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# ‘The Catholic Danger’: the changing patterns of Swedish anti-Catholicism, 1850–1965

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## **Abstract**

*In the 1860s, Sweden’s harsh religious legislation was liberalized. The Dissenter Act legalized conversions to other Christian denominations, but it put in place many obstacles to leaving the Established Church, and many of the legal restrictions were obviously anti-Catholic in intent. Anti-Catholic sentiment was also expressed in conjunction with the legislative proposals and parliamentary debates on the question of religious freedom that preceded the Act on Freedom of Religion of 1951. The fact that full religious freedom was introduced so late stemmed largely from fears that the Catholic Church would grow strong under the protection of more liberal religious legislation. The chapter addresses anti-Catholic rhetoric in Sweden from the mid 1800s to the early 1960s with focus on the debates in the media and in Parliament. It is found that there was a shift in the perception of the ‘Catholic danger’. At the beginning of the period, anti-Catholicism was prompted by a desire to shield Protestant religious unity; later the objective became more and more secular. Even if the country’s Lutheran heritage still played an important role for Swedish cultural identity, common values were no longer prompted by religion, but purely by politics and ideology.*

In the autumn of 1921, the Catholic Apostolic Vicar of Sweden, Bishop Albertus Bitter, submitted a petition to the newly instituted National Board of Education requesting that inaccurate statements about the Catholic Church’s doctrine and practice in schoolbooks on history and church history should be corrected. The petition, of which 3,000 copies were printed and distributed to schools across the country, referred to the national school curriculum, issued two years before, which stated that teachers should avoid anything that might be perceived as a hurtful attack on individuals’ political and religious views. Several examples were given of how these principles had been offended in the description of the Catholic Church, not least concerning the worship of Mary and the saints, indulgences, and the Jesuit order. The Catholic leadership in Sweden thus hoped to benefit from the demands for a more secular education that had long since been advocated by Swedish liberals and socialists (Bitter 1921; Werner 1996, 78–99).

The effect of the Catholic schoolbook petition was dramatic, for it gave rise to one of the largest press campaigns against the Catholic Church in Sweden in modern times. The petition was rejected by an almost unanimous press, and the newspapers proclaimed

themselves embarrassed by what they described as an impudent attempt by the Catholics to win influence over the country's education policy, placing it under 'papal censorship'. The National Board of Education, which investigated the issue, concluded that Catholic criticism of the Swedish schoolbooks was unfounded and on the whole thoroughly exaggerated. There the matter rested. The Catholic intention of bringing about a reassessment of the impression of the Catholic faith and practice given in Sweden's schoolbooks thus failed, and the only thing achieved by the petition was a violent press campaign against the Catholic Church (von Engeström 1921; Wadensjö 1968, 208–10).

It was not the first time that the Catholic Church had been subject to this type of media attack, nor would it be the last. The next press campaign was already underway in the summer of 1923, this time triggered by the visitation to the Nordic countries by Cardinal Willem van Rossum, prefect of the Roman Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. The cardinal's visit, which was part of the Catholic Church's increased missionary activity in Scandinavia, provoked fierce debates in the press, with many conspiracy theories and anti-Catholic attacks. The fact that the Bridgettine order had established what was ostensibly a rest home, but was suspected to be a disguised convent, in the Stockholm suburb of Djursholm, and that Swedish High-Church priests had participated in some of the events organized in connection with the cardinal's visit, merely fuelled anti-Catholic sentiment (Werner 1996, 256–266).

These fears were especially strong within the Church of Sweden. The cardinal's visit coincided with a petition in Swedish churches in support of the Latvian Protestants' objections to a Protestant church in Riga being returned to the Catholics, which stirred up the atmosphere further. At the meeting of the General Assembly of Swedish Priests—an association for Established Church clergy—held in the city of Norrköping in September 1923, the 'Catholic danger' was a major theme. It was decided to set up a 'Protestant Committee to Protect Protestantism', with links to the *Internationaler Verband zur Verteidigung des Protestantismus* formed in Berlin the same year, which had the fight against Catholicism as its primary purpose. Similarly, at the Church of Sweden's General Synod in 1923 and the Scandinavian Bishops' Conference in 1924, 'Papist' propaganda was a central theme (Jergmar 1972, 111, 118).

