

# TEACHING THEOLOGY IN SECULARIZED SWEDEN

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According to the World Values Survey, Sweden is at the extreme in two ways: it is the most individualistic nation in the world and the most secularized (see chart). At the same time, Sweden is known to be at the forefront when it comes to progressive family values. One example is the nation's attitudes toward sex and gender, as the present government is, through systematic policy, leading a shift toward more liberal values. On the other hand, just as in much of Europe, large-scale immigration (where Sweden is also liberal and at the forefront) is changing the country, especially as the number of Muslim immigrants is increasing.

Secularization is seen in the churches of Sweden. The traditional national church is the Swedish Lutheran Church, with roots in the sixteenth-century Reformation. This church—where fifty years ago almost every Swede was a member—has seen a steady decline. This is also true for free churches with roots in the great nineteenth-century Baptist and so-called new evangelical revival, as well as the Pentecostal movement. The picture is not altogether negative; today most of the new converts are Muslim immigrants, and concept churches like Hillsong are

showing some growth. What holds promise is the fact that several hundreds of independent churches have started in recent decades; many of their leaders, however, lack theological training. This is where SST has its most promising constituency. Sweden's individualism perhaps also affects church life. A Swede is quite private and can do without church.

Theological training is of course affected by the situation in the country. Sweden's oldest university is the one in Uppsala, founded in 1477 by the Roman Catholic Church. Since the Reformation, university-level theological education has been run by the state and dominated first by Lutheran theology, and then increasingly by liberal Lutheranism (since the mid-twentieth century). Due to the so-called unity culture of Sweden, free Christian institutions have been difficult to establish, but there are now some free-church seminaries and one Roman Catholic seminary.

## A BEACON FOR THE TRUTH

Scandinavian School of Theology (SST) is the newest among the free-church seminaries. It was established in 1994, closed for financial reasons in 2014,



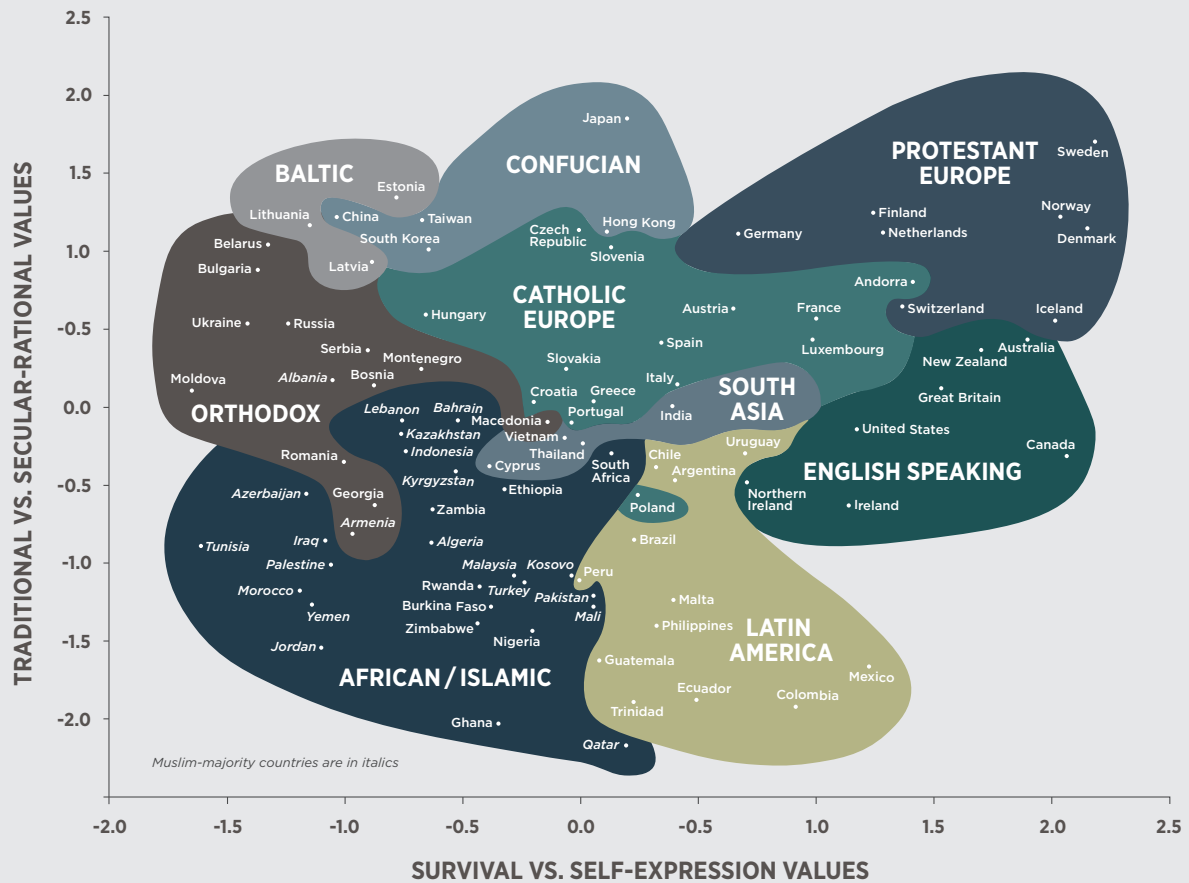
Uppsala, Sweden

## GLOBAL CULTURAL MAP

In their analysis of World Values Survey data, political scientists Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel propose two major dimensions of cross-cultural variation in the world:

- traditional values vs. secular-rational values;
- survival values vs. self-expression values.

