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Problematizing the secular/religion divide: religion as the Other in contemporary discourses on LGBTQIA+ rights in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

This article conducts a multi-scalar analysis of the dynamics between secularism and religion in contemporary Sweden and highlights a growing divide between them, in the wake of neoliberal reconfigurations of the welfare state and a stronger religious pluralism in public space. In the first part of the analysis, we examine the public debate around conversion attempts and state funding for religious organizations. We show that a stronger culturalization and politicization of religion has resulted in a growing secular/religion divide, shaping religion as the Other and as the opposite of secularity, which, in return, becomes equated with values of equality and freedom. In the second part of the analysis, we highlight how such a secular/religion divide constructs religion as the main problem of religious queer people. Drawing on an analysis of the lived experiences of trans and queer people from Muslim, Jewish and Christian traditions, we challenge this divide. Ultimately, the article proposes that there is a need for more spaces that are both queer inclusive and religiously affirmative, rather than stronger state regulation and limitation of religious spaces, and we present some routes ahead for further research in response to the challenges and vulnerabilities detected.

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Introduction

In 2020, ILGA World, the international LGBTI association, released a report mapping the use of conversion therapy globally.¹ In response to the publication, RFSL, the Swedish national LGBTQI organization, described the lack of Swedish legislation against conversion attempts as ‘a failure to the rights of LGBTQI-people’.² Across the years, several debaters from various political backgrounds have brought forth similar demands.³ In the debate, Germany, Norway, and France have been mentioned as countries in Europe that already have incorporated such legislation. Much engagement has been devoted to highlighting the difficulties, and indeed violence, experienced by queer religious people. We want to bring focus to a dimension which has received less attention in the public

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debate, and which has to do with a development where secularism is becoming equated with freedom and progressive values, with queerness being attached to secularism, while religion is framed as the problem to be solved, rather than addressing the issues of cis-heteronormativity. We propose that these developments reflect a polarizing divide between religion and secularism in the Swedish context, where religion has become the Other – described as old-fashioned, intolerant and violent by actors representing secular society, such as politicians, the media and civil society organizations. We approach the debate about conversion attempts as an illustrative example of such a secular/religion divide and recognize that this polarization between secularism and religion is connected to a set of changes that has taken place in the Swedish society over the last years, involving neoliberal reconfiguration, stronger religious pluralism, and the rise of increasingly racist, anti-immigrant policies.

Within this context, our analysis is guided by the aim to explore the dynamics between secularism and religion in relation to queer⁴ lives in Sweden. To strengthen the accuracy of the analysis and to highlight how these complex dynamics play out in society, our discussion draws on multiple methods and sources of material. First, we explore how a divide between religion and secularism is growing stronger through an intensified politicization and culturalization of religion. We conduct a discourse analysis of the public debate around religious conversion attempts targeting queer and trans people, which also is connected to a debate about state support of religious organizations. Secondly, we carry out an analysis of in-depth interviews with queer and trans people from diverse religious backgrounds, highlighting how the divide between religion and secularism functions to conceal the cis-heteronormativity present in society at large as well as the ways in which anti-religious racism impacts religious queers, by constructing religion as the main problem for these groups. Studies on religion and secularism are often located either at the micro-level of the everyday or on the macro-level of policy- and media-discourse. What distinguishes our approach is our attention to multiple scales of analysis, including the macro-scale of governmental policy and nation-wide media, the meso-scale of religious and civil society organizations and the micro-scale of everyday experience. Inquiring into the positionings of diverse actors on multiple societal scales, this multi-scalar approach allows us to highlight tensions, clashes and negotiations between different scales, but also attend to disagreements between differently positioned actors (Ramasar & Kolankiewicz, 2024), which enable us to give a more complex account of the phenomenon explored, intervene into the polarized dynamics of the debate, and forge a path beyond the secular/religion divide.

In the course of the analysis in this article, we propose that religion is made to the Other, against which secularism is shaped as its opposite. While a dichotomous approach to secularity/religion in scholarship can be pragmatically used as a descriptive distinction, we here suggest that a growing divide between secularity and religion in the public debate reflects an ongoing power struggle around state authority, national identity and the impact of religion in society. In developing the notion of religion as the Other, we build further on scholarship that has illustrated how notions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ religion have changed in Sweden, from a previous contested position of Christianity in Sweden before the 1980s, for example in debates on science and religion, to a more recent development in which Islam became the ‘bad’ religion beginning in the 1990s and intensifying after 2001. (Furseth, 2018). Within a Swedish context, far-right populist parties

have integrated such notions of Islam as a bad, even dangerous religion, as part of their racist and anti-immigrant political agendas, which today have rapidly become integrated into the agendas of more mainstream political parties. (Liinason, [in press](#)). We highlight the tension between being religious and being queer that follows from such secular/religion divide. Ultimately, we argue for a need to intervene into this divide, where religion, rather than cis-heteronormativity, is brought forward as the problem to solve. We also propose that there is a need for more spaces that are both queer inclusive and religiously affirmative, rather than stronger state regulation and limitation of religious spaces.

In what follows, we situate these discussions in a research context focusing on critical approaches to the secular and provide a presentation of our understanding of the secular and the religious, the relationship between them, as well as their contextual nature. After that, we discuss the changing dynamics of religion and secularism in Sweden, by giving a detailed presentation of the Swedish context, historically and presently, and highlighting the relevance of examining the secular/religion divide within this site. Next, we describe the theoretical traditions we engage with and contribute to, present our conceptualization of religion as the Other, and provide an in-depth presentation of the material analysed and the methodology used. After this, the analytical parts of the article examine into detail, at first, the policy and media debate around criminalizing conversion attempts, and second, accounts of lived experiences of queer and trans Jews, Christians and Muslims. By way of conclusion, we summarize the findings of the article, the broader impact of these findings, and suggest some routes ahead for further research.

Critical approaches to the secular

We situate this article within a body of literature located at the intersection of religion, migration, gender and race/ethnicity across Europe (Bracke & Fadil, [2012](#); Fedele & Knibbe, [2013](#); Fitzgerald, [2015](#), [2017](#); Hawthorne, [2014](#); Jansen & Meer, [2020](#); Topolski, [2018](#); van den Brandt et al., [2024](#)). In this context, researchers have pointed out that a kind of sexual nationalism has emerged in debates around migrants, gender, and sexuality, in which the idea of being a ‘modern, progressive country’ is connected to notions of liberal sexual values and contrasted against a presumably “‘backward’ migrant who is ‘still’ religious and traditional” (Knibbe, [2018](#), p. 650). Researchers have shown how notions of progressive secularization are given normative status as they become incorporated into broader narratives about modernity, equality, and progress, in which religion is not only described as on the decline but also considered to be dangerous, a cause of conflict and the result of irrational behaviour (Casanova, [2009](#); Knibbe, [2011](#), [2018](#)).

