



Belief and Ministry in Modern Sweden

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Sweden is considered one of the most secular countries in the world. One person out of twenty or even fewer attends church weekly. However, 62% of Swedes pray. The charismatic movement is another component, as well as newly registered congregations: about 400 in the last ten years, half of them migrant churches. The picture is contradictory. How can it be understood? My intention is to give a possible response to this question, both from a historic perspective and from my own experience as a priest.

Sweden was a long time ago a nation characterized by “togetherness” (a united society). There was one family, one God, one religion, one church, and one congregation. Almost all were members of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Sweden. Further: one nation, one king, one language, one flag, and very much “a life with God.”

However, changes would come in the last two centuries. There was a new era with new trends, tending to go from “the one” towards divisions and separations, pluralism, and later on secularization—more and more “a life without God.” The focus shifted to the individual, the “me,” the *ego-ism* and the *individual-ism*; another ideology emerged.

Because of these processes, many things were taking place: urbanization and

Sweden is one of the most secular countries in the world, with low rates of belief and religious participation. Here a theologian and priest in the Church of Sweden relates what it means to be a religious leader within such a secularized situation, doing ministry with those who believe they live without God.

migration, especially from 1840 onwards (which concerns Sweden particularly), especially to America. People were moving from the countryside to the towns (urbanization) in Sweden, but also to other locations on account of the process of industrialization and, of course, in search of jobs.

Many of the members of biological families were consequently more or less forced to move from their homes (mostly farms) to new places and new contexts. The people who moved of course became involved in new, different “families,” often in one or more of the four movements: the Labor movement, the Temperance movement, the Sports movement(s), and (surprisingly) the Free Church movement. These movements contributed to secularization and secularism, and even to de-Christianization.

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To concretize and illustrate the secularization process—a fictitious (but very real) example: There was a traditional family in the countryside. One of the family members left home for a job in urban industry. He became an active member of the Labor movement. Another family member was involved in the Temperance movement; a third one in the Sports movement (e.g., playing football). The fourth family member was converted to the “right belief,” and became a member in one of the Free Churches.¹ Each one was choosing his or her own path of life. This implied leaving the traditional family and its context, getting involved in “a new family” and, of course, a new context.

As a consequence there arose “new families” or associations. God, and the local congregation, was not the unifying link anymore. God was no longer my leader, whom I had to obey and also wanted to follow. The emphasis was on two key terms: *freedom* and *individualism*. The person had to make his or her own decisions and choices, without prayers and seeking the will of God, neither with respect to the possible desires and requests from parents nor the church. People were their own bosses, making the decisions on their own!

In addition to this, we do find other changes, that the Holy Book (the Bible) was replaced with other “holy books.” These gave the members of the “new families” (the Labor, Temperance, and Sports movements) other “doctrines” and instructions. Instead of going to worship (and celebrating the divine service), there were thus other ceremonies in the societies, associations, and clubs. Further, instead of keeping the old Christian rituals, other rituals were growing and taking place. At least in the beginning there was a “both-and attitude” (old and new), combining “the religious” with the other, “the worldly.” The transcendental,

¹Families were tragically and sadly shattered. There were also divisions within the congregations in the Church of Sweden on account of the revival movements.

Christian perspective and impact decreased, however, in families and consequently in the society. The questions and thoughts about Christian living and eternal life did not engage people to any great extent anymore. We meet later on another religion, at least an ideology, in *materialism* and in *consumerism*. It is about life here and now. One has, above all, to get a good life for oneself, living more and more “a life without God.”

A stimulating, even difficult question to ask and deal with turns up in talking and writing about *god*. To negate a sentence, or as in this context a concept, is sometimes a help and may be very useful. When people are saying, “I live my life without God,” what does it mean to neither believe in nor trust in any god? People in Sweden today will rarely believe in and agree with the Christian and Lutheran doctrines such as the Trinity and other fundamental Christian dogmas—if they even know anything at all about them. The Swedes have, generally speaking, their own interpretations and beliefs about the existential questions, about life and death. It is important to distinguish between two concepts, *religion* and *Christianity*.² Religion is generally man’s striving after someone or something,³ while Christianity has its emphasis more on God’s approach to human beings.⁴ This comes to an utterly concrete expression in the doctrine of the incarnation, “The Word became flesh,”⁵ God being flesh (man) in Jesus Christ.

