

A new relationship: Church and state in Sweden

by [Arne Rasmusson](#) in the [May 3, 2000](#) issue

On January 1 the (Lutheran) Church of Sweden began a new era of independence from the Swedish government. Though the new arrangement is far from realizing an American-style separation of church and state, the enactment of this reform represents an important new step in a long process of changing relations between state and church in Sweden. The significance of the recent moves can be understood only in light of Sweden's rather complicated church-state tradition.

When Lutheranism became Sweden's state religion during the 16th century, the reformation was closely connected to the emergence of a centralized state. The king was the head of the church, and the church and the Swedish people were regarded as identical entities.

The church turned out to be a very efficient instrument for king and state. Until just a few years ago, the church was responsible for the national registration of citizens. Church discipline and state discipline were more or less identical. Church attendance was compulsory until the 19th century. Religious services outside the national church did not become legal until 1858. In 1860 it became possible to withdraw from the Church of Sweden, but only if one entered another church. Not until 1952 was it legally possible simply to leave the church. The first Social Democratic prime minister, Hjalmar Branting, was able to leave the CoS only by saying that he intended to join the Methodists (though he never did).

The increasing pluralization and secularization of Sweden have made the loosening of church-state ties more or less inevitable. This move toward pluralism began with the classical "free church" movements during the 19th and early 20th centuries (the Covenant congregations, Baptists, Pentecostals, Methodists and so on). During the past several decades, the influx of immigrant groups has boosted membership in the Roman Catholic Church and various Orthodox churches. Other religions, especially Islam, have also experienced substantial numerical growth.

Sweden is also a very secular nation, and one of the the most important reasons for that secularity, according to sociologists, may be precisely the CoS's close relationship with the state and its long-held monopoly on religion. In the 19th century the church was so closely linked with traditional society that any reactions against that society were also reactions against the church. Moreover, because of its monopoly situation and the system of church tax, the CoS has not been economically dependent on congregational activities.

Approximately 85 percent of Swedes are still members of the CoS (according to figures for 1997). Until 1995 the entrance ticket to the church was simply birth. Given that the church was a state church, the view was that one could not make a purely religious act such as baptism a requirement for church membership. A more theological argument given for this ecumenical anomaly was that to require baptism would deny the grace character of the gospel. However, after some intense debate the CoS decided that baptism constitutes, in principle, the way into the church.

Around 78 percent of Swedish children are still baptized in the CoS, and the confirmation rate is 57 percent. Sixty-two percent of marriages and almost 90 percent of burials take place in the state church. But on average only 2 percent of the population attend Sunday morning services in the Church of Sweden. (If all weekly services are counted, the percentage is 4 percent.) The 2 percent figure is actually optimistic. The core congregation that regularly goes to church is considerably smaller. Moreover, as many or more people worship in churches other than the CoS, mostly in the "free churches."

The idea of separating church and state has been very controversial inside the CoS. The majority of the bishops, the clergy and active churchgoers have for quite some time favored separation, but the majority of the local Parish Councils opposed it for a long time. The Parish Council is the board of the local church that oversees its work and finances. One of the members of the council is the rector, who is responsible for worship, teaching, diaconal work and mission. The rector and the rest of the clergy are employed by the council, though in their ministerial capacity they function independently and are responsible to the church's episcopal structure. This double line of responsibility reflects the combination of democratic and episcopal structure in the CoS.

The Parish Councils have generally been suspicious of changes in the relations between the church and the state, fearing that the church would lose out

economically. The councils have also worried that active churchpeople would gain increased influence in the church, which in the eyes of the councils would mean that the church would be less open and democratic. Here one has to comprehend the dynamics of politics in the CoS. The members of Parish Councils are elected in national elections which are part of the ordinary national political machinery. The political parties nominate candidates, though there are also independent “church parties.” The turnout in these elections is extremely low. Most of those who vote belong to one of two groups: the small group of active churchgoers, and the larger group consisting of the mobilized troops of the various political parties.

As a result, the Parish Council is not really elected by the worshiping congregation. Many members of the Parish Councils seldom attend a Sunday service. (One investigation, now quite old, reported that only 60 percent went to church at least once a month.) A considerable minority even consider themselves atheists or agnostics. Although the details vary greatly from place to place, this general situation tends to create tensions between the clergy and the active churchpeople, on the one hand, and the very mixed Parish Councils, on the other.