We understand religion and secularity as co-constructed categories and call into question the universal character of both (Asad, [2003](#); Brown et al., [2013](#)). Inspired by the framework of critical religion (Fitzgerald, [2015](#), [2017](#); Muftee & Nilsson, [2022](#)), we acknowledge how the category of religion is constructed alongside related categories through historical and political processes. Influenced by Fitzgerald’s ([2017](#), p. 175) notion of the separation between ‘otherworldly’ religion and ‘this-worldly’ secular politics as imaginary, we approach the secular as accommodating multiple positionings of both belief and non-belief (Taylor, [2009](#)).⁵ We do not conceptualize secularism as a binary system where things are either

‘completely based on or totally detached from religion, but rather as a continuum between these two positions’ (Lähdesmäki, 2022, p. 173). This approach illuminates a plurality of secularisms and implies that religious difference cannot only be framed in terms of abstract principles.

While recognizing that religion is a discursive category co-constructed alongside secularity, we draw inspiration from research on the lived religion of LGBTQIA+ people (Browne et al., 2010; Crasnow, 2017; Iqbal, 2020; Peumans, 2014; Rostosky et al., 2008; Shah, 2021; Talvacchia et al., 2015), and acknowledge that religion, just like gender and sexuality, is simultaneously ‘a source of valued and collective identification’ (Hawthorne, 2014). Consequently, we view religion not only as a discursive construct but also as an empirical category that encompasses a diverse range of lived and living religious traditions. These traditions include various communities, identities, worldviews, practices, embodiments and beliefs, as reflected in the experiences of our queer religious research participants (Larrimore, 2015; McGuire, 2008). In other words, we acknowledge that the category of religion is both discursive and epistemic.

We recognize how debates around religion are situated in specific national, cultural, and religious contexts (Göle, 2010) and acknowledge that changes in the dynamics between religion and secularism are influenced by transnational exchanges and flows. Europe is itself an example of such transformations, whose nation-states have increasingly become religiously and culturally diverse, meanwhile Christianity is seen to undergo a form of culturalization, shifting from the field of ‘religious practice and devotion to that of culture’ (Lähdesmäki, 2022, p. 182). While such culturalization of religion brings attention to how national and local traditions impact on the ways in which religion is addressed and taken up in particular contexts, scholars also highlight the increasing tendencies of politicizing religion, as religion becomes politicized by right-wing populist parties within the frames of their anti-immigration policies (Lövhheim et al., 2018; Furseth, 2018). Similar developments are also taking place in Sweden, described as one of the world’s most secular states (Manga, 2022; Martinsson, 2021). Yet, the image of Sweden as ‘exceptionally non-religious’ or ‘de-Christianized’ has been described as exaggerated by scholars (Thurfjell & Willander, 2021). The high membership rates in, and loyalty towards, the Lutheran Church of Sweden, coupled with a low level of religious belief, has been referred to as ‘the Nordic paradox’ (Willander, 2018, p. 223). Scholars have highlighted that Swedes carry an ‘invisible religiosity’ rooted in a historical trajectory of Lutheran doctrine and a Social democratic idea of a ‘people’s church’ [folkkyrka] open for all (Bäckström, 2020, p. 285; Thurfjell, 2015; Claesson, 2016). Originally, Lutheran Christianity had a significant role in building coherence in the evolving Swedish nation state. Today, Lutheran Christianity is still assigned the role of being ‘value guardian of the welfare state’ (Ideström & Linde, 2019, p. 6). As a result, Lutheran Christianity seems to have become such an integrated part of the secular Swedish society that it does not appear to be a religion (Thurfjell, 2015, pp. 21–22), but rather a part of Swedish culture (Berg et al., 2021, p. 280). We suggest that the influence of Lutheran Christianity on Swedish secularism should not be underestimated. Hence, we understand Lutheran Christianity as closely connected to Swedish secularism, and normative for how religion is understood in this context.

Changing dynamics of religion and secularism in Sweden

We consider Sweden an illustrative example for exploring the growing secular/religion divide due to two main reasons: To begin with, Sweden has long been recognized as LGBTQIA+ friendly⁶ and was among the first countries in the world to legalize same-sex marriage in 2009.⁷ Scholars today, however, illuminate the fact that state actors use a homonationalist instrumentalization of LGBTQIA+ rights against an intolerant and foreign, racialized Other (i.e. positing queers against Muslims). By bringing attention to a kind of sexual 'exceptionalism explicitly in relation to the nation' (Puar, 2007, p. 39), the concept of homonationalism highlights the need for intersectional attention to questions of human rights, including the rights of LGBTQIA+ people (Hägerbäck & Norocel, 2024; Kehl, 2018; Liinason, 2023).

Second, Sweden is characterized by historically strong connections between the state and the Lutheran former state church, connections which currently are under renegotiation due to, among other issues, ambitions to strengthen religious freedom and neoliberal reconfigurations of society. Yet, over the years, Sweden transitioned from a Lutheran nation-state, where religious activities and affiliations were strictly regulated, to a society in which financial and other forms of state support were distributed to a diverse range of religious organizations. In similarity with trade unions and popular social movements, the state support of religious organizations implied both a support and control of these actors (Wejryd & Bäckström, 2016), and has, until today, resulted in a strong presence of multiple religious traditions in Swedish society.

Up until the year 2000, the Lutheran Church of Sweden was an integrated part of, and regulated by, the state. Yet, still after the separation between the church and the state, the Church of Sweden retained its semi-official standing in the country through, for example, its role in legitimizing the nation-state at official occasions, such as the opening of the parliament, on national holidays, or in the celebration of national events such as sport performances, or wedding and baptism ceremonies of the royal family (Claesson, 2012). The close relationships between the Church of Sweden and the state, we suggest, have shaped the basis of a normative secularism in this context, which should not be equated with the absence of religion, but rather with the presence of a certain form of religiosity shaped by Protestant Christianity (Asad, 2003).

In addition, neoliberal reconfigurations have during the last 40 years resulted in a renegotiated societal contract between the state, civil society and the market and a stronger emphasis on the freedom of choice and market-based solutions. Scholars note that these changes have involved both a deregulation and a stronger privatization of religion (Furseth, 2018; Wejryd & Bäckström, 2016), as religion since the 1980s have been increasingly relegated to the private sphere, distinct from the public. Yet, despite these changes, scholars highlight that the autonomy of the religious communities continues to be limited by the state's authority (Furseth, 2018), and that new tendencies to regulate religion have emerged among state actors. We understand these changes as complex effects of stronger religious pluralism in Swedish society, and of a simultaneous repressive political turn with racist and anti-immigrant policies on the rise, rooted in far-right, nationalist sentiments and policy proposals. We also recognize that Swedish society still is characterized by a normative Lutheranism, as a carrier of national identity and cultural core values.

