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STATE AND RELIGION IN SWEDEN:
AMBIGUITY BETWEEN DISESTABLISHMENT AND RELIGIOUS CONTROL

Abstract

Since the 1850s Sweden has been moving from almost total unity between state and Church towards a religiously neutral and secular state. A major step was taken on 1 January 2000, when new legislation entailing a fundamental change in the relationship between religious groups and the state was introduced. It aimed to place the various faith communities in Sweden on an equal basis, while simultaneously maintaining continuity with respect to the Church of Sweden as the national majority church. These two ambiguous objectives show an inherent tension within the Church-state reform and indicate that the separation between the two is not complete. This article questions the limits of the Church-state reform. Can the present day Swedish state be regarded as secular and neutral in relation to the various religions? The analysis of legal and financial regulations controlling relations between the state and the different faith communities show that the separation between Church and state does not mean a total separation. Consequently the state is still not religiously neutral, but continues to control religion in different ways and retains a special close relationship with the former state church.

Keywords: Religion, church, state, secular, law, faith community, Sweden

The Swedish religious landscape

Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland and Iceland have historically formed a Protestant Nordic Region. Since the time of the Reformation, the Lutheran national church has been dominant in Sweden, counting the vast majority of the population as members. Today Sweden has a total population of nine million (2010) of whom 70 per cent belong to the same church, The Church of Sweden. Five per cent are members of different minority Christian protestant denominations, two per cent belong to the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches and two per cent of the population belongs to other religions, primarily Islam. This means that in total 79 per cent of the population belongs to an organized religion (Church of Sweden statistics 2010; Nämnden för statligt stöd till trossamfund, SST 2009)1.
Alongside other European countries, Sweden has passed through a process of secularization through which both the state and the individual have liberated themselves from the former power of the Church. Sweden is often referred to as one of the most secularized countries in the world as regards regular participation in worship and belief in traditional church teaching (Zuckerman 2008). However, the Swedish religious situation is complex, most clearly highlighted by the prevailing formal relationship between the vast majority of Swedish people and the Church of Sweden, and the relatively high level of participation in religious life rites in the context of the majority church. Statistics from 2010 show that 54 per cent of all children born are baptized in the Church of Sweden, 33 per cent of all 15-year olds participate in its confirmation education programme, 37 per cent of all marriages take place in the Church of Sweden and 81 per cent of all dead are buried within the Church setting (Church of Sweden statistics 2010). This complexity of high levels of secularization in some respects and at the same time high levels of religious affiliation in others is similar to the situation in the other Nordic countries and is sometimes called a Nordic Paradox (Bäckström, Edgardh Beckman and Pettersson 2004).

Today in 2011, more than ten years after the separation between Church and state, the Church of Sweden still retains a dominant role on the Swedish religious scene. However, in the suburbs of major cities the presence of religion is quite different from the general national situation. Here the presence of other religions as well as other Christian denominations and New Age practices is a fact and it becomes clear that Sweden is part of a global world of religions and cultures. In these areas the Swedish tradition of keeping religion within the private sphere has broken down over the past 30 years and religion has become part of the public sphere through visible attributes and practices (Andersson and Sander 2005). The relatively homogeneous Swedish society with its privatized religiosity is today challenged by the immigration of members of (for Sweden) minority religious groups, especially Muslims, demanding the right to develop their own specificity e.g. by managing their own schools (Berglund and Larsson 2007). Many observers currently talk about a return of religion to the public scene and Swedish society at large (e.g. Sigurdson 2009). It is not possible, however, to give a generalized description of the development since the effects of migration and globalization are very different from one locality to another. It is also a matter of interpretation of the new ways in which people relate to religious institutions and express their religiosity. So the image one gets of religion in Sweden today depends on the researcher’s choice of geographical area as well as the choice of perspective.

Is the Swedish state religiously neutral after the year 2000?

