RELIGIOUS LIBERTY IN DEMOCRACY:
BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL TOLERANCE AND
DEMOCRATIC INCLUSION

Marie Demker
Professor, fil.dr., Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg, Sweden
Email: marie.demker@pol.gu.se

Abstract

How can the concept of religious liberty be interpreted and understood in Swedish public discourse? Possible interpretations of religious liberty within a democratic frame are investigated through an interview study of prominent Swedish leaders in the religious and secular (although not political) arenas in 2010–2012. The results indicate wide differences in the interpretation of religious liberty. The keys to discrete interpretations of religious liberty in democracy are whether religion as such is perceived as an individual characteristic or a collective representation, and the valuation of religion as a social phenomenon. The interpretation of religious liberty is thus not defined by the view on individual agency: respect for free agency is ingrained. Against this backdrop, religious liberty in a democracy may be interpreted both as the state’s guarantee of minimal tolerance for personal choices and as a right to state-supported inclusion of collectively espoused religious beliefs that add particular value to democracy.

Keywords: Religion, religious liberty, democracy, state

Religious liberty is a central element of the polity often called liberal democracy.1 Intrinsic to religious liberty is also afforded strong protection under the European Convention on Human Rights and the UN Declaration of Human Rights. The Swedish Constitution also confers stronger protection on religious liberty than on other rights; this freedom is absolute, while other freedoms may be restricted under special circumstances. What, then, does religious liberty involve? What does it mean that citizens of a liberal democracy enjoy religious liberty?

It might be said that the question of what the concept of religious liberty means is brought to a head in a society globally understood as the most secularised and individualised of all – Sweden. Swedes have been shown in global studies to be the least influenced by religious and traditional values and to rank self-expression values the highest (Inglehart and Welzel 2005). However, Sweden is also a country where nearly 20 percent of the inhabitants were born elsewhere in the world and where religious identities, both the traditional Lutheran and newer ones, have become increasingly apparent in the last decade (Sigurdson 2009). Religious questions and matters of religious tradition have also become more frequent subjects of media debate and political discussion (Lindberg 2015). Religion has become more visible, not only those religions, ancient yet new to Sweden, brought to public awareness through the foreign-born population,
but also through the disestablishment of the state church in 2000, which has created a climate in which the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church can act more freely in a political arena (Bäckström 2014).

Article Nine of the European Convention on Human Rights elucidates the arguments for religious liberty, yet there is no support to be found therein for the interpretation that religious liberty is a matter of freedom from religion. While there is protection against coerced affiliation with a religious community, there is nothing that would require society to provide any kind of arena that is free of religion or that would allow the individual to demand that the public space should be “religion-free”. Instead, the individual is guaranteed a right, “alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance” (my italics).

According to the ECHR, freedom of religion is a positive liberty for individuals, who are given the right to manifest their religion alone or in community with others. Freedom of religion is thus a freedom for persons who choose to manifest religion, not for those who wish to oppose religion (Leigh 2012). Freedom of religion is the only freedom listed in the Swedish Constitution that may never be restricted by law: it is absolute.2 Religious liberty thus enjoys an especially strong position in Swedish society.

The research question in this paper is therefore how religious liberty may be interpreted and understood as a concept in Swedish public discourse against the backdrop of the ECHR. Which is the place of religion in a democratic society? What are the ideas and principles that impregnate the understanding of the concept of religious liberty in a democracy?

Theoretical Premises

The place of religion in the public arena is determined by both the state’s intent to protect religious liberty as well as the state’s active support of religious actors. In her article “Political Liberalism and Religion: On Separation and Establishment” (2013), Cécile Laborde sets out four ideal-typical models of the public place of religion in a modern society, where she examines degrees of separation/establishment, or separation of church and state on the one hand and the extent of state support for the practice of religion on the other. I argue that the four outcomes should primarily be described based on the state’s intent to support and protect religious liberty (Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Ideal-typical models of the relationship between state and religion](image-url)
Only the pluralist state and the secularist state are compatible with liberal democracy (Laborde 2013), and it is in the field of tension between these two that the debate on religious liberty often occurs, thus concerning state support of religious practice (Cliteur 2012; Leigh 2012; Pettersson 2011; compare also Durham 1996). A pluralist state may also relate differently to different religions – providing comprehensive support to one or more, but guaranteeing adequate protection for all (Friberg Fernros, forthcoming). Whether or not the state should subsidise the education of clergy, for example, or cooperate locally with the currently pluralist religious civil society, are examples of current discussions (Amnå 2010). It is sometimes argued that the state should abjure the duty to protect religious liberty, but the usual implication is that only certain religions or manifestations of religion should not be protected by the freedom of religion (Lövheim and Axner 2011). In countries with a tradition of separation of church and state, religious liberty is often understood as a form of protection against patriarchal structures (Selby 2011). All member states of the European Union have committed to complying with the ECHR and its unambiguous protection of freedom of religion in its fullest sense, but how this is implemented is nevertheless left up to the national level (Zanon and Sciotino 2014).

