Chapter 14

Sweden: Criticizing Religion in ‘The World’s Most Secular Country’

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In Sweden the atheist ad campaign was created by the Swedish Humanist Association (SHA). The organization was founded as the Human-Ethical Association (Human-Etiska Förbundet) in 1979, but changed the name in 1999 to the Humanists (Humanisterna). In English they use the official name Swedish Humanist Association and they have been a member of the International Humanist and Ethical Union since 1984. The vast majority of the academic material written about the Swedish Humanist Association in Sweden has been published after the campaign, which increased the visibility of the organization in the public sphere. These studies have been conducted against the background of a perceived Islamophobic trend in Sweden and it has been discussed whether the Swedish Humanist Association has become racist, or if they legitimize racist ideas within society by ‘othering’ Islam and Muslims.¹ ² As will be shown below, the same view was underscored in the media response to the campaign as well, and the Swedish Humanist Association were compared to the Sweden Democrats; a culturally conservative populist party with strong opinions concerning the place (if any place at all) of Islam in Swedish society and culture.³ These links will be further examined in this chapter.

This chapter, based on an indepth analysis of the “There’s probably no God” advertising campaign announced by the Swedish Humanist Association in 2009, will examine, (1) the intended purpose of the campaign; (2) how it was constructed, and; (3) how the campaign was received by the press. From this examination I will identify two themes, which will be discussed at the conclusion of this chapter. The two themes are: (1) the way the Swedish Humanist Association are trying to normalize and institutionalize themselves in society through

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¹ Gerle, 2010; Hagevi, 2010; Olsson and Sorgenfrei, 2011.
² I am currently writing my PhD-thesis about the Swedish Humanist Association.
³ Hellström, 2010, 52; Gardell, 2011, 228.
discursive tactics, and; (2) why the organization was compared to the Sweden Democrats and the humanist’s response to this comparison. I primarily use three types of empirical data. When talking about the Swedish Humanist Association (henceforth SHA) I will use member magazines and other official texts related to the organization. When talking about the “There’s probably no God” campaign I use textual material produced by the SHA as part of the campaign: billboards, newspaper articles, the online domain “gudfinnsnoginte,” and to some degree interviews with the chairman of the SHA. When talking about the societal reception of the campaign I use articles from newspapers which I contextualize by explaining the public discourse and relevant discussions at the time of the campaign.

14.1 Secular Sweden and Islam

One often finds, within both popular debate and societal studies during the 21st century, that Sweden is described as one of “the most secular countries in the world,” often due to the perceived clear separation between faith communities and the state and because of the low adherence to Church-associated beliefs by the Swedes. But the religious situation in Sweden is at the same time described by others as “complex” or “paradoxical” because such a high percentage of the population are still members of organized religions and participate in religious ceremonies such as baptisms, weddings and funerals. Others even talk about a process of de-secularization: “partly because of migration during the last decades.” Sweden, according to this view, has evolved a multi-confessional identity since the 1970’s:

As a sequel to immigration into Sweden, religion has gained a new kind of visibility in the Swedish society. This is demonstrated through newly built mosques (with minarets), religiously articulated dressing codes, celebration of Ramadan, and increasingly, the founding of schools with

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5 I will try to show how this popular understanding of “Secular Sweden” at the same time is both strengthening and weakening the legitimacy of the SHA.

6 70 percent are members of Church of Sweden (the national Lutheran church) and additionally 9 percent is part of other congregations: Muslim, Catholic, Buddhist, and different free churches (Pettersson, 2009, 119).

7 SOU 2009:52, 82.