Religious diversity in the neoliberal welfare state: Secularity and the ethos of egalitarianism in Sweden

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Abstract
Sociologists interested in religious change and state–church relations have, by and large, ignored how regimes of religious diversity and secularism interact with factors that are seemingly external to religious dynamics such as cultural notions of the welfare state and its neoliberal restructuring. This article fills this lacuna by exploring the social dynamics around secularity and religious diversity as they emerge in contestations around educational reforms in Sweden. The authors show that the language of ‘consumer choice’ that pervades discourses around public service provision in many late capitalist societies coalesces with human rights driven legal demands for greater religious freedom in justifying religious pluralism in education. These arguments, though, run up against Swedish understandings of egalitarianism as chiefly implemented through unified schools that are widely, but especially in governmental bureaucracies, viewed as a Swedish ‘tradition’. Theoretically, the article develops and builds the concept of ‘Multiple Secularities’.

Keywords
Neoliberalism, religious diversity, secularism, Swedish education
Introduction

In spite of ongoing processes of secularization, many European countries have witnessed the return of religion as a heated topic of public debate. As a consequence, religion has been deprivatized (Casanova, 1994). This has led to political controversies over secularism, in which the role and place of religion in the institutions of the state and civil society are being contested and renegotiated. Sociologists interested in religious change and state–church relations have mainly addressed these issues in terms of responses to migration-driven religious diversity and controversies around the ways in which inherited notions of religious citizenship, religion’s presence in public spaces and the privileges of dominant national religions are all being challenged and adapted (Fetzer and Soper, 2005; Koenig, 2007). However, scholars have, by and large, ignored how regimes of religious diversity and secularism interact with factors that are seemingly external to religious dynamics, such as cultural notions of the welfare state and its neoliberal restructuring. While scholars have explored the concomitant rise of the market logic in the religious field and welfare provision in the UK (Woodhead, 2012) and how and why religious conservatives promoted neoliberalism in the US (Hackworth, 2012), little is known about the interface between secularism, religious diversity and neoliberalism.

In this article we contribute to fill this lacuna by examining changes in the field of public education as one of the three pillars of the Swedish welfare state (next to health and social service provision). Education, of course, has been recognized as an important field for studying the effects of migration-driven religious diversity: scholars have explored minority accommodation with regard to places of worship in schools and universities, the acceptability of religious dress – especially of Islamic headscarves, Jewish yarmulkes and Sikh turbans – among both students and teachers, the provision of halal and kosher food in school canteens and conflicts over religious education (Joppke, 2013; Liederman, 2000; Scott, 2007). Controversies over religious teaching in particular go to the heart of contemporary debates, as they articulate competing claims to human rights, state neutrality, religious freedom, minority protection and freedom from religious indoctrination. However, just how these claims are framed depends on the regimes regulating the relationships between public and faith-based schools and their cultural underpinnings. Since in Sweden (as elsewhere) faith-based schools are understood as private schools, the religious–secular controversies around education are inextricably bound up with the larger politics of liberalization and public goods and the historically shaped social imaginaries and ‘strong evaluations’ (Taylor, 2004) on the basis of which people engage with them. In Sweden, these ‘strong evaluations’ turn on notions of equality and egalitarianism that have come to be linked with the ‘secular condition’.

Broadly situated within an emerging literature on religion, secularism and neoliberalism (Martikainen and Gauthier, 2013), this article explores the shape of recent contestations around confessional schools in Sweden.1 These contestations are framed by two reforms. Initiated in the early 1990s, the first was geared towards the decentralization of the school system and carried out in the name of cost reduction and greater choices, eventually leading to the rise of confessional schools. The second reform took place in 2011, among other things, as a response to criticism. We analyse the discourses, arguments and narratives of three sets of actors who are professionally involved in the
debates: (1) principals of confessional schools, (2) functionaries of governmental school agencies and (3) representatives of interest groups with stakes in the politics of religious education. We argue that the meanings attached to school politics within these discourses articulate shifting and competing interpretations and justifications of secularism that have to be understood against the backdrop of Swedish welfare traditions and the ‘choice revolution’ (Blomqvist, 2004) occurring during the 1990s.

For two reasons, the Swedish case is particularly valuable for furthering our understanding of the interface between neoliberal reform and secularity. First, Sweden is generally considered one of the most secularized countries in the world, with low figures of church attendance and traditional religious belief, and strong notions of privatized religion; second, it is the welfare state par excellence. Both features, privatized religion and unified welfare provision, are deeply engrained in Swedish culture, feeding into an ethos of equality and centralization (see also Zuckerman, 2008). We may therefore expect that social changes that affect this ethos reveal the links between neoliberal reform and secularity in particularly salient ways. The analysis shows that the language of ‘consumer choice’ that pervades discourses around public service provision in many late capitalist societies coalesces with human rights driven legal demands for greater religious freedom in justifying religious pluralism in education. These arguments, though, run up against Swedish understandings of egalitarianism as chiefly implemented through unified schools that are viewed widely, especially in official bureaucracies, as a Swedish ‘tradition’.