Paul Cliteur (2012), professor of law, has argued that the protection of individual rights within the framework of religious liberty must be supreme. He comes to that conclusion in an analysis focused on the relationship between a multicultural or pluralist state and a more strictly secularist, religiously neutral state on the other. The core of his argument that not only teachers, but also students, should refrain from displaying religious symbols in schools is that it is the duty of the state to protect the weaker party. He argues that a state that embraces multiculturalism will reinforce the bonds between religion and citizens at the expense of civil identity. The case he studies is the matter of French students’ religious dress (hijab) in a French state school, where the principle of laïcité is fundamental. Cliteur argues that the girls who were the subject of the debate should not wear headscarves in school, stressing that they must be educated on equal terms with other children and that this will be impossible if they have first, figuratively, clothed themselves in a religious identity.

Ian Leigh, also a professor of law, is considerably more circumspect in his conclusions than Cliteur. Leigh (2012) emphasises the tension between individual rights under the freedom of religion and the right to collectively practice and manifest one’s faith openly and publicly. He observes stronger emphasis on the collective dimension of religion in recent rulings by the European Court of Justice. Leigh argues that the issue of whether religious organisations should have particular autonomy based on religious liberty is going to be brought to a head in liberal democracies as proliferating Jewish and Islamic groups in Europe are engaging in various forms of internal mediation and legal proceedings.

Professor of political science Bryan T. McGraw (2010) emphasises that religious groups should not be forced to choose between religion and democracy in a liberal democracy. Liberal democracy should acknowledge that moral pluralism is also concomitant with the evolution of democracy. The strength of liberalism, McGraw argues, is that it acknowledges and encourages pluralism. However, he criticises liberal thinkers
and politicians for their anxiety in meeting with religious believers who do not keep their opinions to themselves. Instead, liberals have honed their rhetorical weapons even more against these religious believers, even as other minorities have been included in the democratic project. McGraw argues that liberal democracies want to have their cake and eat it too – they claim to support individual life choices, but reserve the right to restrict these choices when they concern religious matters. This is unacceptable, according to McGraw. It might be possible, he continues, to persuade many to privatise their beliefs, but it would be unwise to count on that strategy in a democracy. Open confrontation between religious values and government is the worst alternative in a liberal democracy, according to McGraw. His prescription for the future is greater faith in the ability of democratic institutions to manage the differences and conflicts that do arise. Democracies are not all “Weimars-in-the-making,” writes McGraw, “and we should stop treating them as if they are delicate flowers” (2010, 273).

In a study of the debate surrounding a Swedish Public Service documentary called Halal TV, Mia Lövheim and Marta Axner (2011), sociologists of religion, show that the matter of religious liberty does not only involve ideas about religion per se, but is equally concerned with a national self-image. Can a Swedish public service broadcaster, in the name of religious liberty and minority rights, allow three young Muslim women in religious dress (hijab) to explore reality with a camera? “No,” say some, “this is incompatible with unbiased journalism.” “No,” say still others, “religious values of the kind displayed are incompatible with Swedish values.” Political scientist Rogers Brubaker (2013) points out that there is also a national component to religious liberty. Brubaker argues that in today’s post-modern societies, religion is a clearer, sharper cleavage than language. Religion and religious affiliation have become more determinative markers of cultural difference than language, and this in a Europe deeply divided – both nationally and regionally – along linguistic lines. A regional language different from that spoken in other areas of a country was once the strongest explanation for the existence of a successful regional political party (Malmström 1998). Brubaker (2013) argues that in areas where the language is by necessity a political medium, religion has been able to work more in the background. The privatisation and individualisation of religion have also made it possible to maintain strong cultural pluralism, unlike with language, which has, if anything, undergone an opposite development (Hagevi 2012). Religious identity is also more intergenerationally robust, according to Brubaker, while linguistic identity has been diluted.

The question of the proper place of religion in public discourse, of its authority in relation to citizens and the state, and of the ability of religious actors to cooperate with a democratic constitution, can thus return a multitude of answers. The field of tension is primarily found between a secularist state and a religiously neutral state (see Figure 1), but the matter of individual rights in relation to the collective claims of religion is also germane. Finally, the view of religion as a separate domain, a cultural cleavage, is also an issue that democratic governments must address. In a study of Swedish public debate, sociologist of religion Marta Axner (2013) has shown that participants in public debate who belong to minority religions tend to speak out about their own issues, while Lutherans (the majority religion) tend to discuss wider social issues. Axner also points
out that many texts contain meta-debates on the legitimacy of religion in public debate. Religious actors, on the whole, have to play by the rules of the media, and they find it harder to gain a hearing on issues where they are not perceived by society in general as having any particular legitimacy (Axner 2013).

