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SWEDEN DEMOCRATS’ APPEAL TO CHRISTIANITY: CAN RELIGIOUS IDENTITY POLITICS WIN GENERAL SUPPORT?

Abstract

The Sweden Democrats (SD) promote religious identity politics. This is done despite the fact that few of SD’s voters identify themselves as religious and the fact that Christianity does not have a large influence over Swedish politics. Hence, it is reasonable to understand these efforts as both reflecting Islamophobia and a culture preservation strategy. The article traces the debate over SD’s public appeal to Christianity, through the Church of Sweden (CoS) – SD being represented with 14 delegates in the Synod – and through the party system. The article also analyses sanctions that any affiliation with SD can lead to, specified as negative labelling, and the choice between keeping one’s job and discontinuing one’s SD membership for ministers and deacons in CoS. The article finds that the various actors have managed to contain and isolate the SD, implying weak support for religious identity politics.

Keywords: Church of Sweden, European Parliament, immigration, islamophobia, Swedish Parliament

Sweden displays highly interesting attitudes on immigration and national symbols, and has a strong recognition of group rights (Minkenberg 2007). Swedes express the most tolerant positions among Europeans in favor of a multicultural society (Blom 2011: 153–156). One author refers to the Swedish pro-immigration attitudes as “remarkable” (Demker 2012: 247). On this background, and the isolation that the Sweden Democrats (SD) have been subject to, it was a surprise for most persons that SD received 12.9 per cent of the vote in the Swedish parliamentary elections in 2014, gaining 49 parliamentarians. An opinion poll in December 2014 showed an even higher percentage, 16.9 (YouGov 2014).

While the emphasis will be on Sweden, seeking to explain SD’s active use of Christian heritage and promotion of this heritage, this article seeks to describe Swedish characteristics by also including characteristics from Sweden’s neighbouring countries,
Denmark and Norway. Hence, the article identifies specific Swedish circumstances that explain SD’s appeal to Christianity – and the reactions against this.

This article will apply the term “religious identity politics”. While general identity politics seeks to “secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalised within its larger context”, as defined by the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, religious identity politics is more exclusivist and divisive. On a national level, searching after religious sources for national identities gave rise to the sacralisation analyses by Anthony Smith (2009, 2003, 1999). On a supra-national level, the clash between civilisations-thesis as proposed by Samuel Huntington (1996, 1993), while widely criticised, is at least reflected by growing religious hostilities, particularly in Middle East and North Africa (Pew Research Center 2014: 25, 84–91).

When religious and national or supra-national identities become mutually reinforcing, this may be utilised by nationalistic and – implicit or explicit – racist political parties to seek to win both new voters and enhanced influence.¹ This article is inspired by the “tripolar religious cleavage” (Madeley 2000: 41) – stating that the conservative and Christian democratic parties’ approach to Christianity differs from the populist right-wing parties’ approach to Christianity. This model has been found by Lindberg (2013: 135) to be applicable to the four Nordic countries.

After presenting approaches for understanding the rise of far-right political parties, the article presents the past and present of the SD. It then traces in detail SD’s appeal to Christianity, operationalised as SD’s religious identity politics, as well as the reactions against this. The SD’s attempted influence through the Church of Sweden (CoS), including how CoS has responded to ministers being affiliated with SD, and through the Swedish party system, are explored. The article then identifies whether SD can be ostracised by suppressing the immigration debate in Sweden and by imposing sanctions on members of or persons sympathetic to SD, or if this will rather lead to a pressure cooker effect, where support of SD will increase.

The main sources are SD’s party platform and other documents from SD; the Swedish public debates on SD in particular and religious identity politics in general before and after SD entered the Swedish Parliament in 2010, covering not only Swedish media; regulations adopted by CoS; and relevant surveys, allowing for comparisons between the three Scandinavian countries.

The research approach

The article seeks to bring new insights to the relationship between religion and what Cas Mudde terms “populist radical right parties” in Europe, a relationship that has received little attention in scholarly research (Mudde 2007: 296). Two quantitative analyses on religion and right-wing voting covering seven and eight Western European states, respectively (not Sweden), found a weak overall relationship between religious practice and voting for radical right parties (Immerzeel et al. 2013; Arzheimer and Carter 2009). The relationship is that religious belief (particularism: believing that there is only one true religion; and doctrine: faith in God, sin, hell, heaven and afterlife)
is significantly related to voting for radical right-wing parties in Belgian Flandern, Norway and Switzerland (Immerzeel et al. 2013: 957–958).