**Religion, secularization and the welfare state in Sweden**

Sweden is known as one of the most secularized countries of the world in terms of religious beliefs and participation. Simultaneously, until 2000 it had a state church and membership that remained surprisingly stable at high levels, epitomizing the pattern of ‘belonging without believing’ (Hervieu-Léger, 1999). While proponents of religious economies explain this situation as an outcome of the highly regulated religious market (Stark and Iannaccone, 1994), cultural and historicist explanations have more to commend them. First, the Evangelical Lutheran Church played a dominant role in Sweden from the Reformation in the 16th century onwards and has always been closely intertwined with the state: initially, alternative religious beliefs were criminalized and citizens turning away from the ‘pure faith’ sent into exile (Jänterä-Jareborg, 2010: 5). Still in the mid-19th century clergymen were members of parliament and influenced politics and standards of social discipline (Bäckström et al., 2004: 36). Since the beginning of the separation of the municipal authorities into church administration and civil administration in 1862, the Swedish government has evolved from an almost perfect unity of church and state into an increasingly secular and religiously neutral state (Pettersson, 2011: 119ff.). Only the Religious Freedom Act of 1951 allowed Swedes to completely leave the church. Culturally, however, while adherence to strict Protestant orthodoxy is seen by some to have alienated the church from parts of the population (Göransson, 1996), its eventual acceptance and embrace of modernity fostered the internal secularization of church and religious life (Tomasson, 2002). In the decades after the Second World War, the church also lost previous social functions in health care, social welfare and education.
Göransson, 1996: 146), and after long negotiations church and state were constitutionally separated in 2000. Importantly, even after disestablishment, the Church of Sweden continues to have a ‘semi-official role’, as well as specific public duties, such as the management of cemeteries and funerals, which a majority of Swedes support (Bäckström et al., 2004: 20; Cavallin, 2011: 45; Pettersson, 2011: 123). Nevertheless, Lutheran dominance did lead to public controversy, e.g. whether end of school year celebrations should continue to be held by priests in premises of the Church of Sweden.

This situation of low participation in worship but high public legitimacy and use of the rites of the dominant church, called the ‘Nordic paradox’ (Bäckström et al., 2004: 87), points to the ways in which Protestantism underpins Swedish concepts of nationhood and belonging, with church membership denoting membership in the national community. Martin (2005: 69) further notes that there is a ‘centralized ethos of Scandinavia where a monopoly church found itself mirrored in a dominant Social Democracy’. More generally, Davie (2000) found that long traditions of national church establishment are often paralleled by a ‘welfare-view of religion’. She further theorized this connection in the concept of ‘vicarious religion’, which she defined as a ‘religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, who (implicitly at least) not only understand, but, quite clearly, approve of what the minority is doing’ (Davie, 2007: 22). Taken together, Sweden reveals a pattern in which religious and cultural homogeneity for a long time went along with a centralized structure of religious and political authority, both of which engendered an ethos of social equality. This ethos was politically cultivated and buttressed by decades of Social Democratic rule (1932–1976) producing a comprehensive welfare state, which promoted individualism and trust in state institutions (Berggren and Trägårdh, 2012: 14).

This situation, however, is changing rapidly, as Sweden is experiencing sharp increases in migration-driven religious diversity and neoliberal restructurings of the welfare state, while church membership has dropped from 82.9% to 67.5% since disestablishment in 2000. About 2 million, or 20.7%, of Sweden’s population of 9.6 million have a migration background (Statistics Sweden – Foreign background). The public visibility and the institutional establishment of Islam, for example the construction of mosques and the opening of Islamic confessional schools, have frequently led, as in other European countries, to conflicts. Some of the public controversies have shown signs of Islamophobia (Gardell, 2010; Larsson, 2006). Importantly, claims of religious minorities to equal treatment were one of the driving forces behind the separation of church and state. Religious diversification thus functions to drive state neutrality and institutional secularization. It also produces shifts in the governance of religious diversity understood as the arrangements that specify the political and legal recognition and institutional accommodation of religious communities at multiple social scales (Koenig, 2007: 912). As the prohibition of kosher and halal unstunned slaughter shows, the secular ethos tends to triumph when rights conflict (Jänterä-Jareborg, 2010: 17). Simultaneously, during the 1980s there was a rising interest in New Age spiritualities that was also used by social groups who were critical of the welfare state to spread neoliberal ideas and render mainstream cultural discourse more amenable to neoliberal ideologies (Ahlin, 2013).
Yet, as we show below, the Social Democratic policies that disentangled education from the church are extremely influential in contestations over religion in schools today in that they define what is considered to be the ‘traditional school system’ in secular terms. Secular public education is widely considered to be a fundamental aspect of modern Sweden. The analysis of school controversies is therefore especially likely to offer insights into the contours of religious–secular dynamics. The question, however, is how to conceptualize these dynamics.

