

# Images, ‘Superstition’, and Popular Piety in Post-Reformation Sweden

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In 1641 the archbishop of Sweden, Laurentius Paulinus Gothus, conducted a visitation in the parish church of Söderby. After explaining the sin of idolatry to all present, he questioned the vicar if he had not taught his parishioners this. The vicar said that he had indeed explained this to them many times, but that they ‘remember nothing of it’. The archbishop then declared in reference to Matthew 24:15, that when he had entered the neighbouring church of Karlskyrka, which was also under the vicar’s jurisdiction, he had witnessed something upsetting:

There was, [...] the abomination of desolation standing in the holy place, in that the image of Mary was next to the altar, and written underneath with large letters as thus: Help, Mary.<sup>1</sup>

Why was this so upsetting to the archbishop? The average parish church in seventeenth-century Sweden still displayed an abundance of representations of the sacred in painted, carved and sculpted form. Naturally, the letters invoking Mary’s protection were in disharmony with Lutheran teachings, but such inscriptions were hardly uncommon.<sup>2</sup> Had the archbishop perhaps noticed something particular in the parishioners’ attitude towards the image?

As in other Lutheran territories, the Church of Sweden remained conservative on the topic of images and placed them among the *adiaphora* — external matters that in themselves were neither good nor evil and that according to Christian freedom, every congregation was free to decide for themselves whether to retain them or not.<sup>3</sup> Recent scholarship, by Andrew Spicer, Raisa Maria Toivo, Bridget Heal and others, has emphasised this ‘conservative power of Lutheranism’, pointing to

<sup>1</sup> ‘fans ther som Christus säger, Matth. förödelsens styggelse i thett helgha rummet. i dett Mariaë bäläthe fans bredhe wijdh altaret, vnderscriffwidt medh stora bokstättwer sålunda: Hielp Maria.’, Rudolf B. Hall, *Ur den kyrkliga folkdisciplineringens historia*, Föreningen för svensk undervisningshistoria: Lund 1927, 125. Herman Lundström, *Laurentius Paulinus Gothus: Hans lif och verksamhet (1565–1646)*. III. Paulinus såsom Ärkebiskop och prokansler (1637–1646), Almqvist & Wiksell: Uppsala 1898, 69–70.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Carl Ivar Ståhle ed., *Rannsakingar efter antikviteter*, II, Almqvist & Wiksell: Uppsala 1969, 263, Samuel Rogberg, *Historisk beskrifning om Småland i gemen i synnerhet Kronobergs och Jönköpings lähner, ifrån äldsta till nuvarande tid, om thess politics, natural-historie, bergwärc, kyrko-stat, folkmängd, hushållning, kyrkor, slott och herregårdar, med mera minneswärdt*, Karlskrona 1770, 257 & 1008–9. Stockholm, Kungliga biblioteket, MS M121, Christoffer Cronholm, *Beskrivning om Bleking*, c. 1750–57.

<sup>3</sup> Laurentius Petri, ‘Then swenska kyrkeordningen. Läter all ting ährligha och skickeliga tilgå.’, in *Kyrko-ordningar och förslag dertill före 1686*, 1:2, Norstedt: Stockholm 1872, 1–180, at 11–12.

how images were retained and adapted to the Evangelical religious culture.<sup>4</sup> They do not, however, linger on how these images could be perceived in practice on a local level. Heal maintains that in Lutheran areas of contemporary Germany, the belief in the mediating powers of images faded quickly among the general population in the wake of the Reformation. Already by the latter part of the sixteenth century, Lutheran understandings of images of the saints had been firmly established.<sup>5</sup>

In this article, I will explore the multitude of responses that pre-reformation images continued to arouse throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Among clerics, this response could range from appreciation to harsh condemnation, and there was a remarkable difference in the attitudes of the lower clergy and the clerical elite. In rural popular piety, some images were believed to possess the power of healing and protection well into the eighteenth century.