Sweden is often distinguished as the “most secularised country in the world” because religious values rarely gain strong support among the Swedish population. In several global studies performed within the framework of the established World Values Survey, Swedes have been shown to value self-expression considerably higher than people in other countries and to support secular-rational values to a higher extent than all other countries except Japan (Inglehart and Welzel 2005). Sweden certainly shares this profile with other Protestant European countries, such as our Scandinavian neighbours of Norway and Denmark, but the Swedish profile is the most extreme among all the surveyed countries. Sweden might thus be said to most closely constitute a critical test; the internal Swedish perspective on religious liberty should be one of the most far-reaching in a liberal orientation with regard to both deference to authority (secular-rational values prioritised) and individualisation (self-expression prioritised). The Swedish population also has a higher percentage of foreign-born persons than most other European countries and thus religious, linguistic and cultural pluralism is tangible in Sweden. How far can the notion of religious liberty reach? We should be able to answer that question empirically in a society like Sweden. A comparison with conceptions of religious liberty in societies at the other extreme (Zimbabwe, Morocco, Jordan) could naturally indicate the other boundary, however narrow the conceptions might be. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Sweden, the majority religion, has also gone further than any other church in the encounter with modernity, individualism and cultural pluralism by, for example, deciding early on to ordain women clergy, celebrate same-sex marriage, and support cooperation with other religions. Nevertheless, or perhaps precisely for that reason, religious liberty is the subject of heated debate in Sweden. Accordingly, this study analyses the boundaries of religious liberty through a study of the Swedish case.

Design of the Study

Through an interview study, the lines of discourse were drawn with regard to individual and collective interpretation of religious liberty, the relationship to the state and the consequences of religious liberty in terms of the role of religious actors in democratic debate.

Three main perspectives were selected, based on earlier research, as points of departure exploring the discourse on religious liberty in Sweden:

1. State protection of religious liberty.
2. Religious liberty as the freedom to practice religion or as the absence of religion.
3. The place of religious arguments in democratic debate.
These questions would uncover the terrain of religious freedom in the Swedish debate, and lines of conflict, mutual understanding and focal points would be made overt.

The participants were selected to represent the greatest possible diversity of views on religious liberty, but representatives of one notably explicit opponent of religious liberty in itself were not included. The aim of the study was to investigate the interpretation of religious liberty from a discursive inside-out perspective, thus proceeding from an acceptance of the intrinsic value of religious liberty. Those who are directly opposed to all forms of religious liberty thus could not be thought capable of contributing to answering the research questions of this study.

The study was performed as an interview study in Sweden, in Swedish, with prominent leaders in the religious and secular (although not political) arenas. For the study’s purposes, the secular arena was made up of representatives of media, academia and non-formal adult education, while the religious arena was made up of representatives of Christian (various denominations), Muslim and Jewish groups. The analysis was guided by a context of explorative discourse. As Talja (1999, 460) puts it: “In discourse analysis, interview data are analyzed at a macrosociological level, as social texts.” Consequently, my analysis focused on identifying the boundaries for religious freedom and the essential arguments in the total discourse. The aim had not been to explain conflicting issues in the group as such, or to characterize arguments related to individual positions, but to provide something like “thick descriptions”. The participants’ roles and characters are therefore significant only for the selection, and not the analysis, in order to secure access to the broadest possible discourse. In the analysis it is the presence of an argument, or an expression, that is significant – not the frequency of the argument or expression. Consequently, labels such as gender, age or profession were not considered in the analysis (Winther Jörgensen and Phillips 1999, 143–68; Bergström and Boréus 2005, 308–26). A guiding principle in the selection of participants was that they should not be the most recognizable figures in the public debate on religious liberty, but should instead be those who hold positions wherein they can be expected to confront issues relating to the boundaries of religious liberty in their day-to-day work. The aim when selecting participants has been to maximize the discursive field in order to be able to explore the boundaries for each issue listed above. As O’Reilly and Parker (2012, 5) put it: “In qualitative inquiry, the aim is not to acquire a fixed number of participants rather it aims to gather sufficient depth of information as a way of fully describing the phenomenon being studied.” A list of the participants is provided after the references. Fourteen people were selected and thirteen interviews were conducted. Seven participants were active in a secular arena, such as the daily press, theatre, academia and writing, and seven in a religious arena, such as church leaders, the daily press and academia. Of the fourteen original participants, five were women and nine were men. Ultimately, five women and eight men were interviewed. All are located in the southern half of Sweden, centred upon Stockholm, Gothenburg, Lund and Uppsala. All interviews were semi-structured and carried out during the period of November 2010 to January 2012. The interviews lasted between 40 minutes and two hours, and were recorded. I took notes during each interview and transcribed these immediately afterwards. The analysis of the interviews began with the notes, after which I listened...
to relevant parts of the recorded interviews. The interview guide is provided after the references.