The legal regulation of the Swedish religious landscape underwent a major change 1 January 2000 when new legislation altered the relationship between the Church of Sweden and the state and created a more equal position for all faith communities. The aim was to make the state religiously neutral and secular and that it should treat all faith
communities equally. The change is usually described as a divorce between Church and state. This is correct on the one hand since the new act proclaimed Church and state to be separate bodies. On the other hand, the act accords the Church of Sweden a continuing special status which makes it more accurate to speak of the current situation as an agreement between partners in an ongoing marriage regarding their respective roles (Ekstrand 2002). This article will investigate the limits of the separation between the Church of Sweden and the state and how far the ambition to treat the different faith communities equally has been met. In other words, has the aim of the Church-state reform been fulfilled? Can the Swedish state be regarded as neutral in relation to different religions? These questions will be discussed by going through the present legal and financial relationships between the state and religion in Sweden. This will include the following areas: a) The legal position of the Church of Sweden, b) State financial support for the Church of Sweden, c) Religious freedom and the legal position of other faith communities, d) State financial support of other faith communities, e) Religious officials’ acting as state officials in marriage ceremonies, f) Religion as a factor to take into particular account in legal matters. Most of the data used are acts on the regulation of religion, government bills and information sourced from websites of public authorities’ and the Church of Sweden.

Legal position of the majority church – the Church of Sweden

The question of separating Church and state was raised in parliament for the first time as early as 1850. At that time mainly Sweden was an agricultural unitary society in which state and Church were almost totally integrated and all citizens were obliged to be baptized and belong to the Church. A first major change in Church-state relationships took place in 1862 when the local authority administration was split into two; a Church administration and a civil administration (Bexell 2003). Since then a number of reforms have taken place which have gradually contributed to the separation of Church and state, which can theoretically be interpreted as part of the functional differentiation process of society (Luhmann 1982; Dobbelaere 2001). Discussion concerning the disestablishment of the Church intensified during the 20th century when different groups demanded the abolition of ties between Church and state. A government inquiry into the question of altering the relationship was launched in 1958, and was subsequently followed by a number of official reports. Altogether more than forty books and reports, pronouncements and government bills were produced. During the inquiries a series of changes in Church-state relationships were gradually introduced such as the abolition of the obligatory role as an arbiter in family disputes in 1973 (SFS 1973:650).

In 1979 the government presented a proposal for a separation between Church and state which was financially generous from the point of view of the Church since the Church was promised financial state subsidies and the parishes would receive financial compensation from local municipalities for the management of graveyards (Regeringsens skrivelse 1979:1). The proposal was based on the result of negotiations and agre-
ments between representatives of the Church and the state (SOU 1978: 1). But the Church of Sweden General Synod turned it down with a majority of 54 votes to 42, and instead promoted a series of reforms of the Church organization within an ongoing Church-state relationship (Kyrkomötets protokoll 1979: 20; Ekström 2003: 134–135). In the decade that followed the political focus changed from the separation issue towards making the Church more independent through reforms in line with the decision of the General Synod.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the ground was laid for the subsequent change in the relationship between Church and state. From having been regulated within the framework of public law the internal organization of the Church was developed along the lines of a non-governmental organization. In 1983 the Church of Sweden General Synod was reformed and strengthened and a central board for the Church of Sweden was established, under the Synod. In 1985 a common and coordinated Church organization at national level was created and in 1989 this was followed by a reform of organizational structures. The regional level, the diocese, was given more resources and its status was reinforced. At local level reforms were made in the division of responsibilities between the two organizational levels; parish and pastorate. As a result of these reforms many issues and decisions which were previously handled by the state were now taken over by the Church itself and vice versa (Ekström 2003, 2004).

As part of the specialization of the Church as a religious agent the responsibility for civil registration was transferred from the Church to the Swedish tax authorities. The Church had managed this state function since it was founded in the 16th century and regulated in the Church Law of 1686. This law was replaced with new Church Law in 1992 since it was in many ways obsolete and also at the time the oldest Swedish law still in use. As part of a process of finding and strengthening a Church identity separate from the state, in 1983 the Church of Sweden proclaimed a decennium of theological work focused on clarifying what an evangelical Lutheran confession should mean at the present time and how it should be formulated (Kskr 1983: 44). This work was finalized and celebrated in 1993 with a Jubilee year and the publication of «The big book on Christian Faith» (Swedish: Stora boken om kristen tro) (Lind 1993). This celebration was part of the 400th year anniversary of the «Uppsala meeting» of 1593, the national Church assembly when the decision was taken that Sweden should turn from being a Catholic to become a Lutheran country.