Explanations for the growth of populist radical right parties focus on demand-side and supply-side explanations. Mudde (2007) specifies that demand-side explanations tend to be understood in too limited terms, and emphasises that these explanations have three levels: macro (demographics and politics), meso (local organisations and cohesion), or micro (individual attitudes, derived from a country’s legacy and political culture) (2007: 202–224). He believes that the meso level is the most important among the three for explaining voting behavior (2007: 217; 231).

Moving to the supply-side, these explanations can be categorised into external and internal supply-side (Mudde 2007). The external supply-side specifies the political opportunity structure that provides space for political parties, such as electoral systems, the positioning of other parties, and the positioning by the media. The internal supply-side emphasises characteristics of the party organisation, leadership – exercised internally or externally (Mudde 2007: 260) – and ideology that appeals to the voters.

Demand-side and supply-side approaches specify what explains the electoral success of radical right-wing parties. These parties may have success in other ways than their voting patterns, however. The ultimate objective of these parties is a stronger sense of self-preservation of nation, culture and traditions, through forms of identity politics, which can be promoted in other ways than through representation in parliament or participation in governments.

First, they may influence other political parties’ rhetoric and policies. In Sweden since 2010, the approach by the other seven parties in Parliament has officially been on non-cooperation with SD. Informal cooperation between the center-right government and SD took place in the period 2010–2014, as the government did not represent parties with an absolute majority, hence needing SD’s support. This cooperation did not, however, influence the policies of the government or its member parties before the 2014 elections, as they maintained their pro-immigration policies.

Second, radical right-wing parties can influence civil society actors and, through this impact, the overall attitudes. In elections for the Synod in Church of Sweden, 300 eligible persons can call for registration of a list, and most of these lists are affiliated with political parties (Church of Sweden 2013: Chapter 38, Section 22; for a criticism of the influence of the parties over CoS; see Kalin 2008). Since 2013, the SD has 14 representatives in Church of Sweden’s Synod. It is not possible to identify any influence that these representatives have had on the policies of CoS.

The internal supply-side will also be included, specifically to analyse the extent to which the religious identity politics that SD leadership promotes is assessed positively by CoS and by ordinary people.

The article seeks to answer the following question – raised in three parts: What is the basis for and content of the religious identity politics as promoted by SD; how is this rhetoric applied in order to gain respectability in the Swedish society overall, through CoS, and by influencing the other political parties; and how can the sanctions by societal actors, CoS and the political parties against SD be explained? The term “sanctions” is defined by the Oxford Dictionary of Sociology as “[a]ny means by
which conformity to socially approved standards is enforced”. Sanctions can be a broad range of measures, from receiving negative labeling if one expresses positions said to belong to SD, via choosing between keeping one’s job and keeping one’s membership or sympathies with SD, to a situation where one might risk attacks by the extreme left. This article will only address the two first, in separate sections.

Sweden Democrats and its religious identity politics rhetoric

SD calls for limiting as much as possible immigration of persons, particularly those coming from countries where fundamentalist versions of Islam are strong (Sweden Democrats 2011b: 27). The Muslims, according to the current SD leader, are said to be the greatest foreign threat to Sweden (Åkesson 2009).

SD was established by persons from the Bevara Sverige Svenskt (Keep Sweden Swedish) movement in 1988, and particularly its youth organisation was influenced by the Swedish neo-Nazi movement for the first years. Both the current leader (from 2005), Jimmie Åkesson, and the former leader (1995–2005), Mikael Jansson, have expelled members who are members of openly racist or anti-Semitic organisations. Since 2014, the SD is represented in the European Parliament with two MEPs, joining the Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy political group, undermining the attempts of forming a political group based on the Front National (FN)-led European Alliance for Freedom (EAF).³

