

Secularization of a state – criteria, processes and liberal policy with empirical data from Sweden ¹

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Purpose and content

The task of this paper is to analyse secularization of states (public institutions) in Europe and to propose liberal policy to promote development of states (public institutions) which are more secular than today. No nation or country in Europe has yet secular states. L'état laïque may be an ideal but has not been achieved in Europe, not even in France with more than 100 years experience of “separation” of church and state.

The paper uses data from Sweden to develop indicators for distance between actual situation of secularization of a state and an ideal secular state. However, knowing that this ideal is neither possible nor in fact desirable as there will always be relations between a state (public institutions) and organisations in civil society, including religious communities.

As a background empirical evidence for Sweden is provided on degrees of religious activity on part of religious communities and on part of individuals in the Swedish society. Inspiration comes from the yearly presentations of secularization in Italy provided by Critica Liberale (Critica Liberale 2010).

Conclusions

The paper shows that it is possible to fruitfully use a set of criteria on the degree of separation of state and religion to assess the situation in European countries. Four criteria were operationalised with indicators of separation for one country – Sweden. The results open up for finding country-specific indicators for other European countries. Further, such indicators can be directly tied to liberal policy to promote development towards more secular states in Europe.

Secularization of states – criteria and classifications

When trying to assess the degree of separation between state and religion the following *criteria* are relevant. The four criteria cover the possible forms of relation between state and religion.

** Degree to which the state “recognises” religions, taking into account discrimination and privileges to certain religious communities*

** Degree to which the state gives financial support to certain religious communities*

** Degree to which the state intervenes in religious affairs*

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* *Degree to which religious communities intervene in affairs of public institutions.*

Compare Ercolessi and Hägg (2008, p. 8) who further suggest a *classification* system with the following categories:

1. “Ideal” state with complete separation between church and state (état laïque)
2. A state which relates to all religions on an equal basis
3. A state in a country with a dominating religion which is favoured in comparison to other religions
4. A state in a country with a dominating religion which is favoured while other religions are ignored.

In this system Sweden would fall into the third category with a dominating Christian church but where other religious communities are recognised.

A question is if the Swedish state is developing in the direction of becoming more secular, moving towards the second category with equality between religions and towards the first category, that is, with complete separation between state and religions.

Secularization in a society – four processes

In the previous section we focused upon a secular state. For a *society* as a whole we identify the following four processes:

1. A process of change of *state relations* with religious communities, where we might find a process of secularization of state institutions, that is a process where state institutions develop neutrality to religious and other belief systems. (It should be noted that for being secular a state need not be neutral as in the former Soviet Union.)
2. A process of change of power and *influence of religious communities* or organisations in different parts of society, especially in state or public institutions
3. A process of change in *religious practice*, which can take place in private or in public
4. A process of change in *the feelings, the sentiments of being religious, of “belonging”* to a religion or belief in the population of a country.

These four processes may be inter-related and can develop in the same direction or develop in different directions, some in the direction of more secularization and others in the direction of less secularization. The four criteria mentioned in the preceding section are relevant for the first and second processes which both deal with the state.

A purpose of this paper is to contribute to the development of indicators of processes of secularization of a state, also as a means of finding ways of promoting such secularization through liberal policy..

“Sweden – secular population and non-secular state” is the title of a chapter in de Beaufort et al (editors), 2008. Hägg there describes a population in Sweden with decreasing participation in religious activities over time, combined with a state which is not neutral to religions and clearly favoured some religious communities, especially the Evangelic-Lutheran Church of Sweden. Conversely it is possible to imagine a country with a very religious population combined with a secular state. A goal to promote reforms in the direction of more secular states is quite different from a goal of advocating more secular societies. The latter is not dealt with in this paper.

The three components of a society: state, civil society, market

A society can be defined in many ways. For the purpose of studying secularization I will use the definition of a society as consisting of

- A *state* with (public) institutions like parliament, government, public agencies, including public institutions on regional and local levels.
- A *civil society* – all voluntary organisations including religious and other faith communities, sports organisations, political parties, environmental organisations etc, sometimes referred to as the third sector.
- A *market* – companies, enterprises, cooperatives etc.

These three components form the society and relate to each other in complex and changing manners – but still with their own identities. (Note: I do not here define society in terms of individuals making up society, but of course individuals are actors in the three components defining society.)