Multiple secularities in the age of neoliberal reform

In the European context, the recent literature on secularism has unsettled the dominant equation of Europe as a unified secular political space (Casanova, 2011). In many ways building on David Martin’s work (2005), scholars have pointed to the specific Christian genealogy and historicity of concepts of the secular (Asad, 2003) and to the inextricable links between specific secular trajectories and histories of state-formation and nation-building within Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox scenarios. European modernity accommodates a host of different models, ranging from French laïcité, also termed ‘radical secularism’ (Modood, 2010) or ‘assertive secularism’ (Kuru, 2009), to various forms of institutional cooperation (e.g. in the Netherlands and Germany) or state churches (e.g. in Denmark and formerly Sweden and Norway). European welfare states reflect their religious and cultural sources in that, for instance, Dutch religious liberalism contributed to shaping a liberal welfare state, while the Lutheran doctrine of citizens’ submission to worldly authorities led to the ‘caring welfare state’ of Scandinavian societies (Anderson, 2009; Manow, 2008; Schuh et al., 2012).

In many studies, however, use of the term ‘secularism’ tends to conflate the social practices and institutions whereby religion and secular spheres are differentiated, on the one hand, and the political ideologies that serve to legitimate such practices and institutionalizations, on the other. For reasons of analytical clarity, in what follows we use the notion of ‘secularity’ to capture the institutionally, culturally and symbolically anchored forms and arrangements of differentiation between religion and other social spheres. Secularity is therefore more encompassing than secularism in that it also captures the at times latent, taken-for-granted and implicit ways of demarcating religion.

This also implies that we construe secularity as carrying cultural meanings that can be driven by different logics and socially legitimized through different guiding ideas that set the basic terms for practices of distinction; in other words, secularity can be deployed to achieve different purposes in political and historical projects. We have theorized the diversity of the meanings of the secular in the concept of multiple secularities (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt, 2012) and guest-edited a special issue in this journal that engages with this perspective (Burchardt and Wohlrab-Sahr, 2013). In this context, Beyer (2012) has pointed to the difficulties of managing the secular–religious divide at the scale of nation-states in a post-Westphalian world.

The concept of multiple secularities suggests that transnational economic and religious dynamics, as they occur for instance through migration, often shape the ways in which different logics and guiding ideas compete in one society and we use it to understand these internal variations. We have identified the model of ‘secularity for the sake
of national unity and progress’ as one basic type emerging as a solution to perceived problems around social integration that competes with ideas of secularity for the sake of balancing religious diversity. While in the European context, the French scenario could be framed in the same terms, it is justified and driven by particular notions of Republicanism. In the Swedish case, by contrast, discourses around secularity emerge in response to the neoliberalization of the welfare state. We argue the welfare tradition has generated an ethos of egalitarianism that operates as a national inflection of secular guiding ideas of modernity and progress.

**Methodology**

Our empirical analysis draws on archival data regarding educational reforms and, chiefly, on problem-centred expert interviews with people who work in different areas of the education sector, as well as with researchers occupying key positions in the educational policy domain. These are people who have expertise regarding the religious–secular divide in confessional schools, which is officially recognized, authorized and validated. The interviews mainly focused on debates about the reforms of the Swedish educational system during the last two decades, as well as on issues of religion and education more broadly. According to Meuser and Nagel, experts are those ‘who in one way or another bear responsibility for planning, implementing, and controlling the solution of a problem, and who have privileged access to information over persons or decision-making processes’ (1991: 443, our translation). We do not claim completeness but instead provide an exploratory account of how people working in the education sector or who are otherwise involved in debates about confessional schools in Sweden interpret and negotiate the religious–secular divide in this regard.

The interviews were conducted in March and May 2012 in the areas of Stockholm and Uppsala. Research partners were schools with an Evangelical Lutheran, Catholic, Muslim and Islamic ethical orientation, representatives of the National Agency for Education (Skolverket), the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (Skolinspektionen), the Swedish Association of Independent Schools (Friskolornas Riksförfund) and members of the Swedish Humanist Association (Humanisterna). Interviews were coded and interpreted using the grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 2009).