Analysis and Results

State Protection of Religious Liberty

The strong protection of religious liberty in the Swedish Constitution was news to some of the participants. However, as expected, none of the participants objected to the notion that religious liberty is a human right and as such deserving of the state’s protection. In the answers in which religious liberty was problematized in terms of boundaries and the relationship to freedom of expression, however, there was some discomfort with the notion that religious liberty in particular enjoyed stronger protection than other freedoms.

The answers that were directly negative towards the strong position of religious liberty also contained the explicit opinion that religious matters, in particular, should be subject to debate and should not be distinguished from other rights. The opinion that the strong position of religious liberty was a relic of a past society, or could be explained by historical events, was also clearly related to a negative attitude towards the especially strong protection of religious liberty.

Typical responses from the participants included “Religious liberty is expanding at the expense of freedom of expression” (R 4). In addition, the strong position of religious liberty was described as being “a historical relic of a more religious society. Religion is something above and beyond freedom of expression and a special position is therefore problematic” (R 8). There were no significant differences between the secular and religious group regarding this question.

I argue that these responses, expressing the opinion that the strong protection of religious liberty is unnecessary or inappropriate, are rooted in the belief that secularisation is an inevitable social evolution. In this understanding, religion is a historical stage of an evolution that is leading towards a greater emphasis on common sense and humanity – the disenchantment of society – at the expense of religious beliefs. The protection of religious liberty is considered problematic because it holds onto something we should let go of, and there may also be an implicit theme that people are being kept in a state of ignorance. The protection of religious liberty is therefore the protection of the weaker party, but this is a protection that should not be expanded in such a way that it encourages the practice of religion. On the contrary, it should be available only for as long as it is necessary. Furthermore, the protection applies only to individuals: individuals whom the participants imagine will no longer need this protection in the future, because they will have abandoned their religious beliefs.

The ideas of the participants who thought, rather, that the strong position of religious liberty was justified were considerably more multifaceted. One opinion was that the special protection also accords religious liberty a more symbolically important role and, thus, that the state supports the belief that religion should play a role in Swedish society. One example was “The strong position of religious liberty clarifies the role of reli-
igion in society” (R 2); another statement was “Considering the homogeneous Christian history of Sweden, it is a good thing that religious liberty enjoys special status” (R7). Another opinion was essentially legalistic and emphasises that the Constitution is so important that it should not be “interfered” with. The drafting of the constitutional laws is here ascribed a particular wisdom that new generations should not alter. One participant stated “We should be very careful about interfering with the Constitution” (R 5), and another that “This is what the legislators intended. That does not prevent conflicts” (R 10). A third opinion was directly related to the idea of personal and individual liberty in a democracy; religious liberty is understood as an expression of the protection of individual agency. This opinion was articulated by one of the participants as “Immigration is forcing increasing consideration in practice; opinion is more circumscribed than the law” (R 6), and also by another “Religion is the most personal thing we have” (R 12). The fourth opinion was that religious liberty is one element of a greater protection of the pluralist society that is critical to the survival of democracy, stated as “Protection of religious liberty is an important signal to the rest of the world; it is part of the legacy of enlightenment” (R 5). Religious liberty was thus understood as a cultural liberty enjoyed by both the individual and the collective community.

I argue that the ideas that emerged in these interviews illustrate how the protection of religious liberty can be understood both as the protection of democracy for individual free agency, as well as for the cultural needs of the collective. The idea that the protection actually confers a democratic special status on religion refers instead to religion in a more abstract or ideological sense; and thus, to the notion that society needs religion, regardless of the individual’s belief world or traditions. It is therefore entirely possible to support the strong position of religious liberty on individualist, collectivist or ideological grounds.

In this way, state protection of religious liberty may be interpreted, on the one hand, as a minimal protection for individuals who are still at a historically earlier stage of social development – a protection that ends as soon as these individuals no longer need it. But on the other hand, there is the opposite pole in the interpretation, namely that the protection of religious liberty is a particular promotion of religion as a phenomenon, a confirmation that democratic societies need religion. The field of tension between a religiously pluralist and a secularist state (see Figure 1) is also distinct.

Religious Liberty – Freedom to Worship or Freedom to Avoid?