Religion as the Other

Combining feminist postcolonial and queer scholarship with insights from queer and feminist studies of religion (Brown, 2013; Khan, 2020; Korte, 2021), we understand religion, sexuality, gender and race/ethnicity as cross-cutting categories (Hawthorne, 2014). Researchers have theorized 'sexual democracy' (Fassin, 2010, p. 512) as a type of politics of national identity focused on gender equality and liberty (Mepschen, 2016; Scott, 2018), based on a definition of equality which exclusively recognizes gender, leaving other relations of inequality, such as e.g. race and class, outside (Bracke, 2012; Fassin, 2010; Göle, 2008, 2010; Verkaaik & Spronk, 2011). To develop a deeper understanding of the growing polarization between religion and secularism in a Swedish context, we build further on the insights of feminist and queer scholars (Carlström, 2023; Mepschen, 2016; Rahman, 2014) and suggest the need to theorize the ways in which sexuality emerge as central for shaping this divide. In the Swedish context, researchers describe the relationship between sexual equality and freedom of religion as a clash between two fundamental values, and that 'when these conflicts collide, religious freedom must yield' (Furseth, 2018, p. 302). A similar dynamic appears also in the context of gender equality vis-à-vis freedom of religion. Within such dichotomous constructs, we argue that religion is constructed as the Other, by actors of the secular society, i.e. actors of the state, the media and civil society. Postcolonial theorizations of the Other in culture and society have contributed to deepening our understandings of the Other as shaped within broader systems of imperial power (Said, 1978), hierarchies of gender and race (Spivak, 1988) and colonial expansion (Mignolo, 1995). We use the concept of the Other here to specifically highlight the power struggle between religion and secularism and the ongoing negotiation of the boundary between the two (Bhabha, 1994). Our analysis illuminates how this polarization reveals a more deep-going struggle around the impact of religion in society, national identity and state authority in times where the boundaries between the secular and the religious are renegotiated and in flux.

The first part of the analysis is devoted to a close reading of the recent policy- and media debate in Sweden around criminalizing religious conversion attempts and questions of state funding for religious organizations.⁸ In our close reading of this material, we examine discourses of sexual and gendered rights and religious freedom and study how these are connected to values of equality and freedom, and the protection of these values. We also pay attention to the ways in which notions of control, vulnerability, and danger come to be connected to these discourses. The analysis is based on a variegated material from diversely positioned actors, produced by governmental actors, religious and secular civil society organizations, and nation-wide media. To begin with, responding to our interest in analysing the recent debate on this topic, we have selected for inclusion the three most recent Government Official Reports (SOU:s)⁹ focusing on the relationship between the state and religious communities. We have also included two governmental propositions¹⁰ in our analysis, one published in 2009, specifying the role of civil society within the neoliberal reconfiguration of state–civil society–market relations and another published in 2024, presenting the new conditions for state support to civil society and religious organizations. Next, we have included material from religious and secular civil society organizations. Here, we have analysed consultancy responses to the state commissioned investigations and propositions written by the Christian Council of Sweden –

an ecumenical organization of 27 Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox congregations. The Christian Council of Sweden describe themselves as an 'ecumenical meeting place and unifying force for the churches in Sweden [...] based on the idea of Christian unity. The purpose is: to promote a common witness in word and deed; to be a meeting place for Christian churches and communities for worship, prayer, dialogue, consultation and cooperation; to be a unifying and coordinating ecumenical body at the national level'.¹¹ The inclusion of the Christian Council of Sweden should not be read as an attempt to give a Christian organization the power of definition over what it means to be religious, or the position of representing all religious voices in society. However, and reflecting our ambition to approach religious communities on their own premises, we recognize that the Christian Council of Sweden represents a strong voice for Christian communities as well as for other religious communities in Sweden, and the inclusion of their consultancy responses allows us to provide a more nuanced understanding of religion. We also analyse two reports by the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (MUCF), written on commission from the government in 2022 and 2024, focusing on the issue of conversion attempts.¹² Finally, we have analysed material from the media debate following these publications. Using the media database Retriever, we collected and read all articles on the topic published in nation-wide newspapers and media channels in Sweden. From this broader material, we selected a limited number of articles to include for close reading, reflecting the diversity of issues brought up in the media debate and the variety of positions taken.¹³

In the second part of the analysis, we explore the lived experiences of 28 self-identified queer and trans Jews, Christians, and Muslims, drawing from in-depth interviews conducted as part of an ongoing ethnographic study on queer religious life in Sweden.¹⁴ While much of the research on religious LGBTQIA+ people in Europe and North America focuses primarily on Protestant and Catholic perspectives – and studies in Sweden tend to centre on Protestant Christianity – we have aimed for a balanced representation of participants affiliated with the three different religions in question, as well as with different branches of Christianity. By limiting the number of Protestant participants, we have aimed to shift the focus away from the majority religion within the Swedish context to instead explore queer religious life in Sweden through diverse minority perspectives. When writing this article, we have conducted in-depth interviews¹⁵ with eight self-identified Jews, ten Christians and ten Muslims of which most identify as religious, practicing or believing,¹⁶ as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, trans, queer, asexual and/or aromantic. In addition to this, we have joined and observed a variety of events and gatherings organized by and for religious queers – such as conferences, lectures and worship services. The majority of the participants have either migrated to Sweden themselves or have parents who did. With a few exceptions, the participants live in, or close to, Sweden's three largest cities: Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö, and their ages span from 23 to 84. Our analysis draws on the knowledge and experiences of several research participants, especially the ones that are Muslim, Jewish or Orthodox Christian. In this article, we mention some of them by name, seeing that these participants personal narratives shed light on experiences of particular significance to the issues discussed in this article¹⁷: Jamal and Noor are both Muslims in their 20s who grew up in Sweden with parents who migrated here. While Jamal describes himself as 'struggling with same-sex

desire' and explains that he has decided to live in a heterosexual relationship in order to avoid same_sex relationships, Noor have embraced their queerness and are an active and well-known member of their local queer community. Mariam, Melody and Shantana are all in their 30s and like Jamal and Noor they have parents who migrated to Sweden. Both Melody and Shantana are Muslims and identify as queer. Shantana describes herself as bisexual. Mariam, who describes herself as lesbian, is Christian Orthodox. In our analysis of the interview material, we have concentrated on identifying challenges that our research participants have experienced in relation to living a queer religious life in Sweden. In doing so, we have identified three recurring themes that appear across many of the narratives shared by our research participants. The analysis of these themes provides a critical perspective on the discourse on religion and LGBTQIA+ rights, grounded in the lived experiences of those directly affected by it.

The culturalization and politicization of religion

On 30 July 2020, the government commissioned the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society, MUCF the task to 'map and summarize knowledge about young LGBTQ people's exposure to so called conversion therapy'.¹⁸ The aim was to further advance the work for LGBTQ people's equal rights and possibilities as well as to develop an action plan. The 103 pages long report 'Young LGBTQ people's vulnerability to conversion attempts in Sweden' was published 1st of March 2022.¹⁹

The report found that conversion attempts occur to some extent but could not estimate how many young LGBTQ people that were exposed. Neither did the report draw a clear boundary between exposure to conversion attempts and other forms of vulnerabilities, such as exposure to hate crimes or other controlling environments, due to a low number of responses.²⁰ A second report, published in 2024, had a more explicit focus on young LGBTQ people's exposure to so-called 'honor-related violence and oppression'. In relation to conversion attempts, neither this report could capture any specific results, and concluded that 'the exposure of LGBTQ people to conversion attempts [is] difficult to discern from other types of violence in a context of honor-related violence and oppression' (MUCF, 2024, p. 24).

During the spring and summer of 2022, a media debate emerged in response to the first MUCF report.²¹ In *Dagens Nyheter*, one of the largest nation-wide newspapers in Sweden, a series of four articles illustrated how a journalist, disguised as a young religious gay man, contacted Imams and Evangelical pastors to seek advice about conversion therapy.²² The articles highlighted how some religious leaders advised the journalist to use religious methods, such as prayer, pastoral care, reading of scriptures, laying of hands, or performing rituals, but also to seek help from medical practitioners and psychologists, preferably from the congregation in question. Following this series of articles, then minister of culture and democracy Jeanette Gustafsdotter explained that if religious organizations disrespect the principle of equal value, or act in ways that go against Swedish democracy, they can lose their state funding (Nyman, 2022). In a follow-up article, Gustafsdotter clarified: 'It is not a goal to diminish religious freedom. The goal is that everyone should be allowed to love whoever they want' (Kulneff, 2022).