**Education and the religious–secular divide in Sweden**

**Educational reforms and religion in schools**

Until the beginning of the 20th century, the education system was managed and shaped by the Church of Sweden and was then gradually secularized. As Hartman (2007: 257) points out, ‘the elementary school was established in a fairly compact, Lutheran, uniform culture’, and ‘even when secularisation lessened the influence of the church, the culture was still fairly closed’. In effect, during the first 75 years of its existence the folkskolan (elementary school) had the character of a religious school (Hartman, 2007: 260). Yet cross-pressured by the rising evangelical free church movement on the one hand and the labour movement on the other, the Social Democrats intensified efforts to secularize the
teaching of religion during their long tenure of office (1932–1976). In 1919 Luther’s catechism had already been removed from the curriculum, and the course load devoted to religion was cut by a half. In 1969 theological teaching in public schools was replaced by teaching about religion, and under national law Christianity and other religions have to be taught in an ‘objective’ and ‘non-confessional’ way (Berglund and Larsson, 2007: 14). This reflects a type of secularity that is imposed on the national level. In other words, ‘Fostering for national citizenship instead of the Lutheran faith became the task of the school system’ (Hartman, 2007: 260).

Educational reforms aimed to enshrine the principle of equal opportunities and were concentrated on the concept of a basic school (en skola för alla – one school for all children) as a way of guaranteeing equal education for all students regardless of their social background. School reforms in the 1960s merged parallel forms of schooling into one homogeneous system. Schools were construed as tools of social integration, and parallel school systems were seen as incompatible with the principle of equal opportunities. Specializations were only possible in high schools at advanced stages of training (Stenholm, 1984: 11ff.). In an important sense, the secular school is a school that aims at societal integration by means of equality of education. Secularity and social integration become closely intertwined and linked to the principle of equality.

The fundamental values, duties, main objectives, guidelines and syllabi, with requirements for each school subject, are laid down in the National Curriculum. Among other things these values and criteria include ‘objectivity’:

The school should be open to different ideas and encourage their expression. It should emphasize the importance of forming personal standpoints and provide opportunities for doing this. Teaching should be objective and encompass a range of different approaches. All parents should be able to send their children to school, fully confident that their children will not be prejudiced in favour of any particular view. (National Curriculum, 2011: 10)

Interestingly, both Christian tradition and Western humanism are explicitly mentioned in the National Curriculum as origins of the ethical values on which the school system is based:

The inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, equality between women and men, and solidarity with the weak and vulnerable are the values that the school should represent and impart. In accordance with the ethics borne by Christian tradition and Western humanism, this is achieved by fostering in the individual a sense of justice, generosity of spirit, tolerance and responsibility. Teaching in the school should be non-denominational. (National Curriculum, 2011: 9)

The mentioning of the ‘Christian tradition’ was the outcome of intense lobbying by the Christian Democrats in political debates in the early 1990s and is still strongly criticized by the Swedish Humanist Association.8

As a result of the reforms of 1992,9 the Swedish education system turned into one of the most decentralized school systems in Europe. Justified with arguments about effectiveness, quality and cost reduction in the face of budgetary constraints, national control
has subsequently been reduced in favour of more local coordination and supervision (Hartman, 2007: 258). The reform enabled parents, foundations, non-profit associations and for-profit companies to establish publicly funded free schools (fristående skolor or friskolor) as alternatives to public schools and aimed at producing competition within a ‘school market’ to increase quality and freedom of choice. As these schools financially depend on state funding, they are required to fulfil certain standards linked to the National Curriculum and to promote the values enshrined in it in the same way as municipal schools are. The Swedish National Agency for Education simply defines a free school (fristående skola) as a school that has a different carrier than the municipality or county council (Berglund and Larsson, 2007: 10). These schools usually have a special pedagogical, religious or otherwise specialized orientation (e.g. artistic, linguistic or sports) marking them as alternatives to traditional public schools. As the National Agency for Education specified, ‘confessional profile’ may mean a thematic profile, as evident in the teaching of specific religions, religious codes of conduct for students and teachers, collective worship, religious decorations and special religious holidays (Löfstedt, 2007: 180).

Since the reform, the number of free schools has risen dramatically. In 2011, 22.5% of all schools were free schools, while 12% of students at the elementary school level (grundskolor) and 24% of students at the A-level stage (gymnasieskolor) attended a free school in 2011 (Eurydice, 2011: 1). For-profit companies manage the largest proportion (64% in 2011/2012), while confessional schools only account for 6% of free schools, the majority of which are Lutheran.

However, due to the worsening performance of Swedish students as measured in comparative international studies like PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), as well as to problems with monitoring, the education system has been heavily criticized during the past decade. Especially schools that are managed by for-profit companies were very often the subject of public debate since they are able to generate profits from taxes, but are not bound to invest anything back into the system, for example, for the renovation of school buildings. In addition, there are no legal limits on the maximum amount of profit which may be withheld.

After numerous debates and changes, a new Education Act entered into force in July 2011. The Act contains regulations that increase the uniformity of the system, enhances stronger control mechanisms to ensure that schools follow the National Curriculum, and subordinates all political and legal aspects of education to the supreme value of the ‘best interests of the child’. The responsibility of the local authorities has been limited, and some competencies were transferred back to national authorities, in particular the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, and their position strengthened (Education Act, SFS 2010:800).