Most agree that SD has gone through a moderation process (Hellström and Nilsson 2010; Bjurwald 2014). This author does not agree with a leading Norwegian Jew, who in her speech when winning the prestigious Fritt Ord (Free Speech) Prize in 2014 termed SD as “a party with clearly expressed Nazi ideas”⁴ (Sender 2014; contra: Lööw 2006). Some fringe parties have been established by defectors from SD, most notably the split in 2001 that resulted in the (now defunct) party Nationaldemokraterna, that in 2010 joined the Alliance of European National Movements (AENM) (Lindhof 2010).⁵

SD was a member of the now defunct Euronat network, initiated by FN in the late 1990s, and received financial support from FN for its 1998 election campaign. Since 2001, SD has sought relations to the Danish Peoples Party (DPP), but without formal connections being built.

Demker (2012: 240–243) acknowledges the differences between the three far-right parties in Scandinavia, noting that only SD originated from a right-wing extremism, unlike the other two Scandinavian countries’ anti-immigration parties, whose origins were neo-liberal and anti-tax.

In its early years, SD might be correctly described as extreme right, as defined by Mudde (2007: 258). While SD regularly excludes disloyal members, SD’s Ethical Guidelines only require SD’s employees to “distance themselves from extreme ideologies” (Sweden Democrats 2011a: 8, 12).

In the current party platform, SD defines itself as social conservative (Sweden Democrats 2011b: 11) and supports a non-racist nationalism (Sweden Democrats 2011b: 13). It says that persons might both join and leave the Swedish nation by chang-
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In the 2013 speech, Åkesson even stated that Church of Sweden is actively supporting the Islamisation of the Swedish society (Svenska Dagbladet 2013) and the same position is taken in the SD’s Church Manifesto, launched before the elections in CoS (Sweden Democrats 2013: 1; see also Sweden Democrats 2012). To say that a church is promoting Islamisation must be considered a most uncommon position.

Hence, SD emphasises anti-Islam, distancing itself from anti-Semitism, making the party stand out from other parties (Swedish Committee against Anti-Semitism 2012). There are indications, however, that SD has moved from being extreme right to a position closer to the radical right (Mudde 2007: 24, 26), by publicly and actively distancing itself from openly racist organisations, and by not calling for forced repatriation.

The receptiveness of and the reactions against the SD’s religious identity politics

What appeal is there in Sweden for a rhetoric that seeks to promote nationalistic religion by identity politics? To answer this question, it is initially necessary to understand the particular Swedish nationalism:
Most Norwegians and Danes relate to national symbols and feelings in ways which differ significantly from the way Swedes do. This has important consequences for how extreme nationalists can exploit or appropriate national symbols (Bjørgo 1997: 275).

A study has found that 46 per cent of Swedes have not used the flag the last year (Botvar et al. 2014: 16), with corresponding figures for Norway and Denmark being 20 and 25 per cent. According to Bjørgo, who has studied nationalist discourses and symbols in Scandinavia, the limited use by the ordinary Swedes of the flag makes it easy to “hijack” by Swedish extreme nationalists and right wing groups and, unlike Norwegian and Danish national heroes, the Swedish national heroes are predominantly warrior kings (Bjørgo 1997: 279). As an example of the latter, commemoration marches on the death day of one of these warrior kings provided an important encounter for North European militant racists in the 1990s, where Nazi symbols were displayed.

Hence, Swedish nationalism has to a certain extent been associated with aggression. In order to make Swedish nationalism more appealing, SD seeks to promote a broader appeal, placing Swedish culture and tradition at the center.

Using the Swedish Christian heritage for purposes of upholding Swedish nationalism has, however, been difficult for SD. First, the typical SD voter is not religious, with only 7 per cent classifying themselves as such (YouGov 2012). The most recent survey in Sweden asking persons to identify themselves as either religious, non-religious or atheist, received a 29 per cent score for religious (Världen idag 2012). Second, Church of Sweden resists such attempts. CoS does promote openness towards persons of other faiths and a societal facilitation for the exercise of other faiths (Church of Sweden 2011a), but this is far from promoting other faiths.

