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WHY ARE DANES AND SWEDES SO IRRELIGIOUS?

Abstract

Denmark and Sweden are among the least religious nations in the world today, measured by both church attendance rates as well as levels of belief in traditional religious tenets. This article attempts to account for Danish and Swedish irreligiosity by drawing upon several contemporary sociological explanations, the three most prominent being: 1) the effects of a longstanding Lutheran monopoly, 2) the result of being safe, secure, and successful societies, and 3) the influence of a high proportion of women in the paid workplace.

Key words: secularity, irreligiosity, Denmark, Sweden, sociological explanation

Introduction

Denmark and Sweden are both characterized by remarkably low levels of traditional religious belief and church attendance (Inglehart et.al. 2004; Halman 1994). According to Palm and Trost (2000:108), Sweden is «one of the most secularized countries in the world.» Andrew Buckser (2003:59) describes Denmark as «one of the sociology of religion's type cases in the secularization of modern society.» To be sure, cultural Christianity is strong and widespread throughout both nations (Gundelach, Iversen, Warburg 2008; Demerath 2000; Iversen 1997), with a majority of Danes and Swedes paying taxes/dues to their national churches, baptizing their babies, and a significant proportion of Danes and Swedes getting confirmed, married, and buried under the auspices of the Lutheran church. This continued participation in church life-cycle rituals by a majority of Danes and Swedes indicates that religion has certainly not disappeared in these nations and that complete secularization is not evident (Gustafsson 1997; Højsgaard and Iversen 2005). However, despite the above-mentioned participation in many life-cycle church rituals, when we compare the situation in Denmark and Sweden with the religious commitment, church attendance, and levels of belief found in other countries, we see that Danes and Swedes are religiously uninvolved and indifferent to a remarkable degree (Zuckerman 2008).

Consider the following:

- Denmark and Sweden have among the lowest rates of church attendance in the world, with only 12% of Danes and 9% of Swedes attending church once a month or more (Inglehart et al. 2004), and only 3% of Danes and 7% of Swedes attending at least once a week (Norris and Inglehart 2004).
- Belief in life after death is as low as 30% and 33% among Danes and Swedes respectively – among the lowest rates of belief in life after death in the world (Bondeson 2003).
- Only 31% of Swedes and 18% of Danes believe in heaven, and only 10% of Danes and 10% of Swedes believe in hell – among the lowest rates of belief in heaven and hell in the world (Inglehart et al. 2004).
- Only 7% of Danes and 3% of Swedes believe that the Bible is the actual/literal word of God (Botvar 2000).
- Only 21% of Danes and 20% of Swedes claim to pray at least several times in a given month (Greeley 2003).
- Only 15% of Danes and 12% of Swedes claim to have ever had a «religious experience» (Greeley 2003).
- When Danes were asked what they thought were the most important goals when it came to fostering certain qualities in their children, only 8% chose «Christian faith». (Gundelach 2002).
- An EPINION survey commissioned by the Danish newspaper *Kristelig Dagblad* in March, 2006, asked Danes what was most important to them in relation to Easter; 58% said being with family, 41% said getting a day off from work, 31% said the arrival of spring, but only 11% said the death and resurrection of Jesus.
- Concerning religious self-identification, 13% of Swedes describe themselves as «religious,» 16% as «a seeker,» and 24% as «Christian,» but by far the largest proportion of Swedes (47 %) self-describe as «secular» (Ahlin 2005).
- As for belief in God, 51% of Danes and 26% of Swedes claim to believe in a «personal God» and another 15% of Danes and 27% of Swedes believe in a «divine power» (Bondeson 2003) – among the lowest rates of God-belief in the world (Inglehart et al. 2004).
- When asked «How important is God in your life» (with 10 meaning «very important» and 1 meaning «not at all»), only 23% of Swedes and 21% of Danes chose 7–10 – again, among the lowest such levels in the world (Inglehart et al. 2004).

