

“OBEYING GOD RATHER THAN MAN” (ACTS 5:29): CHRISTIAN FAITH IN CONFRONTATION WITH POLITICAL CORRECTNESS IN SWEDEN

Katarina LEWIS

Department of Ethnology, University of Uppsala
Uppsala, Sweden

Abstract: At present Sweden is, like other industrialized countries, a highly secularized society. The Church of Sweden, divorced from the state in the year 2000, has lost most of its influence and has become more or less a service institution to lend solemnity to the rites-de-passage of life: baptism, weddings and funerals. Since the 1930s there has been a politically oriented change in the view of the family. The core family as the foundation of society has gradually been dissolved. The system in which the housewife takes care of her family and home with the husband as the sole provider has changed. Both husband and wife pay tax on their own incomes, rather than each paying tax on half of the family's total income. This has made it virtually impossible to manage with only one provider. The political ideal for women was to become independent economically. With the social “revolution” of 1968, everybody was led to believe that the only way of “realizing oneself” was to get a job outside the home. The children should be taken care of in public day centers. With both man and wife fully occupied outside the home little time was left for family life. Within this completely secularized society there exist small, struggling groups whose lives are dominated by Christian ideals. I have studied one such group consisting of pietistic believers within the Church of Sweden: a remnant of the great revival that swept the west coast of Sweden in the last century and the beginning of the 1900s. They maintain a different way of life in confrontation with what is today considered as politically correct. Until the first decades of 20th century their way of life and their ideals were in great part in keeping with what was accepted in society. Now their way of life is very different. Beside their economical hardship due to the tax system, they suffer ideologically. They do not believe in priesthood for women. Recent political decisions declare that only men who fully accept female priesthood are to be ordained in the Church of Sweden, so they might soon find themselves lacking ordained male preachers. They might be faced with the idea hateful to them of forming a free church. A comparable group with comparable ideas are the very Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem and in Brooklyn or even the Amish people in Pennsylvania. While the Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem take political action to change their secular society, the west Swedish pietists in no way act to convince others to adapt to their life style. Their only way of influencing others is by their way of living “in the world” as Christian examples. Although they are now fully conscious that they stand out from their background and that their persistence in keeping to their faith means hardships, they do not plan to adapt themselves to the surrounding society. Instead they work so that the surrounding society will gradually adapt to their ideals of life. *My question is: will they leave the Church of Sweden or will they persist in finding unobtrusive ways to find “a right sermon” within the church they love?*

Keywords: Sweden, secularization, society, Christian ideals, politics

Sweden is, like many other industrialized countries, a highly secularized society. The Church of Sweden has been an established State Church for centuries, but on January 1, 2000, it is separated from the State. It will then stand on its own and although it will gain some freedom from political decisions, it will lose its well organized economy, but will keep some of its privileges and duties. During the 1900s it has gradually lost most of its influence on society and has become more or less a service

institution to lend solemnity to the rites-de-passage of life: baptisms, weddings and funerals. Faced with a great change, the church employees and the church politicians are struggling to increase the small numbers of people who attend different kinds of services. There is, too, a very large body of church administrators that will have to look for new work.

Since the 1930s there has been a politically oriented change in the view of the family. The core family as the foundation of society has gradually been dissolved. The system in which the housewife takes care of her family and home with the husband as the sole provider has changed, especially since the 1960s. Both husband and wife pay tax on their own incomes, rather than the breadwinner paying tax on the family's total income with deduction for wife and children. This has made it virtually impossible to manage with only one provider. The political ideal for women was to become independent economically. With the social "revolution" of 1968, everybody was led to believe that the only way of "realizing oneself" was to get a job outside the home. The children should be taken care of in public day centers. With both man and wife fully occupied outside the home and the children in different kinds of day care centers according to age, little time is left for family life. An important change is that sit-down meals for the whole family are becoming rare. Instead there are quick individual meals when you are on the run. Among other effects there is a noticeable change in people's table manners, ability to engage in ordered conversation, and perhaps more important: much less change of passing on family traditions and human know-how.