There has been a long process in Sweden from the Reformation until today, in general terms, from “a togetherness,” a one-ness of many important symbols and markers to form and unite a nation, towards the present situation, characterized by pluralism and diversity, multiculturalism and a multireligious society. Sweden is a secularized nation characterized very much by “a life without God.”⁶

But Swedes, in spite of what is said and written about them, do live their lives “with a god,” but this is another kind of religion or ideology appearing. What is their “ultimate concern” (Tillich) is neither the Trinity, nor the kingdom of God nor the Word and the Sacraments. The secularized Swede pretends to think and argue that he does not need *God* any longer. For we are the champions, we are *gods*! To exaggerate, it is a process and development from the Christian faith in the holy Trinity—God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—to “a new trinity,” the “me, myself, and I.”

Man is going from being “*homo sapiens*” (wise man) to perhaps a “*homo zappiens*.” People are “zapping” all day and almost all night, on the internet, in travelling—visiting as many places as possible in a very short time. They are not

²I am well aware about the general view, which argues that Christianity is one among other religions.

³See Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, the tribal religions, etc.

⁴God is, according to the Christian faith, more active and the human being more passive; while in other religions it is more up to the individual to strive to get some kind of a relation with a God, the Transcendent. There are some theologians dealing with this; I just want to mention a few of them: Karl Barth with his “*senkrecht von oben*,” and others like Paul Tillich, Friedrich Gogarten, and Rudolf Bultmann.

⁵See John 1:14.

⁶See Lennart Johnsson, *Vartär kyrkan på väg? Analyser och prognoser gällande Växjö pastorat åren 1995–2020*, Svenska Kyrkan 2014.

reading good long books, but just shorter headlines and so on. Most important of all, we ourselves at least think that we make our own choices; but that's *not* true. Rather, we are influenced by the environment.

An interesting and seemingly growing phenomenon worldwide, and not only a phenomenon but a *reality* in many people's lives, is the Charismatic movement.⁷ It is an interdenominational, fast-growing movement. Throughout the world this movement is influencing almost all denominations, not least the Roman Catholic Church, and involves millions of people.⁸ What is special with the Charismatic movement is, among other things, that it sometimes goes alongside the old denominations and even within them, now and then shaping them, and resulting in new separate groups and units. This implies that the former strict barriers between denominations—consisting of each one's special theology of different doctrines, including ecclesiology and baptism(s), the Eucharist, soteriology, eschatology, etc.—often in these contexts tend to be less important, if not even unimportant, to the grassroots people. In other words, *doctrines*, dogmas and teaching, thus play a secondary role in the context of the congregation or religious unit.

Life, interpreted in this way as a relation with God—i.e., the practice of faith, with experiences and feelings—is in focus, and more fundamental and of more importance than “the right dogmas.” It is about a *living* relation between people and God, a relation that thus goes above and beyond denominations and their doctrines.

Let me give a concrete example in order to get a glimpse of some thoughts found in the Sweden of today and how a discussion with me as a priest and believer often proceeds. I often hear in a conversation with Swedes, “You, Lennart, must understand me, but I don't believe in God,” which sometimes means: “I don't believe in ‘your’ God.” What they actually mean by this statement, “I don't believe in God,” I do not at first really understand. Then they may continue, saying: “But, you see, I believe in my own way.” Sometimes the discussion is followed up by a few other similar statements, like, “I think, however, it may be someone or something beyond all this, such as the beauty of the natural world.”⁹

That is a difficult and tricky issue to me, especially as a professional theologian, as well as a priest, to get an understanding of what they really mean with these statements. Do they believe in and have a faith in some *god* at all? Probably they do, in my opinion. It is, however, not a faith or a belief according to the church or to other religions. They live in that respect, according to themselves, “a life without *God*.” At once, I want to contradict this statement and write, they do also live “a life *with God*.”