Several researchers have abandoned the term ‘popular’ out of concern that it can be seen as condescending and that it relies too heavily on an outdated and simplified model of popular and elite cultures as opposites.<sup>6</sup> However, imagining a fully integrated religious community without cultural boundaries between the peasantry and the gentry can be equally simplifying. In the words of R. W. Scribner: ‘such polarities are so evident in the sources that we cannot ignore them, unless we wish to accuse contemporaries of misunderstanding their own culture’.<sup>7</sup> Neither the concept of complete opposites nor the depreciatory view lie within terms such as ‘folk’ or ‘popular’ in themselves, but in the way in which the scholar chooses to apply them. Furthermore, while the concepts of ‘vernacular’ and ‘lived’ religion have their merits, terms such as ‘popular’ and ‘folk’ religion emphasise conflict and power dynamics in a way that these newer terms do not, which better suites this particular case study.<sup>8</sup>

I would like to stress that while retaining the term ‘popular’, I do not argue that the everyday religious practices and concepts of the peasant community were less ‘rational’ than or isolated from those held at other levels of society. Nor do I claim that these practices were not subject to change throughout the vast period of time that we call the Early Modern. Indeed, as some examples of this article will indicate, the line between lay and clerical and learned and unlearned understandings of holy images, was not clear-cut. The topic of the proper use of images seem to have remained complex and even contradictory on all levels of society throughout the eighteenth century.

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew Spicer, ‘Martin Luther and the Material Culture of Worship’, in *Martin Luther and the Reformation*, Sandstein Verlag: Dresden 2016, 250–60 at 250–51, 259–60. Raisa Maria Toivo, ‘Protestantism, Modernity and the Power of Penetration: Saints and Sacrifice in 17th Century Lutheran Finland’, in Sari Katajala-Peltomaa & Raisa Maria Toivo eds., *Lived Religion and the Long Reformation in Northern Europe c. 1300–1700*, Brill: Boston 2016, 75–103, at 102–3. Bridget Heal, ‘Sacred image and sacred space in Lutheran Germany’, in Will Coster & Andrew Spicer eds., *Sacred Space in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2005, 39–59, at 41. Bridget Heal, ‘Visual and Material Culture’, in Ulinka Rublack ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the Protestant Reformations*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 2017, 601–16, at 604–12.

<sup>5</sup> Heal 2005, 58–59; Bridget Heal, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary in Early Modern Germany: Protestant and Catholic Piety, 1500–1648*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2009, 114.

<sup>6</sup> Leonard Norman Primiano, ‘Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife’, *Western Folklore* 54 (1995), 37–56, at 38–40. Sari Katajala-Peltomaa, & Raisa Maria Toivo, ‘Religion as Experience’, in *Lived Religion and the Long Reformation in Northern Europe c. 1300–1700* (as in n. 4), 1–18, at 2.

<sup>7</sup> R. W. Scribner, *Religion and Culture in Germany (1400–1800)*, Brill: Leiden 2001, 47.

<sup>8</sup> James A. Kapaló, ‘Folk Religion in Discourse and Practice’, in *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* 7 (2013), 3–18, at 8–12. On the popular or folk religion, see also the article by Sonja Hukantaival in this volume.

The cases discussed in the following will serve to make two arguments in relation to recent historical research on the views of the efficacy of images in the early modern period. Firstly, they will demonstrate that images could, in fact, keep their miracle-working function, albeit in a new context. Secondly, they will show that despite recent emphasis on the conservative nature on Lutheranism, the rhetoric of the higher clergy of the period was often infused with fear and suspicion of these objects. They will also address the sometimes precarious situation of the local clergy, who often had to balance between the needs of the parishioners and the edicts of their superiors. The cases addressed will consist of a series of samples from a more extensive study conducted within the framework of my doctoral project.<sup>9</sup>

References to ‘superstitious’ practices and beliefs are rare in all types of sources from the period. This relative silence does not, however, necessarily indicate that the practices themselves were rare. Rather, this likely reflects the guidelines of the church ordinance of 1571 and the church law of 1668. These state that superstitions and abuses were not to be discussed explicitly, lest the populace could be inspired to adopt superstitions they did not already practice. Only the most well-known and widespread superstitions were to be openly discussed, and the clergy was generally advised by an old proverb: ‘that which is foul-smelling, one does not touch willingly’.<sup>10</sup> In order to access these glimpses of popular piety, one has to make use of a multitude of different types of sources. Only when combining a broad array of sources – in this case, visitation records, clerical correspondence, antiquarian reports, landscape descriptions, and folkloric records – these ‘isolated’ glimpses of popular piety reveal themselves as integrated parts of a dynamic multi-faceted religious culture – a culture where ‘matter still mattered’.