All our interviewees agreed that during the debates on the 2011 reform there would have been broad political support for abandoning confessional schools altogether. However, given Sweden’s strong pro-European record and its public endorsement of human rights, politicians feared that this may violate the European Convention on Human Rights, which has enjoyed constitutional status since 1994. With regard to education, the Convention states that everybody has the right to education and that in their educational policies states must respect the rights of parents to educate their children.
according to their religious or philosophical convictions (ECHR, First Protocol: Article 2). Swedish educational law interprets this to grant the right to found private schools with a confessional profile, given that they fulfill government standards regarding curricula, the competences of teachers, etc.

Importantly, the law included new provisions regarding the particular ‘profile’ of confessional schools by introducing a distinction between *teaching* (course work) and a more general concept of school-based *education*. The latter includes all activities before, between and after lessons within the school setting. While at municipal schools both teaching and the general school-based education must be non-religious, in confessional schools only teaching must be non-religious: the rest of school education may have religious orientations, given that it is voluntary for all students. Officially, the purpose of this distinction and the requirement of non-confessional teaching aim to ensure that teaching is ‘objective, critical and pluralistic’ (Government Bill, Prop. 2009/10:165: 226) in all schools.

We take this legal distinction between *uniform teaching*, obligatory for all students in Sweden and construed as *objective, pluralist and neutral*, and *faith-based education*, chosen and understood as *world-view-driven, voluntary and particularistic*, as the entry point into our analysis of the meanings of secularity that emerged in the school debates. It is telling that the new law is aimed to function as a ‘compromise’ that allows the nation to express values of egalitarianism and progress while simultaneously envisioning itself as a pluralist democracy. We suggest that the law clearly draws on a concept of religion as something to happen in ‘leisure’ time and hence as a particularity of persons or groups. It may only be added to people’s general social qualities as Swedish citizens to be cultivated and instilled in students in the *main activity*, which is teaching. Consequently, even if a general secular school system is no longer the norm, secularity is evoked in this concept of ‘objectivity’, as well as in the regulations on the specific places and times for religion in schools. In the spirit of the law, if not its letter, the concept of secularity that we interpret as ‘secularity for the sake of societal integration and national unity’ circumscribes and prefigures the possible space for religious expressions and for pluralism.

In our analysis we found three competing positions with regard to secularity, which we now explicate in order to map the field.

**Integrating secularity versus divisive religion.** Overall, representatives of educational authorities, seconded by members of the Swedish Humanist Association, strongly supported the tendencies of a recentralization of the school system as partially implemented through the 2011 law. They did so by drawing on the notion of a secular public tradition in which the connections between secularity, equality and integration, on the one hand, and freedom of choice, social segregation, inequality and religion, on the other, became strikingly clear. Thus the representative of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate emphasized that the 1992 law was a dramatic rupture with the centralized, non-profit education system, which had existed for decades, while a functionary of the National Agency for Education described the change as follows:

> Sweden has an extremely free school system – it is extreme. I think there are only one or two countries in the world that have the same type of free school system that we have. So we went
from a very centralized system to the most decentralized market. Because our free school system is a market. It’s a school market.

For him, the emphasis on the school system as a ‘market’ clearly carries a negative connotation. While the debate on for-profit schools is generally regarded as separate from discussions on confessional schools, both are entangled in that they emerged from the same discourse about freedom of choice. Several interviewees described how the freedom for parents to choose schools in a market system inevitably leads to spatial segregation along the lines of social inequality, as facilities in some schools are often of a higher standard than those in others. Several of them closely linked these divisive tendencies to religion. Hence, religion itself, through its engagement in private schools, is viewed as a divisive factor, threatening not only the equality of students, but also the integration of Swedish society. In order to understand these links, it is worth quoting at length from an interview with a functionary of the National Agency for Education:

For me personally and for many people in this country, we still think it’s a problem when we start to create schools that are like an island, with children who don’t come into contact with the surrounding society. One of the basic ideologies behind the former Swedish school system … was that it was important to mix people from all kinds of backgrounds to create a good democratic society … to create connection between people. … They [religious schools] contribute directly to a kind of religious segregation. I mean, that’s the point of having them. And my concern … is that the more cultic a religious movement is, the more strange and weird they are, the stronger the will to isolate their kids will be. … Of course the stranger your world view is, the more fundamentalist your point of view towards the Bible or the Quran or the Torah is, the stronger is your urge to isolate your kids and take them away.

Proponents of a secular public tradition that serves to integrate an idealized egalitarian society defended the universalism of the centralized school system and consequently denounced the 1992 reform as mainly driven by particularistic cultural interests, with the Christian Democratic Party promoting the reform with a view to Christian schools and the Green Party wishing to foster alternative pedagogies such as Waldorf and Montessori.