Shortly thereafter, the government took the decision to investigate a criminalization of conversion attempts.²³

Notably, the government had been examining the issue both before, during and after this attention in the media. Already in 2018, the state commissioned investigation 'State support to faith organizations in a multi-religious society' (SOU, 2018, p. 18) had been published. The investigation highlighted that in recent years, 'an overarching shift in values have implied that attitudes towards homosexuality and to the rights of LGBTQ people have become more positive in Swedish society', and that this had provoked a conflict between the state and the religious organizations that regarded homosexuality as a problem (SOU, 2018, p. 18, 160). The investigation concluded that 'a democratic society is based on the principle of the equal value of all people, which must also be an important principle for the activities of religious communities' (SOU, 2018, p. 18, 343). In 2019, a follow-up state commissioned investigation proposed the need for the inclusion of a democracy condition in the state funding to religious organizations²⁴ and in 2023, a proposition suggesting a legal change to enable such a democracy condition was agreed upon in the parliament (Governmental office, 2024). The change will come into force by 1 January 2025.

We suggest that this debate about conversion attempts can be theorized as an expression of a secular return of religion, revealing how religion adjusts to the changing reality of contemporary societies (Lähdesmäki, 2022; Taira, 2019; Zielińska et al., 2024). In this way, the debate reflected a stronger visibility of religion in society, resulting from a variety of factors, both the neoliberal shift and the growing religious pluralism, as well as a form of culturalization of religion (Lähdesmäki, 2022). Such culturalization of religion appears when state actors seek to connect religion more closely to national and local traditions, a trend which in scholarship often is linked to the anti-immigration policies of the far-right (Lövheim et al., 2018) and which seem to target 'other religions', or religious pluralism, as a threat to national cohesion and legitimacy. In the debate, such a culturalization of religion was illuminated by the pronounced attention to Muslim religious practices as problematic, especially in the second report by MUCF (2024), focusing on 'honor related violence' and conversion attempts, while less attention was given to problems of conversion attempts in Protestant communities, despite the fact that none of the reports inquiring into the problem could find clear evidence to support a conclusion of any kind.

The debate also revealed a stronger politicization of religion (Furseth, 2018), in which religion itself appeared to be the problem. For example, in the juxtaposition between religious freedom and free love made by democracy minister Gustafdotter above, religion was framed as in the need of stronger control by legal regulation. In this way, the debate illustrated a current and increasing interest among state authorities to use religion as a device or resource to combat social problems and achieve political goals (Hjelm, 2014). In this context, when the problem of conversion attempts is tackled as a problem of religion, rather than a problem of cis-heteronormativity, the divide between religion and secularism grows deeper, a divide furthermore reinforced by the image of religion as old-fashioned, intolerant, undemocratic and dangerous, and as not catching up with the 'shift of values' in the Swedish society, as expressed above in the SOU (2018, p. 18, 160).

Negotiating the divide: authority struggles

In three consultancy response reports, the Christian Council of Sweden presented their response to the state commissioned investigations, highlighting the ongoing negotiations of the boundary between the secular and the religious in the debate. In their responses, the Council brought attention to central issues of importance for the enactment of religious freedom, worldviews and everyday life. To begin with, in relation to the suggested integration of a democracy condition in the state support to religious organizations, the Council found the lack of a discussion about religion problematic. They underlined that it is impossible to 'limit religion to an activity equal to other activities' and recognized fluidity and overlap between religious and societal life. Rather than treating religion as a distinct part of life, they emphasized that religion often characterizes life as a whole, including one's view on society as well as one's role in society. In this way, they explained, religion takes shape as an 'important part of many people's identity and understanding of what it means to be human' (Sveriges kristna råd, 2021, p. 2 see also Sveriges kristna råd, 2018).²⁵ Such an approach to religion, as an attitude to life or as a mode of living, sheds light on the multifaceted nature of religion and religious practice as both a deeply personal and a communal experience. Next, the Council underlined the importance of anti-discrimination and emphasized respect for the equal value of all, but found the integration of a new democracy condition in the state support to religious organizations, as well as the suggested criminalization of conversion, redundant. They pointed to the fact that a major part of the criteria mentioned are already defined as criminal acts in Swedish legislation. Emphasizing that they refrain from all forms of discrimination of individuals and groups, the Council suggested in relation to the particular question of conversion attempts, that this issue can be better addressed by other measures than criminalization, especially since some forms of punishment, such as for example exclusion, fall outside of criminal justice although it can cause great suffering. On this point, they underlined that religious organizations 'need to continue [their] critical introspection and take responsibility to counteract such suffering' (Sveriges kristna råd, 2023, p. 2)²⁶

Third, the Council also identified a tension in the state commissioned investigations between the goal of securing freedom of religion and the role of religious organizations as welfare actors, working for the benefit of society, and underlined a risk of instrumentalizing religion for achieving societal benefits. The Council emphasized the importance of allowing the congregations themselves to define the contents of their activities and highlighted the centrality of respecting freedom of religion and belief as the overarching goal of the state support for congregations. They clarified:

What may look like a binding obligation from the outside may not necessarily be so or be perceived as such from an inside perspective. The choice to wear a religious symbol, for example, should instead be seen in the light of the individual's right to freedom of religion and belief. This requires knowledge and some caution in the assessment by the donor. In this context, it is also important that different theological convictions on issues of marriage, abortion and other medical-ethical issues, as well as the right to choose leaders and organizational forms, are respected. (Sveriges kristna råd, 2021, p. 2)²⁷

Within the frames of a broader neoliberal shift towards market-driven solutions to social welfare, since the 1990s, religious organizations have become more actively

involved in social and political issues – in education, social welfare and elderly care (Governmental office, 2009). Compared with many other European countries, this is a radical shift, given the long-standing tradition of the Swedish welfare state to provide social care and welfare. In a way, this shift has given religious actors a potentially stronger influence in society. Yet, in terms of religious beliefs and practices, religious organizations have simultaneously diminished their influence, as an ‘institution in itself’ (Bäckström, 2014, p. 66). Moreover, for the secular state, as a result of these changes, questions of authority and legitimacy become central. In their attempts to enact authority and achieve legitimacy when acknowledging the important role of religious organizations in delivering social care and fostering national cohesion, the state needs to condition the collaboration with reference to secular values. If religious organizations do not adhere to these ideals, a reinforced emphasis on secular values is needed, to validate the secularity of the state and sustain the collaboration.

As a result of the need for the state to establish such legitimacy, authority struggles can appear, which can result in ‘schism, polarization and radicalism’ (Hjelm, 2014, p. 216). Within the debate about conversion attempts, we note that the vocabulary of sexual equality and the vulnerability of queer religious subjects is central for sustaining a polarizing divide between religion as conservative and controlling, and secularity as free and progressive. In these debates, as illustrated above, religion is constructed as backward, intolerant, undemocratic or dangerous by representatives of secular society, such as state, the media and civil society. In this hierarchical divide, gender equality and sexual freedom is presented as secular values, while religion becomes shaped as its opposite. Within these dynamics, we find that a construction of religion as the Other reveals more deep-rooted struggles around the impact of religion on national identity and state authority and legitimacy, in times where the boundaries between the secular and the religious are renegotiated and in flux.