This cultural map shows how global societies scored on these two dimensions. Moving upward on the map reflects the shift from traditional values to secular-rational values. Moving rightward reflects the shift from survival values to self-expression values.



**Traditional values** emphasize the importance of religion, parent-child ties, deference to authority, and traditional family values. People who embrace these values also reject divorce, abortion, euthanasia, and suicide. These societies have high levels of national pride and a nationalistic outlook.

**Secular-rational values** place less emphasis on religion, traditional family values, and authority. Divorce, abortion, euthanasia, and suicide are seen as relatively acceptable. (Suicide is not necessarily more common.)

**Survival values** place emphasis on economic and physical security. This is linked with a relatively ethnocentric outlook and low levels of trust and tolerance.

**Self-expression values** give high priority to environmental protection, gender equality, growing tolerance of foreigners and LGBTQ people, and rising demands for participation in decision-making in economic and political life.

Source: World Values Survey wave 6 (2010–14), [www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSCContents.jsp?CMSID=Findings](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSCContents.jsp?CMSID=Findings)



Uppsala Cathedral

then restarted later that same year as an interdenominational university college with a theologically evangelical profile.

The vision for SST is to provide quality theological education, based on the integrity of the Bible, for students with a calling to ministry, missions and public service (e.g., education). This vision reflects the school's history and context. The original school was started in the wake of the great missionary endeavor Russia Inland Mission, which began in 1989 and resulted in more than one thousand new churches in the former Soviet Union. One main reason for the school was the need for theological education for pastors in the former Soviet Union and in formerly Communist Eastern Europe. A result of this work was the training of around 2,000 pastors from these countries.

SST's vision is to be a "beacon for the truth," and the integrity of the Bible is a key issue in our environment due to the pressure on the church. The fact that most academic teachers in both state universities and free-church seminaries are trained and partly formed in quite a liberal environment, plus the surrounding culture (including accreditors, see below), makes it difficult to maintain a classical Christian commitment to the word of God, its integrity, and a lifestyle in line with the Bible. In Sweden this truly means swimming against the stream.

From the very start, the school has been com-

mitted to high academic standards—for example, working to get teachers with terminal degrees from Swedish state universities like Uppsala University and Lund University (secular universities with high international rankings; Uppsala ranked 93 and Lund 96 in the World University Rankings 2016–17). The Swedish teachers have earned degrees from these universities, and one teacher has a PhD from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Chicago. The vision is to combine high academic quality with commitment to the church and ministry. Our teachers are involved in research in national and international networks, something we find to be important. SST's natural academic environment is Northern European academics inspired by the German Humboldt university.

In its former organization, SST was affiliated with and accredited through Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma. This provided an extra advantage—the American hands-on approach to ministry training—and our master of divinity program was inspired by and based on the standards of Oral Roberts University's excellent pastoral programs. We have brought those experiences into the way we continue working with pastoral training.

SST presently has three programs: bachelor in theology (comparable to a four-year BA in the United States), master of arts in practical theology, and a church leadership program that combines a bachelor's degree with a pastoral program.



## OBSTACLES IN OUR SECULAR CONTEXT


What are the challenges for a school like SST?

**Accreditation:** State (federal) accreditation happens through a central government authority, and it is possible for free schools to apply for accreditation. However, for an evangelical school, this is a narrow road. We are presently in the process of evaluation, but last time the bias against our type of school was obvious (e.g., the committee asked how we could imagine we'd get accredited since one of our fully qualified teachers had argued in public debate that Ephesians was written by Paul). In Swedish academia at large, there is government-imposed pressure to conform to politically correct views on gender and sexuality. If an institution is not willing to conform, there is a big risk that it will not be accredited. We are applying anyway but are seeking other ways of accreditation. We also have a new partnership with Southeastern University in Florida, so students can pursue an accredited bachelor's degree.

Another problem is that students cannot integrate their theoretical theological courses and practical courses in the state accredited degree due to the strict division between faith and science. Therefore, the students in the church leadership program are registered both in the academic institute and in a separate leadership institute.

**Student finances:** Since the programs do not yet have state accreditation, there are no study loans available. What's more, all university study in Sweden is tuition-free (the costs are covered by the world's highest taxes), and therefore people do not understand why an institution like ours charges fees. Financial and accreditation issues are the biggest hindrances for recruitment.

However, our calling is stronger than the challenges, and we are happy to see students choosing SST despite these hardships. For them, the chance to grow in an environment of biblical integrity with the vision to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth trumps their personal costs and toil to support themselves. Our greatest joy is to see the many pastors who have studied with us over the years, knowing they have a solid ground in classical Christian faith, as well as the many alumni with bachelor's and master's degrees who are now serving the Lord all over the world, with over 85 percent in ministry.

*Soli Deo gloria.* 



**ANDERS GERDMAR** is presently working on a monograph, *The Jew as the Perpetual Other*, studying the view of Jews and Judaism in key theologians from the apostolic fathers to modern times.



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