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**Swedish Theology, Anti-Semitism and National Socialism  
– the Apologetic Writing of History**

It is only recently that scholars within the field of Swedish theology have started to investigate the Swedish theologians which sympathized with National Socialism. One example is the co-operation between Swedish theologians from the University of Lund and representatives from the “German Christians” during the Second World War which has been subject to discussions in recent years.

The question I would like to answer in this paper is simple: How come we had to wait over 60 years for this kind of research to be done? To answer this question I will give a brief overview of Swedish theology and the Swedish Church during the National Socialist regime and how Swedish Church History has treated the subject in the post-war era. After that I will present more sociological explanations to the question why it took so long.

***Overview: the Swedish church 1933-1945***

It is a good idea to compare investigations carried out on the relationships between the Swedish church and National Socialism and similar international research.<sup>2</sup> Investigations on German theology or other academic subjects reveal about the same structure found within the Swedish case. Within Swedish Theology one will find some persons taking a strong position against National Socialism as well as some persons openly supporting the “New Germany” until the end of the war. The majority of Swedish theologians however are to be found in between these two positions. Within this Grey Area, between pro- and anti-Nazism one will find a large group of indifferent persons, not caring much for politics, as well as people pending between pro and contra or only sharing some of the ideas of the extreme right, or of its opponents.

The same is true of positions within the church but outside academic theology. A group supporting the National Socialist politics was the small right-wing “Kyrkliga Folkpartiet” (Church Peoples Party) in Gothenburg.<sup>3</sup> This party was led by the priest Ivar Rhedin and showed an outspoken support for the “Law and Order” of the new Germany. Throughout and unbiased

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<sup>2</sup> For overviews see i.e.: Langewiesche, Dieter, “Die Universität Tübingen in der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus. Formen der Selbstgleichschaltung und Selbstbehauptung”, in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 23, 1997, p. 618-646. Lundgreen, Peter, “Hochschulpolitik und Wissenschaft im Dritten Reich”, in: Peter Lundgreen (ed.), *Wissenschaft im Dritten Reich*, Frankfurt am Main 1985, p. 9-30. Szöllösi-Janze, Margit, “National Socialism and the Sciences. Reflections, Conclusions and Historical Perspectives”, in: Margit Szöllösi-Janze (ed.), *Science in the Third Reich*, Oxford 2001, pp. 1-35.

<sup>3</sup> Lööv, Helene, *Nazismen i Sverige 1924-1979. Pionjäreerna, partierna, propagandan*. Stockholm 2004, pp. 327.

investigations on the attitudes within the church as a whole however are still lacking. According to a recently published, but widely criticized book however some 3% of the Swedish priests were members of a pro-German or fascist organization. Most of them belonged to the upper class Swedish-German Association, which also had a professor of theology as chairman.<sup>4</sup>

Interesting from a historiographic point of view is the fact that Swedish Church History only recently started to investigate the persons within the church who supported National Socialism or were attracted to National Socialist or fascist ideas. The “good guys” however, such as the priests of the Swedish Church in Berlin, Birger Forell and Erik Perwe, have been object to research since the end of the war: A research of an often very hagiographic character.

This is a sharp contrast to the research on the “bad guys” within the church. Not only was the pro-Nazi Germany fraction within the Swedish church and Swedish theology neglected for a long time, but authors dealing with persons within the church known to have been supporting the “new Germany” or the pro-Nazi “German Christians” often choose not to mention this part of the history. The research on the Swedish church is no national exception. This hagiographic writing of Swedish World War II history was, and is, still very common.

### ***The “forgotten” sympathisants – Odeberg and Stadener***

The case of Hugo Odeberg, who had been a priest in the south of Sweden before he took over the chair of exegetics in Lund after Erling Eidem in 1933, is a good example of how recent research has changed the official picture of a person.

