freedom, there is no political freedom.²⁰⁰

²⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p. 331.

When Sweden did not recognize a genocide

I met Hana, who was the caretaker of my church in Baghdad. When he told me about his youngest son, who was five years old, he struggled to hold back tears. Hana's son was cut in half before his eyes during one of the Islamic State's attacks. The murdered boy's name was Andrew, after me. I cry every time I think of him.²⁰¹

THIS IS HOW CANON Andrew WHITE, vicar of Iraq's only Anglican church, described the situation in the country in 2014. That summer, the Islamic State (IS) declared a caliphate in the country's second largest city, Mosul. The aim was to erase the border between Iraq and Syria and to expand into large parts of both countries. There were plans to initiate an apocalyptic war with the Christian West.

ISIS gave Christians in Iraq's northern province of Nineveh, where the city of Mosul is located, an ultimatum: pay *jizya*, a religious tax for non-Muslims, convert to Islam or flee. Or face the sword. In practice, the choice was to convert, flee or die.

Nina Shea, of the Washington-based *Hudson Institute Center for Religious Freedom*, has described the terror as thousands of Christians fled Mosul: "ISIS took Christians' houses and the cars they drove as they left the city. They took everyone's money. One old woman had her life savings of 40,000 dollars with her. She asked if she could keep a hundred dollars, but the terrorists refused. When they couldn't get her wedding rings off, they cut off her fingers."²⁰²

In 2003, before the US-led invasion that ended Saddam Hussein's rule, there were around 1.5 million Christians in Iraq. Today, there are around a quarter of a million, most of whom live in Baghdad, the Nineveh Province in northern Iraq or Iraqi Kurdistan.²⁰³ As Christians fled Mosul when ISIS took over the city in 2014, their homes were marked with the Arabic letter 'N' for *Nazari* (Nazarene or Christian). According to the Chaldean

²⁰¹ White, Canon Andrew. "We need military action NOW", *Daily Mail*, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2720983/Vicar-Baghdad-We-need-military-actions-NOW.html>

²⁰² Powers, Kirsten. "Iraqi Christians' nightmare", *USA Today*, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2014/07/29/kirsten-powers-iraqi-christians-nightmare/13329557/>

²⁰³ "Factbox: Iraq's Christian denominations", *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-popec-iraq-christians-sects-factbox-idUSKCN2AT1UZ>

Archbishop of Erbil, Bashar Warda, that summer was the first time in 1,600 years that no mass was celebrated in Mosul.²⁰⁴

On March 17, 2016, then US Secretary of State John Kerry referred to Islamic State's terror as genocide against Yezidis, Christians and other religious minorities. The recognition was described as historic by several commentators:

In my judgment, Daesh (IS) is guilty of genocide [...] Labeling these crimes is important, but even more important is stopping them [...] The fact is that Daesh (IS) kills Christians because they are Christians, Yezidis because they are Yezidis, Shiites because they are Shiites.²⁰⁵

On 4 February of the same year, the European Parliament, after a vote, had also determined that the killings by ISIS constituted genocide.²⁰⁶ The least decent thing for Sweden could do would have been to also recognize the genocide and work for a protected zone for Iraq's Christians. There was no shortage of reports of the atrocities. However, a majority of MPs voted against, despite the fact that several experts on the UN Genocide Convention argued that the criteria for genocide were met. If Sweden had recognized genocide against Christians, Yezidis and other minorities, there would have been several opportunities to act. For example, it could have prevented more Swedes from joining the terrorist group. Instead, the deadly threat posed by the Islamic State to religious minorities was relativized. In 2014, Mehmet Kaplan, then leader of the Green Party's parliamentary group, compared the Swedes who joined IS with Swedish volunteers who fought against the Soviet Union in the Finnish Winter War in 1939-1940.²⁰⁷ Talking about Christians as a vulnerable group was met with reluctance.

Over time, more and more people understood the suffering of the religious minorities in the area – which is still going on. However, it took Pope Francis' visit to Iraq in March 2021 to put the international spotlight on the plight of Christians after the defeat of ISIS in the region, and the scale

²⁰⁴ World Watch Monitor. "No Mass said in Mosul for first time in 1,600 years, says Archbishop", *Christian Today*, <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/no.mass.said.in.mosul.for.first.time.in.1600.years.says.archbishop/38493.htm>

²⁰⁵ TT. "USA: IS is carrying out a genocide", *SVT Nyheter*, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/utrikes/usa-is-genomfor-ett-folkmord>

²⁰⁶ TT. "EU Parliament: Folkmord på kristna", *Svenska Dagbladet*, <https://www.svd.se/eu-parliament-folkmord-pa-kristna>

²⁰⁷ Stefan Olsson's blog. "The Green Party likens jihadists to volunteers during the Finnish Winter War", <https://stefanolsson.nu/2014/07/01/miljopartiet-liknar-jihadister-vid-frivilliga-under-finska-vinterkriget/>

of the tragedy became apparent. During the Pope's visit, Stina Blomgren, Middle East correspondent of the Swedish TV (SVT), reported on the religious persecution of Christians in the region, something that has not been common in SVT's news coverage:

“For Iraq's Christians, who have been severely affected by extremist violence, this historic visit is long-awaited. Only a fifth of the 1.5 million Christians living in Iraq twenty years ago remain in the country today. Christians are still being persecuted in Iraq, and many hope that Pope Francis' visit will put their rights on the agenda and underline the need for tolerance – in a country plagued by sectarian fighting after the 2003 US-led invasion. [...].

In the city of Mosul, where the Islamic State terrorist sect declared its caliphate, the Pope will hold a prayer for the victims of the war in a shattered church. In Mosul, the picture is still bleak, with only about 70 Christian families having returned.”²⁰⁸

At the same time, it was not the first time that Swedish politicians avoided speaking out about genocide against Christian minorities. Perhaps the clearest example is Sweden's reluctance to recognize the 1915 genocide in the former Ottoman Empire. More than two million Christian Syrians/Assyrians/Chaldeans, Armenians and Greeks were killed, which the Swedish parliament recognized in a vote in 2010, but governments since then have not wanted to recognize (the center-right government as well as red-green coalition). It is the descendants of these victims of 1915 who have suffered and continue to suffer at the hands of Islamist terrorist groups.

Despite Stefan Löfven's election promise in 2014 to carry out the parliament's recognition of the 1915 genocide, this has not been fulfilled.²⁰⁹ When president Joe Biden in April 2021 designated it a genocide, Minister for Foreign Affairs Ann Linde chose to call it a “mass atrocity” on Twitter,²¹⁰ which was met with hard criticism. A week earlier, the same government had wanted to make it a criminal offense to deny the Holocaust²¹¹ But

²⁰⁸ Blomgren, Stina. “Analyse: ‘Sätter ljuset på kristnas rättigheter’”, *SVT Nyheter*, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/utrikes/paven-till-irak-satter-ljuset-pa-kristnas-rattigheter>

²⁰⁹ Norbergh, Erik and Fallenius, Karin. “Stor besvikelse efter Löfvens brutna löfte – erkänner inte folk mord”, *SVT Nyheter*, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/sormland/stor-besvikelse-efter-lofvens-brutna-lofte-erkanner-inte-folkmord>

²¹⁰ Ann Linde's Twitter account (@AnnLinde) on April 24, 2021, <https://twitter.com/AnnLinde/status/1385910651160342528?s=20>

²¹¹ Olsson, Lova. “Regeringen: Gör det ulovligt att förneka Förintelsen”, *SR Ekot*, <https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/regeringen-gor-det-olagligt-att-forneka-forintelsen>

this is a problematic measure. Politicians should generally avoid legislating on the interpretation of history, even if the intentions are good and Holocaust denial is part of ongoing Nazi propaganda. But if you want to prohibit denying the Holocaust as the unique display of evil it was, why refuse to even acknowledge the existence of a genocide that killed millions because of their religious identity? Here is an inconsistency that many find deeply tragic.

It is not unusual for the persecution of Middle Eastern Christians to be minimized in the West. Sweden is no exception, and sometimes it is expressed in a tragicomic way. When a Christian Iraqi called Swedish Radio's popular phone-in programme *Ring P1* and expressed his concern about ISIS, program host Tappas Fogelberg asked if "it is time to start crusading again [...] A thousand years ago, Christians went down to fight the Saracens and the infidels, the Muslims. It was a religious war".²¹² In July 2014, *Skånska Dagbladet's* editor-in-chief Lars J Eriksson argued that IS should be left alone: "Let the caliphate be built up from the ruins of the war-torn countries. It may even be worthwhile for the outside world to contribute money to build the infrastructure of such a caliphate."²¹³

There has been no shortage of reports about ISIS's goal of eliminating Christians, their culture and history. A video clip shows extremists using sledgehammers and hammers to destroy three thousand year old sculptures in the Nineveh Museum.²¹⁴ The library in Mosul with hundreds of thousands of books and manuscripts was also destroyed. UNESCO described it as "one of the most devastating acts of destruction of library collections in human history".²¹⁵

Journalist Nuri Kino was one of those who followed the development of the genocide and the kidnapping of children and women. In *Svenska Dagbladet* (2017) he gave a description:

"On August 11 this year, I came into contact with one of the women liberated from ISIS in its self-proclaimed capital Raqqa in Syria. She was raped almost daily for three years, sometimes up to ten times. 'I decided

²¹² Swedish Radio. *Ring P1*, 12 August 2014, <http://sverigesradio.se/sida/av-snitt/415495?programid=1120&playepisode=415495>

²¹³ Eriksson, Lars J. "Låt Isis få sitt kalifat", *Skånska Dagbladet*, <https://www.skd.se/2014/07/06/lat-isis-fa-sitt-kalifat/>

²¹⁴ Williams, A. R. "ISIS Smashes Priceless, Ancient Statues in Iraq", *National Geographic*, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/150227-islamic-militants-destroy-statues-mosul-iraq-video-archaeology>

²¹⁵ Fadhil, Muna. "Isis destroys thousands of books and manuscripts in Mosul libraries", *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/feb/26/isis-destroys-thousands-books-libraries>

early on to leave my body, that it didn't belong to me anymore, that my soul was mine and my body was theirs, their tool. For me it was also a tool to keep my life. As long as it worked and they needed that tool, I would live. They could use it as much as they wanted, it wasn't entirely mine, I hovered over it, over them, over the abuse. Now it's mine again and I'm fighting to repair it'. Shortly after ISIS started kidnapping women and girls in the summer of 2014, they drew up a public price list for sex slaves. The price was set according to, among other things, age and eye color. The younger, the more expensive. If she had blue eyes, she was considered exotic and precious. IS members proudly filmed the kidnappings and sale of girls and women themselves.”²¹⁶

In the report *Edge of extinction*²¹⁷ by, among others, former congressman Frank Wolf, who has been highlighting the persecution of Christian minorities for years, describes some of the terrorist group's worst abuses against women and children. These include the kidnapping of babies and the imprisonment of hundreds of girls.

Another report, by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2015), described the fate of the kidnapped girls. IS established markets “where they sell abducted children and women” while the former Badush prison near Mosul was used as a “makeshift prison” for children held as sex slaves.²¹⁸

The Committee on the Rights of the Child also described how children of other minorities were murdered, including “several cases of mass executions of boys, as well as reports of beheadings, children crucified and buried alive”.²¹⁹

The persecution of Christians in Iraq is not new, but although Christians were a vulnerable minority even before the US-led invasion in 2003, their religious practice was protected by law. It was after the invasion that Iraqi Christians came to be identified with the Christian West and attacks began. The process was described in the German *Deutsche Welle*:

²¹⁶ Kino, Nuri. “IS performs a genocide: ‘They came to destroy us’”, *Svenska Dagbladet*, <https://www.svd.se/de-kom-for-att-utplana-oss>.

²¹⁷ The 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative, *Edge of Extinction: The Eradication of Religious and Ethnic Minorities in Iraq*, <https://21wilberforce.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Iraq-Report-1.pdf>

²¹⁸ United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. *Concluding observations on the combined second to fourth periodic reports of Iraq*, <http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2015/images/02/06/u.n..isis.children.report.pdf>

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

“Christians became a target of violence when Islamist groups and ordinary Muslims, outraged by the military action, began to see them as the enemy and associated them with the ‘crusaders’: the invading forces of the United States and Britain.”²²⁰

In 2004, Christians in Iraq were paralyzed when coordinated car bombs in both Baghdad and Mosul killed twelve worshippers in what was believed to be the first targeted attack on the Christian minority.²²¹ Soon, priests began to be kidnapped and killed. In February 2008, Mosul’s Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho was captured and later found dead.²²² The most famous case in Sweden was the Södertälje priest Ragheed Ganni, who had been active in the St. John’s Church in Södertälje and who was murdered in 2007 in a targeted attack in Mosul against him and three coworkers, when their car was attacked by an armed group.²²³

In May 2010, 160 Christian students were injured as they traveled in buses from various towns and villages to the University of Mosul.²²⁴ On Sunday, October 31, 2010, eight terrorists stormed the Catholic Church of Our Lady’s Liberation in Baghdad during mass, killing 57 people, including two priests.²²⁵

In an article by Eliza Griswold in the *New York Times Magazine* (2015), she asked whether Christianity in the Middle East is coming to an end.²²⁶ She noted that although Christianity appeared in the country in the first century, most of Iraq’s Christians (Assyrians, Chaldeans and Syrians) trace their ethnic origins to the Mesopotamian empires around a thousand years BC. Now, the significant presence of the Christian minority is gradually diminishing.

²²⁰ Nagger, Mona and Amies, Nick. “Iraqi Christians fear escalating persecution as US forces withdraw”, *Deutsche Welle*, <https://www.dw.com/en/iraqi-christians-fear-escalating-persecution-as-us-forces-withdraw/a-6052335>

²²¹ Howard, Michael. “Twelve killed as bombers attack Christians in Iraq”, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/aug/02/iraq.michaelhoward>

²²² *BBC News*. “Kidnapped Iraqi archbishop dead”, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7294078.stm

²²³ Boström, Hasse. “Södertäljepräst mördad i Irak”, *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/2007/06/05/sodertaljeprast-mordad-i-irak/>

²²⁴ Kremida, Damaris. “Bomb Attack in Iraq Seriously Injures Christian Students,” *Christian Headlines*, <https://www.christianheadlines.com/articles/bomb-attack-in-iraq-seriously-injures-christian-students-11631237.html>

²²⁵ Doyle, Kerstin. “Blodigt gisslandrama i Bagdad-kyrka”, *Dagen*, <https://www.daagen.se/nyheter/2010/11/02/blodigt-gisslandrama-i-bagdad-kyrka/>

²²⁶ Griswold, Eliza. “Is this the end of Christianity in the Middle East?”, *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/26/magazine/is-this-the-end-of-christianity-in-the-middle-east.html>

“For more than a decade, extremists have targeted Christians and other minorities, often acting as proxies for the West. This is particularly true in Iraq after the US invasion that led to the flight of hundreds of thousands. [...] ‘Since 2003 we have lost priests, bishops and more than sixty churches have been bombed’, says Bashar Warda, the Chaldean Catholic Archbishop of Erbil. With the fall of Saddam Hussein, Christians began leaving Iraq in large numbers. The Christian community dwindled to less than half a million today from as many as 1.5 million in 2003.”²²⁷

Developments suggest that all Christians and other vulnerable minorities will soon have left their historical homelands.

In December 2013, Patriarch Louis Sako of the Iraqi Catholic Church spoke at a conference in Rome about the persecution of Christians in the Middle East. Besides the fact that the persecution of Christians will continue, he stressed that Middle Eastern societies in general will suffer. He referred to how Christians have contributed to the economic, intellectual and cultural development of the region for two thousand years. The Christian presence has been stabilizing, as it has brought religious pluralism to the area. The same observation has been made by historian Habib Malik – son of Charles Malik, the main author of the UN Declaration of Human Rights. During a seminar on the future of the Middle East after the fall of the Islamic State in Washington DC in 2019, Malik emphasized how “healthy pluralism counteracts radicalization”. Among other things, the incentives to demonize the “other” are weakened when people live next door to each other, work together, and their children go to the same school.

We will later focus on religious pluralism as a prerequisite for reducing religious tensions. At the same time, Malik was pessimistic about the future of minorities in the Middle East: “ISIS 1.0 may be over, but ISIS 2.0 and 3.0 could still come.”

The terrorist group has been driven back, but the beliefs remain.

²²⁷ Ibid.

Islamism and Islamophobia

In 2015, journalist Graeme Wood WROTE a highly acclaimed article in *The Atlantic* highlighting the Islamic State's theological motivations as a neglected dimension in understanding and countering people joining the terrorist group.

“To pretend that [IS] is not really a religious group for a millennial empire with a theology that must be understood to be fought [is to] underestimate it and justifies foolish actions”.²²⁸

The background was statements made by everyone from the US military to the top US political leadership that they did not really understand the idea behind the Islamic State, claiming that the organization was not Muslim. According to Wood, there is a temptation to perpetuate the image of jihadists as “modern secular people with modern political concerns in a medieval guise”.²²⁹ And although ISIS attracts “psychopaths and adventure seekers”, the “religion preached by its most ardent followers is based on consistent and even scholarly interpretations of Islam”.²³⁰

In the article, he points out how the town of Dabiq near Aleppo in Syria has an important place in both Muslim eschatology and the ideology of the Islamic State. “It is here, according to the Prophet, that the armies of Rome will camp. The armies of Islam will meet them and Dabiq will be Rome's Waterloo”, writes Wood.²³¹

It is therefore not surprising that the terror group's own propaganda and recruitment magazine had the same name: *Dabiq*. A Christian equivalent might have been called Armageddon. The organization the *Clarion Project*, which serves as a platform for Muslim human rights activists and trains politicians and opinion leaders on Islamist extremism, has published several issues of the magazine on its website. In the eighth issue of *Dabiq*, the signature Umm Sumayyah Al-Muhajirah describes how she and other women who have joined the Islamic State see themselves: “Opponents often repeat the claim that those who make hijrah [emigration] to the Islamic State belong to a marginalized group in their former home-

²²⁸ Wood, Graeme. “What ISIS Really Wants”, *The Atlantic*, <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/02/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid.

lands. That they live under difficult conditions of unemployment, poverty, family problems and psychological disorders. But I saw something different! [...] I saw sisters giving up a life of luxury and abundance. I saw sisters who abandoned beautiful homes and luxury cars and left for the cause of their Lord.”²³²

In *Dabiq*'s fifteenth and final edition, entitled “Break the Cross” on the cover, the emphasis is on refuting Christianity and Western secularism with the aim of converting non-Muslims to Islam.

The religious reasoning found in *Dabiq can* also be found among some of the Swedes who joined the Islamic State. In a report on a jihadist known as Adam from Gothenburg, which was shown in Swedish Television's *Uppdrag granskning* in 2015, it is all about religious motives and hardly at all about unemployment.²³³ When asked why he had fought for IS and would soon join again, he replied: “It was mostly what I saw on TV. I saw how people had it there and how the rest of the world didn't care. You felt that you can't sit still. Especially if you are a Muslim and they are Muslims and Allah commands us to defend his religion.”²³⁴

Although Sweden is considered a “good” country, Adam wants his children to “grow up in an Islamic caliphate” and be able to “achieve martyrdom”. His friends who have died are in paradise. He himself aspires to become a martyr.

On his blog, *Svenska Dagbladet*'s the then editorial writer Per Gudmundson drew attention to another example. In a video clip with the Gothenburg muslim preacher Michael Skråmo, who later died in Syria and whose children were taken in by their grandfather, when the mother also died, he says: “I want you to be here with me. I want us to be together in Jannah. Good brothers, make this decision, trust in Allah, and sacrifice your money and your life for Allah, and you will have the highest with Allah”.²³⁵

²³² Umm Sumayyah Al-Muhajirah. “To our sisters”, <https://clarionproject.org/docs/isis-islam-magazine-issue+8-sharia-alone-will-rule-africa.pdf> pp. 33-34. *Dabiq* 8th issue

²³³ *Uppdrag granskning*. “Swedish jihadist: Vet inte om jag dödat någon”, SVT, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/granskning/ug/svenske-jihadisten-vet-inte-om-jag-dodat-nagon>

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Gudmundson, Per. “Göteborgspredikant manar till jihad från Syrien”, Gudmundson's blog, <http://gudmundson.blogspot.se/2015/02/goteborgspredikant-manar-till-jihad.html>

Even the supreme leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, placed the greatest emphasis on religious duty. In his first and only public appearance, he preached in a Mosul Mosque: “Obey me as long as I obey God.”²³⁶

As a non-Muslim, I must allow Muslims to define their faith in the same way that I want to define my Christian faith. Therefore, recurring claims, such as those made by then US President Barack Obama and Sweden’s then Minister for Home Affairs Anders Ygeman (S), that IS “are not real Muslims”²³⁷ are problematic. The same applies to the then deputy speaker of the Riksdag, Björn Söder (SD), and his categorical judgment that Islam is anything but “the religion of peace”.²³⁸ Or for that matter, Söder’s party colleague Richard Jomshof’s statement that Islam is “an abominable religion”.²³⁹ Not that this constitutes incitement to hatred – freedom of religion and expression must allow both criticism and mockery of religious beliefs – but because in both cases it is beyond the competence of the state to determine what is true or false belief. Elected officials should refrain from making sweeping judgments about a religion with 1.8 billion practitioners and 1 500 years of tradition. Again, it is free to criticize and even heckle a religious belief, but when elected politicians make the comments, the focus is shifted from the important debate on ideas to the judgment itself, as was the case after Richard Jomshof’s statement, which was met with condemnation from both the right and the left.²⁴⁰ Whether it is a matter of categorically describing Islam as a religion of peace or as an abominable religion, the important debate on the actual problems that exist in many Muslim countries and groups is obscured. It may even, as Graeme Wood points out, be counterproductive to gloss over violent Islamism:

“I suspect that most Muslims appreciate Obama’s statement [...] But most Muslims *are not* inclined to join the jihad. Those who are inclined will only have their suspicions confirmed: the US is lying about [our] religion to serve its own purposes.”²⁴¹

²³⁶ Olsson, Erik. “Isis leader in public appearance”, *Dagens Nyheter*, <http://www.dn.se/nyheter/varlden/isis-ledare-i-offentligt-framtradande/>

²³⁷ Lilja, Josefin. “Interior Minister on IS: ‘No real Muslims’”, *Dagen*, <http://www.dagen.se/inrikesministern-om-is-inga-riktiga-muslimer-1.317592>

²³⁸ Sköld, Josefin. “Björn Söder om attentatet i Paris: ‘Fredens religion visar sitt ansikte’”, *Dagens Nyheter*, <https://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/bjorn-soder-om-attentatet-i-paris-fredens-religion-visar-sitt-ansikte/>

²³⁹ Åhman, Emma. “Kristersson om SD-toppens islamuttalande: Stötande”, *Expressen*, <https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/sd-ledamotens-ord-om-islam-avskyvard/>

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Wood, Graeme. “What ISIS Really Wants”, *The Atlantic*, <http://www.theatlantic.com/features/archive/2015/02/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>

Since then, European leaders have begun to draw attention to the need for a clearer debate on the concept of Islamist terror. In 2013, following the murder of 25-year-old soldier Lee Rigby in the UK by two radicalized Islamists, former Prime Minister Tony Blair wrote in the *Daily Mail* about the need for further discussion on the violent elements of Islam, but also that a clear distinction must be made between the Islam practiced by the majority of Muslims and the violent individuals and movements: “We need to be open about it and be honest. Of course there are Christian, Jewish, Buddhist and Hindu extremists. But I am afraid that this movement is not isolated to a few extremists. At its core is an understanding of religion and of the interaction between religion and politics that is not compatible with pluralistic, liberal and open societies.”²⁴²

Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz has been on the same line. After an Islamist attack outside a synagogue in Vienna in the fall of 2020, in which four people were shot dead and many were injured, Kurz was interviewed on *SVT Agenda* where he argued that fighting terrorism is not enough. The underlying mindset, Islamism, must also be addressed:

“When young people are seduced, when hatred is fomented against our democracy, against our rule of law and against equality between men and women, against equal rights for homosexuals, against Jewish life and many other things.... If you spread that kind of hatred, there will always be people who put that hatred into action.”²⁴³

Blair and Kurz are asking important questions. In an increasingly pluralistic society, we must learn to live with each other’s differences in a civilized way. However, we must not end up falling in a trap where religious beliefs are banned from the public sphere or in the other trap where one religion dominates at the expense of others.

Precisely the need to make a clear distinction between Islam as practiced by the majority of Muslims on the one hand and, on the other, Islamism, both in its violent and activist forms, has been emphasized by the professor of Islamic theology at Uppsala University, Mohammad Fazlhashemi, in an interview with SV T Nyheter:

“They connect Islam with for example Islamism, and then all Muslims are accused of supporting that type of ideology, even though many of them distance themselves from it. They do not want to see that Muslims are a large

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ *Aftonbladet*. “Efter Wiendåd: Kurz till storms mot islamism”, TT, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/900a6w/efter-wiendad-kurz-till-storms-mot-islamism>

group of people that is very multifaceted.”²⁴⁴ He is of course right, but at the same time it is worth asking why many representatives of the largest mosques in Sweden seem to have a difficulty making that same distinction. In an article on the Doku Foundation’s website, which examines the violent and radical Islamist environment, historian of literature Johan Lundberg and the lawyer Lars Jonson describe how representatives of about ten mosques in Stockholm, Gothenburg, Malmö, Västerås, and Jönköping do not want to “recognisewhat is meant by the words Islamism and Islamist”.²⁴⁵

“A few write briefly that whoever uses the words need to explain what they mean. They all say that they only talk about Islam and Muslims and that they do not use any other term. Some state that the words only aim to point out practicing Muslims as extreme and that it is islamophobic and racist to use them. These responses are consistent with findings in previous similar surveys. There is a broad perception in some Muslim organizations that Islamism and Islamist are terms used by non-Muslims in the West to denigrate or damage Islam and its reputation.”²⁴⁶

The perception among representatives for mosques that the term “Islamism” is problematic, or even an expression of racism or Islamophobia, should give pause for thought. The equivalent would be for Christian churches to equate the term “fundamentalism” with general Christophobia.

It has been common in the public debate on Islam to slip into personal attacks. In an interview in *Dagens Nyheter* Michael Krona, a media researcher at Malmö University and an expert on ISIS propaganda, says that reports that have problematized and highlighted aspects of Islamism have led to accusations of Islamophobia, which in turn have fueled Islamist groups.

“Debaters who wanted to warn against anti-democratic forces were misrepresented,” Krona says, and this damaged the broad Swedish effort against radical Islamism.

“Too few dared to get involved and offer critique. I am absolutely convinced that the Islamophobia label played a role there.”²⁴⁷

²⁴⁴ Pan, Ellen. “Experten: Tre vanliga fördomar om muslimer – som är helt fel”, *SVT Nyheter*, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/upsala/experten-tre-vanliga-for-domar-om-muslimer-som-ar-helt-fel>

²⁴⁵ Lundberg, Johan and Jonson, Lars. “Islamism and Islam – an analysis of word choice and issues”, Doku Foundation, <https://doku.nu/2021/04/11/islamism-och-islam-en-analys-om-ordval-och-sakfragor/>

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Orrenius, Niklas. “Läraren Hanna Gadban följde svenskarna som lockades till terrorgruppen IS”, *Dagens Nyheter*, <https://www.dn.se/sverige/lararen-hanna-gadban-foljde-svenskarna-som-lockades-till-terrorgruppen-is/>

Of course, there have been – and are – negative attitudes towards Muslims. At the same time, the overall discussion of pro-violent messages in some parts of Islam has been hampered by accusations of Islamophobia or racism.

One example is when the former chairman of the Islamic Association in Sweden, Omar Mustafa, was criticized for inviting anti-Semitic speakers. In turn, the Islamic Association responded by accusing the critics of encouraging “strong Islamophobic forces”.²⁴⁸ The same thing happened in connection with the defamation trial against the then chairman of the municipal council in Gothenburg, Ann-Sofie Hermansson (S), who canceled an event which, according to her, gave space to extreme voices that were left unchallenged.²⁴⁹ And when the Ministry of Justice’s expert committee Delmi issued a policy brief in which it wanted to analyze the normalization of racism and xenophobia in the public sphere, this was exemplified by how the writer Ivar Arpi’s editorials in *Svenska Dagbladet* criticized Islamism.²⁵⁰

But accusing someone of Islamophobia is hardly responding to objections or arguments. It is no more Islamophobia or racism to criticize the ideas and actions of some Muslims than it is Christophobia to criticize the ideas and actions of some Christians. It is important to distinguish between an idea and the person. It was this that prompted the AP news agency to remove the suffix -phobia in political and social contexts – as in homophobia and Islamophobia – from its stylebook.²⁵¹ Editor Dave Minthorn explained the background to the AP’s decision to *Politico*: “It’s like attributing a mental disability to someone and implies a knowledge we don’t have, which would be wrong.” Minthorn adds: “We want to be precise, accurate, and neutral in our wording.”²⁵²

Accusations of Islamophobia have therefore become a watered-down concept. The fact that there is a debate about the relationship of the Islamic Association in Sweden and other organizations to the Muslim Brotherhood or other Islamist movements, and the problems associated with

²⁴⁸ Stiernstedt, Jenny. “Jag står upp för allas lika värde”, *Svenska Dagbladet*, <https://www.svd.se/jag-star-upp-for-allas-lika-varde>.

²⁴⁹ Arpi, Ivar. “Islamister tar lagen som gisslan”, *Svenska Dagbladet*, <https://www.svd.se/islamister-tar-lagen-som-gisslan>.*SvenskaDagbladet*

²⁵⁰ Delmi. “Interactive racism on the internet, in the press and politics”, https://www.delmi.se/media/s40dgfqc/delmi-policy-brief-2021-8_web.pdf

²⁵¹ Byers, Dylan. “AP nixes ‘homophobia’, ‘ethnic cleansing’”, *Politico*, <http://www.politico.com/blogs/media/2012/11/ap-nixes-homophobia-ethnic-cleansing-150315.html>

²⁵² *Ibid.*

this, illustrates the importance of not giving in to accusations of Islamophobia or personal attacks and thus turning the issue of criticism of Islam into a question of xenophobia.

A further example was given during an Almedalen seminar on the theme “Are religious views allowed in politics?”, arranged by the Christian think tank, the Clapham Institute, with, among others, Stefan Gustavsson, then Secretary General of the Swedish Evangelical Alliance, Peter Weiderud, then Chairman of the Social Democrats side organization for religious communities, and Omar Mustafa of the Islamic Association.²⁵³ Gustavsson highlighted the need for crititiquing and criticizing religions and gave the widespread persecution of Christians who have converted from Islam as an example. Mustafa did not want to admit that the persecution of those who left the religion is a bigger problem within Islam than within Christianity. Instead, he said that it isn’t possible to generalize about Islam and that he did not know the proportions.

Let us consider this issue. Of course, hatred against converts from Islam is a sensitive issue for many in Sweden, not least because of the vulnerability many Muslims experience due to xenophobic elements. But at the same time there is also a debate about the anti-Semitism that occurs in Muslim environments. Here are some examples. In December 2017, two hundred people, mainly from Muslim countries, gathered at Möllevångstorget in Malmö and chanted “We have called for intifada from Malmö. We want our freedom back and we are going to shoot the Jews”.²⁵⁴ According to reports, this was a reaction to the decision by US President Donald Trump to recognize Jerusalemas the capital of Israel.

During a riot in Malmö after supporters of the Danish far-right politician Rasmus Paludan burned and kicked the Koran, an anti-Semitic rhyme was chanted in Arabic: “Jews remember Khaybar, Mohammad’s army returns.”²⁵⁵ Anti-Semitism occurs in many environments. Within parts of Christianity, centuries of persecution of Jews have had to be dealt with. Often the persecution has been motivated by theological reasons. Similarly, anti-Semitism is common in Swedish right-wing extremist circles. Nevertheless, there are many indications that the hatred of Jews in Sweden today is largely imported. In many Muslim countries, anti-Semitism and hatred of

²⁵³ Clapham Institute. “Are religious views allowed in politics? Almedalen 2013”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WxpCYFnsnQ> at about 44 min.

²⁵⁴ Shexo, Revend and Larsson, Jimmi. “Hätsk och hotfull stämning mot judar på demonstration”, *Sveriges Radio*, <https://sverigesradio.se/artikel/6839254>

²⁵⁵ Carlson, Claes and Vickhoff, Alexander. “Misstänkt judehat utreds som hatbrott”, *Kvällsposten/Expressen*, <https://www.expressen.se/kvallsposten/demonstranterna-skrek-ut-sitt-judehat/>

Israel are part of the culture. If it is then important to discuss hatred of Jews – without lapsing into similar hatred of Muslims – there is also justification for discussing hatred of Christians who convert from Islam. In this area, a worrying trend has emerged in recent years, especially as the phenomenon is widespread in Sweden. In 2011, Somali speakers could hear an imam on Swedish Radio's *Radio Sweden Somali* saying that "it is the duty of every Muslim to kill those who leave Islam",²⁵⁶ after a group of Somali Christians came to Rinkeby Square to evangelize. In 2015, a convert was to be baptized at a service in my own congregation. He was stabbed by former fellow believers before he could go to the church. Back to the above-mentioned seminar in Almedalen. When StefanGustavsson insisted that the problem of converts being persecuted in some Muslim contexts is more common than in Christianity, Peter Weiderud responded that Gustavsson was committing "a very serious offense": "[We] have to think about your arrogance as a Christian [...] Don't stand with a smile and think that you have found a superior world view [...] This is not criticism of religion, it is colonialism."²⁵⁷

The Almedalen seminar, which admittedly began with a broad consensus on the importance of religious freedom and that all beliefs should be welcomed in the public sphere, thus took a different direction and revealed a major problem in the public debate on religion. The difficulty of discussing a problem – in this case the persecution of Muslim converts to Christianity – as commonplace in some parts of Islam without receiving accusations of "serious abuse". The question is empirical. Is the claim correct? It is not a question attitude or person. It is hardly constructive to condemn religious criticism solely on the basis of the sender.

It is worth noting that in the same debate, Weiderud criticized the Armenian Orthodox Church (in which he said his daughter was baptized) for a number of problematic issues: "It has a view of women that I don't think my daughter should have. It has a view on homosexuals that I cannot accept. It expresses things about Turks that I do not want my daughter to even hear."²⁵⁸ The question of why it was not an expression of "colonialism" to highlight these phenomena in a church tradition other than Weiderud's was not answered. If criticism of religion cannot be directed at beliefs other than one's own, freedom of religion and expression is not worth much.

²⁵⁶ Zetterman, Jacob. "Dödshot mot konvertiter i Sveriges Radio", *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/2011/09/07/dodshot-mot-konvertiter-i-sveriges-radio/>

²⁵⁷ Clapham Institute. "Are religious views allowed in politics? Almedalen 2013", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WxpCYFnsnQ> at about 56:14 min.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid*, at about 56:40 min.

Calling critical views on phenomena within Muslim communities Islamophobia is not debate. It is a diagnosis. In *Ljusets fiender* (2013), Johan Lundberg has shown how the well-known source of inspiration for jihadism, Anwar al-Awlaki, presented the idea that Western society is permeated by Islamophobia. One of the expressions of this can be how the late artist Lars Vilks's Muhammad cartoon is used as fuel: "The theory of Islamophobia welds together and radicalizes the disciples and confirms that there is a war going on that is so intense that it is necessary to take up arms."²⁵⁹ In this way, according to Lundberg, the two poles reinforce each other. On the one hand, according to al-Awlaki, the "true doctrine", on the other hand the notion of widespread Islamophobia.²⁶⁰

This is a challenge for society as a whole, not least in many Muslim contexts, to be constructive partners in the public debate. This also applies to the radicalization of young Muslims. When the Government's then national coordinator against violent extremism, Mona Sahlin, wanted Muslim communities in Sweden to take greater responsibility and actively distance themselves from the Islamic State, she was criticized by the Swedish Muslim Council.²⁶¹

According to the organization, Sahlin's statement constituted "an extremely problematic collective blaming of an entire group", but at the same time she received support from the Ahmadiyya movement in Sweden, which deviates from both Sunni and Shia Muslims.²⁶²

For example, Imam Kashif Virk argued that Muslim communities have a moral responsibility for young people's radicalization.²⁶³ Even the former Salafist preacher Anas Khalifa, who himself had advocated armed jihad but

²⁵⁹ Lundberg, Johan. *Ljusets fiender* (Timbro förlag 2013) p. 148.

²⁶⁰ Ibid, pp. 146-147.

²⁶¹ Bergmark, Rebecca Randhawa and Horvatovic, Iva. "Sveriges muslimska råd kritiskt till Sahlins uttalande", *SVT Nyheter*, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/sveriges-muslimska-rad>

²⁶² Around 160 million people profess the Ahmadiyya Muslim faith worldwide. In Pakistan, there are about four million people and congregations in 207 countries. Sweden has five congregations and the Nasir Mosque in Gothenburg was the first mosque built in the country. The Ahmadiyya Muslim community is the only Muslim community that believes that the promised Messiah has come, through Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835-1908). Although Ahmadiyya Muslims believe in the six articles of faith and the five pillars of Islam, and accept the Quran, they are not recognized as true Muslims by Sunni or Shia because of their theological beliefs. Source: Ahmadiyya Muslim Society of Sweden and Wikipedia.

²⁶³ Bergmark, Rebecca Randhawa and Horvatovic, Iva. "Sveriges muslimska råd kritiskt till Sahlins uttalande", *SVT Nyheter*, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/sveriges-muslimska-rad>

has now distanced himself from violent Islamism, believes that an open and free debate on problematic ideas in Muslim contexts is needed:

One thing that many Imams (wrongly) teach is that it is totally forbidden to question the faith. This is a deadly way to go. To criticize, question, hesitate, think and reflect is precisely what leads to a stable faith or conviction.²⁶⁴

There is much more to say about this. I have only scratched the surface. The point is not that Muslims are prone to violence; the absolute majority want to live in peace with the surrounding society. My point is that there is a need for a wider and more serious debate about the theological motives for violence that we find in Muslim contexts. For academics, journalists and Muslim representatives to avoid the issue or claim that it has nothing to do with Islam is to do a disservice not least to the Muslims who need to navigate the debate and their own faith. If even believers who have themselves been involved in inspiring young Muslims to commit acts of terrorism see the need for a debate on ideas to counteract radicalization, then no person has the right to sit on the sidelines.

²⁶⁴ Anas Khalifa's Twitter account (@anaskhalifa) at 13:49 on July 31, 2021, <https://twitter.com/anaskhalifa/status/1421437951729356804?s=20>

PART 2

THE HISTORY OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Enlightenment idea or apostolic legacy?