Until 1860, Sweden was a Lutheran confessional state, and as late as 1858 six women converts to Catholicism were sentenced to exile for apostatizing from 'the pure Protestant faith'. This incident provoked a storm of protest across Europe and contributed to forcing a change in Sweden's religious legislation. The result was the Dissenter Act, which legalized conversions to other Christian denominations, although anyone hoping to leave the

Established Church, which from now on was labelled the Church of Sweden, faced endless restrictions that had a deliberately anti-Catholic sting. The members of so-called 'foreign' religions were excluded from being teachers at state schools, and were denied access to the public teaching and nursing colleges. Since the majority of the members of the Protestant Free Churches chose to remain in the Established Church, these discriminatory regulations primarily affected Catholics (Palmqvist 1958, 334–457). This was also the case with the new Dissenter Act of 1873, whose purpose was to impose a legal framework on the vigorous revivalist movements. Anti-Catholic sentiment was also expressed in connection with the legislative proposals and parliamentary debates on the question of religious freedom that preceded the Act on Freedom of Religion of 1951. That full freedom of worship was introduced so late stemmed largely from fears that the Catholic Church, under the protection of liberalized religious legislation, would intensify its missionary work in Sweden (Kellberg 1990, 299–309). The debate in the press once again illustrated the deep-seated anti-Catholic sentiment in the country.

What form did anti-Catholic criticism take? To what extent did it draw on national Lutheran confessional traditions? What was the role of foreign influences? And how did anti-Catholic rhetoric change over time? These are the questions I will address in this article, and in so doing I will shed light on anti-Catholic rhetoric in Sweden from the mid 1800s to the early 1960s.

### *For the protection of Lutheranism*

With the Dissenter Acts of 1860 and 1873 the correlation between Swedish citizenship and Lutheran confession was broken. The purpose of the Acts was to create a framework for the vibrant Protestant Free Church movement, and the fact that the new legislation also benefited the Catholic Church was seen as a necessary evil. The issue had been a matter of debate since the 1840s in the Swedish Parliament, which at that time was still made up of four Estates. The reason why it had taken so long to arrive at a decision was due in no small part to the strength of anti-Catholic opinion in Parliament. The greatest resistance came, not unexpectedly, from the Estate of the clergy: they described Catholicism as a superstitious and unbiblical heresy and a threat to the country's Lutheran social order and culture. Marian dogma, the cult of the saints, and the importance of good deeds as a means to justification were taken as examples of such unbiblical teachings and traditions, and the supranational character of the Catholic Church and its hegemonic claim to be the one true Church were described as a threat to Swedish national integrity. In the parliamentary debates, voices warned against Jesuit

infiltration and Catholic proselytizing, to which the lower sections of the population were said to be particularly susceptible. Several parliamentarians were afraid that, as one of them put it, the country would be studded with Catholic convents (Palmqvist 1958, 364–457; Sidenvall 2007, 253–268; Harvard 2006, 79–83). It was bad enough that the Catholic Church was allowed to operate in Sweden – the line should be drawn at permitting monasteries.

The debate continued along the same lines even after the replacement of the parliamentary estates by a modern, bicameral parliamentary system and the establishment of a new representative body for the Church of Sweden, the General Synod, in the late 1860s. Interestingly, it was mainly the conservatives who continued to criticize the Catholic Church, while the representatives of the liberal movement – which played a dominant role in the anti-Catholic polemics on the Continent – were more passive, and in some cases even defended Catholic rights. However, this was not an expression of Catholic sympathies per se, but instead reflected the fact that the evangelicals were strongly represented in the Liberal Party and feared that more severe religious legislation would also affect the Protestant Free Churches. Increased Catholic activities in Sweden in the latter half of the nineteenth century led to repeated attempts by religious conservatives to tighten up the Dissenter Act, as evidenced by the debates in Parliament as well as in the General Synod (Hessler 1964, 249–252; Werner 1996, 30–73).