⁷In this movement there is, to generalize, more focus on feelings, experiences, than on (right) dogmas.

⁸See, e.g., Allan Anderson, *To the Ends of the Earth: Pentecostalism and the Transformation of World Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁹See a very well-known Swedish poem by Dan Andersson (1888–1920), “Omkring tiggarn från Luossa,” in *Svarta ballader* (1917; Odyssé Bokförlag, 2006), giving expression to this kind of faith. It is said in one of the verses: “och om sin längtan sjöng han hela natten lång: ‘Det är något bortom bergen, bortom blommorna och sången.’”

Some years ago, I worked as university chaplain and diocesan curate in the old, historic city of Uppsala, Sweden. Uppsala University was established in 1477; as a matter of fact, the founding of Uppsala University was the action of the church. From the beginning there was teaching and education in theology, philosophy, and law, with the Faculty of Theology as the central focus over the centuries.

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Students, researchers, professors, and alumni at Uppsala University—people came and conversed with me. I met them at cafés and restaurants, as well as at the institution and in the “nation houses”—where people meet from their own region. Very often I did wear my priest shirt; at special happenings, however, as for example the special festivals and celebrations (in Swedish “gasques”), I wore my formal clerical garments. The dinners consisted of three lengthy courses and the dinner ran as long as five or six hours. During the dinner there were some humorous speeches and also common songs. After the feast, the party continued with a lot of music, dance, and open bar.

At these occasions many people would chat with me, not least while I was the priest—even at times “our priest.” As you can assume, I was in some ways an odd figure at these events, among students and celebrities. People always wanted to start a dialogue with me about *THEO*-logy (literally meaning the doctrine about God), many times in a more or less provocative way, as it tends to be among academics. A person would say to me: “I do not believe in *God*, I am agnostic,” or even, “I am an atheist.” Well, I would answer (with a smile), that is interesting but you are not the only one in our Swedish secularized society having such an opinion. Sorry to say, I do believe, however!

I could many times continue the dialogue, asking them the next question: “But why don’t you believe in God?” After a while, having dealt with this question and the issue of the concept *god*, as well as discussing some other issues, I asked them straightforwardly another question: “What do you mean when you are talking about *God*, and are using the concept *god*?” They would at first hesitate to give me any answer at all, struggling to find a relevant, more or less scientific answer. What I often found, however, in this dialogue was that they did not have any deeper reflective or insightful thoughts to give a relevant answer to the questions I asked, if they had thought about it at all. It seemed to me that they in their answers had a very stereotyped and superficial view of God, and thus a similar interpretation of the concept *god*.¹⁰

¹⁰I found very often that the answer they gave me was that they could not believe in a god on account of the evil in the world. Therefore they did deny God. In other words, we are standing in front of the difficult theodicy problem: if God is or does exist, why does not God stop the evil things?

People could later on have thoughts and ideas about my questions. Then they wanted to continue the dialogue. What I very often found in these discussions was that there were very different interpretations of especially this concept and term *god*. In addition to that question, I sometimes continued the dialogue and asked them still another question: “What kind of image do you have when you are thinking and talking about *god*?” This was just in order to continue a very good starting talk that was inspiring, rewarding, and interesting. Sometimes, of course, it became a tricky and complicated philosophical dialogue for all of us.

What was remarkable, sometimes funny, was that I often shocked them. For when they tried to describe and talk about their image of *god* to me—i.e., they explained to me why they could not believe in “*that god*,” which they supposed was “my *god*”—I then told them: “In that case, by the way you have described your image of *god* and what you are telling me about *god*, I myself must also be regarded as an agnostic, yes, even as an atheist!” After that, the earlier more philosophical conversation tended to turn to a more theological one.