IN SWEDEN, as in many other Western countries, freedom of religion and belief is seen as a fruit of the Enlightenment, marked by growing religious criticism of Europe's state churches. After decades of wars between Catholics and Protestants, it was time to be free of the burden of Christianity. Thinkers and scientists formulated ideas about human rights and freedoms.

In a *Washington Post* essay on authoritarian leaders as a threat to liberal democracy, conservative columnist Robert Kagan writes:

It was not until the advent of Enlightenment liberalism that people began to think that the individual's conscience as well as the individual's body was inviolable and protected from the interference of the state and the church. The moment this idea was born, it was met with intense resistance.²⁶⁵

In Sweden, there has recently been an intense debate on the role of Christianity concerning human rights and democracy, not least in an opinion article by the leader of the Christian Democrats, Ebba Busch, on the need for Christian values to address problems in Swedish neighborhoods that have faced violence and other crimes.²⁶⁶ In a reply, the Social Democrat pundit Daniel Färm responded:

We hardly have Christianity to thank for the emergence of human rights, liberal democracy and egalitarian individualism in Europe and the United States. These freedoms and rights have sprung from a completely different tradition of thought: the secular and humanist enlightenment.²⁶⁷

One of those who shared Färm's post on her Twitter account was Matilda Ernkrans, Minister for Higher Education and Research. It can be assumed that she considered his opinion worth spreading. A similar message came from Center Party MP Niels Paarup-Petersen:

²⁶⁵ Kagan, Robert. "The strongmen strike back", *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/opinions/wp/2019/03/14/feature/the-strongmen-strike-back/>

²⁶⁶ Busch, Ebba. "Även förorten skulle må bra av en kristen grund", *Expressen*, <https://www.expressen.se/debatt/aven-fororten-skulle-ma-bra-av-en-kristen-grund/>

²⁶⁷ Färm, Daniel. "Tacka inte kristendomen för Sveriges framgångar", *Expressen*, <https://www.expressen.se/debatt/tacka-inte-kristendomen-for-sveriges-framgangar/>

In what kind of society do you live best as a woman? Where is it best to be a homosexual? In which part of the world is it easiest to belong to a religious minority? The results are not set in stone, and there are outliers, but the answers are likely to point to societies built, not on religion, but on liberal values and a clear separation of church and state.²⁶⁸

As a Christian, I am skeptical of religious faith as a means of state control. Christianity is about God giving the world his only son²⁶⁹ to save us from sin and give us eternal life – not about fostering good citizens, creating a cultural heritage or promoting the equal value of all people, even though these have often been concrete effects where Christianity has been the dominant religion. However, Paarup-Petersen and others with him make a category error. He perceives “societies built, not on religion, but on liberal values”²⁷⁰ as freer. But pitting religion, which is too broad a category, against liberal values is like comparing apples and pears. The question is what are the long-term effects of Christianity – a specific worldview with specific truth claims about man and reality – on social life. Throughout history, much evil has been done in the name of Christianity, but there are also strong arguments that Christian faith has been a prerequisite for the liberalism Paarup-Petersen and many like him advocate.

The same negative reaction met an article co-authored by Ebba Busch, which was published in connection with Easter. Here, the thesis was that it was “Christianity that gave democracy real power”.²⁷¹ Minister of Justice Morgan Johansson (S) liked a tweet from *Sydsvenskan*’s political reporter Olle Lönnaeus, which read: “[this] is how Christianity built democracy: Crusades – inquisition – witch burning [...] and simsalabim it became democracy!!!”²⁷² Member of Parliament and former Minister of Social Affairs Annika Strandhäll (S) wrote on Twitter that she agrees with the assessment that the article is the most bizarre thing she

²⁶⁸ Paarup-Petersen, Niels. “Våra förorter behöver inte mer religion”, *Aftonbladet*, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/a/2GVaXx/vara-fororter-behoover-inte-mer-religion>

²⁶⁹ Gospel of John, chapter 3 verse 16.

²⁷⁰ Paarup-Petersen, Niels. “Våra förorter behöver inte mer religion”, *Aftonbladet*, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/a/2GVaXx/vara-fororter-behoover-inte-mer-religion>

²⁷¹ Busch, Ebba, Skånberg, Tuve and Landgren, Per. “KD: Kristen etik bevarar samhället från värderingsmässigt gungfly”, *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/debatt/2021/03/31/kd-kristen-etik-bevarar-samhallet-fran-varderingsmassigt-gungfly/>

²⁷² Olle Lönnaeus twitter account (@ollelonnaeus) at 20:41 on April 1, 2021, <https://twitter.com/ollelonnaeus/status/1377692663718281222?s=20>

has read.²⁷³ Ola Spännar, former head of communications for the Center Party, commented on the article by tweeting a picture of Nazi loyal German priests from the 1930s.²⁷⁴

Again, historical events are complex. There are, of course, examples of church representatives standing in the way of democracy and human rights. At the same time, it is possible to note similar simplification on the part of critics when they reject the idea that Christianity could have contributed to the emergence of democracy. Many of these critics are also supporters of the idea that the Enlightenment was the source of human rights and freedoms, despite the fact that it led to serious human rights violations, armed revolution, the guillotine, the reign of terror and, by extension, socialism and communism.

Political voices from conservative, left-wing and liberal quarters – and many others in the media and culture – are thus united in the idea that Christianity has been an obstacle to human development. This is a view that also characterizes a large part of Swedish education and schools. It is the Enlightenment that has shaped our ideas about human rights, the inviolable value of the individual and freedom from oppression, which have characterized the Western world for centuries. Religion in general and Christianity in particular have been obstacles to equality, freedom and fraternity. It is true that Christians in general and state churches in particular have in many cases had a problematic relationship with religious freedom. At different times, the Church has been guilty of persecuting religious minorities. But there are also numerous examples of the opposite, which are more in line with the fundamental ideas of Christianity from its original document, the New Testament.

Historically and today, the Church has also experienced persecution. When the most famous apostle of the early Church, Paul, writes to the church in the Greek city of Corinth, he emphasizes the unity of Christians in different situations by likening it to a body. All parts of the body are interdependent in both good and bad times.²⁷⁵

In Acts²⁷⁶ we follow the first Christians in Jerusalem in the period immediately after Jesus' death and resurrection. Simon Peter and the other

²⁷³ Annika Strandhäll's twitter account (@strandhall) at 12:06 on April 1, 2021, <https://twitter.com/strandhall/status/1377563104305893380?s=20>

²⁷⁴ Ola Spännar's twitter account (@olaspannar) at 8:20 on April 2, 2021, <https://twitter.com/olaspannar/status/1377868428996923392?s=20>

²⁷⁵ "If one part of the body suffers, so do all the others", First Corinthians 12:26 (Bible 2000).

²⁷⁶ Unless otherwise stated, the Bible quotations are taken from the Bible 2000 (Swedish Bible Society).

disciples preach that God has raised Jesus from the dead and confess his claim to be God incarnate. There are reports that the sick can be healed by praying for them in Jesus' name. Those in power in the city – the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high council – resent the development and put the disciples on trial. After deliberation, the Council forbids them to “speak and teach in the name of Jesus”.²⁷⁷

In his defence speech²⁷⁸ Peter refers to three pillars of what characterizes an open and free society today:

- Freedom of thought and conscience: “Which is right [...] *You be the judges!*” Peter asserts the right and responsibility to follow one's own conscience and not blindly follow accepted truths. Each individual has his or her own responsibility and must take a stand on vital issues. He challenges the powers that be to think for themselves about what is right. It is not possible to excuse oneself by simply obeying orders.
- Religious freedom: “*Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him?...*” The conviction – and argument – of Peter and the other disciples was religiously motivated. They considered it proven that God acted in a historically definitive way through Jesus. It was stressed to the rulers that if they face a God who created the world and who holds humanity accountable, it is self-evident that no human authority can demand unquestioning obedience. In other words, it is a demand for religious freedom from the state.
- Freedom of expression: “*we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.*” Peter claimed the right to freely communicate his beliefs. If people are not allowed to share what is crucial to their life there is no real freedom of expression. This includes the freedom to criticize the beliefs of others. The disciples continued to teach their beliefs despite being forbidden by the Sanhedrin. Gradually the rulers become increasingly annoyed: “*We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,*” he said. “*Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching*”.²⁷⁹

Thus, alongside the increased pressure on the early Christian community, there seems to have been a spontaneous understanding of what is now reflected in Articles 18 and 19 of the *UN Declaration of Human Rights*: the right to freedom of thought, conscience and *religion*, and the right to freedom of opinion and expression. Article 20, the right to peaceful assembly

²⁷⁷ Acts 4:18.

²⁷⁸ “Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard”, Acts 4:19-20 (NIV).

²⁷⁹ Acts 5:28.

and association was also reflected when “[t]hey devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”²⁸⁰

I would not say that the apostles formulated the UN Declaration of Human Rights, but already in the early church there seems to have been a spontaneous understanding of the right to believe and think for oneself. Greg Forster, who in *The Contested Public Square: The Crisis of Christianity and Politics* (2008) analyzes the relationship between church and state from a historical perspective, comments on Peter’s speech:

If the state commands the church to murder or to worship an idol, the church must refuse to do so. This is an important principle, as Christians believe that God has given the church the mission and authority to preach the gospel, preserve the written word of God, conduct worship, administer the sacraments, maintain order in the church, provide assistance to those in need, and perform other ecclesiastical acts. If the state attempts to interfere with the function of the Church, the apostles have clearly authorized the Church to disobey.²⁸¹

The emphasis on the right to think and believe for oneself was not unique to the early church. Peter’s speech was just the beginning.

²⁸⁰ Acts 2:42.

²⁸¹ Forster, Greg. *The Contested Public Square: The Crisis of Politics and Christianity*. (IVP Academic 2008) p. 35.

Libertas Religionis – from Tertullian to Thomas Jefferson

THE FREEDOM TO PRACTICE a specific religious belief is based on an inner conviction about the nature of ultimate reality, which has practical consequences in external actions. We know of no culture in any era that has not exhibited such behavior. Giving other groups the right to worship their deity is also an old custom. One example is how the Persian King Cyrus II (c. 576 BC – 530 BC), mentioned in the Book of Ezra in the Old Testament, allowed the Jews to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem after their exile in Babylon. The so-called Cyrus Cylinder, a clay cylinder with Babylonian cuneiform writing, now in the British Museum in London, has been described as the world's first known declaration of human rights, as it allows a certain amount of freedom to worship gods other than the king's.²⁸²

But it was the view of the early Christians that each individual had to take a stand on religious matters that changed the world. Despite the prohibitions of those in power, the first Christians did not hold back. Soon the first major systematic persecution began. The first Christian martyr was the deacon Stephen, who was executed around 35 AD and is traditionally celebrated on December 26. A strong driving force behind the persecution was the demand for religious uniformity and the reluctance to tolerate dissenters. That Jesus equated himself with the God of Israel, which was consequently preached by the disciples, was a blasphemy in classical Judaism. Demands for religious conformity were also behind later religious persecution – including within the church when Christianity became the state religion.

Initially, the Roman government tolerated the Christian community as a Jewish sect. Throughout the empire, the government had accommodated the Jewish way of life. The historian Josephus describes how Jews in the Greek city of Ephesus, among other places, were allowed to observe the Sabbath and “do everything according to their own laws”.²⁸³ However, because of the universal nature of the Christian message, Christians were not limited to a particular ethnic group. They began to appear everywhere, even among those who belong to Caesar's household.²⁸⁴ Thus, they potentially posed a political as well as a religious threat. One of the earliest and

²⁸² Wikipedia. Kyros cylinder, https://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kyros_cylinder

²⁸³ Wilken, Robert Louis. *Liberty in the Things of God* (Yale University Press 2019) s. 9.

²⁸⁴ Philippians 4:22.

most common assessments of the Christian group was given by the Roman historian Tacitus (56-117) who described their beliefs as a “deadly superstition” – an alien and subversive cult. Church historian Robert Louis Wilken points out how other groups honored the Roman gods alongside their own. Christians refused to participate in the sacrifices and imperial cult.²⁸⁵ Thus, it was not the fact that Christians worshipped Jesus as God that made them a target for the authorities, but that they did not also worship any other god or emperor. Failure to conform was an insult to Rome and was considered a threat to the coexistence of the empire.

It wasn't long before the persecution of Christians became state-sponsored under Emperor Nero (in power around the years 64-68). In the years following Nero, the persecution escalated in both intensity and scope under, among others, Domitian (c. 81-96), Marcus Aurelius (c. 161-180), Decius (250-251) and Valerian (257-259). Persecution reached its peak under Diocletian and Galerius with the ‘Great Persecution’ (303-311), when Christian books were burned, churches demolished and Christian leaders executed.

Under Roman law, Christians were considered atheists because they did not recognize the Roman emperor's claim to divinity, which was punishable by death. For example, Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna (now Izmir in Turkey), was executed around 155 AD on such a charge.²⁸⁶ As persecution increased, Christians began to develop “apologias”, defense speeches inspired by the Roman court system. For each *categoria*, accusation, there was an *apologia*, defense. Tertullian (c. 150) of Carthage was one of the first Christians to write in Latin. In his *Apologeticum* (c. 197), he argues for greater tolerance of different religions:

Let one worship God, while the other worships Jupiter. Let one supplicant stretch his hands to heaven, while the other turns to the altar of Fides [goddess of fidelity]. Let one pray while counting the clouds if he believes in such things, but the other counts the roof panels. Let the one commit his life to his god, while the other commits himself to a goat!

Depriving people of their religious freedom [*libertas religionis*] is also a violation of religion. It prohibits the free worship of a deity so that I cannot worship whoever I want. Instead, I am forced to worship the one I do not want. But not even a human being wishes to receive reluctant worship.²⁸⁷

²⁸⁵ Wilken 2019, p. 10.

²⁸⁶ Forster 2008, pp. 19-20.

²⁸⁷ Cited in Wilken 2019, p. 11.

Tertullian's call for religious tolerance is clearly motivated by giving Christians the right to their religion. But it also expresses a double message that has underpinned religious freedom, namely that religious worship is not only about the deepest convictions of human beings, but also the right to express them in external rites. Robert Louis Wilken comments on the argument:

Using the concept of *freedom*, Tertullian advances the truth that human beings are moral agents capable of acting on their convictions. A self-governing domain exists inside the human chest free from external constraints; this sphere must be respected [...] Tertullian's argument revolves around the nature of religious belief, while the conflict for the Romans was about practice, not belief. They had no interest in what Christians believed in their hearts – they were interested in what Christians did (or did not do) in public.²⁸⁸

For Tertullian, however, the inner conviction of man was of central importance. Wilken also notes that the concept of religious freedom relates to the beliefs and inner life of the community. While a religious belief is always individual, it is also always practiced in community with others. Of course, there are exceptions, but since the great commission is central to Christianity, its practice presupposes that it can be practiced with others. For this to happen, a free exchange of opinions is also required to some extent.

At a later date, Tertullian wrote another essay, *Ad Scapulam* in 212, dedicated to the Roman proconsul Scapula, who initiated a severe persecution of Christians in Carthage. Again, he argues that the practice of religion must be voluntary:

It is a fundamental human right, a primordial law of nature, that all men should be allowed to worship in the manner consistent with their own convictions; one man's religion neither harms nor helps another. It is not right to force a religion on anyone. One must adopt it voluntarily, not under duress.²⁸⁹

Without the ability to freely choose god, a person cannot be held responsible for his or her actions, Tertullian argued. Wilken writes that Tertullian in Latin uses the term "natural right", which means that the capacity to choose is something inherent in man – that freedom is inherent.²⁹⁰ Man is

²⁸⁸ Wilken 2019, pp. 11-12.

²⁸⁹ Cited in Wilken 2019, p. 13.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 13-14.

thus a responsible and moral actor. Therefore, forcing Christians to perform certain actions that went against their own convictions was against the natural order of things.

The fundamental issue that Tertullian and many Christians after him wrestled with was the relationship of the church to the government. Although the Bible affirms the idea of a state and a common social order, it does not take a position on any form of government – even if the authority is defined as a servant.²⁹¹ Today, it can be said that liberal democracy is the least bad. An imperfect social order is always better than chaos.

At the same time, history shows that this was not an easy challenge. Even for the apostles, it was a matter of orientation between, on the one hand, submitting to every authority for the sake of the Lord,²⁹² and, on the other hand, obeying God when the authority forbade Christians to preach the gospel.²⁹³

For Tertullian, and many other believers who approached the question of the Christian's relationship to the state, the obvious starting point was Jesus' words in Matthew 22:17-22, which address the question of whether Roman taxation was legitimate. Jesus is asked whether it is right or wrong to pay taxes to Caesar. In response, Jesus takes a coin stamped with the emperor's face and replies that they should give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor and to God what belongs to God.

We now have access to the coins used at that time. On one side is the inscription "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus", on the other "Pontifex Maximus" (high priest).²⁹⁴ The coin simply indicated that Emperor Tiberius was the chief religious representative of the Roman Empire. By contrasting the emperor's image with what, according to Jewish understanding, is the image of God – man – Jesus emphasizes that earthly authority has its limits. Expressed in terms of rights: it should be beyond the power of the state to claim the ultimate loyalty of man. Robert Louis Wilken describes how Tertullian used this text in 212 in one of his writings addressed to Christians:

The 'image of God', which is not on any coin, is stamped on humans. This image means that you should give your money to the emperor and 'yourself to God'. Because people are made in the image of God, they are able to resist the praise of gods that are not gods.

²⁹¹ Romans 13:4.

²⁹² First Peter 2:13.

²⁹³ Acts 4:18-19.

²⁹⁴ Witherington III, Ben. *The Indelible Image: The Theological and Ethical Thought World of the New Testament Vol. 2* (InterVarsity Press 2010) p. 466.

For Tertullian, this dual loyalty to God and the governing authorities was an ‘apostolic precept’. Christians are to obey ‘judges, princes and authorities’ while refraining from worshipping false gods.²⁹⁵

In liberal democracy, this corresponds to the citizen’s responsibility to follow the law and the individual’s responsibility to follow his or her conscience.

Tertullian was not the only person in the history of the early Church to defend religious freedom. Lactantius, who later became an advisor to Emperor Constantine the Great, Rome’s first Christian emperor, summarized the Christian faith in the third century in *Divinae institutiones*:

If you want to defend religion by bloodshed, by torture and guilt, it will no longer be defended but will be polluted and desecrated. For nothing deals so much with free will as religion; in which, if the mind of the worshipper is unwilling, religion immediately disappears and ceases to exist.²⁹⁶

‘Laws can punish transgressions’, writes Lactantius, ‘but they cannot punish consciences’.²⁹⁷ Most historians agree that Lactantius was instrumental in the so-called Edict of Milan in 313. Until then, Christianity was a persecuted minority, but when the Western Roman leader Constantine, together with his Eastern Roman colleague Licinius, issued the Edict, which stipulated that ‘the free exercise of religion should not be denied to anyone’,²⁹⁸ Christianity became legal. It is commonly believed that Constantine’s edict made Christianity the Roman state religion, but it was not until 380, under Constantine’s less than tolerant successor, Theodosius I, that it became so. Although the Edict of Milan was not enforced for very long, it is worth highlighting its historical importance. In many ways it resembles the *Magna Charta*, which from 1215 limited the power of the English king. The Edict, which is more than twice as old as the *Magna Charta*, is clear in its claims to religious freedom:

In view of the fact that the free exercise of religion should not be denied to anyone, but that freedom must be left to the judgment and will of each individual to practise his religion of his own choice, we have already ordered in the past that Christians should also be allowed to maintain the beliefs associated with their sect and religion.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁵ Wilken 2019, p. 15.

²⁹⁶ Lactantius. “Divine Institutes”, *Book V (Of Justice)*, ch. 20, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/07015.htm>

²⁹⁷ Wilken 2019, p. 20.

²⁹⁸ Wikipedia. ‘Edict of Milan’, https://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ediktet_i_Milano

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

According to Robert Louis Wilken, it is remarkable that the edict deals not only with the situation of Christians, but with the beliefs of all people, and that the declaration goes beyond mere toleration of the beliefs of others, emphasizing that “liberty must be left to the discretion of each individual”.³⁰⁰ “The new use of the word *libertas* suggests that the emperors had something more than tolerance in mind”, writes Wilken.³⁰¹ Many centuries have passed, but Christianity is a slowly flowing river. One should not underestimate the importance of Tertullian and the early Christian thinkers for religious freedom in later times. Of course, the question of tolerating religious dissent continued to engage theologians, thinkers and princes throughout European history – even when the Christian faith was dominant and anything but sympathetic to the beliefs of others. Many of those who argued that Christian faith could not be forced did not hesitate to use violence to punish blasphemers and dissenters. It took many years freedom of religion was consistently applied in practice. The political thinker most associated with the issue of tolerance of religious dissenters is probably the Englishman John Locke (1632-1704).

Both during and after the Thirty Years’ War, countries across Europe grappled with what they saw as a tangible problem: how to deal with a continent no longer characterized by a unified Christian confession. Did a common creed and values not guarantee social cohesion? To prevent social fragmentation and societal collapse, confessional state systems were established, ‘*Cujus regio, ejus religio*’ (Latin: ‘He whose country it is, his religion shall rule). Each unitary society had its own state church. Catholics and Protestants therefore began moving across the new geopolitical map to live where their own confession was the mandated state religion. However, as Greg Forster, author of a number of books on John Locke, writes in *The Contested Public Square* (2008), this in itself did not put an end to the underlying question of how Christianity relates to political authority. What would happen if the prince or king chose to change his religious beliefs? And what if the followers of the other orientation increased in number? This happened in both England and France, resulting in a series of conflicts.

It was because of this that John Locke wrote *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), which was widely circulated in Europe. Greg Forster summarizes the contents of the letter, which was originally written in Latin to reach the widest possible audience:

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Wilken 2019, p. 23.

“The letter begins with a heavy-handed attack on religious persecution by pointing out that toleration of all peaceful people is ‘the chief characteristic of the true church’, while those who punish people for their religious beliefs ‘have not really embraced the Christian religion in their hearts’. Locke presents biblical arguments that faith works through love and that physical weapons should not be used in spiritual warfare (Gal 5:6 and 2 Cor 10:4).”³⁰²

It is worth noting that John Locke relied on arguments from the Bible, rather than the religious criticism of the approaching Enlightenment. Tolerance for all people is “the chief characteristic of the true church”,³⁰³ while those who punish people for their religious beliefs “have not really embraced the Christian religion in their hearts”.³⁰⁴ Forster argues that Locke relied more on the New Testament in his arguments for church-state relations than did, for example, the reformer John Calvin, who drew more inspiration from Old Testament kings as guardians of true worship and the punishment of heretics. Locke’s cultural Christian upbringing was also of great importance. Theologian Fredrik Wenell writes about John Locke’s ideas on religious freedom:

His ideas had already been formulated earlier by Baptist preachers and other dissenters. Rasmusson tells of the Baptist Thomas Helwys who already in 1612 argued for religious freedom for both Jews and Muslims. Another Baptist, Katherine Chidley, published a book in 1642 on conscience and religion based on the idea of the independent church. This is the cultural milieu that provides the background for Locke’s ideas.³⁰⁵

John Locke’s recognition that it was not the role of government to control citizens’ religious beliefs was not new. The Bible affirms the idea of a state and common social order, but the state must not intrude on the conscience of the individual in fundamental questions of human dignity and metaphysical beliefs. In his dialogue with Pontius Pilate, the highest representative of the Roman state in Jerusalem, Jesus emphasized that his kingdom was not of this world,³⁰⁶ that is, the goal of Christianity and the emerging church was not to establish political rule. Some aspects of the human experience extend beyond the jurisdiction of the state. But while

³⁰² Forster 2008, p. 154.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ Wenell, Fredrik. “Churches that preserve the specifically Christian can contribute with good in society”, *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/ledare/kyrkor-som-bevarar-det-specifikt-kristna-kan-bidra-med-gott-i-samhallet/3868966>

³⁰⁶ John 18:36.

Tertullian and other apologists argued for religious freedom in relation to Rome, the nationalization of Christianity led precisely to the churches of Christendom as political entities, something Locke opposed. Forster writes about how key Christian figures such as Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and Martin Luther argued that religious faith cannot be coerced and yet tried to do just that with Christianity in one form or another. Locke's interpretation of tolerance as a concept instead asserted the separation of church and state in a more principled and consistent way:

Locke insists that the right to enjoy religious tolerance belongs to every peaceful person, 'whether Christian or pagan,' and adds that 'neither Mohammedan [Muslim] nor Jew should be excluded from the civil rights of the Commonwealth on account of their religion [...]. Locke argued forcefully that if we truly believe that 'no one should be forced to embrace the faith against his will,' we must unwaveringly accept its consequence that state power should not be used at all in matters of faith.³⁰⁷

Although morality ultimately rests on a person's beliefs, society could expect all citizens to follow the same social rules, without thereby determining which worldview was the correct one. Even if the state did have the ability to save souls, it does not follow that the state represents the "true faith". Many rulers might even use their power to promote the wrong religion, which is obvious from the fact that most people profess different beliefs, Forster continues.³⁰⁸ A drastic example from our time is the "saved souls" forced upon the population in a state like North Korea. A less drastic example might be the commercialism "imposed" on citizens in a country like the United States. But the coercive apparatus of the state may not conjure up beliefs it considers to be true and right, even if it has the opportunity. The freedom to think for oneself is, according to Locke, fundamental to a Christian and must by extension apply to believers in every religion as well as those who renounce all religion.

John Locke has had a major influence on how we think about freedom of opinion and religion, not least in the context of the American Revolution. Basically, this struggle for liberation from the British Empire was driven by three demands: tax relief, freedom of trade and freedom of religion. The Declaration of Independence shares many features with Locke's essay *Two Treatises of Government* (1689/90) with its emphasis on natural rights and the state as the guarantor of these rights. But Locke's texts on tolerance of different religious beliefs were also important.

³⁰⁷ Forster 2008, p. 160.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid*, p. 159.

The Library of Congress in Washington DC houses part of the library of Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), the third President of the United States and the principal author of the Declaration of Independence. He was strongly influenced by John Locke, but was also a faithful reader of Tertullian. The library contains Jefferson's copy of the letter to the Roman proconsul Scapula, where the lines about not imposing religion are marked.³⁰⁹ One of Jefferson's most famous quotes, reproduced on the Jefferson Memorial in Washington DC, could be an echo of Tertullian:

No one shall be compelled to attend or support any religious service or activity or suffer in any way because of his or her religious views or beliefs. Instead, all people should be free to profess and argue their religious beliefs.³¹⁰

Thomas Jefferson was also one of the first to use the term 'separation of church and state'. It is a common misconception that this phrase is found in the US Constitution and would be about limiting the ability of religious politicians to apply their faith in their work. The separation of church and state is mentioned in a letter Jefferson wrote to a Baptist congregation in the state of Connecticut: "[...] religion is a matter solely between Man and God, which he is not bound to account for. The legitimate exercise of power by the state concerns only actions, not opinions."³¹¹ This is hardly an argument against openly religious politicians. Tertullian would probably have agreed.

It was not only the arguments of the early Christians that laid the foundation for the freedom to join a religious community and to openly argue for it in speech and writing. Martyrdom also had a subversive effect on Roman oppression. As Cambridge University historian T R Glover put it in the early 20th century: "Christianity was victorious because the early Christians out-lived, out-thought, and out-died the world around them." The way they lived (respect for each other), the way they thought (the arguments) and the way they died (in defense of their beliefs) meant that today Rome's temples are just ruins and old monuments. As in political revolutions, the few who are passionate about their beliefs often prevail over authorities driven by trivial claims to power.

³⁰⁹ Wilken 2019, p. 190.

³¹⁰ Wikipedia. "Jefferson Memorial", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jefferson_Memorial#Interior

³¹¹ Library of Congress, "Jefferson's Letter to the Danbury Baptists", <https://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9806/danpre.html>

Theologian Peter J. Leithart writes in the journal *First Things*³¹² that the spectacles of the Roman arenas – the executions of Christians – became a form of “Christian liturgy” in which the faithful opposed the rulers’ self-image of power and domination. The martyrs represented “a superior political resistance that revealed the fragility of the Roman order and widened the cracks in the foundation of Roman civilization.”³¹³

³¹² Leithart, Peter J. “Witness unto death”, *First Things*, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2013/01/witness-unto-death>

³¹³ *Ibid.*

Human dignity and the individual

THAT ALL HUMAN BEINGS are born free and equal in dignity and rights, as expressed in the opening paragraph of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, has historically been far from self-evident. In fact, most people that have been born have been given different values and rights. The philosopher Aristotle sums up the common perception in early antiquity when he compares women and slaves to domesticated animals:

Furthermore, men are by nature stronger and women weaker, and the former decide while the latter obey. In the same way it must be in the case of men in general. There are those who are as different from each other as the soul from the body and men from animals; so it is with those whose function is to work with the body and who can do no better. These people are slaves by nature, and for them it is best to be subordinate to this rule, as it is for the above.³¹⁴

The view of the human being as a responsible individual with inherent dignity was part of the thinking introduced by Christianity. Previously, the norm had been to see people as subjects or rulers – bound by the rules of the clan, kingdom or empire, guided by the whims of gods or the spirits of ancestors. Throughout most of the 20th century, historiography was characterized by a dismissive attitude towards the role of Christianity in the development of democracy and human rights.

In *The Wisdom of the West*, the British philosopher and Nobel Prize winner for literature, Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), puts all his academic weight behind the claim:

As the unifying authority of Rome declined, the countries of the Western Empire began to descend into an age of barbarism, during which Europe suffered a general cultural decline. The dark centuries, as they are called [...] A certain amount of learning was cultivated in the monasteries, especially in remote places like Ireland. Yet it is not misleading to call these centuries dark, especially when compared to what went before and what came after.³¹⁵

Russell is very clear. After the fall of Rome, the last of the intellectual and cultural influence of classical antiquity disappeared. With the Church, a

³¹⁴ Aristotle. *Politiken* (P. Åström 1993), in translation by Karin Blomqvist, p. 16.

³¹⁵ Russell, Bertrand. *The Wisdom of the West* (Forum 1975) p. 142

darkness of barbarism and ignorance descended upon Europe. It was not until the Renaissance – the ‘rebirth’ – at the end of the 15th century that the forgotten human ideals of antiquity were rediscovered. It was the first step towards bringing the light – the Enlightenment – back to Christian Europe.

Russell haven’t not alone in this view of history. If anything, the image of Christianity as an obstacle to equality, freedom and human dignity has been the norm. The Social Democratic commentator Daniel Färm wrote in 2019³¹⁶ (in an article in the *Express*) that the human rights and freedoms that we take for granted today “have sprung from a completely different tradition of thought: the secular and humanist enlightenment”.³¹⁷

At a party leaders’ debate in Parliament on January 19, 2011, Maria Wetterstrand, former spokesperson for the Green Party, said:

All forms of extremism damage our society [...] When society was ruled by conservative churches in the Middle Ages, development stagnated until other more open forces took over. DDR was also the result of an extreme faith.³¹⁸

Wetterstrand links the influence of the Christian Church in the Middle Ages to extremism, backwardness and one of the worst oppressive regimes in history. It was only when “more open forces took over” – i.e. when the influence of the Christian faith declined – that democratic societies could emerge.

Other commentators have expressed similar views. The Moderate politicians Jan Lindblom and Pontus Båth wrote in *Göteborg-Posten* in 2016 that the reason why Sweden is one of the most democratic countries in the world today is related to “relegating religious beliefs to the private sphere [...] To tamper with the secular approach is to shake a foundation on which our democracy rests.”³¹⁹

It is because religious beliefs play less of a role in people’s everyday lives that Sweden is more equal, tolerant and free than before, according

³¹⁶ Färm, Daniel. “Tacka inte kristendomen för Sveriges framgångar”, *Expressen*, <https://www.expressen.se/debatt/tacka-inte-kristendomen-for-sveriges-framgangar/>.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*

³¹⁸ Parliament. Partiledardebatt woensdag den 19 janurari 2011, https://www.riksda.se/en/dokument-lagar/dokument/protokoll/riksdagens-protokoll-20101143-onsdagen-den-19_GY0943/html

³¹⁹ Lindblom, Jan and Båth, Pontus. “Slå vakt om vår sekulära stat”, *Göteborgs-Posten*, <https://www.gp.se/debatt/sl%C3%A5-vakt-om-v%C3%A5r-sekul%C3%A4ra-stat-1.4743>

to Lindblom and Båth: “Democratization and secularization go hand in hand.”³²⁰ And the youth wing of the Christian Democrats has even called for “cultural assimilation” to “our almost unique view of individualism, equality and secularism”³²¹ to solve pressing integration problems, something that is likely to create even more friction in society if realized.

Another 2010 opinion article³²² on the new Swedish school curricula, signed by author PC Jersild and then Minister of Justice Morgan Johansson, among others, argued that ideas of compassion and respect for the equal value of all people are not “specifically Christian” at all. Instead, they emerged in “an ethical-philosophical context of Greek and Indian philosophy and many other non-religious philosophers and thinkers long before the birth of Christianity. For example, the Chinese philosopher Confucius formulated the “golden rule” in writing some 500 years before it was attributed to Jesus.”³²³

The claim is not empty, but on the one hand, the Indian philosophers and Confucian philosophy have had minimal impact on the development of ideas in Europe compared to Greek philosophy. On the other hand, it would be difficult to argue that the ideas of the Indian philosophers and Confucian philosophy have laid a solid foundation for the development of democratic societies and equal human dignity in their part of the world. Jersild and Johansson also claim that the foundations of Western humanity and respect for the equal value of all people were laid by the Greek philosophers and not the Christian church. Again, the claim is not empty. The first tentative steps towards democracy can be found in ancient Greece. But it was a democracy based on the assumption that people do *not* share the same value. The quote from Aristotle illustrates how Greek thinkers rejected the idea of the equal value of all people. It is only when Christianity’s conviction that every human being is of equal value that the crucial foundation for what we call democracy is laid. But according to Jersild and Johansson, humanity and the idea of human dignity emerged in Europe *despite* the Christian faith. Their view of the history of the West can be summarized as a staircase that first goes down and then up:

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Örbrink, Nike. “Mål med integrationen måste vara assimilation”, https://www.expressen.se/debatt/malet-med-integrationen-maste-vara-assimilering/?fbclid=IwAR2pw43P9QO-04_EFvtQQqR68CEAdS_C_JJ65GQqfOlFRPZE1XjtJos4tOEY. Expressen

³²² Johansson, Morgan, Jersild, P C et al. “Myt att kristendomen byggt Sverige”, <https://www.svd.se/myt-att-kristendomen-byggt-sverige> Svenska Dagbladet

³²³ Ibid.

1. Classical antiquity.
2. Europe enters the Dark Ages, when all development stagnates under the Christian Church.
3. Antiquity's way of thinking is rediscovered and a step is taken towards a flourishing development in which culture is freed from the oppression of the Church, and reason and science regain their rightful place.
4. The modern era begins with the Enlightenment.

In addition, there is a tendency today to regard all religions as one and the same phenomenon. This is the case when talking about religion in a positive as well as a negative sense. An example of the former is the statement that "the essence of all religions is love and respect". This is hardly a fair way to describe the specificity of different religions. Different beliefs say completely or partially different things about reality, human beings, life, death, the meaning of life, and so on.

What is true, however, is that most religions bind people together in a community of faith that generates a specific view of the inherent value and characteristics of human beings – this is uncontroversial. It is also not a problem that a variety of beliefs with different truth claims are heard in a pluralistic society.

The problem is that it is not in fact this diversity that has created the Western ethic, which in turn has given us the open and free society. This ethic can be traced directly to the claims of Christianity. The sociologist of religion and honorary doctor of University of Lund, Rodney Stark writes:

Christianity transformed life in Greco-Roman cities by offering new norms and social relationships to address many of the urgent urban problems. In cities characterized by homelessness and poverty, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. In cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered immediate context. In cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity offered a new and expanded sense of family. In cities torn apart by ethnic conflict, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. And in cities that faced epidemics, fires and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services.³²⁴

One of Stark's many examples has to do with the view of women among early Christians compared to the wider Greco-Roman culture. In ancient Rome and Greece, women were considered, in Aristotle's words, 'deformed men'. Stark notes that for residents of Rome, it was not uncommon for baby girls to be left to die on rubbish heaps. A typical illustration of this

³²⁴ Stark, Rodney. *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton University Press 1996) p. 161.

Roman custom is found in a letter dated to 1 BC. Stark quotes a man named Hilarion, who is traveling while his pregnant wife waits at home:

If – may it go well with you – you have an offspring, if it is a man, let it live; if it is a woman, get rid of it.³²⁵

Early Christians were strongly against infanticide and rescued abandoned girls. A very tangible consequence of this was that the gender distribution within Christian congregations was much more equal than in the rest of society.

However, a common criticism of the early Christian movement is that it did not take a clearer stand for equality and against slavery. Paul urged women to submit to their husbands and servants to submit to their masters.³²⁶ But the early Christian movement was by its nature not an armed or revolutionary movement. It was a subversive part of contemporary culture that eventually undermined the many hierarchies that characterized the Roman Empire. Two of the most influential leaders of the Christian movement, Paul and Peter, speak repeatedly of the believers one day being held accountable to “him who judges each one according to his deeds without regard to person”.³²⁷ The believers are urged to “[l]ive in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position”.³²⁸ Paul sums up: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus..”³²⁹ In the long term, this would have enormous consequences for equality and the view of slavery.

In comparison with Roman law, which defined women as man’s property, “Christianity granted women significant status and the ability to lead. In addition, Christianity made life much more attractive for *all* female members”,³³⁰ writes Stark. This was particularly true within marriage. In direct opposition to the surrounding Roman culture, Christianity emphasized the responsibilities and demands of husbands and wives to each other, and set limits on the demands that men could make according to the prevailing norm.³³¹

³²⁵ Stark, Rodney. *The Triumph of Christianity* (Harper Collins, 2011) p. 126.

³²⁶ Ephesians 5:22 and 6:5.

³²⁷ First Peter 1:17.

³²⁸ Romans 12:16.

³²⁹ Galatians 3:28.

³³⁰ Stark, Rodney. *Discovering God: The Origins of the Great Religions and the Evolution of Belief* (HarperOne, 2007) p. 320.

³³¹ First Corinthians 7:2-7.

