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NATO AND THE SWEDISH CHURCHES: DEALING WITH DEFENCE POLICY IN THE MIDST OF A EUROPEAN CRISIS

By Erik Sidenvall

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Russia's full-scale assault on Ukraine in late-February 2022 triggered a swift response on the part of the Swedish churches. The leaders of, for example, the Swedish Roman Catholic diocese, the Swedish Pentecostal churches, the Uniting Church in Sweden (*Equmeniakyrkan*), and the Lutheran Church of Sweden expressed their sympathy with the Ukrainian people and their feelings of distress at an already troublesome situation that now had taken a turn for the worse.¹ The nightmares of full-scale war had descended upon Europe once again. Already on February 24, the presidium of the Christian Council of Sweden (an ecumenical body which counts among its members not only the major Protestant churches, the Roman Catholic Church but also most of the Orthodox and Oriental churches active in Sweden) joined in the global outcry against the invasion. They expressed their "deep concern" and that they "shared the sorrow and distress of the people who now must leave their homes, who will get injured or will die." Yet, war should not have struggle between churches as its consequence: "The dialog between Russian and Ukrainian churches continues through the ecumenical networks. We believe in continued intercession, dialogue and that peace is the road to peace." Inspired by a call issued by Pope Francis, the Council recommended that the following Ash Wednesday (March 2) was to be observed as a day of prayer and fasting for the people of Ukraine.² The

¹ <https://www.katolsktmagasin.se/2022/02/24/halsning-till-alla-troende-i-stockholms-katolska-stift-med-anledning-av-kriget-i-ukraina/>; <https://equmeniakyrkan.se/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/ie-nyhetsbrev-2203.pdf>; <https://www.pingst.se/ukraina/>. See also recorded message by Church of Sweden primate, Antje Jacklén, at <https://vimeo.com/689415946> [accessed 6/9/22].

² "djup oro"; "delar smärtan och sorgen med människor som måste fly, som skadas och döda"; "genom de ekumeniska nätverken fortsätter dialogen med ryska och ukrainska kyrkor. Vi tror fortsatt på förbön, dialog och

Council's fundamental commitment to dialogue did not deter the presidium from later issuing a strongly phrased protest (published in one of the major Swedish newspapers) against Patriarch Kirill's support for the invasion. The head of the Moscow Patriarchate is here accused of exposing a "ghastly theology" which is used to legitimize an unlawful invasion that cannot, by any means, be justified. By this action, Patriarch Kirill "hides the richness of the Orthodox theological tradition," and, indeed, "the Christian message of Jesus Christ the Prince of Peace, who choose the path of love and non-violence."³

On the part of the individual churches, there have been many services and calls to prayer for the situation in Ukraine (including a digital one at the Church of Sweden's "web of prayer").⁴ Ukrainian refugees have received the support of local congregations on numerous occasions (it should however be noted that the number of refugees coming to Sweden so far has been relatively modest),⁵ but it is primarily through the churches' various aid organizations that they have been able to offer direct assistance to those who have suffered the tragic consequences of this war. Act Church of Sweden, Caritas, Diakonia, and the Pentecostal Mission have conducted public fundraising campaigns and engaged in various efforts of on-site measures to aid Ukrainian refugees.⁶ Relief has been provided through the channels offered by large-scale aid organizations, but sometimes more informal conduits have been used to help. It should be noted that many of the Swedish evangelical churches established links with similar religious groups in Ukraine already during the Soviet era.⁷ These bonds of friendship can now be utilized to offer support in a time of need.

During the spring of 2022, it became obvious that the war in Ukraine was to have a fundamental impact on Swedish politics. Sweden's position of neutrality was reconsidered against the backdrop of the tragedy that was unfolding in the European south-east. On May 16,

att fred är vägen till fred." <https://www.skr.org/uttalande-fran-sveriges-kristna-rads-presidium-gallande-kriget-i-ukraina/> [accessed 6/9/22]. All translations mine.

³ "fasansfull teologi"; "döljer den ortodoxa teologins stora rikedom ... det kristna budskapet om fredsfursten Jesus Kristus som valde kärlekens och ickevåldets väg." <https://www.expressen.se/debatt/rysslands-patriark-drar-evangeliet-i-smutsen/> [accessed 6/9/22].