Odeberg was an internationally renowned expert on Jewish mysticism and one of the first Swedish theologians to point out the importance of Jewish sources for the understanding of Early Christianity. Odeberg showed strong sympathies for the “new Germany” in the late 1930s and early -40s. In 1941 he took over as chairman of the Swedish-German Association, which had been founded in 1937.<sup>5</sup> The association had the outspoken aim to “promote understanding for the new Germany” in Sweden. Odeberg was also founder of a Research Group on Old Norse Religion in Lund called “Odal”, which collaborated with the German “Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life“ in Eisenach.<sup>6</sup> A member of this institute, the professor of theology in Jena, Wolf Meyer-Erlach, had held lectures at the

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<sup>4</sup> Brodd, Birgitta, *Var Sveriges sak också kyrkans? Svenska kyrkans utrikespolitiska aktivitet 1930-1945. En tidslägesorienterad analys*, Skellefteå 2004, pp. 263.

<sup>5</sup> Oredsson, Sverker, *Lunds universitet under andra världskriget. Motsättningar, debatter och hjälpsatser*, Lund 1996, pp. 113.

<sup>6</sup> Heschel, Susannah, “Theologen für Hitler”, in: Leonore Siegele-Wenschkewitz (ed.), *Christlicher Antijudaismus und Antisemitismus*, Frankfurt am Main 1994, pp. 125-170.

University of Lund in 1941, invited by Odeberg. Odeberg participated in a number of conferences in Nazi Germany during the years 1941-1943 arranged by the institute and also sent some of his doctoral students to study for Meyer-Erlach in Jena. Odeberg also kept in contact with the Pro-Nazi theologian Gerhard Kittel, from "Forschungsabteilung Judenfrage" in Munich which Odeberg also visited. Recent investigations have also drawn attention to the strong anti-Semitic bias of Odebergs book "Pharisaism and Christianity", first published in Swedish in 1943 and course literature on the priest seminars of the Swedish Church until the 1970s.

The article on Odeberg in the Swedish Biographical Lexica, written by Tryggve Kronholm professor in Semitic languages at the University of Uppsala, in the early 1990s however, does not mention any of the facts I just mentioned. What it does say is that Odeberg was accused of being a Pro-Nazi Anti-Semite during the war, but that his friendship with a number of Jews "speaks another language".<sup>7</sup> A conclusion which is not only weak, but obviously a lie considering the facts mentioned above. This is a rhetoric figure with the one and only aim to excuse Odebergs Anti-Semitism as well as his work for the Swedish-German Association during the war.

Odeberg is not the only example, neither of Pro-Nazism within the church during the war nor of this kind of apologetic writing of history after the war. Another example is the Bishop of Växjö, Sam Stadener, who openly supported the German Christians. It was only an intervention from the Swedish archbishop, Erling Eidem, and other colleagues that stopped Stadener from traveling to Germany to attend the initiation of Reichsbishop Müller. Stadeners open support for the German Christians is completely ignored in a biographical study of Stadener as politician, written in the 1960s.<sup>8</sup>

## ***Explanations***

### ***General Changes within Swedish historical research***

The recent interest in the Swedish Church during the 1930s and -40s is not an isolated phenomena, but part of a larger trend. It is only within the last 15-20 years that Swedish historical research has started to question the post-war myth of a united, neutral Sweden where fascist and National Socialist ideas only were to be found within the small, unimportant parties on the extreme right. It is true that the National Socialist parties were marginalized in Sweden, sympathies for National Socialism however was not. The Swedish-German Society for instance, which Odeberg headed from 1941 and onwards, was certainly no marginal phenomenon, but was founded by members of the highly educated political, educational and cultural elite.

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<sup>7</sup> Kronholm, Tryggve "Odeberg, Hugo" in: *Svenskt biografiskt Lexikon* 28, Stockholm 1992-1994, pp. 1-5, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Nilsson, Clarence, *Sam Stadener som Kyrkopolitiker*, Stockholm 1964.