The 2013 speech (Svenska Dagbladet 2013) was met with criticism, reminding Åkesson of Sweden’s human rights obligations (Pearce and Fast 2013), countering Åkesson’s linking of the Christian and the Swedish (Klint 2013). The Danish discourse linking Danishness and (Lutheran) Christianity – as promoted primarily by the Danish Peoples’ Party and the Liberal Party (Haugen 2011; Riis 2011) – has obviously been an inspiration for SD (Lodenius and Wingborg 2009). There is much less receptivity for such linkages in Sweden.

Åkesson’s argument that Church of Sweden should more proactively fight multiculturalism was met with reactions stressing that SD’s nationalistic vision for CoS does not match CoS’ own ecclesiology (Klint 2013; Pearce and Fast 2013; Samuelsson and Hedman 2013). Klint ends his response to Åkesson by noting:

The truth is that the legacy that CoS upholds suits your political agenda badly. Take it as a good advice: look elsewhere for the values that can support your political ideology. If you allow the Christian Gospel in, this will tear down the walls that you build from the inside (Klint 2013).

Klint, a minister in Church of Sweden, also notes that CoS is preaching about care for others and against xenophobia every Sunday. This moves us to an analysis of how SD has sought to win positions and allies within CoS.
Sweden Democrats’ influence through the Church of Sweden

Is SD able to exercise influence through Church of Sweden? When modelling the diversity of the Nordic churches, CoS is placed in the category “high church – religious liberalism” (Thorkildsen 2014: 90):

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<th>Characteristics of Nordic churches</th>
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<tr>
<td>High church</td>
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<td>Pietism</td>
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<td>Religious liberalism</td>
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The terminology of “high church” is applied to worship practices in Lutheran churches that are similar to those of Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism. A high church will be more hierarchical than a low church, implying that signals and instructions from the central level of the church are expected to be accepted at the local level.

Religious liberalism has been termed by Woodhead and Heelas (2000) as a “religion of humanity”. A church with such characteristics tends to favor individual and collective rights of immigrants and those belonging to other religious communities.

What is the appeal of SD among ministers in Church of Sweden? There are ministers who have been affiliated with SD. One is a congregation minister who resigned her position in 2014, Helena Edlund, writing an open letter to her bishop where she said that she has been “portrayed as a half-fascist…” (Edlund 2014). In 2013, she abandoned her representations for SD, saying: “It is not possible because I work where I work” (Skånska Dagbladet 2013; Fria Tidar 2013). According to Edlund, she has been pressured to distance herself from SD in order to continue her employment in CoS, but subsequently left her job as a minister.

Is this an indication of an implicit “berufsverbot” for SD members as regards liturgical positions (ministers and deacons) in Church of Sweden? If so, is this justified? To answer such a question one must first understand the essential characteristics of SD, and second, the requirements of CoS, identifying whether these set certain standards for conduct that are incompatible with membership in SD.

Concerning SD, it is correct to state that SD is not anti-Semitic, and is moving from being extreme right (Mudde 2007: 258) to being xenophobic, islamophobic and radical right (Mudde 2007: 26). Hence, SD differs from openly anti-Semitic political parties, such as Svenskarnas Parti (The Swedes’ party). The European churches have a long and shameful history of practicing both religiously grounded anti-Judaism and anti-Islam. Anti-Semitism goes one step further, being a racist, conspiracy-based ideology that is qualitatively different and more incompatible with the Christian Gospel compared to the Islamophobia that SD stands for. What is the core of this Islamophobia? The essence is that Muslims as a group are said have a “religious belief that has proved to be the most difficult to harmoniously coexist with Swedish and Western values” (Sweden Democrats 2011b: 27). Moreover, SD does not display a too stereotypical image of followers of Islam, at least officially. First, SD does not present Muslims as such to constitute a demographic threat, as SD primarily requires from...
persons living in Sweden that they learn the Swedish language and accept Swedish norms, and SD does not promote revoking permits of or forcefully repatriating persons residing legally in Sweden, but calls for temporary asylum. Second, arguing for limiting immigration from countries with a strong presence of fundamentalism (Sweden Democrats 2011b: 27) does represent an unwarranted categorisation of individual persons, but SD’s argumentation is primarily relating to the need for a good integration, avoiding parallel societies from developing. Third, SD does not give an image of Islam as representing Satanic forces, which is not uncommon in the most fierce, conspiracy-oriented Islamophobic actors.