In addition to what the above surveys report, qualitative/ethnographic research has also illustrated the degree to which religion is marginal and muted in contemporary Denmark and Sweden. Based on extensive in-depth interviews with Danes some 35 years ago, Per Salomonsen described Danish views on religion as «inarticulate» and «vague,» concluding the English summary of his study by noting a «low level of communication and information about religious matters among the respondents» (Salomonsen 1971:361). Based on in-depth interviews with nearly 150 Danes and Swedes in 2005–2006, Phil Zuckerman (2008) found that certain segments of Danish

and Swedish society are about as secular as is sociologically possible, with many informants being decidedly indifferent – if not downright oblivious – to basic religious questions and concerns.

This article is an attempt to account for and explain the irreligiosity of Danes and Swedes. I am, however, an American sociologist unable to read Danish or Swedish at the scholarly level. Thus, my arguments presented below are those of an outsider, and my analysis surely suffers from my unfortunate inability to access and utilize the vast and important literature on religion and secularity produced by Scandinavians that is published in their respective languages.

Why?

As Peter Berger (1999:11) astutely notes, «strongly felt religion has always been around; what needs explanation is its absence rather than its presence.» How do we account for the low levels of religious participation and traditional religious belief among Danes and Swedes? It is, admittedly, a very difficult question to answer simply. Any and every major characteristic, trait, trend, or aspect of any and every society is inevitably the result of a frustratingly complex and highly idiosyncratic combination of historical developments, economic dynamics, cultural peculiarities, political formations, gender constructions, creative expressions, geographic realities, weather patterns, family structures, etc. – all affecting one another and acting upon one another in a myriad of ways. However, as social scientists, we should not give up attempting to answer this question of Danish and Swedish secularity, regardless of the complexities involved. Indeed, several sociological explanations have emerged in recent years that can be readily applied to the Danish and Swedish situation, thereby offering a good amount of illumination.

Below I shall present several key sociological explanations that may help account for the relatively high degree of irreligiosity that characterizes contemporary Denmark and Sweden.

Longstanding Lutheran monopolies

This explanation comes primarily from the work of Rodney Stark and his associates (Stark and Finke 2000, 2002; Finke and Stark 2003; Stark and Iannaccone 1994; Iannaccone 1992). According to Stark, when there are many different religions in a given society – with none of them being state-subsidized – interest and involvement in religion will be high. Conversely, when there is only one dominant religion in a given society – and it is subsidized by the state – interest and involvement in religion will be low. This is the case because, according to Stark, when there are many different religions – again, none of which are state subsidized – a «free market» religious situation of competition arises; religious organizations must compete for members if they are to stay afloat. Religious organizations thus become good at marketing themselves, and

are able to successfully stir up interest and involvement in religion by offering alluring products and services (Sargeant 2000; Chesnut 2003). However, when a religious organization is the «only show in town», that is, when a given religious organization has a state-subsidized, hegemonic dominance in a given society akin to that of a monopoly – without any competition – it grows lazy. Because it doesn't have to market itself, it becomes boring, stale, or unappealing, and people eventually lose interest in it and, by default, in religion. We can thus explain levels of religiosity by looking at the «supply side» of a given society's «religious economy»: how many religions are out there? Are there a lot of different religions in a given society in competition with one another, or only a few? Or maybe only one? And furthermore, what role does the state play? Does the government stay out of the religious economy as a neutral entity, or does it take an active role by perhaps favoring, or even financially supporting one of the religious organizations? Stark argues that societies characterized by a high degree of religious pluralism with no state interference experience a situation of healthy religious competition and wider «consumer» choice, and in such a societal situation with such a diverse and «unregulated» religious economy, the net result will be an overall heightened interest and involvement in religion. However, if the religious economy in a given society is that of a monopoly – and a state-subsidized religious monopoly, to boot – the result will be an overall weakening of interest and participation in religion.

