Secularization theories often presuppose that religion is the victim of inevitable modernizing forces. Science, technology, industrialization, urbanization, and functional differentiation constitute a teleological process whose end result is the marginalization of religion in the modern world. Growing numbers of historians and sociologists are countering these theories, insisting that religion has been and continues to be a resilient force in the face of modernity. These critics point to high levels of church participation and religious beliefs in the United States or the Global South as proof of this resilience. Some even argue that while religious participation in Western Europe does not match trends in the rest of the world, religious beliefs still persist, even if they no longer fit neatly in traditional “orthodox” categories.

The problem with these critiques is that they are largely limited to beliefs and practices and fail to address adequately the public role of religion. Religious historians of modern Europe generally take it for granted that the growing number of specialized, secular institutions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries stripped religious institutions of most of their societal functions and relegated their influence to a more private realm. What I am arguing is that even this aspect of the secularization thesis needs serious qualification. One outcome of functional differentiation in modern European history was secularization, but this was not the only outcome. The nineteenth century was the age of associations and philanthropies, and some of these organizations took advantage of the opportunities generated by functional differentiation and became themselves specialized providers of essential social services. In the case of religious organizations and associations, some were more successful than others, but the larger point is that it was functional differentiation that gave these organizations their raison d’être.

The female diaconate in Sweden is an excellent example of a nineteenth-century religious organization that was largely successful in its efforts to specialize in three significant social functions: education, health care, and poor relief. This does not mean that the deaconess movement was an unequivocal success story. The diaconate did struggle to keep up
with demand through recruitment. Its work in education was also short-
lived, and deaconesses had less of an impact on teaching than on the fields
of health care and poor relief. But the diaconate was a religious organiza-
tion whose services were in high demand throughout the late nineteenth
century. Since the secularization thesis claims that modernity and mod-
erization inevitably lead to a decline in the demand for religion, the fact
that deaconesses were in such demand at the very least raises questions
about whether the thesis is too narrow in its understanding of the effects
of modernity on religion.

What accounted for this demand for deaconesses? One important fac-
tor is the very government reform efforts that led to increased functional
differentiation. While nineteenth-century legislation created more spe-
cialized institutions and professionals to carry out government-spon-
sored education and welfare, it also generated much greater demand for
these services in society. The new specialized institutions and profession-
als either could not or would not meet this demand on their own, and this
opened the door for religious organizations such as the female diaconate
to find a niche in providing these services.

In education, the 1842 Elementary School Law marked the first at-
tempt at compulsory public schooling. This legislation stipulated that
all parishes had to establish a school and hire a certified teacher. The
law stimulated increased functional differentiation, but it also created
a huge demand for teachers and schools that the teaching colleges and
parishes could not meet for several decades. This led provincial schools
to hire teachers who had not been educated at teaching colleges, and dea-
conesses were among those who worked in this capacity. The deaconess
institution’s school for poor children in Stockholm also served a need
for many poor families in the Katrina parish who had difficulty finding
schooling for their children, and the school’s enrollment was consistently
so high that children had to be turned away.

Even though J.C. Bring began withdrawing the diaconate from ele-
mentary education in the 1860s, his decision was not due to a lack of
demand for deaconesses as teachers. The main reason he gave for the
decision was the growing number of certified teachers and the inability of
deaconesses in the long run to compete with these specialized profession-
als educated. Functional differentiation did influence Bring’s decision to
abandon teaching, but it must be stressed that he made this decision while
demand appeared to be at its highest. A far more important factor driving
his decision was his desire to pattern the diaconate on the early church
model of diaconal work through a focus on health care and poor relief.