## Changes in the official views of sacred matter

As much as a knife is ‘programmed’ for the action of cutting, pre-reformation images of the saints were designed to initiate a particular type of interaction with a human agent. They were meant to be touched and handled as much as seen, and the late medieval image had in some ways more in common with a relic than a portrait.<sup>11</sup> The interactions that these images called for were by the seventeenth century no longer sanctioned by official teachings. While church authorities could control the presence of these objects, they could not control how parishioners responded to them.<sup>12</sup> If we acknowledge the profound role of sacred matter in the late medieval culture, from which the reformations themselves emerged, the Lutheran view of images appears less conservative than we usually imagine. The transition from objects that were carriers of divine immanence and that were

<sup>9</sup> The full survey is presented in Terese Zachrisson, *Mellan fromhet och vidskepelse: Materialitet och religiositet i det efterreformatöriska Sverige*, Institutionen för historiska studier, Göteborgs universitet: Göteborg 2017, 86–133.

<sup>10</sup> Laurentius Petri 1872 [1571], 28. A.J. Rydén ed., *Sveriges Kyrkolag af år 1686; jemte ännu gällande stadganden, genom hvilka den blifvit ändrad eller tillökt, utgifven af A.J. Rydén*, J. Sandwall: Jönköping 1846, 21.

<sup>11</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe*, Zone Books: New York 2011, 59.

<sup>12</sup> Henning Laugerud, ‘Jesu fødsel’ på prekestolen fra Onsøy gamle kirke: Ikonologisk-teologisk ‘dissonans’ i Østfold’, in Hanne Sanders ed., *Mellem Gud og Djævelen: Religiøse og magiske verdensbilleder i Norden 1500–1800*, Nordiska ministerrådet: København 2001, 121–53, at 150–1.

in some sense ‘alive’, to inanimate objects whose only powers were those of invoking a cognitive response within the viewer, is a rather fundamental one.<sup>13</sup>

A synod in Örebro in 1529 declared that several material aspects of religious life needed to be carefully explained, since ‘much abuse and false opinion’ had emerged regarding these matters. Here, the true meaning of holy water, images, blessed candles and other physical aspects of Christianity were consistently transferred to a cognitive and mnemonic sphere: ‘We do not have images for the reason that we shall kneel before them, but as a reminder of Christ and holy persons’.<sup>14</sup> The church ordinance of 1571, authored by Laurentius Petri, the first Lutheran archbishop of Sweden, came to be the main normative text up until the end of the seventeenth century. It stated that images could indeed be of great value in a didactic sense, but the use of these images had to be regulated. Certain interactions with an image were forbidden. Some actions defined as ‘abuses’ were specified in the ordinance, such as carrying the image in procession, kneeling and bowing before it, adorning it with clothing or precious objects, and lighting candles before it.<sup>15</sup> In theory, violating these guidelines meant committing idolatry and all images that were being misused had to be removed. At least to higher clergy, the abuse of images was considered a grave sin and a serious offense. In a statute for the diocese of Västerås from the first half of the seventeenth century, Bishop Johannes Rudbeckius enlists the sin of conducting idolatry with an image along with other ‘devilish acts’, such as adultery, heresy and witchcraft.<sup>16</sup>

Twenty-four years before the visitation in Söderby, Laurentius Paulinus Gothus had authored an extensive and widely read commentary on the Catechism, called the *Ethica Christianæ*. Linger- ing on the subject of superstition and idolatry, he concluded that not all images were *adiaphora*, but that some were harmful and superstitious in themselves, ‘In that their very likeness and representa- tion grant opportunities for abuse and ungodliness’.<sup>17</sup> A similar view was expressed in bishop Olaus Laurelius’s proposition for a new church ordinance in 1659. The clergy was instructed to make sure that no ‘superstitious or otherwise unsuitable images,’ such as ‘those [made] according to popish fables’ were to be kept in the churches. Bishop Laurelius also stressed that images were but wood and stone, ‘wherein there could be no life nor aid to be found’.<sup>18</sup> It seems clear that among the seventeenth-century clerical elite in the Kingdom of Sweden, there was still a grave concern that certain images could initiate inappropriate responses among parishioners. In the following, I will address some cases where pre-reformation images seem to have been invested with a meaning that went far beyond their didactic function. In popular piety, some images were still believed to have the ability to convey divine intercession.

<sup>13</sup> Bynum 2011, 105.

<sup>14</sup> Council of Örebro 7 February 1529, in *Svenska riksdagsakter jämte andra handlingar som höra till statsförfat- ningens historia under tidevarfvet 1521–1718*, I, Norstedt: Stockholm 1887, 120.