The political philosopher Larry Siedentop notes that the message of the Christian movement was crucial to the idea of the sanctity of the human person:

The idea of the individual – of an underlying moral status shared equally by all – may have first appeared to many non-Christians when they saw scenes or heard stories of martyrdom. There was something admirable about the martyrs that may have given food for thought to at least some of their pagan persecutors, as well as the observers. An unintended consequence of the persecution of Christians made the idea of the individual, or moral equality, more comprehensible. Catching a glimpse of these deep-seated motives, which were simultaneously individual and potentially universal, stuck in the mind.³³²

It was not Socrates, Buddha or Muhammad who shaped the idea of the inviolable value of the human person that has characterized the Western world. British historian Tom Holland points out that Paul's message that the hierarchies of Roman society had no place in the Christian community must have raised a number of questions for his early readers:

If all were equally saved by Christ, if all were equally loved by God, what about the hierarchies on which even the simplest Roman household was based? [...] 'God', he clearly declared, 'makes no distinction between people'. All were equally free from the slavery of sin and death. The master of the household was no more or less a son of God than his slaves. All should then belong together in a common love.³³³

At the same time, Holland notes a certain ambivalence in Paul's insistence on the equality of all before God. Why not draw the logical consequence of this reasoning? Why not form an opinion for the abolition of slavery? It is worth noting that the dominant form of slavery in the Roman Empire is not entirely comparable to that of the transatlantic slave trade. Of course, people were captured in the course of wars and conquests and thus enslaved – something Paul denounced.³³⁴ But elsewhere, slavery functioned as a form of debt repayment plan. When people were in debt, a few years of work was simply a way to pay back – to be paid in some sense.

³³² Siedentop, Larry. *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Penguin 2014) in Chapter 6.

³³³ Holland, Tom. *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (Little, Brown 2019), p. 82.

³³⁴ In his account of various vices in 1 Timothy 1:8-10, Paul mentions the group "robbers of men". The most widely read translation, the *New International Version*, translates it as "slave traders".

Paul touches on the institution of slavery in the Roman Empire in one of the so-called household codes.³³⁵ He writes to those who are slaves: “[...] obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord.”³³⁶ Paul then addresses the Christian masters directly: “Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.” Basically, the same conditions apply to the slave as to the master. Professor of New Testament Ben Witherington III comments:

It is this last point of the instruction [that the slave master has a master in heaven over him] that clearly relativizes the position and power of the master within the Christian community. Masters should not cheat their slaves but rather provide them with what is just and fair. This is the opposite of what Aristotle says when he points out that the question of justice is not raised with regard to the slaves [...] Compared to Aristotle, what Paul says here is revolutionary.³³⁷

What Paul is saying is that slaves are also people with rights, something that was unthinkable for most slave owners in ancient times. So what sounds reasonable to us was revolutionary to the people of that time. Paul goes so far as to argue that slaves who have the opportunity to become free should take that opportunity. Admittedly, First Corinthians 7:21 is translated as “And even if you can be free, it is better to remain as you are” in the Swedish Bible 2000. However, there are good reasons to believe that Paul actually wrote the opposite.³³⁸ The most widely used Bible translation, the *New International Version*, reads: [A]lthough if you can gain your freedom, do so..”

The importance of Christianity for human rights and human dignity is thus often greatly underestimated. Historian Dick Harrison has put it this way:

Christianity is much more individualistic than previous religions – it demands personal responsibility for one’s own actions. This has meant that, in Christian societies, there are clear rules that protect people and give rights [...] Already in the gospels, it is inherent that one should not necessarily accept the orders of the governing authorities. Since the Middle Ages, we have plenty of Christians who have questioned their own church and found

³³⁵ Colossians 3:22-4:1.

³³⁶ Colossians 3:22.

³³⁷ Witherington III 2010, p. 656.

³³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 675.

support in religion to criticize popes, bishops and kings [...] Regardless of what you think about Jesus, God and the Bible, our Western thinking has very strong ties back to the view of human dignity found in Christianity.³³⁹

Today we know that although the Western Christian mission since industrialization was in some places associated with colonialism, it was also in many places in strong opposition to the colonizers. At the same time, there is still a one-sided negative image of the historic mission, even among leading journalists. When the young American missionary John Allen Chau was killed in 2018 by the islanders of North Sentinel, in the Bay of Bengal, *Aftonbladet's* columnist Peter Kadhammar linked Christian missions with oppressive colonialism and genocide of various indigenous populations.³⁴⁰ He therefore believed that the islanders acted rationally and “did the right thing”: “The Sentinelese on the small island in the Indian Ocean did what the inhabitants of Australia, America, Africa and large parts of Asia should have done as soon as the white man stepped ashore and shouted: – Jesus loves you!”³⁴¹

In addition to the oddity of reducing Chau, who himself was of Chinese descent and Asian appearance, to “the white man”, Kadhammar’s thesis illustrates the widely held view that Christianity has only led to misery outside the West. However, historical research suggests the opposite.

Robert Woodberry, a political scientist at Baylor University in Texas, is an expert on the historical role of Protestant missionaries in the development of democracy in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania. He has found that missions were crucial to the development of democratic structures. About half of the institutional elements of democracy in today’s Africa, Asia and Latin America can be explained by Protestant missionary work, he says. Contrary to the popular image of missionaries as ‘cultural imperialists’, they were catalysts for the spread of religious freedom, mass education, health care, printing, newspapers, NGOs and reforms. Literacy, education, newspapers and books were motivated by the idea that everyone should be able to read the Bible in their own language, which had unexpected side-effects in terms of far-reaching social reform.

³³⁹ Andersson, Sara. “Dick Harrison: The West can thank Christianity,” *The World Today*, <https://www.varldenidag.se/nyheter/dick-harrison-vastvarlden-kan-tacka-kristendomen/461312>

³⁴⁰ Kadhammar, Peter. “Invånarna som dödade missionären gjorde rätt”, *Aftonbladet*, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/kolumnister/a/6nJ7R8/invanarna-som-dode-missionaren-gjorde-ratt>

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*

In the *American Political Science Review*³⁴² Woodberry describes how 212,000 books were printed in forty different languages just 32 years after the missionaries brought the printing press to India in 1800. They also created the typeface that dominated South Asia for most of the 19th century. Hindu and Muslim groups responded with their own printed matter using techniques learned from Christian mission stations. Eventually, this also had an impact on the emergence of free media. Woodberry concludes his article:

Max Weber argued that Protestantism helped stimulate the rise of capitalism. Some of his causal links may have been wrong, but his basic intuition seems to be correct: religious beliefs and institutions matter. What we think of as modernity was not the inevitable result of economic development, urbanization, industrialization, secularization or the Enlightenment, but a much more conditional process deeply shaped by activist religion.³⁴³

Of course, there is much more to say about the historical development of religious freedom. The Enlightenment has certainly played a role here, but it has not been the only contributing factor and certainly not the first. Nor was it the origin of our idea of the equal value of all human beings. Tom Holland writes in *Dominion* (2019):

That every person had equal dignity was far from a self-evident truth. A Roman would have laughed at this. Fighting discrimination on the basis of gender or sexuality depended, however, on a large number of people sharing a common assumption: that everyone had intrinsic value. The origin of this principle – as Nietzsche had so contemptuously pointed out – was not in the French Revolution, nor in the Declaration of Independence, nor in the Enlightenment, but in the Bible.³⁴⁴

The Christian faith has played a major role in the history of Europe and Sweden. Today we live in a pluralistic society where different beliefs are given a space to voice their concerns and thus make their contribution to culture. Requiring religious people to keep their faith private, as some commentators do, when engaging in political issues that inevitably affect people is an absurd idea. Think of Martin Luther King and the fight against

³⁴² Woodberry, Robert D. "The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy," *American Political Science Review*, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/missionary-roots-of-liberal-democracy/3D96CF5CB2F7FEB19B1835393D084B9A>

³⁴³ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁴ Holland 2019, p. 478.

racism in the US. Should he have kept his Christian faith out of the civil rights movement and contented himself with being a community shepherd? Consider Mahatma Gandhi and the fight for India's independence from the British Empire. Should he have stuck to Hindu piety?

Or what about the evangelical Christian 18th century parliamentarian, William Wilberforce, and his crucial contribution to the activist struggle against the transatlantic slave trade? The biography *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery* (2007) describes how "in the midst of the heat of the struggle to abolish slavery, one of its many devoted opponents, Lord Melbourne, was outraged that Wilberforce dared to impose his Christian values of slavery and human equality on British society. 'That it should have come to pass,' he famously thundered, 'as to allow one's religion to invade public life.'"³⁴⁵

I think everyone today, not least those affected by slavery, is glad that Wilberforce and those like him allowed their "religion to invade public life". But the fact that all beliefs have a right to be heard does not mean that all are equal. What I am arguing is that no belief should be privileged in public debate. The state-church monopoly or the idea of the Christian state belongs to the past – and did not even belong there. At the same time we in Sweden have gone in a short time from a Lutheran state church, which dominated our culture and legislation, with little room for freedom of religion and belief, to a secular and narrow state ideology with little room for dissenting voices. None of these options are appealing.

³⁴⁵ Metaxas, Eric. *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery* (HarperOne, 2007) p. xv. Stark, Rodney. *Discovering God: The Origins of the Great Religions and the Evolution of Belief* (HarperOne, 2007) p. 320.

From conventicle act to Sweden's popular movements

IN SWEDEN WE have had a relatively short period of religious freedom. At the Uppsala Synod in 1593, Sweden established a state church that lasted for more than four hundred years and which periodically ruled religious life with an iron fist. It was forbidden to profess any religion other than Lutheranism. In the 2018 government report on state subsidies to religious communities it is described how this manifested itself:

All children in Sweden had to be baptized within eight days of birth, all people had to go to church and their faith was verified by household and catechism interviews. From the 18th century, regular participation in communion was a statutory obligation. State, church and society became an interwoven entity. The parish functioned as an administrative unit with the priest as a state official and the church was given responsibility for poverty relief, schools, health care and population registration.³⁴⁶

With the rise of the Pietist revival, the Conventicle Act was introduced in 1726 by the Swedish parliament, banning prayer meetings and services in homes. The law was harsh and Sweden was known for its strict attitude towards religious dissenters.

Repeated offenses could lead to two years in prison followed by exile. One of the most famous examples was the pietist Thomas Leopold. He was imprisoned for 43 years in Bohus Fortress until his death in 1771 for his beliefs.

Although the 16th paragraph of the Swedish constitution of 1809 guaranteed a certain amount of freedom of religion and conscience, the law was in practice ineffective in favor of the Conventicle Act. A clear example of this was how six Swedish women who had converted to Catholicism in 1858 were sentenced to exile by the Svea Court of Appeal, the same year that the Conventicle Act was to be repealed. This case attracted international attention, including from the Evangelical Alliance in the UK. *The Catholic Layman* newspaper of the same year quoted a letter from one of its leaders, Sir Culling Eardley, to the Swedish ambassador in London: "It is

³⁴⁶ Regeringen. Statens stöd till trossamfund i ett mångreligiöst Sverige (SOU 2018:18), <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/statens-offentliga-utredningar/2018/03/sou-201818/>

incumbent on Protestants to allow even their strongest opponents the same freedom of conscience as they demand for themselves.³⁴⁷

Many of those who joined the Christian revivalist movements chose to leave Sweden of their own accord. Many went to the United States in the mid-19th century.

After being softened in various stages, the Conventicle Act was abolished in 1858 after more than 130 years. Voices had been raised for greater religious freedom. King Oskar I, whose wife, Queen Josefina, was a Catholic, addressed the issue in his throne speech of 1856. The King criticized the laws that prevented free practice of religion and worship and promised a bill that would expand religious freedom. These efforts, however, only led to the repeal of the Conventicle Act on October 26, 1858.³⁴⁸

It was not until 1868 that the obligation to be baptized as infant in the state church was removed. The so-called Dissenter Acts of 1860 and 1873 made it possible for Swedish citizens to leave the Church of Sweden, but only if they simultaneously joined a denomination approved by the state. It was still illegal not to belong to a religious community. At the same time, it was forbidden to criticize the church and Lutheran beliefs, even though Sweden has the oldest freedom of the press in the world. One of the most famous cases involved Viktor Lennstrand, nicknamed ‘The Blasphemy Kid’, who in 1889 was sentenced to prison under the Swedish Blasphemy Act for delivering a speech on religious freedom. In 1949, the law was replaced by a law concerning offenses against the sanctity of religion, which in turn was abolished in 1970.

The so-called Dissenter Act Committee, which was appointed by the government in 1943, and which consisted of both Swedish church and free church representatives, proposed in its report in 1949 that the 1873 Dissenter Act should be replaced by a new “Freedom of Religion Act”.³⁴⁹ The reason was that too many changes would be required in the Dissenter Law to be called a “revision”.³⁵⁰ The proposed Freedom of Religion Act meant the right to leave the Church of Sweden without simultaneously becoming a member of another registered religious community, i.e. not only the

³⁴⁷ “Who Wishes to Keep up Religious Persecution?” *The Catholic Layman*, vol. 7, no. 82, 1858, pp. 112-113. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30066612>

³⁴⁸ Pernestrand, Lennart. “Om Konventikelplakatets avveckling. Debatten inom och utanför riksdagen 1823 – 1858” (2008), from <http://konventiklar.blogspot.com/2008/01/avgrande-riksdagen-185658-debatt.html>

³⁴⁹ Dissenterlagskommittén. Betänkande med förslag till religionsfrihetslag m.m. (SOU 1949:20), p. 13-14, <https://lagen.nu/sou/1949:20?attachment=index.pdf&repo=soukb&dir=downloaded>

³⁵⁰ Ibid.

right to freedom of religion, but also the right to freedom from religion. Everyone would be free to practice their religion or non-religion, to participate in meetings and to join other religious communities – or not. It also became possible to hold a government position without being a member of the Church of Sweden. Until then, Catholics were also prohibited from working as teachers, nurses or doctors. That Swedish legislation in this area lagged behind our neighbors was made clear in the publication of the Dissenter Act Committee. In Finland, “an expanded freedom of religion was introduced from January 1, 1923 [...] Leaving the Evangelical Lutheran National Church thus could be done freely”.³⁵¹ And in Norway, since 1891, the law had allowed “free public worship, the right to withdraw from the state church, the formation of dissenting societies with their own priests or directors, and exemption from paying taxes to the state church and its officials to a certain extent”.³⁵²

With the passing of the religious freedom act on Saturday May 19, 1951, Gustav Mosesson, a member of the Liberal People's Party and member of the Swedish Mission Covenant church, who was also a member of the Dissenter Law Committee and thus one of the architects of the law, opened the debate in the second chamber of the Riksdag. He excitedly noted that the decision did not come a day too late: “It has not been quick in this kingdom, when it has been a question of legislation in the field of religion.”³⁵³ In his speech, he referred to the 16th paragraph of the constitution of 1809 that “the King should [...] not force or coerce anyone's conscience, but protect everyone in the free exercise of their religion”³⁵⁴ as the “proud formulation, which we used to consider as the Swedish people's Magna Carta”. The weight of his speech illustrates the importance attached to the right to freedom of religion.³⁵⁵ At the same time, Mosesson noted that the legislation concerning freedom of religion and conscience that was still in force was contradictory: “This paragraph had the same wording as today, as when in the past Orsa readers and others were taken on the prison cart to

³⁵¹ Ibid, p. 10.

³⁵² Ibid.

³⁵³ Parliament. Minutes of the Second Chamber on Saturday, May 19, 1951, https://riksdagen.se/en/dokument-lagar/dokument/protokoll/1951----andra-kammaren---nr-20_EC9020/html

³⁵⁴ Regeringsformen 1809 med ändringar 1809-1974” in *Sveriges konstitutionella urkunder* (SNS Förlag 1999), [https://web.archive.org/web/20100831012655/ http://www.sns.se/zino.aspx?articleID=839](https://web.archive.org/web/20100831012655/http://www.sns.se/zino.aspx?articleID=839).

³⁵⁵ Parliament. Minutes of the Second Chamber on Saturday, May 19, 1951, https://riksdagen.se/en/dokument-lagar/dokument/protokoll/1951----andra-kammaren---nr-20_EC9020/html

the prisons in Falun and Gävle or to other prisons and punished with bread and water just because they had gathered with their neighbors to read father Luther, pray and sing.”³⁵⁶

However, public opinion had finally swung in favor of the free exercise of religion outside the Lutheran confession. “It certainly does not tear down any Jericho walls, it will not tear down any temple, it essentially means only that an outdated legislation is adapted to the actual social reality”,³⁵⁷ said the Social Democratic member Rolf Edberg. The Liberal People’s Party member Gustav Mosesson (incidentally the grandfather of the actor Hans Mosesson, also known as ICA-Stig) expressed great gratitude to the other members and in particular the Social Democratic Minister of Justice Herman Zetterberg for the way in which the debate was now being conducted in the parliament. According to him, the need for full religious freedom was not least linked to the major contribution of the revivalist movements to society: “Since 1873, the extensive free evangelical activity in our country has practically been given its organizational form. It is, as the members of the chamber were told, only a few countries where the free church movement proportionally meant and means as much as in our country.”³⁵⁸

When the time came for the then Minister of Justice Zetterberg, perhaps best known for being the longest-serving Minister of Justice in Sweden (12 years), he pointed out that freedom of religion goes to the heart of a person’s beliefs:

[A law on freedom of religion does not only concern general civil rights, general democratic conditions. *It also touches on the question of people’s outlook on life, faith and religion. These are the things that for many are the deepest or only essential part of life.* In addition, however, among the people who have very definite ideas about these deep and serious things and who have a pronounced faith, as well as among those who adhere to a view of a different kind – not a creed, perhaps, but nevertheless a conception of the mysteries of the world and the meaning of existence – opinions are very divergent [...] When it comes to legislating about such things, about things that are so essential to people, it is important to try to proceed with caution, tolerance and consideration.”³⁵⁹

The Swedish Freedom of Religion Act was proclaimed on October 26, 1951 and came into force on New Year’s Day 1952, a “milestone [...] which is by

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

³⁵⁹ Ibid (my italics).

no means completed and which will not be completed until the final regulation of the relationship between church and state that only divorce can provide",³⁶⁰ according to Social Democrat Rolf Edberg. Although the new law was a milestone, it was by no means a final destination. It would take until 1977, for example, before monasteries could be founded without first applying for the king's permission.³⁶¹

An important observation concerning the 1951 parliamentary debate is that support for a law on freedom of religion was cross-party, with the majority voting 'yes'. With regard to religious issues, political scientist Andreas Johansson Heinö has shown that from "the parties' infancy until well into the 20th century there was a clear difference between the parties. All three non-socialist parties rested on an explicitly Christian foundation, while the Social Democrats and the Communists contained significant anti-clerical elements".³⁶² The 1951 decision illustrates how freedom of religion united politicians from both sides, but it was not only secular ideas that paved the way for a more open and free society, as we have seen in the supporters of the 1951 Freedom of Religion Act. In the national debate in May 1951, "the simple men and women who followed their convictions even though it cost them humiliation and punishment"³⁶³ were described as pioneers of a freer Sweden. In fact, there were professing Christians on both sides of the struggle for religious freedom: those who, based on their Christian confession, wanted to preserve the state church monopoly and those who, for the same reason, wanted to abolish it. But among those who wanted greater freedoms, hardly anyone relegated their religious beliefs to the private sphere. The historian of ideas Ronny Ambjörnsson, former professor at Umeå University, has shown that the Swedish revivalist movement in the 19th century promoted freedom of assembly, freedom of religion and the right to organize, and also gave rise to a tradition of education. In *Idéhistoria i tiden* (2008) Ambjörnsson writes:

The revival movement introduced concepts such as freedom of assembly and the right to organize. In this way, it has significance for our country's

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

³⁶¹ Wikipedia. "Monasteries in Sweden", https://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kloster_i_Sverige

³⁶² Johansson Heinö, Andreas. "Has religion become left-wing? De svenska partierna och religionsfrågorna", in *Religionen i demokratin* by Göndör, Eli (ed.) (Timbro förlag 2013) p. 14.

³⁶³ Parliament. Minutes of the Second Chamber on Saturday, May 19, 1951, https://riksdagen.se/en/dokument-lagar/dokument/protokoll/1951----andra-kammaren---nr_20_EC9020/html

democratic development [...] [T]he revival movement, the reader movement, establishes a reading behavior that is of great importance for the understanding of the literary working-class culture that then develops, primarily in the workers' and temperance movements. This reading behavior is radically different from the reading behavior that was fostered in the state church. There they studied the catechism, often by heart. That is to say, one mechanically learned an apologist's, Luther's, exposition of the Bible and the Christian faith. The readers, the revivalists, were themselves apologists. They interpreted the text, interpreted and commented [...] The goal was not to learn Luther or Rosenius, the goal was to become a Luther, one might say.³⁶⁴

In his contribution to the 1998 Democracy Inquiry's eighth publication, *Läsarna och demokratin*, Anders Johnson writes in the same spirit. According to the report, the first Baptist baptisms in 1848 at Vällersvik in northern Halland constituted 'the moment of birth of the People's Movements in Sweden:

The free church and temperance movements played a major role in the development of the early labour movement. It was from these movements that the labour movement took its organizational and meeting forms. The influence of the free church and temperance movements contributed to the victory of the reformist line over the revolutionary one [...] The revivalist movements contributed to the development of democracy in Sweden by demanding freedom of religion and by emphasizing the importance of the individual's relationship to the written documents and the Bible, thus the right of each individual to seek his or her own path to truth and education.³⁶⁵

The contribution of revivalist movements to Sweden's democratic breakthrough is often passed over in silence. This has been particularly true for discussions on diversity and the importance of minorities. One example is the exhibition *100% kamp - Sveriges historia (100% Struggle - Sweden's History)*, which has been shown at the Swedish History Museum in Stockholm and other museums in Sweden.

The exhibition offers a teacher's guide for primary and secondary schools, but despite the theme of struggle and human rights, the struggle for religious freedom is conspicuously absent.

³⁶⁴ Ambjörnsson, Ronny. "Om möjligheten av en folkets idéhistoria", in *Idéhistoria i tiden* by Andersson, Nils & Björck, Henrik (eds) (Symposium 2008) p. 212-213.

³⁶⁵ Johnson, Anders. "Läsarna och demokratin - ett brev till det läsande Sverige" (SOU 1998:134 / Demokratiutredningens skrift nr 8), Regeringen, <https://www.regerin.gen.se/rattsliga-dokument/statens-offentliga-utredningar/1998/12/sou-1998134>

According to the Swedish History Museum, *100% Kampis* “about people who have fought for their own and others’ conditions. People who fought for the right to live, stay and love on equal terms regardless of functional abilities, sexual orientation, faith, gender, class or origin”.³⁶⁶

When I visited the exhibition, it became clear to me that an exhibition about the struggle for human rights and democracy in Sweden has an important function. It is through history that we understand our present and build towards a better society. Here, strong human destinies were presented that fought against, among other things, the ban on sign language and forced sterilization. But the exhibition also gives a paradoxical impression of a lack of history. The contemporary focus on identity politics and experiences of oppression are placed like a grid over historical research. Understanding Sweden’s democratic development from such a perspective is problematic. When the perspective is so clearly based on the temporary debates of the time, the risk of anachronism becomes striking and the depiction of history becomes politicized.

Several rights struggles are missing or underestimated in the exhibition *100% Kamp*. The highly controversial emergence of religious freedom takes a strikingly obscure role in the absence of any historical explanation. Nothing about the Conventicle Act or dissenter’ laws. The fact that the revivalist movements of the 19th century, together with the labour movement and the temperance movement, were driving forces for freedom of religion, freedom of expression and freedom of association is not mentioned, even though the exhibition was made with the support of the Labour Movement’s archives and library. Nor is it mentioned that Swedish Baptist congregations gave women the right to vote 71 years before the parliament passed the same decision.³⁶⁷ The exhibition gives the impression that Swedish religious freedom is a special interest in the great story of the struggle for democracy and equal rights.

³⁶⁶ Historical Museum. “Nu öppnar utställningen 100% kamp – Sveriges historia på Historiska museet”, <https://news.cision.com/se/historiska-museet/r/nu-oppnar-utställningen-100--kamp--sveriges-historia-pa-historiska-museet,c2452912>

³⁶⁷ Arenius, Håkan. “Självklar plats för kvinnor redan 1865”, *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/livsstil/2015/12/07/sjalvklar-plats-for-kvinnor-redan-1865>

PART 3

FREEDOM OF RELIGION IN SWEDEN

Democratic values? The state and faith communities

“We SHOULD KEEP AN arm’s length distance and not control what religious communities think and how they develop.” These are the words of the then Minister for Culture and Democracy Alice Bah Kuhnke (MP) in an interview in *Dagen* (2015).³⁶⁸ When the Minister announced the following year an investigation into state support for religious communities with the aim of tightening “the requirements for democratic values among the denominations”³⁶⁹ a number of questions were therefore raised. Despite good intentions, there is a tension between “arm’s length” and tightening the requirements for the values of the communities.

Bah Kuhnke emphasized that “tax money should not be used for hate speech and polarization”, an objective shared by every democratically minded person, but anyone who has followed the public debate also knows that these concepts can easily be stretched to include things that simply do not fit one’s own worldview. Why do we need further judgments directed at religious communities in particular? Anyone who breaks the law can already be prosecuted and convicted under current legislation, regardless of the context.

When you ask the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FR A) about “hate speech” (i.e. hateful rhetoric or incitement), the definition varies depending on which document you read. One refers to “incitement and encouragement of hatred, discrimination or hostility against a person motivated by prejudice against him or her on grounds of a particular characteristic”.³⁷⁰ Another refers to conducting a “disrespectful public debate”.³⁷¹

³⁶⁸ Zetterman, Jacob. “Bah Kuhnke om samfundens roll”, *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/bah-kuhnke-om-samfundens-roll/3646162>

³⁶⁹ Bah Kuhnke, Alice. “Skattepengar ska ikke gå till hatretorik och polarisering”, *Dagens Nyheter*, <https://www.dn.se/debatt/skattepengar-ska-inte-ga-till-hatreto-rik-och-polarisering/>

³⁷⁰ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. “Hate Speech and Hate Crimes against LGBT Persons”, http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/1226-Factsheet-homophobia-hate-speech-crime_EN.pdf

³⁷¹ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. “Homophobia and Discrimination on Grounds of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in the EU Member States: Part II – The Social Situation”, http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eng_uploads/397-FRA_hdgso_report_part2_en.pdf

A third publication refers to “negative opinions”.³⁷² A 2009 Council of Europe manual states that there is no universally accepted definition of the term “hate speech”.³⁷³ This shows how problematic the term is. If it is not possible to clearly define what is meant by hate speech, almost any provocative message can be accused of hate speech. Ahmed Shaheed, the UN Special Envoy for Religious Freedom, notes that restrictions on so-called hate speech or other forms of incitement legislation can function in the same way as blasphemy laws “if they are formulated in vague terms or focus on prohibiting specific content”.³⁷⁴ Shaheed continues:

Laws formulated in this way are often applied to reinforce the dominant political, social and moral narrative and views in a society. They are repeatedly used to single out opposition voices and dissenters and to censor minorities.³⁷⁵

In connection with the publication of Kajsa Ekis Ekman’s book *Om könets existens. Tankar om den nya synen på kön* (Polaris 2021), in which she critically examined the debate on gender identity and trans ideology, an open letter was published on the Church of Sweden’s Diocese of Västerås’ website in the spring of 2021 with the title “Personal letter to you who are trans”.³⁷⁶ The letter was signed by nearly a thousand church employees, and although the purpose was to express concern for a vulnerable minority, it also claimed that those who have a different view on the gender and trans issue stood for “trans hatred” and were inspired by “the darkest sides of humanity”: “We see that trans-exclusionary feminism uses a rhetoric that we recognize from radical right-wing Christian groups and right-wing

³⁷² European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. “Homophobia, transphobia and discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity 2010 Update”, https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/1759-FRA-2011-Homophobia-Update-Report_EN.pdf

³⁷³ Weber, Anne. *Manual on hate speech* (Council of Europe Publishing 2009), http://www.icm.sk/subory/Manual_on_hate_speech.pdf p. 3.

³⁷⁴ Shaheed, Ahmed. Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief: “Report on restrictions imposed on expression on account of religion or belief”, United Nations Human Rights Office Of The High Commissioner, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/FreedomReligion/Pages/ReportRestrictionsExpression.aspx>

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ Redner, Cecilia, Degréus, Hans et al. “Personligt brev till dig som är trans”, Svenska Kyrkan, https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/vasterasstift/personligt-brev-till-dig-som-ar-trans?fbclid=IwAR2V3P_C9rYvQcdoQ0pneamoolpxzj-8vP_v5wEld6S4EhyN3zygWUgzh7o

populists.”³⁷⁷ When the journalist Ivar Arpi, who himself has debated and criticized trans ideology, contacted the people who had written the letter, they were unable or unwilling to give examples of what this “trans hate” consisted of or which individuals were involved.³⁷⁸

In other cases, situations may arise that appear to be slightly absurd. For example, the Swedish metal group Ghost, whose texts can be perceived as hate rhetoric, was given the government’s prize for outstanding contributions to Swedish music exports in 2019 – a tolerant choice of laureate.³⁷⁹ In Finland, meanwhile, the Christian Democratic Party member of parliament Päivi Räsänen has been prosecuted for incitement of hatred against a population group³⁸⁰ after Twitter posts that criticized the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church’s involvement in a Pride festival in Helsinki.³⁸¹ She has also shared a brochure she wrote in 2004 in which she discusses the Bible and same-sex relationships,³⁸² for which she is now also being prosecuted. The police made the assessment that the text did not contain anything criminal, but the Prosecutor General was of a different opinion.³⁸³ Päivi Räsänen discusses sexual ethics based on theology. Homophobic and misogynistic texts by rap artists are based on different values and escape prosecution. These different assessments highlight the problem with the concept of “hate speech” and thus also Bah Kuhnke’s demand for “democratic values among communities”.

Of course, Räsänen’s comments are offensive and provocative to many people, but should they be criminalized? Such action is traditionally limited to speech that incites violence. Instead, provocative messages have

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

³⁷⁸ Arpi, Ivar. “Gender as the Prison of the Soul”, Straight Right with Ivar Arpi, <https://ivararpi.substack.com/p/gender-as-the-prison-of-the-soul>

³⁷⁹ Government. “Ghost receives the government’s music export prize from Foreign Trade Minister Anna Hallberg”, <https://www.regeringen.se/pressmeddelanden/2020/10/ghost-far-regeringens-musikexportpris-av-utrikeshandelsminister-anna-hallberg/>

³⁸⁰ Mannila, Saga. “MP Päivi Räsänen prosecuted for three cases of incitement to racial hatred”, *Svenska Yle*, <https://svenska.yle.fi/artikel/2021/04/29/riksdagsle-damoten-paivi-rasanen-atalas-for-three-cases-of-incitement-to-racial-group>

³⁸¹ Ottestig, Johannes. “Finska KD-politikern Päivi Räsänen utreds för hets mot folkgrupp”, *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/finska-kd-politikern-paivi-rasanen-utreds-for-hets-mot-folkgrupp/4151104>

³⁸² Päivi Räsänen’s Twitter account (@PaiviRasanen) at 23:13 on November 26, 2019, <https://twitter.com/PaiviRasanen/status/1199451245083316224?s=20>

³⁸³ Österholm, Peik. “KD politician Päivi Räsänen subject to a new investigation into incitement to racial hatred”, *Svenska Yle*, <https://svenska.yle.fi/artikel/2019/11/04/kd-politikern-paivi-rasanen-foremal-for-ny-utredning-om-hets-mot-folkgrupp>

been addressed through public debate. Räsänen found the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church's commitment to Pride provocative and expressed her objections, not through threats of violence or slander or by naming names, but through arguments. That these arguments provoke and are met with counter-arguments is a strength of a democratic society. Paul Coleman, who represents Räsänen and who also works for the Christian legal organization Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), commented on the charge of incitement of hatred as follows:

In a free society, everyone should be allowed to share their beliefs without fear of censorship. This is the foundation of every free and democratic society. Criminalizing speech through so-called 'hate-speech' laws shuts down important public debates and poses a grave threat to our democracies. These sorts of cases create a culture of fear and censorship and are becoming all too common throughout Europe.³⁸⁴

The problematic nature of the prosecution of Päivi Räsänen is also illustrated by the fact that ten prominent university professors of political science, religion, philosophy and law at Princeton, Stanford, Yale and Harvard, among others, sharply criticized the Finnish Attorney General in an open letter to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom. According to the signatories, the Finnish Attorney General is sending the message that “no one who stands for traditional teachings of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and several other religions, when it comes to issues of marriage and sexual morality, will be safe from state harassment”³⁸⁵ and that the prosecution constitutes a serious violation of Article 18 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights.

In his book *Censored* (2016), Coleman notes that the unclear definition means that accusations of hate speech risk generally silencing controversial views and preventing open debate. The consequence may be stronger regulation of provocative speech:

To summarize [...] a culture of censorship will grow alongside criminal law restrictions: there will be an expansion of litigation and state-sponsored monitoring and reporting bodies to maintain the problem of dangerous

³⁸⁴ ADF International. “Major Finnish Free Speech Case: Two additional investigations against Räsänen, MP”, <https://adfinternational.org/news/major-free-speech-case-in-finland-2newinvestigations/>

³⁸⁵ Berkowitz, Peter, Callanan, Keegan, et al. “A Letter to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom”, *Real Clear Politics*, https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2021/05/28/a_letter_to_the_us_commission_on_international_religious_freedom__145839.html

speech; and finally, the courts will be given additional powers to assess the validity of certain views and will gradually restrict speech so that ‘controversial’ views are only allowed in very limited circumstances.³⁸⁶

However, the outcome isn’t predetermined. Well-defined restrictions on freedom of expression can pinpoint hate speech without allowing the state to punish controversial views. An important criterion is not to allow speech that directly, and in some cases indirectly, incites violence. In this respect, as mentioned above, there is already legislation against, among other things, defamation and incitement to violence. At the same time, it is essential to respect polarization as something inevitable in a pluralistic society. The existence of areas of conflict is not a negative thing. Being able to live with each other’s deepest differences is a necessary ingredient in the democratic project.

The *SNS Democracy Council’s 2021* report states this clearly: “Ideological polarization is necessary for a vibrant democracy. Pluralism – the existence of meaningful differences between political alternatives – is built into the very definition of democracy.”³⁸⁷

Minister for Democracy Alice Bah Kuhnke also discussed ‘democratic values’, a term that has been recurring in the debate but never really defined. In the article, the terms ‘democratic values’ and ‘hate speech’ are both open to interpretation. Similar demands for “democratic values” in religious communities were presented a few months earlier in a debate article in *Aftonbladet*³⁸⁸ by 16 members of parliament from the parliament’s cross party network against honour-based discrimination and oppression. Among the signatories were former Speaker Per Westerberg (M) and Minister for Democracy Birgitta Ohlsson (L), as well as MP Amineh Kakabaveh (-). The demand made was that religious communities that violate “elementary democratic criteria” should not be given state subsidies. Examples of these criteria included not “prohibiting women from holding religious office”; not “prohibiting love before marriage” [sic!]; and not “prohibiting homosexual love at all”. Theologies and practice within denomination that did not allow this was “tantamount to violating basic democratic principles”.³⁸⁹

³⁸⁶ Coleman, Paul. *Censored* (Kairos Publications 2nd edition 2016) p. 127.

³⁸⁷ Ekengren Oscarsson, Henrik et al. “Demokratirådets rapport 2021: Polarisering i Sverige”, *SNS*, <https://sns.se.cdn.triggerfish.cloud/uploads/2021/03/demokratiradets-rapport-2021-polarisering-i-sverige.pdf> p. 14.

³⁸⁸ Kakabaveh, Amineh, Westerberg, Per et al. “Fel att skattepengar går till hederskultur”, *Aftonbladet*, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/a/3jojBA/fel-att-skatte-pengar-gar-till-hederskultur>

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

There is much to say about this list, but it is not stringent. For example, extremism is reduced to a conservative view on the issue of religious office – something that unites the Catholic Church, the Orthodox churches, as well as many Muslim communities – or a traditional definition of religious marriage as a union between a man and a woman. It is of course possible to have strong objections to the beliefs of the world’s religions on these issues, but it is hardly the task of politicians to determine the beliefs of the communities or, for that matter, to classify hundreds of thousands of Swedes as anti-democrats.

In the completed report *Statens stöd till trossamfund i ett mångreligiöst Sverige* (SOU 2018:18),³⁹⁰ the investigator points out how important the religious communities are for Swedish society and the importance the state’s support for religious communities. It is emphasized that freedom of religion should continue to be the main motive for the state to support religious communities. At the same time, the report proposes that the communities should undergo training in what are described as fundamental values, including issues relating to gender equality and sexual ethics. The next question is then who should define what is the proper goal for these trainings. Which worldview should prevail when the secular zeitgeist clashes with religion and, by extension, with religious freedom? The Pentecostal movement was one of the referral bodies:

Should churches that preach that human sexuality only belongs in a traditional marriage be considered to be restricting people’s sexual freedom and thus require training? Can a conversation about LGBTQ issues in the congregation lead to requirements for training of the congregation’s representatives?³⁹¹

The proposal to train priests, pastors, rabbis and imams in “foundational values” raises a number of questions. A society’s values change over time. How does one determine in principle which values are timeless?

If the question seems banal – surely the foundations of democracy and the rights of the individual do not change with the times? – it may be worth considering the Pentecostal movement’s response, which points out, among other things, how the investigation by the *Committee on Sexual Offences* in the early 1980s (SOU 1982:61) proposed that the so-called incest act

³⁹⁰ The Government. *Statens stöd till trossamfund i ett mångreligiöst Sverige* (SOU 2018:18), <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/statens-offentliga-ut-redningar/2018/03/sou-2018:18/>

³⁹¹ Opinion on the report “Statens stöd till trossamfund i ett mångreligiöst Sverige” (SOU 2018:18), Pingst FFS, <https://www.regeringen.se/4a53c9/contentassets/fd25acf441b440358e87b07eb61fae20/pingst--fria-forsamlingar-i-samverkan.pdf>

should be abolished and that sexual intercourse in close family relationships be legalized, provided that the relationship was voluntary. The twenty-year-old debate on the possession of child pornography is also highlighted as an illustrative example of how values have changed in Sweden. At that time, the Chancellor of Justice (JK), among others, believed that it could be justifiable to show child pornography in certain contexts, such as news coverage, opinion formation and art exhibitions. On both these occasions, Christians protested against the politically dominant values. Almost thirty years later, the denominations have won the state over and they are on the same side on these issues, but now there are other areas of conflict.

What does it look like tomorrow?

The investigation also opens the door for religious communities to be disqualified from state subsidies if an individual representative expresses opinions that go against any of the criteria formulated in the report. Of course, neither the state subsidy for media organisations nor the subsidy for political parties are conditional on such premises.