The process of state inquiries on changed relationships between Church and state passed through a number of preliminary stages over the years and in 1994 a proposal for reform was put forward which aimed at a more or less the complete disestablishment of the Church (SOU 1994: 42; Regeringens skrivelse 1995: 1). In 1995 a principal decision on separating Church and state was adopted by a large majority of the Church General Synod, without the counting of votes, and also by a large majority of the Swedish parliament with 282 votes for and 19 against a separation (Ekström 2003: 229–230).

From 1 January 1996 a change was introduced in the conditions for membership of the Church of Sweden. Before this date, all infants automatically became members of the Church of Sweden by birth if one of the parents was a member. But from 1996,
baptism became the determinant of membership. The new rules clearly assume a more active desire to belong to the Church than was previously the case.

The final decisions on the road towards a religiously, almost, neutral and secular state were taken in 1997 and 1998 when the parliament changed the Swedish constitutional law, separating Church and state and increasing the recognition of other faith communities. A new Act on Faith Communities (SFS 1998:1593) as well as a special Church of Sweden Act (SFS 1998:1591) was introduced. This legislation aimed at placing the various faith communities in Sweden on a more equal footing, while simultaneously preserving continuity with respect to the position of the Church of Sweden as the national church. As a part of the process and a consequence of these juridical changes, the Church of Sweden General Synod adopted a new Church ordinance in 1999 replacing major parts of earlier legislation with internal regulations (Kyrkoordningen 1999, 2007). These parallel and coordinated reforms undertaken by the state and by the Church internally were implemented from 1 January 2000.

A major element of the reforms consisted of moving decision-making in Church affairs from the state to the Church itself and its own internal democratic organization. The Church has thereby been given responsibility for its decision making structures, the ordination of bishops, clergy and deacons as well as its financial administration. For example, the bishops are, since 1 January 2000, no longer appointed by the government, but rather elected in a democratic manner by representatives of the Church members and representatives of the clergy and the deacons (Ekström 2003: 271; Kyrkoordningen 2007: 27–31).

As part of the reform the former Church tax was replaced on 1 January 2000 by a Church fee. This fee continues, however, to be levied by the state via the tax system, which means that there is in practice no change for the individual Church member. The same opportunity to use this service has, from the year 2000, also been available to all officially registered faith communities.

Still a semi-official church

However, even if the former state church is now an organization separate from the state, some elements of the activities of the Church of Sweden are still closely connected to the state. A significant example is that the Church of Sweden retains primary responsibility for the maintenance of burial grounds, with the exception of some other special arrangements in a few places in Sweden. This includes the provision of special burial plots for people of different religious traditions, when such requests occur. The state has delegated this public service responsibility to the Church of Sweden through special legislation (SFS 1990:1144). This function of the Church of Sweden is often referred to as the last remaining part of its former position as a public authority, which will be handed over to the state sometime in the future. Currently, however this is not an important issue in political or public debate.

A second area which maintains the Church of Sweden’s special position in relation to the state concerns the fact that the Church owns a large part of Sweden’s national cultural heritage in the form of medieval churches and other old buildings. The Church
has responsibility for their administration and preservation, something which is regulated by a special act (SFS 1988:950). A third area stressing the special status of the Church of Sweden is the requirement by law that the monarch, as head of state, must belong to the Church of Sweden (SFS 1974:152).