The situation in Denmark and Sweden fits this «Longstanding Monopoly» explanation quite nicely (Hamberg and Pettersson 1994; Hamberg 2003). For many centuries, Lutheranism has been the overwhelmingly dominant religion in both countries. And furthermore, this Lutheranism has been consistently state-enforced and state-subsidized. Today, 83% of Danes continue to pay annual membership taxes/fees to keep their national church afloat, and while the Church of Sweden officially split from the Swedish government in 2000, nearly 80% of Swedes are still subsidizing members of their national church. Thus, the «religious economy» of Denmark and Sweden is one in which there is very little serious competition; the national Lutheran Church holds a virtual monopoly. It isn't an absolute monopoly, of course. About 4% of Danes and 5% of Swedes belong to independent, so-called «free» Christian churches (be they Baptist, Pentecostal, Methodist, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc), another 1% of Danes and 2% of Swedes are Catholic, and there also exist smaller religious movements such as the Baha'i Faith, Judaism, Scientology – not to mention the new and ever-growing influx of Islam (Kühle 2006). However, when compared to other Western nations, the overall dominance of Lutheranism over the centuries has been markedly pronounced. And since the Lutheranism of Denmark and Sweden is largely state-subsidized through taxes, what that ultimately means is that the churches will all be nicely painted, the gas bills will be paid, the lawns will be mowed, and the salaries of the pastors will be regularly ensured – whether five hundred people come to church every week, or only five. It doesn't really matter. Since the state is subsidizing the enterprise, there has been little motivation for pastors to «market» their congregations, or to offer appealing or alluring products or services. And there is little motivation for the National Lutheran Church to make itself attractive or inviting, since it is basically the sole religious option. It is thus very possible that the national churches in Denmark and Sweden have simply grown lazy.

There are several significant criticisms of the religious economies perspective, particularly its rational choice core (Bruce 1999, 2000, 2002b; Bryant 2000; Norris and Inglehart 2004; Chaves and Gorski 2001; Olson and Hadaway 1999). And it could also be argued that despite the ostensible Lutheran monopoly in Norden, there have always existed tensions, divisions, and internal differences within the majority churches – not to mention voluntary associations, laymen’s movements, etc. – which makes the Nordic National Lutheran churches less absolutely monopolistic than might be discerned at face value (Repstad 2002). That said, it is still quite plausible that because the churches haven’t needed to compete much for members over the years, they have not marketed themselves much, and people have subsequently come to take them for granted, and Danes and Swedes have thus generally lost interest in religion over the course of the 20th century.

Secure societies

A second sociological explanation comes primarily from the work of Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (Norris and Inglehart 2004). According to this perspective, when people in a given society experience a low degree of security, they tend to be more religious. Conversely, when people in a given society experience a high degree of security, they tend to be less religious. What is meant by «security»? The term refers to questions like: do most people have enough food to eat? Do most people have access to stable housing? Uncontaminated water? Jobs? Do most people have access to medicine? Are they vulnerable in the face of natural disasters, such as droughts or floods? Do most people find their personal or communal survival precarious? According to this perspective, when a given society is riddled with poverty, disease, and disorder, we can say that the bulk of its people live relatively insecure lives – and they will tend to be more religious. And conversely, if a society has very little poverty, disease, and disorder, we can say that the bulk of its people live relatively secure lives – and they will tend to be less religious. In the words of Norris and Inglehart (2004:5):

People who experience ego-tropic risks during their formative years (posing direct threats to themselves and their families) or socio-tropic risks (threatening their community) tend to be far more religious than those who grow up under safer, comfortable, and more predictable conditions. In relatively secure societies...the importance and vitality of religion, its ever-present influence on how people live their daily lives, has gradually eroded.

This of course is not a new idea: many have recognized that when life is hard, people turn to religion for comfort, as Karl Marx argued back in the 1840s (Tucker 1978:54). What is new here is the rigor and depth of Norris and Inglehart’s social science; their conclusions are supported with excellent data that takes into account numerous possible variables and relies upon extensive international comparisons. In short, their systematic analysis is quite convincing. And more importantly for our purposes here, their

insight that high levels of security correlate with low levels of religiosity is forcefully illustrated by the situation in Denmark and Sweden.