It is also noteworthy that on a number of occasions the inquiry bases its positions on sources that take a one-sided position in the medical ethics debate. This does not do justice to the different sides represented in important social debates. For example, Christians who problematize the issue of abortion or argue for freedom of conscience are described as opponents of women's rights. The basis for this is taken from the Feminist Initiative's online magazine, *Feministiskt perspektiv*,³⁹² which hardly takes a neutral stance. The investigation describes the involvement of these religious representatives as "political campaigns that have been contrary to fundamental democratic values such as gender equality and the equal value of all".³⁹³

The Catholic Church comments on this in its submission:

[I]n a democratic society, there must be room for people to hold, and also publicly express, different views on ethical issues. This also applies in sensitive areas, such as the issues of abortion and contraception. It is therefore astonishing that the inquiry seems to believe that a common Christian view on these issues, a view based on respect and reverence for life, is 'contrary to fundamental democratic values such as equality and the equal value of all'.³⁹⁴

³⁹² Christenson, Gerda. "#abort: Abortmotståndarna i Sverige alltmer högljudda", *Feministiskt perspektiv*, <https://fempers.se/2011/feministisktperspektiv-se-arkiv/arkiv-abort-abortmotstandarna-i-sverige-allt-mer-hogljudda/>

³⁹³ SOU 2018:18, p. 152.

³⁹⁴ Opinion from the Roman Catholic Church on the report Statens stöd till trosamfund i ett mångreligiöst Sverige (SOU 2018:18), Stockholm Catholic Diocese,

In many other contexts, it is seen as an expression of diversity that government grants are given to actors with viewpoint on human ethics. For example, political parties and newspapers receive state subsidies to push opinion on ethical issues concerning sexuality, medicine, taxes, climate, the environment, healthcare, etc. However, when it comes to support for churches, state subsidies are conditional on the positions not being in conflict with the majority's perception. Former Minister for Social Affairs Stefan Attefall touched on this in an interview in *Dagen*:

Support for political parties and the press exists to safeguard diversity. But association grants sometimes seem to strive for uniformity. This goes against the whole democratic system we have in mind.³⁹⁵

RFSL, which has struggled against the flow of culture when criticizing the Swedish sex purchase act, also raised this in *Aftonbladet*:

We cannot have a climate of debate where consensus is required and anyone who has a dissenting opinion is discredited and fundamentally opposed.³⁹⁶

Although the report states that freedom of religion is the main reason for state support for religious communities, it returns on a number of occasions to the emphasis on the benefit to society and that the aim of the support should be "to maintain and strengthen the fundamental values on which society is based". This seems to presuppose an instrumental view of both state support and religious communities. The risk of a politicization of support for religious communities – similar to that which has occurred in support for culture³⁹⁷ – is clear. This becomes clearest when the inquiry states that its "review shows that the support can have a normative effect in that religious communities must relate to the prevailing democracy criteria".³⁹⁸

The report *Demokrativillkor för bidrag till civilsamhället* (SOU 2019:35), which followed up the report on support for religious communities and

<https://www.regeringen.se/4a4f6c/contentassets/fd25acf441b440358e87b07eb61fae20/romersk-katolska-kyrkan-i-sverige.pdf>

³⁹⁵ Österberg, Thomas. "När kyrka och kommun krokar", *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/dokument/nar-kyrka-och-kommun-krokar/3732928>

³⁹⁶ Palacios, Deidre and Berglund, Frank. "Nej, vi kampanjar inte mot sexköpslagen", *Aftonbladet*, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/a/VbX9lV/nej-vi-kampanjar-inte-mot-sexkopslagen>

³⁹⁷ Johansson, Lars Anders. *Dancing to the tune of power: Culture in the service of politics* (Timbro Publishing 2017).

³⁹⁸ SOU 2018:18, p. 239.

also builds some of its reasoning on this, also discusses the boundaries of religious freedom. Without providing a more detailed definition, the inquiry speaks of, for example, the communities' "religious activities" on a number of occasions, including discussion of certain exemption rules,³⁹⁹ while social and cultural activities fall into another category. For most religious communities, however, there is no clear-cut boundary. For example, most churches organize voluntary devotions in connection with their children and youth activities.

The inquiry also proposes that grants should not be given to an organization if it or any of its representatives "violate the principle of the equal value of all people",⁴⁰⁰ a concept that can be open to different interpretations. We saw above that the inquiry into state support for religious communities, on which the Democracy Inquiry was largely based, considered that the Catholic Church's view on abortion is "contrary to fundamental democratic values such as gender equality and the equal value of all people".⁴⁰¹ The fact that an organization could also be excluded from state funding because of the actions of an individual representative opens the door to a surveillance culture where assessments of what is problematic can easily become subjective. New legislation based on both the investigation into state support for religious communities and the Democracy Condition investigation is expected in spring 2022. The Government therefore proposed additional financial resources to, among others, the Swedish Agency for Support to Religious Communities (SST) in order to review churches and communities when the democracy condition is to be tightened.⁴⁰² Of course, it is important that tax money are not used to incite violence or violate other Swedish laws. However, situations may arise where the practice of religion in itself is considered to be contrary to the conditions of democracy, for example if a religious document is interpreted differently from what the parliamentary majority considers acceptable.

The temptation to push religious communities towards the "right kind" of values is imminent.

³⁹⁹ Government. *Demokrativillkor för bidrag till civil society* (SOU 2019:35), <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/statens-offentliga-utredningar/2019/06/sou-201935/> p. 363.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 349ff.

⁴⁰¹ SOU 2018:18, p. 152.

⁴⁰² Government. "10 million in reinforcement for clarified democracy conditions", <https://regeringen.se/pressmeddelanden/2021/09/10-miljoner-i-forstarkning-in-for-fordyldigat-demokrativillkor/>

Emma Høen Bustos, editor-in-chief of *Liberal Debatt* and political editor of *Falu-Kuriren* and *Mora Tidning*, has criticized the fact that the state can steer religious communities towards the “right kind” of values through the design of state subsidies. According to her, state support for religious communities is about “wanting to protect diversity but also homogenize religious life by steering it towards the ‘right’ values. This despite the fact that it is when religions have values that are offensive and deviate from the majority society that both religious freedom and tolerance are really put to the test.”⁴⁰³

A better system than state subsidies to communities could have been a generous tax deduction for gifts to the whole of civil society, which is already applied in many countries. It creates less dependence on the state and strengthens the responsibility of individual members. A number of Free Church leaders argued for this in connection with the establishment of state support for religious communities other than the Church of Sweden in the 1970s. In the debate book *Kejsarens pengar och Guds* (Libris 1971), Sigfrid Deminger, former principal of the Örebro School of Theology, writes about the risk of dependence and undue influence to adapt to the prevailing correct view. He believes that tax deductible gifts would be preferable: “It weakens the motives for state intervention. It streamlines responsibility. It strengthens the responsibility of individuals”,⁴⁰⁴ says Deminger in an interview in *Svenska Dagbladet*. At the same time, the Swedish state already provides grants to associations, media and other institutions that uphold their own core values. It would be inconsistent to apply different rules to religious communities that do not fully share the values of the political majority. We have already seen that the expression “fundamental values” challenges religious freedom in Sweden. In Falun, the municipality has terminated a contract with a local church after it was reported in the media that the church does not marry same-sex couples. According to the political leadership, the church’s practise is contrary to “the values that the municipality has”.⁴⁰⁵ In the long run, all suppliers would then be forced to agree to a specific interpretation of the municipality’s values in order to enter into a contract with the municipality. In principle, such a development is worrying, as it politicizes the municipality’s work on the basis

⁴⁰³ Høen Bustos, Emma. “Slopade bidrag protects religious freedom”, *Smedjan*, <https://timbro.se/smedjan/slopade-bidrag-skyddar-religionsfriheten/>

⁴⁰⁴ Ericson, Per. “Varningsord om kejsarens pengar och Guds”, *Svenska Dagbladet*, <https://www.svd.se/varningsord-om-kejsarens-pengar-och-guds>

⁴⁰⁵ Zetterman, Jacob. “Falu kommun redo avbryta samarbete med Lugnetkyrkan: ‘Är homofientlig’”, *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/falu-kommun-redo-avbryta-samarbete-med-lugnetkyrkan-ar-homofientlig/3365852>

of the majority's opinions. According to a survey of all 310 municipalities and regions in Sweden, which is reported in the Democracy Condition investigation, it appears that associations that do not follow the municipality's values can be denied support.⁴⁰⁶ The investigation also provides no clear definition of the public sector's values. The concept of core values means different things depending on whether the Green Party or the Sweden Democrats is the leading party. In the fall of 2019, for example, *Dagens Samhälle* published a report on how different municipalities' declarations of core values differ greatly and how most of them are reminiscent of political platitudes:

However, the fact is that most municipalities today have adopted some form of core values, common or different for each administration. So obviously they are considered important. The majority settle for a couple of key words, with 'development', 'commitment', 'flexibility', 'security', 'competence', 'openness' and 'responsibility' among the most common. Others, such as Strängnäs and Södertälje, print entire guidance brochures [...] However, an astonishing number of municipal values seem to mean nothing at all. For how should one actually interpret 'meaningfulness', 'the right quality' or 'joy'? Highly individual, probably. And thus the beautiful words become difficult to use.⁴⁰⁷

The organizational researcher and professor at Lund University, Mats Alvesson, who has conducted case studies of values-based work in organizations and companies, believes that core values can even "serve as a surrogate for good practice".⁴⁰⁸ But, he adds, "sometimes core values are linked to practice. Then things can get even worse. A teacher who didn't accept rowdy and disruptive behavior in the classroom – and consequently had conflicts with both students and colleagues – was called to the principal to be reprimanded and later offered severance pay to resign. Addressing the unacceptability in student behavior was unacceptable. The core value was a 'positive view of humanity' – and then one may not point out the negative, except in exceptional cases."⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁶ SOU 2019:35, p. 268.

⁴⁰⁷ Lundegårdh, Anna. "Kommunala värdegrunden – en floskelparad?", *Dagens Samhälle*, <https://www.dagensamhalle.se/nyhet/kommunala-vardegrunden-en-floskelparad-29958>

⁴⁰⁸ Alvesson, Mats. "Värdegrunder ett surrogat för verkliga förbättringar", *Dagens Nyheter*, <https://www.dn.se/debatt/vardegrunder-ett-surrogat-for-verkliga-forbattringar/>

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

Alvesson points out that there is an element of uniformity in the thinking behind core values. In an interview in *Dagens Samhälle*, he states quite simply: “This can lead to suppression of opinion.”⁴¹⁰

The government’s *Core Values Delegation* that has subsequently been closed down said something similar :

In essence, the concept [of core values] is based on clearly marking the values that are desirable within the organization, although this may sound restrictive and limiting, in practice it means a more open landscape for those who experience discriminatory treatment in many other contexts.⁴¹¹

What the *Core Values Delegation* is saying, then, is that every set of values carries with it a “restriction” or “limitation”. The natural follow-up question is then how these boundaries should be drawn and whether there is a risk that the restriction is made by political interests. In the example of Falun municipality and a local free church, it turned out that the line was drawn at a specific interpretation of the concept of marriage.

There has long been a debate in the higher education world about whether academic freedom is compatible with a conditional core values. For example, two members of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences warned in a debate article in *Dagens Nyheter* that the Government’s research bill would limit the free search for knowledge.⁴¹² This is because the bill states that academic freedom must always be exercised “on the basis of the core values that apply”,⁴¹³ which, according to the authors of the article, “opens the way for future regimes to exert pressure on individual researchers and entire universities [...] What will happen when the values suddenly change, perhaps with a demagogue as Prime Minister?”⁴¹⁴ If academic freedom is threatened when it is linked to society’s changing values, how does this differ from religious freedom if communities are similarly

⁴¹⁰ Granestränd, Cecilia. “Professor Sågar värdegrunder: ‘Kan leda till åsiktsförtryck’”, *Dagens Samhälle*, <https://www.dagenssamhalle.se/chef-och-arbetsgivare/ledarskap/professor-sagar-vardegrunder-kan-leda-till-asiktsfortryck/>

⁴¹¹ Värdegrundsdelegationen, <https://www.vardegrundsdelegationen.se/>

⁴¹² Hultman, Lars and Moberg, Christina. “Säg nej till värdegrund som villkor för fri forskning”, *Dagens Nyheter*, <https://www.dn.se/debatt/sag-nej-till-vardegrund-som-villkor-for-fri-forskning/>

⁴¹³ Government. “Research, freedom, future – knowledge and innovation for Sweden”. Prop. 2020/21:60, <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/proposition/2020/12/forskning-frihet-framtid-kunskap-och-innovation-for-sverige/>

⁴¹⁴ Hultman, Lars and Moberg, Christina. “Säg nej till värdegrund som villkor för fri forskning”, *Dagens Nyheter*, <https://www.dn.se/debatt/sag-nej-till-vardegrund-som-villkor-for-fri-forskning/>

made dependent on changing values? One can also draw a parallel to the discussion on the politicization of culture. In relation to culture, politicians have asserted the principle of an arm's length distance to protect the freedom of art. At the same time, there is an ongoing debate about the ideological control of cultural funding, exhibitions and the purpose of culture by politicians and activists. A clear example of the fact that the talk of an arm's length distance between politics and culture is just talk was the report "Så fri är konsten"⁴¹⁵ from the Swedish Agency for Cultural Analysis. The state authority's conclusion is that there is no "protection against political influence over artistic content"⁴¹⁶ in Sweden and that cultural policy governance risks having a negative impact on artistic freedom. At the Swedish Arts Council, the largest government funder in the cultural field, grant applicants are asked "how they will integrate a perspective based on gender equality, LGBTQ, diversity and interculturalism in their work".⁴¹⁷

Among other things, Lars Anders Johansson has shown how the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs (now divided into the Ministries of Culture and Education), which controlled both cultural policy and the then state church, has politicized culture since at least the 1930s. The architect behind this project was ecclesiastical minister Arthur Engberg (S), who wrote what is considered the first Swedish cultural policy program, *Demokratisk kulturpolitik*. Lars Anders Johansson:

The purpose of cultural policy, according to Engberg, was to 'make citizens capable of fulfilling the demands that popular self-government places on them', including 'understanding, insight, skill and his readiness to sacrifice self-interest for the common good' [...] For Engberg, cultural policy was thus a tool in the service of democratic community building, aimed at making citizens ready to shoulder the responsibility that comes with citizenship. In this view, culture is reduced to an instrument for political objectives. It is probably as an attempt to establish itself in this tradition that the Löfven government, after the 2014 election, chose to merge the office of Minister of Culture with the even more diffuse role of Minister of Democracy.⁴¹⁸

The same Engberg stated the following from the podium of the parliament during his time as a minister: "Let's start by abolishing the bishops and

⁴¹⁵ Swedish Agency for Cultural Analysis. "So free is art: The impact of cultural policy governance on artistic freedom", https://kulturanalys.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/2021_1-webb.pdf

⁴¹⁶ Ibid, p. 223.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid, p. 13.

⁴¹⁸ Johansson 2017, pp. 23-24.

introducing an ecclesiastical supervisory board with a director general of the Royal Beatification Office.”⁴¹⁹ In the 19th century, the goal of the labor movement was, among other things, to abolish the power of the Church of Sweden, something that was toned down in the 1920s, and in the following decade began to see the church as a possible platform for the political interests of the labor movement.

Engberg thus saw not only culture but also the church as a political instrument. It is not far-fetched to say that the ecclesiastical minister’s vision has become reality today. The bishops still exist and the Church of Sweden’s link to the state has been formally terminated. At the same time, there is hardly any other Lutheran church which is so strongly influenced by party politics. It is also the only episcopal church in the world whose bishops do not have the right to vote in their own church synod. Arthur Engberg would probably have been happy with that compromise.

It is also not unreasonable that he sowed the seed that would eventually characterize the state’s relationship with other religious communities as they became eligible for state subsidies. It is no coincidence that today we see recurring demands for religious communities to reflect the convictions of the parliamentary majority. But the political ambition to instrumentalize both culture and religious communities can easily change direction. Today, progressive values may be in vogue. Tomorrow is a blank slate.

Theatre director Stina Oscarsson gives a clue, however, when she comments on the debate surrounding the Sweden Democrat-led municipality of Sölvesborg’s goals for public art and asks a rhetorical question: “How many of those who are now horrified by the SD’s art policy in Sölvesborg would have reacted if it had been a red-green-pink leadership in the municipality that wrote that when purchasing art, they intend to prioritize innovative art with a focus on diversity and a norm critical approach? This is what has been happening at cultural institutions around the country for several years.”⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁹ Parliament. Party leader debate, Wednesday, March 12, 1930, https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/documents-lags/dokument/protokoll/1930-andra-kammaren-nr-17_DR9017/html

⁴²⁰ Oscarsson, Stina. “Kritiken mot Sölvesborg är intellektuellt ohederlig”, *Svenska Dagbladet*, <https://www.svd.se/a/joMpk7/kritiken-mot-solvesborg-ar-intellektuellt-ohederlig>

From state church to an arena of partisan politics

IN THE MOST secular country IN THE WORLD, you often hear that religion should not interfere with politics. More rarely is the opposite heard – that politics should not interfere with religion. This is despite the fact that the Church of Sweden was separated from the state at the turn of the millennium. This issue has been raised in the debate on the politicization of the Church of Sweden.

Many members, even parliamentary politicians, thought that political power over the Church of Sweden would be broken in the year 2000. However, no politically independent church was actualized when what was officially called the Church of Sweden’s “change of relationship” with the state, happened. As recently as 2017, then prime minister, Stefan Löfven (S) told the newspaper of the Church of Sweden, *Kyrkans tidning*:

The church will be an interesting arena for social democracy for the foreseeable future. I can’t see the end of that engagement.⁴²¹

Löfven also said that “all priests have to marry everyone, including same-sex couples”.⁴²² He said that there is a parallel “to the midwife who refuses to perform abortions. If you work as a midwife you must be able to perform abortions, otherwise you have to do something else. It is the same for priests who do not want to marry same-sex couples”. The Prime Minister received much criticism for his statement, not least from non-religious quarters. Christer Sturmark, former chairman of the Humanists, wrote on Twitter:

Stefan Löfven seems to have forgotten that we no longer have a state church in Sweden. He should not demand anything from the Church.⁴²³

⁴²¹ Söderberg, Kajsa. “Stefan Löfven: ‘Alla präster ska viga samkönade couple’”, *Kyrkans tidning*, <https://www.kyrkanstidning.se/nyhet/alla-praster-ska-viga-samkonade-par>

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ Christer Sturmark’s Twitter account (@ChSturmark) at 20:17 on June 24, 2017, <https://twitter.com/chsturmark/status/878678483936960512>

Dagens Nyheter also criticized the statement: “Same-sex couples already have the right to marry in the church and there are plenty of priests who are more than happy to oblige.”⁴²⁴

But the prime minister also received support. In January 2020, the board of the Network against Honor-based Violence, including that year’s Fadime Prize winner Maria Rashidi, wrote that Stefan Löfven should have gone further:

A prime minister in a multicultural country could have stated: no priest, regardless of religion, should be able to refuse to marry same-sex couples. Or say that multiculturalism is exempt from equality laws.⁴²⁵

Political demands among religious communities for obligation to marry is something recurring. In a survey prior to the 2021 church elections, five of the eleven nomination groups, which together represent almost half of the members of the General Synod, responded that new priests should be forced to say yes to marrying same-sex couples.⁴²⁶ This is despite the fact that the doctrinal committee, which examines whether proposals in the General Synod are compatible with the Church of Sweden’s doctrine, has in a unanimous opinion described the requirement for obligation to marry as of a “non-constitutive character”.⁴²⁷ Previously, the nomination group *Borgerligt alternativ* (which was formed when the Moderates left church politics) had wanted to preserve the so-called right of refuse, but has since changed its mind. A few weeks later, the Centre Party’s nomination group also swung on the issue and wanted to introduce an obligation to marry.⁴²⁸ And on its editorial page, *Aftonbladet*’s Jehna Al-Moushahidi has pushed the idea that priests “who do not want to marry same-sex couples must change jobs”, as “not even religion [should] be reason enough to refuse to perform marriages between same-sex couples. Especially not when the Church of

⁴²⁴ DN’s editorial board. “Löfven ska lämna kyrkan i fred”, *Dagens Nyheter*, <https://www.dn.se/ledare/huvudledare/lofven-ska-lamna-kyrkan-i-fred/>.

⁴²⁵ Rashidi, Maria et al. “Hedersförtrycket växer – med skattepengars hjälp”, *Dagens Samhälle*, <https://www.dagenssamhalle.se/debatt/hedersfortrycket-vaxer-med-skattepengars-hjalp-31127>

⁴²⁶ Ljungkvist, Matilda. “Fler vill se nytt vigningskrav för präster”, *Kyrkans tidning*, <https://www.kyrkanstidning.se/nyhet/fler-vill-se-nytt-vigningskrav-praster>

⁴²⁷ Church Council. Lärnämnden’s opinion 2016:8y. “Priests’ vows and marriage of same-sex couples”, https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/filer/Ln2016_08y_pr%c3%a4sters_vigningsl%c3%b6fte_och_vigsel_av_samk%c3%b6nade_par.pdf

⁴²⁸ Lundgren, Joakim. “C swings: Nya präster bör viga samkönade”, *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/2021/08/27/c-svanger-nya-praster-bor-viga-samkonade/>

Sweden's official position is to be in favor of homosexual rights".⁴²⁹ Obviously, even religious and theological considerations may not guide a church. The fact that priests do not want to marry same-sex couples is even due to "an outdated and rotten view that does not belong in an open and democratic society",⁴³⁰ according to Heléne Björklund, Member of Parliament and chairman of the Social Democrats in Blekinge.

In late summer 2020, the then Minister for Gender Equality, Åsa Lindhagen (MP), made a similar announcement: the Green Party wanted to make it illegal for religious communities with the right to perform legal marriage not to marry same-sex couples.⁴³¹ Obviously, Lindhagen's announcement served as a test balloon. The following day, the party's spokesperson, Per Bolund, and the MEP Alice Bah Kuhnke, wrote in the *Aftonbladet* that a future reform should be that "marriage celebrants should not be allowed to discriminate against same-sex couples".⁴³² Priests, pastors, imams and rabbis would be forced to go against their theological convictions.

A few days later, the Green Party's traffic council in Stockholm, Daniel Helldén, spoke warmly in favor of an inclusive society in connection with the announcement to place gender-neutral traffic lights in the capital.⁴³³ First the legal exclusion of minorities, then the inclusion of other minorities, all from the same party in the course of a few days. It was a clear indication that the inclusive society for minorities is a goal mainly for those who share beliefs with the majority currently running the country.

According to the regulation in force since the introduction of gender-neutral marriages on 1 May 2009, "there is no obligation to perform marriages for a religious community or the person who is an authorized marriage celebrant within a religious community. This means that it may

⁴²⁹ Al-Moushahidi, Jehna. "Präster som ikke vill viga samkönade får byta jobb", *Aftonbladet*, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/ledare/a/5G31zK/praster-som-inte-vill-viga-samkonade-far-byta-jobb>

⁴³⁰ Björklund, Heléne. "Kyrkan viktig för samhället", *Sydöstran*, <https://www.sydosttran.se/insandare/insandare-kyrkan-viktig-for-samhallet-d39711d5/>

⁴³¹ Älverbrandt, Marcus. "MP-kravet: Vig homosexuella – eller inga alls", *Aftonbladet*, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/8mrzRw/mp-kravet-vig-homosexuella-eller-inga-alls>

⁴³² Bolund, Per and Kuhnke, Alice Bah. "Sverige måste göra mer för hbtq-rörelsen", *Aftonbladet*, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/a/QodO4P/sverige-maste-go-rarmer-for-hbtq-rorelsen>

⁴³³ Brandt, Per. "Klart: Här får Stockholm permanenta samkönade trafikljus", *Mitt i Stockholm*, https://www.mitti.se/nyheter/klart-har-far-stockholm-permanentasamkonade-trafikljus/reptfx!Lb460TywhHcy5ZcdYc6AJw/?fbclid=IwAR2AjiexxKGt-t36FQfDJk3wNaKiCZMV7Gn7UO_TcnAsRZ9xC3MvtkQy9Y

happen that a marriage desired by a couple within a certain religious community cannot take place there, even if the couple meets the requirements of the Swedish Marriage Code. For example, there may be situations where the beliefs of the religious community or the officiant prevent a marriage because the parties do not practice the same religion or because one of the parties is divorced”⁴³⁴.

The fact that denominational marriage officers, including the Church of Sweden, are not obliged to perform marriages is not just a matter of maintaining a traditional definition of marriage. It can also apply to situations with opposite-sex couples where the officiant has reasons to suspect, for example, that the man is abusing the woman, or that the parties do not take marriage seriously. The statutory right to marry simply means that church officials must decide on a case-by-case basis whether to perform a marriage. Moreover, same-sex marriages are very few in proportion to both the number of priests and other issues that dominate everyday church life. According to statistics from the Church of Sweden’s employers’ organization (SKAO), there are 3,060 priests in the Church of Sweden.⁴³⁵ How many of these priests are actually positive to marrying same-sex couples is of course difficult to ascertain, but it is only 147 out of a total of 14,000 marriages per year (about one percent).⁴³⁶ Jonas Eek, opinion editor of *Kyrkans tidning*:

Even for those of us who unreservedly embrace same-sex marriage, it may seem a little backwards that this particular issue is taking the oxygen from so many other issues.

Backwards in terms of proportionality and focus. The average number of same-sex marriage ceremonies is 147 per year. When compared to the 46,000 baptisms, 26,000 confirmations, 14,000 marriages and 62,000 funerals that took place in the Church of Sweden in 2019, 147 same-sex marriages is not a major issue.⁴³⁷

The inquiry *Statens stöd till trossamfund i ett mångreligiöst Sverige* (SOU 2018:18) also stated that it is “clear from the case law of the European Court

⁴³⁴ Government. “Marriage and Cohabitation”, <https://www.regeringen.se/regeringens-politik/familjeratt/aktenskap-och-samboende/>

⁴³⁵ Pålsson, Camilla. “Historiskt skifte: Fler kvinnor än män är präster i Svenska kyrkan”, *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/historiskt-skifte-fler-kvinnor-an-man-ar-praster-i-svenska-kyrkan/3838940>

⁴³⁶ Eek, Jonas. “Bakvänt, begripligt, beklagligt och besvärande”, *Kyrkans tidning*, <https://www.kyrkanstidning.se/ledare/ledare-bakvant-begripligt-beklagligt-och-besvarande>

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*

of Human Rights [...] that it is up to each religion to determine whether and to what extent same-sex marriages are permitted (Parry v. United Kingdom, decision of November 28, 2006; Council of Europe and European Court of Human Rights a.a., paragraph 132)".⁴³⁸ Ironically, it was the above-mentioned inquiry that Alice Bah Kuhnke herself received during her time as Minister responsible.

Nor is it possible to actually claim that a traditional view of marriage is discriminatory, a view that is recurrent in the aforementioned statements by both the Prime Minister and the then Minister for Gender Equality. Of course, adults are free to live as they wish, but as the government investigator Hans Regner wrote when examining the conditions for the future gender-neutral marriage law: "I do not see that the conventions in this area go beyond guaranteeing heterosexuals the right to marry."⁴³⁹ He simply rejected the discrimination argument. The same conclusion was reached in a 2016 European Court of Justice decision.⁴⁴⁰

Of course, it can be perceived as a mixed message when religious communities on the one hand act as an extension of the state by declaring people legally married, and on the other hand refrain from certain marriages. But this is actually a situation that the majority of the Swedish Parliament, including the Green Party, has voted for. In 2009, a broad majority (261 to 22) voted for this very legislation, including the arrangement that there should be no obligation to marry within religious communities. "You cannot force an individual priest to marry a specific couple, regardless of gender. That is what Swedish law says",⁴⁴¹ according to Archbishop Antje Jackelén of the Church of Sweden.

Despite basically accepting the compromise proposal put forward by the Christian Democrats to introduce a civil law system, the parliamentary majority chose to vote through the current law. Green Party MP Jan Lindholm said at the time: "I actually think it is quite reasonable to take the next step, and it may take fifteen years. By then we may have found a form

⁴³⁸ SOU 2018:18, p. 345.

⁴³⁹ Government. "Marriage for same-sex couples – Marriage issues" (SOU 2017:17), <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/statens-offentliga-utredningar/2007/03/sou-200717/>

⁴⁴⁰ Signum."Court ruling: no discrimination to reserve marriage only for men and women", <http://signum.se/domstolsutslag-nej-diskriminering-att-reser-vera-aktenskapet-enbart-for-man-and-woman/>

⁴⁴¹ Stenlund, Johannes. "Man kan inte tvinga präster att viga samkönade par", *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/kyrkovallet/2021/09/14/arkebiskopen-forvanad-over-vigselplikt-som-valfraga/>

that is without problems for the denominations, so that we can, for example, have an obligation to marry instead of a right.”

It took even less time for a new statement on the issue. It is not clear that this was done in a way that respects differences and does not risk fueling suspicion of religious communities. Six months before Åsa Lindhagen’s statement, she met with several church leaders for a discussion about how religion is described in the public debate, freedom of religion and the situation of young believers in schools.⁴⁴² Of course, the minister should care about all minorities, but here she rather pitted minorities against minorities.

If political demands on religious communities are problematic in a pluralistic society, it is even more remarkable that a head of government considers the former state church still an “interesting arena”⁴⁴³ for pushing political ideology. This shows that the gap between church and state is still fragile in Sweden, especially when it comes to the involvement of the political sphere. There is hardly any other Lutheran church in the world that is so strongly influenced by party politics. It is worth considering which other organizations independent of the state have such a clear party presence. In *Kyrkomöte och partipolitik* (2019), Klas Hansson, former director of the Archbishop’s Office, writes that the importance of political ideas for the Church of Sweden’s General Synod “for decisions of principle is unique”.⁴⁴⁴ This simply means that there is a “partisaninfluence on an overall, ideological level” in the Church Council.⁴⁴⁵ Since a number of nomination groups represent parliamentary parties, it means that “it is a party executive committee in a secular political party that sets the agenda for how a church, formally free from the state, should be shaped for the future”.⁴⁴⁶ It is not only critics who emphasize the influence party politics has and has had on the Church of Sweden. This also applies to those who defend this system. In *Reformismens väg – om socialdemokratin och kyrkan* (2020), the author and journalist Jesper Bengtsson describes, on behalf of the Social Democratic think tank *Tiden*, “how political forces have worked for a long time to change a religious insti-

⁴⁴² Swedish Christian Council. “Kyrkoledare i samtal med Åsa Lindhagen om unga och tro”, <https://www.skr.org/pressmeddelande/kyrkoledare-i-samtal-med-asa-lindhagen-om-unga-och-tro/>

⁴⁴³ Söderberg, Kajsa. “Stefan Löfven: ‘Alla präster ska viga samkönade couple’”, *Kyrkans tidning*, <https://www.kyrkanstidning.se/nyhet/alla-praster-ska-viga-samkonade-par>

⁴⁴⁴ Hansson, Klas. *Kyrkomöte och partipolitik* (Artos & Norma Bokförlag 2019) p. 266.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

tution”.⁴⁴⁷ This applies in particular to how the Social Democratic “party has been involved in moving the Church’s values step by step in a progressive direction”.⁴⁴⁸ Like a mirror image of Klas Hanson’s criticism of the unique importance of political ideas in the decisions of the Church of Sweden, Bengtsson writes appreciatively:

As a reform project, the transformation of the Church is almost unique in its persistence and its slow but thorough process. It had to take time. Each step has been preceded by studies, discussions, referrals, new studies and finally decisions. Sometimes the Church was still not ready, as in the case of female priests. *Then the state has intervened and pushed the church forward [...]* Step by step the church has stepped into modern times.⁴⁴⁹

Instead of allowing the Church to be guided by its own theological positions, it has thus been important for the state to *push the Church forward*.

How has the importance of political ideas been expressed in the last church elections in 2021, when just over 850 000 Swedes voted – around 18% of those eligible to vote? The Social Democrats, the Sweden Democrats and the Centre are the nominating groups that are directly linked to political parent parties. That is, their election program is set by a parliamentary party, and together the three have a majority of the seats in the General Synod. The Social Democrats have the largest share of the General Synod’s 251 seats. In their election manifesto for the church elections, there was no mention of God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit, but there were several general election promises that the Church of Sweden “should be there for and be open to everyone”, “strengthen its competence as an employer”, and “be a leader in the green transition”.⁴⁵⁰ What secular association could not agree with this? The Church of Sweden, we are also told, is important for the “Swedish labor market model” and for “construction of welfarestat”.⁴⁵¹

The Center Party campaigned for “clear and measurable environmental objectives” and that the Church of Sweden should be “a place where we stimulate each other to grow into the people we are in our inner hearts”.⁴⁵²

⁴⁴⁷ Bengtsson, Jesper. *Reformismens väg – om socialdemokratin och kyrkan* (Tiden 2020) p. 11.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.* (my italics).

⁴⁵⁰ Socialdemokraterna. Valmanifest – Kyrkoval 2021, <https://www.socialdemokraterna.se/s-i-svenska-kyrkan/nyheter/artiklar/2021-02-02-valmanifest--kyrkoval-2021>

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵² Centerpartiet. “En öppen folkkyrka, tillgänglig för alla”, <https://www.centerpartiet.se/download/18.352355d2175e185a35f3afa/1608213881612/Valprogram%202021.pdf>

For the Sweden Democrats, it was primarily a matter of “breaking decades of Social Democratic power monopoly”.⁴⁵³ It is true that in the long term they want to dismantle “all parties’ involvement in church elections, including our own”,⁴⁵⁴ but the way to do this is by being a “church with a socially conservative base”.⁴⁵⁵ At the same time as they want to break off a certain kind of party political activism, they want to replace it with another.

Interestingly, both C and SD referred to God and Jesus in their respective election programs. C quoted from the Church Constitution, which states that the fundamental task of the local congregation to worship, teach, and practice acts of charity and mission is aimed at ensuring that people come to faith in Jesus Christ.⁴⁵⁶ SD referred to both the Great Commission, and to stand against an inclusivist view of religion where several paths is said to lead to God.⁴⁵⁷ Although S does not explicitly profess Christian theological convictions in their election manifesto, they are nevertheless part of the Church of Sweden’s leadership, which in turn is subject to the Church Constitution. The Church Constitution, which is the Church of Sweden’s regulatory framework, is based on the classic Christian confessions, such as the Apostolic and Nicene Creeds, and how the secular parties just mentioned relate to this seems highly contradictory. It is particularly problematic from a religious freedom perspective. On the one hand, they take a stand for specific Christian beliefs in the church elections, and on the other hand they claim to be secular parties that want to govern the country. But just as a church should not be able to govern the state through religious edicts in an open and free society, the parties that govern the state should not be able to make decisions for a church. The participation of S, C and SD in the church elections also raises the question of how they relate to the confessions of other religions. By committing to a specific Christian Lutheran confession, are they not taking a stand against the beliefs of their Catholic, Muslim, Jewish and Buddhist voters? Or will the parties eventually also engage in the democratic processes of other religious communities?

⁴⁵³ Sverigedemokraterna. Kyrkopolitisk valplattform 2021, <https://ratatosk.sd.se/sd/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/30183140/Valplattform-kyrkovalet-2021.pdf>

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁶ Centerpartiet. “En öppen folkkyrka, tillgänglig för alla”, <https://www.centerpartiet.se/download/18.352355d2175e185a35f3afa/1608213881612/Valprogram%202021.pdf>

⁴⁵⁷ Sverigedemokraterna. Kyrkopolitisk valplattform 2021, <https://ratatosk.sd.se/sd/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/30183140/Valplattform-kyrkovalet-2021.pdf>

Berth Löndahl, member of the non-political nomination committee *Frimodig kyrka* in the General Synod and the Church Board, writes:

A prerequisite for both individual members and entire nomination groups to be part of the General Synod is thus that they are not only loyal to but also bound by the introduction to the Church Order. Or they are totally inconsistent in that in one context they are religiously independent and a secular party and in another they claim to stand for the Christian faith and the creed of the Church of Christ.⁴⁵⁸

Either S, C and SD are secular and religiously unaffiliated parties, in which case they should refrain from holding church elections, or they are bound by a specific Christian creed and can hardly be considered suitable to lead a secular state.

In addition to S, C and SD, there are nomination groups that, although they are now organizationally free from political parties, are still largely guided by political ideologies. To varying degrees they still relate to parliamentary parties. These include the Green Party in the Church of Sweden, the Free Liberals in the Church of Sweden, the Left in the Church of Sweden and the Christian Democrats in the Church of Sweden. *Borgerligt Alternativ*, which was formed when the Moderates left church politics in 2011, was about to re-establish ties with the political party in the autumn of 2019. In connection with the Moderates' party meeting that year, the party executive committee supported two motions to re-enter the church political context that they had previously left. However, the proposal was voted down by the party congress.⁴⁵⁹

The only non-political nomination groups are *Partipolitiskt obundna i Svenska kyrkan* (POSK), *Frimodig kyrka* (FK) and *Öppen kyrka* (ÖK A). These three groups gather members regardless of party affiliation and also work to ensure that political parties do not make decisions in the Church of Sweden. They were compared by *Aftonbladet's* Anders Lindberg with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and former US President Donald Trump, and described the respective nomination groups as "right-wing conservative" (POSK), ultra-right (FK) and "left-wing"

⁴⁵⁸ Löndahl, Berth. "Ett riksdagsparti bör vara religiöst neutralt", *Kyrkans tidning*, <https://www.kyrkanstidning.se/debatt/ett-riksdagsparti-bor-vara-religios-nt-neutralt>

⁴⁵⁹ Zetterman, Jacob. "Moderaterna: Vi återvänder ikke till kyrkopolitiken", *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/2019/10/20/moderaterna-vi-atervander-inte-till-kyrkopolitiken/>

(ÖK A),⁴⁶⁰ as they wanted to “dismantle democracy for their political opponents”.⁴⁶¹ But the claim that political parties are needed in the Church of Sweden to safeguard democracy raises several follow-up questions. It is not possible here to discuss them separately, but one can ask whether this means that the independent churches, which historically was the first to have equal voting rights – independent of state influence – are undemocratic?

Although other religious communities are regularly targeted by the demands of politicians, the situation in the Church of Sweden is unique in that the nomination groups can act as an extension of the parties. Klas Hansson writes:

Overall, this is an arrangement that there is reason to question in a church that has changed its relationship with the state and is supposed to be free. The Church of Sweden is limited by the fact that most members of the General Synod are bound to parties and political ideological traditions.⁴⁶²

There was no immediate official response from the Church of Sweden to Löfven’s demand that “all priests have to marry everyone, including same-sex couples”. However, another request from a party leader caused the Church of Sweden leadership to react. In a debate article in *Aftonbladet*⁴⁶³, Sweden Democrat leader Jimmie Åkesson criticized the Christian Council of Sweden – and especially the Church of Sweden – for expressing views on refugee policy.