The semi-official character of the Church of Sweden is obvious when the Church of Sweden Act and the preparatory government bills behind the act are examined. In the latter in particular there is an obvious tendency to maintain state control of the Church. The Church of Sweden Act states the following: that the confession of the Church is, even in the future, to be evangelical Lutheran; that the Church is to be open to all; that its activities should cover the country as a whole; and that it is to be a democratic organization. In the bill which formed the Church of Sweden Act, the government stresses the important role of the Church in society and expresses a welfare service perspective on the Church. The Church is an important part of the welfare society; it should be open, democratic and accessible for all citizens and offer its services to all and in all parts of the country. The only condition the Church may set when allowing people to make use of its services is membership of the Church. The law regulates that no other demands may be made (Regeringens proposition 1995/96:80, 9–10). The government has, in other words, indirectly set a direction for, and limits to, the identity of the Church and retains some degree of control over its development (Lundstedt 2006: 27–28).

This shows that the close connection between state and Church has not disappeared. The state still regards the Church of Sweden as something different from and more important than other faith communities, since there are no comparable state ambitions concerning these other organizations. Thus it can be said that the Church of Sweden has a semi-official position.

Financial state support of the majority church

The Church of Sweden has a relatively sound financial footing, which is linked to its historic role as a national church with a majority of the population as members. Its work is, however, mainly financed by a Church fee paid by its members based on a percentage of the individual’s total income which all members pay via their tax return. This means that the Church finances are highly dependent on the number of members and their income level. Since there is a yearly decline in membership of around one per cent the Church is under some economic pressure to reduce its costs continuously. The size of the Church fee is determined locally at parish level, and is on average around one per cent of the individual’s total income. People who are not members of the Church of Sweden still pay that part of the fee which goes to maintaining the burial grounds. Added to the membership fees, the Church also has significant income from property in the form of forests and agricultural land.

Linked to the above mentioned responsibility for a large part of Sweden’s cultural heritage the Church receives subsidies from the state for the administration and preservation of buildings that are particularly valuable from a cultural and historical perspec-
tive, (SFS 1988:950). These grants are distributed by the Swedish National Heritage Board (Riksantikvarieämbetet). In the year 2009, 46 million Euros was allocated to the Church for this purpose. The only direct financial support from the state to the Church of Sweden’s basic finances is the tax authority’s costs for collecting the membership fees. As part of the agreement of separation between Church and state it was decided that the Church of Sweden would receive this service for free, while other faith communities would have to pay for it if they wanted to collect their fees through the tax system. After discussing the legal position and state financial support of the Church of Sweden, we turn now to the third area of examination; the legal position of other faith communities.

Religious freedom and the legal position of other faith communities

In comparison with many other European countries, freedom of religion was introduced into Sweden relatively late. In 1726 a special decree was made prohibiting religious gatherings other than those of the established Church, with the intention of containing the growing pietistic movement. These regulations were replaced in 1873 by a special law concerning ‘alien’ religious believers in particular, which made it possible to leave the established Church and become a member of another Christian denomination recognized by the state. Not until 1951 did Sweden get a law guaranteeing freedom of religion, giving the citizens of the country the right to freely practice a religion of their own choice, or to abstain from being a member of any religious body (SFS 1951:680). In the Swedish constitution, it is formulated as «freedom to alone or together with other people practice religion» (SFS 1974:152). Today the Swedish state is officially neutral in relation to all faith communities. From 1 January 2000 all faith communities shall in principle be treated equally, although the Church of Sweden is still regulated separately and has particular responsibilities as mentioned above.

In order to create a common label for different religious denominations the concept «faith community», was introduced defining a new legal form of association. The new Act on Faith Communities defines a faith community as «a community for religious activity that includes the arrangement of religious service» (SFS 1998:1593). This definition mean that non-religious life view associations like the Swedish Humanist Association (Humanisterna) are not included within the state regulated group of faith communities. Faith communities can voluntarily apply to the government to gain legal status as a «faith community» and thereby enter the register of faith communities. The Church of Sweden is automatically registered as a faith community through the act. According to the act no one is obliged to belong to a faith community and children from the age of 12 must give their own consent to enter or leave a faith community.
Financial state support of faith communities

Voluntary organizations form an important part of Swedish society and are regarded by the state as generating significant social capital (Social ekonomi 1999). This view is confirmed in practice by the fact that voluntary organizations, which are seen as contributing to the building of society and the maintenance of fundamental common values, are supported financially by the state. As mentioned above a special act specifies a certain category of voluntary organizations as «faith communities». National state support to these is regulated by two acts and one regulation; The Act on Faith Communities (SFS 1998:1593), The Act on support to Faith Communities (SFS 1999:932) and the Regulation on State Subsidies to Faith Communities (SFS 1999:974).