As regards Church of Sweden, there are national codes of conduct (Church of Sweden 1990) and diocese-specific codes of conduct, stating that employees shall practice so that “God’s will is realised in the world” (Stockholm Stift 2011: 5). God’s will talks about the unity between all persons irrespective of origin, status or gender, but God’s will cannot be said to extend to non-criticism of certain expressions of religions, including one’s own. The Christian Gospel also calls for welcoming the stranger and showing love to one’s enemy, not only to one’s neighbour. In CoS’ ordinance, there is a basis for dismissal if acting contrary to one’s ordination promise, being convicted, choosing a lifestyle or in other ways damaging the probable reputation of a minister or a deacon (Church of Sweden 2013: Ch 31, § 12; Ch 32, § 12). Should one’s reputation extend to one’s opinions on immigration or Islam? As stated above, Ministers in CoS cannot be prevented from having critical views on other religious expressions. A minister or deacon, however, shall not act in manners that resemble party agitation. Moreover, if anti-immigrant views are agitated from the pulpit, this is too far from the general position of CoS, and such conduct might damage one’s reputation. Based on available reports, it seems as if it is the SD membership – and not the overall conduct – that has led a minister like Edlund to being “pressured” – her own words – to leave her position.

Edlund has criticised Church of Sweden for being too soft on Islam: “Islam is protected… to the absurdity” (Edlund 2011). Edlund has been a part of what has been termed the “identity debate” in Sweden, where one group says that identity issues are crucial for CoS (Borg and Hugo 2011). Their allegation is that CoS is promoting only what is “churchly correct” (Borg 2011). They have been countered by another group which is dialogue-oriented. In a criticism of the identity-promoting ministers, this second group concludes: “That right-wing forces are nourished by an occasionally perverted ecclesiastical debate is deeply regrettable” (Lindqvist Hotz et al. 2012). This illustrates a polarised debate.

Another minister, Axel W Karlsson, who is currently the only independent member of the Synod of CoS, was in 2014 expelled from SD because he had published in the weekly magazine Nya Tider (New Era). This is a magazine run by defectors from the (now defunct) party Nationaldemokraterna. The New Era magazine was launched in 2012, receiving 1.67 million SEK in 2013 from the Press Subsidies Council (Vergara 2013). Karlsson has not been employed by CoS for the last years. SD’s Party Secretary said that Karlsson has been active in organisations that are far removed from SD (Expressen GT 2014). The Bishop of Gothenburg said that the minister had engaged in
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anti-Semitic activities, which is not consistent with a CoS ordination (Kyrkans Tidning 2014a). There are also examples of retired ministers and theology students who support the SD (Helsingborgs Dagblad 2014; Norrländska Socialdemokraten 2014).

Attitudes by Church of Sweden bishops and other ministers differ considerably from these SD-embracing attitudes. A survey of approximately 350 ministers and deacons found that none indicated that they would vote for SD, while for instance the Greens had strong support (Kyrkans Tidning 2014b). In 2010, during the church service at the opening of the Swedish Parliament, the (then) Bishop of Stockholm said:

> It is not worthy for a democracy like ours to treat people differently. It is not possible for people of faith to treat people differently. It is unworthy for people to treat other people differently. (…) Here we have a common mission (…) (Brunne 2010).

Identifying the common mission and emphasising the moral responsibility on all three levels (states, faith communities and individuals) have a strong moral appeal, and must be understood to target SD. This was confirmed by Åkesson, saying that he was hurt by the speech, and both he and all other SD parliamentarians left the church during the sermon. Åkesson has later attended these church services – also the interreligious ones (Temo 2013).

Despite CoS allowing parties to present lists for elections, CoS seems to be a difficult channel through which SD can promote religious identity politics. This assessment moves us to analysing the extent to which Swedish political parties and the national political system in Sweden are receptive of the religious identity politics as promoted by SD.

Sweden Democrats’ influence through other political parties

The seven other parliamentary parties’ non-cooperation line since 2010 has been reiterated after the 2014 election. While it might be difficult to see how the parties will be more inclined to promote the religious identity politics agenda of SD, are these other parties nevertheless tempted to adjust their policies in order to win back votes lost to SD in 2014?