In a response, Archbishop Antje Jackelén of the Church of Sweden wrote: “Let the church be the church. Do not impose a political agenda on it. Neither your own nor those of your political opponents. Allow it to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed.”⁴⁶⁴

Of course, the churches, as well as the rest of civil society, may and perhaps even should discuss and have views on Swedish politics. No parliamentary decision is set in stone or handed down from above. Nevertheless, an open discussion about how we should view the politicians’ views on the

⁴⁶⁰ Lindberg, Anders. “Kyrkopolitikerna låter som Ungerns diktator”, *Aftonbladet*, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/ledare/a/Wj648j/kyrkopolitikerna-later-som-ungerns-diktator>

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶² Hansson 2019, p. 272.

⁴⁶³ Åkesson, Jimmie and Emilsson, Aron. “Kyrkan ska inte lägga sig i flyktingpolitiken”, *Aftonbladet*, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/a/mRaql1/kyrkan-ska-inte-lagga-sig-i-flyktingpolitiken>.

⁴⁶⁴ Jackelén, Antje. “Låt kyrkan fortsätta vara kyrka, Åkesson”, *Aftonbladet*, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/a/P9m6LR/lat-kyrkan-fortsatta-vara-kyrka-akesson>

denominations' theological views would be welcome. This applies not least to politicians' actions in relation to the old state church. Is it independent and one denomination among others, or is it still an extension of the political arena, as it once was for conservatism and is today for progressive parties? Not least for the church's own future, this is of fundamental importance.

More recently, both the current archbishop and a number of previous ones have criticized the existence of political parties in the Church of Sweden. For example, Archbishop Antje Jackelén has described this system as outdated and a remnant of the state church system.⁴⁶⁵

It may be worth repeating Stefan Löfven's statement in *Kyrkans tidning*: "The church will be an interesting arena for social democracy for the foreseeable future." This manifests a structure that could just as easily be exploited by a conservative majority. Will the connection between politics and the former state church be as obvious to Löfven then? If not, it is quite obvious that the goal is something other than allowing party politics to influence the church. Then the goal is in fact to let politics influence the church, but only as long as it is the right politics.

⁴⁶⁵ Lundgren, Joakim. "KG Hammar: Partipolitiken destruktiv för kyrkan", *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/2021/07/28/kg-hammar-partipolitiken-destruktiv-for-kyrkan/>

The right to blaspheme

WHEN THE DEBATE IS about the return of religion or its increased visibility in society, it is typically Islam that is referred to. The new religious presence in Sweden, mainly from first or second generation immigrants with a Muslim background and faith, presents society with new challenges in the relationship between the public arena and people's religious beliefs. In a number of areas, a renegotiation is taking place.

In *Religionskollision* (Timbro Förlag 2017), Islamologist Eli Göndör points to the friction that arises when two majority cultures meet: the Arab Sunni Muslim culture, which includes many Muslims in Sweden, and the secularized Christian majority population which regards religion as a private matter:

“The current state of affairs means that two parties, each based on their majority status, are forced to re-evaluate both their self-image and their view of the other. Muslims are suddenly in a minority, surrounded by a secular Christian majority that views religious meetings, social mobility, equality, dietary laws and mosques differently. This leads them to ask themselves questions in a way that did not occur in majority Islamic societies. It also means that conversations raised by the immigration of Muslims to Europe affect European perceptions of what secular means.”⁴⁶⁶

According to Göndör, the fact that some Muslim organizations which are concentrated in the metropolitan areas, but claim to speak for all Muslims, require adaptation from the majority society, and also receive state support for their activities, is a result of this collision. When the secular Swedish majority society demands that the growing number of Muslims adapt to the majority society, it can in some cases be perceived as oppression and create resistance:

Since the majority expects the minority to adapt, the divergences of the minority are often described as something inferior or unfavorable that needs to be adjusted to the majority's perception of what is right and good. This resistance develops what [Manuel] Castells calls a resistance identity. According to Castells, the resistance identity is formed, among other things, by resistance to the majority society's moral claims, norms, rules or perceptions of how society should be formed.⁴⁶⁷

⁴⁶⁶ Göndör, Eli. *Religionskollision* (Timbro förlag 2017) p. 85.

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 34-35.

The development of a resistance identity in a religious minority should not be problematic in itself. It is rather an expression of the struggle for religious freedom discussed above. At the same time, the resistance identity combined with failed integration and problematic beliefs can lead to increased conflict.

The fact that the French President Emmanuel Macron highlighted the emergence of a parallel social order in a keynote speech on October 2, 2020, where he presented a bill against Islamic separatism, is one such example.

On both sides of the Swedish debate on religion, voices that see common freedoms and rights as a zero-sum game dominate. The secular majority culture sees every religiously influenced element that might be considered as something that undermines democracy – in this case Muslim believers who do not adapt their beliefs to secular norms and expressions. This seems to be a particularly Swedish experience, says Göndör, comparing it to the UK. He points out how Sweden has more difficulty “dealing with cultural or religious expressions that are perceived as foreign. Not least, this seems to be due to the fact that what can be considered Swedish in various ways [...] has never before been challenged and therefore constantly needs to be defined or rediscovered [...].

Britain, on the other hand, seems to have a more self-evident self-image, which leads to a more practical approach when decisions are to be made”.⁴⁶⁸ On the contrary, the minority culture argues that public expressions of religious identity should be welcomed without reservations or distinctions between what is more or less problematic. When certain expressions are resisted, it is sometimes argued that this can lead to the radicalization of young Muslims. The majority population’s skepticism towards certain forms of Muslim practice can even be portrayed as the cause of Islamist terrorist acts. Therefore, the surrounding culture should avoid criticizing Muslim beliefs: arguments, political proposals or satire are believed to trigger acts of violence. This relationship was put to the test when the French teacher Samuel Paty was murdered after showing the so-called Muhammad cartoons for teaching purposes. Several Muslim countries called for a boycott of French goods and protested when Emmanuel Macron defended the publication of the images. Miguel Ángel Moratinos, head of the *United Nations Alliance of Civilizations* (U NAOC), which works against extremism and for inter-religious dialogue, said that the “inflammatory cartoons [...] have provoked acts of violence against innocent civilians who are attacked on the basis of religion, belief or

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 34

ethnicity”.⁴⁶⁹ Although Moratinos made a clear statement against the violence, it is worth noting that the UN chief places a significant part of the responsibility for the brutal murder of Samuel Paty on the “inflammatory cartoons” that “provoked acts of violence”. Similar arguments were made in *Politico Europe* under the headline “France’s dangerous religion of secularism”⁴⁷⁰ and in the *New York Times* under the headline “Is France Fueling Muslim Terrorism by Trying to Prevent It?”⁴⁷¹

The assertion that caricatures of minority beliefs or demands for conformity to the values of the majority culture would provoke acts of violence may seem tenuous and raises a number of questions. If this is true, should we not see an increase in violence from other vulnerable minority groups as a result of the negative attitude of the majority?

The Swedish Agency for State Aid to Religious Communities’ survey of xenophobic acts against religious communities (2014) states that Muslim and Jewish communities are the most vulnerable.⁴⁷²

On October 17 of the same year, *Dagens Nyheter* wrote about the report: “The Jewish communities tell of a constant threat, of fear of terrorist acts and of Jews who wonder whether they can remain in Sweden.”⁴⁷³

By the same logic, shouldn’t this anti-Semitism incentivize Jewish terrorists in Sweden? However, no such cases have been reported. The same applies to antiziganism. The government’s commission against antiziganism wrote in *Göteborgs-Posten* in 2014:

Roma visitors from Romania and Bulgaria, among others, have been subjected to outright hate crimes. Night shelters have been attacked and some

⁴⁶⁹ TT-AFP. “UN chief calls for ‘mutual respect’”, *Svenska Dagbladet*, <https://www.svd.se/fn-oroas-over-spanningar-over-karikatyer>

⁴⁷⁰ Khosrokhavar, Farhad. “France’s dangerous religion of secularism”, *Politico*, <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-attacks-religion-secularism-radicalism-blas-phemy-islam/>. The article was de-published after much criticism and because, according to the newspaper’s editor-in-chief, it did not meet the newspaper’s “editorial standards”.

⁴⁷¹ Geisser, Vincent. “Is France Fueling Muslim Terrorism by Trying to Prevent It?”, *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/31/opinion/france-terrorism-muslims.html>

⁴⁷² Swedish Agency for State Aid to Religious Communities. “Främlingsfientliga handlingar mot trossamfund: En kartläggning av religiösa gruppers och individers utsatthet i Sverige 2014”, <https://myndighetsst.se/download/18.2f6fb2621900fdb71fe4b2f/1718689296876/Fr%C3%A4mlingsfientliga%20handlingar%20mot%20trossamfund.pdf>

⁴⁷³ Unsigned editorial. “Skydda religionsfriheten”, *Dagens Nyheter*, <https://www.dn.se/ledare/huvudledare/skydda-religionsfriheten/>

of those appealing for financial support have been subjected to violence and harassment. A woman in Skara was shot in the head with an air gun. Extremist hate sites call for abuse of visitors and SD spreads insidious myths about visitors as criminals.⁴⁷⁴

Despite this, no case has been reported where discrimination was met with violence by the Roma victims.

It is important to discuss how far the French principle of laicism should be pushed in relation to freedom of religion, not least when it comes to the right of minorities to express their religion in public, such as Muslim women wearing full-face veils. The French Minister for Home Affairs, Gérald Darmanin, made a problematic statement in January 2021 when, in a televised debate on foreign influence and funding in the field of religion in France, he described evangelical Christians “as a major problem, obviously not of the same nature as the Islamism that carries out attacks and murders”.⁴⁷⁵ There are historical and other reasons for the principle of laïcité, but it is constantly in danger of turning into a general demand for uniformity. We have noted above how secularism as a worldview can be a driving force for restrictions on the religious freedom of minorities, which are deeply problematic in an open society where different voices should be allowed. One example is *MIVILUDES* – the French Ministry of the Interior’s commission for the fight against sectarian aberrations, created in 2002 to monitor and analyze religious movements. A recent report from the authority states, among other things, that “separatism” is a problem for broad “strategic areas” that include “social life” and “nutrition”.⁴⁷⁶ The fact that Christians and Muslims fast and participate in a social life beyond the control of the state is thus described by a French authority as a problem. This is remarkable in a society where the core of the self-image is that the state must not interfere in the everyday life of its citizens.

In 2019, Middle Eastern Christians demonstrated outside the SVT building after comedian Per Andersson mentioned Jesus while covering his

⁴⁷⁴ Hammarberg, Thomas, et al. “Oacceptabel antiziganism mot romer i Sverige”, *Göteborgs-Posten*, <https://www.gp.se/debatt/oacceptabel-antiziganism-mot-romer-i-sverige-1.248339>

⁴⁷⁵ Alestig, Inger. “Fransk minister i blåsväder för uttalande om evangelikaler”, *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/2021/02/06/fransk-minister-i-blasvader-for-uttalande-om-evangelikaler/>

⁴⁷⁶ Introvigne, Massimo. “Anti-Cultism in France: Old/New Risks for Religious Liberty?”, *Bitter Winter*, <https://bitterwinter.org/anti-cultism-in-france-old-new-risks-for-religious-liberty/?fbclid=IwAR3eUoTGgzgC8yKR5WiV1kBGpuWPRMFNSox6Wy7E80RZVhc7RpVDr66UISc>

genitals with a crucifix. The comedy clip was from 2012, but had been re-published on SVT's social media, where it still remains. The protesters, many of whom came from countries where Christians are persecuted, found this deeply offensive. However, SVT stood its ground. Thomas Hall, head of *SVT Nöje* in Stockholm, argued that the right to publish was "important for freedom of expression": "[...] we cannot limit ourselves based on who might be upset."⁴⁷⁷ This is an important principle. It is of course possible to discuss what form of humor is compatible with the public service mission. One can discuss whether it is constructive to ridicule someone's god or prophet or burn holy writings. But one *cannot* argue that outraged emotions constitute a limit for freedom of expression. The oft-repeated truth is that freedom of expression exists precisely to guarantee the right to express what provokes such reactions. What does not upset is not in need of legal freedom of expression. Yet it is precisely outraged feelings that risk drawing a line for freedom of expression in the wake of the reported Koran burnings in Rosengård and Rinkeby. After the murder of Samuel Paty, several Swedish teachers noted that what happened to their French colleague could also happen in Sweden.⁴⁷⁸ In connection with the parliamentary question time, Prime Minister Stefan Löfven was asked whether the teacher who wants to show the Muhammad caricature for educational purposes risk their lives. Löfven replied that it is "important that all of society shows its support. We will stand up for our freedom of expression".⁴⁷⁹ But if not *all of* society wants to stand up for freedom of expression, and if significant groups think that mockery of religious beliefs should be restricted, does the Prime Minister's pledge apply? It is worth noting that the far-right politician Rasmus Paludan was reported to the police for incitement of hatred against a population group for his plans to burn the Koran even before he carried out his plan in Malmö in 2020. The report was filed by 18 Muslim associations in Malmö, who argued that the Swedish constitution "gives us the freedom to believe what we want without anyone openly attacking and deliberately humiliating our religious

⁴⁷⁷ Liderfors Westholm, Andreas. "Kristna demonstrerade mot SVT:s humorklipp med krucifix", *SVT Nyheter*, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/sodertalje/svt-s-humorklipp-skapar-debatt-per-andersson-haller-krucifix-framfor-sitt-konsorgan>

⁴⁷⁸ Frenker, Clarence. "Svenska lärare efter dådet i Frankrike: 'Vi måste vara beredda på att det kan komma att ske även här'", *SVT Nyheter*, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/svenska-larare-efter-dadet-i-frankrike-vi-maste-var-beredda-pa-att-det-kan-komma-att-ske-aven-ar>

⁴⁷⁹ Zetterman, Jacob. "Busch: På vissa skolor går det ikke att visa karikatyrer på Muhammed", *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/2020/11/13/ebba-busch-pa-visa-sa-skolor-gar-det-nte-att-visa-karikatyrer-pa-profeten-muhammed/>

beliefs and feelings”.⁴⁸⁰ The signers distanced themselves from violence, but “strongly questioned whether the burning of books can really be part of the freedom of assembly and expression”.⁴⁸¹ After the Koran burning in Stockholm, additional Muslim communities in the capital wanted to ban mockery of Islam and other religions.⁴⁸² At the end of November 2020, following the murders in Paris, Nice and Vienna, a prayer demonstration was organized outside the French Embassy in Stockholm, not in support of the victims of the terror, but with the message that mockery of religion should be banned.⁴⁸³ According to an opinion poll by the *Institut français d’opinion publique* (IFOP), conducted after the murder of Samuel Paty, 66 per cent of French Muslims believed that teachers should not have the right to display caricatures of religious figures.⁴⁸⁴

Calling for a blasphemy ban is, of course, an opinion that falls under the freedom of expression just as much as blasphemy. Again, it is worth stressing that several imams have made clear their opposition to acts of violence in response to blasphemy. Nevertheless, the discussion illustrates that freedom of expression cannot be taken for granted and needs to be constantly explained and defended.

It is welcome that many Muslim leaders contributed to quelling the riots that started in Malmö in August 2020.⁴⁸⁵ At the same time, however, the report against Rasmus Paludan incorrectly assumes that Swedish law prohibits “degrading [...] religious beliefs and feelings”⁴⁸⁶ or

⁴⁸⁰ Copy of the police report published on Malmö Moskén – Islamic Centers Församlings Facebook page on Monday, August 24, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/IslamicCenterMalmoSweden/posts/3251133691599126>

⁴⁸¹ Ibid.

⁴⁸² Hökerberg, Josefine. “Järvås ledare manar till lugn when högerextrema vill bränna Koranen”, *Dagens Nyheter*, <https://www.dn.se/sthlm/jarvas-ledare-manar-till-lugn-nar-hogerextrema-vill-branna-koranen/>

⁴⁸³ Ottestig, Johannes. “Muslimsk böneprotest utanför franska ambassaden”, *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/2020/11/24/muslimsk-boneprotest-utanfor-franska-ambassaden-i-stockholm/>

⁴⁸⁴ Institut français d’opinion publique. Le rapport à la laïcité à l’heure de la lutte contre l’islamisme et le projet de loi contre les séparatismes, <https://www.ifop.com/publication/le-rapport-a-la-laicite-a-lheure-de-la-lutte-contre-lislamisme-et-le-projet-de-loi-contre-les-separatismes/>

⁴⁸⁵ Nordevik, Alice and TT. “Imamen: ‘De som ville provocera fick som de ville’”, *SVT Nyheter*, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/skane/de-som-ville-provocera-fick-som-de-ville>

⁴⁸⁶ Copy of the police report published on Malmö Moskén – Islamic Centers Församlings Facebook page on Monday, August 24, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/IslamicCenterMalmoSweden/posts/3251133691599126>

“mocking Islam and its prophet is against the freedom of speech we have in Sweden”.⁴⁸⁷

Moreover, a ban on criticism or mockery of religious beliefs would probably hit Muslims hardest. Indeed, from an international perspective, the first to be silenced tend to be Muslim religious and political activists who want to see reforms within the framework of their own religion. Muslim thinker and former Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid writes in *Silenced* (2011) that blasphemy laws would only encourage “Muslim fundamentalists to impose a spiritually empty, harsh and monolithic understanding of Islam on the world. Instead, Western governments should vigorously defend freedom of expression.”

A current Swedish example of the need for religious criticism in a Muslim context is the former Salafist preacher and jihadist influencer Anas Khalifa, who has now distanced himself from the pro-violence Islamist milieu. In an interview on the Doku Foundation’s website, he describes how the theological processing of the faith was of decisive importance for his de-radicalization.⁴⁸⁸ The prerequisite for serious theological questioning points to the need for religious criticism, something Khalifa himself formulates in a Twitter post in which he comments on the interview with Doku:

Any religion that cannot handle criticism, questioning and intellectual thinking is not a religion worth following. Islam is no exception. We Muslims must begin to STRENGTHEN our faith by putting it to the test. It is human to doubt.⁴⁸⁹

Freedom of religion is a precondition for freedom of expression, just as freedom of expression is a precondition for freedom of religion. Both simply mean the right to express one’s beliefs even if these include criticism of the beliefs of others that may be perceived as demeaning and mocking.

Nobody likes humiliation and mockery, least of all if it affects something they hold dear and sacred. It is also true that the police do not have to give permission for a demonstration outside a mosque or allow a Koran

⁴⁸⁷ Arpi, Ivar. “Bönedemonstration mot de mördade”, *Svenska Dagbladet*, <https://www.svd.se/a/BlMAvE/bonedemonstration-mot-de-mordade>

⁴⁸⁸ Löwenmark, Sofie. “Anas Khalifa – därför lämnade jag salafismen”, Stiftelsen Doku, https://doku.nu/2021/07/29/anas-khalifa-darfor-lamnade-jag-salafismen/?fbclid=IwAR2_Gig3njd2AzL4CiLi_9FNqJNtNfB8RygzekVq8BRCPm0m6sqR0rDMmus

⁴⁸⁹ Anas Khalifa’s Twitter account (@anaskhalifa) on July 31, 2021 at 13:49, <https://twitter.com/anaskhalifa/status/1421437952937402370>

burning there. Perhaps they make the assessment that they cannot guarantee people's safety there and then.

But provocation is and remains part of the reality of an open and free society.

It is better to read and discuss books than to burn them. Few believe that Rasmus Paludan's action was an attempt to engage in a conversation with the Muslims he provoked. But instead of trying to limit religious criticism, Muslim communities should encourage more religious criticism. After the attack in Vienna, Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz stressed that fighting terrorism is not enough. It must also be countered by another form of thought: Islamism. He shares this view with a majority of Muslims, yet many Muslim representatives have backed away from this debate on ideas and chosen to talk about Islamophobia. Within Swedish Christianity there is a lively and public discussion about what led to the Knutby tragedy. Within the Catholic Church, there is a similar discussion about the sexual abuse of children by priests and how leading representatives of the Church concealed these abuses for a long time. In the same spirit, Muslim leaders must engage in the debate on Islamism and radicalization. A society that embraces secular humanists, Christians, Jews, and Muslims living side by side needs more criticism of religion, not less.

Threats, harassment and attacks against individual Muslims and mosques is an acute problem in Sweden. The perception that Muslims in their capacity as Muslims constitute a threat to an open society is not uncommon. This does not mean that criticism of ideas and expressions in Muslim contexts necessarily reinforces this image. Criticism of ideas and expressions within Christian or secular contexts does not reinforce the image of Christians or seculars as a threat. It is when objections to ideas and expressions are not addressed that the risk of conflict increases. Moreover, not critically examining ideas within certain Muslim contexts would be a betrayal of the many Muslims and Muslim reform movements that are persecuted within their own religion. As mentioned above, the majority of those accused of "defaming Islam" by Muslims are themselves Muslims, and many are also human rights activists. Restrict religious criticism of Islam and it is these Muslims who suffer.

We have previously discussed how elected politicians' sweeping judgments about Islam as either a religion of peace or as "abominable" are problematic, as they obscure the debate on ideas about Islam and Islamism and the actual reality for so many Muslims. An example of the opposite of these simplifications was given in 2018 in a report in *Dagens Nyheter* by journalist Niklas Orrenius, who took on both a discussion and analysis of problematic ideas within Muslim contexts. Orrenius addressed hatred and

threats, often theologically motivated, against Muslims who renounce their faith, sometimes to convert to another religion. Among other things, the imam Salahuddin Barakat, director of the Islamic Academy, who has participated in various initiatives for religious dialogue, was interviewed about the view of apostasy, i.e. leaving their faith. In Islam, this is a close cousin of blasphemy. Orrenius' report is worth a longer quote:

“According to classical Muslim jurisprudence, leaving Islam is punishable by death, says Salahuddin Barakat.

– But in Sweden in 2018, that is not the case. You have absolutely no right to do so, as a parent or as anyone else.

When does it apply?

– Not in any country as it is now. Nor in the countries where many Muslims live. Nowhere is there really a good Islamic social order, with a high level of Muslim knowledge and education and a leader who is fair.

Salahuddin Barakat talks about what classical theology considers to be the ideal Muslim society, with a learned, righteous caliph maintaining order. In such a society, leaving Islam would be punishable by death. But almost no one would want to abandon Islam in such a society, he says.

[...]

At the same time, he expresses some understanding for parents who threaten drastic measures if their children leave Islam.

– If you know that your child is about to plunge into certain destruction, an eternal hell. What do you do? You do everything you can to stop it. In the beginning, you might try to persuade. If that doesn't work out, you might resort to threat or to cutting ties, breaking contact.

The Koran says that coercion is not allowed in religion, right?

But that is not applicable to leaving Islam. It's about entering the religion – then you can't force anyone.”⁴⁹⁰

There are different views within Islam, but it is significant that a recognized moderate Muslim authority like Salahuddin Barakat considers the ideal society to be ruled by a learned caliph where religious freedom is in practice non-existent. In a Facebook comment later in the fall of 2020 on President Emmanuel Macron's speech on Islamic separatism (but before the murder of teacher Samuel Paty), Salahuddin Barakat described France as an “Islamophobic rogue state”. The country represents a “philosophically weak, extremely secular, and racist-nationalist ideology that was established through the guillotine reign of terror and then spread

⁴⁹⁰ Orrenius, Niklas. “Hot om döden skrämmer ex-muslimer från att lämna islam”, *Dagens Nyheter*, <https://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/hot-om-doden-skrammer-ex-muslimer-fran-att-lamna-islam/>

throughout the world through executions, torture, and mass graves” and lives on “sucking the blood of the world’s weak”.⁴⁹¹ It is no secret that France, like many other countries, has had a problematic history for many years. And as we have seen earlier, there is a tendency within the French laïcité principle to demand uniformity. On French television in February 2021, France’s Interior Minister Gérald Darmanins said that one cannot “discuss with people who refuse to sign that the laws of the Republic are above God’s”.⁴⁹² The fact that the laws of liberal democracies are above divine decrees is necessary from a political perspective, but the statement is hardly an invitation to dialogue. The same applies to Barakat’s description of France as a racist rogue state.

Today, the death penalty for leaving Islam is applied in countries such as Pakistan, Iran and Somalia. The fact that this is analyzed, discussed and criticized is not an expression of contempt for Swedish Muslims – especially since Muslims themselves participate in this criticism. However, the fact that we live under constitutionally protected freedom of religion does not mean that society prohibits groups and individuals, religious and secular, who do not agree with this right. This has become clear in recent years in the debate on integration and honorary violence.

⁴⁹¹ Cwejman, Adam. “Svensk islamism i fårakläder”, *Göteborgs-Posten*, <https://www.gp.se/ledare/svensk-islamism-i-faraklader.e526222c-4925-47b1-92a6-166c5ba71729>

⁴⁹² Alestig, Inger. “Fransk minister i blåsväder för uttalande om evangelikaler”, *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/fransk-minister-i-blasvader-for-uttalande-om-evangelikaler/2964734>

Catechism interrogations and governmental competence

IN THE WAKE OF THE 2015 refugee crisis, reports began pouring in of threats and violent crimes against Christians in Swedish asylum accommodations. At the same time, pastors and priests also noticed an increasing tendency for the Migration Agency to distrust Muslim refugees who had converted to Christianity. The converts were not considered to have a genuine Christian faith, since in conversations with the agency's administrators – according to them – could not give an accurate account of Christian life and teachings. The attacks and distrust of converts overlap as both touch on issues of refugees and religious freedom in relation to how Swedish authorities lack both competence and knowledge.

There is little evidence that values and beliefs change overnight just because a person moves from one place to another. Such conversions tend to happen over time or in response to personal crises. But in the case of the attacks on Christians in our refugee centers, many politicians and officials have suggested that this cannot be true, as the perpetrators should have undergone a change of attitude as soon as they encountered Swedish society. In the case of Christian converts, politicians and officials have also been suspicious of the idea that another part of Swedish society – the Christian churches – has been able to bring about a change of attitude among refugees by leading them to convert.

In the summer of 2015, it was reported how a group of Christian asylum seekers from Iraq and Syria fled a refugee facility in Kalmar after several threats from other residents. Among other things, they had been warned not to wear a cross around their necks.⁴⁹³ In a major investigation by *Expressen*, a Christian refugee from Syria said that a Muslim countryman at the same accommodation had threatened to “cut his throat”.⁴⁹⁴

Despite several news reports, there was no comprehensive governmental investigation of the phenomenon. Yet, at the same time, the European Parliament's annual report on human rights and democracy emphasized that in Europe “Christian refugees are routinely persecuted because

⁴⁹³ TT. “Kristna lämnade asylboende efter hot”, *SVT Nyheter*, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/smaland/kristna-lamnade-azylboende-efter-hot>

⁴⁹⁴ Salihu, Diamant. “You have left Islam, then you know that we have the right to kill you”, *Expressen*, <https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/du-har-lamnatt-islam-da-vet-du-att-vi-har-ratt-att-doda-dig/>

of their religion”.⁴⁹⁵ Previously, the 2014 survey by the Swedish Agency for State Aid to Religious Communities had highlighted how converts from Islam to Christianity had been abused, threatened and harassed by countrymen and former co-religionists in the same refugee accommodation.⁴⁹⁶ However, it was only when the Christian human rights organization Open Doors Sweden decided to conduct its own thorough investigation that it emerged how bad the situation was for Christian refugees in Sweden.⁴⁹⁷ The year before, Open Doors in Germany conducted a similar investigation, the methodology of which formed the basis for the Swedish equivalent.⁴⁹⁸

A total of 123 people were interviewed, all of whom had suffered persecution in Sweden because of their Christian faith. In total, there were 512 incidents ranging from death threats, sexual abuse, violence and other forms of harassment. The majority of the victims were converts and most of the perpetrators were other migrants who converted to Islam. Due to fear of retaliation or simply not believing it would help, only 33 of the people in the report had reported the incident to the police.

At the same time, the number of unreported cases was high. The report did not include the large group that is persecuted for not sharing the same religious interpretation of Islam as the perpetrators. It also did not include atheists, LGBT people or political dissidents. Between November 2015 and January 2016, the police recorded 830 cases of assault and 480 cases of threats and harassment in asylum accommodations (which received the attention of the police, code R291). It was unclear how many of these crimes were religiously or otherwise motivated.

One of the people interviewed by Open Doors says in the report: “Once they said that my daughter cannot eat in the canteen without a scarf if she wants to keep her head. Another time they told my son not to wear a

⁴⁹⁵ European Parliament. ‘Annual report on human rights and democracy in the world and the European Union’s policy on the matter 2015’, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2016-0502_SV.html

⁴⁹⁶ Swedish Agency for State Aid to Religious Communities. “Främlingsfientliga handlingar mot trossamfund: En kartläggning av religiösa gruppers och individers utsatthet i Sverige 2014”, <https://myndighetsst.se/download/18.2f6fb2621900fd671fe4b2f/1718689296876/Fr%C3%A4mlingsfientliga%20handlingar%20mot%20trossamfund.pdf>

⁴⁹⁷ Open Doors Sweden. “Religiöst motiverad förföljelse mot kristna flyktingar i Sverige: En enkätundersökning under våren 2017”, <https://www.open-doors.se/for-foljda-kristna/flyktingrapport-2017/>

⁴⁹⁸ Deutsche Welle. “Attacks on Christians in German refugee shelters condemned”, <https://www.dw.com/en/attacks-on-christians-in-german-refugee-shelters-condemned/a-19248193>

cross so that it is visible if he wants to keep his health.”⁴⁹⁹ Furthermore, almost every fourth person in the report describes incidents where the perpetrators are translators and interpreters employed by the authorities. “When the Muslim staff worked alone in the accommodation (with-out other staff), they looked at me strangely, treated me unfairly, spread untruths, made fun of me and froze me out. Their behavior was volatile and unpredictable. Sometimes they were kind to me and sometimes they were mean. This spread to the whole staff group. Even the manager of the accommodation was one of those who bullied me,” says one person in the report.⁵⁰⁰

Despite the extent of the alarming data, the Open Doors investigation was poorly received by the media and politicians. In particular, the grave information that employees are persecuting people in need of protection should have led to demands from the media and human rights organizations for an immediate investigation by a relevant authority. During the parliamentary question time on February 25, 2016, Maria Abrahamsson (M) asked the then Minister of Culture and Democracy Alice Bah Kuhnke (MP) what concrete measures the government would take to “stop this type of persecution in our Swedish asylum centers”.⁵⁰¹ Bah Kuhnke replied that an action plan was on the way:

We are working on an action plan. Together with Minister of Justice Morgan Johansson and Minister for Home Affairs Anders Ygeman, we will develop concrete measures for how we will work and handle this issue in the centres, but also outside the centres. This is as concrete as it gets.⁵⁰²

A few years later, I contacted the Ministry of Culture to ask for a copy of the action plan.⁵⁰³ The action plan was completed on the 24 November 2016, nine months later, with the name *National Plan against Racism, Similar Forms of Hostility and Hate Crime*.⁵⁰⁴ Concrete proposals regarding vulnerable

⁴⁹⁹ Open Doors Sweden. “Religiöst motiverad förföljelse mot kristna flyktingar i Sverige: En enkätundersökning under våren 2017”, <https://www.open-doors.se/for-foljda-kristna/flyktingrapport-2017/> p. 19.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 22.

⁵⁰¹ Parliament. Question Time, February 25, 2016, https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/webb-tv/video/fragestund/fragestund_H3C120160225fs

⁵⁰² Ibid.

⁵⁰³ Email received from the Ministry of Culture 2018-05-24 13:07.

⁵⁰⁴ Ministry of Culture. *National plan against racism, similar forms of hostility and hate crime*, <https://www.regeringen.se/4aee39/contentassets/0be1b45cd781476494e91d92824deb4d/nationell-plan-mot-rasism-liknande-former-av-fientlighet-och-hatbrott>

Christian refugees were not only missing. They were not even mentioned in any of the 44 pages of the report.

Thus, the government's action plan does not mention the threats to Christian refugees (either ethnic groups such as Assyrians/Syrians/Chaldeans or former Muslims who have converted to Christianity). Nor does it mention the attacks in refugee accommodations. This can be compared to other vulnerable minorities mentioned in the action plan. Muslims are mentioned 24 times. Of course it is of the utmost importance that the crimes against these Muslims are highlighted and addressed, but this must not be at the expense of similar crimes against other minorities.

Although the hate crime statistics from the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention, as reported in the action plan, show that Christophobic motives have increased the most (an increase of 140% between 2011 and 2015), this is not commented on. The planned measures mention a number of areas requiring training and research, including racism, Afrophobia, Islamophobia, homophobia and transphobia. However, there is no mention of Christophobia as a phenomenon to be countered within the framework of, for example, the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (MUCF). Allowing the Living History Forum to draw attention to the cleansing of Christian minorities would also be a relevant measure that is not mentioned in the action plan.

The Living History Forum is the government agency tasked with coordinating and following up the *National Plan against Racism, Similar Forms of Hostility and Hate Crime*, and with training public employees in these issues. On its website, Living History explains the purpose of its work: "Through coordination, the opportunities for collaboration between authorities will increase and the conditions for learning between authorities will be improved."⁵⁰⁵ When I inquired, project manager Mikael Öhman Almén wrote back that the work focuses "on Afrophobia, anti-Semitism, anti-Gypsyism, Islamophobia, racism against the Sami, homophobia, biphobia and transphobia because these are the forms of racism identified in the national plan – and that have been identified in our mandate from the government".⁵⁰⁶ When I asked specifically whether Christophobia and Christophobic hate crimes are addressed by the authority and refer to a case where an 11-year-old Christian boy was robbed at a playground in Malmö

⁵⁰⁵ Living History Forum. "Myndigheters arbete mot rasism, homo-, bi- och transphobia" <https://www.levandehistoria.se/fakta-fordjupning/rasism/myndigheters-arbete-mot-rasism-homo-bi-och-transphobia>

⁵⁰⁶ Email received from Mikael Öhman Almén on 2020-09-03 15:15.

(the police suspect a hate crime motive),⁵⁰⁷ Almén replied that they often have “a broad focus on racism”. However, he could not answer whether they specifically discussed Christophobia and Christophobic hate crimes, as Living History’s forum meetings with other authorities often consist of group discussions. In the planning for 2021, Christophobia was not included as a theme.⁵⁰⁸

Swedish authorities are characterized by a blindness towards vulnerable Christians, as reflected in the Swedish Migration Agency’s handling of converts who have fled their home countries. However, the trend is not limited to Sweden alone.

In the spring of 2019, international attention was given to an Iranian convert who was denied asylum in the UK after claiming that the Christian faith was more peaceful than the Muslim faith. The fact that the man expressed his genuine beliefs made no impression on the British Home Office, which deals with migration issues. In its eyes, it was more important to discuss the substance of the statement: isn’t it true that Christianity is anything but peaceful? The agency’s rejection cited verses from the Old Testament as an argument for the its decision.⁵⁰⁹ Already in 2016, a parliamentary report criticized the Home Office for repeatedly asking asylum seekers complicated questions about the Bible and theology.⁵¹⁰ Examples of questions that could be asked was to name the Ten Commandments; how many books are there in the Bible; and the names of Jesus’ twelve disciples. Despite promises of better trained staff, not much had changed in the agency’s handling when the Iranian convert’s asylum application was rejected three years later.

Similar problems exist with the Swedish Migration Agency, which has been criticized for repeatedly asking converts complicated questions to verify the authenticity of their Christian beliefs. Among other things, the agency has asked asylum seekers to explain the Christian Trinity, the sacraments and Protestant traditions in Sweden.

⁵⁰⁷ *Kvällsposten*. “11-åring ränad i lekpark – kallades för ‘grisjävel’”, <https://www.expressen.se/kvallsposten/krim/11-aring-ranad-i-lekpark-kallades-for-grisjavel/>

⁵⁰⁸ Email received from Mikael Öhman Almén on 2020-12-18 09:53.

⁵⁰⁹ Schaverien, Anna. “Rejecting Asylum Claim, U.K. Quotes Bible to Say Christianity Is Not ‘Peaceful’”, *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/21/world/europe/britain-asylum-seeker-christianity.html>

⁵¹⁰ Zylstra, Sarah Eekhoff. “Can You Name All Ten Commandments? If Not, This (and 18 Other Questions) Could Get You Deported”, *Christianity Today*, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2016/06/19-christian-questions-converts-deported-uk-asylum/>

A study by the University of Gothenburg⁵¹¹ and a review by the Swedish Migration Agency⁵¹² in 2018 found structural problems related to the investigations of asylum seekers' conversion.

The study from the University of Gothenburg revealed shortcomings in the skills of government employees and interpreters. "In some cases, these interviews tend to be pure interrogations [...] There is a focus on knowledge questions about, for example, hymns or Christian holidays instead of listening to the convert's journey. It may be about Bible passages or being able to list Jesus' disciples by heart. It should be about what the converts tell about their lives, and whether there is a consistency with what other converts tell. When the Migration Agency makes its decisions, it is based on incorrect grounds",⁵¹³ says Jakob Svensson, who did the study as part of his master's thesis.

In the Migration Agency's own report, the agency admitted that there were unnecessarily detailed theological questions in almost every fifth interview. This is despite the fact that the Migration Agency has previously emphasized that it is the investigation of the actual conversion process that is most important, not detailed knowledge of the Bible.

Several times caseworkers have dismissed the certificates of congregations as irrelevant. In a rejection decision for an Iranian family, who had converted from Islam to Christianity, the Eumenia Church and the Pentecostal Movement were described as "two different sects".⁵¹⁴ In an interrogation protocol, a caseworker objected to a convert's newfound faith by stating that "it is the same God in Christianity and Islam".⁵¹⁵ Two separate incidents that raise questions about the knowledge, objectivity and objectivity of the authority, quite apart from the fact that it is hardly the state's task to take a position on theological issues. There have also been cases where caseworkers have encouraged converts to keep their

⁵¹¹ University of Gothenburg. "Studie: Migrationsverket fattar beslut utifrån felaktiga grunder", <https://lir.gu.se/aktuellt/Nyheter/fulltext/studie--migrationsverket-fattar-beslut-utifran-felaktiga-grunder.cid1541085>

⁵¹² Janzon, Eva. "Medger snedtramp i konvertit-förhör", *Världen idag*, <https://www.varldenidag.se/nyheter/medger-snedtramp-i-konvertit-forhor/369823>

⁵¹³ University of Gothenburg. "Studie: Migrationsverket fattar beslut utifrån felaktiga grunder", <https://lir.gu.se/aktuellt/Nyheter/fulltext/studie--migrationsverket-fattar-beslut-utifran-felaktiga-grunder.cid1541085>

⁵¹⁴ Manfredh, Thomas. "Migrationsverket kallar frikyrkor för sekter", *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/migrationsverket-kallar-frikyrkor-for-sekter/3759332>

⁵¹⁵ Lundgren, Joakim. "Migrationsverkets handläggare: Kristendom och islam har samma Gud", *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/migrationsverkets-handlaggare-kristendom-och-islam-har-samma-gud-1.1099771>

Christian faith secret in their home country.⁵¹⁶ Even though the Migration Agency has accepted some of the criticism and backed down from several statements, there are still reports of catechism interrogation-like interviews of asylum-seeking converts. There has been no detailed governmental review of the Migration Board. Just as in the case of the Open Doors report on vulnerable Christians in refugee accommodation, it was a Christian organization that was able to reveal the Migration Agency's inadequate handling of Christian converts' asylum applications. In 2019, it was a free church network that, together with the Scandinavian Human Rights Lawyers, published the *Convert Investigation*. This reported 619 asylum cases involving converts with a Muslim background from Afghanistan.⁵¹⁷ All of them had been baptized and were active in various churches. According to Open Doors World Watch List from 2020, Afghanistan is considered the second most dangerous country in the world to live in as a Christian, and there are many indications that the situation will worsen under the new Taliban regime. The Swedish Migration Agency is also aware of the threats to Christians in the country. In an interview in *Dagen*, Fredrik Beijer, the agency's head of legal affairs, said that a "person who has left Islam cannot be deported to Afghanistan, there is a great risk for such a person to return".⁵¹⁸

How was this reflected in the *Convert Investigation*? It turned out that seventy percent of the 619 converts were denied asylum because their faith was not considered genuine. The decisions varied depending on the office in the country where they were made and the political leanings of the Migration Court's judges. The report concluded, among other things, that the Migration Agency shows a weak understanding of conversion, which is not based on science, and that the agency's decisions were arbitrary and lacked legal certainty.