⁴ <https://be.svenskakyrkan.se/fred/>. See also, for example, <https://equemeniakyrkan.se/bon-for-ukraina/>; <https://katolskakyrkan.se/aktuellt/stiftsnyheter/2022/valbesokt-vallfard-till-marielund-med-bon-om-fred-i-ukraina> [accessed 7/9/22]

⁵ See for example [https://www.sandaren.se/nyhet/forsamlingar-fortsatter-hjalpa-flyktningarna](https://www.sandaren.se/nyhet/forsamlingar-fortsatter-hjalpa-flyktningarna;); <https://www.dn.se/sverige/flydde-kriget-i-ukraina-nu-vill-hon-hjalpa-dem-som-kommer-efter/> [sites accessed 7/9/22].

⁶ <https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/act/nyheter/act-svenska-kyrkan-agerar-for-ukraina> (a website in English); <https://www.caritas.se/nyhetsarkiv/?year=2022&month=3>; <https://www.diakonia.se/aktuellt/nu-ar-irina-och-hennes-barn-i-sakerhet/>; <https://www.pingst.se/nyheter/ukraina/> [accessed 7/9/22]

⁷ K. Lundström, K. Ahlstrand, J.-Å. Alvarsson, and G. Janson (eds), (2021). *Svensk mission och kyrkorna som växt fram*. Skellefteå: Artos, pp. 165–69.

2022, Swedish government decided to submit a formal bid to join NATO. Over the last couple of years Swedish defense policy has step by step drawn towards an ever closer alignment to NATO, with considerable military co-operation with NATO forces and, above all, the USA.⁸ These moves were by and large triggered by increasing tensions in the Baltic and Arctic regions. It was increasingly recognized that Sweden, and its eastern neighbors, were in an increasingly vulnerable position. Collaboration and bi-lateral agreements seemed to be the way to provide the stability that this situation called for. However, the decision to join NATO represents a fundamental change in the Swedish political landscape. Owing to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, public opinion drifted significantly towards a pro-membership attitude during the spring of 2022. To leading politicians, Finland's choice to leave its neutral status seemed to turn a revision of Sweden's position into a bare necessity.

How did the Swedish churches respond to this course of event, which, gradually uprooted long held opinions about Sweden's position in the global political landscape? By and large, the churches have remained reticent about "the NATO issue." Even though the Swedish churches are no strangers to commenting on international politics (what has been written above offers a, perhaps extreme, case in point), they have in general refrained from making direct remarks on Sweden's geopolitical situation. The dominant Swedish church, the Lutheran Church of Sweden (until the turn of the century, the established, national, church) declared, however, its attitude vis-à-vis Sweden's relation to NATO already in 2016. This decision was occasioned by a motion from one of the members of the Church of Sweden's national synod (*kyrkomöte*). The proposer had requested a protest from the Board of the National Synod (*kyrkostyrelsen*) in relation to recent issues of Swedish foreign policy. In particular the proposition singles out Sweden's recent "participation in unprovoked aggression against foreign countries" (a reference to Sweden's participation in the NATO-led operation in Libya in 2011) for criticism, but also urges the Board to address the Swedish Parliament regarding the question of a future NATO membership. According to the proposition, NATO is to be shunned by Sweden at all costs, since it is "an alliance for war."⁹ However, the national synod rejected both suggestions. After rehearsing the contents of the Church of Sweden's recent position paper on "a just peace"

⁸ See for example, M. Nilsson, (2009). "Amber Nine: NATO's Secret Use of a Flight Path over Sweden and the Incorporation of Sweden in NATO's Infrastructure." *Journal of Contemporary History*, 44(2), 287–307. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009408101252>; C. Wagnsson, (2011). "A security community in the making? Sweden and NATO post-Libya." *European Security*, 20(4), 585–603. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2011.633514>.

⁹ "Deltagande i oprovocerade anfallskrig mot främmande länder"; "en allians för krig." https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/filer/Mot%202016_006.pdf [accessed 19/8/22]. For the decision of the synod, see https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/filer/Protokoll_166_2016.pdf [accessed 19/8/22].