<sup>15</sup> Laurentius Petri 1872, 12–3, 101–2.

<sup>16</sup> Johannes Rudbeckius, *Biskop J. Rudbeckius’ kyrkio-stadgar för Westerås stift*, Herman Lundström: Uppsala 1900, 33.

<sup>17</sup> Laurentius Paulinus Gothus, *Ethica christiana pars prima, de ratione bene vivendi. Thet är: Catechismj förste deel, Om Gudz lagh [...]*, Stockholm 1617, 73–2.

<sup>18</sup> Olaus Laurelius, ‘Then svenska kyrkio-ordningen öfversedd och förbättrat, och i twenne deelar eller böcker skiftat’, in *Kyrko-ordningar och förslag dertill före 1686*, II, Norstedt: Stockholm 1881, 355–561, at 434.

## Images for healing and protection

In an antiquarian report from 1668 Petrus Laurentii Nachovius, the vicar of Genarp parish, mentions one of the sculptures in his church. The image, which the church ‘during the Papacy’ had invested a considerable amount of money in procuring, was a wooden Easter sepulchre with a collection box attached to it. However, the image was apparently considered to be more than just a historical monument. The vicar continues his report by informing us that on every Midsummer, people from all over the surrounding area visited the church in order to make votive offerings before the image. These offerings were made in the hope of curing various illnesses, and interestingly, the vicar does not reproach his parishioners for doing this. On the contrary, he himself seems to believe in the power of the sculpture, adding to his statement that these offerings were often made ‘with success’.<sup>19</sup> The Genarp example is perhaps especially telling since it highlights both the creative and the traditional aspects of early modern popular image veneration. It seems clear that this practice was not a mere continuation of a pre-reformation tradition. Easter sepulchres would have been used in the liturgy during Holy Week, not at the feast of St. John the Baptist in Midsummer. It would also seem that by the seventeenth century, the critical element was the offering instead of the passion play. When the image had lost its place in official liturgy, the cult was transferred to the laity, and thus it became more local, more subject to change and specifically adapted to the needs of the laity.

The case in Genarp also shows that seventeenth-century lower clergy could share the beliefs of the peasant community, in which they lived and worked. This clerical tolerance can also be seen in a case from Berga parish, involving the Head of John the Baptist. The head is somewhat surprisingly discussed in a letter to the Church Ordinance Commission, signed by Dean Andreas Kierner in 1726. The letter first cites a paragraph from the parish register, allegedly written by former vicar Jonas Hastadius in the 1640s. The letter tells that at this time, the head was placed upon the high altar, and that people ‘high and low’ flocked to the church to place offerings of coin in it. As in the Genarp case, the reason for doing this was the belief that this would cure illnesses – and the head was considered especially effective when dealing with various ailments of the head. For the best results, Hastadius continues, the church should be visited at dawn, and preferably on a Sunday. Apparently, during the thirty years that Hastadius served as the vicar, nothing was done to prevent this practice. Moreover, the dean does not fail to mention this negligence. To discourage the practice, a later vicar decided to move the head, instead placing it behind the altar. Despite this, some people still secretly placed coins in it. Finally, Kierner concludes, the head was ‘abolished

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<sup>19</sup> Carl Ivar Ståhle ed., *Rannsakningar efter antikviteter*, III, Kungliga Vitterhetsakademien: Stockholm 1992, 239.

and thrown away' in 1720, and ever since, no signs of such 'superstitions' had been seen.<sup>20</sup> By the beginning of the eighteenth century, it seems that the tolerance shown by vicars such as Hastadius and Naschovius was no longer an acceptable clerical behaviour.

In *Glysisvallur*, a description of Hälsingland, the vicar and school master Olof Broman (1676–1750) provided several glimpses into how images were perceived by the peasantry in the province. The collection was not published until the year 1900, which makes a precise dating difficult to establish, but the majority of the accounts had likely been completed by 1720.<sup>21</sup> Drawing on his own day-to-day experience of pastoral work, Broman concludes that although images were but 'dead pieces of wood', the peasants were 'still too fond of them'. Upon entering or leaving the church, they bowed and made the sign of the cross before the crucifix. From some images, paint and fragments of wood were scraped off in order to be used for healing purposes.<sup>22</sup> In two of the churches in the area, Ilsbo and Hassela, tablets depicting the Holy Face were placed on the high altars. These tablets had according to Broman 'doubtlessly been venerated with kisses, nearly up to the present day'. To Broman, the respect these images enjoyed appeared perplexing and ridiculous, since they were nothing but helpless 'dead wooden stumps, that could not make use of their feet or defend themselves, with neither mouth nor hands'.<sup>23</sup> Once again we encounter statements that emphasise that the images were *not alive*. The simple fact that the clergy repeated this argument for so long suggests that other, contradicting views on the nature of holy matter still existed.