Within this otherwise completely secularized society there exist small struggling groups whose life is dominated by Christian ideals and who try to keep the core family together and pass their traditions and their faith on to coming generations. I have studied one such group consisting of pietistic believers within the Church of Sweden: a remnant of the great revival that swept the west coast of Sweden in the last century and the beginning of the 1900s (LEWIS 1997). They maintain a different way of life in confrontation with what is today considered as politically correct. Until the first decades of the 20th century their way of life and their ideals were in great part in keeping with what was accepted in society. Now their way of life is very different and they are more or less a marginalized group. I am now in the process of analysing how they react to the coming of the third millennium.

Beside their economical hardship due to the tax system that "punishes" families with only one parent on the labour market, they suffer ideologically. Most noticeable politically is that they do not believe in priesthood for women, a belief founded on biblical grounds. Recent political decisions in Sweden declare that only men who fully accept female priesthood are to be ordained in the Church of Sweden. Men, already ordained, cannot be promoted to vicars. In the public eye this has become an inflamed question of equality, rather than of Christian belief. Thus these pietistic believers might soon find themselves at a loss for ordained male preachers they can accept. Another threat is that they might find themselves without a church where they can celebrate the service in the way they are accustomed to. They might be faced with the idea hateful to them of forming a free church. Hateful since they

consider the Church of Sweden their spiritual home, where they find the confession they embrace and the "Gemeinschaft" (ASPLUND 1983, 1987, 1991) they belong to.

Another danger to this way of life is a beginning sectarianism. Hurt and rather disappointed at two front wars from both society and the established Church they are born into, they have started to withdraw from their secularized surroundings when they have a choice in private life. The younger generation with many children are showing a growing tendency to socialize within the circle of "sibblings of grace". Since this lay people's chosen way of evangelization is to live and work "in the world" and socialize with workmates and neighbours as examples of how their Christian beliefs form them, this indicates a serious change.

According to this pietistic way of life parents should not meddle in the choice of life partner; this should be a question for the contrahents and God. That way women might have an important task: to bring a secularized husband, who is the choice of her heart, to Christ (1.Peter 3:1) by prayers and by being a good example in daily life. Quite contrary to this tradition, I have noticed an active effort of parents to bring "suitable" young people together and a tendency to early marriages within the group.

Another leading idea is the individual responsibility for your own life. You should not trust to a collective but rely on your own resources. This ideal has led to independence and self assurance in all earthly affairs coupled with a deep humility and submission to the will of God. Sectarianism, on the other hand, allows you to hide in a group. It might lead to endogamy both spiritually and biologically and then another important factor will be lost: to stand on your own, to be visible as an individual, to be a unique being with unique qualities, endowed by God with an unique mission on earth.

Outsiders note rather critically that Swedish people and especially Swedish people as represented by the media, favour one idea at a time. The raging public discussion (1998-99) has concerned sexually deviating groups: homosexuals, lesbians, transvestites and their rights in society. The Archbishop of Sweden has been instrumental in allowing and encouraging an exhibition consisting of photographs of a figure presented as Christ among such sexually inclined human beings and depicted as being one of them. This led to the Pope withdrawing an invitation to the Archbishop to visit the Vatican. More important it led to an enlarging clift between many Christians and the established Church as represented by the Archbishop, other bishops and priests adhering to this politically correct notion. Quite a few immigrant churches arranged demonstrations against what they considered as blasphemy. Muslims and Jews pronounced their surprise at a clergy who approved of Christ being shown this way and who chose to point to homosexuals as a specially suffering group foregoing less spectacular sufferers as the unemployed, the homeless, the old, the growing number of crime victims, war victims, etc.

In accordance with many other Christians the pietists I discuss here took a definite stand on this exhibition: it should not be shown. Showing it in churches was to them an act of blasphemy and an attempt to lessen the importance of Christ and degrade him to be a sinner amongst sinners.

Most of them seem to consider homosexual practice sinful the same way or even stronger as they look upon heterosexual promiscuity. Their point is, too, that Christ, although fully human, chose not to practice his sexuality. The public discussion went on and on and led to actual, mostly verbal, abuse of people who criticized this exhibition and what it brought about. It became gradually obvious that there was only one politically correct view on this problem and even normally outspoken people became wary of expressing contradictory notions at the risk of being put down as loveless fundamentalists and, strangely, racists. I have followed this discussions in three daily newspapers of different political colours and it has been strange reading.