The ideal type (in a Weberian sense) state in a liberal, open society is l'état laïque, to use the French concept, a state that is neutral to all religions and other belief systems, a state that safeguards the right for individuals to form such organisations and for such organisations to be active in civil society, and the right for individuals to stay out of such organisations, and to leave them at will. In the same sense the ideal civil society would be a civil society where all kinds of organisations, including religious ones, are flourishing, where people engage in religious and other faith organisations. For liberals it is important to promote a state which is an état laïque.

Church and state in Sweden were “separated” in the year 2000

From the year 2000 the former state church in Sweden is no longer part of the public sector in the country. Already much earlier it was, however, possible for individuals to leave the state church. The “separation” ended a long period of discussions and preparation taking place after the second world war. The reform was a compromise between different interests, but broadly accepted also by the church as a reasonably good solution. Adopting the name The Church of Sweden the church is a legal, in principle autonomous personality, a religious community in the Swedish civil society. It is by far the largest voluntary organisation in Sweden, with about 6 million members out of a total population of about 9 million. After the so called separation it could keep all earlier members. The number of persons leaving the Church of Sweden have increased after 2000. (See later in this paper with more about the Church of Sweden). The reform has been called a separation but in fact we only have a partial separation so far, after ten years. And efforts to go in the direction of a real separation have been small. The reason for this might be the broadly accepted interpretation that the separation has reached a satisfactory level.²

Indications of recent secularization of the Swedish state and liberal policy proposals

The indicators chosen here include both quantitative and qualitative ones. The choice is made not on a theoretical basis but from empirical observations. They are very preliminary and

² For a more detailed presentation of secularization in the Swedish society, that is, the third and fourth processes mentioned above see Appendix to this paper.

need to be challenged and other indicators developed. The indicators of secularization of the state and possible changes of these indicators from 2000 to 2010 are the following:

1. In connection with the “separation” in the year 2000 two laws were adopted by the Swedish parliament, one Act on the Church of Sweden and one Act on religious communities. Thus giving the Church of Sweden a special treatment. Proposals in parliament by liberals and others to merge the two laws have so far been rejected.

Policy recommendation. In a first stage combine the two laws into one. In an second stage consider a law which includes all voluntary organisations in civil society. Further – the very special legal person “religious community” should be abolished and religious communities being offered to use the legal form that is used by other voluntary organisations in civil society.

2. In the Act on the Church of Sweden the state stipulates that this church “is an Evangelic-Lutheran religious community” thus strongly interfering in the affairs of this organisation. It is obliged to be “an open Folk-church”, that is, an open and “popular” church. The Act also stipulates how the Church of Sweden should be organised. Some proposals in parliament for letting the Church of Sweden to get more autonomy about its faith and organisation have not led to results. No change between 2000 and 2010

Policy recommendation. See under Number 1. In a combined law all reference to faith basis and organisation of the church should be deleted.

3. In the Act on religious communities the state puts the Swedish taxation agency at the service of the Church of Sweden, without cost for the church, collecting the membership fees for the church. Other religious communities fulfilling certain criteria can on application get the same service. They have, not least, to actively promote the basic values of the Swedish society, as these values are formulated in Swedish law. The government has allowed eight other religious communities this service. These are favours that non-religious organisations in civil society cannot get. At the same time these communities have to give the state their membership lists which might be interpreted as a kind of state interference into organisation-internal matters in civil society. No change between 2000 and 2010.

Policy recommendation. This service should no longer be offered to any civil society organisation.

4. The state can according to the Constitution delegate administrative affairs to civil society organisations, among others to registered religious communities. It can further by law delegate public functions to such organisations. The state actually hands over certain public functions to the Church of Sweden and other registered religious communities: church marriages are thus getting legal recognition. The Church of Sweden is responsible for the cemetery system in Sweden. No change between 2000 and 2010 in spite of proposals in parliament to let only civil marriage get legal recognition. The state also involves the Church of Sweden in crisis management and in hospitals and the military. Discussions about how to involve other religious communities in these areas are going on.

Policy recommendation. Delegation by law of public functions should be abolished for all voluntary organisations. Delegation of administrative affairs to all kinds of organisations in civil society can be continued but then on an equal treatment basis.

5. Registered religious communities can according to a law apply for financial support from the state on the condition that they practice active and long-term religious activity in the form of divine service. Thus the state purposely directly supports religious activities. The total amount is about 5 million euro per year – a fairly small amount of money. No change between 2000 and 2010.

