



Erika Willander: *Unity, Division and the Religious Mainstream in Sweden*. Palgrave Studies in Lived Religion and Societal Challenges, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, 137 pp. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-030-52478-4.

In *Unity, Division and the Religious Mainstream in Sweden* Erika Willander focuses on how best to understand the role religion plays for the majority of Swedes, who are situated between decidedly religious and non-religious positions. The empirical data presented in this book have been published in two previous publications: Willander's 2014 PhD thesis, and a 2019 publication on the religious landscape in Sweden, published in Swedish.

In this volume the presentation of the religious mainstream in Sweden draws on two main sources of data, which are presented in conjunction as a basis for theorization on Swedish majority religion. The first set, 250,000 blog posts written in Swedish, are analysed through Latent Semantic Analysis (LSA), which seeks to explore in which semantic contexts 'religion' is used in the Swedish blogosphere, thereby untangling the connotations of 'religion' in everyday language. As a complement to the LSA, excerpts from interview data serve as examples of everyday discussions of religion, making the point that religion is not an appreciated topic of conversation in the mainstream population. The second source consists of representative survey data from the European Values Study (EVS,

1982–2011) and Society, Opinion and Media (SOM, 1988–2016). The survey data are employed to demonstrate how the attitudes to other cultures and religious traditions found in the religious mainstream can be understood as boundary work, demarcating 'us' from 'them' – that is, religious minorities. Willander employs a historical comparative method to contextualize the contemporary sets of data with the aim of not only establishing the contours of the religious mainstream but also demonstrating their historically persistent character. The analyses are further complemented by an historical overview of the legal regulation of religion in Sweden, as well as an analysis of the contemporary demographic profile of the religious mainstream.

The religious mainstream in Sweden is presented as a collectivity (resembling Benedict Anderson's imagined communities) that is characterized by shared patterns of behaviour underlined by a certain rationale, which in turn results in implicit social bonds between its members. Since the rationale and shared patterns of behaviour are related to the 'religious', Willander refers to this collectivity as 'the religious mainstream'. While the Church of Sweden plays a central role for this collectivity, a result of bonds with others and shared patterns of behaviour in relation to the religious often taking place in this particular social context, the empirical analyses are not limited to Church of Sweden members. The

Church of Sweden can thus perhaps be understood as an implicit node for the collectivity Willander describes.

In the introductory chapter Willander declares her intention to study the religious mainstream in Sweden from a 'lived religion' approach. The approach is particularly prevalent in the discussion of how religion should be conceptualized in empirical studies of religious mainstreams, where Willander claims that the Swedish mainstream's supposed indifference to religion is a result of how religiosity has traditionally been measured and defined within the sociology of religion. The overview of research on religiosity in Sweden from the end of the nineteenth century to the present day (Chapter 3) serves to demonstrate how the sentiments of the religious mainstream in Sweden are with some exceptions overlooked, because it does not match the theoretical understandings of 'religion proper' and/or interests on behalf of the researchers. Due to the 'focus on an abstracted version of religious beliefs' (2020, p. 29) in survey research, Willander argues that experiences and understandings of the religious found in the Swedish population have been downplayed or overseen.

Willander refutes the understanding of European (sic!) mainstreams as indifferent to religion: while these collectivities may well be characterized by indifference to internal church matters and theological reasoning, 'this indifference (...)

does not have to include the aspects of the religious that family stories bring to the fore' (p. 7). Willander claims that the religious mainstream in Sweden plays a central role for the Swedish religious landscape, not least because its majority position entails the power to construct and maintain cultural boundaries, both in informal settings and public debate. However, the empirical study of collectivities such as the religious mainstream in Sweden calls for an exploratory approach to religion as a social phenomenon and the abandonment of certain established assumptions about religion. The presented analysis can therefore be understood as Willander's way of practising what she preaches.

Willander's compilation of historical data from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, which demonstrates that the low religious attendance figures in Sweden are a persisting feature of Swedish religion rather than a result of religious decline, presents a clear and thought-provoking contribution to research on continuity and change in Swedish religion. The LSA affords an insight into a novel empirical field and raises questions about how religion in the blogosphere can be explored further. The survey and interview data presented largely resonate with findings from previous studies.

Willander convincingly argues that the image of religion in Sweden has been tainted by the explicit and implicit understandings of 'religion proper' that have been dominant

in quantitative studies within the sociology of religion. A reader acquainted with Nordic religiosity is likely to agree with her about the limited usefulness of conventional survey questions on religious beliefs and practice for uncovering mainstream religion. However, Willander's approach concludes by conceptualizing the Swedish mainstream as a *religious* mainstream. A scholar who regards Sweden as a clear case of secularity, non-religion, or religious indifference is therefore likely to agree with Willander's reasoning up to a point yet arrive at a different conclusion about how best to conceptualize the collectivity she describes. This suggests that while the quantitative sets of data presented in this volume are comprehensive in character and skilfully handled, separate sets of data require a solid conceptual or theoretical base that holds the analysis together. As isolated pillars of data, objections can be raised about why these sets of data should be interpreted as reflections of a religious rather than a secular or cultural collectivity. Willander's argument is precisely that when these sets of data are analysed in conjunction, the resulting image paints a picture of the Swedish majority as far from indifferent in their position towards religion. To shore up the main tenets presented in the empirical data, it might perhaps have been helpful to complement the lived religion approach with another concept or theory, as it may have further strengthened the claim Willander wishes to make.

In her foreword, Erika Willander writes that she wishes to 'participate in dialogue about religiosity in Sweden in the midst of ongoing change' (2020, v). The volume testifies to her broad insights into the field of sociology of religion and quantitative surveys of religion in particular, and the broad range of empirical data presented mirrors Willander's versatile methodological skills. Willander therefore demonstrates in this book her important role as part of the ongoing discussion about mainstream religion – and not least, how it should be studied.

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