One of the more controversial parts of the new church order is the decision to give Parish Councils, not the cathedral chapters, the power to hire clergy. Most clergy have opposed this step because they fear that they will become too dependent on the Parish Councils. Some even fear that the church will move away from its episcopal structure to a more congregationalist structure, although, it must be added, this would be a very odd form of congregationalism. The relative power of the bishops and the clergy has for a long time slowly decreased, and the new church order is just one more small step in that direction.

The new law is not neutral and has not made other churches equal to the CoS. The law states that the CoS should be an evangelical Lutheran open “folk church” which covers the whole territory of Sweden, and which is episcopal and democratic. Under these terms, the government guarantees the future development of the CoS and retains the right to intervene if the CoS develops in an undesirable direction. Critics say this arrangement shows that the CoS does not trust its own democratic processes. It reveals, in any case, that the political leaders, like the councils, are worried that the church will be taken over by more active churchpeople.

Another provision of the new law gives the church, not the government, the ability to elect bishops, and bishops and clergy are no longer civil servants. The role of

bishops in the national Church Assembly has also been hotly debated. To understand this debate one must again grasp the full political context. Political parties play the same role in the Church Assembly that they do in the Parish Councils. According to the new church order, the bishops have no voting rights in the assembly. Some see this as a consistent development of democracy, while others see it as a further development away from an episcopal structure, and think it preposterous that political parties can vote on church doctrine.

But bishops do constitute a majority in the Doctrinal Commission of the Church Assembly, which deals with binding church teachings. The Church Assembly has never voted against the decisions of this commission. The archbishop is also chair of the Central Board, which is elected by the Church Assembly. Some democracy advocates object to this, thinking the board chair should be an elected member.

Under the new law church “dues” have replaced the church tax, but the state authorities still administer these dues, so people will not notice much difference. The Church of Sweden also continues to be responsible for most of the burial grounds and retains its considerable property.

A new law applicable to other “faith communities” (*trossamfund*) has also been enacted. Under the old system, churches other than the CoS have had to choose between organizing themselves as voluntary associations or as foundations, neither of which category suited the self-understanding of many churches. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, has been organized as a foundation.

The idea behind the law is that the new legal category “faith community” should make it possible for religious communities to define themselves legally according to their own self-understanding. A “faith community” is defined as a community for religious activity, which includes the conducting of religious services. The organizational form can then vary according to the specific traditions of each community.

The state offers to administer the dues (usually 1 percent of the taxable income) for these other “faith communities.” In contrast to the law covering members of the CoS, however, paying dues is voluntary for members of other communities. A complicating factor is that many members of the free churches are officially members of the CoS. As a result, several churches have tried to get their members to leave the CoS so that their dues may flow to their own churches. As one might

guess, this strategy has stirred some controversy, both among the members of these churches and in the CoS.

A more interesting discussion, however, may be the one some Catholics recently have tried to initiate through an open letter to the CoS. They contend that the new church order does not say anything about the apostolic task of preaching the gospel, and they ask if this omission is related to the fact that the CoS by law has to live by the fiction that it already represents the whole population of Sweden. The task of the CoS, it is often said by its leading representatives, is not to tell people what they should believe, but to be a listening and conversing partner in the search for meaning. This attitude, created by the wish both to be a Lutheran church and to embody the religious dimension of the Swedish people as a whole, will, the Catholics suggest, continue to create problems for the CoS, and will be an obstacle in ecumenical dialogue.

Many people inside the CoS would agree with this Catholic critique. Others think it represents the type of Catholic clericalism that a Lutheran “folk church” should avoid. This way of opposing clericalism and democracy is, of course, not uncommon in the history of the church, but the way the CoS is governed (not by the worshiping congregation but by Parish Councils and a Church Assembly nominated by the political parties) gives this debate a strange bent.

There is much discussion in the Church of Sweden about identity. For the great majority, the concept of an open “folk church” is central, but since the idea has several quite different interpretations, it functions more as a slogan than as a clarifying concept. Not least, it seems, it is used for smoothing over the tension between the church’s claim to represent almost the whole Swedish population and its actual situation.