Secular uniformity as constraint on religion. Unsurprisingly, the leadership of some confessional schools viewed the school debates with suspicion and came to frame secularity in terms of standardization and constraints on religion. Principals critical of the legal reform embarked on a signature campaign against it, as they felt it undermined the right to religious education as enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights. Especially the Council of Free Christian Schools (Kristna Friskolerådet) complained about the obligation to provide non-confessional teaching. In an interview, the principal of a Lutheran high school (gymnasieskola) explained that classes on the Old and New Testament had to be removed from the curriculum as a consequence of the law. Another principal of a Lutheran primary school (grundskola) lamented: ‘Well, with this new law from last year it is harder for the Christian school to be a Christian school.’ She clearly felt that what makes a school Christian is the nature of the teaching (as opposed to the remaining activities). Thus, while the ability to have confessional schools is retained, in her view its deeper meaning is thwarted by the obligation to adhere to secular neutrality.
in teaching and the perceived threat to integration that confessional teaching presents. She attributed this to the broader public sensibilities regarding religion: ‘Some are afraid of religion. I don’t know what kind of bad things about religion they have seen. But I think nowadays almost every party is sceptical about religion except the Christians, the Kristdemokraterna.’

That the new law was indeed meant to standardize and constrain religious expression is confirmed by a representative of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, who emphasized that, ‘Before they did not have to follow the curriculum and could do their special things. Now they can’t do that anymore. Now the same is valid for everybody. It’s more uniform, yes.’ The notion that secularity and its practical cognates such as secular neutrality in teaching are chiefly tools to integrate society is thus confirmed by both proponents and critics of secular education, which is why it develops its particular social traction.

**Religious–secular distinctions as a definition of spaces for religion.** However, even representatives of private schools do not exclusively stress the restrictive perspective of the new law. Paradoxically, distinctions between the religious and the secular also serve to define space for religious activity positively. By specifying distinct rules for teaching and school-based education and defining both activities, the new law introduces religious–secular distinctions into educational practices of subject formation in ways that did not exist before in written legal text. This left the leadership of many confessional schools uncertain about their rights and obligations with regard to religious elements. Such legal ambiguities are epitomized in one Catholic school principal’s remark that hitherto, when he asked three officials of the school authorities about some uncertain matter, he would receive three different answers.

Against this backdrop, we identified a third perspective that turns on the enabling function of religious–secular distinctions. Thus, the legal advisor of the Swedish Association of Independent Schools suggested:

> We say that the new school act has actually made the system more allowing, it allows more confessional elements. We think that the Act therefore had the opposite effect of what the government hoped for. … Today, when they say teaching must be non-confessional, they open up the rest of the school day to have more confessional elements.

Similarly, one Catholic school principal celebrated the fact that through the Act confessional schools have for the first time been nationally recognized in terms of defined spaces for religion, whereas hitherto the focus had been on limitations only (‘Before, it was always like “You can’t do this, you can’t do that” ’). For Islamic schools especially, however, this positive recognition was seen by some to be an advantage, as they were already viewed with suspicion in the broader context of Islam’s securitization and may now act with more confidence.

While school experts thus differ in their understandings of the meanings of confessional schools in the Swedish context, they all draw – positively or negatively – on the notion of secularity for the sake of societal integration and national unity, supporting our argument that this is the type of secularity that predominates in Swedish society. Our secular interlocutors see religion as a divisive factor that threatens the values of
egalitarianism and unity. Their opponents, that is, the representatives of private religious schools, consequently see their scope of action as having been restricted by standardizing secular regulations. Yet others, however, see their activities as regulated but thereby also embedded in a secure space.

**Privatized religion and public secularity**

In general, it is remarkable how ingrained the notion of privatized religion was across the board among our interviewees, even when they diverged in their evaluations of it. All interviewees felt that the majority of Swedes were against confessional schools. School principals especially perceived scepticism against religion to be widespread among the population, including politicians. Principals and teachers felt that students in municipal public schools would generally be hesitant to mention in conversations with friends that they are Christian or Muslim because they would feel obliged to defend their religion or apologize for all sorts of negative things done in the name of it. The principal of a Lutheran elementary school asserted that ‘Swedes don’t care about religion. They keep it for themselves if they have some religion. But they don’t want to speak about it.’

As a consequence, school principals also emphasized their efforts to keep ‘a low profile’ regarding the confessional nature of their schools. One Catholic school principal told us that ‘We are perfectly aware of the boundaries and very careful not to do anything that would threaten our reputation.’ Others mentioned that they would not even use the whole space for the religious expressions the law allows them, as this might raise suspicions among the public.