After the question of conversion attempts had been examined in several investigations and reports, in 2023, the final state commissioned investigation on the topic concluded that:

conversion attempts in religious settings in Sweden today seem to occur primarily in private and to some extent religious contexts. With regard to the latter, there has been no indication that religious communities have centrally supported or encouraged the performance of conversion attempts. Rather, attempts at conversion in a religious setting are likely to be by individual religious leaders or other persons within individual congregations (p. 266–267). – – – [T]he current legal framework provides good possibilities to intervene criminally against attempted conversion and a specific penal provision is unlikely to be effective in strengthening the protection against this type of acts.

However, during the debate, as policy-makers sought to push religious organizations to display their loyalty to the goals of the state, secularism and religion was posited in stark contrast to each other. In the debate, Minister of Justice and the Interior in Sweden Morgan Johansson explained:

All should have the right to love who they want. This right pertains to all, in all contexts, irrespective of religion or family. [...] We don’t want to see this happen. We want to strengthen the legal support. (Sadikovic, 2022d)

A broad group of politicians across the political spectrum took the same position and expressed united support for a criminalization of conversion attempts, in responses framed as a guarantor of democracy, equality and sexual freedom, while distance was taken against religion as controlling and violent (Kulneff & Jakobsson, 2022). However, already the first MUCF report (Kulneff & Jakobsson, 2022) had illuminated difficulties with such a polarized divide. For example, in the report, non-binary and trans people described experiences of conversion attempts in their encounters with secular health care workers, who had tried to convince them that they were not trans. Narratives like these point at a need to problematize the polarizing divide between secularity and religion, in terms of equal rights. Yet, MUCF explained that they found it more fruitful to keep these discussions separated (Westerlund et al., 2024, p. 429).

We understand the divides and tensions in the policy- and media debate as expressions of an ongoing renegotiation of the boundary between religion and secularity within the public sphere. In this debate, as illuminated above, religion was shaped as the Other of secularity, as controlling and dangerous, while secular society was constructed as the guardian of equality and freedom. Furthermore, state actors marked a distance against religion. By so doing, politicians sought to re-establish the authority of the secular state at a time when religious organizations have been given a new and expanded role in society. In this renegotiation, state actors required the religious actors to show loyalty to the goals of the state, contribute to the cohesiveness of national identity and confirm the authority of the secular state above the authority of religion. However, contestations about where this line should be drawn emerged between religious organizations and the state.

Yet, in parallel with such ongoing Othering of religion – in which religion is shaped as controlling, undemocratic, old-fashioned and intolerant – people continue to engage with religion in diverse ways, with their relationships to religion often being both complex and ever-evolving. However, these dimensions are less frequently highlighted in the public debate. We hold that deeper insights into these more nuanced complexities can contribute to problematizing the rising polarizations between the secular and the religious and give room for more constructive processes of knowledge exchange and dialogue. Accordingly, to gain deeper insights into the diverse ways in which religion is lived by people who challenge the secular/religion divide by being both queer and religious, below, we enter into detail in an analysis, drawing on interviews with LGBTQA Jews, Christians and Muslims in Sweden.

Queer religious life beyond the secular/religion divide

In the majority of our interviews with trans and queer Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Sweden, conversion attempts – or experiences that might be described as such – did not emerge as a central theme. This may be attributed to several factors, among which at least two are central for our discussion: First, our invitation to participate in the study was primarily aimed at LGBTQIA+ people identifying as religious, practicing or believing – in other words to people who have not left religion. Second, we did not ask research participants specifically about conversion attempts but open questions on both the positive and negative aspects of their lives as religious queers. Because of our participant selection and the topics

covered during interviews, we can offer an analysis of queer religious life in Sweden that is deeper and more nuanced than what the public discourse on conversion attempts conveys.

While so called “conversion attempts” are not absent in our interviews, these experiences, as we describe below, raise important questions about the boundary between societal cis-heteronormativity and religious beliefs. They also highlight challenges and vulnerabilities that, while significant for religious queers, are not unique to them but are also shared by non-religious queers. In what follows, we highlight and discuss three categories of challenges and vulnerabilities that have been experienced by a majority of our research participants. Drawing on these more multifaceted and complex experiences, we challenge the polarizing divide that has emerged between secularism and religion in public discourse, as illustrated in the previous sections of this article.

Navigating family relationships and societal cis-heteronormativity

Many of our research participants have shared experiences with us that could be classified as conversion attempts, according to the definition offered by MUCF. In line with the findings presented in the reports by MUCF (2022, 2024), most of such experiences involve family members expressing disapproval of the participants’ sexual orientation, gender identity and/or gender expression. However, among our research participants, these experiences are not framed as conversion attempts, but rather as expressions of cis-heteronormativity, a discussion which we soon will return to. Before that, we would like to highlight the narratives of a smaller group of participants whose experiences stand out due to the more severe expressions of discontent from their parents, compared to others. Jamal, who describes himself as a Muslim struggling with ‘same-sex attraction’, has been encouraged by his parents to enter into a heterosexual relationship in order to abstain from same-sex relations. Noor, also a Muslim, left their hometown for a short period right after revealing their queerness to their family out of fear for their parents’ reaction, and Mariam, an Orthodox Christian, had to break off contact with her mother because she could not accept her daughter’s queerness. While we do not intend to minimize the harm caused by these forms of behaviour, it does remain unclear, both in the narratives of our participants and in the MUCF reports on conversion attempts (MUCF, 2022, 2024), to which extent family members’ disapproval of their children’s queerness – whether subtle or overtly violent – stems from religious convictions, reflects the structural heteronormativity of society, or is a complex entanglement of both.

While most research participants do not describe religious organizations or religious leaders as the main source of cis-heteronormativity in their lives, many of them point out school, university, and working environments as sources of cis-heteronormativity. Several also attribute their parents’ disapproval or incomprehension of their queerness or trans identities to the structural cis-heteronormativity of the societies in which they have lived their lives, rather than a direct consequence of a religious conviction. As has also been highlighted in queer scholarship and political struggles, our participants emphasize that complicated relationships with parents are not unique to queer people – religious or otherwise – but are common experiences, which are often overemphasized in discussions on religion and queerness. Furthermore, not everyone of our research participants has conflicted relationships

with their families, and among those who have, some also have parents who are not religious themselves.

In contrast to the common portrayal of religion as something imposed on queers by their families, many of the religious queers we have interviewed have actively chosen to become religious or practicing – sometimes even in opposition to their parents' wishes. Some participants were raised in religious households or communities and chose to either remain religious or return to their religion later in life, while others grew up in secular or non-religious families and embraced religion in adulthood. A couple of the participants have converted from the religion of their families to another religion.