In Church circles a watchful eye was kept on Catholic activities in the country, and calls for tighter legislation to meet the ‘Catholic danger’ were heard from time to time. The meeting of the clergy in Stockholm in the autumn of 1888 heard a proposal for Sweden’s national commemoration days to be used to warn against the dangers of Catholicism. On the commemoration day for Gustavus Adolphus the following autumn, the *pastor primarius* (first pastor) in Stockholm, Fredrik Fehr, used his sermon to call for vigilance against Catholic propaganda. A bazaar in Stockholm in April 1890 for the benefit of the Catholic Sisters of Saint Elizabeth and their health-care activities prompted him to convene the Stockholm clergy at Storkyrkan, the main church in the capital, to discuss this new threat to what he chose to term ‘evangelical freedom’. The clergy duly passed a resolution urging the Swedish people not to support Catholic health care in the capital. Fehr was a prominent representative of the so-called ‘liberal theology’, a Protestant movement that strove to adapt the Christian message to modern society and its mentality, and to bring it into line with the new scientific worldview. Liberal theologians were notably active in the fight against the ‘Catholic threat’ (Werner 1996, 171–180).

There were connections between these events and the efforts at around the same time to tighten up the Dissenter Act. The debates were ostensibly prompted by the Catholic Church's strict marriage laws. In the Swedish Parliament, proposals were put forward to prohibit prior agreements on children's Catholic education in mixed marriages, the aim being to ensure that the children of such marriages would be brought up as members of the Church of Sweden, as was the law in the event that no prior agreement had been reached by the parents. In the debates in Parliament and the General Synod, several speakers pointed to Catholic expansion abroad and the need to prevent similar developments in Sweden. They justified their position by arguing for the importance of safeguarding Protestant religious liberty and protecting the individual from Catholic dogmatism, moral constraint, and 'pushy priests' (FK 1903, 15:29–30; AK 1910 5:14–18, 26–37; Werner 1996, 48–54). In the press, sharp criticism was directed against what was termed the Catholic Church's sneaky attempt to use religion to control individual consciences and to 'ensnare souls'. Some of these press debates were later published in book form (Hammargren 1930).

Conservative churchmen also used this type of rhetoric, and from the late nineteenth century references to the true faith or the responsibility for people's salvation became more and more rare. True, there were several among the clergy who would have liked to have seen a return to old Lutheran unitary religious order, but the Church of Sweden's weakened position in society on the one hand and its close ties to government on the other made it increasingly difficult to call for it openly. Rather, it was the political ramifications that were in focus, and Catholicism was thus presented as a threat to individual liberty and national security. Suspicion of the Catholic clergy led to restrictions on Catholic parishes. In the 1910s they were thus deprived of their right to be institutions of record, and this task was taken over by the Church of Sweden. In the debates, this measure was justified by the need to prevent the Catholic Church from exerting pressure on Catholics who did not want a Catholic marriage, or who wished to defy Catholic doctrine by remarrying. The initiative for this action, however, came not from the Protestant clergy but from the government, and it was motivated by state rationale, not by theological arguments (Werner 1996, 58–64).

The situation may thus have changed, but the values and principles at issue remained broadly the same. Catholicism was seen as a threat both to basic societal values and to Sweden's political culture, not to mention individual freedom, but all these concepts were gradually filled with new content. The resultant shift in perspective left anti-Catholic attitudes in Sweden more akin to those on the Continent, which originated in the contradiction between the liberal (and socialist) principle of religion as a private matter and the Catholic Church's

demands for uninterrupted influence over politics and society (see the Introduction to this volume). It also illustrated the importance of Lutheran cultural heritage. As several researchers have shown, the legacy of Christian confession was an important factor in the construction of nineteenth-century national identities. In Protestant Scandinavia, the connection between Lutheranism and Nordic national identity remained relevant long after the disappearance of religion as an all-encompassing norm in daily life (Thorkildsen 1997, 138–60; Blücker, 2000).