In the European Convention and the Swedish Constitution, religious liberty is entirely understood as the freedom to practice religion, alone or in community with others (Leigh 2012). Thus, freedom of religion. But there are occasional discussions in public debate on religious liberty in which the actors emphasise the right to avoid religion: not only to avoid practising a religion as individuals, but also to avoid encountering religion in everyday contexts, such as school leaving ceremonies held in churches. In this sense, religious liberty may be designated as freedom from religion. It is, of course, perfectly possible to assert that both sides are equally important.
Only a couple of cohesive ideas surrounding religious liberty as freedom from religion emerged in the interviews. In the contexts where freedom from religion was emphasised, the participants focused on individual agency and not the collective or public right to reject religion. One argument stressed that religious liberty should be interpreted as an individual freedom from coercion, and another argument the right to personally reject the practice of religion. But in these arguments, the mirror image thus becomes a freedom to practice one’s religion, not to reject it. If religious liberty is freedom from the coercion to profess a religious belief or the freedom to reject such a belief, the same liberty must also entail a right to retain one’s religion and the right to choose a religious belief. Another idea concerning religious liberty emphasised in some arguments is the right to change religions. Religious liberty is then certainly the freedom to practice one’s religion, but the crux is the freedom to abandon one form of religious practice to freely choose another. None of the participants presented notions of religious liberty as freedom from religion in the public space; on the contrary, several examples in the arguments imply that this is impossible.

For example, in the interviews, one participant answers a question about whether religious liberty means freedom of religion or freedom from religion by saying “we must be free from being forced into a religion, free from coercion” (R 3). But another believes religion is a constant presence in society and religious liberty is therefore a matter of “choosing one’s religion, yes, but not rejecting. (…) Freedom from religion is utopian” (R 5), while another stresses the opportunity to remain neutral, to hold what is often called an agnostic position, “perhaps especially important to be able to remain neutral; one’s reasons for avoiding religion do not matter” (R 7). The choice is almost always linked to individual agency, as when a respondent argued that “the option to reject religion is important, but this is more personal and not primarily a matter of the public space” (R 11).

The recurring understanding is therefore that religious liberty equates to freedom of religion, the freedom to practice one’s religion, both alone and collectively, and to manifest one’s faith in various ways. But there are two different notions, distinct and coherent, that underpin the understanding that religious liberty is the freedom to practice one’s religion: an individualised understanding and a collective understanding.

Religious liberty as an individual freedom to practice one’s religion was expressed in such terms as religion being a personal choice for the individual, and the important idea being that the decision to practice a religion is autonomous. Freedom from religious coercion is central to this understanding. Arguments that stress the individual’s personal stance include such arguments as “Religious liberty is the freedom to practice or not to practice religion. The individual has a right to reject religion, but society cannot reject religion” (R 2) but also that religious freedom is the right to “personally make the decision about your own religion and religious practice” (R 10).

However, religious liberty as a collective freedom was not explicitly expressed as a freedom for the collective per se, but as support for the right of individuals to express themselves collectively. A recurring notion was that religious liberty is the freedom to exert religion (cult), the liberty to express oneself publicly, to behave and dress based on one’s religious beliefs and to practice one’s religion in community with others. The
understanding that religious liberty means that society should facilitate the collective practice of religion was also expressed. Many arguments that emphasised collective freedom were built on the idea that “there is no boundary between religion and cultures” (R 5), and also that religion is not only transcendent but also, as one of the participants put it: “Religious liberty is a form of freedom of expression, the right to be acknowledged and to publicly express one’s faith” (R 8). Some of the participants explicitly stressed the collective practice by arguing that religious liberty is “the right to assemble and hold your chosen liturgy. To not be disturbed by anyone. The right to express one’s faith in public” (R 12).

The idea that religious liberty is a freedom of was thus expressed both as an individual freedom and as a collective freedom – but never as a collective right. The emphasis on freedom from was primarily linked to individual agency and not with the notion that society could or should repudiate or inhibit religious expression.

Interestingly enough, both individualist and collective notions were found as the basis for the understanding religious liberty as freedom of religion. On the one hand, religion was regarded as something so personal that individuals must be allowed to decide this matter for themselves, while on the other hand religion was identified as something expressive, something that people do in community with others. The idea that religious liberty is primarily a freedom from religion was based entirely on an individualist perspective, that religion is a private matter and that it actually has nothing to do with collective manifestations such as dress, ritual or customs, to which the individual voluntarily submits. However, the recurring theme in the interviews was that religious liberty is primarily a freedom to practice one’s religion, alone or in community with others, and both in the public space as well as within the religion’s own circles. The idea of religious liberty as a freedom for the individual to reject the religious practices of others in the public space did not appear. Nor did any arguments emerge that underpin the idea of religious liberty as a collective right in conflict with individual agency. There are no differences in this respect between the religious and the secular participants. The understanding of religious liberty as a “positive liberty” is fundamental; that is the liberty to be able and allowed to practice one’s religion.

