# Negative and Positive Freedom of Religion: The Ambiguous Relation of Religion and Human Rights in Sweden

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**Abstract** Sweden can be characterized as one of the most secularized countries in the world. This chapter aims to explore the relationship between religion and human rights in Sweden, with a focus on the contemporary situation. The research question is how to understand the relation between religion and human rights in the light of the role of religion in the country. The contentious argumentation around the freedom of religion illustrates the ambiguous role that religion plays in contemporary Swedish social life. Starting out from cases where freedom of speech and freedom of religion have been contested, this chapter explicates that Swedish society often constructs religion as a private matter and uses human rights discourses as a common denominator. Also empirical data on young people's attitudes toward freedom of religion and religious diversity are used, underlining this ambiguous picture. Public discussions on human rights in Sweden follow three tracks: consensus on human rights discourse in general, an awareness of the need for constant refinement regarding the application of human rights, and thirdly a rising awareness of the stigmatization of Muslims which can be seen as a sign of a lack of religious literacy.

Sweden can be characterized as one of the most secularized countries in the world (Pettersson and Esmer 2005; Esmer and Pettersson 2007). Comparative value studies such as the World Values Survey have demonstrated that contemporary Swedish culture scores exceptionally high on values such as trust in democracy, individual integrity, social equality, tolerance and gender equality. At the same time the situation is the opposite for what in these studies is called traditional values: Swedish people score exceptionally low when asked if they find it important to obey authorities, if it is important to obey one's parents or if they adhere to traditional family values. They furthermore demonstrate low traditional religious participation and beliefs. Pettersson (2006) has even suggested that in Swedish culture, values such as individual integrity and self-realization can be seen as the new sacred values. Some authors would further claim that human rights have taken the position of the sacred in Swedish society (Porsdam 2012; Botvar and Sjöborg 2012). This chapter aims to explore the relationship between religion and human rights in Sweden, with

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a focus on the contemporary situation. The research question is how to understand the relation between religion and human rights in the light of the role of religion in the country. This connects to the title of this chapter, as the contentious argumentation around the freedom of religion illustrates the ambiguous role that religion plays in contemporary Swedish social life.

## Social and Religious Change

Sweden has a history of being a homogeneous Protestant country ever since the Reformation. Dominated by a Lutheran state church for several centuries, the modernization process of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries gradually brought increased pluralism: the labour movement, the free churches movement (i.e. Baptists, pietistic Protestants, and Pentecostals) and the temperance movement went hand in hand with increased industrialization and urbanization. Improved education and extended suffrage contributed to further social reforms. During the twentieth century, the state church system was retained but it was gradually opened up. In 1951 it became allowed to leave the Church of Sweden without stating a reason or providing an alternative denomination. In 1958 the duty of the bishops of the Church of Sweden to inspect the secondary schools were taken away, and morning prayers in schools were abolished. The 1960's saw the introduction of a new non-confessional school subject of Religious Education, which replaced Christianity as a school subject (Gustafsson 2000). The Swedish development in terms of differentiation of the school system came several decades before some neighbouring countries such as Finland and Norway. In the year 2000 the state church system was officially replaced in favour of a system which grants the Church of Sweden the status of a folk church (meaning a people's church). Even if 69% of the population remain members, regular service attendance is much lower: 2% attend weekly, 10% monthly. 60% of the new-born children are baptized in the Church of Sweden, 35% of youth are confirmed, and almost 50% of the marriages are carried out in the church order. 85% of the funerals take place in the Church of Sweden (Bäckström et al. 2004; Svenska kyrkan 2013).

Regarding other religious organizations it can be mentioned that apart from minor historic representations of Catholics and Jews, the only alternatives to Church of Sweden for long time were the so-called Free Church movements. It was not until 1950's and onwards that Sweden accepted work force immigration and later also refugee immigration. Of Sweden's population of 9,6 million people 20% have what in statistical terms is called a "foreign background" (Statistics Sweden 2013). This somewhat dubious term implies that the individual—or both parents—are born outside Sweden. Today, Islam represents the second largest religion in Sweden, with 100,000 practicing Muslims, and altogether 400,000 cultural Muslims. Jewish communities count some 10,000 members (altogether 20,000 cultural Jews). Among Christians, Catholics constitute some 90,000, and Eastern and Orthodox Christians, of which the Syrian Orthodox are the largest group, count some 120,000 members. Different free churches count some 300,000 members (SST 2013).