### The Swedish welfare state and anti-Catholicism

During the inter-war period ‘the Catholic danger’ was a perennial topic of debate in the Swedish media, which can be seen as response to the Catholic Church’s internationally strengthened position after the First World War and its increased missionary activities in Scandinavia. The issue was addressed at the Swedish Bishops’ Conference in 1920, and four years later the Swedish bishops issued a joint statement urging vigilance against ‘Papist propaganda’ (Wadensjö 1968, 215–219; Werner 2005, 164–177). Catholic activities in Sweden and abroad were followed closely by the media, and the leading daily newspaper, *Dagens Nyheter*, published a special series of articles on ‘Catholic propaganda’ (DN 9 & 10 September 1923; Hammargren 1925).

Cardinal van Rossum’s tour of Scandinavia led, as mentioned, to sharp attacks on the Catholic Church in the press. These attacks became even more vituperative after the publication of a booklet in Dutch a year later, in which the cardinal described his impressions from the Scandinavia trip. In the booklet, which was intended to encourage Dutch Catholics to donate money to the Catholic mission in Scandinavia, the cardinal gave a very optimistic picture of the opportunities for Catholic missionary activity in the North. Thus he stressed that the Nordic people were increasingly turning away from Protestantism and directing their gaze towards the Roman ‘Mother Church’. The Catholic Apostolic Vicar of Sweden, Bishop Johannes Müller, spoke in the same spirit in conjunction with his fundraising trips in Catholic Europe (van Rossum, 1923; Wadensjö, 1968, 215–219; Werner 2005, 164–177). The Swedish. Sweden’s Archbishop Nathan Söderblom was sharply critical of what he described as the Catholic Church’s misguided missionary work in Protestant countries. In his opinion, the Catholic Church, through its exclusive claim to truth, had put itself outside true catholicity and developed into a sect, whose monolithic principle of unity constituted a threat to modern society (Werner 1996, 322–324).

When studying newspaper and Church magazine articles on the Catholic Church, one is struck by the military metaphors. There is much talk of the Catholic Church's 'plans of attack' against Scandinavia and wish to 'encircle' Protestantism, and similarly of 'occupation troops' in form of Catholic priests and women religious, and the Protestant 'defence preparedness' to meet this threat. The Catholic Church, in other words, was characterized as a danger to society and political developments in Sweden, and there were warnings of an approaching Catholic missionary offensive against the Nordic countries. There were frequent references to developments in countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, and Britain, where there was a growing Catholic minority. It was also characteristic for Catholicism to be described as anti-progressive, authoritarian, and oppressive. Left-wingers expressed concerns that Catholicism would inhibit Swedish democratic development, while conservatives described Catholicism as a threat to the country's cultural identity and national independence. Although the media occasionally ran positive portrayals of Catholic events and ceremonies, the basic trend was for Catholicism to be depicted as something strange and different that did not belong in Swedish society (S-T 27 September and 10 November 1923; DN 15 July 1923, 20 July 1925, SD 17 November 1921, 4 February 1923, 12 July 1924, 14 March 1930; NDA 6 January 1918, 17 July 1923, 12 and 20 July 1924, 11 July and 12 August 1925; 24 March 1930).

Suspicion of Catholic religious orders and monasteries was especially strong. An article in the Young Church movement's magazine *Vår Lösen* ('Our Watchword') from 1922 warned against Catholic monasticism, which it labelled a prime means of Catholic propaganda and an expression of the oppressive Catholic system. Several articles that year described Catholic monasteries as a threat to social morality and state authority and as anti-liberal establishments, whose very existence was contrary to modern liberties such as freedom of speech and thought (NDA 26 January; SD 2 February; SM 1 March; S-T 5 and 6 February 1922). Interestingly, women were described as being particularly susceptible to the temptations of monastic life, and again and again there were warnings against the girls' schools run by Catholic religious institutes in Scandinavia. In the 1930s, the focus was on two Catholic establishments for women in the Swedish capital, namely the French School of the Sisters of St Joseph, a French congregation at work in the capital since the 1860s, and the St Ingrid Nursing Home for young women, run by the French Dominican Sisters. It was suspected that these institutions were used as means to proselytize. The Catholic Church was duly subjected to vicious attacks in the media, and from all sides calls were heard for increased government control of Catholic activities (Åmell 2004, 121–142; Werner 2009, 35–39). Celibacy was another common focus

for attacks. The celibate life was denounced as unethical and, as was particularly evident in the debates on female monasticism, a threat to society's moral order. The alternative women's role represented by the female religious institutions conflicted with the Protestant ideals of womanhood then current in Scandinavia. Married life and women's duties as wives and mothers were emphasized, while a celibate monastic life was rejected as unnatural and unchristian (Markkola 2000).

