Religious historians and sociologists of religion have participated in a vigorous debate since the 1960s over how to explain the apparent decline of religion in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe. I will engage this debate from a historical perspective by studying the social significance of deaconesses in late nineteenth-century Sweden. Swedish deaconesses acquired, maintained, and expanded their influence in important social functions during this period. They did so even though more secular, specialized institutions and professionals were increasingly assuming formal responsibility in Sweden, as in much of Europe, for many of the social functions carried out historically by religious institutions. The influence of deaconesses in the public sphere demonstrates that the adoption of social functions by more specialized institutions and professionals did not necessarily push religious institutions and professionals to the margins of society. Religious organizations and personnel continued in many instances to carry out essential social functions, both in competition and cooperation with other specialized institutions. Swedish deaconesses had to overcome obstacles that their male religious counterparts did not face in carrying out these social functions. For this reason, my study will also address the ways in which gender enabled deaconesses to wield public influence at a time when women were often limited in the work they could perform outside the home. I will argue that the female diaconate succeeded in alleviating some gender-based concerns with its work by extending the domestic sphere and the qualities deemed most suitable for women into the public sphere. The female diaconate gained access to the public sphere by organizing, interpreting, and carrying out its work in accordance with the traditional religious construction of gender that was prevalent in the nineteenth century.

Given the focus of my study, I will devote much of this chapter to a discussion of the secularization debate between and among sociologists and historians, as well as to how my study fits into this debate. I
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will subsequently address the relationship between gender and religion in contemporary Swedish historical scholarship and how recent developments in Swedish gender history have aided my study of the female diaconate. My study differs from much of the Anglophone historical scholarship on secularization in modern Europe in that its primary focus is not on the decline of religious beliefs and practices among individuals and particular social groups over the past several centuries.¹ My main concern is secularization at the societal level, in conjunction with what sociologists of religion term “functional differentiation.” Functional differentiation is the process in which social functions historically carried out by religious institutions and personnel are absorbed by more secular, specialized institutions and professionals in the modern era. To take one example, in medieval Europe, poor relief was largely the preserve of parish clergy, religious orders, and confraternities. In the early modern and modern periods, social workers and welfare boards gradually assume formal responsibility for this work.

Prominent sociological defenders of the secularization thesis argue that functional differentiation, as part of the process of modernization, inevitably led to a decline in the “social significance” of religion in the public sphere, that is, in that domain of society in which essential social, political, and economic functions are carried out on society’s behalf.² When social functions such as poor relief or education began to be adopted by more secular, specialized institutions, religious institutions not only experienced general decline in their influence in the public sphere, but they became marginalized in the social order, with their influence and activities relegated to a more private realm.

Since many religious historians of modern Europe have emphasized the decline of religious beliefs and practices in their studies on secularization, very little historical work has been done on exploring the socio-

¹ In certain regions of Europe, historians who study secularization do not emphasize the decline in religious beliefs and practices. French historians, for example, typically give little attention to the decline in traditional Christian beliefs or church attendance in their studies of post-Revolutionary France, focusing instead on church-state relations and/or the decline of religion’s influence in the public sphere. On the other hand, historians from the United States who study modern French religious history are much more likely to devote considerable attention to the beliefs and practices of individuals and social groups. See Thomas Kselman, “Challenging Dechristianization: The Historiography of Religion in Modern France,” Church History 75 (2006), 130–139.

² The definition of secularization as a decrease in the “social significance” of religion can be traced to the work of the sociologist Bryan R. Wilson. See Wilson, Religion in Secular Society: A Sociological Comment (London: C.A. Watt & Co. Ltd., 1966), xiv.