Observers of the Swedish public discourse find that there is little acceptance for alternative views. On the immigration issue, the conflict line goes between SD and the other parties. Contrary to what others have found (Blom 2011: 153–156; Demker 2012: 243–247), a leading Swedish expert on the radical right observes that Swedes’ attitudes on immigration are not significantly different from those found in other European states (Rydgren 2010:66). In contrast with Denmark, however, these attitudes are not reflected in the positions of the various political parties (Jensen and Frølund Thomsen 2013).

The Swedish election surveys do not indicate a potential for massive growth in anti-immigrant attitudes, support for SD and for religious identity politics. When asked about the most important issues in the recent elections to the Swedish Parliament (1998, 2002, 2006, 2010), the share that lists immigration as the most important issue
has been 3, 10, 5, and 9 per cent, respectively (Statistics Sweden 2011: 60). In opinion polls made during the 2014 election day – with 12,909 respondents – refugees/immigration is ranked as the 13th most important issue, and 17 per cent say that they agree mostly with SD on refugees/immigration (Swedish Television 2014: 9, 11). On other issues, SD has very low scores, ranging from 2 to 5 per cent.

The different attitudes between SD voters and those voting for other parties appear in the Swedish 2010 election survey. Three questions concerning values in the future Swedish society are particularly interesting (Statistics Sweden 2011: 74), asking respondents if they want: 1) more emphasis on Christian values; 2) more emphasis on multiculturalism and tolerance of others; 3) more emphasis on traditional Swedish values. Each will now be presented.

On Christian values, SD’s voters have preferences reflecting the average among all respondents, with 17 per cent and 16 per cent, respectively. Not surprisingly, the preference among Christian Democrats (CD) voters is the highest, but only 68 per cent. A situation where one out of six wants more emphasis on Christian values indicates that there is limited appeal in Sweden for enhanced emphasis on Christian values. Even if the term Christian values is not specified, it must be perceived that such values are understood as being derived primarily from the Christian faith, not from the Christian tradition. This low score corresponds with a Church of Sweden survey, with only 20 per cent of Swedes agreeing that CoS should engage in issues that are “political” – but half of the respondents agree that CoS should take part in the public debate (Church of Sweden 2011b).

On multiculturalism and tolerance, 11 per cent of SD’s voters indicate their support, as compared to 56 per cent for all respondents. The Social Democrats and the Conservative Party (CP) are the closest to SD’s respondents, both having 52 per cent of their voters supporting multiculturalism and tolerance. On the one hand, the fact that one of ten of SD’s voters actually come out in favor of a multicultural society can be considered as relatively high. On the other hand, this is an issue where SD’s voters clearly deviate from the other parties.

On traditional Swedish values, 80 per cent of SD’s voters support this, as compared to 49 per cent among all the respondents. Hence, in Sweden there is overall weaker support for traditional Swedish values than for multiculturalist values. The CD voters have a score on Swedish values of 64 per cent – the same as these respondents’ score on multiculturalism. Hence, while there are huge differences between SD and CD voters on Christian values and on multiculturalist values, the CD respondents’ attitudes on Swedish values are closest to the attitudes of the SD’s respondents.

Since the 2010 elections, the new SD voters in 2014 come primarily from the CP (Swedish Television 2014:14), but there were as many (8 per cent) who shifted from the CP to the Social Democratic Party between 2010 and 2014 (Swedish Television 2014: 14).

As shown above, immigration is still an issue with a relatively limited mobilising potential. It is not possible to say if the new leadership of the CP – to be elected in 2015 – will imply a substantial shift in policy. While non-cooperation is still the official attitude among the other parties, a much stronger SD implies that it will be more difficult
Will there continue to be sanctions by being associated with SD?