In past centuries, Denmark and Sweden were poor, impoverished countries, where poverty, epidemic diseases, and starvation were constants for most of the population. Neil Kent (2000:120) describes the Nordic region of the Early Modern period as «one of the least healthy in Europe,» marked by high mortality rates and lives lived «close to the existential minimum.» Donald Connery (1966:5) describes 19th century Scandinavians as «a poverty-stricken mass.» But over the course of the 20th century, Denmark and Sweden became not only among the wealthiest nations in the world, but also among the most egalitarian. Due to the success of the most well-developed welfare systems within the democratic world (Einhorn and Logue 2003), the wealth in Scandinavia is shared to an impressive degree throughout the nations' populations; the gap between the rich and the poor in Denmark and Sweden is smaller than in any other industrialized democracies. Poverty and starvation have been almost completely eradicated in Denmark and Sweden; famines are the stuff of history. And nearly everyone has access to decent housing, health care, food, education, and shelter from nature's harsher manifestations. According to the *Human Index Report* annually published by the United Nations, life expectancies in Denmark and Sweden are among the highest in the world, the percentages of infants born with low birth-weight are among the lowest in the world, rates of HIV infections are among the lowest in the world, the maternal mortality ratios are among the lowest in the world, rates of tuberculosis are among the lowest in the world – to mention a few indicators of the excellent societal conditions one finds in Denmark and Sweden. Additionally, we can consider the Global Peace Index, which ranks 121 nations on an international scale according to the degree of peace and security in each country, taking into account such factors as homicide rates, levels of violent crime, levels of disrespect for human rights, likelihood of violent demonstrations, political instability, levels of distrust among citizens, etc. According to the 2008 index, Denmark ranks 2nd and Sweden ranks 13th; in 2007, Denmark ranked 2nd and Sweden ranked 7th. And when it comes to overall quality of life, according to *The Economist's* «Quality of Life Index,» which measures 111 nations as to which are the «best» places to live in the world, taking into consideration multiple factors, such as income, health, freedom, unemployment, family life, climate, political stability, life-satisfaction, gender equality, etc., both Denmark and Sweden rank in the top ten.

Concerning the levels of security and insecurity that Norris and Inglehart (2004) discuss, Denmark and Sweden are without question among the most «secure» nations on the planet, and perhaps in the history of modern, industrial democracy. And this may very well explain their markedly high degree of irreligiosity: with such secure lives and healthy societies, the demand for the balm and comfort that religion often provides, has waned.

Working women

A third sociological explanation comes from the work of Callum Brown (2001), a British historian who has attempted to account for the decline of Christianity in British society over the course of the 20th century. According to Brown (2001:1) what has occurred in Britain is that «a formerly religious people have entirely forsaken organized Christianity in a sudden plunge into a truly secular condition.» The explanation for this drastic drop of religiosity among the British is to be found, according to Brown, by looking at women. He argues that it was women who historically kept their children and husbands interested and involved in religion. And then when women opted out of religion, their husbands and children followed suit. As Brown (2001:10) states, «women were the bulwark to popular support for organized Christianity...and...it was they who broke their relationship to Christian piety in the 1960s and thereby caused secularization». According to this perspective, a major cultural shift occurred in the 1960s that changed the way women perceived themselves, their lives, and their possibilities in the world. Traditional Christian femininity was problematized – or in Brown’s words, there was a «de-pietization of femininity» – and subsequently new forms of feminine identity were forged. A key ingredient of this cultural shift in feminine gender construction was that British women became less interested in religion, Christian faith became a less central or essential element to their identities, and when this secularized generation of British women stopped going to church or caring about God, so too did men.

If there is one thing we know about religion, it is this: women are more religious than men, on all measures (Walter and Davie 1998). Whatever indicator one wants to look at – whether in terms of church attendance, frequency of prayer, or faith in God – women always score higher than men (Miller and Stark 2002; Miller and Hoffman 1995). And this seems to hold true in all societies, including Scandinavia (Furseth 2001; Sundback 1994). So, if women are in fact the ones who push their husbands and children to get up and go to church on Sunday mornings, if women are the ones who keep their husbands and children dutifully praying at night and studying their Bibles, if women are the ones who instill piety in their families and keep the candle of faith lit in their homes, then it would make sense that if women were to themselves become less interested and involved in religion, a general loss of religion would occur throughout society – just as Brown argues. But what might cause such a change in women’s religiosity? Although Brown doesn’t offer too much here, one could easily argue that a major source would be women’s increased participation in the paid labor force. As Ole Riis (1994:122) acknowledges, drawing from much previous research, «women in paid employment are less religious than women working at home».