Commenting on the report, Beijer rejected its criticism:

We are a secular authority that must make an assessment of whether this is a genuine belief, while the task of the church, and the free churches here, is

⁵¹⁶ Högfeldt, David. "Konvertit uppmanas dölja korstatuering", *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/migrationsverkets-handlaggare-kristendom-och-islam-har-sam-ma-gud/3062084>

⁵¹⁷ Pingst FFS. "Konvertitutredningen: Rapport om Migrationsverkets hantering av konvertiters asylprocess", <https://www.pingst.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/konvertitutredningen.pdf>

⁵¹⁸ Zetterman, Jacob. "Migrationsverket: Vi utvisar inte konvertiter till Afghanistan", *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/migrationsverket-vi-utvisar-inte-konvertiter-till-afghanistan/3809190>

whether people should be part of the congregation or not. And there we probably never meet, because we are different entities,” he says.⁵¹⁹

At the same time, the criticism of the migration authorities’ competence regarding asylum seekers’ self-perceived identity is not limited to conversion and religion. Similar criticism has come from the Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex Rights (RFSL), which between 2012 and 2020 examined more than two thousand asylum cases concerning LGBTQI people.⁵²⁰ Here too, they found a significant legal uncertainty and encouragement from officials to hide their sexual orientation or gender identity in their home country.

The last word has not yet been said on the issue of the Migration Agency’s handling of asylum-seeking converts – or other vulnerable groups. After much criticism from churches, the Government, through its regulatory letter, instructed the agency to report on the legal quality of decisions that invoke religion as a motive. In February 2020, the Migration Agency presented an analysis in its annual report for 2019.⁵²¹ This revealed regional differences in the approval rate that varied between 18 percent and 33 percent, i.e. the same difference as shown in the *Convert Investigation*. “The result is an indication that the Migration Agency lacks uniformity in the examination of cases where conversion or atheism is invoked”,⁵²² was the assessment of the agency, which otherwise found no deficiencies. According to the annual report, the Migration Agency intended to conduct a more detailed review of the reasons for the regional differences in 2020.

In a follow-up report from the Scandinavian Human Rights Association which came two years after the *Convert Investigation*, it was noted that some changes had been made, partly as a result of a number of precedent-setting judgments. Even though questions about knowledge of the Bible and Christian theology still occur, “the Migration Agency’s administrators in the asylum investigation no longer make such high demands on knowledge, but there is an overemphasis on demands for emotional reasoning about

⁵¹⁹ Levinson, Petra. “Migrationsverket försvarar utvisningar av konvertiter”, *Sveriges Radio*, <https://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=83&artikel=7194784>

⁵²⁰ RFSL. “LGBTI asylum seekers are denied asylum with unauthorized rejections”, <https://www.rfsl.se/verksamhet/asyl-och-migration/rfsl-slapper-ny-rattsutredning/>

⁵²¹ Swedish Migration Agency. Årsredovisning 2019, <https://www.migrationsverket.se/download/18.2b2a286016dabb81a186962/1582201496682/%C3%85rsredovisning%202019.pdf>

⁵²² *Ibid*, p. 39.

the conversion”.⁵²³ Among administrators, it is still the case that “the necessary expert knowledge regarding conversion is lacking, which creates arbitrary assessments”.⁵²⁴ The report’s authors also claim that the Migration Agency has not taken into account that the European Court of Human Rights and UN committees have established that a convert may not be expelled on the grounds that he or she can keep his or her faith secret in the home country.

Of course, there are migrants and refugees who claim to have converted or become atheists under false pretences. But this is no reason not to strive for a legally secure process. Maria Ludvigsson, editorial writer for *Svenska Dagbladet*, writes that any “loophole that can help a family or a person obtain a residence permit will be exploited by desperate people. It is a human drive to try every possible route. This is also the reason why a completely legally secure procedure is needed to distinguish those who have the right on their side from those who are lying. This is not currently the case with the relevant authority. Equality before the law must mean that, by definition, judgments must not depend either on who judges or on who is judged.”⁵²⁵

⁵²³ Scandinavian Human Rights Lawyers. “Konvertituredningen and its consequences”, <https://manniskorattsjuristerna.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Konvertituredningen-2.0.pdf>

⁵²⁴ Ibid.

⁵²⁵ Ludvigsson, Maria. “Likhet inför lagen gäller inte för konvertiter”, *Svenska Dagbladet*, <https://www.svd.se/likhet-infor-lagen-galler-inte-for-konvertiter>

The tug of war between the secular and pluralist world

IN RECENT YEARS, the Swedish debate on religion has become polarized. At one end of the scale we find the secular majority culture. At the other is the Muslim minority culture. The debates on independent religious schools, religious dress, sexual ethics, public messages and other values affect all religious communities to some extent, but the focus is on Muslim communities in particular.

The issue of Muslim prayer calls is an example of how the Swedish social contract is being renegotiated in terms of religious beliefs. The dividing lines are not easy to define. For example, there were several interesting nuances in the debate about Muslim prayer calls, initiated when a mosque in Växjö applied for and received permission to broadcast a call to prayer once a week via loudspeakers. Not all Muslims and Muslim communities in Sweden requested a call to prayer. In Ljungby, 20 miles from Växjö, Abdelhak Lahouarichri, vice-president of a Muslim association, said that it does not “fit [...] in Swedish society to call out when it is time for prayer. I am a citizen of Sweden, I must comply with Swedish laws.”⁵²⁶

There are legitimate arguments on both sides of this debate. Recurring and institutionalized proclamations in people’s neighborhood – now authorized to be played at the same sound level as a normal rock concert – are hardly an unproblematic feature in a Swedish context. How does it foster a good neighborhood? What do the residents say? Will it affect house prices in the area? Who wants to live there and does it promote integration? These are questions that should be considered when making a decision. However, it goes without saying that the permit request must be handled. The authorities should not take an a priori position on religious or ideological messages, as long as they do not involve defamation or incitement to violence. Even in the latter case, it can be difficult to make clear assessments without hindsight – and in the worst case, it may be too late.

By coincidence, I was stading outside the mosque in the Araby district of Växjö at 13:03 on May 25, 2018, when the first prayer call was to be made. About ten police officers were posted with about fifty curious spectators on the other side of the road. The newly formed party Alternative for Sweden held a counter-demonstration elsewhere in Växjö, but there were no

⁵²⁶ Persson, Anna Karolina. “Böneutrop tillåts i Växjö”, *Småläningen*, <https://www.smalanningen.se/artikel/boneutrop-tillats-i-vaxjo>

disturbances outside the mosque. When I talked to other spectators, I was met with a mixed bag of opinions. Some found the call to prayer problematic, others accepted it. The sound volume itself – according to the permit a maximum of 110 decibels – reminded me of a platform announcement at a train station. It was loud enough that residents in the nearby residential area could not help but hear the recurring calls to prayer. Whether this is an acceptable sound element in everyday life is difficult to judge, but it is true that it was hardly welcomed by everyone. Political and religious proclamations regularly made outside one's home are probably perceived as a problem by many, even by some who agree with the message. I am a Christian and happily proclaim the Nicene Creed with the members of my congregation, but would hardly want it played outside my window every Sunday morning. Similarly, a committed leftist would surely tire of hearing the Internationale every Monday morning on the way to work. And what secular humanist wants to hear a lecture by Richard Dawkins played in the lunchroom at his workplace five days a week?

Freedom of religion and expression means something else, for example that we all have to accept that we have to face messages we don't like.

A society where majority approval is required may reduce some friction, but it is hardly free. It requires a constant balancing act between pragmatism and principle. The method includes civil discussions about conflicting goals and impact assessments of both arguments and political decisions. How do we create an inclusive society where we consider both the pragmatic and the principled? Government inquiries usually guarantee that we take major societal changes seriously. When discussing the role of religion in society, we no longer seem to be able to rely on this body. Categorical statements such as "religion is a positive force" or "religion is a dangerous force" follow each other without any distinctions that take seriously what is meant by "positive", "negative" or "neutral" expressions of religiosity. What is meant when representatives of different faiths want to see more Christian, Muslim or secular values permeating society? Such views and their formulations mean different things to different people. The term 'Muslim values' obviously means something positive more to a Muslim than to a Christian. Similarly, the term "Christian values" sounds more positive to a Christian than to a secular person. But these clear-cut observations become much murkier when the concepts are more sweeping and the recipients less well-defined. The debate on the role of religion in society requires far greater objectivity, analysis and empiricism than it has so far shown. Without greater precision, "religion is a positive force in society" is just as meaningless a statement as "religion is a harmful element in society".

In the anthology *Religionen i demokratin: Ett politisk dilemmas återkomst* (2013), Eli Göndör discusses the need for balanced distinctions between the specific beliefs of different faiths in an increasingly pluralistic society:

The dividing line between the secular and the religious is no longer sustainable due to the evolution of religion and religious practice [...] While remaining vigilant against religious expressions that seek to limit liberal democracy or the values on which it is based, the dividing line should rather be drawn between those who are against and those who are for secular liberal democracy and its values. This is regardless of whether these forces are religious or secular.⁵²⁷

Göndör is right that the distinctions need to be made clearer. If faith has previously been described as an asset, today it tends to be described as a problem to be dealt with – without clarifying what is problematic. In Gothenburg, the consequence was that municipal subsidies for children's and youth activities were withdrawn because a Christian scout corps ended up in the same category as violent Islamism – both constituted “religious activities”.⁵²⁸

Similar perspectives are found in other municipalities, albeit with different motivations. In Härnösand, associations and organizations have been offered the opportunity to apply for financial support to create free summer activities for children and young people on the condition that they are “free of religious elements”.⁵²⁹ The activities are intended to promote integration and create new contact areas for children and young people from different social backgrounds, something that churches and other religious communities contributed to long before the 2015 refugee crisis. Most churches' activities are motivated by common decency – like any sports club – but also by theological convictions. It therefore seems odd to ask for the results of the contribution of religious actors on the one hand, and to disqualify activities whose religious values justify their contribution to integration and encounters between different groups of children and young people on the other. Christian Mølk, who has shown great commitment to refugees, writes on his Twitter account:

⁵²⁷ Göndör, Eli (red.) *Religion in democracy: The return of a political dilemma*. (Timbro förlag 2013) p. 168

⁵²⁸ Ottestig, Johannes. “Lättare för scouter i Göteborg att få bidrag igen”, *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/lattare-for-scouter-i-goteborg-att-fa-bidrag-igen/3556803>

⁵²⁹ Christian Mølk's Twitter account (@christianmolk) at 16:47 on May 8, 2018, <https://twitter.com/christianmolk/status/993864885367910400?s=20>

The [municipality] knows that we churches are good at certain things, such as [sic!] integration, and wants our help, but it must be on their terms. They probably mean well, but it's a bit strange. If they want our help, they must also accept us.⁵³⁰

Several municipalities in Skåne have also discussed association subsidies, with the result that churches and religious organizations, among others, have been asked to contribute to integration and meaningful meeting places. In Simrishamn, grants to organizations on political or religious grounds were withdrawn at the beginning of 2021.

“Lotta Hildebrand (L), chairman of the culture and leisure board, tells *Dagen* that the committee had wanted to modernize its rules and clarify the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as a basis for values.

It is not that the board considers that political and religious organizations do not make socially useful and worthwhile contributions, she says. But we have prioritized associations that do not have the possibility of funding from other sources and that have a neutral activity.”⁵³¹

It is somewhat ironic that a municipality on the one hand wants to clarify the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as a value basis, and on the other hand prioritizes activities “that have a neutral activity”. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is hardly a value-neutral document.

Politicians and opinion leaders are also increasingly talking about the need to protect secular society and place religion exclusively in the private sphere. In a comment to TT News Agency on the subject of Muslim prayer calls, Anna Tenje (M), chairman of the municipal council in Växjö, certainly presents a pragmatic argument against prayer calls: that she wants to counteract tensions in society. Then she adds: “I like the secular society and am happy to defend it.”⁵³² This is hardly the only example of how a secular view of society is elevated to a political program. When the Social Democrats went to the polls in 2018 to ban denominational independent schools, the then Minister of Civil Affairs Ardan Shekarabi (S) said in *Agenda*: “We believe in a secular society, where religion is essentially private and the role of religion in public life is limited.”⁵³³

⁵³⁰ Christian Mølk's Twitter account (@christianmolk) kl 17:44 on May 8, 2018, <https://twitter.com/christianmolk/status/993879374289100801>

⁵³¹ Österberg, Thomas. “Skånska kommuner drar in bidrag till kyrkor”, *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/skanska-kommuner-drar-in-bidrag-till-kyrkor/3762355>

⁵³² TT. “Anna Tenje (M): ‘Jag beklagar polisens beslut’”, *SVT Nyheter*, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/smaland/tenje-m-jag-beklagar-polisens-beslut>

⁵³³ *SVT Agenda*, March 18, 2018, <https://www.svtplay.se/video/17322286/agenda/agenda-18-mar-21-15-1>

This is a very problematic development for an open and free society. In fact, the belief in a secular society is itself an expression of a worldview. Society is much larger than the state and is characterized by a variety of beliefs. Talking about the inviolable value of all people and human rights is also an expression of a worldview. They are abstract ideas that we profess, not scientifically verifiable propositions. A secular public sphere – where religion is kept private – favors a secularist worldview just as much as a Christian or Muslim society favors its worldview. It also means that the secularist state – which is different from the secular state – takes a stand against religious persons and associations in matters of belief and faith. In other words, such a state restricts freedom of religion.

Another way of looking at the idea of politically marginalizing religious beliefs is in terms of the tug-of-war between different spheres of society (state, business, science, religion, etc.) highlighted by the opinion analyst Markus Uvell in a column in *Dagen*, in which he advises Christians in Sweden to offer more resistance when politicians want to “prune and control”⁵³⁴ religion in society:

The relationship between the different spheres of society is always a tug of war. A society is never ‘finished’ but is constantly being reshaped, based on the strength of different interests. And political representatives will never let go; the desire to increase the influence of politics will never be satisfied. Christians needs to resist.

Take, for example, the debate on Christian independent schools. In simple terms, the current situation can be described as being allowed to exist at the mercy of others – for the time being – but only on condition that they do not differ from non-denominational schools. The Christian element is reduced to a mere formality.⁵³⁵

It is well known that Sweden has a long tradition of government restrictions on private life and that it has exhibited a political regulatory zeal that has generated a backlash from a variety of interest groups. In the same way that excessive regulation of companies or universities has destructive consequences for the freedom of business and education, politicians’ desire to regulate associations and congregations will lead to limited religious freedom. This is what sociologist Hans L. Zetterberg referred in his research to the need for balance between different spheres of society, so

⁵³⁴ Uvell, Markus. “Svensk kristenhet måste våga bjuda mer motstånd”, *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/gastkronikor/svensk-kristenhet-maste-vaga-bjuda-mer-motstand/3847981>

⁵³⁵ *Ibid.*

that no sphere becomes dominant at the expense of others. The market must not overpower politics. Politics must not overpower education. Education must not overpower civil society – and so on. Here, Zetterberg points to the unique situation of Swedish civil society (which includes religious communities), which he describes as the state’s “colonization of civil society”:⁵³⁶ “Life in civil society rarely takes place on the *dictates* of the colonial power; the state does not decide who we should marry, or who we should associate with, or which association we should participate in, or where we should live. But life in Swedish civil society takes place to an unexpected and enormous extent on the *terms* of the colonial power.”⁵³⁷

This colonization entails disproportionate restrictions on the exercise of faith. A more pragmatic approach to beliefs, which are *de facto* found among citizens, is preferable to the religious insensitivity that continually creates divisions.

The question policymakers should ask themselves in the debate about prayer calls is how they contribute to a society where people with different beliefs can coexist. This does not happen through political regulation of civil society. The fact that there are areas of conflict is not necessarily negative, but at the same time a certain degree of cohesion is in everyone’s interest. The conclusion is that principles are the foundation, but the good society also requires pragmatism. Only then can differences be acknowledged and discussed without leading to destructive polarization. In other words: religious beliefs in the context of democratic discourse.

The talk of politicians and opinion leaders about “protecting the secular society” seems to assume that the existence of religious diversity is a problem in itself, that it carries within it religious friction. But to advocate religious diversity based on the notion that all religions basically say the same thing is directly contradictory. If all beliefs were about the same thing, there would be no diversity. Downplaying the differences and emphasizing the commonalities of world religions has been popular for some time. It is a comfortable approach. It promises that we can put tensions and conflicts behind us. But it means that it is not so important to examine and take a stand on the deepest questions of life, which is the very premise of religious freedom.

⁵³⁶ Zetterberg, Hans L. “Civla samhället, demokratin och välfärdsstaten” in Lars Trädgårdh (ed), *Civilt samhälle kontra offentlig sektor*, SNS förlag, Stockholm, <http://zetterberg.org/Papers/ppr1995c.html#:~:text=Civla%20samh%C3%A4llet%2C%20demokratin%20och%20v%C3%A4lf%C3%A4rdsstaten%20%5B1%5D&text=Under%20den%20andra%20h%C3%A4lften%20av,och%20%C3%A4ven%20i%20samh%C3%A4llsvetenskapliga%20fakulteter>.

⁵³⁷ *Ibid.*

It is therefore easy to conclude that religious diversity and friction itself leads to conflict and radicalization. In order to create a more peaceful society, the state may therefore wish to regulate religious life in general and religious movements in particular through legislation. If religion is seen as a problem, rather than a natural feature of society, it is easy for politicians to restrict religious life. And the greater the religious diversity, the greater the temptation for elected officials. But as Andreas Johansson Heinö writes in a column for *Borås Tidning* on the occasion of Sweden's position in the 2020 world culture map from the World Values Survey (WVS):

“Today, Sweden is more religiously pluralistic than ever before. This is a good thing, not only as an expression of tolerance (diversity is a natural consequence of religious freedom) but also because pluralism has a value in itself. Democratic institutions must be agnostic, but the existence of different, competing truth claims strengthens a society.

Sweden has difficulty in managing the tension between the ideal of religious freedom and the religious pluralism that is a natural consequence of this freedom. There is a strong secular norm, shaped by our Lutheran heritage, with a comparatively narrow definition of religiosity (prayer, personal faith, participation in religious services).”⁵³⁸

That competing truth claims strengthen a society is supported by a 2014 report by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) and the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation (RFBF), which found that countries with high levels of religious diversity and fewer restrictions tend to be more peaceful than countries with no freedom of religious expression:

The presence of multiple religions in a country seems to have a calming effect if they are free from restrictions. Alternatively, if the followers of a religious group dominate and ‘achieve a monopoly’, they are likely to be able to access and exploit state power. What has happened in the past is that dominant religious groups with state power are open to persecuting other religious groups and competitors.⁵³⁹

Brian Grim and Roger Finke’s *The Price of Freedom Denied* (2010) makes clear that more government regulation of religion leads to more conflict. The authors analyze statistics from nearly two hundred countries and conduct

⁵³⁸ Johansson Heinö Andreas. “Mångfald i värderingar gör Sverige verkligt unikt”, *Borås Tidning*, <https://www.bt.se/ledare/heino-mangfald-i-varderingar-gor-sverige-verkligt-unikt/>

⁵³⁹ The Institute for Economics and Peace. “Five Key Questions Answered on the Link between Peace and Religion”, <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Peace-and-Religion-Report.pdf> p. 18.

case studies of six countries. They show that while tensions may arise in multi-faith settings, there is a clear correlation between stronger state restrictions on religious freedom and growing societal hostility to religious beliefs. The argument is that when the state over-regulates religious beliefs or practices, violent religious persecution and conflict tend to increase. Conversely, religious violence tends to lead to increased regulation. Restrictions on religious freedom, whether by limiting groups or favoring a particular group, are thus mutually reinforcing.

“Restrictions placed on religions – both state and social restrictions – are the driving force behind higher levels of violent religious persecution and conflict”,⁵⁴⁰ Grim and Finke summarize. Lighter restrictions, more permissible beliefs and increased religious freedom, on the other hand, have a neutralizing effect on social tensions, they argue. The authors add that religious freedom also has a positive effect on the economy and the rest of society. If religious people are welcomed as part of society, they make positive contributions.

The idea of the calming effect of competing beliefs on society was already put forward by ‘the first economist’, Adam Smith. In *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Smith writes:

The interested and diligent activity of religious teachers may become dangerous and troublesome, only if there is only one recognized sect in the community, or if a whole large community is divided into only two or three large sects, and the preachers of each sect work in concert, disciplined and organized. Their religious zeal must be quite harmless, where society is divided into two or three hundred or perhaps as many as thousands of small sects, none of which can be large enough to disturb the general peace.⁵⁴¹

The desire to regulate polarizing religious expression may be good – to create a cohesive society – but the consequence tends to be the opposite, with restrictions driving social tensions.

⁵⁴⁰ Grim, Brian and Finke, Roger. *The Price of Freedom Denied* (Cambridge University Press 2010) p. 86.

⁵⁴¹ Smith, Adam. *An Inquiry into the Prosperity of Nations, its Nature and Causes* (Gleerup 1909-1911) pp. 135-136.

Independent confessional schools – “poisonous cocktail” or democratic right?

INDEPENDENT CONFESSIONAL SCHOOLS have long been debated, illustrating how religious elements are seen as a problem that should be confined to the private sphere. Already today, religious elements are forbidden in the teaching itself, while education is otherwise allowed to include voluntary gatherings with a religious character. The debate intensified in 2018 when the Social Democrats in their election campaign promised to stop independent confessional schools.

The Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO) quickly joined in. The union’s then chairman Karl-Petter Thorwaldsson posted a picture on his Twitter account with the text: “It is not a right to impose on our children’s the parents’ beliefs on them. We should not have religious free schools.”⁵⁴² A message that created reactions, as Thorwaldsson claimed to be in charge of Swedish parents and to call other people’s children his own. Hardly in line with the words of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights on the rights of parents to “ensure the education and teaching of their children in conformity with their religious, philosophical and pedagogical convictions shall be respected.”⁵⁴³

The outward face of the Social Democrats’ campaign against independent confessional schools was then Minister of Civil Affairs Ardalan Shekarabi, now Minister of Social Security. In a video on his Facebook page, Shekarabi said that the Social Democrats “want a school that breaks segregation [...] that stands up for students’ religious freedom, the right to choose [...] that combats gender roles [and] stands up for equality. And we will have zero tolerance for gender segregation in Swedish schools. The Swedish school should be run by educators and teachers, not priests and imams.”⁵⁴⁴

⁵⁴² Zetterman, Jacob. “LO: ‘Pådyvla inte våra barn föräldrarnas religion’”, *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/lo-padyvla-inte-vara-barn-foraldrarnas-religion/9592916>

⁵⁴³ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, <https://fra.europa.eu/sv/eu-charter/article/14-right-to-education>

⁵⁴⁴ Ardalan Shekarabi’s Facebook page March 13, 2018. “Vi vill förbjuda religiösa friskolor”, <https://www.facebook.com/Shekarabi.Ardalan/videos/vi-vill-f%C3%B6rbjuda-religi%C3%B6sa-friskolor/1666078593440214> (last visited February 20, 2021).

In an article in *Aftonbladet* the day before, he referred to his years in an Iranian school and compared it to denominational schools in Sweden “which market themselves by offering a religious education and competition in who can best recite religious scriptures” and promise “that girls and boys will not be taught together”.⁵⁴⁵ These schools even threatened the entire social structure, according to Shekarabi. He therefore appealed to other parties as well as parents: “To all parties that cherish an open, democratic and equal society, I want to say: think again. Think about the consequences for children and the cohesion of Sweden. With my experience, I also want to ask all parents to think about whether you really should put your children in a religious independent school.”⁵⁴⁶

The article did not provide any concrete examples of schools where exercises of the kind Shekarabi warned about existed. The only reference the reader was given was Shekarabi’s own schooling in the Shiite-ruled dictatorship of Iran. Of course there are problematic schools with a religious profile in Sweden⁵⁴⁷ but what relevance this has to the actual majority of confessional independent schools, which have a Christian owner and are well-functioning, is a mystery. The fact that problems have largely occurred in independent schools that were not registered as confessional but as ordinary independent schools, and with a Muslim focus,⁵⁴⁸ means that the prohibition requirements affect the well-functioning Christian, Muslim and Jewish schools and not primarily those that constitute a problem.

One of the most wellknown Christian independent schools in Sweden, also located in Shekarabi’s former hometown of Uppsala, is Word of Life Christian school (since 2018 they are called Ansgarskolorna). No marketing about reciting New Testament texts by heart can be found on the school’s website. However, in the fall of 2017 (the year before the election), the Swedish Schools Inspectorate examined all Word of Life school units and found nothing to complain about.⁵⁴⁹

⁵⁴⁵ Shekarabi, Ardalan. “Jag ser religiöst förtryck igen – i svenska skolan”, *Aftonbladet*, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/a/gProg9/jag-ser-religiost-fortryck-igen--i-svenska-skolan/>

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁷ Olsson, Daniel. “Vetenskapsskolan stängs – blir av med tillståndet”, *Expressen/GT*, <https://www.expressen.se/gt/vetenskapsskolan-stangs/>

⁵⁴⁸ Pihl, Karin. “S-förslag stoppar inga islamist-rektorer”, *Göteborgs-Posten*, <https://www.gp.se/ledare/s-forslag-stoppar-inga-islamist-rektorer.0b675e52-3f1b-44b1-8c63-4c790ee4d4de>

⁵⁴⁹ Ansgar schools. “Annual school inspection 2017 completed – no remarks!”, <https://ansgarskolorna.se/vara-skolor/skolinspektion-2017-ingen-anmarkning/>

Part of the January Agreement between the governing parties, the Center Party and the Liberals was to order an investigation into stopping the establishment of new independent confessional schools. “In recent years, we have seen examples of schools that, in the name of religion, separate girls and boys, barely teach sex and relationships, and equate evolution with religious creation myths. This is completely unacceptable. The government is now taking the first steps towards stopping new religious independent schools”, said Minister for Education Anna Ekström when the report was launched.⁵⁵⁰ A ban on all religious independent schools was also a key requirement for the independent MP Amineh Kakabaveh to vote for Stefan Löfven as prime minister after the declaration of no confidence in the summer of 2021.⁵⁵¹

In a debate article in *Expressen* a few months after the investigation was launched, Ekström and Interior Minister Mikael Damberg wrote how the possibility “to start religious free schools [...] became a poisonous cocktail”⁵⁵² with extremism and radicalization as a result.

“People whom the Swedish Security Service (Säpo) considers to be a threat to Sweden’s security and key figures in radicalizing young people have been allowed to run schools. There are also reports of ISIS returnees being employed at schools. Today, the police and security police can share certain confidential information with schools if, for example, it can counteract terrorism and the fact that people with links to violent extremism are acting within the school.”⁵⁵³ In its response to the consultation after the report was presented, Säpo writes that it “happens that representatives of school activities have links to extremist environments. This can contribute to increased radicalization in Sweden and to the growth of pro-violence environments. It may be the case that persons associated with violent extremism are active in, for example, independent schools and kindergartens”.⁵⁵⁴

⁵⁵⁰ Ministry of Education. “Stopp för nya religiösa friskolor utreds”, <https://www.regeringen.se/pressmeddelanden/2019/06/stopp-for-nya-religiosa-friskolor-utreds/>

⁵⁵¹ Lallerstedt, Siri. “Kakabaveh har åtta krav för att rösta på Löfven”, *Dagens Nyheter*, <https://www.dn.se/sverige/kakabaveh-har-atta-krav-for-att-rosta-pa-lofven/>

⁵⁵² Ekström, Anna and Damberg, Mikael. “Religious charter schools became a toxic cocktail”, *Expressen*, <https://www.expressen.se/debatt/religiosa-friskolor-bleven-giftcocktail/>.

⁵⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁴ Säkerhetspolisen. “Extremister bakom skolverksamhet i Sverige”, <https://www.sakerhetspolisen.se/ovriga-sidor/nyheter/nyheter/2020-05-27-extremister-bakom-skolverksamhet-i-sverige.html>

According to statistics from the Swedish National Agency for Education's school unit register, which the investigation presents, just over 9,400 pupils attended the 72 registered independent confessional schools in the 2018/19 academic year.⁵⁵⁵ "This corresponds to just under one percent of primary school pupils", the investigator notes.⁵⁵⁶ The vast majority of schools have a Christian profile, about ten are Muslim and one is Jewish.

Of these, a number of schools with a Muslim profile have been criticized for dividing girls and boys into different classes and for links to violent extremism. In an interview with Henrik Höjer for the online journal *Kvartal*, Johan Olsson, head of operations at the Swedish Security Service, clarifies that "at the moment it is precisely about violent Islamism and nothing else".⁵⁵⁷ Politicians have also made it clear that it is mainly schools with an Islamist profile that have led to the discussion of a ban on establishment. Even before the 2018 election, former Liberal Party leader Jan Björklund made a statement about this:

Any legislation must apply equally to all religions." But Björklund is clear about which religious independent schools he sees as a problem. "The current growth of new religious independent schools is about Islamic independent schools in our suburbs, and they are aimed at the children who most need to be integrated in Sweden."⁵⁵⁸

Based on Säpo's and the Swedish National Agency for Education's figures, there are certainly hundreds of children affected by these schools. However, it is worth noting that Säpo does not see the proposal for a ban on the establishment of independent confessional schools as a solution. What the Swedish Security Service welcomes instead is the tightening of the ownership and management assessment proposed by the investigation. In their consultation response, the establishment ban is not even mentioned,⁵⁵⁹ which means that their statement cannot be used as ammunition in the criticism of the existence of independent confessional schools.

⁵⁵⁵ Government. Nya regler för skolor med konfessionell-inriktning (SOU 2019:64), <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/statens-offentliga-utredningar/2020/01/sou-201964/>

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁷ Höjer, Henrik. "Kunskapslucka om de islamistiska skolorna", *Kvartal*, <https://kvartal.se/artiklar/kunskapslucka-om-de-islamistiska-skolorna/>

⁵⁵⁸ *Svenska Dagbladet*. "S till val på stopp för religiösa friskolor", <https://www.svd.se/s-vill-forbjuda-religiosa-friskolor>

⁵⁵⁹ Säkerhetspolisen. "Extremister bakom skolverksamhet i Sverige", <https://www.sakerhetspolisen.se/ovriga-sidor/nyheter/nyheter/2020-05-27-extremister-bakom-skolverksamhet-i-sverige.html>

Rather, other measures are required to address the actual problems where children are at risk.

Moreover, a closer look at the report itself reveals that it too does not provide an argument for a ban on establishment. Rather, both the statistics and the legal analysis in the report are a powerful counter-argument.

The inquiry notes that it “has been difficult to objectively determine the advantages and disadvantages of confessional elements in the school system”,⁵⁶⁰ as the question of whether or not independent confessional schools should be established is often “an essentially ideological and to some extent a subjective issue”.⁵⁶¹ This is illustrated not least by the fact that the commission of the inquiry was ideologically motivated. After the special investigator Lars Arrhenius described several significant obstacles to banning new confessional schools, the Minister of Education said that “it’s legally tricky, but it will be possible”.⁵⁶² According to the philosopher of religion Ulf Jonsson, this sent “ominous signals that the handling of the issue is getting out of hand” and that the Minister should not “take the law lightly and thereby undermine people’s faith in the ethical and legal foundations of society”.⁵⁶³

The government inquiry therefore provided a good summary of the establishment ban issue when it described it as “challenging fundamental freedoms and rights such as freedom of enterprise and freedom of religion, as well as to equal treatment and discrimination”.⁵⁶⁴ Such restrictions only occur in societies where politicians see the state as the primary educator, i.e. the view expressed by Karl-Petter Thorwaldsson of LO.

The investigation also notes that it is not possible to lump all confessional independent schools together, as they “differ greatly from each other”. It is “not possible to draw any far-reaching conclusions on the segregating or integrating effect of schools with a confessional orientation”,

⁵⁶⁰ Government. Nya regler för skolor med konfessionell-inriktning (SOU 2019:64), <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/statens-offentliga-utredningar/2020/01/sou-201964/>

⁵⁶¹ Ibid.

⁵⁶² Letmark, Peter. “Så vill regeringen stoppa nya religiösa friskolor”, *Dagens Nyheter*, <https://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/sa-vill-regeringen-stoppa-nya-religiosa-friskolor/>.

⁵⁶³ Jonsson, Ulf. “illavarslande – ministern vill trixa med juridiken”, *Svenska Dagbladet*, <https://www.svd.se/illavarslande--ministern-vill-trixa-med-juridiken>

⁵⁶⁴ Government. Nya regler för skolor med konfessionell-inriktning (SOU 2019:64), <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/statens-offentliga-utredningar/2020/01/sou-201964/>

writes the investigator.⁵⁶⁵ This goes against the image of confessional independent schools as a uniform group and undermines one of the main arguments for a ban on establishment: that these schools are characterized by segregation.

In fact, it is municipal schools that have the most problems with segregation. A survey by *Dagens Samhälle* in 2017 showed that the City of Stockholm was one of the municipalities with the strongest school segregation and 23 of the 38 most segregated schools were municipal.⁵⁶⁶ Obviously, this type of challenge also exists among confessional schools, but as the investigation points out, it is “not obvious that a freeze on establishment can be seen as an appropriate or proportionate measure to address these problems, which should also require other measures”.⁵⁶⁷ The same conclusion is made in a research overview from the think tank Timbro, which notes that “the majority of schools have a diversity of nationalities and religions”.⁵⁶⁸ When I asked Olle Burell, the then Vice Mayor for Schools and Education in the City of Stockholm, in an Almedalen debate in 2018, if he could give any examples of segregated independent schools with a confessional focus, he had no answer.⁵⁶⁹

As expected most religious organizations criticized the proposal for an establishment ban. At the same time, other major referral bodies also objected to the commission’s mandate. *Barometern’s* editorial writer Martin Tunström presented some of them:

The two administrative courts – Malmö and Stockholm – that have been appointed as referral bodies emphasize that a ban on establishment conflicts with other rights laid down in the European Convention and EU law.

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid. Qvarsebo, Jonas and Wenell, Fredrik. “Konfessionella friskolor – samhällsproblem eller mänsklig rättighet?”, <https://timbro.se/integration/konfessionella-friskolor-samhallsproblem-eller-mansklig-rattighet/> Timbro

⁵⁶⁶ Granestränd, Cecilia. “Här är de mest segregerade skolorna”, *Dagens Samhälle*, <https://www.dagenssamhalle.se/nyhet/haer-aer-de-mest-segregerade-skolorna-33206>

⁵⁶⁷ Government. Nya regler för skolor med konfessionell-inriktning (SOU 2019:64), <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/statens-offentliga-utredningar/2020/01/sou-201964/>

⁵⁶⁸ Qvarsebo, Jonas and Wenell, Fredrik. “Konfessionella friskolor – samhällsproblem eller mänsklig rättighet?”, <https://timbro.se/integration/konfessionella-friskolor-samhallsproblem-eller-mansklig-rattighet/> Timbro

⁵⁶⁹ Newmaninstitutet, *Signum magazine*, Studieförbundet Bilda. “What is so dangerous about religious independent schools?”, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4CrgU58CZQU&t=2s> ca 50:35 min.

Stockholm University – legal science is usually part of the legal doctrine – asks the straightforward question of whether control and supervision of independent schools should not be enough to solve the ‘problem’. The reason for stopping is not proportionate to the restriction of rights. The same reasoning for the Chancellor of Justice (JK), which usually weighs heavily in legislative work concerning rights. Uppsala University emphasizes that a ban on establishment should include – if it is to be introduced – all independent schools. The upper court, the Administrative Court of Appeal in Gothenburg, which has been appointed as the referral body, does not support the main proposal either.⁵⁷⁰

According to the *Curriculum for Compulsory School, Preschool Class and School-Age Educare* (Lgr11), Swedish schools should, in addition to knowledge, pass on clear values based on faith convictions, rather than science: “The inviolability of human life, the freedom and integrity of the individual, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men and solidarity between people.” This is hardly something that can be tested in a laboratory, but requires a confession. Some schools go further and apply a form of gender pedagogy to counteract the two-gender norm and gender-based intolerance. Experience suggests that this is more of an ideological experiment.⁵⁷¹

When the report proposes the definition of “confession” as “a body containing confessional or proclamatory elements belonging to a particular religion”⁵⁷² a number of follow-up questions are thus raised. What “religion” refers to is not answered in the report.

It is stated that “there is no definition in Swedish law of what is meant by religion” but that it is “a multidimensional phenomenon that can encompass a number of different perspectives”. Those who “have chosen a secular approach” are also included.⁵⁷³

No school is value-neutral or free from a dominant worldview, whether explicit or implicit. For example, researcher Karin Kittelmann Flensner has shown that religious education in municipal schools is characterized by an atheist norm. After conducting observations in three large municipal

⁵⁷⁰ Tunström, Martin. “Stopp, stopp och stopp för regeringens stopplag”, *Barometern*, <https://nxt.barometern.se/ledare/stopp-stopp-och-stopp-for-regeringens-stopplag/>

⁵⁷¹ Olof Edsinger. *When the minority takes the majority hostage*, SEA 2015.