For many of the participants, engaging with religion serves as a way to reconnect with the traditions of their extended families, as well as the cultural or religious heritage of their broader ethnic or religious communities. This is particularly evident among many of the Jewish participants, for whom practicing Judaism is described as a way of rediscovering and reclaiming their Jewish identity – an identity that was not always nurtured during their upbringing due to their family members' disconnection from Judaism. This is also true for many of the research participants with a history of migration: religion becomes a link to a geographic place and to the diasporic community associated with that place. Moreover, for the research participants who have conflicted relationships with their parents and closest families because of their queerness, religion sometimes serve as a way to connect to them beyond disagreements over queerness. Melody, for example, who grew up in a Muslim family, describe how she reconnected to Islam and Islamic spirituality in part because she found it to be a means of reconnecting with her family after feeling alienated from them because of her queerness.

Taken together, it appears that when our queer religious research participants navigate relationships within the family, they face challenges that are also experienced by non-religious queers within the Swedish society. While some of them have experiences that may be more directly connected to their parents' religiosity, the root cause of their parents' behaviour seems to be a complex entanglement of religious convictions and societal cis-heteronormativity. Also, and importantly, for many of the research participants, religion is not what separates them from their families, but rather something that connects them to their families in ways that have a positive impact on their overall lives.

With the family being a core issue to many of our research participants, we find it noteworthy how the measures taken against conversion attempts primarily target religious organizations, while the social institution of the family remains unaddressed. Insofar as families are addressed as a problem in the public debate and the reports by MUCF, as examined in the first part of this article, the focus is exclusively on those families identified as adhering to so-called 'honour norms' [hedersnormer]. By placing the oppression of religious LGBTQIA+ people primarily within religious organizations and certain families characterized by 'honour norms', the cis-heteronormativity that permeates the whole society – including its secular spheres – is overlooked.

The focus on religious organizations, both in the public debate and in the MUCF reports, creates the impression that religious cis-heteronormativity is distinct from secular cis-heteronormativity, requiring a different approach to its handling. One alternative approach could be to treat religious organizations as one of many societal institutions, alongside schools and the healthcare system, where children and youth are exposed to both authority figures and social norms that may reinforce cis-heteronormativity.

Anti-religious racism in the Swedish society and in secular queer communities

Alongside cis-heteronormativity, another prevalent societal structure frequently addressed by our research participants is anti-religious racism, including anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish racism. While we recognize that the projection of cis-heteronormativity on religious settings and families follows the logics of the secular/religion divide – portraying the secular as a safe haven for LGBTQIA+ people – we regard anti-religious racism as a key element of this divide.

With anti-religious racism we refer to a societal structure through which some religions, more than others, are described as foreign to the Swedish society. This racialization of religion relies, in the context of Sweden, on the notion of Protestant secularism as more modern, democratic, rational and objective than the religious Other, reinforcing a racialized understanding of religion that associates religious belief, practice and embodiments with backwardness, irrationality or even danger. By using the terms ‘anti-Jewish racism’ and ‘anti-Muslim racism’, researchers have highlighted how Islamophobia and antisemitism are part of larger social and racialized structures in Sweden, rather than isolated forms of hatred directed at specific minority groups (Kolankiewicz, 2019; Sältenberg, 2022). In this part of the analysis, we use the term ‘anti-religious racism’ to explore the impact of racism on the queer religious lives of our research participants.

The participants recount experiences of diverse forms of racism, spanning from overt harassment to pervasive assumptions that everyone in Swedish society is (or ought to be) secular Protestants. Some of the consequences of this racism are, according to the narratives of the participants, a reluctance to disclose one’s religious affiliation due to fear of potential repercussions and a difficulty in accessing religious spaces that are heavily securitized. ‘It is generally harder for me to reveal that I am Muslim than to reveal that I am queer’ Shantana says after explaining how her mother stopped wearing hijab after migrating to Sweden and being subjected to a lot of harassment due to being visibly Muslim. Jamal shares this experience with Shantana: he also witnessed his mother being harassed for wearing hijab during his upbringing and explains that this led him to eventually leave Sweden to live in another European country with greater acceptance of Muslims.

Beyond overtly violent expressions of anti-religious racism, racism also manifests in more subtle ways, such as in the notion that religious people do not think for themselves but unquestioningly follow the dictates of an authority or tradition that are often portrayed in overly monolithic or fundamentalist terms. To connect this notion of racism to the first part of our analysis, it is stated in the second report about conversion attempts published by MUCF that the ‘the three Abrahamic religions Islam, Judaism and Christianity [...] are based on patriarchal structures that emphasize traditional family values that imply that sexuality belongs to marriage and that complementary gender roles are advocated’. Furthermore, it is claimed that ‘homosexuality [...] is condemned by almost all religious traditions’ (2024, p. 22). Statements like this fail to acknowledge the diversity of interpretations, practices and beliefs which exist within the referred religions. Beyond portraying religion as static and trapped in an erroneous past, such statements also overlook sexual and gender minorities as religious subjects and erase the ongoing struggles for gender and sexual justice within these religions.

Several research participants testify that this view of religion as impossible to combine with queerness is prevalent in many queer communities, and they describe white, secular, queer spaces as arenas for both anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim racism.²⁸ Many of the Muslim participants, particularly those who wear hijab, explain how they have encountered suspicion for being present in such queer spaces and how they have faced questioning about their queerness. When presenting themselves as both queer and Muslim, they have often been expected to explain why they have not left Islam or to provide their personal interpretations of Islamic teachings. These manifestations of anti-Muslim racism create hostile environments in which the presence of queer Muslims is constantly scrutinized, prompting many research participants to instead seek out BIPOC²⁹ queer spaces, where there is greater acceptance of them being both Muslim and queer.

While the Orthodox Christian participants share similar experiences of racism with the Muslim participants – either because they are assumed to be Muslims or because they are being racialized as non-white – the Jewish participants' experiences of racism take on somewhat different forms. Many of the Jewish participants report that they are often assumed to be secular Protestants. When they clarify that they are not, for example by revealing that they observe Jewish traditions or do not celebrate Christian holidays, they suddenly become both hypervisible and unintelligible. Participants who can be visually identified as Jewish – for example by wearing a Star of David – report experiences of more severe expressions of anti-Jewish racism, similar to the anti-religious racism faced by visibly Muslim participants. Many of the Jewish participants also experience pressure to either distance themselves from or express support for the political opinions and actions expressed by other Jews, simply because they are Jewish themselves.

Taken together, many of our research participants highlight anti-religious racism as a central challenge to their lives as religious queers in Sweden. While both anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish racism are complex phenomena that could be described in much greater nuance than we do here, we have provided a few examples of how these forms of racism affect our research participants in their everyday lives as well as in their navigation of queer spaces. Simplistic and devaluing understandings of religion, along with the notion that certain religions are incompatible with being queer, make many of our research participants hesitant to engage in secular queer communities or to reveal that they are religious. Hence, the anti-religious racism inherent in the secular/religion divide creates the impression that it is impossible to be both queer and religious, and it limits the space for queer religious people to be visible as such. In the last section of this part of the analysis, we will address the lack of spaces within the Swedish society where people can be both queer and religious.