The overarching aim of financial state support to faith communities is to create opportunities for them to maintain long term religious activity in the form of religious services, counseling, teaching and care. The support in the form of grants is handled by the Swedish Commission for Government Support to Faith Communities (SST) which is a state authority under the Ministry of Culture. It has a board of nine members and an advisory group made up of 24 representatives of different faith communities. The board is appointed by the government and consists of faith community representatives nominated by the advisory group. This means that the decision making body of SST is a state authority that consists of representatives of the organizations which are the receivers of the state grants which it distributes.

SST distributes state grants to faith communities other than the Church of Sweden. It also provides other kinds of support and coordinates matters concerning the role of faith communities in catastrophe management (SFS 2007:1192). In order for an organization to receive support a number of specified criteria have to be fulfilled (SFS 1999:932; SFS 1999:974; SST Tillämpningsföreskrifter 2009). The faith community has to: a) contribute to maintaining and strengthening the fundamental values of society (my italics), b) be organizationally stable and have a life force of its own, c) serve at least 3000 people in Sweden and manage activities in several locations in the country. If it serves less people, it must instead be part of an internationally active faith community of substantial importance, d) be organized as a registered faith community or a registered non-profit association with leadership in Sweden, e) be financed mainly by members living in Sweden, f) own or rent premises for its activities.

The meaning of the fundamental values of society is elaborated in the government’s bill to parliament on state support to faith communities (Regeringens proposition 1998/99: 124). Here it is stated that these values concern democratic values and the equal value of all humans, including equality between women and men. This means working against discrimination of people based on sex, skin color, national or ethnic origin, language or religious belonging, handicap, sexual orientation or age. It also means encouraging ethnic, language and religious minorities to maintain and develop a cultural and religious life of their own. It is also stated that in order to be eligible for grants a faith community should encourage its members to take part in the life of society and clearly distance itself from antidemocratic currents in society.
There are currently 40 faith communities receiving state grants, which are of three different kinds: a) An organizational grant enabling provision of religious services, pastoral care and education, b) A working grant to support specific areas that the state wishes to subsidize, e.g. hospital chaplaincy and theological training at certain theological colleges, c) Project grants, which aim to stimulate new forms of activity and cooperation.

The major (organizational) grants are distributed according to the number of people which it is estimated that the respective faith community serves and this can include more people than are members. Figures from the year 2009 show that 5.023 thousand Euros were distributed as organizational grants (Nämnden för statligt stöd till trossamfund, SST. Utbetalda statsbidrag 2009). These were distributed (in thousand Euros) to the Pentecostal movement (649), Mission Covenant Church of Sweden (634), fifteen Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox Churches (590), five Muslim organizations (529), the Roman Catholic Church (420), Inter Act (Evangeliska Frikyrkan) (251), National Evangelical Missionary Society (EFS) (232), Baptist Union of Sweden (156), Swedish Alliance Mission (118), Salvation Army (110), Official Council of Swedish Jewish Communities (53), Buddhist co-operative council of Sweden (22), The Adventist Church (25), Nine minor Christian denominations (176).

State support to collect membership fees via the tax system
From 1 January 2000 the state made it possible for all officially registered and acknowledged faith communities to have their membership fees levied by the state via the tax system. As previously mentioned this service is free for the Church of Sweden, but other faith communities have to pay the costs for this service. In 2010 the following eight faith communities collected their membership fees through the tax system (Skatteverket 2010. Avgift till andra trossamfund): Mission Covenant Church of Sweden, Catholic Church, Swedish Alliance Mission, Baptist Union of Sweden, Inter Act (Evangeliska Frikyrkan), Salvation Army, Methodist Church, Pentecostal parishes in cooperation.