⁵⁷² Government. *Nya regler för skolor med konfessionell-inriktning* (SOU 2019:64), <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/statens-offentliga-utredningar/2020/01/sou-201964/>

⁵⁷³ *Ibid.*

secondary schools during the 2011-2012 academic year, where she followed 13 teachers teaching 24 different classes, she concluded:

Being religious was presented in the lessons as being difficult to reconcile with being a modern, rational, individualistic and independently thinking person. In contrast, taking a non-religious and atheistic position was described as a neutral and normal approach to religion. That this discourse was so strong in all classrooms was a result I had not expected.⁵⁷⁴

As a result, many pupils of faith – regardless of their religious affiliation – feel more alienated in public schools. In some cases, it may even be a matter of vulnerability. A survey by the Swedish Christian Council (SKR), presented in 2020, showed that one in two Christian pupils (48.7 percent of 393 Christian young people from different church traditions surveyed) feel offended due to their faith. In the *Young Believers in Society* report, a young boy Christian from an Orthodox tradition described his school situation as follows: “I was called stupid, got comments like ‘do you believe in Santa Claus too’.”⁵⁷⁵ A young Catholic girl had been told that as a believer she “should be careful not to be raped”.⁵⁷⁶ In connection with a breakfast seminar, the report’s author Fredrik Wenell highlighted other insults directed at young believers that did not fit in the written report:

I was ridiculed for being “so stupid” to believe in the Bible and received offensive comments.

Comments such as being unintelligent and the like. That all Christians are pedophiles, etc.⁵⁷⁷

Looking more closely at the testimonies in the SKR report, it is also claimed that teachers can be the ones who insult religious pupils during lessons. Among other things, a mocking tone is used about the Christian faith in relation to science, with the attack directed at individual pupils and their beliefs. In a follow-up report, *Kränt för sin tro*, from the Christian think

⁵⁷⁴ University of Gothenburg. “Teachers and students often talk about religion as something outdated and alien”, <https://hum.gu.se/aktuellt/Nyheter/fulltext/la-rare-och-eler-talar-ofta-om-religion-som-nagot-foraldrat-och-frammande.cid1340014>

⁵⁷⁵ Swedish Christian Council. “Unga troende i samhället: Varannan kristen ungdom upplever sig kränkt för sin tro”, <https://www.skr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/20200219-rapport-unga-troende-i-samhallet-sveriges-kristna-rad.pdf>, p. 10.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 13.

⁵⁷⁷ Church of Sweden. “Young people violated for their faith – breakfast seminar with SKR”, <https://vimeo.com/392445049>

tank the Clapham Institute, which is based on SKR’s survey, but also conducts in-depth interviews with twenty young Christians from different church traditions, a pattern of what is described as an anti-religious discourse is highlighted both on the basis of previous research and on the basis of the pupils’ experiences.⁵⁷⁸

A common objection to independent confessional schools is that they constitute segregating environments that isolate children and young people from the rest of society. In one of its conclusions, however, the Clapham Institute’s report states that the secular intolerance towards religious pupils in public schools entails “an obvious risk that these groups will instead end up in various types of segregated environments both at school and in their leisure time – i.e. precisely the consequences that the critics of independent schools claim to want to counteract”.⁵⁷⁹ The confessional independent schools thus function as “a diversity-promoting corrective measure in relation to normative secularism”.⁵⁸⁰

Both confessional independent schools and municipal schools are now required to be characterized by presenting diverse views. This should particularly be true in relation to the worldview that is dominant among the school’s students and teachers, which in many cases can be a secular worldview. The debate about independent confessional schools has been conducted as if metaphysical beliefs are unique to these schools, but this applies to all schools in Sweden – even those seen as supposedly neutral. To call for a ban on all confessional independent schools, when the vast majority offer a good and varied education, is to throw the baby out with the bathwater. This is particularly true given that similar questions about the role of beliefs in education can be asked of teachers and school management in municipal schools. No school is value-neutral or without a dominant worldview. The discussion on independent religious schools should reasonably focus on whether or not the Swedish Schools Inspectorate has done its job – i.e. to examine and shut down schools that do not fulfill their mission – before demanding a totalitarian ban on all independent confessional schools. In an open and democratic society, even politicians who are critical of the role of religion in citizens’ lives and child rearing must accept that there are citizens who make choices contrary to their own convictions.

⁵⁷⁸ Clapham Institute. “Kränkt för sin tro Kristna ungdomars upplevelse av sekulär intolerans i dagens svenska skola”, https://claphaminstitutet.se/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Clap-Rapport4_helpdfhemsida.pdf p. 22.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 23.

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 26.

The fact that the last word on the existence or non-existence of confessional independent schools has hardly been said is made clear by the fact that, according to the January Agreement, a ban on establishment will only become relevant after July 2023.⁵⁸¹ Before that, there will be a parliamentary election with an unclear outcome. One of the many reasons that has delayed the process is the international conventions to which Sweden has committed itself regarding freedom of religion and freedom of enterprise.

While disproportionate and inconsistent, the demands to ban denominational independent schools can be understood in relation to other debates on values, where Sweden appears to be an increasingly homogeneous society. Schools, democratic education and values have long gone hand in hand. This also applies to the freedom to think for oneself on complex and fundamental issues. But what happens to the view of democracy in a society that demands uniformity on major ethical issues? These questions also relate to the individual's moral compass and thus the freedom of religion in society.

⁵⁸¹ Zetterman, Jacob. "Inget förbud för konfessionella friskolor före valet", *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/inget-forbud-for-konfessionella-friskolor-fore-valet/3518358>

Democratic drift

In 2019, Swedish democracy CELEBRATED ONE hundred years. On May 24, 1919, the Swedish Parliament decided to introduce universal and equal suffrage, and in terms of voter turnout, democracy is getting better and better. Statistics Sweden (SCB) shows that the number of Swedes exercising their right to vote is increasing, and in the 2018 parliamentary elections seven out of eight eligible voters went to the polls.⁵⁸²

But democracy is more than free elections. It also requires the ability and the right to think for oneself and to voice one's opinion on issues that may be considered controversial. One such issue is abortion.

Questions on medical ethics are almost always difficult. They touch both the deeply personal and the fundamental: how do we want to be as human beings, how should we think about human life and what is a human being?

During the recent EU elections, it was made clear that a dissenting opinion on Sweden's current abortion legislation could be seen as a threat to democracy itself. "We have to choose our path now", as the Prime Minister put it after Lars Adaktusson had voted against making legislated abortion a matter for the EU rather than for each individual member state. Adaktusson's position was perceived as a vote against the right to abortion itself.⁵⁸³ History repeated itself almost two years later when *Dagens Nyheter* wrote that Sarah Havneraas, president of the Christian Democrats' women's association, had been involved in a number of anti-abortion organizations, including as a board member of *Människovärde*.⁵⁸⁴ Havneraas responded that she supported the current abortion legislation and her involvement was limited to "the issue of the society of sorting out people, with selective abortions where girls are aborted but also when children with Down syndrome are seen as less worthy".⁵⁸⁵

⁵⁸² SCB. "Valdeltagande i Sverige", <https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/sverige-i-siffror/manniskorna-i-sverige/valdeltagande-i-sverige/>

⁵⁸³ Rosén, Hans. "Skarp kritik mot KD: Ta avstånd från hur Adaktusson röstat", *Dagens Nyheter*, <https://www.dn.se/nyheter/politik/bjorklund-till-kd-ta-avstand-fran-hur-adaktusson-rostat/>

⁵⁸⁴ Delin, Mikael and Sköld, Josefin. "Arbetade mot abort - nu formar hon KD:s nya feminism", *Dagens Nyheter*, <https://www.dn.se/sverige/arbetade-mot-abort-nu-formar-hon-kds-nya-feminism/>

⁵⁸⁵ Zetterman, Jacob. "Sarah Havneraas (KD): Jag har aldrig velat förbjuda abort", *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/2021/01/29/havneraas-alla-har-brytt-sig-om-mitt-tidigare-engagemang/>

The notion that the abortion issue is morally complicated was condemned. “A woman’s right to decide about her own body is not a ‘morally complicated’ issue. It is precisely this kind of language that makes the Christian Democrats unreliable on human rights”,⁵⁸⁶ tweeted *Aftonbladet*’s political editor-in-chief, Anders Lindberg. The then Minister for Gender Equality Åsa Lindhagen (MP) attacked Havneraas on social media⁵⁸⁷ and the Left Party’s MEP Malin Björk described Människovärde and similar organizations as right-wing conservative and misogynistic.⁵⁸⁸ The fact that the organizations she was referring to – Ålska Livet, Provita and Människovärde – have roughly the same views on abortion as the Dalai Lama, Mother Teresa and the Pope was not mentioned. Malin Wollin, columnist in *Aftonbladet*, likened abortion procedures to going to the hairdresser.⁵⁸⁹

In an editorial, *Göteborgs-Posten*’s Karin Pihl compared the reactions to those directed towards the midwife Ellinor Grimmark, Elisabeth Svanteson (M), who has a similar background to Havneraas, and Green Party member Yasri Khan, who doesn’t want to shake hands with women for religious reasons:

They were all more or less keelhailed. And when they tried to explain their positions or said they had changed their minds, they were met with suspicion. It was almost as if the critics wanted the people in question to have the darkest of intentions. Because it made their own reaction seem more reasonable than it was.

It is as frivolous as accusing opponents of welfare profits of being socialists, feminists of being man-haters or non-feminists of hating women, but it is worse when the accusation is directed at an individual [...] what is the point of an open and free society if there is no place for those who are perceived as odd? Can it even be called open and free then? Tolerance does not mean that everyone should have progressive views, it means being patient with people whose views you do not share.⁵⁹⁰

⁵⁸⁶ Anders Lindberg’s Twitter account (@anderslindberg) at 13:39 on January 27, 2021, <https://twitter.com/anderslindberg/status/1354408774371520515?s=20>

⁵⁸⁷ Åsa Lindhagen’s Twitter account (AsaLindhagen) at 9:50 on January 25, 2021, <https://twitter.com/AsaLindhagen/status/1353626370966958080?s=20>

⁵⁸⁸ Björk, Malin. “Systematiska hot mot aborträtten måste bekämpas”, *Feministiskt Perspektiv*, <https://fempers.se/2021/feministiktperspektiv-se-arkiv/arkiv-systematiska-hot-mot-abortratten/>

⁵⁸⁹ Wollin, Malin. “Kan KD förbjuda min lugg?”, *Aftonbladet*, https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/kolumnister/a/rgnXym/kan-kd-forbjuda-min-lugg?fbclid=IwAR2GRy6hrvqclrCDyTUPQSDKbpEZzw3_Sdwo6k82A159Wjy_19l7ClRXbs0

This is not the first time dissenting views on abortion have been dismissed as democratically questionable. When Catholic politician Tonio Borg from Malta was elected as an EU Commissioner in 2012, the same thing happened. At the same time as some Sweden Democrats received legitimate criticism for racist and sexist statements⁵⁹¹, Swedish politicians described Borg with words such as “a mummy”, “dinosaur” and “homophobic”.⁵⁹² Other opinion leaders wanted to “send the extremist back to the cave”.⁵⁹³ At the same time, the “We like those different from us”-campaign was underway in several established media.

In an editorial on November 6, 2012 with the headline that said “Nefarious man from Malta”, *Sydsvenskan* wrote that “the risk is imminent that conservative forces – not least in countries where the Catholic Church has great influence – will have an increased opportunity to influence laws and policies in an illiberal and downright misogynistic direction”.⁵⁹⁴ A little over a week later, on November 16, the same newspaper ironically turned against “many people’s day-to-day racism. Us and them thinking. This constant categorization where ‘they’ are lumped together and attributed characteristics, often negative”.⁵⁹⁵

When politician Elisabeth Svantesson was appointed as the new Minister of Labor in 2013, *Aftonbladet’s* Anders Lindberg wrote: “If the values Elisabeth Svantesson has previously expressed are woven into that politics, it would be a disaster for women’s and gay rights, among other things” and said that “the Christian right has succeeded”.⁵⁹⁶

⁵⁹⁰ Pihl, Karin. “Karin Pihl: I Sverige betyder tolerans att alla ska tycka lika”, *Göteborgs-Posten*, <https://www.gp.se/ledare/i-sverige-betyder-tolerans-att-alla-ska-tycka-lika.954deb4a-d8bf-42c5-a822-828e738b5bfd>

⁵⁹¹ TT. “SD-topp avgår efter rasistbråk”, *Sydsvenskan*, <https://www.sydsvenskan.se/2012-11-14/sd-topp-avgar-efter-rasistbrak>

⁵⁹² Nummelin, Wiktor /TT. “Cecilia Wikström: Ny EU-kommissionär en dinosaurie”, *Dagens Nyheter*, <https://www.dn.se/nyheter/politik/cecilia-wikstrom-ny-eu-kommissionar-en-dinosaurie/>

⁵⁹³ Swedin, Daniel. “Skicka extremisten tillbaka till grottan”, *Aftonbladet*, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/ledare/a/1kRvWe/skicka-extremisten-tillbaka-till-grottan>

⁵⁹⁴ *Sydsvenskan*. “Mörkman från Malta”, <https://www.sydsvenskan.se/artikel/mork-man-fran-malta/>

⁵⁹⁵ *Sydsvenskan*. “Ett färgblint Sverige”, <https://www.sydsvenskan.se/artikel/ett-fargblint-sverige/>

⁵⁹⁶ Lindberg, Anders. “Nya ministern får visst makt över abortfrågan”, *Aftonbladet*, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/ledare/a/G1Or2J/nya-ministern-far-visst-makt-over-abortfragan>

Perhaps one of the strongest judgments came from Mona Sahlin when, in her capacity as the government's coordinator against violent extremism, she claimed that there are fundamental similarities between ISIS terrorists and midwives who do not want to participate in abortion for reasons of conscience. In a panel discussion, she said: "Anyone who refuses to perform an abortion is, in my opinion, an extreme religious practitioner, on a completely different level than ISIS is".⁵⁹⁷

And when the organization Scandinavian Human Rights Lawyers organized an international conference on trafficking at Uppsala University, where Queen Silvia's work to protect children from abuse would also have been praised, both the University and the Royal Court withdrew after pressure from *Aftonbladet* and the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education (RFSU), among others.⁵⁹⁸ The reason: The organizers not only work against trafficking, but are also legal representatives for the midwife Ellinor Grimmark in her case about freedom of conscience in healthcare. Uppsala University's motto, "To think freely is great, but to think rightly is greater" seemed somewhat ironic in this context. Thinking freely apparently did not apply to the abortion issue.

If we study the abortion issue not in substance, but as a phenomenon, we see a shift in the discussion of democracy from a state system to ideological positions and individual issues. The increasing use of "democratic values" and "democratic values" is one of several examples of this. This can be translated as "these views are democratic" and "those views are undemocratic". But democracy is not an opinion. Democracy is not an ideology. Democracy is a process and a form of government through which different opinions and ideologies are assessed and enforced – as long as democracy works.

In a guest editorial in *Svenska Dagbladet* on June 2, 2019, the political scientist Emil Uddhammar described this shift, in which we are increasingly moving "from procedure to content as determining democracy".⁵⁹⁹ "This volte-face also makes it difficult for the political elites to handle the concept of tolerance, even though it is central to their self-image", he writes.⁶⁰⁰

⁵⁹⁷ Janzon, Eva. "Sahlin jämställde jihadister med abortmotståndare", *Världen idag*, <https://www.varldenidag.se/nyheter/sahlin-jamstallde-jihadister-med-abortmotstandare/195516>

⁵⁹⁸ Zetterman, Jacob. "Så fick RFSU drottningen att avstå från människorättspris", *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/sa-fick-rfsu-drottningen-att-avsta-fran-manniskorattspris/3824324>

⁵⁹⁹ Uddhammar, Emil. "Innehållet har tagit över synen på demokratin", *Svenska Dagbladet*, <https://www.svd.se/innehallet-har-tagit-over-synen-pa-demokratin>

⁶⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

There are several reasons to criticize this change. Of course, a line must be drawn against those who use violence and oppression as a method or want to abolish democracy itself. But being critical of the design of an individual law is something else. It is an expression of democracy as a procedure, not as a set of opinions.

As with other laws, elected representatives are free to express their views on the design of abortion legislation and to lobby to change it in one direction or another. According to any reasonable understanding of the concept, this cannot in itself be undemocratic. Today, three parliamentary parties say they want to abolish the monarchy. None of them are accused of wanting to copy the French Revolution with the guillotine executions. However, this is exactly how many people seem to argue when it comes to the issue of abortion. The lack of nuance is striking.

Similarly, one can criticize the debate on freedom of conscience, the most current example in Sweden being whether one can be a midwife and at the same time refuse to contribute to the performance of abortions. The right to freedom of conscience is closely linked to freedom of religion. They are included in the same article of rights in both the European Convention on Human Rights and the UN Declaration of Human Rights. They are rights aimed at protecting individuals' fundamental beliefs and thus self-identity as manifested in external actions.

In the fall of 2019, the Liberals took a stand to ban freedom of conscience in healthcare and change the term "freedom of conscience" to "refusal to care".⁶⁰¹ However, the right to freedom of conscience is more extensive than the Liberals understand, as explained in ethicist Susanne Wigort's Yngvesson's *Frihet till samvete* (2016):

Of course, the relevance of the right to freedom of conscience and its limits does not only apply to health professionals but to all professions that are challenged by difficult moral choices [...] We may have different views on where the line should be drawn for exemptions from duties within a profession, but leaving conscientious beliefs or conflicts of conscience outside the professional role risks creating a cynical and mechanical working life.⁶⁰²

The position that freedom of conscience is not equal to refusal to work is a union regulated position for journalists, who have the right to refrain from tasks that is contrary to their convictions. In paragraph 3.3 of the Swedish

⁶⁰¹ Holm, Kerstin. "Liberalerna: Ersätt 'samvetsfrihet' med vårdvägran", *SVT Nyheter*, <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/inrikes/liberalerna-slopa-samvetsfrihet-och-ersatt-med-vardvagan>

⁶⁰² Wigorts Yngvesson, Susanne. *Rätten till samvete* (Timbro förlag 2016) p. 26.

Union of Journalists' collective labour agreement for editorial staff states: "Employees may not be required to perform tasks that are humiliating or contrary to his or her beliefs."⁶⁰³ In most areas, conscience is an asset of the employee. Speaking of the reactions to midwives' right to freedom of conscience, Wigorts Yngvesson notes that it is "interesting that opinion leaders and the public can simultaneously expect staff in other fields to act according to their conscience".⁶⁰⁴ For example, the motion of MP's Gustav Fridolin and Yvonne Ruwaida from the Green Party in 2003 on "the right to conscientious objection to allow people to refuse to perform work tasks"⁶⁰⁵ after a postal worker refused to distribute election advertising from a party associated with racist views. Moreover, the right to refrain from participating in abortion on ethical or religious grounds was already foreseen both in the preparatory work of the abortion legislation⁶⁰⁶ and in the government bill.⁶⁰⁷

Given that abortion is a moral dilemma for many people, it is hardly liberal to let the state demand uniformity on this issue. Or as a former gynecologist, who has participated in several abortions, wrote in a letter to journalist Paulina Neuding, formerly of *NEO magazine*, which she was allowed to publish in a blog post:

I myself have not suffered from any serious conscientious objections, but I think that society as a whole takes the problem far too lightly – in a false way. Everything is presented as so unproblematic – 'the procedure takes 5 minutes and you sleep the whole time and can go home afterwards'. But as a gynecologist you sometimes come into contact with patients' emotional problems [...] The problem with our society is that we try to alleviate the moral dilemma. But society should not alleviate the moral dilemma but make people recognize it.⁶⁰⁸

⁶⁰³ Journalistförbundet. Swedish Union of Journalists: Collective agreement for editorial staff 2020-2023, https://www.sjf.se/system/files/2021-03/medieftg-dag-spress-journa-listforb-6593-2011_1.pdf p. 18.

⁶⁰⁴ Wigorts Yngvesson (2016) p. 21.

⁶⁰⁵ Parliament. Ecological self-defense and conscientious objection. Motion 2003/04:Ju275 by Gustav Fridolin and Yvonne Ruwaida (mp), https://www.riksda.gen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/motion/ekologiskt-nodvarn-och-samvets-vagran_GRO2Ju275

⁶⁰⁶ Fahlbeck, Reinhold. "Samvetsfrihet finns redan i abortlagen", *Svenska Dagbladet*, <https://www.svd.se/a/fe691f42-c4e3-3120-9910-25300e4597d7/samvetsfrihet-finns-redan-i-abortlagen>

⁶⁰⁷ Parliament. Kungl. Maj:ts proposition med förslag till abortlag, m. m. (Prop. 1974:70), <https://data.riksdagen.se/fil/EAEA39A2-89DD-44EB-AA60-8E9B-C34E7A6C> pp. 76-77.

⁶⁰⁸ Neuding, Paulina. "I have participated in hundreds of abortions", *NEO blog*, <https://magasinetneo.se/blogg/2014/2/>

If you follow the debate on freedom of conscience for health professionals, you will soon notice how it slips into the issue of abortion itself, rather than the issue of freedom of conscience. What worries opponents of the right of midwives not to participate in abortions on the basis of personal conviction is that it could be a step towards restricting abortion rights. In an editorial in *Aftonbladet*, Eva Franchell expresses this concern:

The main purpose of supporting such cases is to reduce the availability of abortion and create a gap in abortion legislation.⁶⁰⁹

And in an opinion piece in the newspaper *Norran*, Social Democrat MEPs Evin Incir and Heléne Fritzson writes that freedom of conscience for health professionals is akin to “stone age mentality” and equates it with restrictions on legal abortions.⁶¹⁰

However, apart from the obvious, that freedom of conscience is an issue far greater than “freedom of conscience for midwives”, the background to the demand for freedom of conscience for midwives is precisely that it presupposes the right to abortion.

In addition to the fact that the issue of freedom of conscience for midwives was linked to the separate issue of abortion rights, it is difficult to shake the feeling that the strong reactions also resulted from the fact that the midwife’s request was religiously motivated. If an ethical vegan employed by a supermarket asked not to work in the charcuterie or a police officer who came to Sweden as a refugee asked not to participate in the forced deportation of refugees – it is difficult to imagine that references to freedom of conscience in these cases would have been given as much attention and met with as much resistance.

This tendency to regard religious – in this case Christian – involvement in society as a democratic problem is in itself a democratic problem. To problematize a phenomenon because it can “create a rift in abortion legislation” and link this to the fact that the dissenting opinion is religiously motivated risks undermining one of the most important freedoms in a democratic society.

In *NEO Magazine*, Marika Formgren discusses what she describes as two competing visions of the conditions for democracy:

⁶⁰⁹ Franchell, Eva. “Barnmorskan ska inte ha något jobb”, *Aftonbladet*, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/ledare/a/5d160/barnmorskan-ska-inte-ha-nagot-jobb>

⁶¹⁰ Fritzson, Heléne and Incir, Evin. “Kvinnors rätt till sin egen kropp måste garanteras”, *Norran*, <https://norran.se/artikel/lwp8q71r>

What is the basic condition for democracy? In Sweden today, there are two competing answers to that question. The deep divide between the two approaches to democracy is, in my view, the reason for the polarized political debate. It is two incompatible ways of looking at democracy, rather than bloc political or right/left differences, that has led us to have increasingly feverish discussions about the corridor of opinion, politically motivated violence and vuvuzelas.

One side, to which I belong, says that the basic prerequisite for democracy is freedom of opinion, expression and debate.

Only when all political options have been allowed to present their views and arguments in a free, public debate can the voter/citizen make an informed and reasoned choice in the run-up to a general election.

“It is this view of democracy that leads people to quote the maxim ‘I hate your opinions but I am prepared to die for your right to express them’. It was also this vision of democracy that was solemnly proclaimed 16 years ago, when I, together with other beginners, attended the introductory course at the JMK journalism school. We can call its adherents freedom of opinion democrats.

The other side argues instead that the basic prerequisite for democracy is a set of beliefs. The set of beliefs is usually called ‘democratic values’, or even better ‘democratic core values’, but alternative formulations such as ‘equality of all’ are also used. Only when all people share democratic values can we achieve democracy, and therefore debate and opinion cannot be free. It must be conditioned and restricted so that people whose views differ from the values are not given the opportunity to influence the public. It was this view of democracy that sometimes emerged later in journalism education, when the solemn introductory course had been completed and forgotten. We can call its adherents core valuedemocrats.”⁶¹¹

As a core value democratic view of the conditions for democracy becomes more common, the view of freedom may also change. If freedom is no longer seen as freedom from the limitations of the state, but as freedom from perceived limitations in society, where religious convictions deviate from the political majority, then freedom of opinion democracy becomes a problem, not least for a welfare state with the ambition to take great responsibility for the needs of citizens in a variety of contexts.

⁶¹¹ Formgren, Marika. “Democrats for freedom of opinion, and democrats against”, *Magasinet NEO*, <http://magasinetneo.se/artiklar/demokrater-for-asiktsfrihet-och-de-mokrater-emot/>

The challenge of a growing state making ever greater claims is commented on by Paul Marshall in his chapter in the anthology *Under Caesar's Sword* (2018), which is an account of a three-year research project on how Christian groups respond to restrictions on religious freedom. Marshall writes:

With few normative constraints on its authority beyond the notion of individual rights, the state tends to expand into more and more areas of society. But if religion should stay away where the state is involved, then religion should stay away from more and more areas of society. Wherever the state is, the church and religion must be removed. But aside from individual privacy, the state today tends to move in the direction it wishes. And as governments become more and more expansive, especially in welfare or socialist states, religion must become less and less involved and increasingly marginalized.⁶¹²

In the long term, a state that seeks to replace the role of religion in people's lives poses a major challenge to freedom of religion and freedom of opinion.

⁶¹² Marshall, Paul. "Western Christians' Responses to Denials of Religious Freedom" in *Under Caesar's Sword: How Christians Respond to Persecution* by Philpott, Daniel and Shah, Timothy Samuel (eds) (Cambridge University Press 2018) p. 434.

Freedom and friction

RECURRING tensions over religiosity in public life can be found in much of the Western world, often described as a cultural struggle between religious beliefs and progressive values. I spent the fall of 2013 in Washington DC studying challenges to religious freedom at the *Hudson Institute* and its *Center for Religious Freedom*. There I met Thomas Farr, who has focused his research on religious freedom and also worked on religious freedom issues as a diplomat for the US State Department under both Bill Clinton and George W Bush.

In a speech in the U.S. House of Representatives in June 2013, Farr summarized the religious freedom challenges he sees in the West based on the fact that the U.S. Bill of Rights rejects the idea of a state church where the state privileges one religious belief over others or restricts the free exercise of religion, often described as “the first freedom”:

Today, the threats of such ‘institutionalization’ do not come from any religious group, but rather from an increasingly aggressive secular ideology that does not hesitate to restrict citizens’ religious freedoms if they do not conform to contemporary secular confessions. This includes issues such as abortion, contraception and the redefinition of marriage. For these new ideologies, ‘error has no rights’. Religious individuals and groups must assimilate.⁶¹³

In a later speech before the Senate in 2018, Farr pointed out that alongside increasing discrimination and violence against Muslims and Jews in American society and culture, this secular “institutionalization” continues in the political and legal world where the trend is to “try to silence traditional religious voices”.⁶¹⁴ A contentious issue in 2013 was Barack Obama’s healthcare reform, *The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act*, popularly

⁶¹³ Farr, Thomas F. “Examining the Government’s Record on Implementing the International Religious Freedom Act”, Testimony before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform Subcommittee on National Security, June 13, 2013, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/GO/GO06/20130613/100970/HHRG-113-GO06-Wstate-FarrT-20130613.pdf>

⁶¹⁴ Farr Thomas F. “The Global Crisis of Religious Freedom: the Stakes for America and the World”, Testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee Subcommittee on The Constitution, October 2, 2018, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57052f155559869b68a4f0e6/t/5bb3c1c953450aac93c3f68b/1538507210601/10-02-18+Farr+Testimony.pdf>

known as “Obamacare”. The highly complex legislation meant that universities, charities and businesses – even those founded and run for religious reasons – were forced to offer the ‘morning-after pill’. In many cases, this went against religious and ethical beliefs, particularly those of Catholic institutions, and led to widespread debate. For example, would Catholic institutions be forced to comply with this legislation or was there a possibility of exemption as stakeholders have been able to do in other cases? How would the legislation help the hundreds of Catholic hospitals or orders of nuns that have been providing health care to the country since at least the beginning of the 20th century?

Another key event in the continuing tensions over the place of religious beliefs in the public sphere was when the issue of same-sex marriage was decided by the US Supreme Court in 2015. Donald Verrilli, the president’s solicitor general, announced at the time that Christian universities would have problems with their tax deductibility if they did not adapt to the new legislation.⁶¹⁵ This had a major impact on many conservative Christian voters in the 2016 election and was a contributing factor in their vote for Donald Trump, who could hardly be regarded as a Christian role model. What was interpreted by many Americans as an expansion of freedom – the ability for same-sex couples to marry on equal terms in any state – was interpreted by others as a curtailment of their freedoms, as the state threatened to use economic pressure to force private institutions to act contrary to its values. At the same time, activists had attacked religious adoption agencies and business owners by taking them to court because of their theological beliefs regarding same-sex marriage. These have included individual bakers, and florists who, because of their traditional view of marriage, did not want to make specific wedding cakes or bridal bouquets, even though they otherwise treat all customer groups equally. Of course, in the eyes of many, this is a strange position to take in a culture that celebrates inclusion and diversity, but the question is what kind of society it leads to in the long run if you force someone to create an artistic work that celebrates an idea that goes against their conscience. For example, should a Muslim web designer be forced to create a website critical of Islam or a homosexual bookshop-owner be forced to sell a traditional Catholic marriage book? Or does the freedom to conduct business make it possible to turn to other business owners of the same kind for their demands when it comes to business activities that encourage competition? An

⁶¹⁵ French, David. “Yes, American Religious Liberty Is in Peril”, *Wall Street Journal*, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/yes-american-religious-liberty-is-in-peril-11564152873>

obvious exception, however, is larger companies that have gained such a position in society that they have become a natural part of the basic infrastructure. It is therefore interesting to note the debate around accusations of censorship and political regulation of global social media companies such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. As *Göteborgs-Posten's* Håkan Boström writes, social media constitutes “the fundamental communication infrastructure of our time”, where most “of our conversations about society and politics take place”.⁶¹⁶ The fact that smaller local businesses have conscientious concerns about which religious or political messages they are expected to convey is in this context less worrying than the restrictions on free speech that are possible on social media.

The events in the US further fueled the culture war and reinforced the polarization between conservative and progressive voter groups. As the Supreme Court, with its nine justices appointed for life by the president to interpret the Constitution, has increasingly come to be seen as an arena for judicial activism, many conservatives saw a risk in Hillary Clinton appointing future members. Add to that a growing divide between urban and rural, elite and a growing underclass. Many also felt targeted when Clinton referred to Trump supporters as “deplorables”. That is hardly a way to build bridges between voter groups.

Trump was erratic, crude, contradictory, having changed his mind on a number of issues, and far from the ideal candidate. But at least he was not Hillary Clinton. Although some Christians cast a blank vote, others reluctantly cast their vote for Trump. “In the short term we may lose reputation,” many thought, “but in the long term it will be a better policy for the country.” Thus, the death of Supreme Court Justice and women’s rights activist Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Donald Trump’s nomination of the Catholic Amy Coney Barrett to replace her led to intense debate. Coney Barrett was accused of espousing a patriarchal faith and that her Catholic faith community was the inspiration for Margaret Atwood’s book *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985).⁶¹⁷ Her actual experience as a lawyer and previous judicial opinions seemed to matter less. Neither did the fact that the US

⁶¹⁶ Boström, Håkan. “Kan vi tämja tech-jättarnas makt över politiken?”, *Göteborgs-Posten*, <https://www.gp.se/ledare/kan-vi-t%C3%A4mja-tech-j%C3%A4ttarnas-makt-%C3%B6ver-politiken-1.40573084>.

⁶¹⁷ Trotta, Daniel. “As U.S. Supreme Court nomination looms, a religious community draws fresh interest”, *Reuters*, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-court-barrett-religion-idUSKCN26D2RR?utm_campaign=trueAnthem%3A%20Trending%20Content&utm_medium=trueAnthem&utm_source=facebook&fbclid=IwAR2rZXle7nYG_xyoahXel_by7j1Tvh8xf8HcE105_J-Exv5HVz8vkUIUBLU

Constitution explicitly prohibits religious tests as a requirement for qualification for any office or public position.⁶¹⁸

The American debate largely revolves around the very definition of the concept of religious freedom. Ross Douthat wrote in a widely read column in the *New York Times* that “defenders of the health care reform emphasize that it guarantees free worship, which it does. But it hardly guarantees the genuine and free exercise of religious beliefs [...] If you want to fine Catholic hospitals for following Catholic teaching, or prevent Jewish parents from circumcising their sons, or ban Chick-fil-A in Boston [a Christian-owned fast-food chain], don’t tell religious people that you respect our freedoms. Tell them what you really think: that we threaten all that is good and decent when we practice our religion, and that you will use all available power to force us into obedience.”⁶¹⁹

This forms part of the background to the high-profile culture war issues that characterize American politics and society today. At the same time, it is worth noting that several of these voices, not least Ross Douthat, were strongly critical of President Donald Trump.⁶²⁰ The election of Trump created even greater divisions around religious beliefs in American society. In particular, Muslim and other minorities were negatively affected by the President’s rhetoric and decisions, including the radicalization of political opponents. The emphasis on international religious freedom in foreign policy during the Trump years was positive, and although activists and experts alike express some concern that religious freedom will be deprioritized in foreign policy⁶²¹ under Joe Biden, the current President was about as quick as Trump to nominate his candidate for the important post of Ambassador for Religious Freedom.⁶²² Compared to both George W. Bush and Barack Obama, who took 14 and 17 months respectively to make a

⁶¹⁸ Brownstein, Alan E and Campbell, Jud. “The No Religious Test Clause”, *The National Constitution Center*, <https://constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/interpretation/article-vi/clauses/32#:~:text=After%20requiring%20all%20federal%20and,as%20the%20No%20Religious%20Test>

⁶¹⁹ Douthat, Ross. “Defining Religious Liberty Down”, *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/29/opinion/sunday/douthat-defining-religious-liberty-down.html>

⁶²⁰ Douthat, Ross. “The Only Way to Remove Trump”, *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/01/opinion/sunday/trump-2020-democrats.html>.

⁶²¹ Crabtree, Susan. “Biden Admin Puts Religious Freedom Programs on Hold”, *RealClearPolitics*, https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2021/04/13/biden_admin_puts_religious_freedom_programs_on_hold_145569.html

⁶²² Weber, Jeremy, Religion News Service. “Biden Names First Muslim Religious Freedom Ambassador”, *Christianity Today*, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2021/07/rashad-hussain-irf-ambassador-religious-freedom-uscirf-khan/>

nomination, it is an important and welcome signal to nominate a highly experienced and qualified candidate just seven months after Biden took office, according to most observers in the religious freedom community.⁶²³

Os Guinness, a British sociologist and long-time resident of Washington DC, has analyzed the growing conflicts around religiosity and points out how freedom of religion and belief has lost its importance in the West, and in particular in the United States. In *Last call for Liberty* (2018), he points out that religious freedom was called “the first freedom” by the American founding fathers,⁶²⁴ as it is enshrined in the First Amendment of the US Bill of Rights.⁶²⁵ Historically, religious freedom has played a central role in American politics and culture. For example, the Constitution explicitly prohibits requiring religious tests to qualify for public office, which was a common requirement at the time the Constitution was adopted. In North Carolina, anyone who “denies the existence of God or the truth of the Protestant religion” was banned from working in government.⁶²⁶ One of those who highlighted the very prohibition on requiring religious tests for government work was a young Massachusetts senator in the 1960 presidential campaign, John F. Kennedy, when he was accused of being the Catholic Church’s presidential candidate and thus taking instructions from the Vatican.⁶²⁷ More recently, there are examples of both Democratic and Republican senators inserting theological considerations into hearings. In 2017, Donald Trump’s nominee for deputy director of the White House Office of Management and Budget, Russell Vought, was slammed by Bernie Sanders for expressing in an article his Christian belief that Muslim believers need Jesus to be saved.⁶²⁸ And as recently as July

⁶²³ Ibid.

⁶²⁴ Guinness, Os. *Last Call for Liberty: How America’s Genius for Freedom Has Become Its Greatest Threat* (InterVarsity Press, 2018) p. 144.

⁶²⁵ “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” First Amendment, Bill of Rights, [https://sv.wikipe dia.org/wiki/Bill_of_Rights_\(USA\)](https://sv.wikipe dia.org/wiki/Bill_of_Rights_(USA))

⁶²⁶ Brownstein, Alan E and Campbell, Jud. “The No Religious Test Clause”, *The National Constitution Center*, <https://constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/in terpretation/article-vi/clauses/32#:~:text=After%20requiring%20all%20federal% 20and,as%20the%20No%20Religious%20Test>

⁶²⁷ Wikipedia. “Article Six of the United States Constitution”, https://en.wikipe dia.org/wiki/Article_Six_of_the_United_States_Constitution#Text

⁶²⁸ French, David. “Watch Bernie Sanders Attack a Christian Nominee and Impose an Unconstitutional Religious Test for Public Office”, *National Review*, <https://>

2021, Republican Senator John Kennedy questioned Hampton Dellinger, Joe Biden's nominee for Assistant Attorney General, about his faith and views on abortion.⁶²⁹

However, the central status of religious freedom, even its meaning, has changed and Guinness identifies what he calls “three radical R’s”, which he argues undermine religious freedom: reducing religious freedom to the freedom to worship; reforming religious freedom to mere freedom *from* religion; and revising the meaning of religious freedom to a code of bigotry and intolerance.⁶³⁰ For example, Martin R. Castro, then chair of the *U.S. Commission on Civil Rights*, which is charged with upholding the civil rights of all Americans, described religious freedom in 2016:

Expressions like “religious freedom” will stand for nothing but hypocrisy as long as they are code words for discrimination, intolerance, racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamophobia, Christian domination or any other form of intolerance.⁶³¹

Describing Catholic nunneries, which provide care for the most vulnerable in society and do not want to be forced to provide contraceptives, as institutions of “intolerance” and “Christian domination” is weak.

Often the right to religious freedom is seen as an implicit restriction on the rights of LGBTQ groups. The idea seems to be that there is a zero-sum game between, on the one hand, the freedom to live according to traditional religious values and beliefs and, on the other hand, the freedom to live according to progressive values and one's personal identity. We know that this tension exists; for example, today there is an ongoing debate about the latest version of the *Equality Act*,⁶³² an amendment to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that is intended to prohibit discrimination on the basis

www.nationalreview.com/corner/watch-bernie-sanders-unconstitutionally-impose-religious-test-public-office/

⁶²⁹ Stern, Mark Joseph. “Why Did a Republican Senator Ask a Biden Nominee if He Believes in God?”, *Slate*, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2021/07/john-kennedy-hampton-dellinger-god.html>

⁶³⁰ Guinness, Os. *Last Call for Liberty: How America's Genius for Freedom Has Become Its Greatest Threat* (InterVarsity Press, 2018) p. 144ff.