Lack of queer inclusive religious spaces and religiously affirming queer spaces

While our research participants describe religion as a significant and integrated part of their lives that intersects with and affirms their queerness in ways that the secular society does not, many of our research participants express a lack of spaces where they can be open about their religious affiliation as well as their queerness without being questioned about either. While many Protestant and some Catholic participants have been able to find queer-affirmative congregations within their denominations, there are also established organizations and networks for queer Protestants and Catholics in Sweden. To our

knowledge, there are no queer-affirmative congregations within the Orthodox Christian community in Sweden, nor is there any organization specifically established by or for Orthodox Christian queers. While many of the Jewish congregations in Sweden are queer-affirmative, some of our research participants feel unwelcome in these spaces for other reasons. While the Jewish community in Sweden is relatively small, the queer Jewish community is even smaller, making queer-Jewish organizing challenging both within and outside the congregations.

Although there have been examples in Sweden of short-lived or temporary queer Muslim organizing in the past, none of our research participants are aware of any active Muslim queer community in Sweden today and not of any queer-affirmative Muslim congregations. Many report feeling at home in BIPOC queer communities, where they are neither hypervisible nor questioned, but also express a desire for a community where they can connect with, and practice their faith together with, other religious queer Muslims. Hence, queer Muslim participants as well as queer Orthodox Christian participants (but also Jewish, Protestant and Catholic participants) express a need not only of a queer community in which they are able to be openly religious, but also of spaces where they can practice religion while being openly queer. While some participants have access to such spaces and others create them temporarily with others, some participants are left to practice their religion on their own.

Given that the secular/religion divide situates queerness within the secular, the need for more queer-affirmative religious spaces and religiously affirming queer spaces is not addressed in the Swedish discourse on LGBTQIA+ rights. While religion has had a positive impact not only on their relationships with their families, but also on their relationships to themselves as queer people, the need for spaces where queer people can be religious and practice their religion should not be underestimated. In a society shaped by both cis-heteronormativity and anti-religious racism, spaces that offer opportunity for people to be both queer and religious are scarce. Yet, as we have illuminated, in Sweden today, there is not only a lack of such spaces but also of political ambition to establish them, as the current discourse on LGBTQIA+ rights is more interested in regulating religious organizations, than on increasing the support of a pluralistic religious civil society in which there is space for queer people from diverse religious backgrounds.

Challenging the Othering of religion: towards the creation of queer inclusive and religiously affirmative spaces

In this article, we have conducted a multi-scalar analysis guided by an interest to explore the dynamics between religion and secularism in policy- and media debates, as well as to highlight nuances and complexities in everyday experiences of being queer and religious in Sweden today. As we have examined in this article, a polarizing divide between religion and secularism has emerged in the wake of neoliberal reconfigurations of the welfare state and a stronger religious pluralism in the public space. While we encourage critical scrutiny of violent and fundamentalist forms of religion, we find that the lack of attention to this divide not only conceals the ways in which the boundary between religion and the public sphere is shifting today, but also the more complex ways in which religion is lived and practiced among religious queers. As we recognized the multi-scalar nature of this

phenomenon, taking shape at the level of policy discourse and in civil society organizing, as well as on the micro-scale of everyday experience, we developed a multi-scalar approach to our analysis, guided by the aim to explore the dynamics between secularism and religion in relation to queer lives in a Swedish context. This approach allowed us to highlight ongoing negotiations around the role of religion in society and everyday life between actors located at different scales. It also enabled us to capture disagreements between differently positioned actors, and grasp how religion is made the Other in secular society, by state or civil society actors shaping religion as controlling, dangerous and violent, as the opposite of secularity, which in return is related to values of equality and freedom. In contemporary times of renegotiation of the boundaries between the secular and the religious, we found that these disagreements reflect a more deep-going power struggle around the impact of religion in society, on national identity and state legitimacy and authority.

Finally, the multi-scalar approach also enabled us to problematize this construction of religion as the Other, and to challenge the construction of religion as the main problem of religious queers, drawing on everyday experiences of queer and trans Jews, Christians, and Muslims which brought attention to a more complex nature of the challenges experienced. This part of the analysis highlighted the cis-heteronormativity in society, as well as in family relationships, as a boundary to queer religious life that extends beyond religious communities. Moreover, the manifestations of anti-religious racism both in overall society and in secular queer communities were brought forward as shaping a situation of significant vulnerability for these groups, for whom the lack of queer inclusive religious spaces, as well as of religiously affirming queer spaces, also were recognized as factors that restrict queer religious lives. Taken together, these challenges illustrate a need to intervene into the secular/religion divide and reframe the description of the problem for religious queers, which appears to not only rely on a culturalization of religion, but also a normative conceptualization of secularism, shaped and upheld by state actors in their efforts to strengthen the state's legitimacy and authority in times when the boundaries between the secular and the religious are in flux. Within this ongoing transformation, we hold, the vulnerability of religious queers has become one of the ways by which state actors display their commitment to values of equality and freedom. In these efforts, the vocabulary of gender and sexual equality becomes a tool for state actors in their attempts to strengthen the authority of the state by politicizing religion.

Ultimately, within this ongoing negotiation of the boundaries between the secular and the religious in Swedish society, we propose that there is a need for problematizing the Othering of religion and for the creation of more spaces that are both queer inclusive and religiously affirmative, rather than a stronger state regulation and limitation of religious spaces. We suggest that future research could focus on defining what distinguishes so-called conversion attempts from other forms of cis-heteronormative influence on queer life, and engage in closer examinations of whether conversion attempts in religious environments differ from those occurring in secular spaces, such as schools or healthcare settings. Explorations into what is specific about cis-heterosexist oppression in religious environments, in comparison with other sites, could also be fruitful avenues for future research, in order to develop insights that could contribute to reduce the range of vulnerabilities which religious queer and trans people are exposed to.