Prior to the 1960s, the vast majority of Danish and Swedish women were engaged in unpaid domestic work as mothers and housewives. But over the course of the last four decades, there has been a dramatic change in terms of women’s involvement in the labor force. By one count, in 1960 over 800,000 Danish women worked at home as housewives; twenty years later, that number had dropped to 250,000 (Andersen 1986). But another way, in 1969 just over 43% of women worked outside the home in the paid labor

force, but by 1990 that had increased to over 78% (Gundelach, Iversen, and Warburg 2008). Today, the vast majority of Danish and Swedish women work outside the home. In fact, Danish women currently have among the highest employment frequency in the labor market in the world; according to a recent report, the percentage of women in the paid labor force is actually on the verge of surpassing the percentage of men in the paid labor force (Confederation of Danish Employers 2007). Thus, it is quite possible that the remarkably high degree of women in the paid workforce in Denmark and Sweden helps account for the low levels of religiosity there. As Bradley Hertel (1988: 590): has concluded:

The lower level of membership, attendance, and religious identity of men and women in families in which the wife works full time may in turn – and probably does – lead parents to place less emphasis on religious training for their children. If so, then the work-related declines in married women's involvement in religion may impact negatively on the long-term future religious involvement of their children.

An influx of so many women into the paid labor force may not have caused the marked irreligiosity of Danish and Swedish society, but it most certainly helped accelerate or deepen it. Once women became occupied with the duties and concerns of paid employment, their interest in – and energy for – religion decreased. And their husbands and children followed suit.

Other possibilities

The above three explanations are arguably the most plausible sociological answers as to why Denmark and Sweden are so relatively irreligious. When taken together – a lazy church monopoly, secure societies, and working women – much of the puzzle of secularity in Denmark and Sweden is explained. But there are other possibilities.

One additional factor to consider when accounting for irreligiosity in Scandinavia comes from the work of Steve Bruce (1996, 2002a) and David Martin (1978) and can be described as the lack of a need for cultural defense. Bruce and Martin recognize that religion is often a key ingredient in national, ethnic, or cultural identity. And whenever national, ethnic, or cultural identity is threatened, the religiosity of the threatened group will typically be strengthened. That is, whenever a society or nation feels threatened or oppressed – either by a dominating foreign power or a neighboring menace – religion often serves as a pillar of ethnic, communal, national, or cultural defense. The classic illustration for this phenomenon would be the case of Ireland, where Catholicism and Irish nationalism have strongly reinforced each other over the centuries (Gilley 2003). Another fine example would be the case of African Americans, who have historically turned to the Black Church for refuge and support against an often hostile and oppressive white majority culture (Zuckerman 2000; Billingsley 1999) which greatly helps to explain why black Americans are far more religious on all measures than white Americans (Greeley and Hout 2006). How might this relate to Denmark and Sweden? Simply that there has

been a noticeable *lack* of a need for cultural defense concerning Danish and Swedish society. Over the course of the last several centuries, Danes and Swedes have never been extensively oppressed or dominated by a foreign conqueror, especially one of a different faith. Although Denmark suffered humiliating military defeats at the hands of the Prussians in the 1860s (which resulted in a significant loss of land and people), and while Denmark endured several years of German occupation during the Second World War, it is safe to say that neither Denmark nor Sweden has been extensively threatened, dominated, or oppressed in the past several centuries by a foreign culture with a different religious tradition. In the words of sociologist Benton Johnson (sent as personal correspondence via e-mail),

Ecclesiastical laziness and public detachment from religion are most likely to set in when the culture/religious monopoly isn't threatened by alien powers. When it is threatened, as Irish Catholicism was for centuries at the hands of the British, or as Poland was under centuries of alien rule, then a religious monopoly can serve as a reinforcer of a people's identity and an institutional center of resistance. Lutheran Europe, with the possible exception of Finland under Czarist rule, hasn't felt itself culturally or religiously threatened for a long, long time, maybe as long ago as when the Swedes stopped being a Protestant military giant in Europe's religious wars.