As before, the fiercest attacks came from the conservatives, while the social democrats showed a certain understanding for Catholic claims. Hence the editor of the socialist newspaper *Arbetet* ('Work'), Arthur Engberg, somewhat unexpectedly defended the Catholic schoolbook petition discussed above. Yet this was not an expression of Catholic sympathies, but rather a means to get at the Church of Sweden. Engberg soon changed tack, and by the end of the 1920s he was an advocate of a cohesive Swedish state church system: the Church of Sweden should be used as a tool for a radical cultural policy, and Catholicism was chief among the movements that had to be held at bay. As a church minister from 1932, Engberg kept close watch on the Catholic Church (Hessler 1964, 249–252; Stråth 1993, 17–21; Alvunger 2006, 45–61).

However, it was not just the media that took a critical stance on the Catholic Church and spread anti-Catholic views: the textbooks used in state schools served much the same purpose. This was the background to Bishop Bitter's petition, after all. In the textbooks for history and religion, the Catholic Church was described as a corrupt apparatus of power, hell-bent on selling forgiveness of sins, and wedded to the principle that the end justified the means. The Jesuits, who were depicted as cunning and devious, appeared as the foremost exponents of this Catholic striving for power, and conflicts in the early modern period were frequently attributed to malign Jesuit influence. Catholic worship was described as superstitious and primitive, and the Virgin Mary and the saints were said to have the status of demigods. Monasticism was portrayed as a refuge for lazy men and oppressed women, and the Reformation as liberation from spiritual darkness and religious despotism. Similar descriptions are also to be found in encyclopaedias and reference books, and in even more extreme form in contemporary pamphlet literature (Hidal 1988, 248–251; Palmqvist 1993, 151–157).

### *Freedom of religion and Catholicism*

The deep-rooted distrust of the Catholic Church was much in evidence during the referral and parliamentary discussion of the Bill that led to the Act on Freedom of Religion in 1951. One

of the issues that prompted most debate was the right to establish monasteries. The current Dissenter Act explicitly prohibited monastic orders and monasteries; the government Bill now proposed that the monastery ban should be repealed and replaced with a provision that allowed the establishment of monasteries on certain conditions. This was ultimately the line taken by Parliament (Inger 1962, 138–165; Alvunger 2006, 157–170; Werner 2009, 26–29).Parliament.

But during the parliamentary readings, the monastic issue was subject of heated debate and a series of separate votes. In these debates, in which differences of opinion did not follow the usual party lines, a strong distrust of the Catholic Church in general and of monasticism in particular was very much on show. Several speakers pointed to Catholicism's political dimension and the central position of monastic life in the Catholic system, while others argued that monastic institutions constituted a threat to individual rights and freedoms, and therefore should not be allowed in Sweden. But what particularly worried them was that the monasteries could be used as tools for Catholic propaganda and to lure in converts. There were also warnings, not least from Social Democrat speakers, about the negative consequences of an increasing degree of Catholic influence in the country. Catholicism was described as a reactionary ideology, hostile to freedom, and incompatible with Swedish society's democratic values (FK 1961, 17:11–18; AK 1961, 17:18–25).

The fact that a majority of the members of Parliament in the end endorsed the government's proposals was due in part to the fact that a ban on monasteries was incompatible with the European Convention on Human Rights, which Sweden had signed only shortly before. Indeed, it should be noted that the monastic issue was actually one of the reasons why the Swedish government had long hesitated about accession to the European Court of Justice, for it was feared that this would force Sweden into an unconditional repeal of all its restrictions on the establishment of monasteries. Similarly, the strong Catholic presence in post-war European politics played a certain role in this connection, and the Swedish foreign policy debate often presented the first steps towards European integration as a Catholic project that had to be guarded against (Kellberg 1990, 299–309; Werner 2006, 81–106; Stråth 2000, 366–383).

