



Growing Animus Toward Religious Schools in Sweden

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Sweden often pushes atheistic norms despite being an increasingly multi-religious society with a secular state that claims to be inclusive and tolerant of different faith expressions. This is evident in the area of education. While the government praises churches and other religious denominations for their important contribution to combating the ongoing coronavirus crisis, it simultaneously imposes severe restrictions on religious schools.

In recent years, leading politicians and ministers such as the Minister for Education, Anna Ekström, and Minister for Social Security, Ardalan Shekarabi, have compared faith-based schools to theocratic dictatorships. They have described them as a barrier to integration, and even called them a “poisonous cocktail.” These caricatures are far from the real situation of the vast majority of these schools in Sweden but are offered as part of the government’s efforts to prevent the creation of any new religious schools. The [report](#) from a government inquiry has now been published in preparation for this spectacular change in the Swedish school system.^[1]

The role of the Christian church in Swedish education has a long history. As the renowned historian Dick Harrison [said in an interview](#) last year: “Almost the entire Swedish education system – every school from the 1100’s to the first half of the 1900’s, was run by the church. In this way Christian principles became the basis for all thinking. Even those who stood up against the church and thought that the priests were out of their minds got their schooling through the church.” Even today, there is a close connection between church and education in western Europe. In the Netherlands, for instance, as many as 76.3 percent of primary school pupils attend independent faith schools. In Belgium, that number is 56.8 percent, in the UK 37.2 percent, and in France 20 percent. However, in Sweden, less than 1 percent of all students attend independent faith schools, which are a vanishingly small part of Sweden’s educational landscape.

The purported reason for the government’s proposal to ban all new independent faith schools is that they hinder the integration of immigrants in Sweden. Politicians have [admitted](#) that their

principal concern is certain Muslim schools, which are an exceedingly small minority of the already miniscule number of faith-based schools, most of which are Christian. These politicians also readily admit that the proposal is a proxy for addressing problems of radical Islam.

But, as the recent government inquiry [states](#), it is “difficult to determine the advantages and disadvantages of religious aspects in the education system on a purely objective basis,” and that the attitude towards independent faith schools “is often essentially ideological and to some extent a subjective issue.”^[2] One stark example of this ideological attitude was the nature of the inquiry itself; instead of investigating *whether* the establishment of new religious schools would be a good idea, it focused on how to stop the creation of any new ones. The report also concedes, however, that the proposal “entails challenges with respect to fundamental freedoms and rights such as commercial freedom and religious freedom, and as regards equality of treatment and discrimination.”^[3] Indeed, in its latest Universal Periodic Review at the UN Human Rights Council, Sweden received a recommendation to abandon its proposed ban on new faith schools. Karl-Petter Thorwaldsson, president of the Swedish Trade Union Confederation, which has close ties to Sweden’s ruling Social Democratic Party, posted on Twitter: “The school should be free from religion. There is no right to impose the beliefs of the parents on our children [sic]. We should not have religious schools.” Thorwaldsson’s view is that children are the wards of the state. But, as the [European Convention on Human Rights](#) (ECHR) states: “the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions.”^[4] Also, as the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) states: “Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.”^[5]

The report from the inquiry also proposes placing several conditions on the managers of independent schools. For example, if it is suspected that a school will mistreat children or try to undermine the democratic rule of law, that school’s manager should be removed. Even if these conditions are not directed solely against schools with a religious profile, they are motivated by perceived problems with religious schools. This points to a larger problem within Swedish society: that religious beliefs are viewed as a problem if they clash with so-called “democratic values,” which is often political newspeak for progressive policy preferences.

Unfortunately, this problem is not limited to education but affects many public institutions. For example, a housing company owned by the regional council on the island of Gotland has decided not to rent its facilities to political or religious organizations. The rationale the regional council gave for this decision is that they want to be “politically and religiously neutral.” In another case, the municipal government of the city of Falun (the elected officials of which represent a broad coalition) refused to extend a contract to one of the largest free churches in the region, and advised others to do the same. The Chairman of the City Council, Joakim Storck, said that the congregation’s stand for a traditional Christian view of marriage is “in contradiction to the basic values of the municipality.”

Apart from illustrating how a politicized set of municipal values labeled “democratic” can trump national legislation and discriminate against believers, these instances show how secular politicians all-too-often are blinded by their own worldview and beliefs. According to the national curriculum for the compulsory school (Lgr11), a Swedish school must pass on certain values based on beliefs. In its opening paragraph the [curriculum](#) says: “The inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men, and solidarity between

people are the values that the school should represent and impart.” It adds that this is achieved in “accordance with the ethics borne by a Christian tradition and Western humanism.”^[6]

The discussion about independent religious schools in Sweden has long given the impression that the aspect of belief or confession is something unique to these schools but, in fact, it applies to all schools in the country. Studies have shown that the teaching on world religions in many public schools is characterized by an atheistic norm. “The findings indicate that a secularist discourse was hegemonic in the classroom practice and implied [a] norm of talking about religion, religions and worldviews as something outdated and belonging to history. A non-religious, atheistic position was articulated as neutral and unbiased in relation to the subject matter and was associated with being a rational, critically thinking person.”^[7]

This is why the Swedish Evangelical Alliance has called for all schools in Sweden to state their philosophical and ideological basis, not just religious schools. Of course, the Alliance wants the public-school system to be pluralistic on the issue of worldviews, but it is also time for many of Sweden’s so-called public schools to come clean and confess their faith.

Endnotes:

[1] See pp. 47–71 for an official English summary of the government report on independent faith schools.

[2] See pp. 48–49.

[3] See p. 66.

[4] See p. 34.

[5] See Article 26 (3), p. 7.

[6] See p. 5.

[7] Karin Kittelmann Flensner, “Religious Education in Contemporary Pluralistic Sweden”, Doctoral Thesis, University of Gothenburg, 2015, p.5, <https://gupea.ub.gu.se/handle/2077/40808?locale=sv>.

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