A practice that is harder to interpret comes from the parishes of Holm and Liden. In the medieval church of Liden, a rare cross with paintings depicting the images of St. Martin on one side and St. Margaret on the other is preserved. In a letter to the cathedral chapter of Härnösand, written in 1776 by the vicar of the neighbouring parish of Holm, an almost identical cross is mentioned. According to the vicar, this cross had the paintings of the Virgin on one side and St. Joseph on the other. His parishioners had told him that the 'during the Papacy', this cross had been placed in a shrine at a place in the woods between the two parishes. The cross had been used as an 'offering place' by those unable to walk the distance to the churches. It is possible that these two crosses were actually one and the same, and that the figures of St. Martin and St. Margaret had been reinterpreted as those of Mary and Joseph in a post-reformation context. The surviving cross from Liden is covered in carvings on both sides. These carvings consist of initials, house marks and the year 1641 – clearly indicating that the carvings were made in the early modern period.<sup>24</sup> The carvings are not mentioned in preserved sources, and the actual meaning behind them remains elusive. Possibly,

<sup>20</sup> Stockholm Riksarkivet. Prästeståndets arkiv, ecklesiastiska handlingar, R1108, no. 120.

<sup>21</sup> Anders Grape, 'Olof Johansson Broman', in *Svenskt biografiskt lexikon*, VI, Stockholm 1926, 341.

<sup>22</sup> The practice of scraping fragments of images and using these fragments for 'superstitious' healing purposes is mentioned in several cases from other parts of the country. As late as in the middle of the nineteenth Century, antiquarian and artist Nils Mandelgren claimed that he had encountered this practice in many of the churches he had visited during his travels across the country. Lunds universitet, Folkklivarkivet med Skånes musiksamlingar, Mandelgrenska samlingen, Series 5, Linköping diocese, Sya Church.

<sup>23</sup> Olof Johansson Broman, *Glysisvallur och öfriga skrifter rörande Hälsingland*, II, Gestrike-Helsinge nation: Uppsala 1912–53, 19–25, 117, 294, 340.

<sup>24</sup> Henrik Cornell & Axel Rappe, 'Ljustorps, Indals samt Medelpads västra domsagas tingslag', in Sigurd Curman & Johnny Roosval eds., *Sveriges kyrkor: Konsthistoriskt inventarium. Medelpad Bd. 2*. Riksantikvarieämbetet: Stockholm 1939, 143–416, at 230, 232–3. Landsarkivet i Härnösand, Domkapitlet i Härnösand E III:76, Holm 11 September 1776.

they have been made for healing purposes, thus linking the applicant and his or her household to the cross, or that which the cross represented. Similar carvings of initials and house marks were made on the doors and pillars of the votive churches<sup>25</sup> of Svinnegarn, Fru Alstad, St. Olof and Mortorp by those wishing to be healed at these sites.<sup>26</sup>

The most well-documented tradition of Swedish image veneration is that of St. Olaf in a parish named after him in Scania. Reports of pilgrimage to the church can be traced back to the middle ages, but information on the cult is even richer in the early modern period. In 1627, when Scania was still a part of the Danish realm, visiting bishop Mats Jensen noted that parishioners were ‘worshipping’ the image of St. Olaf, which they had dressed up in linen clothing. Reportedly, he had the garments ripped up, after which he ‘threw the idol out’ of the church. We do not know whether the parishioners later brought the image back in, or if the church possessed another image of St. Olaf, but reports of ‘superstition’ concerning the sculpture continue throughout the early modern period.