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Well, what I found, in these stimulating and rewarding conversations, where most of them were “typical Swedes” (mostly agnostic and atheistic people at different ages), was that in trying to persuade me with arguments “*against god*” (i.e., living a life without *god*), they actually stopped after a couple of arguments. I myself, however, could continue, saying in all humility that I had many more arguments; sometimes also giving some to them. I could also give them good reasons why I actually did believe in God, out of theological and philosophical knowledge and perspectives. In addition to that, I could also give them examples of now living (or of the past) men and women who had not only theoretical knowledge about God, from doctrines and dogmas, but who also themselves had a real experience of a meeting with what they said and meant was the living god.

Today, I find myself, in the prevailing secularized situation as a priest, closer to what we read about St. Paul at the Areopagus in Athens.¹¹ The Swedes are praying to an unknown god. Even if the number of members is decreasing about 1–2% per year, and added to this the continuing decrease of infant baptisms, most Swedes still belong to the Church of Sweden, about 6.2 out of 10 million. But they don’t believe in the Christian doctrines. The Swedes tend to believe in “their own god” and in “their own way,” the way of privatization and individualism.

Their knowledge about Christian faith is not too good—often people know

¹¹ Acts 17:16ff., esp. from verse 22ff.

more about other religions. All this results in problems, especially in my meetings and dialogues with people in general, and especially in preparing sermons for baptisms. Frequently the question arises as to how to translate and explain the best and most powerful message in the world, the Good News about grace, faith, and eternal life, to these Swedes. It is, of course, a challenge. I try, however, to talk in parables and pictures, explaining until people agree and are nodding their heads in understanding.

The latest religious influences coming to Sweden are through the migrant churches (Coptic, Syrian, Mekane Yesus, Chinese, etc.), the more experienced-based Christian congregations and units (the Neo-Charismatic congregations like Hillsong, New Wine, Alpha, International Mission Church Stockholm, Vineyard, Third-wave, etc.) who are especially attracting the younger generation, and the immigrants with other religions.

All this shapes an even more multicultural and multireligious society, in the midst of the process of secularization, with its challenges to both traditional congregations and to Swedish society. In spite of the process of secularization, fewer members in the Church of Sweden, and so on, people, not least the younger generation, are longing and seeking for something, often something spiritual.¹² The old question about identity is also a focus; people are struggling with their identity, asking: “Who am I?”¹³

To generalize and simplify the development in Sweden from Christianity towards secularization:

<i>Christianity</i>	<i>Secularized society</i>
The Holy Bible, the Word	The Market, money (economy, materialism)
God leads me	I am my own leader and make my own choices
Celebration, the mass	Ceremonies, in societies and clubs
Community, family	In Swedish “Ensam—Tillsammans” (Alone—Together), community happens on my terms
Baptism, confirmation, funeral	Other rituals related to work, shopping, drinking/pubs, graduation, etc.
The kingdom of God, eternal life	Who knows? Who cares?

The process of secularization has resulted in divisions and separations on different levels across Swedish society. One of many questions is, “Who or what will give answers to people’s existential and religious questions in the future?” It will be

¹²See Psalm 62:1ff. and also St. Augustine.

¹³See, e.g., all the selfies: “I am” my picture/image, i.e., the center of the world.

interesting to find out if in Sweden there will be an increase of people choosing “a life without God.” Of course the other alternative is also possible. The question about secularization and even de-Christianization (*avkristningen*) in Sweden is perhaps even caused on one hand by the Lutheran doctrine about the two governments, implying a division in society of two distinct parts: “the religious” or spiritual one (church on Sundays at 11 a.m.) and “the secular” or worldly one (the rest of the hours of the week). On the other hand, it is also caused by other movements that contributed to the problem by dividing traditional families. Explicitly or implicitly these movements emphasized freedom and the decisions of the individual (the Labor, Temperance, Sports, and Free Church movements, among others). ⊕

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