The debate gained fresh momentum when a group of Belgian Carmelite sisters applied for permission to establish a monastery in Glumslöv in southern Sweden. Several leading figures argued that the application should be turned down, and there was talk in the media of 'spiritual concentration camps' and 'orgies of self-torture' (*S-T* 13 November 1961; *SvD* 1 August 1963; *DN* 4 August 1963; *Arbetet* 4 August 1963). Nevertheless, in 1961 the

government submitted a Bill for approval by Parliament. Once again the discussion did not follow clear party lines, although the most critical comments this time came from the Social Democrats. As in the debate on the issue a decade before, the discussion was more about the perception of the Catholic Church than about the matter at hand. Opponents stressed the Catholic Church's political aspirations and the incompatibility of monastic life both with Swedish legal tradition and with modern notions of individual rights and freedoms. It was also pointed out that the Catholic Church, in its determination to improve its footing in Sweden, was quick to invoke religious freedom, despite rejecting this principle as heresy in its doctrinal teaching. Both parliamentary Chambers stayed various decisions, which meant that the proposal was defeated, yet even so the government, referring to the European Convention on Human Rights, decided to authorize the establishment of the monastery (FK 1961, 20:19–65; AK 1961:17:36–81; Inger, 1962, 138–165).

An important reason for Swedish resistance to the monasteries was that they were perceived as the purest expression of Catholicism and Catholic life. Critics made much of the principle of authority, which of course was particularly prominent in monasticism. The same views were apparent in the anti-Catholic rhetoric across the Western world, but equally in the Catholic Church's own teachings. This explains why the 'cultural wars' between church and state that from the mid-nineteenth century onwards raged in many countries mainly affected members of religious orders and congregations (de Maeyer et al. 2004). Yet in the Swedish debate the Protestant legacy is discernible. While the Lutheran tradition emphasizes the importance of marriage and family life, the ideals of celibacy and ascetic monasticism are regarded as superior forms of Christian life according to Catholic teaching (Werner 2002, 14–5, 80–4).

### *Concluding reflections*

Anti-Catholicism was a legacy of the Reformation. As a consequence of the disintegration of Protestant cultural unity and the ongoing secularization of Swedish society, there was a shift in the perception of the 'Catholic danger'. As late as the early twentieth century, the overall aim had been to preserve religious unity on Lutheran grounds. Fifty years later the objective was to defend the Protestant-inspired democratic ideology that had now become the self-evident foundation of Swedish society. Even if the Lutheran legacy still played an important role for the Swedish cultural identity, common values no longer reflected religion, but political and ideological reasons. In both perspectives, the Catholic faith, with its hierarchical order and demands for obedience and submission to the Church's teaching, appeared as alien

and dangerous, not least from a political point of view, and the supranational character of the Catholic Church and its demands for independence from state power were regarded a threat to national identity and integrity.

The debate about the Glumslöv monastery in the 1960s was the last major expression of anti-Catholic sentiment in Swedish politics; it marked the end of an era. Anti-Catholic statements were to continue, but the criticism expressed was neither as solid nor as overwhelmingly negative as before. Today there is no talk in Sweden of a 'Catholic threat', and such anti-Catholic rhetoric as there is mainly focuses on Catholic teaching on sexual morality and the family. This change in attitude can be seen as resulting from the profound transformation undergone by the Catholic Church following the Second Vatican Council (1962–5) and the subsequent reforms that paved the way for a more open form of Catholicism, but was also due to changes in Swedish society, which followed similarly lines of development towards greater openness and cultural diversity. In both cases, past strategies of delimitation and uniformity were abandoned in favour of more pluralistic views (Werner 2006, 13–19, 24–24, 81–106). Today it is Islam that is portrayed as a threat to the Nordic community of values. The rhetoric is closely allied to that used in the 1960s against Catholicism. This is evident not least with regard to women's issues, and the veil has taken the place of the monasteries as supposedly bearing witness to forced subordination and oppression (Hvitfelt 1998, 72–84; Roald 2003, 189–212).

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