Rejected applications for financial state support
A few applications to enter the state support system have been rejected and these organizations have then also been denied the chance to use the fee collection service. From the year 2000 until 01–06–2010 the following four applications for state support have been rejected: a) The Quakers, b) The Mandeic community, c) Jehovah’s Witnesses, d) The Church of Scientology.

An application from the Quakers (Vännernas samfund) in 2006 was turned down because the community did not count 3000 members (or people served) in Sweden, and neither was it considered to be part of an internationally active faith community of considerable size (Regeringsbeslut 2006–12–14). Although the Quakers worldwide have around 200 000–400 000 members (depending on source), this was not considered enough.
An application from the Mandeic community in 2009 was rejected because the community was not considered to be organizationally stable with «a life force of its own» (Regeringsbeslut 2009–06–17a).

In 2009 Jehovah’s Witnesses was judged not to be contributing to maintaining and strengthening the basic values of Swedish society (Regeringsbeslut 2009–06–17b). It was argued that the members are not encouraged to participate in political elections, or to take on political roles and duties. Thereby Jehovah’s witnesses were regarded as not encouraging their members to take part in the life of society. Added to this their attitude to general principles concerning health and medical care was also mentioned, as members of the Witnesses refuse blood transfusions. Another argument was the difficult situation for ex-members, who in some cases are isolated from the members.

The Church of Scientology was, in 2006, found not to fulfill the requirement to contribute to maintaining and strengthening the fundamental values of Swedish society (Regeringsbeslut 2006–02–16). Some questions about the organization of the Church were also raised and it was questioned whether the activities really are mainly financed by the members, as this is one of the conditions for state support (Frisk 2010).

In recent years the Swedish Humanist association has raised criticism of state support to faith communities, arguing that the state is secular and should not support any religion at all. In addition they have also argued that faith communities are often carriers of conservative, non-humanist values, which should not be supported by the state (Sturmark 2011). In 2006 the Humanist association applied to be acknowledged as a faith community, but the application was rejected because the organization does not manage any religious activity (Regeringsbeslut 2006–12–21). Renewed applications have been sent in 2007 and 2009 without being accepted.

Financial support from local municipalities and regional authorities
The Church of Sweden at local and regional level does not normally receive any financial support from local municipalities (kommuner) or regional authorities (landsting, länsstyrelser). Since the Church of Sweden has traditionally, until recently, been regarded as a public authority in parallel with other authorities, it has no tradition of applying for such money. However the activities for children and young people provided by other faith communities are often supported financially by local or regional authorities according to the authorities’ principles of providing general support to voluntary organizations running these kinds of activities. But there are no official national statistics detailing the amount of this kind of local or regional financial support. This is something that requires further investigation.

Religious officials’ acting as state officials in marriage ceremonies
The Church of Sweden has, along with about 40 other faith communities, the right to conduct legally accepted marriages. This right is given by a government agency (Kammarkollegiet) in two steps. First the faith community has to apply and prove its orga-
organizational stability and ability to apply Swedish marriage law. Following this the faith community has to apply for certain individual officials to receive the right to conduct marriage ceremonies. This means that the right is conferred after individual examination and not given generally to all religious officials within a faith community. Currently around 4000 individual faith community officials have this right, of whom the large majority are ordained clergy in the Church of Sweden. Until 1 May 2010 the Church of Sweden was an exception, with the right given to all ordained ministers. But following this date the government made the right to conduct marriage ceremonies individual in all cases, in order to make all religious officials equal. This change was also a way of marking the state control of the marriage right and thus part of the Church-state separation process. The individual nature of this right to conduct marriage ceremonies means that ministers can lose it, if they, for example, forget some formalities of the procedures.