## Religion as a Private Matter—Human Rights as a Common Denominator

With the formation of the Social-Democratic welfare state and increasing pluralism in society during the twentieth century, Swedish society has been characterized by an increased emphasis on human rights in terms of trying to establish a common value base for social life. Central in such an emphasis is the liberal notion of religion as a private matter. The idea in this line of thought is that in order to grant the individual their freedom of religion or belief, the state should favour no particular religion.

The human rights discourse form the base for discussions on common life, and provides arguments in several fields, such as children's living conditions, gender equality and civil rights. From the domains of education, and foreign policy, to health care and welfare policy, human rights can be said to form a base for Swedish society, as well as for many societies. This is, for instance, evident both in legal documents such as the Swedish constitution and the steering documents for the school system (Andersson and Modée 2011).

A greater religious and cultural diversity has come about in recent years, partly due to global migration. Some researchers speak of this development as an increased visibility of religion (Bäckström et al. 2011). They claim that in several Western societies this increased visibility creates concern and unease, since religion for a significant period of time was considered to belong to the private sphere. The historic homogeneity of the Swedish society, the dominance of Lutheran Protestantism along with a rapid modernization, paved the way for a secularization of exceptional character. Referring to Eisenstadt's concept of multiple modernities, Bäckström et al. have underlined that there are specific modes of modernity (Bäckström et al. 2011; Eisenstadt 2002). The combination of a general welfare system, and a high level of female participation in the work force, along with the highly privatized role of religion in Sweden paints the picture of a modern society that is on one hand democratic and gender equal, tolerant towards social minorities such as homosexuals and immigrants, but on the other hand increasingly ambivalent or even anxious when it comes to the rather new situation of cultural and religious diversity. There are both cases of discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief, and evidence of Anti-Semitic and Islamophobic attitudes among the population (Mella and Irving Palm 2012; Anders 2011). This can also be seen in other European countries and has received increased academic attention (Werts et al. 2013).

In relation to the problem of discrimination and conflicts regarding religion in Western secularized countries, the concept of religious literacy has been introduced. The concept contributes a tool for analysis on micro as well as meso and macro levels. Dinham (2012) argues there is a lack of literacy in relation to issues of religion (Sjöborg 2013b; Lövheim 2012a). Dinham has claimed that in Britain as a secularized Western society, both social institutions such as municipalities and city councils, and individuals serving as politicians or public officials often lack the competence they would need in order to recognize the value of religion. Examples given by Dinham are related to when public authorities

cooperate with organizations in the civil society and often neglect the added value which lies in social welfare being provided by religious organizations. This is also relevant in the Swedish context where religion for a long time has been regarded as a private matter. In such a secularized society it will be more likely that individuals may lack language and categories to talk about issues related to religion. The notion of religious literacy contributes with an understanding of this. Further, it is often the case in the public debate in Sweden that the secular and the secularist positions are confused. Commonly these discussions about religion in society pinpoint conflicting rights within human rights, or different interpretations regarding whose rights should be given priority by an authority or in relation to an individual or a group. In the following this will be illustrated with a few examples from recent debates in Sweden.

As human rights in general hold a central position in Swedish culture and society, the official stance of all major religious organizations in Sweden can be said to be positive or even actively positive in relation to human rights. Sometimes this is inspired by experiences from foreign aid and missionary work that these churches have been actively involved in. Drawing on the experiences from work abroad, these organizations transfer their attention to human rights also in Sweden, primarily regarding social and economic rights, such as the welcoming of refugees in Sweden where church leaders from time to time are active in the public debate. Another explanation may be that leaders of religious minority groups need to address prejudices against them and wish to indicate that their traditions contribute to shared values in the majority society.