I argue that the ideal in the arguments is the religiously pluralist state rather than the secularist state (see Figure 1). The participants’ opinions covered the spectrum from the individual’s right to reject a religious belief, regardless of whether or not it is practiced in the person’s own family or among close friends, to the state’s duty to support and facilitate the preferences of individuals who want to practice their religion, even if it makes them visible as a collective in society. A secularist state would probably not be able to support religious liberty to the extent desired by the participants. Consistently, the emphasis is also on protection of individual agency, regardless of whether or not it has collective consequences.
The Standpoints of Religious Arguments in Democratic Debate

How, then, should we treat religious arguments and religious actors in the democratic conversation? Are all arguments legitimate and should representatives of religious groups or beliefs have access to, or should they be excluded from the conversation? Do religious actors have any place in democracy?

While we may perceive religious actors as more or less desirable in the public debate, we may yet contend that they should be more or less open about their religious beliefs when they argue. We may also perceive religious arguments – in the sense that they identify themselves as religious – to be inherently more or less legitimate in the public debate. An understanding characterised by pluralism in relation to the actors emerged in the interviews. The participants, however, demonstrated ambivalence as to whether or not arguments should be identified as religious – if indeed they are – by those who present them, or whether they should be identified as coming from a clearly religious agent, if one exists. Opinions were also divided as to whether or not religious arguments are legitimate at all, or even desirable, in democratic public discourse.

The opinion that religious actors are welcome in the public debate was found both among those who believe that religious arguments should be clearly denoted as religious, and among those who believe the opposite.

The opinion that religious arguments – arguments whose legitimacy resides in explicitly religious beliefs of a transcendent nature – should also be labelled as such is thus not obviously linked with the opinion as to whether or not religious actors are welcome in the debate. In some cases, participants believed that arguments should be identified as religious and that they should, in such cases, not be presented – or else the conversation should regard them as irrelevant – but in other cases, the identification is understood only as a kind of declaration of origin. The arguments are welcome, but the source of their legitimacy should be clear.

However, declaration of religious affiliation by participants in the debate is a prerequisite for any evaluation of religious arguments as valuable or, on the contrary, undesirable. The very expression of preferences that arguments should be declared as religious thus leads to an evaluation of whether or not religious arguments have any value.

The opinion that religious arguments do not have to be identified as such, however, was always linked to the opinion that they are not a special case and thus need not be evaluated on any special grounds. The arguments should quite simply be evaluated on their own merits, on rational grounds. The opinion that religious arguments need to be identified as such, however, constitutes a basis both for repudiating religious arguments per se and for welcoming them specifically because they are religious.

An opinion commonly expressed in the interviews was that religious actors should participate in public debate because their involvement enhances the democratic conversation, on condition that the arguments stand on their own merits and do not require divine legitimacy to be valid, and also that new arguments derived from a spiritual arena are a valuable contribution. Another opinion was that religious actors are certainly welcome in the debate, but for general democratic reasons rather than because they enrich the debate in any particular way. The arguments should be clearly identified as religious arguments.
so that their legitimacy can be evaluated on that basis. A third opinion was that religious actors should not participate in the democratic conversation at all on religious grounds, and that religious arguments cannot be regarded as having any value that differs intrinsically from the value of other arguments in a democracy. Above all, this third opinion was imbued with a distrust of religious arguments and religious actors, and was only expressed by some secular participants.

The view that religious actors are welcome in a democratic conversation was thus based on varied reasons: partly that the participation enhances the discussion and debate, and partly that religious actors have a democratic right to participate, just like everyone else. However, the assertion that religious actors have something special to say, that no one else does, features prominently in the arguments, both among secular and religious participants. The participants express, for example, that “religion is a good thing in society. But (religion) does not get that across well enough” (R 1) and that “religion has something to contribute concerning a great many issues, but has been bad at communicating that” (R 2). Other similar arguments are that “religious actors are very important … the fundamental values of religion are humane” (R 6) and that “religious actors should be involved. The important thing is that they have thought [for themselves]” (R 8). Some doubt was also conveyed about publicly expressing one’s opinions as a religiously-tinged actor, for example that “[a religious actor] should take a place in the debate, but should also be allotted a special, particular place; the latter is problematic” (R 9), and that it is “not a problem precisely because there is a wide variety of actors” (R 13).

The opinion on religious arguments may thus be regarded partly as a question of whether or not the arguments need a religious label and partly as a question of whether or not the label is relevant in the first place. The consistent basis for the opinion that arguments need a label was that the label facilitates the conversation and makes it easier to consider and evaluate the arguments. The participants expressed this by saying, for example, that “identifying the actor is a good thing; it clarifies the complexity of the debate” (R 2) and “it makes things easier to sort out” (R 7). Once again, there was some distrust of religious actors, expressed by “the separation of the civil and the religious is crucial [certain religious strands] in the group. (…) There are always both technical and spiritual arguments on various issues” (R 9) or, more bluntly, by “religious arguments can be used tactically” (R 10).