This critical turn in research regarding Sweden during the period 1933-1945 is related to the political situation in Europe at that time. The disappearance of the, as most Swedes saw it, threat from the Soviet Union made it easier to criticize the image of a united, neutral Sweden during World War Two.<sup>9</sup>

### ***The “time-factor” or generational change***

But changing political frames do not suffice to explain the general change of perspective on Sweden during this time, especially not regarding the History of Religion and Theology. Contemporary German research on academics and universities during the Nazi-era often point out that, although research on National Socialism and the National socialist state is old, research on university personnel as a group and academic subjects as a whole is a relatively new research field. For many the main reason for this is the fact that the academic generation now active at the universities is the first generation which did not have teachers active during the National Socialist epoch. One could say that critical research was not carried out because of a will to protect friends and mentors.<sup>10</sup>

We have a similar situation concerning Swedish Theology. Most of the biographies existing are written by friends or disciples of the portrayed person. Swedish theology is also a small world considering the size of Sweden with its around nine million inhabitants and who wants to be accused of ruining the image of one of the great professors, especially if one happened to know him personally?

### ***The self-image of the church versus the writing of critical history***

The situation is similar if one focuses on the history of the church in general. It seems almost unnecessary to point to the fact that the borders between the church organisation and the theological faculties are almost non-existing and that many persons have positions in both organisations. Odebergs predecessor on the chair in Lund was, as mentioned earlier, for instance the archbishop Erling Eidem.

This situation does however raise the question of the possibility of a critical writing of Church history within the theological faculties. To me it seems that there is a conflict of interest between guarding the self image of the church as an organization opposing National Socialism on the one hand, and the writing of history on the other. I would say that this is one of the main reasons

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<sup>9</sup> See for instance: Östling, Johan, ”Småstatsrealismens sensmoral. Svenska berättelser om andra världskriget”, i: Klas-Göran Karlsson, Eva Helen Ulvros & Ulf Zander (red.), *Historieforskning på nya vägar*, Lund 2006, pp. 163-179.

<sup>10</sup> See for instance: Junginger, Horst, ”Einführung”, in: *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 9, 2001, pp. 149-167.

why the subject of National Socialist sympathies in the Swedish church was ignored when writing Church History at the theological faculties for such a long time. The situation becomes even more problematic if one considers the close ties between church and state in Sweden. The official picture of Swedish politics was, as stated above, that the government actions to stay out of the war at any price was legitimate. As an institution of the state, the Swedish church had to support and defend this view – during as well as after the war.

One should also consider the strong tradition within the church of Sweden to view the church as the new Israel. This manner of interpretation had it that the old treaty between god and the Jews has been annulled making the Jewish people seem ignorant and their faith anachronistic. It is true that this form of theology opens for Anti-Semitism, but more important for my argument is that anyone criticizing Anti-Semitism and Pro-Nazism within the church would in many cases also criticize the theological tradition.

This argument gets stronger regarding the fact that the discussion of the position of the Swedish theology and church was initiated by research done by historians outside the church, such as Steven Koblík in his book *The stones cry out*, Helene Löw's investigations on the Church Peoples Party or Sverker Öredsson's book on the university of Lund during the second world war.<sup>11</sup> Hugo Odeberg's Anti-Semitism and connections to the German Christians are being investigated mainly by scholars specializing in Old Testament exegesis and active within the Jewish-Christian dialogue, whereas church historians are remarkably absent in the discussions.

### ***Conclusion***

It may come as a surprise that I do not consider things such as Christian ideology or Anti-Semitism within the church to be of major importance for the understanding of why it took so long time for the Swedish theology to investigate the more unpleasant sides of its history as well as the history of the Swedish church during the Second World War. These aspects might be of some importance, especially in isolated cases, but they alone can never explain why a whole discipline neglected parts of its recent history.

I would like to stress the social foundations of the production of scientific knowledge. It was the close ties between church and university, the general historical paradigm as well as a strong theological tradition made it almost impossible to commit critical research on the Swedish church during the cold war era for anybody who wanted to stay active within the academic world.

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<sup>11</sup> Koblík, Steven, *The Stones Cry out. Sweden's Response to the Persecution of the Jews. 1933-1945*, New York 1988. Löw, Helene, "The Social Structure of a small Right-Wing Religious Party in Western Sweden: Kyrkliga Folkpartiet in the 1930's", in: Magnus Mörner & Thommy Svensson (eds.), *Classes, Strata and Elites. Essays on Social Stratification in Nordic and Third World History*, Göteborg 1988, pp. 51-68. Öredsson 1996 (same as footnote 5).