More than a century later, the governor of the province issued a decree stating fines for those who made offerings to the image. When Carl Linnæus visited the parish in 1750, he described the image and — being a man of the Enlightenment — noted that the people in this area still lived ‘*in obscuro*’ and ‘follow old superstitious traditions’. In addition to making offerings to the image, another practice described on multiple occasions was the rubbing of the sculpture’s axe, and in relation to Linnæus’s visit, his commentator Carl Hallenborg made the following report:

They approach the image, fall to their knees and mumble something, then they take the axe and rub it on their injury, wherever on their body it may be. Some of them undress completely, if they are granted enough time alone, in order to gain better access. Afterwards they go to the collection box by the door, where they leave their money, which have to be of an uneven number. Some of them, either upon entering the church or after having worshipped the image and made their offerings, sit down in the pews and read a prayer. After this, they go to St. Olaf’s well, [...], wherein they wash themselves, drink and throw money, bread, pork, pieces of meat, cheese and other such things into the well. To the image in the church they also make offerings, in that they hang ribbons,

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<sup>25</sup> Votive churches were churches that in the Early Modern period were believed to possess a particular level of holiness, to which offerings were made in order to increase the chances of prayers being heard. The phenomenon is well-attested in seventeenth- and eighteenth century Scandinavia. See Monica Weikert, *I sjukdom och nöd: Offerkyrkoseden i Sverige från 1600-tal till 1800-tal*, Göteborgs universitet: Göteborg 2004.

<sup>26</sup> Ingrid Rosell, ‘Svinnegarns, Enköpings-Näs och Teda kyrkor i Uppland’, in *Sveriges kyrkor: Konsthistoriskt inventarium. Uppland XI:1. Åsunda härad, södra delen*, Riksantikvarieämbetet: Stockholm 1966, 3–205, at 35. Monica Rydbeck, ‘S:t Olofs kyrka i Skåne restaurerad’, *Fornvännen: Journal of Swedish Antiquarian Research* (1951), 91–126, at 95–6. Ståhle 1992, 161.

stockings and rags that have been wrapped around the injured limb onto it, so that master Olaf looks rather pitiful in all this grandeur.<sup>27</sup>

The same ritual was witnessed by the antiquarian Hilfeling twenty years later, where he added that the axe could only be used three times, before one had to put it back in the saint's hand to recharge. He added that the rituals were all 'very solemn' and that prayers were said on multiple occasions during the ritual. The latter part is an important reminder that such practices were firmly rooted in a specific *Christian* context, and not part of a separate 'magical' system of thought. Hilfeling also tells us that offerings to the image were not only made by individuals that suffered from sickness. Offerings could also be made on behalf of an entire village and the intervention people hoped for was not limited to healing. St. Olaf could also protect livestock, enhance the fertility of women, secure the harvest and ward off ill fortune in general.<sup>28</sup>

In the parish of Norra Vånga, a thirteenth-century sculpture of an apostle was known as the 'Grain God' (Sw. *Kornguden*). According to folklore records from the area, it held an important function to the local community in securing a good harvest. On certain days, the image was retrieved from the church and carried across the fields to protect the crops. This custom has a remarkable similarity to rites practiced in the Middle Ages, but the first mention of this particular tradition is of a late date, first appearing in a district court record from 1760. On this occasion, a man that was expected to appear as a witness in an unrelated case, was absent from court due to being busy 'carrying the Grain God'.<sup>29</sup> The mention of this undoubtedly illicit practice in a court of law did not generate any further investigations. This hints to that the general absence of similar cases from court records cannot be used as an argument against the prevalence of such beliefs and customs. Instead, it shows that the secular courts — which were made up mostly by local freeholders — did not view such matters as serious offenses.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> 'De gå fram till bilden, töra väl alldeles för denna stoken falla på knä och mumla nogot, taga sedan yxen, hvarmed de strycka den skadade lemman, ehvar kan finnes på kroppen framme eller bak; somlige att komma så mycket bättre åt, afläda sig och helt och hållit, om de få så länge blifva ensamme. Sedan gå de till stoken eller kyrkiokistan, som står vid dörren, och nedstoppa sine penningar, som äntel. måste vara udda. En dehl gå, antingen då de först komma in i kyrkan eller sedan bilden är tillbedin, offert gifvit, in i en stohl och läsa en bön. Därpå gå de till S:te Olofs kiella, som ligger litet stycke från kyrkan vid berustade säteriet S:te Olofs gård, tvätta sig därstädes, dricka uhr kiällan och offra eller kasta dit penningar, brödstycken, fläsk, kiöttbitar, ost och mera dylikt. Till sielfva bilden i kyrkan offra de och, att de hänga på honom gamla hårband, strumpeband och trasor, som sutit om den skadade lemman, så att her Olof ser rätt ynkelig ut i sin präcktighet', Carl Hallenborg, *Carl Hallenborgs Anmärkningar till Carl von Linnés Skånska resa*, De skånska landskapens historiska förening: Lund 1913, 325.