At the same time, in the discourse we also find a clearly expressed preference that it would be good if arguments did not have to be labelled, and this preference is found regardless of how the respondent evaluates the inclusion of religious actors in the democratic conversation. The participants could express this as: “In the best of all worlds, who said what would not be important, but it becomes so in our flow of information” (R 6), or “the agent is not important to me. Those who want to be identified as the agent consider themselves more important than the argument” (R 3).

When the opinion was that religious arguments – or religious actors – have no place in the democratic conversation, the justification was always that the driving forces of these arguments and actors were invariably foreign to society, or in any case, alien to fundamental democratic values. The arguments uncovered a distrust of religion as a
phenomenon in democracy and may be seen as a parallel to the previously discussed understanding of secularisation as a positive and inevitable evolution away from religious beliefs. The participants expressed, for example, that “the agent is important because the basis of religious arguments is different to other arguments” (R 4), and that “the actor is important in a debate; it is best to find arguments based on rational grounds. (...) Democracy comes first, religious liberty second” (R 11).

Attitudes concerning religious actors in the debate may therefore be based on the democratic idea that everyone must have the opportunity to be heard, and on the notion that the quality of the democratic public conversation is enhanced if religious actors speak out. When these actors then present their arguments, there is a margin in this point of view to demand the clear identification of the agent, as well as the preference for evaluating the arguments on their own merits.

The opinion that religious arguments are not legitimate in the public debate was found only in connection with the demand that the agent should be clearly identified. The justification for this was simple: we must be able to reject such arguments. This opinion was expressed only by participants who are active in the secular arena, but it did not typify this group. The understanding that religious actors and their arguments are valuable to the public debate was likewise found only in concert with beliefs that religious arguments – regardless of whether or not they are labelled as such – are valuable. This opinion was found both among the secular and the religious participants.

Religious liberty is interpreted here both within a democratic frame that implies individual freedom for every citizen to express their opinion, and within a perspective on democracy by which a pluralism of arguments inherently deepens democracy. In the former interpretation, there is also room to declare religious arguments illegitimate; just as everyone can express their opinion, everyone also has the duty to be open about where they are coming from – the points of departure that, in this line of argument, are also interpreted to mean that religious arguments are illegitimate. The interpretation that religious actors in particular should voluntarily, in practice, democratically delegitimise their own arguments was an individualist interpretation of religious liberty. While the question was never asked concerning other actors, judging by this line of argument, a specific label on their arguments was demanded only from religious actors. Religious liberty became synonymous with the idea that religious actors also enjoy freedom of expression, something that was self-evident to all participants, but which also reduces religious liberty to a variant of freedom of expression. The interpretation was based on the opinion that religion actually has no place in the democratic conversation and thus aligns with the secularisation perspective, as mentioned above.

The interpretation that religious arguments, whether identified as such or not, enrich and deepen democracy, refers instead to a collectivist principle in which the actual pluralism of society is recognised. The argument may then be evaluated based either on religious legitimacy (God is a higher authority than democratic rule) or based on its inherent reasonability (the primacy of the argument). Such an interpretation of religious liberty emphasised the collective expression and historical value of religion in society and was based on trust in a collective evaluation process in the democratic society.
Discussion and Conclusion

Religious liberty, as a concept, has a very wide area of application, if we are to rely on the picture that emerged in the interview study above. How the relationship between state and religion should be interpreted relies – according to this study – more heavily on the participants’ view of religion than their view of the state. The interpretations were occasionally close to a view of the relationship between religion and the state that could be described as anti-religious, but I argue that the complete discourse was mainly situated in the field between a secularist and a pluralist state (compare Laborde 2013). The state should protect religious liberty, and doubt about the ethics of this relationship was expressed in only one or two cases. An individualist interpretation of religious freedom also underlies these interpretations (see Selby 2011). Here we find both minimalist interpretations (religious liberty as a form of individual freedom of expression) and more maximalist interpretations (religious arguments and traditions have a particular value and should be supported by the state). The Swedish case, with its far-reaching individualisation and modernism, is likely an illustration of the breadth of interpretation of religious freedom in a post-secular society.

The opinion on the place of religion in a democratic society is therefore also highly distinctive. On the one hand, there is the opinion that religion has an important place in the democratic conversation by virtue of democratic pluralism. The conversation is expected to be enhanced by a pluralism of arguments per se, but religious arguments can also be expected to contain particular values that are not addressed by other actors. On the other hand, there is the opinion that religious arguments should be dismissed entirely from the democratic conversation; they have no special value and are instead fraudulent and thus destructive to democracy. The opinion that religious actors should be silenced was never expressed in the interviews, but demands that they should declare their religious identity, and that the arguments ought to be presumed to be grounded in religious beliefs, imply the expectation that the democratic conversation should ignore them.