In an article in *Svenska Dagbladet* in July 1999 a philosopher (?) argued that this entire discussion had been brought about by representatives of the established Church, since the question of the homosexuals and their place in Church and society was the last question left, where the Church as a body could show broadmindedness. Everything else as abortions, promiscuity, the rights of criminals and civil servants as embezzlers, etc. had already been used up as arguments to show what the Church was prepared to accept and embrace in its quest to be seen and heard and to avoid more difficult problems like the survival of the Church of Sweden, according to Olsson. The most surprising factor was that nobody representing the Church, thus addressed, took up this argument.

The discussion in the media about the advent of the new millennium mostly concerns what will happen to our computer-directed society, purely mechanically. Will all the lights go out, will all the iceboxes turn warm, the stoves turn cold? Will the trains stand still, will the aeroplanes fall down?

Similar questions in a spiritual dress concern the pietists: Will God finally tire of his creation? Will He stop the world? Will New Age with all its magnetisms, crystals, horoscopes, and magic manipulations win over people from a decadent Church? It seems obvious to them that the evil force is at large. The wars on the Balkan, the senseless shooting of civilians in the U.S., the bombing of innocent people in Russia are all his manifest doings to create disorder and to make people lose all hope, they claim. All in all, on the Eve of the new millennium they feel a great trepidation as to what will happen to the world.

A comparable group with comparable ideas are the very Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem and in Brooklyn or even the Amish people in Pennsylvania. The Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem take political action to change their secular society, not hesitating to use violence. The Amish people remain steadfastly within their communities, keeping to their ways, seeming not to worry about the world outside. The west Swedish pietists, so far, have in no way acted to convince others to adapt to their life style. Their only given way of influencing others is by their way of living "in the world" as Christian examples. Although they are now fully conscious that they stand out from their background and that their persistence in keeping to their faith means hardships, they do not plan to adapt themselves to the surrounding society. Instead they hope that the surrounding society will gradually adapt to their ideals of life.

In the midst of all this, they do not seem to fear for themselves: As long as they listen very carefully to "the voice of Christ", put their trust in him and remain in

their given task, God will keep his promises to take care of them. One of God's foremost promises, according to them, is that “the inner church, the Body of Christ” will remain as long as the world stands. One of their beliefs is, that they are building-stones in “this inner church” where Christ is the head. But their burning question is: how will they best obey God in this time of great change? Will He demand of them that they go out as active witnesses?

My question is: will they be forced out of the Church of Sweden for political reasons or will they persist in their unobtrusive ways to find “a right sermon” within the church they love?

SOURCES

This paper rests largely on my structured reading of three daily newspapers during the autumn of 1998 and still going on, with the perspective how politics influence the practice of a Christian faith.

A continuing source is the many lectures I have been asked to give in connection with my thesis. This “reciprocal ethnography” (LAWLESS 1992), enables me to follow from the inside the discussion among scientists and, more importantly, among lay people concerning questions of interest for this article.

NEWSPAPERS USED

Svenska Dagbladet, the leading conservative newspaper in Sweden.

Östgöta-Correspondenten, a large local liberal newspaper, often cited in other press.

Bohusläningen, a small, independent liberal daily of long standing, used here because it has a very lively coverage of the opinions of ordinary people, not least the Christians of the west coast.

Unfortunally I have not been able to find a socialistic newspaper that discusses anything but the politically correct, which, I suppose, is a result in itself.

LITERATURE

ASPLUND, Johan

1983: *Tid, rum, individ och kollektiv*, Stockholm.

1987: *Det sociala livet elementära former*, Göteborg.

1991: *Essä om Gemeinschaft och Gesellschaft*, Göteborg.

LAWLESS, Elaine J.

1992: I was afraid someone like you... an outsider... would misunderstand: Negotiating Interpretive Differences between Ethnographers and Subjects, *Journal of American Folklore*, p. 105.

LEWIS, K.

1997: *Schartuansk kvinnofromhet i tjugonde seklet: En religionsetnologisk studie. (Schartauan Female Piety in the 20th Century: An ethnological study of religion)*. Written in Swedish with an English summary. Skrifter utgivna av Bohusläns museum och Bohusläns hembygdsförbund Nr 59, 215 pp. ISBN 91-7686-155-4, ISSN 0280-4174.