<sup>28</sup> C. G. G. Hilfeling, 'Journal förd vid antikvitestecknaren C. G. Hilfelings antikvariska resa i sydöstra Skåne sommaren 1777', in *Tomelilla hembygdslokrets årsbok*, Tomelilla hembygdslokrets: Tomelilla 1980, 33–46, at 40.

<sup>29</sup> Jan Svanberg, 'Kornguden i Vånga och dess likar', in *Det tidiga Västergötland: En aktuell historia*, Skaraborgs läns museum: Skara 1983, 90–118, at 100. Jan Svanberg, 'Kornguden i Vånga: En bild i långvarigt bruk', *Taideshistoriallisa tutkimuksia - Konsthistoriska studier* 8 (1985), 255–65, at 258–60. Carl-Martin Bergstrand, *Brott och straff i 1700-talets Västergötland*, I, Göteborg 1972, 18.

<sup>30</sup> Nils Erik Villstrand, 'Stormaktstidens politiska kultur', in Jakob Christensson ed., *Signums svenska kulturhistoria: Stormaktstiden*, Signum: Lund 2005, 16–101, at 95–6. Cf. Toivo 2016, 84–85.

## The destruction of ‘superstitious’ images

As indicated by the cases above, seventeenth-century lower clergy does not seem to have been threatened by the popular use of images, even when it was in breach with official teachings. The lack of concern is a contrast to how accusations of conjuring and witchcraft were treated in same period.<sup>31</sup> However, in the ranks of the higher clergy, popular conceptions of holy images were a continuous source of worry. As previously discussed, leading men of the seventeenth-century Church did not view all religious images as adiaphora and archbishop Paulinus Gothus was noticeably upset when encountering an image of the Virgin in the visitation record of 1641. He does not, however, seem to have had the image destroyed. This is telling when considering that during the very same visitation, he did order the burning of the relics of St. Karlung that were still kept (and apparently venerated) in the church of Karlskyrka.<sup>32</sup>

As in the case of Berga, where the head of St. John the Baptist was destroyed in 1720, the records reveal several other occasions where images were destroyed because they were perceived to encourage popular superstition. During the first half of the eighteenth century, fear of religious non-conformism culminated in the 1735 Act on Religion – which essentially made it legally compulsory for vicars to actively seek out and report anyone harbouring irregular religious views.<sup>33</sup> This new law was chiefly aimed at rooting out Pietism and other more organised forms of religious non-conformity, but attitudes to all sorts of heterodox beliefs seem to have been sharpened during this time period.

Bishop Daniel Juslenius of Skara (1676–1752) can be seen as an embodiment of this heightened hostility towards both Pietism and popular ‘superstition’. The visitation records of Bishop Juslenius from the mid-eighteenth century reveal a deep concern with those pre-reformation images that were still in place in the diocese’s churches. On multiple occasions, the bishop demanded that images of the saints — and in particular those of Mary — were to be removed. Such acts have previously been explained with changing aesthetics and Enlightenment contempt for anything medieval — which definitely played an important part in the loss of countless sculptures during the eighteenth century. But what have often been overlooked are the reasons those in charge of such acts actually claimed themselves. From the visitation records of Bishop Juslenius, it is clear that the images were to be removed because their theological content made them dangerous, and the reasons were never claimed to be that the images were out of date, unsightly or taking up much-needed space. An image of Mary was to be removed from the church of Ugglum in 1749, because it was the cause of ‘much harm’ in the parish. Two years earlier, the bishop had demanded the removal of another

<sup>31</sup> Linda Oja, ‘De kloka och renlärigheten’ i Jakob Christensson, *Signums svenska kulturhistoria: Stormaktstiden*, Signum: Lund 2005, 301–27, at 312–15.

<sup>32</sup> ‘ytherst förmantes folket affskaffa den affguden Karlung som de en gång om åhrett dyrcke, hwilkens been i Karlz kyrckia liggia vthi en skrijn, honom skulle de vpbränna.’ (‘Above all, the people were proscribed to abolish their idol, Karlung, that they worship once a year [and] whose bones are in a casket in Karlskyrka, him, they were to burn.’), Hall 1927, 124–26.