Notes

1. The report *Curbing Deception: A world survey on legal regulation of so-called 'conversion therapies'* (Lucas Ramon Mendos, Geneva: ILGA world) is available online: https://ilga.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/ILGA_World_Curbing_Deception_world_survey_legal_restrictions_conversion_therapy.pdf. ILGA world have also developed an interactive database, displaying the countries where conversion therapies have been criminalized: <https://database.ilga.org/conversion-therapies-lgbti>. ILGA Europe uses the term conversion therapy, while in Sweden, the term used is conversion attempts. Therefore, there is a mixed use of the terminology in this article.
2. RFSL 2021", Både positiv och negativ utveckling under 2021", <https://www.rfsl.se/aktuellt/bade-positiv-och-negativ-utveckling-i-europa-under-2021/>.
3. For example, see: Redar Lawen and Daniel Vencu Velasquez Öhrlund Castro (2023) "Omvändelseförsök måste kriminaliseras, 6/11, ETC, <https://www.etc.se/debatt/omvaendelsefoersoek-maaste-kriminaliseras>; Robin Paulunen (2022) "Ett enda bröd, men inte en hel mänsklighet", 5/6, Kyrkans tidning, <https://www.kyrkanstidning.se/debatt/ett-enda-brod-men-inte-en-hel-mansklighet?fbclid=IwAR1wjyuHjdQFOYgzHDeK89XFGFaxXcnDnves1QWdk7jvIkedE7A4G3ul3nE>; Kommunstyrelsen Göteborg (2023) Sverigedemokraterna Yttrande, 1/11 [http://www5.goteborg.se/prod/intraservice/namndhandlingar/samrumportal.nsf/93ec9160f537fa30c12572aa004b6c1a/ee18095535415468c1258a58004b3453/\\$FILE/42_20231108.pdf](http://www5.goteborg.se/prod/intraservice/namndhandlingar/samrumportal.nsf/93ec9160f537fa30c12572aa004b6c1a/ee18095535415468c1258a58004b3453/$FILE/42_20231108.pdf)
4. In this article, we use queer both as a category of self-identification and as a synonym to LGBTQIA+, hence referring to both queer genders and queer sexualities.
5. We distinguish between the secular, secularization, secularity, and secularism (Asad, 2003; van den Brandt et al., 2024). While we understand the secular as an epistemic category and secularization as an analytical conception of a historical process (Casanova, 2009), our focus in this article is on secularism, understood as a political doctrine specifying the relationship between religion, the state and citizens (Asad, 2003), and secularity, understood as carrying an attitude opposed to religion, which involve assumptions, practices and social arrangements that prioritize 'private reason', 'this-worldly', and 'self-made' aspects of human life as common good and the most relevant public issues (van den Brandt, 2019).
6. The description of Sweden as an LGBTQIA+ friendly society refers to the ambitions by the Swedish state to bring about equality in economic, social and sexual relations. The legalization of gay marriages in Sweden in 2009 is an illustrative example of such ambition, but the broader cultural recognition of LGBTQIA+ people is also visible through eg. the participation of authorities in the Pride parades, LGBTQIA+ certified health care in the public sector, and a recognition of same sex practices and trans issues in schools (Liinason, 2017; Schmitt, 2023). Although tensions and ambiguities accompany these ambitions, it has shaped a progressive image of Sweden as being a friendly society by having successful equal rights policies.
7. Among the countries legalizing same-sex marriage before Sweden were Netherlands 2001, Belgium 2003, Spain 2005, Canada 2005, South Africa 2006, Norway 2009, <https://database.ilga.org/same-sex-marriage-civil-unions>.
8. The discourse analysis and the collection of material for this have been conducted by Liinason.
9. State commissioned investigations are launched by the government and have the task to examine complex questions and provide suggestions for legal change.
10. Governmental propositions suggest the introduction of a new law or a change in an existing law and are followed by a voting procedure in the parliament (<https://lagrummet.se/lagrummet/rattsinformation/forarbeten>). In the case of the two propositions analysed in this article, both were accepted by the government. In the process of developing these documents, both state commissioned investigations and propositions are sent to stakeholders. In the article, the following state commissioned investigations and propositions are included for analysis (SOU, 2018, p. 18; SOU, 2019, p. 35; promemoria S2021/07063 (SOU, 2023, p. 37; Governmental office, 2024); (Prop 2023/24:119). Consultancy responses from the Christian

Council of Sweden to all these, apart from prop 2023/24:119, have also been included in the material: <https://www.skr.org/amne/remissyttranden/>

11. Quote from the website of the Christian Council of Sweden, 'About us': <https://www.skr.org/om-oss/om-skr/>
12. (MUCF, 2022, 2024), see reference list for details.
13. For analysing the debate in news media, close reading has been based on the following articles (Kulneff, 2022; Kulneff & Jakobsson, 2022; Nyman, 2022; Sadikovic, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d, 2022e). See reference list for details.
14. The fieldwork and interviews, as well as the analysis of these, have been conducted by Lundell.
15. Most interviews, which lasted between one and two and a half hours, were recorded and later transcribed. While the majority were conducted face-to-face, some took place online. Additional follow-up interviews were conducted with some of the participants, and we followed some of them along to places and spaces of significance to them to gain deeper insight into their social contexts.
16. To examine the intersection of queerness and religion, we invited participants to this study who have an active relationship with their respective religion. Hence, we have not asked to interview queer participants who have permanently left religion, or religious participants who have refrained from living a queer life. All participants do not, however, describe themselves as both queer and religious. One participant describes themselves as 'struggling with same-sex desire' and does not wish to live a queer life. Two participants describe themselves as neither practicing nor believing. Instead, they describe themselves as 'culturally' Muslim and Christian respectively, but with a strong personal relationship with their religion. The rest of the participants practice their religion and most of them also identify as religious and/or believing. While many participants distinguish between practicing and believing – as well as between religion, culture and tradition – these aspects of religiosity intersect in various ways throughout their religious lives. Following our ambition to allow research participants to provide a self-definition of their positioning, we describe all participants here as religious. This furthermore illuminates that the religious is a broad and open-ended category.
17. All names used for the participants are pseudonyms chosen either by themselves or by us.
18. Lindhagen and Kjellander (2020), 'Uppdrag till Myndigheten för ungdoms- och civilsamhällesfrågor att kartlägga och sammanställa kunskap om unga hbtq-personers utsatthet för sk omvandelseterapi', A2020/01669/MRB, <https://regeringen.se/contentassets/de1988e475204602a6bcde4db0830bf9/uppdrag-att-kartlagga-och-sammanstalla-kunskap-om-s.k.-omvandelseerapi-riktad-mot-unga-hbtq-personer.pdf> (accessed June 20, 2024). The commission was a part of the January agreement, a political coalition between 18th of January 2019 and 9th of July 2021, constituted by the Social Democratic Party, the Center Party, the Liberal Party and the Green Party.
19. Link to pdf: <https://www.mucf.se/publikationer/unga-hbtq-personers-utsatthet-omvandelse-forsok-i-sverige>.
20. The report was based on an annual survey with young people in the age of 16–25 years from 2021 of which 11 percent of the participants defined themselves as LGBTQ, interviews with nine young LGBTQ people, seven anonymous written narratives and interviews with staff at support organizations.
21. Nation-wide media channels published, e.g. a TV-documentary ('Gud som haver barnen kär', SVT 2022) and a series of articles in *Aftonbladet* and *Dagens Nyheter* (2022). In 2023, two radio documentaries were published by the national broadcasting cooperation ('Fadern, sonen och synden' P1 Dokumentär and 'Emils hemlighet – kristen, fanatiker och bög', *Verkligheten i P3*).
22. See footnote 9.
23. Sadikovic (2022d).
24. SOU (2019, p. 35), <https://www.regeringen.se/rattsliga-dokument/statens-offentliga-utredningar/2019/06/sou-201935/>. For details on the democracy condition, see SOU (2019, p. 35, 23), and Prop 2023/24:119 'Statens stöd till trossamfund och civilsamhället – enhetliga och rättssäkra villkor'. The Swedish government approved the suggested legal change on April 3, 2024.

25. Sveriges kristna råd (2021, p. 2), <https://www.skr.org/demokrativillkor-for-stod-ur-allmannarvsvfonden/>; se även Sveriges kristna råd (2018), <https://www.skr.org/statens-stod-till-trossamfund-i-ett-mangreligiost-samhalle/>
26. Sveriges kristna råd (2023, p. 2), <https://www.skr.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/sveriges-kristna-rad-yttrande-over-sou-202337.pdf>
27. Sveriges kristna råd (2021, p. 2), <https://www.skr.org/demokrativillkor-for-stod-ur-allmannarvsvfonden/>
28. For a more in-depth analysis of the invisibility and hyper-visibility of religious queers within secular queer spaces, as well as within the public discourse on religion and queerness, see Lundell (in press).
29. The acronym BIPOC, which stands for Black, Indigenous and People of Color, is used by several of the research participants to describe themselves and their communities.

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