Policy recommendation. This support should be abolished. Support to civil society organisations should be given on an equal treatment basis.

6. The King (or Queen) of Sweden has to adhere to the Evangelic-Lutheran belief according to the Swedish Constitution. No change between 2000 and 2010. If he or she would like to leave this religion he or she has to leave the throne. Thus the freedom of religion guaranteed in the Constitution does not apply to the head of state. This might seem to be a trivial matter as the King of Sweden has little formal power but has a symbolic importance.

Policy recommendation. The constitution should be changed so that head of state can choose his/her own belief or non-belief adherence.

7. Religious free schools must, as public schools, have all compulsory education non-confessional but in contrast to public schools they are allowed to have voluntary confessional education and activities during the school-day. This can be problematic for pupils who do not belong to the particular religion involved and who will find it difficult to abstain from participating in these “voluntary” activities. In the new Act on schools from 2011 this is also allowed, that is, thus in practice no change and cementing the present rules.

Policy recommendation. The Act on schools should be changed in order to require confessional education and activities only before or after the ordinary school day.

8. The state is involved in the education of priests even if university cooperation with Church of Sweden priest educational institutes in principle should imply non-confessional ingredients on part of the state. This involvement from the year 2000 in confessional parts of priest education has in 2009 been strongly criticised by the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education.

A government committee in 2010 concluded that it should not be the task of the state to get involved in education of Islamic imams. Even if the reason for such education was to help Islamic communities to get access to imams with good knowledge about the Swedish society and its values. The reason for the negative conclusion is that the state should not be involved in religious education which should be left to the religious communities themselves. And what could be needed in university education is already available in ordinary non-confessional university courses.

Policy recommendation. Confessional parts of education of religious leaders should be completely separated from public higher education institutions. If financial support is given to such education offered by private institutions similar kinds of financial support should be possible for other kinds of leadership educations.

9. The state through the government is involved in inter-religious dialogue. In 2000 a “Government council for contact with religious communities” was established, led by a

government minister and is an arena for dialogue between the government and various religious leaders. No change in the first decade of this century.

Policy recommendation. Either this council should be abolished or similar councils set up for contact with other kinds of civil society organisations.

10. The Constitution demands that the state must support religious minorities so that they can preserve their denomination. This was inserted into the Constitution in 2003, thus a step away from secularization of the state.

Policy recommendation. The Constitution should be changed so that his requirement is abolished. It is enough that the Constitutions requires the state to guarantee basic individual rights.

11. Some political parties take part in the elections to the General Synod of the Church of Sweden, some have active groups more or less connected to political parties. The Swedish Liberal Party as such does not take part in the elections. This is a debated practice also criticised from within the church but no changes since 2000.

Policy recommendation. Hopefully the political parties will eventually come to the conclusion that they should not continue to take part in elections in specific religious communities.

12. Public radio and television, while not public institutions in a formal sense, continue to present religious programmes in ways that no longer should be relevant after the separation of state and church in 2000. For example, programmes with divine services from the Church of Sweden are presented with reference to “the church” and not with reference to the name of the religious community.

Policy recommendation. Care should be taken in public radio and television to be neutral to different religious communities and be clear about who stands for content in religious programmes.

13. The Church of Sweden is trying to strengthen its participation in public crisis management and crisis work in which there is a long tradition of participation from the church. The same applies to participation in the military, in hospitals and prisons, that is, in important public functions.

Policy recommendation. There is nothing wrong with civil society organisations trying to influence public functions but the state must try to respond with equal treatment to all kinds of civil society organisations and for participation in crisis work, the military, prisons and hospitals.

14. The setback for the Church of Sweden does not correspond to marked increases for other religious denominations even if especially Islam has become more visible in media etc. If we look upon the statistics for religious communities having been granted state financial support we find that the number of persons “served by” these organisations (including members) was less than 800000 where so called free churches (Christian) stand for most of them, and for example Islamic organisations 110000, Jewish 9000, Buddhist 6000. They were altogether granted about 5 million euro in 2009.

Policy recommendation. Even if 5 million euro is a small sum state financial support should be given on basis of equal treatment to all kinds of civil society organisations.