Also striking in this regard is the fact that teachers feel hesitant to admit in conversations that they teach in a confessional school. This was illustrated by the case of a teacher from an Islamic confessional school who was not a Muslim herself and stated that it was just not good to be seen ‘to be working in that kind of school’. She explained: ‘When teachers at my school meet new people and they ask “What work do you do?” they don’t say “I work at a Muslim school”; they say “I work with Somali students in a school outside Stockholm”.’ Importantly, it is not migration but religion that is perceived as problematic. While working with migrant children is construed in this remark as the legitimate, if evasive answer here, teachers repeatedly reported that their competences were questioned when mentioning that they worked in Muslim schools.

While many interviewees mentioned the negative reputation of Islam in public discourse, such disparaging views are not only associated with its foreign origin, but also with perceptions of high religious commitments that are rendered alien in a highly secularized society. Strong religious commitments render religious people different from the rest of Swedish society, especially when these commitments are publicly visible. It is the intertwining of the cultural commitments to secularity and a strong version of egalitarianism that produces religion as its other – with particularly exclusionary effects for Muslims.

With regard to the restrictions effected by the 2011 reform, the advisor of an Islamic school remarked: ‘But you know, this is still too much religion for most Swedes. They think that it should be removed, that we should take everything away that has to do with prayers and Islam and everything like that.’ She also recalled that the school she advises
has sometimes been labelled the ‘Al-Qaida school’. As in other highly secularized European countries, Islam thus turns into the generalized religious other. A principal of another Islamic school, by contrast, recalled many acts of open violence against her school: ‘Almost after every weekend there were broken windows and writing on the wall saying things like “Go home”. And the boys from the public school across the street behave very badly towards our girls and lifted their veils.’ The leaders of Christian schools were aware of allegations of radicalism in Muslim schools and felt that in the public discourse they turned into a generalized suspicion that confessional schools would nurture fundamentalism from which they had to distance themselves. In yet another act of generalization, confessional schools are sometimes perceived per se as Muslim schools and rejected on such grounds.

**Freedom of choice or equality? Consequences for secularity**

Whereas the free school reform of 1992 was, among other things, promulgated in the name of parents’ freedom of choice, the 2011 Act still actually carries this motif in its title: ‘The New School Act: Knowledge, Freedom of Choice and Safety’. While the introduction and forceful promotion of market competition and consumer orientation, typically couched in the idiom of ‘New Public Management’, has been the hallmark of many neoliberal public service reforms across the world, its entanglements with religious diversity remain underexplored. We suggest that, chiefly, these entanglements work by arguments about neoliberal reform, the welfare state and freedom of choice being deployed as an argument about religion and secularity – and vice versa. One example of this is concerns over quality in education, as discussed by functionaries of the National Agency for Education. While neoliberal reformers, just like some of the principals we talked to, generally defend liberalization because of the expected positive impact of competition on the quality of education, our interviewee from the National Agency for Education found that freedom actually led to a situation in which quality became impossible to control: ‘The freedom allowed the schools to offer thousands of locally invented courses. And on the national level we were really worried about their quality.’ Critics of confessional schools lend this argument a particular secular inflection when suggesting that religious teaching opens the doors to arbitrariness and partiality, which is perceived as a general lowering of quality.

In general, the criticism of for-profit school companies feeds into the rejection of the pluralist school system, of which confessional schools are a part, while criticism of the latter mainly turned on their public financing. As one interviewee remarked: ‘Alright, we can have confessional schools, but then people must pay to have their children there, and that is a very un-Swedish thought.’ Here, the issue of material equality (not having to pay for school) becomes an additional argument for the divisive function of private religious schools. Class and religion are treated as divisive forces that threaten equality as a central value of Swedish society and thus also threaten its unity.

An official of the National Agency for Education emphasized that the debate about the problems stemming from neoliberal and market-oriented reforms was increasingly buttressing demands for a reunification of the education system. One officer of the Swedish Schools Inspectorate saw increasing social inequality and segregation as resulting from differences between schools and the possibility of school choice:
Class society enters the school more and more because the independent school and the right to make choices means that all good students go to one school and all the bad students gather together in another. They are not popular for the teachers to work in, and the worst teachers and students go there. These are negative spirals.

In addition, the decentralization and empowerment of local authorities have led to highly discrepant conditions in schools due to the different financial situations of their respective municipalities. While there is no conclusive evidence, there are conjectures that poorer municipalities spend less money on schools than wealthier municipalities while having much greater needs.

**Conclusion**

Drawing on controversies over privatization in Sweden’s educational sector, in this article we argued that neoliberal reforms of the welfare state affect religious–secular dynamics in largely unexplored ways. Construing religious–secular distinctions as plural and contingent, we suggest that in Swedish discourses around confessional schools arguments about secularity for the sake of accommodating religious diversity had to take a backseat as secularity was chiefly viewed as geared towards preserving national unity and integration. In this context, it was striking how social segregation and religious segregation are discursively coupled; both are seen as consequences of free choice, which threatens equality as a central value of Swedish society. Secularity, on the other hand, is seen as a unifying force. It is only the second group of school teachers who interpret secular regulations positively inasmuch as they define clear spaces for religious activity.