As specified when introducing the research question, sanctions are means by which conformity to socially approved standards is enforced. When analysing sanctions associated with indicating support for SD or SD’s positions, we start with the Swedish public debate. There is a certain mismatch between the attitudes of the Swedish people and positions of the Swedish political parties as regards immigration (Jensen and Frølund Thomsen 2013). Will this mismatch lead to a pressure cooker effect, implying that a suppressed dissatisfaction with the prevailing policy can suddenly intensify and spread, leading to a surge in support for SD? Alternatively, will the strategies of isolating SD locally and nationally, emphasising the Swedish tradition of hospitality, result in limited long-term success for SD?

The reasons persons with anti-immigration positions do not vote for SD might be diverse. Four likely reasons will be provided, relating the external and internal supply-side.

First, on the demand side (meso level), the organisations and movements in Sweden – including CoS – have served as effective barriers against the spread of bigotry in Sweden, as shown by various surveys (Blom 2011: 153–156; Demker 2012: 243–247). Moreover, the traditional parties have broad experiences from practical politics, implying that people trust such parties, not inexperienced parties such as SD. The overall – and growing – levels of trust in Sweden are explained further below.

Second, on the external supply side, a person who is identified with SD risks receiving negative reactions from one’s surroundings. This is because the overall public debate climate in Sweden is characterised by an overarching consensus on what one shall not question or discuss in public. A Norwegian commentator refers to the “Swedish censorship” (Ørjasæter 2014; see also Arnsberg and Sandelin 2013).

When the book by Arnsberg and Sandelin – on the difficulties to discuss Swedish immigration policy – was promoted, there was a counter-advertisement by the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise and the think-tank Fores (2013), and a petition to the Swedish Advertising Ombudsman by 92 individuals. The petition alleged that the book advertisement is racist and discriminatory against immigrants, and the term “racism” was also used by a reviewer of the book (Edquist 2013). The Ombudsman said that its mandate does not apply to communications that are protected by the Freedom of the Press Act (1949: 105) or the Fundamental Law on Freedom of Expression (1991: 1469) (Swedish Advertising Ombudsman 2013). The debate on the book does show that there indeed are sanctions for expressing views that are associated with SD.
Third, also on the external supply-side, the strong anti-SD position taken by the civil society organisations in Sweden, including CoS, might actually deter persons from joining or associating with SD. The consensus not to let the far right define the Swedish immigration debate has been noted by an author comparing the three Scandinavian countries:

In Sweden, as opposed to Denmark and Norway, immigration has not become an issue monopolized by those seeking to support a restrictive approach to immigration, but is also politicized by those who demand a more generous approach to immigration issues (Demker 2012: 249).

The present author disagrees that the immigration issue has not been politicised across the political spectrum also in Denmark and Norway. It is correct to say, however, that the Swedish parties have been more assertive not to seek to appeal to nationalistic voters. Demker also provides two other explanations for the high threshold for voting for SD, first that xenophobia in Sweden has a narrow social base, a position that seems more difficult to maintain today (YouGov 2012), and second that the Swedish party politics cleavages primarily are structured around economy, not culture (Demker 2012: 248–249; see also Rydgren 2002).

Fourth, on the internal supply-side, central persons in SD have behaved aggressively (Nyheter24 2014; for an historic account, see Expo 2014). Just before the 2014 elections, 12 candidates withdrew their candidacy after posting insulting statements, having used terms such as “parasites” and “beasts” when referring to asylum seekers (Expressen 2014), making SD most difficult to associate with for persons who do not appreciate such behavior.

Figures on levels of trust, both of parties and the political system, and on the media, can provide a basis upon which some predictions on the potential for SD – despite the four explanations provided above – can be made. A low level of trust might imply that there is a certain pressure cooker effect in Sweden, implying that dissatisfaction might become more visible in the future.

First, on trust in political institutions, the trust levels in the parliament, in political parties and in politicians in Sweden are on the same level as in Norway, both having trust levels placing them as number seven to nine among European countries (Listhaug and Ringdal 2008: 141). Denmark has the highest scores on all three. Hence, the political trust in Sweden is not particularly high, but Sweden has seen a rather strong increase in trust of politicians over the last years, from 23 per cent in 1998 to 44 per cent in 2010 (Statistics Sweden 2011: 29).