And this situation very well might change in the decades ahead, with the ever-increasing presence of deeply committed Muslim immigrants in Denmark and Sweden. Their presence could possibly result in an increase of Lutheran piety as a contemporary expression of Scandinavian cultural defense. But this remains to be seen. It is equally possible – and perhaps even more likely – that if Scandinavians feel the need for some sort of cultural defense in the face of the new immigrants' strong Islamic religiosity, it will be in the form of an increased embrace and celebration of rational, democratic secularism – rather than traditional Christian belief and practice.

Another possible factor that may help explain the marked irreligiosity of Danes and Swedes would be simply the matter of education. Denmark and Sweden were two of the earliest nations to successfully push for widespread literacy among their populations. In fact, Denmark was the first nation in the world to legally enact free compulsory elementary schooling for all children throughout the country, regardless of social status, and that was back in 1814 (Jespersen 2004). Sociological studies have consistently shown that the more educated a person is, the less likely he or she is to accept supernatural religious beliefs. For example, a recent Harris poll found that of Americans with no college education, 86% believed in the resurrection of Jesus, 77% believed in the Virgin Birth, and 74% believed in the existence of hell. But belief in such things was noticeably lower among those highly educated Americans possessing post graduate degrees, of which 64% believed in the resurrection of Jesus, 60% in the Virgin Birth, and 53% in the existence of hell (Harris Poll #11, Feb.26, 2003). A recent Gallup Poll found that of Americans with no college education, 44% consider the Bible to be the actual word of God to be taken literally, but Americans with graduate degrees, only 11% maintained this view of the Bible (Gallup and Lindsay 1999). International rankings further strengthen the correlation between strong education and weak religiosity. For instance, a 2002 UNICEF report shows that of the top ten nations ranked highest in terms of their teenage students'

abilities in reading, mathematics, and science, all with the exception of Ireland are relatively irreligious nations such as South Korea, Japan, Britain, and the Czech Republic (Sweden ranked 9th). Both Denmark and Sweden have very well-funded and well-organized school systems and highly educated populations. According to a 2000 report by the Program for International Student Assessment, teenagers in Sweden and Denmark rank in the top twenty in the world regarding reading literacy, mathematical skills, and scientific knowledge. Furthermore, Denmark and Sweden have among the highest adult literacy rates in the world (assumed to be at 99% according to the United Nations *Human Development Report*). It is thus quite possible that some correlation does exist between having a very well-educated population, and subsequently low levels of religiosity.

A final possible matter to recognize in accounting for secularism in Denmark and Sweden is the significant governmental influence the Social Democrats have had in constructing Danish and Swedish society for much of the 20th century (Sundback 1994). More than any other political party, the Social Democrats have dominated the parliaments of Denmark and Sweden, with their nearly hegemonic strength only diminishing in recent years (Arter 1999). The Social Democrats have always been relatively anti-religious and anti-clerical and have sought at times to weaken or dilute religion's influence throughout society. Examples of this abound and include, for example, changing the public school curriculum so that Christianity is not taught in an evangelical or confessional manner, but in a more «social science» vein which teaches «about» Christianity as one among several religious traditions. Additionally, the Social Democrats have had the power over the years to appoint liberal, progressive, non-fundamentalist or «modern-thinking» men and women as Bishops or in other upper level positions within state-linked religious institutions. Thus, it is possible that the secular and often anti-religious agenda of the Social Democrats over the years has influenced or perhaps accelerated secularization in Denmark and Sweden. There are, however, two problems with locating the Social Democrats as a source of Danish and Swedish irreligiosity. First is that it must be recognized that Social Democrats are not the only ones to push for a secular agenda; the Liberals have also favored this development, particularly the «de-Lutheranization» of the school curricula. Second, even if we can point to the Social Democrats as having a significant influence on weakening religion, then this raises the following question: why would Danes and Swedes allow the Social Democrats to dilute or weaken their religion? After all, if religion was so important to them, surely they wouldn't have continually elected and re-elected the Social Democrats, year after year, decade after decade. Perhaps the secularity and relative anti-religiosity of the Social Democrats, rather than shaping the will and sentiments of the people, actually just reflected them.