<sup>33</sup> ‘Kongl. Maj:ts Nådige Stadga och Påbud, til Hämmande af hvarjehanda willfarelser, och theras vtspridande, emote then rena Evangeliska Läran. Gifwit Stockholm i Råd-Cammaren then 20. Martii 1735’, in Anders Anton von Stiernman, *Samling Vtaf åtskilliga, tid efter annan, vtkomna Konglga Stadgar, Bref och Förordningar, Angående Religion. Giord oppå Hans Konlg. Maj:ts Nädigaste Befallning*, Stockholm 1744, 225–37.

image of Mary, in the church of Husaby, ‘as to prevent any harm and superstition’.<sup>34</sup> When visiting the parish of Norra Ving in 1746, Juslenius stated that the images of ‘Mary and other saints’ were not only to be removed, but ‘smashed up and buried’, because they were being ‘misused for all manner of superstitions’.<sup>35</sup>

One example from the parish of Fågelö can be used to illustrate that though there were likely general differences in the views of these matters between the peasantry and the higher clergy, on an individual level a zealous attitude to ‘superstitious’ images could be found in all layers of society. In a parish description from the middle of the eighteenth century, the vicar of Fågelö describes the votive chapel of St Peter. He recalls how parishioners used to place offerings of coin into the hands of two ‘small images’ in the chapel, one depicting St Peter and the other one the Virgin – and apparently, this custom had so enraged a local knacker man named Sven, that he had decapitated the image of St. Peter. Interestingly, Sven’s decision to take matters into his own hands won no praise from the vicar, who refers to him as a ‘fool’ – though he is somewhat excused by the fact that the image had been in superstitious use.<sup>36</sup>

## Conclusions

Despite the fact that images, in general, were never banned from church space, several bishops held a negative view of images with a ‘popish’ content and feared that these depictions wielded a disruptive influence on parishioners. Stressing the inanimate state of images while simultaneously fearing their influence, in practice, these bishops granted the very agency to images that they denied on a theoretical level. This fear of images can be observed throughout the seventeenth century, but it intensified in the first half of the eighteenth century, only to diminish in the last part of the century. During the seventeenth century, the position of the local clergy often seems to have been more aligned with the traditions of the local community than learned theological views. These vicars tolerated and sometimes even supported customs that their superiors viewed as superstitious, and were sometimes reprimanded by higher authorities for it.

On a local level, traditional views of the images of Christ and his saints did not necessarily disappear as Lutheran understandings of images were introduced but could continue to hold relevancy in popular piety alongside sanctioned interpretations of the images as didactic tools. These images were believed to exercise a benevolent supernatural power that could cure the sick, protect the harvest and ward off ill fortune. Even small fragments of these objects were thought to convey these powers, as demonstrated by the practice of scraping.

As I have tried to demonstrate, several practices concerning images, which were officially deemed superstitious, were part of the repertoire of popular piety. The cult of images changed in its form and function when it was transferred from official to unofficial, but the underpinning belief — that God acted through material objects and that human action could influence God to do this — was still present, and sometimes echoed aspects of medieval popular piety. It seems clear that

<sup>34</sup> Landsarkivet i Göteborg, Gudhem C:1 & Husaby N:1.

<sup>35</sup> Landsarkivet i Göteborg, Norra Ving KI:1.

<sup>36</sup> Skara stifts- och landsbibliotek, Wilskmanska samlingen, De Singulis in Diocesi Scarensi Parochiis, vol. 5, 237–38.

the images on a local level could have meanings that went far beyond the didactic. Even after the Reformation, people needed divine intercession when struggling with the immediate needs of rural society, and these holy objects could sometimes be the means to that end. However, I would like to emphasise that these phenomena should not be interpreted as mere ‘Catholic survivals’, but as living parts of a dynamic religious culture. The vast majority of ordinary people identified themselves as good Evangelical Lutherans.<sup>37</sup> However, views could differ as to where the boundary between piety and superstition was to be drawn. The problem was not that the new interpretations of images offered by the church authorities were rejected by the populace, but that older views did not always simultaneously disappear. Traditional and Evangelical interpretations of an image did not need to exclude each other, and this opened up for the vast array of different interactions and approaches that are to be found in the sources from the period.

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<sup>37</sup> Göran Malmstedt, *Bondetro och kyrkoro: Religiös mentalitet i stormaktstidens Sverige*, Nordic Academic Press: Lund 2002, 165.