As part of the Church-state debate within the Church the function of clergy as state officials in marriage ceremonies has been one of the issues that have been questioned by some groups within the Church which argued for a total separation of the Church from the state. This issue was brought up, in particular, in parallel with the general debate on same sex marriages. There was an intense internal debate within the Church of Sweden, regarding whether the Church should accept same sex partnerships, introduced in Sweden in 1995, and later whether the Church should adapt to the new sex neutral marriage law of 1 May 2009. When the Church of Sweden General Synod took the decision in 2009 to adopt the sex neutral marriage law, 176 of 251 Church synod members voted in favor of the proposal. This made the Church of Sweden the first major church in the world to accept same sex marriages. So far no other Swedish faith community has followed the Church of Sweden in this respect, and the state has not tried to force faith communities, or threatened to withdraw their right to conduct legally binding marriage ceremonies.

Even if the change in 2010 to individualize the right to conduct marriage ceremonies for Church of Sweden clergy was not officially linked to the issue of same sex marriages, it indirectly made it possible for ministers against same sex marriages to voluntarily abstain from this right. Although no minister is obliged to conduct a same sex marriage, the option to abstain has been used by a few as a way of protesting and also of avoiding getting into personal conflicts on this issue. This has caused an ongoing discussion in the Church of Sweden concerning how to handle this new situation and a variety of praxis has developed among the dioceses. Some dioceses accept that clergy abstain from the right to conduct marriage ceremonies, while others give the minister a formal rebuke because it means abandoning one of the main elements of his or her duties. Presumably a more coherent Church praxis will develop over the coming years.

Religion as a factor to take into special legal account

A general principle in Swedish society developed during the 20th Century has been that religion should be regarded as a private matter. No special recognition should be given
to religion as a factor to take into account in public contexts. The public sphere should be a secular non-religious arena where all people are treated equally and are expected to accept the same social rules regardless of gender, ethnicity, cultural background or religion. This secular and religiously neutral public sphere has, however, slowly but continuously altered in character. The Swedish society has become more aware of the existence of immigrant cultures and the ways in which some of these regard the religion of individuals as a matter that has to be taken into account in public contexts. This changing attitude has been caused by increasing immigration in parallel with a general cultural shift from values stressing societal homogeneity and collectivism to subjective values stressing and respecting individuality, plurality and diversity.

However, when it comes to public holidays the effects of increasing plurality and the disestablishment of the Church have not yet caused any official changes and no Christian holidays have been made «secular». Neither has any holidays been officially added from other religious traditions, although they are increasingly noted and made visible in public spaces such as the media and schools, an example being the Islamic Ramadan.

The general view is that religious observation belongs to the private sphere and so far no legal exemptions have been made with reference to religious belonging, with the exception of one case. This concerns members of the Jehovah Witnesses who in 1966 were totally exempted from the obligation to participate in military service (Gustafsson 2008).3

When it comes to religious traditions such as circumcision, regulations surrounding food or clothing these are also regarded as private matters and no special acts refer to religion as a motive for legal exemption, although the law on circumcision may be seen as referring to religion as a motive. Female circumcision is strictly prohibited in Sweden, while male circumcision is accepted in law and must be performed by professional doctors with the use of anesthetics. However, circumcision of boys under two months of age may be performed by persons who have been given special permission by the national Social Authority (Socialstyrelsen) following recommendation by a faith community which has circumcision as a tradition (SFS 2001:449). The legal acceptance of circumcision is, however, often questioned, e.g. by many medical professionals who argue that it amounts to mistreatment of the child.

Religious slaughter following Jewish or Islamic practice is still prohibited in Sweden, although many argue for a change. The use of traditional clothing, which is often cited as having religious motivations, like the headscarf for Muslims or the Sikh turban, often leads to negotiations at local level in workplaces. Such negotiations are normally solved through mutual agreement, and there is no specific law regulating the right to wear religious garments. The most controversial clothing discussion has been on the issue of whether the Muslim burqa4 should be accepted in public spaces.