(issued March 16, 2016) and several recent decisions on related topics by the national synod,¹⁰ the committee preparing a reply to this exhortation declared that it was “not within the Church of Sweden’s area of competence and responsibility” to offer opinions on political questions such as Sweden’s relation to NATO.¹¹ In the decision the committee resorts to Swedish bureaucratic terminology. The term “competence” is used to denote the areas in which, for example, a government agency has been granted mandate to decide. Even though the terminology may be seen as slightly misleading, the decision of the committee, and subsequently by the national synod itself, is a clear expression of the church’s unwillingness to involve itself in matters of foreign and defense policy. This decision reaches back to a situation when the ties between the national, Lutheran, church and the Swedish state were more strongly knit. Even though considerable liberty to express opinions on matters of politics had been given even to representatives of the “state church” during the twentieth century, foreign policy was tacitly understood to be strictly “off limits” for church officials. That the national church should publicly express opinions on matters of foreign politics that run counter to the decisions of the Swedish government was inconceivable. That leading representatives of the national church occasionally could raise an opposing voice in private, or at informal gatherings, is another matter.

During the spring of 2022, the Church of Sweden could therefore reach back to this earlier statement when pressed to have an opinion on the recent political development. In the leading church periodical, *Kyrkans tidning*, a press officer of the Church of Sweden repeated the decision of 2016. In this communication the position of the national synod was further explored: the submission of a membership application “isn’t a pastoral matter, or something for us to hold a joint opinion about. If Christians are worried about the associated dangers, it’s up to local congregations to counsel them.”¹²

Yet, there are, of course, different and differing voices within the Swedish Christian landscape. Public statements expressing a whole-heartedly positive attitude are hard to come by. *Världen idag*, an organ of the Swedish Christian right, comes closest. A lead article,

¹⁰ For these decisions, see <https://km.svenskakyrkan.se/km-2001/skrivelser/2001-8/KsSkr2001-8.shtml.html>; <https://km.svenskakyrkan.se/km-2001/betankanden/EU20015R.shtml.html#TopOfPage>; https://km.svenskakyrkan.se/tcrot/km/2005/skrivelser/e_KsSkr_2005-5_Redovisning_vald_II.shtml.html#TopOfPage [accessed 30/8/22].

¹¹ “inte ligger inom Svenska kyrkans ansvars- och kompetensområde.” See <https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/filer/KI%202016-07.pdf> [accessed 19/8/2022]

¹² As quoted and translated in the (English) *Church Times*, see <https://churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2022/20-may/news/world/finnish-and-swedish-churches-reticent-about-formal-bid-to-join-nato> [accessed 23/8/22]

published towards the end of March, declares that the newspaper had not “once and for all made up its mind” concerning how or if Sweden should form a closer relationship with NATO. The pros and cons seem evident to the writer:

We have shown support for the need to secure military assistance in a time when our country, due to decades of political naivety, stand poorly equipped. We could benefit from NATO’s military muscle. At the same time, we have previously demonstrated the drawbacks of abandoning our alliance-free position; a NATO-membership not only offers military securities, it comes with a duty to assist other countries in the case of war.

However, according to this article, the fundamental flaw of national politics is that Sweden has long “been at war with a far greater power.” According to this article, the possible military security that a NATO-membership could provide will be of little significance if the nations’ “spiritual defenses” are not simultaneously strengthened.¹³

Within the Church of Sweden there have been occasional voices of outright protest. Above all members of the “progressive group” (*Vänstern i Svenska kyrkan*) within the national synod has been moving for a revision of the church’s position on this issue. So far, they have been unsuccessful. When asked why this is a matter for the Church of Sweden, the chairperson of this grouping stated that

the Church of Sweden has a strong voice in our society. It is Sweden’s largest member-organization which has invested considerably in working for peace and reconciliation, ecumenically and internationally. If you are a part of society, you have a right to an opposing voice on any matter. The Church of Sweden has much to contribute in the present situation.¹⁴

A more negative attitude has also been implicitly voiced by Karin Wiborn, assistant president of the Uniting Church. When commenting on a recent survey of pastors’ attitudes towards a possible future NATO-membership (which indicated that there was an approximate 50-50 split in pastors’ attitudes towards a possible NATO-membership), she declared her belief that NATO should not be seen as a “proactive way to peace.” She expresses a mild