But the first generation of human rights also has been emphasized by church leaders. The examples here concern the freedom of speech and the freedom of religion/freedom of religious speech. A Pentecostal pastor (Åke Green) was convicted for hate speech when giving a sermon which sharply criticized homosexuality. He was sentenced, but the decision was appealed. The Swedish Supreme Court finally decided to drop the charges, running the risk of losing in the European Court (Österdahl 2006). Of course this court case was highly debated, since there is a generally open attitude in the public debate around same-sex relationships. At the same time, this was an interesting case of principles since it also involved the freedom of the pulpit, a part of the freedom of religion (Lindkvist 2011).

The second example concerns the gender and Islam issue, here exemplified by the so called Halal-television case (Lövheim and Axner 2011). This example also points to the right to religion (freedom of religion), but furthermore illustrates that arguments drawing on protection of women can be used for several different positions in the debate. At stake was whether three hosts of a television-programme on public service television could wear a hijab (headscarf). Both sides in the debate drew on human rights arguments for protecting the women's rights to dress as they wish—including a headscarf—or stressing the impartiality of public service television, not taking sides for a particular religious or ethnic group. As was stressed in Lövheim and Axner's analysis of the

debate, the discussions also illustrate how Swedish society in order to understand itself as secular, constructs the "other" as religious. In other words, this example highlights how Swedish secularism is often taken for granted and how such a silent assumption may have severe consequences in relation to the issue of freedom of religion.

The third example concerns the so-called Vilks affair, or Sweden's own version of the Mohammad caricatures crisis. The Mohammad caricature issue occurred in Denmark (and Norway but also Sweden). A Swedish modern artist, Lars Vilks, decided to follow up that event by depicting the prophet of Islam as a round-about-dog. Vilks is renowned for a provocative style as an artist. This led to an intense debate, in a way similar to the Danish case, including murder threats, arson and a suicide bombing in central Stockholm December 2010. Lately the artist has also been sharply criticized for participating in the conference of the openly Anti-Semitic organisation Stop Islamization Of Nations (SION) in New York 2012 (Svenska Dagbladet 2013). Issues under debate here were the freedom of speech and the protection of minorities or religious values (blasphemy). Blasphemy is not an offense in Sweden, but hate speech is.[1]

Of the three examples here, two concern Islam. This is worth noting, and probably reflects the stigmatized situation for Muslims all over the Western world post 9–11 2001. But it perhaps also reflects the lack of understanding of minorities in general and of religious values specifically in the Swedish society. A strong norm of individualism combined with lack of religious literacy seems to stir the feelings of the Swedes, as well as agitate the debate on what the freedom of religion may mean in a diverse society.

Lastly, a fourth example which also concerns Islam is that for a long time Sweden had no parliamentary representation of a radical right-wing populist party. In the election of 2010, this was changed when the Sverigedemokraterna (The Sweden Democrats) received 5.9 % of the votes and the party became the balance of power in the parliament. Trying to wash off its openly racist history, the party has made attempts to appear like a normal political party. It has ties with the English Defence League, wants to stop immigration to Sweden, and is openly critical of Islam and Muslims. With regard to the threats against rights of minorities, churches and other religious organizations have actively entered into the political debate. Some of the participants in these discussions draw on freedom of religion. Church leaders have taken up the argument against the Sweden Democrats ever since their increased support in the 2010 election campaign. The party itself, on the other hand, also uses freedom of speech-arguments, and claims that there is a consensus culture of "politically correctness" on the behalf of established parties and mass media hindering ideas which are critical of present immigration policy from being heard in the debate. In other words, they employ freedom of speech in their argumentation (Lindberg 2011).

[1] The prohibition of blasphemy was taken out of the penal code in 1949, and replaced by a statute on Peace of faith, which was subsequently abolished of the penal code in 1970.