The 14 indicators presented here together give a picture of a somewhat non-neutral , non-secular state with little changes in the first decade after the “separation” in 2000. Proposals in parliament for steps to a more secular state have been rejected. Public discussion about the unsatisfactory situation have not led to changes. The state continues to have a strong influence on the Church of Sweden. The situation implies special advantages to the Church of Sweden in comparison to other religious communities. Also advantages are given to registered religious communities in comparison to such communities that are not registered and to other kinds of voluntary organisations in the civil society. There are also “disadvantages” to the Church of Sweden which according to the law is not allowed to develop its faith basis and its organisation. Sweden thus continues to fall in the third category in the classification system mentioned in the beginning of this paper (A state in a country with a dominating religion which is favoured in comparison to other religions.) The state influence is manifested in the Constitution, in laws and in government directives. Fairly clear policy proposals can be formulated to promote a more secular state in Sweden.

An important conclusion from this paper is that it is possible to “measure” progress (or regress) in the direction towards a secular state using the four criteria mentioned in the beginning of the paper as a starting point. The example from Sweden with the 14 empirically based indicators are all related to the four criteria. For other countries other indicators will probably be needed, but then also based on the four over all criteria.

A difficult issue is relations between the state and civil society where the state wants to engage civil society organisations in activities like social and other services while at the same time not diminishing the autonomy of these organisations. Equal treatment of all kinds of voluntary organisations in civil society is essential. As has been demonstrated registered religious communities continue to have privileges. To find a good balance between state support and civil society autonomy is essential but very difficult.

All this said, no doubt the Swedish state took decisive steps towards a secularized state from the middle of the 20th century until 2000 – the year of the (partial) separation of church and state. These steps were mainly taken in agreement with the state church. But as can be seen not much has happened in the first ten years after the reform. Comparing with France that not even after 105 years of separation has reached the ideal of l'état laïque ten years is a very short period. The ideal secular state will probably never be achieved in any country in the world. But this does not imply that steps in the direction of this ideal are needed in a liberal democratic country.

Appendix

The Church of Sweden and religiousness (secularization) in the Swedish population

The Church of Sweden is as mentioned earlier the by far the largest religious community. According to its own statistics it had 6.7 million members in 2009 which is 71 percent of the population. The number decreased from 7.4 million in 2000 which is 83 percent of the population. Its income of about 1600 million euro per year consists of about 1100 million euro in membership fees, and from the state 300 million euro for the Swedish cemeteries and about 50 million euro for maintaining historic church buildings owned by the Church of Sweden.

Religious practice of the population

The number of persons leaving the Church of Sweden is since 2000 a little less than 1 percent per year of the members (lowest percentage 0.3 and highest 1.1). The percentage of children who are baptized in the church decreased from 73 percent in 2000 to 56 percent in 2009. The percentage of church members at relevant age (15 years) participating in confirmation decreased from 51 percent to 40 percent in the same period. The percentage of all marriages which were carried out in conformance with the Church of Sweden decreased from 61 to 41 percent and the percentage of burials from 88 to 83 percent. All these figures thus indicate a continued secularization process of the population when it comes to publically visible religiosity. The number of visits to the main Sunday service decreased from 6.6 million to 5.0 million and only a few percentages of the members go to church regularly. Of course the Church of Sweden is not happy about this development even if the numbers utilizing the rituals of baptism, marriage and funeral continue to be impressive. The development affects church income and diminishing the number of employed and reorganisations are taking place. In its strategy against this development it tries to focus upon activities for children and young persons (up to 25 years of age with an emphasis on those up to the age of 15) and the number of visits to such activities has increased from 1.6 million in 2001 to 2.1 million in 2009. The decreasing interest in the Church of Sweden did not start 2000 but is more long-term, partly also a sign of this church gradually losing its “monopoly” in the Swedish population. Immigration and other religions have become more visible in the country.

Being a religious person

A debated issue is if the sentiment of being a religious person, of the feeling of “belonging” to a religion is changing. From the International Values Surveys we find that the percentage of those seeing themselves as religious persons in Sweden increased from 32 percent in 1982 to 37 percent in 1999. The corresponding figures for those who saw themselves as non-religious were 55 and 52 percent respectively. (See Hägg, 2008, p.38 and Bäckström et al 2004). Also the interest in religion as manifested in the public debate and partly a consequence of increased visibility of other religions, especially Islam, is regarded as an increase in the importance of religion (post-modern de-secularization, sacralization). However, I do not see these observation as convincing. My interpretation is that religious interest has never really disappeared but only been taking different appearances – more or less visible.

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