When it comes to legal protection of religion Sweden historically had a specific blasphemy law protecting religion as such. It was introduced by King Erik XIV in 1563 and followed by different Acts on this theme until 1949, when it was replaced by an Act on «Peace of Faith» which was a milder form of restriction (Hedin 2008). In 1970 this Act was abolished and a new Act was introduced on «agitation against a specific
group of people» (SFS 2002:906). This Act is focused on minority groups of a specific «race, skin color, national or ethnic origin, faith or sexual orientation». Thus, it is not the religion as such that is protected, but the group of people that adhere to the religion. Religious faith is paralleled here with e.g. ethnicity or sexual orientation. This act has mostly been used in cases concerning agitation in relation to Jews and homosexuals. There is presently no Act prohibiting blasphemy in Swedish Law (cf. Dahlgren 1985: 198).

Discussion
The relationships between state and religion in Sweden have changed slowly, continuously and in a long term perspective dramatically over the last 150 years. The development has been from a situation of almost complete unity between a monopoly Lutheran church and the Swedish state in 1862 to a religiously neutral state with a pluralistic religious landscape today. In parallel with society’s functional differentiation of most of its organizational components and activities, religion has developed as a continuously more specialized social function. This functional secularization has reduced the impact of religion in relation to society’s hierarchical power structure, but increased the notion of the specificities of religion as such, and highlighted the need to take account of religion as a special and persisting field of social life. In the last few years the impact of religion has become a subject of increasing interest in many societal as well as academic fields in which it was regarded as obsolete only a few years ago. The continuous negotiation between the officially secular Swedish state and different religious agents concerning their mutual relationships is a significant example of the persisting role of religion.

The separation process between the Swedish state and the Church of Sweden has taken place as part of the process of societal differentiation. Officially it is described as an almost complete separation between state and religion. Looking more closely, however, we find many persisting formal as well as informal links between the majority church and the state, as well as state support to and collaboration with other faith communities. Thus the state is ideologically secular although in many ways religion is integrated in social practice as shown by the facts presented in this article. It is obvious that the majority church has a different societal role after the changed relationship to the state on 1 January 2000. On this date the Church of Sweden became an independent agent and over night appeared as the largest organization in Swedish society after the state. Not surprisingly the state cannot leave such a major organization, and thereby a potential power, without a control.

The preparatory texts behind the Church of Sweden Act clarify the government’s notion of the Church as an important state resource that still needs state control. When interpreting the state policy expressed in the different acts on relationships between the state and faith communities, it is obvious that religious agents are regarded as important contributors to the Swedish welfare system. The Church of Sweden is regarded as having a special function for a majority of Swedish citizens and society at large, and
other religious organizations are seen as having a similar contributing function in the manner of other voluntary organizations. The difference between the actions of the state in relation to the former state church on the one hand, and the minority religious organizations on the other hand, remains for historical reasons and because of significant differences in sociological function. The Church of Sweden still has a function very similar to that of a public service organization even after deregulation in the year 2000, while the other churches and religious organizations mainly serve their own members in the same way as other associations do. As we have seen above, the practice of having a state support system for faith communities other than the Church of Sweden further shows that both directly and indirectly the state still has an impact on religion as such as well as on the role of religion in society at large.

Conclusion

The future development of state-religion relationships in Sweden is difficult to predict. Religious pluralism will increase along with the increased proportion of immigrants in the population, and Church of Sweden membership figures will continue to decrease. The state will presumably keep on supporting religious agents in different ways, both as a matter of general control and a matter of directing the resources of these organizations into needs prioritized by the state. It is anyhow clear that the Swedish state is not strictly neutral in relation to religion, but has an implicit religious agenda, even if it does not carry that label. The state can, however, still be regarded as principally secular, in line with the type of secularization theory stressing the functional differentiation of society and the specialization of religious agents (Luhmann 1982; Dobbelaere 2001; Beyer 1994). The continuous reforms of Church-state relationships have obviously been driven by a principle of the division of roles between the state and religious agents.

Notes

1 The percentage figures refer to people that are members or users of religion in organized form according to reports from the respective religious organization.
2 A pastorate is an organisational unit with a major responsibility for economy and personnel. It can consist of one or a number of parishes.
3 From 1 July 2010 the obligatory military service was made voluntary for all (SFS 2010:590).
4 Burqa is a garment worn by women covering the head and body completely.

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