What I have presented in this essay are the specifically *sociological* explanations for the low rates of religious participation and belief in Denmark and Sweden. What is missing – or what has only been minimally touched upon in various sections above – is the broader history behind the present situation, specifically the historical trajectory of pre-Christian religion as well as Christianity proper over the previous centuries in Scandinavia. Surely the historical developments of culture and religion in Denmark and Sweden are crucially informing factors in explaining the current state of irreligiosity (Kent 2000; Nordstrom 2000; McLeod 2000; Thorkildsen 1997; Grell 1995). Another

area of potential explanatory importance that has been neglected in my analysis are the psychological factors at play. That is, the psychological dispositions and general mentalities of Danes and Swedes should be considered in any appraisal of their lack of religious participation or belief (Sørensen and Stråth 1997; Daun 1989). However, although both historical developments and psychological factors are important topics in their own right, and definitely essential for a truly broad and thorough understanding of irreligiosity in Denmark and Sweden, they are beyond the limited sociological scope of this essay.

Conclusion

As for the decidedly sociological appraisal of irreligiosity in contemporary Denmark and Sweden presented here, it is necessary to mention how the case of Denmark and Sweden fit into the general discussion of secularization, one of the most discussed and debated topics within the sociology of religion (Martin 2005; Christiano, Swatos, and Kivisto 2002; Swatos and Olson 2000; Berger 1999; Bruce 1992). Some scholars have argued that secularization is an inevitable or unavoidable characteristic of modernity (Wallace 1966). I disagree with this assertion; no major social trend is ever inevitable or unavoidable. Other theorists have argued that secularization is intrinsically self-limiting if not downright impossible (Smith 2003; Stark 1999; Greeley 1972). I disagree with this position as well. Although Denmark and Sweden are not wholly or completely secular, and various church rituals certainly play an important part on the life cycles of most Danes and Swedes, these countries do exist today as societies where religion is distinctly marginal, relatively powerless, and more or less unimportant in most people's daily lives. My position on secularization is therefore as follows: it is not inevitable, but neither is it impossible. Rather, a loss of religion in a given society, or the relative lack of religion in a given society – however one chooses to conceive or measure such a loss or lack (Dobbelaere 2002; Glasner 1977) – is merely *possible*. And that does not mean it is irreversible either, for religiosity can wax and wane over generations, dying out and then suddenly reemerging. That said, there is no question that religiosity in Denmark and Sweden – in terms of both belief and participation – has declined over the past 100 years (Bruce 2000; Buckser 1996; Pettersson and Riis 1994), but that does not mean that the decline will necessarily continue, for a religious revival is always possible. As mentioned earlier, it will be of great interest to see how the influx of Muslim immigrants – many of whom tend to be quite religious – will affect and potentially challenge the marked irreligiosity that currently typifies Danish and Swedish culture (Stenberg 2002).

Finally, in any discussion of irreligiosity in Denmark and Sweden it is important to acknowledge that we must be ever mindful of how «religiosity» is defined, understood, labeled, and thus observed for study. Just because less than 10% of Danes and Swedes attend church weekly, that doesn't necessarily mean people aren't religious in other, less obvious or traditional ways. Just because belief that the Bible is the literal word of God may be minimal among Danes and Swedes, or belief in a «personal God,» or in the existence of heaven and hell, this doesn't necessarily mean that religion has evaporated alto-

gether, or that irreligiosity is the same thing as bald secularity. As Stark, Hamberg, and Miller (2005) have argued, religiosity and various forms of spirituality can and often do exist outside of the church walls or the limited definitions of traditional creeds and theological doctrines. Many Danes and Swedes, for instance, will profess belief in «something,» although not necessarily the God of the Bible (Zuckerman 2008; Ahlin 2005). Additionally, it must be acknowledged that very few Danes and Swedes openly self-identify as atheists (Warmind 2005). However, while acknowledging these realities, the fact still remains that when it comes to international comparisons of traditional or standard measures of religiosity, Denmark and Sweden rank towards the very bottom. This essay has attempted to explain why.

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