## Empirical Data Among Young People: An Ambiguous Relation

Empirical studies of young people's values and attitudes with regard to religious and existential issues indicate that the conditions for religious socialization have changed not only in Northern Europe but also in Sweden. From a recent survey among a representative sample (ages 16–24) 13 % were brought up in a religious home and 7 % attend activities in religious organization at least once a month (Lövheim 2012b). There are salient differences between youth who are 'organized religious', 'individually religious' and 'non-religious'. The first category primarily encounters religious issues in church or another religious place, at home or with friends. The second category rather comes in contact with religion via school, television or friends. The largest and third category comes in contact with religion via television, newspapers or school (Sjöborg 2012a).

The situation addressed in this chapter can be illustrated by empirical data from two different surveys among young people in upper secondary school (ages 16–19). In a representative sample of 1850 upper secondary students, the attitudes towards freedom of religion regarding religious and cultural diversity in society were investigated: 68 % of all pupils agreed with a statement on general freedom to speak about one's religion at school or work (Sjöborg 2013a). But only 34 % stated that clothes and symbols related to religion (exemplified as veil, turban, cross etc.) should be allowed in Swedish workplaces. In other words, regarding the statement concerning speaking about religion a little more than two-thirds agreed, while for the statement regarding visual representations of religion only a third agreed. This is worth noting since it represents a distinct difference in terms of tolerance of religion. An attitude of tolerance may thus shift depending on whether the matter concerns one's freedom to speak or one's freedom to wear visual representations. This may be understood as suggesting that the visual presence of religions is perceived as being more provocative than verbal presence. Another finding of relevance here stems from Swedish data on upper secondary students, where differences between Christian, Muslim and nonreligious students were investigated (Sjöborg 2012b). Thirty-two percent of the respondents agreed that making fun of religious people in a cabaret is a legally protected right. Thirty-four percent of the students agreed that TV journalists with radical convictions have a civil right to employment. For both of these statements, the religious self-identification did not bring out any significant differences. However, regarding a statement on freedom of religion, namely whether politicians are allowed to interfere with religious communities, Christians (44 %) and Muslims (46 %) agreed to a larger extent than did the nonreligious students (26 %)[2].

[2] The first data mentioned come from a school survey, using a two-step representative sample of upper secondary pupils, ages 18–19, who responded in school to a questionnaire on religion and Religious Education (Sjöborg 2013b). The second data mentioned comes from a strategic sample in Greater Stockholm schools of upper secondary pupils, ages 16–19 (Sjöborg 2012b).

## Conclusion

The political treatment of human rights issues can be said to follow three tracks. First, it can be said there is a wide consensus around the central status for the human rights discourse and catalogue of rights and their application (Andersson & Modée 2011; Singer 2012) and a vivid reflection in the public sphere that there is always a need for constant refinement and improvement (Regeringen 2013). Second, there are also diverging positions especially when it comes to the first generation of human rights. These positions concern interpretations about the role of religion in society, where a liberal, secularist position is discernible, as well as a more post-secular or pro-religious position. For instance both these positions are noticeable within the present coalition government. Note 3: This refers to the four-party coalition as of September 2014. In addition to the already mentioned cases, tensions may concern end of year school ceremonies taking place in a church (freedom of religion, separation of church and state), confessional schools (rights of parents, freedom of religion [of the child], same-sex marriages (freedom of lifestyle, right to build a family), or the role of religious organizations for integration. Third, there is the concern around the public stigmatization of Muslims mainly associated with the entrance intoSwedish parliament by the Sweden Democrats. On all these three tracks, religious leaders take some part in the public debate, often making use of human rights arguments (Axner 2013).

There is a risk that new generations with little or no literacy about religion are restricted to superficial or stereotypical images of religion in mediatized forms. Current school curricula underscore the normative, fostering role of the school system, stressing values like tolerance and specifically human rights. It remains to be seen whether such enterprises are completely successful. In times of financial hardship and unsecure markets of education and labour especially among young people there are many threats against an open and tolerant society. Religious and political organizations are able to gather some youth involvement. However interest in religious or political issues is not at all as closely linked to participation in organized political and religious organizations as in previous decades.

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