The view of state support for religious liberty in practice in a democracy thus swings between fragile tolerance and strong inclusion of religion. The post-secular condition, as professor of religious studies Ola Sigurdson (2009) calls it, seems not to create a uniform frame for how the state should interpret the specific part of human rights constituted by religious liberty. Interpretations that represent a fragile tolerance are based on secularisation theory, thus that religious beliefs are historical relics that will dissipate with the continued evolution towards modernity and individualism. These interpretations are thus controlled more by the view of religion as a private matter than by the view of the state and democracy. Instead, the inclusive interpretations stress the importance of pluralism, and understand religious affiliations and manifestations of such as social phenomena. Such interpretations are also more focused in relation to the representation of collectives and groups in society.

The results of the study therefore suggest that wide disparities exist in the understanding and interpretation of religious liberty in a democratic society, but that these disparities cannot be assigned to a secular or a religious affiliation. Yes, religious liberty
is regarded as a matter of respect for individual free agency by the state, but this understanding may underpin both a very fragile tolerance for something considered a relic of the past and an inclusive and pluralist view on democracy in which various collective values are afforded special latitude. The key to interpretations of religious liberty in a democratic conversation is according to this study not the view on individual agency—respect for this is ingrained—but instead whether or not religion is understood as an individual characteristic or a collective representation. Against this backdrop, religious liberty in a democracy may be interpreted both in terms of the state’s guarantee of a fragile tolerance of individual agency, and as a clearly state-supported inclusion of collectively embraced perspectives that add special value to democracy. The key to interpretations of religious liberty in a democracy, as a result of this study, is consequently the evaluation of religion as a social phenomenon. In-depth studies of actual political decisions in the Swedish Riksdag (parliament) and municipal assemblies could further increase understanding of how religious liberty, as a right, is interpreted in a democratic society. A weakness in this study is the lack of comparisons between systems with different religious public institutions such as stat-church-relations and/or family law. However, historical relations between state and churches also decide the current space for religious freedom in a way that would make automatic comparisons difficult. In that light, this study may instead provide an interpretive frame and indicate key conflicts that may constitute analytical points of departure for further research.

Notes

1 Special thanks to Associate Professor Henrik Friberg-Fernros and Professor Ulf Bjereld for valuable comments on the text.

2 Ritual slaughter of animals for food is a matter often referred to as a matter of religious liberty and is also the subject of debate in Sweden. At present, it is considered a matter of animal welfare, supported by European law, and slaughter without stunning is therefore prohibited. Ritual slaughter with stunning is permitted and practiced.

3 This study of a discourse on religious liberty has not been targeting patterns related to gender, age or religious beliefs among the participants. Although I did not look for patterns a specific evaluation of all the interviews does not reveal any significant differences, concerning my research questions, associated to gender, age or religious beliefs.

References


Religious Liberty in Democracy: Between Individual Tolerance and Democratic Inclusion


Interview Guide

1. Religious liberty enjoys particularly strong status in the Swedish Constitution. What do you think about that? Do you think it is a good thing? Or bad? Why do you think it is good/bad?

2. When you think about the concept of “religious liberty”, what kind of freedom comes to mind first?
   – Is it the opportunity to practice one’s religion?
   – Is it the opportunity to be left alone by religion?

3. Do you think it is important to know whether political arguments or standpoints in the democratic conversation have a religious or non-religious actor?
   – Do you believe there are arguments/standpoints that are intrinsically “religious” or “non-religious”?
   – What role do you believe religious interests or organisations have in a democracy?

4. How would you describe or categorise your stance on existential questions?

Participants

In alphabetical order, along with their position at the time of the interview:

Ahmed Al-Mofty, chairman, Gothenburg Mosque
Heidi Avellan, editor-in-chief, Sydsvenska Dagbladet
Anders Björnsson, writer, editor
Karin Burstrand, cathedral dean, Diocese of Gothenburg
Anders Carlberg, former president of the Jewish Community of Gothenburg
Pelle Hörnmark, general superintendent, Swedish Pentecostal Churches
Stefan Jonsson, professor, literary critic
Ulrika Knutson, journalist, literary critic
Agneta Lindblom-Hulthén, journalist, former chair of the Swedish Journalists Union
Religious Liberty in Democracy: Between Individual Tolerance and Democratic Inclusion

Stina Oscarsson, playwright, head of Swedish Radio Drama
Anders Piltz, professor, Catholic priest
Elisabeth Sandlund, editor-in-chief, Dagen magazine
Anders Svensson, regional leader, United Methodist Church of Sweden