
70 Years of Religious Freedom in Sweden: Prospects and Challenges

Jacob Rudenstrand
Swedish Evangelical Alliance

Although 2022 marks 70 years since religious freedom was enshrined in Swedish law, demands to control religious expression and criticism are regularly recurring in the world's most secular country.

Take, for example, the fundamental right to freely criticize a religious belief, which the attacks against Salman Rushdie and Charlie Hebdo have illustrated is under threat in Western countries. When Danish activist and far-right agitator, Rasmus Paludan, burned copies of the Quran in various cities around Sweden during the spring, he was regularly met by radical Muslim mobs. In several cities, violence ensued with severe damage inflicted upon police cars, public transportation, and private property, much of which had never been seen in Sweden before. Instead of explaining that freedom of religion entails the freedom to offend religious sentiment, leading [politicians](#), [journalists](#), and [academics](#) have argued for the necessity to impose special restrictions on religious criticism. One [petition](#) likened the burning of privately owned copies of the Quran to vandalism of mosques, and received as many as 38,000 signatories for making this a hate crime.

Even Sweden's former Foreign Minister, [Jan Eliasson](#), who served as Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations between 2012-2016, considered some blasphemy restrictions reasonable. He wrote in a [tweet](#) that, "Quran burning should be regarded as ethnic agitation." He added that it was "unreasonable" to devote the police's resources to protect these "obvious crimes" and that the "respect for our freedom of speech is actually eroded by these provocations." A significant portion of the population seemed to agree with him, as 28 percent of Swedish citizens in a [survey](#) supported the idea of forbidding demonstrations that could offend anyone or any group. What they are missing, however, is that what an "offensive" demonstration is varies from person to person. To some, a pride parade is offensive; to others, it is the March for Life; and still for others, it is a rally for the opposing soccer team.

It is always better to read and debate books than burning them. But in a free society, religious provocations, or whatever is deemed as offensive to religious sensibilities, cannot constitute the limit of freedom of expression. The consequences would be that a vigorous religious debate – which Sweden needs – is stifled, and vulnerable people who criticize or leave repressive forms of Islam suffer. International examples illustrate that legislating "respect" for religious feelings is just another form of blasphemy law, something Sweden eliminated in 1949.

For a long time, Swedes were forbidden to criticize Lutheran dogmas. In 1884, for example, playwright August Strindberg was charged with mocking the Lord's Supper. But while many thought that secularism and enlightenment ideas would do away with this kind of dogmatic thinking, we now have other progressive taboos to consider today. In a short time, Sweden seems to have moved from a repressive Lutheran state church with little tolerance for heretics to a secular state ideology

with equally low acceptance of dissenters, something I argue in my book [*"Den första rättigheten: Frihet till religion, frihet från religion"*](#) (Timbro 2022) (*"The First Liberty: Freedom to religion, freedom from religion"*). Together with cancel culture, which is increasingly pervading various spheres of society, this makes for a new form of puritanism.

When the [Pew Research Center](#) surveyed support for democratic principles in different countries, only 53% of Swedes considered religious freedom to be very important, which was one of the lowest figures in Europe. At the same time, a full 96% considered gender equality a very important principle. With Sweden being one of the top [10 countries](#) with the highest gender equality in the world, this comes as no surprise. At the same time, our consensus-driven ideal of “equality” has difficulty tolerating religious expression that departs from the secular norm.

Therefore, it is no surprise to see the recurring political demands – particularly in the debate about independent faith schools and religious expression in the workplace – that religion should be private, followed by the confession that we live in a secular society.

Sweden’s 2022 election and its aftermath saw several examples of this. Sweden’s roughly 70 independent faith schools, where less than 1 percent of all students attend, were decried as “anti-democratic” by the then Minister for Schools, Lina Axelsson Kihlblom of the Social Democrats party. Religious elements in public education are also seen as a democratic problem, but ironically, this is not said about progressive tenets around gender, queer, and norm critique in schools. On the contrary, such elements are labeled as “democratic values” and are therefore welcome, if not mandated.

While the Religious Freedom Act of 1952 gave Swedes the unconditional right to leave the Church of Sweden, as well as prohibiting a religious test for public office, new secular “confessions” are now required of politicians. When MP Julia Kronlid of the Sweden Democrats – who is also a devout Christian – was named Second Deputy Speaker of Parliament, she was [immediately criticized](#) for her views on the creation of the world. In an old interview from 2014, she had expressed skepticism of the theory of evolution and support for young-earth creationism. Her criticism of Sweden’s liberal abortion law was also used as fuel by the modern-day inquisition, something to which Christian politicians regularly are subjected. While Kronlid more recently has [stated](#) that she has changed her mind regarding these ideas, her critics still persist. This only goes to show that the secular heresy hunters of modern-day Sweden still won’t welcome you even if you recant.

Before 1952, Sweden was for a long time one of the worst countries for religious freedom in Europe, with many free-thinkers and pietists fleeing to the United States. As historian [Dick Harrison](#) has summarized it: “Religious freedom in Sweden is a historical exception.” For a country which today prides itself on being the most progressive and broad-minded nation in the world, Sweden was late to the game. We still have long way to go.

Jacob Rudenstrand is the Deputy General Secretary of the Swedish Evangelical Alliance.



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Religious Freedom Institute
316 Pennsylvania Ave. SE | Suite 501
Washington, D.C. 20003
202.838.7734 | [rfi.org](https://www.rfi.org)