Second, on trust in the media, a survey found that 44 percent among Swedes have little or no confidence in the Swedish media, with the figures being 24 percent among Danes and 16 percent among Norwegians, respectively (Nordiske Mediedager 2012). In sum, therefore, Sweden has the lowest trust level if one combines the political realm and the media realm. The possible existence of a pressure cooker effect can be presented as a hypothesis which should be investigated further. The SD seems to have a recruitment base by appealing to voters being dissatisfied with the parties or the Swedish political system.
Conclusion

The findings will now be given in line with the structure of the research question. First, seeing Christianity as integral to Swedish culture and Islam as alien to this culture forms the basis for and determines the content of the religious identity politics as promoted by SD. Second, SD has not been successful – so far – in promoting religious identity politics in Sweden, and SD’s attempts of linking the Swedish and the Christian has not enhanced SD’s respectability in the Swedish society overall. The public media, businesses, Church of Sweden and the parties have all been successful in containing and isolating SD. Third, the sanctions by societal actors, CoS and the political parties against SD still apply, and it is reasonable to say that there are restrictions on what persons in Sweden can discuss without risking being labelled intolerant or xenophobic.

Church of Sweden is one of many actors in the containment and isolation strategy, building on a universalist and inclusive theology welcoming the stranger and showing love to one’s enemy, not only to one’s neighbour. Hence, it is most difficult to promote religious identity politics through CoS.

In addition to the isolation strategies of the various actors, SD has been restrained by low rates of xenophobia in Sweden and the fact that the Swedish party cleavages are predominantly economical (Demker 2012: 248–249). The isolation strategies might have led to sympathy voting for SD, as well as votes from dissatisfied voters, but it is difficult to assess the future recruitment potential by appealing to these voters. Isolation – if continued – will result in the SD having limited influence. In any case, SD is not likely to be a main driver for religious identity politics in Sweden, even if it strengthens this aspect of its platform.

Notes

1 Note that the current understanding of racism is primarily concerned with identifying differences and predetermining persons by their cultural background, also termed “culturalism” (Haugen 2011: 477).

2 The most violent left extreme group is ‘Revolutionära Fronten’ (RF), which has violently attacked what they consider as political opponents, including members of the Liberal Party. For a story of how RF was invited by a Conservative party candidate to “visit” – in other words attacking – a SD stand, see NyheteriDag 2014.

3 The Europe of Freedom and Democracy political group was established after the 2009 elections, and had the term ‘Direct’ added after 2014 (EFDD); important parties after the 2014 elections are the Five Star Movement, and UKIP. For four days in October 2014, the EFDD did not meet the threshold for being recognised as a party group in the European Parliament, having MEPs from seven states (Euraktiv 2014), but EFDD subsequently managed to recruit one independent MEP. The EAF can be traced back to 2010, with Kent Ekeroth, SD’s secretary for international affairs, previously being the treasurer in the board. The EAF currently consists of FN, Party for Freedom (PvV), Vlaams Belang (VB), Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) and Lega Nord. EAF’s attempt of establishing a political group in 2014 failed also because EAF sought to avoid parties such as Hungarian Jobbik and Bulgarian Ataka. When the SD decided not to join the EAF party group, this also led SD’s youth movement to dis-
associate from the Young European Alliance for Hope movement (Vergara 2014), that was launched by SDU, together with the youth movements of FN, VB and FPÖ in April 2014 (EAF 2014).

4 This and subsequent translations from Swedish and Norwegian are done by the author.

5 The AENM is since January 2014 chaired by Béla Kovács (Jobbik), as the Front National and the British National Party withdrew from AENM in November 2013. When the Nationalaldemokraterna announced that it was closing down, it encouraged its sympathisers to vote for SD or (for activists) engage in the Nordisk Ungdom (Nordic Youth); see Dagen [Norway] 2014.

6 The 2011 service at the opening of the Parliament marked a new era, as also a rabbi and an imam participated in the service. It has been decided that the service shall be interreligious every second year and ecumenical every second year (Temo 2013).

7 SD supports Israel, saying in its Church Manifesto – under “CoS as former of public opinions and social force” (2013:2): “End the unilateral criticism of Israel.”

8 Some dioceses in CoS have Ethical Guidelines (Stockholm Stift 2011), which refer to the § 12 formulations, but do not specify them further, except from emphasising solidarity.

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