¹³ “har vi inte tagit definitiv ställning”; “Vi har visat förståelse för behovet av att säkra upp militär hjälp i en tid när vi i vårt land – på grund av decennier av naiva politiska beslut – står väldigt dåligt rustade. Här har Nato militära muskler som vi kunde ha nytta av. Samtidigt har vi visat på baksidorna med att överge alliansfriheten, hur ett medlemskap i Nato inte bara ger militär garanti utan också en plikt att rycka in och hjälpa andra länder i händelse av krig”; “Sverige ligger redan i krig med en mycket större makt”; “andliga försvar.” <https://www.varldenidag.se/ledare/nato-racker-inte-for-ett-sverige-i-krig-med-gud/repvbu!IVmzS2WuSh@MEPsxYrsPiQ/> [accessed 26/8/22]

¹⁴ “Svenska kyrkan är ju en stark röst i samhället, det är Sveriges största medlemsorganisation, och man har ett stort fredsarbete, ekumeniskt och internationellt. Är man en del av samhället så har man rätt att göra sin röst hörd, och Svenska kyrkan har mycket att bidra med i frågan.” As quoted in <https://www.visk.info/2022/04/20/intervju-i-kyrkans-tidning-visk-vill-stoppa-natoanslutning-45947545> [accessed 25/8/22]; see also <https://www.visk.info/v%C3%A5r-politik-10583139> [accessed 25/8/22].

disappointment at the result of the survey, and, repeating a phrase much used in Swedish Christian circles, declares her belief that “peace is the way to peace.”¹⁵

Spearheaded by former Church of Sweden Archbishop K. G. Hammar, the Christian Peace Movement (*Kristna freds rörelsen*) has been the one Christian grouping voicing the most vocal opposition towards Sweden’s change in defense policy.¹⁶ In a recent article, the general secretary of this ecumenical body, expressed bewilderment in a new situation and a sense of disappointment at the way in which leading Swedish politicians have dealt with the entire issue. Sweden’s neutrality has long been a point of departure for the Christian Peace Movement when working for reconciliation:

Where can we find solid ground if Sweden is no longer neutral but a part of NATO? Where can we find hope for a new security order which is a path to peace? How can we as a popular movement of the people (Sw. *folkrörelse*) navigate when questions which require a considerable democratic anchoring turns into quick governmental decisions, unthinkable before the war in Ukraine escalated.¹⁷

Besides these statements of opinion, public comments on the NATO-question on the part of the Swedish churches have been few and far between. It should be noted that there have been no official statements coming from representatives of the Roman Catholic Church or of the Orthodox Christian communities (some of which, of course, have been fundamentally affected by the confrontation between Russia and Ukraine).¹⁸ So far, the Swedish bid to join NATO has not been ratified, but there is little to suggest that the Swedish churches will alter their opinions or express any other views than those presented above in the foreseeable future. Just like the rest of the population, Swedish Christians remain fundamentally divided in their opinions about the best way to arrange Sweden’s relationship to NATO. But the responses on the part of the churches also seem to hark back to bygone ages. National defense and foreign policy remain, in a country for centuries fundamentally shaped by Lutheran doctrine concerning the division

¹⁵ “Fred är vägen till fred”, see <https://www.sandaren.se/taxonomy/term/1678> [accessed 30/8/22].

¹⁶ <https://www.kyrkanstidning.se/nyhet/fredrörelsen-besviken-efter-beslut-om-ansökan> [accessed 25/8/22]. See also <https://www.sandaren.se/nyhet/kg-hammar-det-blir-inte-fred-om-man-rustar-krig> [accessed 25/8/22]; and K. G. Hammar, (2021). *Lilla fredsboken: om att vara följare till Jesus på fredens väg*. Stockholm: Verbum.

¹⁷ “Vad ska vi ta spjörn mot om Sverige snart inte längre är alliansfritt utan en del av NATO? Var ska vi hitta hoppet om en förändring som leder till en säkerhetspolitik för fred? Hur ska vi som folkrörelse navigera när frågor som kräver bred demokratisk förankring blir snabba regeringsbeslut som var otänkbara alternativ innan kriget i Ukraina eskalerade?”, https://krf.se/wp-content/uploads/20220613_Fredsnytt_1_2022_webb.pdf (krf.se) [accessed 25/8/22].

¹⁸ Without conducting interviews of individual members of congregations, the situation is actually difficult to assess. There have, however, been occasional confrontations, see <http://www.ryskaortodoxkyrkan.se/3/uttalande.html> [accessed 6/9/22].

between faith and politics, a matter for the political realm. A tense and potentially threatening geopolitical situation tends to reinforce long cherished views.