⁶³¹ U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. “Peaceful Coexistence: Reconciling Nondiscrimination Principles with Civil Liberties”, <https://www.usccr.gov/files/pubs/docs/Peaceful-Coexistence-09-07-16.pdf> p. 29.

⁶³² Boorstein, Michelle and Schmidt, Samantha. “Equality Act is creating a historic face-off between religious exemptions and LGBTQ rights”, *Washington Post*, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2021/03/16/equality-act-fairness-for-all-religious-liberty-lgbtq-lgbt-biden/>

of gender identity and sexual orientation in a wide range of areas, which the current US administration wants to enforce. At the same time, it overrides the right to certain exemptions guaranteed to religious actors by a previous piece of legislation from 1993, the *Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA)*, a law signed into law by Bill Clinton. This is of concern to many religious commentators and leaders, as RFRA's purpose is to protect the rights of religious people at the federal level from government actions that could force them to go against their beliefs. For example, RFRA allows religious organizations to use their traditional view of marriage in employment and foster care placements, but under the *Equality Act* this is presumed to be unlawful discrimination. Problematizing and debating gender identity and trans ideology is also assumed to be grounds for prosecution.⁶³³ Ironically, it was Democrat Chuck Schumer who introduced RFRA as a bill in the U.S. House of Representatives in 1993, where it passed with unanimous support. A companion bill was introduced in the Senate on the same day by Democrat Ted Kennedy, where an overwhelming majority (97 yes votes to three no votes) voted in favor of RFRA,⁶³⁴ including Joe Biden, then representing the state of Delaware.⁶³⁵ Among those who opposed RFRA at the time were Catholic and other pro-life organizations who were concerned that the law could be used to justify a "religious right to abortion that could override state abortion restrictions".⁶³⁶ Today, however, the defense of RFRA comes mainly from conservative voices, although there are of course exceptions to that rule.

Douglas Laycock, professor of law at the University of Virginia, who helped to formulate RFRA in the early 1990s and also supports gender-neutral marriage and other LGBT rights, has described the new version of the *Equality Act* and its impact on RFRA:

This is not a good faith attempt to reconcile competing interests. It is an attempt by one side to grab all the disputed territory and crush the other side.⁶³⁷

⁶³³ Burke, Monica. "Look to States for Preview of Havoc the 'Equality Act' Would Wreak", *The Daily Signal*, <https://www.dailysignal.com/2019/04/08/look-to-states-for-preview-of-havoc-the-equality-act-would-wreak/>

⁶³⁴ GovTrack.us. H.R. 1308 (103rd): Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993, <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/votes/103-1993/s331>

⁶³⁵ United States Senate. Roll Call Vote 103rd Congress - 1st Session. Vote Summary, https://www.senate.gov/legislative/LIS/roll_call_lists/roll_call_vote_cfm.cfm?congress=103&session=1&vote=00331

⁶³⁶ Sonfield, Adam. "Learning from Experience: Where Religious Liberty Meets Reproductive Rights", Guttmacher Institute, <https://www.guttmacher.org/gpr/2016/learning-experience-where-religious-liberty-meets-reproductive-rights#>

In other words, a zero-sum game where no pardon is given to the other side. Michael Wear, an opinion strategist and former staff member of Barack Obama's re-election campaign and the White House Office of Inter-faith Relations, writes:

The history of religious freedom and LGBT rights in the twenty-first century has been almost entirely one of litigation. It is time for the American people to take back the pen and write our shared future together. To do so, we must see, recognize, and advocate for each other. We need to put aside the fantasy that there is a future we can achieve where we get everything we want, or where we all do what we think is best.⁶³⁸

What Wear says is that legal disputes hardly creates a good social climate for people with different beliefs.

At the same time, research shows that there is no necessary conflict between religious freedom and LGBT rights. In the study *Religious Freedom and LGBT Rights: Do they have common ground?* (2019), which is based on surveys from both Gallup and Pew Research Center, Brian J. Grim shows that support for LGBT rights tends to increase with more religious freedom.⁶³⁹ If people are free to live according to their beliefs – provided they agree on the democratic rules of the game – everyone benefits. The tendency is to emphasize one's own freedom from the pressures and views of others, not to focus on life choices other than one's own. In practice, this laissez-faire attitude is not always easy to maintain. In a democratic society, it is expected that people and communities have a say about each other's lives, but feeling that one's own freedom is guaranteed is less likely to lead to open conflict.

⁶³⁷ McCormack, John. "A Liberal Law Professor Explains Why the Equality Act Would 'Crush' Religious Dissenters", *National Review*, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/05/law-professor-explains-why-the-equality-act-would-crush-religious-dissenters/>

⁶³⁸ Wear, Michael. "Religious Freedom, LGBTQ Rights, and the Hopeful Absurdity of Liberal Democracy", Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/religious-freedom-lgbtq-rights-and-the-hopeful-absurdity-of-liberal-democracy>

⁶³⁹ Grim Brian J. "Religious Freedom and LGBT Rights: Do they have common ground?", Religious Freedom & Business Foundation, <https://religiousfreedomandbusiness.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/COMMON-GROUND-LGBT-Rights-and-Religious-Freedom.pdf>

In a February 2020 report⁶⁴⁰ by the UN Special Envoy Religious Freedom Ahmed Shaheed, he focuses on gender, sexuality and equality, and provides a typical example of this conflict. The report criticizes the religiously motivated violence against girls, women and LGBT people in countries such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Uganda. Criminal laws against homosexuality, like blasphemy laws, create incentives for violence, discrimination and marginalization. Shaheed also highlights the discrimination faced by minority women in many countries, many of whom are subjected to forced marriages, and makes a series of recommendations on how religious freedom can still be promoted.

However, the report links traditional theological beliefs on sexual and medical ethics among peaceful groups to the justification of violence against minorities. It criticizes that “religious interest groups engage in campaigns that portray rights advocates working to combat gender-based discrimination as ‘immoral’ actors, seeking to harm society through a ‘gender ideology’ that is harmful to children, families, tradition and religion.”⁶⁴¹

The report criticizes health professionals who, for ethical or religious reasons, do not want to participate in abortions, i.e. freedom of conscience, which is already guaranteed by national legislation in a number of countries. The UN report thus takes a direct position on an issue that many consider to be a difficult ethical dilemma.

Ahmed Shaheed further writes that “some religious institutions promote and uphold interpretations of religious beliefs that encourage gender-based violence and discrimination against women, girls and LGBT people in the form of physical, sexual and psychological harm.”⁶⁴²

Shaheed’s important report is not unproblematic. “Psychological harm” is an ambiguous concept that risks blurring the line between real attacks on the one hand and open and free debate on the other. Does “psychological harm” mean feeling that you have been violated? If so, what protection can be claimed against real or perceived violations? How to distinguish between real and perceived violations? We have seen how such questions can also lead to a narrower corridor of opinion when it comes to open and free debate on ethical issues. This is evident when Shaheed

⁶⁴⁰ Shaheed, Ahmed. Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief: “Report on freedom of religion or belief and gender equality”, United Nations Human Rights Office Of The High Commissioner, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/FreedomReligion/Pages/ReportGenderEquality.aspx>

⁶⁴¹ Ibid.

⁶⁴² Ibid.

argues that “it is difficult to justify accommodation of religious beliefs when the consequences are discrimination and harm to others, especially to groups that have been discriminated against and marginalized for a long time”.⁶⁴³ Again, it is important that concepts such as “discrimination” and “harm” are given a clear meaning. If broad and disparate interpretations are allowed, there is a risk that strong but reasonable differences of opinion will be categorized as “discrimination” and “harm”, which in turn may lead to restrictions on free and open debate.

The conflict between the values of secular society and religious beliefs on ethical issues knows no geographical boundaries. It constitutes one of the great issues of our time in the common effort of all of us to live together in mutual respect despite deep and different convictions. We must all demand more of ourselves to become as good as possible at disagreeing in a civilized way.

⁶⁴³ *Ibid.*

The last temptation of the liberation project

A REQUIREMENT FOR disagreeing in a civilized way is a functioning democratic ecosystem that is updated by each new generation. It is not created and maintained by itself. This is very much the case for religious freedom, which is a litmus test for a democratic and open society. In the Diversity Barometer 2020 survey by the University of Gävle, 82 percent of Swedes agree with the statement: “Religious affiliation, regardless of religion, is a private matter that should not affect the work situation.”⁶⁴⁴ Only nine percent disagree with this statement. The most recent surveys were conducted in 2018 and 2016, when 85 and 82 percent respectively agreed with the statement. The situation thus appears to be stable, with a decline of three percentage points from 2018 to 2020. According to the survey, “it remains to be seen at the next measurement if this is a temporary decline or a trend”.⁶⁴⁵ Although the surrounding questions in the survey relate to Islam in particular,⁶⁴⁶ which may have some impact on how the question on religious affiliation is interpreted, the specific question is formulated to apply to all religions. Regardless of how the question is understood, it is striking that more than eight out of ten Swedes think that religion is a private matter that should not be noticed or affect the workplace. The Diversity Barometer 2020 summarizes the figures by stating that “it is possible to trace a slight upward trend in deteriorating attitudes all the way back to 2005 when these measurements began”.⁶⁴⁷ In the long term, this may mean that resistance to religious diversity outside the home is increasing.

Commenting on the 2018 report, opinion analyst Markus Uvell wrote in *Göteborgs-Posten*:

“In the Diversity Barometer, 85 percent of Swedes believe that religion ‘is a private matter that should not affect work’. The struggle of religious

⁶⁴⁴ University of Gävle. Mångfaldsbarometern 2020, [https://www.hig.se/download/18.84e037d17401f598762d316/1599642010229/Ho%CC%88gskolan%20i%20Ga%CC%88vle%20presents%20Ma%CC%8AngloBarometer%202020_updated%20with%20non-responsereport\(1\).pdf](https://www.hig.se/download/18.84e037d17401f598762d316/1599642010229/Ho%CC%88gskolan%20i%20Ga%CC%88vle%20presents%20Ma%CC%8AngloBarometer%202020_updated%20with%20non-responsereport(1).pdf) p. 48.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁶ Although Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism are mentioned in a number of questions, specific issues such as prayer calls from mosques, full veiling and Islamic independent schools are given the most attention.

⁶⁴⁷ Diversity Barometer 2020, p. 5.

minorities to live according to their own faith is reduced to a hobby, something to be silenced so that no one takes offense.”⁶⁴⁸

He continues:

This stance appeared in all its puffed up confidence when the Center Party’s general assembly recently demanded that Sweden should be the only country in the world to ban male circumcision. A 3,000-year-old tradition, crucial to the Jewish faith, was dismissed as ‘outdated’ and ‘anti-liberal’.⁶⁴⁹

Uvell refers to the Center Party’s general assembly’s decision in the fall of 2019, when a majority voted for the party to work for a ban on circumcision of boys that is not done for medical reasons. However, the party leadership was critical and warned that it would be perceived as the party wanting to ban Judaism and Islam. Ironically, the decision came just a day after party leader Annie Lööf wrote on Twitter that the Center Party “will continue to stand up for an open, liberal and tolerant society”.⁶⁵⁰

Dana Pourkomeylian, who was then a representative of the Centre Party’s youth organization (CUF) but later left the party, was a strong proponent of the circumcision ban. For her, it was a “liberal matter of principle”.⁶⁵¹ For Jews and Muslims, the Center Party’s position hardly meant a quest for an “open, liberal and tolerant society”.

The argument seems to be based on a specific view of liberalism, described by the political thinker Isaiah Berlin as a distorted form of positive freedom. This echoes what has been described above as characteristic of core value-democrats. The effort to free people from perceived limitations can lead to oppression, as Berlin emphasizes:

This makes it easy for me to imagine that I could exert coercion on others for their own sake, in their interest, not mine. I then claim to know what they really need better than they know it themselves. What this means at

⁶⁴⁸ Uvell, Markus. “Mångkultur är inget museum”, *Göteborgs-Posten*, <https://www.gp.se/ledare/gastkolumn/mangkultur-ar-inget-museum.56c113e4-3250-4f35-80cb-499ae79c4978>

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁰ Annie Lööfs Twitter account (@annieloof) at 8:44 on September 27, 2019, <https://twitter.com/annieloof/status/1177474099066503168>

⁶⁵¹ Rosén, Hans and Bolling, Anders. “Centern vill förbjuda religiös omskärelse”, *Dagens Nyheter*, <https://www.dn.se/nyheter/politik/centern-vill-forbjuda-religios-omskarelse/>

most is that they would not resist me if they were rational and wise like me and understood their own best interests as I do.⁶⁵²

If one believes that people's free choice prevents them from acting according to what is really "their latent rational will",⁶⁵³ that their choices keep them in their "unenlightened state",⁶⁵⁴ then one can see coercion as justified. It is this overemphasis on positive freedom that sometimes leads some liberals, in their commitment to progressive values, to totalitarianism. Hence the debates on, for example, veil bans, religious free schools and freedom of conscience. Author Lars Anders Johansson writes about this in an article in the online magazine *Kompass magasin*:

If the first form of liberalism saw the role of politics as safeguarding individual rights and freedoms through a framework of institutions, the second form of liberalism takes a more activist view of the role of politics.

From this liberal perspective, people do not understand their own best interests and the coercive power of politics must be used to enforce the rationalist agenda. This is the basis for the seeming paradox that people who call themselves liberal are often the most likely to want to control people's private lives.⁶⁵⁵

Johansson exemplifies how in the "so-called culture war issues [...] we have repeatedly seen liberals take a stand for progressive positions against fundamental liberal principles [...] The fight against religion in society has been considered more important than the fight for religious freedom, as in the case of independent confessional schools."⁶⁵⁶

It is not surprising, therefore, that we are seeing increasing tensions between progressives and those who emphasize traditional values.

Here the pluralist society faces a challenge. Once liberalism has freed itself from restrictions in the form of political oppression, the temptation seen in so many liberation movements arises: the freedom project lives on by turning against perceived or constructed oppressive structures. Values, norms and attitudes that were established prior to the liberation and that persist become obstacles to the ongoing self-realization of society and individuals. While many religious views of freedom have a clear element of

⁶⁵² Berlin, Isaiah. *Essays on Freedom* (Timbro förlag 2011) p. 207.

⁶⁵³ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁵ Johansson, Lars Anders. "Den konservativa vägen tvingar liberaler att bekänna färg", *Kompass magasin*, <https://kompassmagasin.se/den-konservativa-vagen-tvingar-liberaler-att-bekanna-farg/>

⁶⁵⁶ Ibid.

teleology, man is created *for* communion with the Creator and finds himself only in the right relationship with God, the secular view of freedom rather emphasizes independence and freedom of choice. We then see, among other things, how freedom of religion becomes freedom from religion, since those who look at the religious context from the outside see individuals constrained by ancient traditions and beliefs. Thus, another task for the liberators: to free those who are burdened by their own religious choices.

The motive may be a freer society, but it is not particularly liberal. Rather, we see an elite determined to educate the backward.

Susanne Wigorts Yngvesson has aptly described how in Sweden we show “an almost religious reverence”⁶⁵⁷ for the right to freedom of expression, while at the same time the freedoms of religion and conscience are paradoxically placed on the periphery of the public debate.

This is illustrated in the Pew Research Center’s early 2020 survey on support in different countries for democratic principles such as gender equality, freedom of expression, impartial justice and freedom of religion.⁶⁵⁸

According to the study, 96% of Swedes surveyed thought that gender equality is the most important democratic principle. The second most important principle (93%) is an impartial judicial system. Regular elections, freedom of expression, free media and free internet were considered very important by about eighty percent each, which did not differ significantly from other countries. The view of the importance of religious freedom was at the bottom of the list of what Swedes considered very important for a democracy. Only 53% thought that religious freedom was very important. Globally, the median score for this right is 68%. According to Pew, religious freedom “has the lowest priority in a number of more secular nations, especially in Europe, where the French, Swedes, Spanish and Dutch all give it the lowest priority”.⁶⁵⁹

According to Pew, Swedes see religious freedom as the least important democratic principle. How strong is this democratic principle standing in Sweden? In a survey conducted by the European Commission in May 2019, 56 percent of Swedes responded that there is widespread religious discrimination in society, while 42 percent considered such discrimination to be

⁶⁵⁷ Wigorts Yngvesson (2016) p. 30.

⁶⁵⁸ Wike, Richard and Schumacher, Shannon. “Democratic Rights Popular Globally but Commitment to Them Not Always Strong”, Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/02/27/democratic-rights-popular-globally-but-commitment-to-them-not-always-strong/>

⁶⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

very rare.⁶⁶⁰ In terms of both the importance of religious freedom and whether it is threatened, a roughly equal proportion of the population responded similarly. It is not a bold guess that these are roughly the same people. When *Dagens Nyheter* asked the research company Ipsos to investigate Swedes' attitudes towards religious practices, it emerged that the majority are negatively inclined towards certain phenomena.⁶⁶¹ In particular, this applies to attitudes towards minorities:

- 71% believe that it should be forbidden for children in preschool to wear a veil.
- 70% are negative towards religiously motivated circumcision of boys.
- 79% are negative towards independent confessional schools.
- 55% are negative towards people not shaking hands for religious reasons.

According to Bi Puranen, a researcher at the Institute for Futures Studies, who works on the international World Value Survey, the respective surveys of DN/Ipsos and WVS are well aligned:

It is an interesting result that shows that there is not much room for maneuver for religious expression in our society [...] These things are seen as a threat to the liberal values that are tremendously strong in Sweden. They are not negotiable from a majority Swedish perspective.⁶⁶²

If we look at the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention's (Brå) hate crime statistics, there has been an increase in reported hate crimes with some form of religious motive. In 2018, almost 280 crimes with an anti-Semitic motive were identified (53% more than in 2016), just over 560 with an Islamophobic motive (28% more than in 2016), just over 290 with a Christophobic motive (the same number of reports as in 2016) and 260 with other anti-religious hate crimes, such as crimes committed because of different interpretations within the same religion (the same level as in 2016).⁶⁶³ Seen

⁶⁶⁰ European Commission. "Special Eurobarometer 493 Report: "Discrimination in the European Union", <https://ec.europa.eu/comfrontoffice/publicopinion-mobile/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/surveyKy/2251> p. 236.

⁶⁶¹ Eriksson, Karin and Rosén, Hans. "Partier och väljare splittrade när religionsfriheten ställs på sin spets", *Dagens Nyheter*, <https://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/partier-och-valjare-splittrade-nar-religionsfriheten-stalls-pa-sin-spets/>

⁶⁶² Ibid.

⁶⁶³ Brottsförebyggande rådet. "Hate crime 2018: Statistics on police-reported crimes with identified hate crime motives", https://www.bra.se/download/18.bbb8316de12eace227048/1614334407813/2019_13_Hatbrott%20_2018.pdf

over a longer period of time, all hate crime motives have increased since 2010. A common type of crime is unlawful threats and harassment where the victim is threatened with violence either close to their home or on the internet. In addition, churches, mosques and synagogues are regularly subject to vandalism and attacks. Although it is the criminal act itself that is assessed – not the opinion of the perpetrator at the time of the crime – the motives are fundamentally about a negative attitude towards people’s religious identity and beliefs. Of course, this is far from being as problematic as pure threats and violent crimes, but it is nevertheless an indication of the support for restrictions on the statutory freedom of religion.

While the negative attitude towards religious expression measured in DN/Ipsos is largely linked to Islam and immigration, other surveys show that support for “Christian values” is increasing. In a study conducted by Linnaeus University for the 2018 parliamentary elections, forty percent of the population wanted to see a society built on “Christian values”⁶⁶⁴ – a doubling in size compared to 2014. This may seem contradictory, as Sweden is considered by many other surveys to be one of the most secular countries in the world, but according to Magnus Hagevi, the political scientist responsible for the survey, there is a certain statistical correlation between criticism of immigration and the desire to see a society built on Christian values. He therefore believes that the results may be a reaction to the increasing presence of Islam in Sweden. When it comes to the attitude that the Christian faith has a special position and deserves more space in the public sphere, it is rather a privatized form of faith. This is illustrated by Erika Willander’s report for the Swedish Agency for Aid to Religious Communities, *Sweden’s religious landscape – togetherness, belonging and diversity in the 2000s* (2019):

About a quarter of the population believes that immigrants should be able to practice their religion freely in Sweden and another third believes that immigrants should be able to practice their religion partially. If these results are interpreted generously, they mean that just over half (57%) of the population are positive about immigrants’ religious practice, while just under half are negative. Further analysis has shown that the skepticism about immigrants being able to practice their religion in Sweden is rooted in a negative attitude towards immigration more generally. Behind the results there also seems to be a concern that increased religious diversity may lead to restrictions on what are perceived as the usual ways of expressing religiosity,

⁶⁶⁴ Hagevi, Magnus. “Allt fler vill satsa på ett samhälle med kristna värden”, Magnus Hagevi’s blog, <https://hagevi.wordpress.com/2019/03/11/allt-fler-vill-satsa-pa-ett-samhalle-med-kristna-varden/>

i.e. believing in ‘something’ and belonging to the Church of Sweden without attending services regularly.⁶⁶⁵

The practiced religiosity that is seen as acceptable is thus believing in “something”, not “attending religious services regularly”. In Sweden, the focus is often on negative religious freedom, i.e. freedom from religion rather than freedom to religion. It is often perceived as rational to avoid religion. Willander summarizes the attitude by saying that “the regulatory framework used by the state to define religious freedom does not necessarily correspond to the Swedish population’s attitude towards religion and perceptions of the place of religions”,⁶⁶⁶

Thus, there is a clear gap between legislated religious freedom and society’s definition of religious freedom. This fits well with political scientist Henrik Ekengren Oscarsson’s 2013 observation about the ‘opinion corridor’:

The opinion corridor – that is, the buffer zone where you still have some leeway to express an opinion without having to receive a fresh diagnosis of your mental state – is very narrow in Sweden. It is now enough to say that you believe in God. (which, incidentally, 45 percent of the population say they do) to be considered not in their right mind.⁶⁶⁷

Debates about religious versus progressive values in ethical issues often result in accusations of one or the other phobia, which illustrates Ekengren Oscarsson’s point. We do not debate. We diagnose. Views contrary to ours are described as medical conditions.

⁶⁶⁵ Willander, Erika. “Sveriges religiösa landskap – samhörighet, tillhörighet og mångfald under 2000-talet”, SST:s skriftserie nr 8, Myndigheten för stöd till trossamfund Stockholm 2019, https://www.myndighetenst.se/download/18.3907b1d0169055cec1fa7a49/1554715170878/sverigesreligiosalandskap_utskrift.pdf p. 13 and 15

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 15.

⁶⁶⁷ Ekengren Oscarsson, Henrik. “Väljare är inga dumbommar”, Forskarbloggen Politologerna, <https://politologerna.wordpress.com/2013/12/10/valjare-ar-inga-dumbommar/>

The first right and the open society

IN THE WAKE OF THE PANDEMIC, Sweden's democracy celebrates ONE hundred years. In a four-year long jubilee the breakthrough of democracy is celebrated with exhibitions, book publications, seminars and study materials.⁶⁶⁸ In 1919, universal and equal suffrage was introduced in Sweden and two years later the first parliamentary elections were held in which women could also vote. But as mentioned earlier, democracy is more than free elections and universal and equal suffrage. An open and free society requires the ability and right to think for oneself and to express dissenting views. Freedom of religion is crucial here, and Swedish democracy has not yet arrived. How religious freedom has been treated over the past year is one of the clearest examples of this.

In the bill for the temporary pandemic law that came into effect on January 10, 2021, there was hardly any discussion of the significance of the restrictions for religious practice. This is despite the fact that the law entails clear restrictions on fundamental freedoms and rights.⁶⁶⁹ Freedom of assembly, demonstration and business is given considerably more space, despite the fact that freedom of religion is an absolute right in the constitution while freedom of assembly, demonstration and business is allowed to be restricted.

The lack of an impact assessment for freedom of religion also applied to the bill.⁶⁷⁰ Ruth Nordström and Rebecca Ahlstrand, lawyers at the Scandinavian Human Rights Lawyers, commented in *Dagens Juridik*:

In the referral, the government reviews a number of serious restrictions on, for example, freedom of assembly and demonstration, freedom of business and freedom of movement.

Curiously, the very serious restriction of an even stronger right, namely freedom of religion, is almost entirely omitted from the Government's review. The word religion is barely mentioned in the referral at all, other than through quoting objections from the Church of Sweden that the restriction of religious freedom should not go further than necessary. Among gatherings classified as "public gatherings", which can be restricted by both the

⁶⁶⁸ Swedish Parliament. "The Swedish Parliament celebrates democracy", <http://fira.demokratin.riksdagen.se/global/sveriges-riksdag-firar-demokratin>

⁶⁶⁹ Government. "A temporary COVID-19 law". Prop. 2020/21:79, <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/proposition/2021/01/prop.-20202179/>

⁶⁷⁰ Government. "Covid-19 law", <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/lagadsremiss/2020/12/covid-19-lag/>

Public Order Act and the pandemic law, gatherings for religious practice as well as theater and cinema performances is included.⁶⁷¹

Nordström and Ahlstrand note that going to the movies is equated with celebrating church services. This “indicates a limited understanding of the absolute and fundamental nature of religious freedom”, they write.⁶⁷² The importance of limiting the spread of infection is of course completely uncontroversial. The question is whether the restrictions on church and other religious services are proportionate given the square metre rules applied to other premises (shops, gyms and shopping centers). For example, Uppsala Cathedral, when it was open as a museum, could accommodate five hundred people and comply with the square meter rule, but only eight people were allowed to gather for worship when it was open for services and mass.⁶⁷³ When then Prime Minister Stefan Löfven was questioned in the parliamentary Committee on the Constitution about the proportionality of the rule of eight persons in churches, he replied that the government did not want to “take more far-reaching measures than necessary”, but did not explain the reasoning behind it.⁶⁷⁴ Considering that the practice of religion is constitutionally protected in Sweden, the Prime Minister should have been able to give a clearer answer as to why such an interference with religious freedom was made – especially as outdoor markets and amusement parks were regulated separately.

In a column, Catholic priest Thomas Idergard addresses the issue of disproportionality and asks whether the restrictions on religious practice related to the coronavirus pandemic are relevant:

In several countries, there have been judicial reviews of what we are now seeing in Sweden, where churches that previously managed to gather people at a sufficient distance in seated places in a pandemic-safe manner have had to close, while shopping malls and restaurants freely continue to gather many people in large crowds. National courts have ruled in several cases, for example in Germany and France, that such discrimination has no scientific basis. An indiscriminate “force of action” directed against religious practice

⁶⁷¹ Nordström, Ruth and Ahlstrand, Rebecca. “Hur skall regeringen skydda religionsfriheten under pandemin?”, *Dagens Juridik*, <https://www.dagensjuridik.se/ombatt/hur-skall-regeringen-skydda-religionsfriheten-under-pandemin/>

⁶⁷² *Ibid.*

⁶⁷³ Karlgren, Andreas Stenkar. “Orimligt att bara åtta får fira gudstjänst”, *Svenska Dagbladet*, <https://www.svd.se/a/WOzVmj/orimligt-att-bara-atta-far-fira-gudstjanst>

⁶⁷⁴ Zetterman, Jacob. “Löfven pressed about the rule of eight in the churches”, *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/nyheter/2021/04/27/lofven-pressades-om-8-regeln-i-kyrkorna/>.

while protecting economic values violates religious freedom. If faith communities implement the required pandemic safeguards, the state should simply not make demands that lead to the suspension of activities.⁶⁷⁵

Idergard concludes by stating that “if we accept that the good end justifies the means, when will it be the turn of freedom of expression to be curtailed for vital reasons?”.

The freedom to express an opinion is constitutionally protected in Sweden – there is no law against expressing provocative opinions. But the question is whether the emerging demands for safe spaces, “de-platforming” and restrictions on free speech in parts of society indicate that the freedom to express opinions contrary to the majority – i.e. the very people who need freedom of expression – is being challenged in practice. Freedom of expression is being redefined to mean freedom from opinions you dislike. As Adrian Wooldridge puts it in a column in *The Economist*: “According to classical liberals, your freedom to swing your fist ends where my nose begins. For today’s progressives, it means that your freedom to express your views ends where their feelings begin.”⁶⁷⁶ The content of the opinions – not the democratic approach – is playing an increasingly important role.

In culture and academia, the fear of not being infected by unpleasant ideas has led to distancing. Authors have been canceled and teachers reprimanded for talking to people with the wrong views or using the wrong words. Academics who do not apply the required perspectives in their research find it more difficult to receive research funding. One example that has repeatedly appeared in media has been Konstfack University of Arts, Crafts and Design, which has been criticized for being dominated by “post-colonial anti-racism”⁶⁷⁷ with little room for dissenting voices. In *Fokus*, Nina Solomin quotes a number of people from within the university who wish to remain anonymous:

‘It is very narrow, what you can think and express, contrary to the ambition of diversity. One also avoids discussing certain topics, keeping a low profile.’

⁶⁷⁵ Idergard, Thomas. “Att fira gudstjänst och att shoppa kan inte jämföras”, *Dagen*, <https://www.dagen.se/ledare/gastkronikor/2020/12/02/att-fira-gudstjanst-och-att-shoppa-kan-inte-jamstallas/>

⁶⁷⁶ Wooldridge, Adrian. “Left-wing activists are using old tactics in a new assault on liberalism”, *The Economist*, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2021/09/04/left-wing-activists-are-using-old-tactics-in-a-new-assault-on-liberalism>

⁶⁷⁷ Solomin, Nina. “Testimonials from Konstfack are characterized by fear”, *Fokus*, <https://www.fokus.se/2021/06/vittnesmalen-fran-konstfack-praglas-av-radsla/>

‘How many people at Konstfack can I dare to be honest with? Hm. A maximum of three in the whole building. We like to test a little, to see where the others stand. You might mention an event or a statement linked to the anti-racist, norm-critical discussions and see how the other person reacts. If they seem to agree, you don’t say what you really think and feel.’⁶⁷⁸

When I myself was preparing a seminar for the political discussion forum, Almedalen Week, in the summer of 2018 on academic freedom, organized by the Swedish Evangelical Alliance, I invited Konstfack’s vice-chancellor Maria Lantz as a panelist. At first she accepted, but just a few days later she backed out. According to the university’s communications officer, Susanne Helgeson, the reason for the withdrawal was that “the values of our respective organizations are too far removed from each other and the risk of ending up in scenarios where different truths are pitted against each other is too great”.⁶⁷⁹ The question is how this fits in with the basic question of the planned seminar on academic freedom and the free exchange of opinions. Is it not the task of colleges and universities to allow different ideological convictions to be pitted against each other? In any case, it is clear that there is a problematic trend towards uniformity in culture and academia, which has even caused members of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences to react.⁶⁸⁰

According to our self-image as Swedes, we are more democratic, non-judgmental, progressive and tolerant than most other countries. There are no taboos in Sweden – except those that are right and reasonable. At the same time, buzzwords like “tolerance” and “multiculturalism” seem to change in meaning depending on the kind of dissenters they apply to. The idea of Sweden as unique seems to have simply made it difficult for people to be dealing with differences. Why is this the case? Here, the opinion analyst Markus Uvell has shown how our strong tradition of consensus combined with “our exceptionalism leads to obvious problems in managing cultural diversity [...] This will be one of the biggest challenges for majority Sweden in the coming decades. We must agree on basic ground rules that apply to all of us living in Sweden, and ensure that they are actually complied with.”⁶⁸¹

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁹ Email received from Susanne Helgeson on 2018-04-04 11:00.

⁶⁸⁰ Hultman, Lars and Moberg, Christina. “Säg nej till värdegrund som villkor för fri forskning”, *Dagens Nyheter*, <https://www.dn.se/debatt/sag-nej-till-vardegrund-som-villkor-for-fri-forskning/>

⁶⁸¹ Uvell, Markus. “Ryktet om svenskens tolerans är överdrivet”, *Dagens Nyheter*, <https://www.dn.se/debatt/ryktet-om-svenskens-tolerans-ar-overdrivet/>.

One explanation for this difficulty in dealing with differences and cultural diversity is the low interest in freedom of religion – a law introduced seventy years ago and now enshrined in the constitution. It is late for a country that wants to be at the forefront. The historian Dick Harrison considers "Swedish religious freedom to be a historical exception". Writing in *Svenska Dagbladet* in 2018 he concludes that "the sad truth is that Swedes have distinguished themselves for intolerance rather than open-mindedness when it comes to religious freedom".⁶⁸²

We have seen earlier how, according to the Pew Research Center, Swedes see religious freedom, which emphasizes the right to dissent from the majority's views, as the least important democratic principle. This at the same time as equality, which rather emphasizes sameness, finds the greatest support.⁶⁸³ The fundamental tension between freedom and equality was noted by Alexis de Tocqueville in the United States in the 1830s. He reasoned about the actual differences (income, status and education) that will arise in a free society, while underneath the surface there is a desire for greater equality. The tension can manifest itself in calls for authoritarian methods to address the challenges that characterize any democratic and open society:

I believe that democratic peoples have a natural attraction to freedom [...] But for equality they have a burning, insatiable, eternal and irrepressible passion. They want equality in freedom, but if they cannot achieve it, they want equality even in slavery."⁶⁸⁴

The same dynamic is also evident in the area of ideas. We seem to almost reflexively dislike opinions that contradict our own. The next step is to want to censor or suppress disagreeable beliefs. We have a robust legal tradition that stands in the way of such impulses when it comes to the state's capability to stand in the way of free and uncomfortable debate. But there are other mechanisms that can silence the conversation. Public debate values diversity while promoting conformity.

⁶⁸² Harrison, Dick. "Svenska religionsfriheten är ett historiskt undantag", *Svenska Dagbladet*, <https://www.svd.se/a/L0eyX4/svenska-religionsfriheten-ar-ett-historiskt-undantag>

⁶⁸³ Wike, Richard and Schumacher, Shannon. "Democratic Rights Popular Globally but Commitment to Them Not Always Strong", Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/02/27/democratic-rights-popular-globally-but-commitment-to-them-not-always-strong/>

⁶⁸⁴ de Tocqueville, Alexis. *Om demokratin i Amerika*, bok 2 del 2 (Bokförlaget Atlantis AB 1997) p. 137.

Freedom of religion is about more than the right to worship and may also be a way forward as majority Sweden tackles the increasing cultural diversity and pluralism of ideas in the coming years. Freedom of religion presupposes that no view of life – whether religious or secular – is relegated to the private sphere. Politicians in particular know that this is practically impossible in a free society. Former US President Barack Obama expressed this in a speech in 2006:

Secularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering the public square. Frederick Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, Williams Jennings Bryant, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King – indeed, the majority of the great reformers in American history – were not only motivated by faith, but repeatedly used religious language to make their case. So to ask men and women not to bring their ‘personal morality’ into the public policy debate is a practical absurdity. Our law is by definition a codification of morality, much of it is grounded in the Judeo-Christian tradition.⁶⁸⁵

As the principal author of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, Charles Malik, has pointed out, “the value of the other rights pales into relative insignificance”⁶⁸⁶ without religious freedom. It supports the other rights: “The right to be free within is the goal and justification for all other rights.”⁶⁸⁷

From this basic position, which is freedom of religion, follows freedom of opinion, freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. This is the sequence in both the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights.⁶⁸⁸ Other freedoms and rights that are essential to human beings follow logically from freedom of religion. Freedom of assembly requires freedom of expression. People want to gather to say something, but not just anything. Therefore, freedom of religion is a prerequi-

⁶⁸⁵ Obama, Barack. “Obama’s 2006 Speech on Faith and Politics”, *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/28/us/politics/2006obamaspeech.html>

⁶⁸⁶ Malik, Charles Habib. “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” in *Free and Equal: Human Rights in Ecumenical Perspective*, ed. Otto Frederick Nolde (World Council of Churches, 1968) p. 11.

⁶⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸⁸ In the UN Declaration of Human Rights, freedom of opinion and expression (Article 19) and freedom of assembly (Article 20) come after the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 18). Similarly, freedom of expression (Article 10) and freedom of assembly and association (Article 11) come after freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 9) in the European Convention on Human Rights.

site for freedom of expression. What you want to say to others is what you feel is most important – and what the state or the majority does not agree with or even wants to ban.

The first baptisms by baptists in northern Halland in 1848 were a form of civil disobedience. The act was forbidden by law. The event has been described as “the moment of birth of Sweden’s popular movements”.⁶⁸⁹ In Swedish Baptist churches, women had the right to vote 71 years before the parliament gave all women the right to vote. The importance of religious freedom for the breakthrough of democracy should therefore not be underestimated.

In the church father Tertullian’s *Apologeticum*, a late second century defense of Christianity, we see for the first time the concept of “religious freedom”. He opposes Christians being forced into imperial worship and insists on his demand for *libertas religionis*. It was not until 1500 years later that John Locke described man as a free and moral agent. The question is what relationship man should have with the surrounding society in the future. Should he be free to express his deepest convictions on ethical issues, ultimate reality and the meaning of life – however different they may be from the prevailing norm and set of core values – or learn to adapt and follow the majority? In a short period of time, Sweden has gone from a state church monopoly with little room for dissenters and blasphemers to an open democracy with constitutional freedom of religion, but dissenting ideas and ethical beliefs are challenged at all times, albeit from different directions, whether by blasphemy and apostasy laws in their traditional or modern forms. Neither divine decrees nor political core values are free from open and free debate. In Sweden today, there is good reason to remember Tertullian’s call for *libertas religionis*. Where religious freedom is strong, the free exchange of opinions is valued. The reverse is also true. The only way to restrict religious freedom is to cut back on the other freedoms. In the coming years, the first right – freedom to religion and freedom from religion – will be a requirement for a more open and free society.

⁶⁸⁹ Johnson, Anders. “Läsarna och demokratin – ett brev till det läsande Sverige”, Regeringen (SOU 1998:134 / Demokratiutredningens skrift nr 8) (<https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/statens-offentliga-utredningar/1998/12/sou-1998134/>)

Freedom of religion is the first human right. If we are allowed to practise our religion or openly reject any religion, then everything else falls into place. And where freedom of religion is taken away, every other human right is automatically stifled. In this way, freedom of religion is the first link in the chain that locks in and restricts the state so that citizens can live in freedom.

For believers and non-believers alike, it lays the foundation for a liberal society. Globally and in Sweden, there is an ongoing debate and ongoing work for the right to practise and spread one's faith. But how effective is it? And why does the most persecuted group in the world, Christians, seem to be the least worthy of protection? The First Right is a landmark work for anyone interested in the status of religion. It provides a broad overview of current political measures that can be traced back thousands of years. In the debate about the threatened status of liberal democracy, it appears that freedom to and from religion is perhaps the most important safeguard for the survival of the secular state.



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