Overall, we see that the dominance of secularity for the sake of societal integration and the way it is underpinned by Sweden’s ethos of egalitarianism and construed as a public tradition render confessional schools deviant in a dual sense. First, as private schools operating in a market, they are received as undermining the centralized public welfare aspect of the secular school system. Second, by drawing on the right to cultural and religious difference, they are seen as promulgating particularism and thus violating Swedish notions of universalism and its un-interrogated assumption of cultural homogeneity as standard in public institutions. We suggest that more comparative research is needed to fully understand the peculiar connections between neoliberal reforms and the perceived crisis of secularity European societies are facing today.

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**Notes**

1. This is a shorthand for the official term, which is ‘schools with a confessional profile’.
2. Church of Sweden Statistics.
3. People with a foreign background are defined in these statistics as persons who were either born in another country or whose parents were both born in other countries.

5. The concept of ‘multiple secularities’ was developed in a research project at the University of Leipzig headed by Monika Wohlrab-Sahr. The project was funded by the Saxon Ministry of Science and the Fine Arts. We wish to thank Roman Vido, Ute Wegert, Cora Schuh and Susanne Lemke for their collaboration and contributions to the project. The interviews for this article were conducted by Susanne Schenk for her Master’s thesis on secularity and education in Sweden (Schenk, 2012).

6. This school is considered to be non-confessional, but gives ethics classes about values in Islam.

7. Except for the scientists who were interviewed, all individual-related data have been rendered anonymous.


9. The reform of 1992 was passed by a centre-right government, a coalition government between the Moderate party (m), the Centre Party (c), the Liberal Party (fp) and the Christian Democratic Party (kds).


11. In total, in 2011 there were 75 confessional schools (National Association of Free Schools, personal communication, 24 April 2012, ), of which 16 are Islamic (Jenny Berglund, personal communication, 7 May 2012). Only a few confessional schools were founded before the introduction of public funding in 1992.

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Résumé
Les sociologues qui s’intéressent aux évolutions du fait religieux et aux relations entre l’Église et l’État ne se sont pour la plupart pas intéressé à la façon dont les régimes qui pratiquent la diversité religieuse et la laïcité interagissent avec des facteurs apparemment étrangers à la dynamique religieuse, comme par exemple la notion culturelle d’État-providence et sa reconfiguration néolibérale. Cet article vient combler ce vide en analysant les dynamiques sociales à l’œuvre dans le contexte de la laïcité et de la diversité religieuse telles qu’elles apparaissent dans les controverses autour des réformes du système éducatif en Suède. Les auteurs montrent que la rhétorique sur le « choix du consommateur » qui envahit le discours sur l’offre des services publics dans de nombreuses sociétés capitalistes modernes, se combine avec des revendications pour une plus grande liberté religieuse inspirées des droits de l’homme, pour justifier le pluralisme religieux dans l’enseignement. Ces arguments se heurtent cependant à la conception suédoise de l’égalitarisme, qui passe essentiellement par des écoles unifiées, qui sont perçues en général, mais plus spécialement au niveau des bureaucraties officielles, comme une « tradition » suédoise. Sur le plan théorique, l’article développe et élabore la notion de « laïcités multiples ».

Mots-clés
Diversité religieuse, enseignement en Suède, laïcité, néolibéralisme

Resumen
Los sociólogos interesados en el cambio religioso y en las relaciones estado-iglesia, en general, han ignorado cómo los regímenes de diversidad religiosa y secularismo interactúan con factores que son aparentemente externos a las dinámicas religiosas, tales como las nociones culturales sobre el estado del bienestar y su reestructuración neoliberal. En este artículo se aborda esta cuestión mediante el análisis de las dinámicas sociales en torno a la laicidad y la diversidad religiosa que van surgiendo como contestación a las reformas educativas en Suecia. Los autores muestran que el lenguaje de la “elección del consumidor” que impregna los discursos sobre la prestación de servicios públicos en muchas sociedades capitalistas tardías se coaliga con demandas legales, inspiradas en derechos humanos, de una mayor libertad religiosa para justificar el pluralismo religioso en la educación. Sin embargo, estos argumentos chocan con la concepción sueca del igualitarismo tal como se aplica principalmente a través de las escuelas unificadas que se perciben de forma general, pero especialmente en las burocracias gubernamentales, como una “tradición” sueca. A nivel teórico, el artículo desarrolla y construye el concepto de “múltiples secularidades”.

Palabras clave
Diversidad religiosa, educación sueca, laicismo, neoliberalismo