Rings for the Rainbow Family: Religious Opposition to the Introduction of Same-Sex Marriage in Sweden

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The aim of this paper is to get a closer understanding of the ways in which religion, (homo)sexuality and national identity have been constructed through public debates on same-sex marriage in Sweden. Sweden introduced same-sex marriage in 2009: the seventh country in the world to do so. Until the introduction of same-sex marriage (or, more precisely, gender neutral marriage), same-sex couples had the option of registered partnership, which gave them approximately the same juridical rights as married couples. In an extensive government report however it was concluded that the symbolic added value of marriage should not be withheld from gays and lesbians (Regner 2007).

The social climate of Sweden can be characterized as one in which sexual diversity and queerness are relatively widely accepted, and queer issues are on the agenda of LGBT lobby groups more than in any other European country. This translates into the way emancipation issues are taken up, for example in the 2009 Law on Gender Identity and Gender Expression which forbids the discrimination of ‘persons who exceed gender norms’. In a climate where traditional gender roles can be questioned and the expression of non-normative gender roles is protected, the adjustment of the institution of marriage outside the traditional boundaries of male-female relationships can easily be imagined. The non-traditional regnbågsfamilj, the ‘rainbow family’ consisting of same-sex couples and their children, found its way to Sweden’s “fifth gospel”: the IKEA catalogue – the ultimate marker of accepted Swedish phenomena. While the LGBT lobby in Sweden and other Scandinavian countries initially was critical towards the traditional institution of marriage, they later ‘de-radicalized’ and adopted a legal rights discourse which emphasized equal rights for same-sex couples (Rydström 2011). Unsurprisingly, then, governmental support for same-sex marriage was overwhelming: of the seven political parties, six voted in favor while only one, the Christian Democrats, voted against.

The Lutheran Church of Sweden, which was the country’s state church until the year 2000, felt compelled to grapple with the issue of same-sex marriage even before it was actually introduced. According to Swedish law, clergy may perform legal marriages without state interference. Since the church feared the new legislation would make the church’s attitude to same-sex marriage provisional for this right, it had to weigh the
possibility of losing the right to perform marriages should it oppose same-sex marriage. Hosting conservatives and liberals alike, the Church of Sweden had to navigate towards a compromise between liberal voices that urged for the blessing of same-sex relationships, and a group of over eight hundred “concerned priests” who signed a declaration against such blessings. The struggle over marriage might be qualified as a rearguard action among theologians and clergy. Religion in Sweden has been characterized as mostly cultural religion: “a way of being religiously connected without being religiously active” (Demerath 2000, 136). Others speak of the “Swedish paradox”: while regular church attendance is extremely low and many Swedes identify as atheists or agnostics, the majority of the Swedes are still official members and do find church rituals such as baptism and church marriage important (Bäckström et al., 2004; Jänterä-Jareborg 2010). The Church of Sweden thus needed to renegotiate its position as both an important marker of religious and national identity for many Swedes, and as the representative of both liberal and conventional adherents which it traditionally has been. In the end it was decided that the church would bless same-sex marriages, but that individual priests would not be obliged to perform the wedding ceremony.

Apart from the right wing of the Church of Sweden, conservative religious public statements in Sweden often come from the so-called ‘free churches’, minority denominations of mostly Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, and from the Roman Catholic Church. Located on the edges of the Swedish religious landscape, in the debate on same-sex marriage these marginal Christian denominations and minority religions became much more outspoken than many Swedes were accustomed to. Their well-organized protests caused many to reconsider the position of conservative minorities in Swedish public debate and public space, and urged the majority to relate to views that diverge from what in Sweden is considered to be common good.

The Swedish case is characterized by a unique set of political, religious and social configurations, the disentanglement of which can lead to better insights into the role of religious and political structures at the national level in the construction of sexuality and religion. In this paper, I will therefore investigate in what way religious opposition to same-sex marriage has presented itself in public debate, how this conventional religious argumentation has been represented and countered in the media and how in this process both Swedish identity and its ‘proper’ relationship to religion are being (re)negotiated.

Marriage, homosexuality and religion according to “Protect Marriage”

In the run-up to the introduction of same-sex marriage, many of the ‘free churches’ formed alliances with the Roman Catholic Church as well as Muslim and Jewish communities in order to organize opposition. They united in an initiative called Bevara äktnskapet (Protect Marriage, PM). PM launched a website where people could sign a petition against same-sex marriage, published a book, put up posters in subway stations
and organized street protests. Since the opposition was well-organized and could launch its arguments in a prepared and well thought through manner, its argumentation became the point of departure for the further debate (Axner 2013). I will present the way in which in the initial PM argumentation and derivative media articles marriage, homosexuality and religion are constructed, before moving to the arguments of the proponents of same-sex marriage.

In a brochure, spread both through the action group’s website and in various printed media, PM explains its main argumentation. Different kinds of arguments are presented: based on terminology, history, culture, biology and children’s rights. Many of these arguments are well-known to those familiar with debates on same-sex marriage: marriage is presented as an institution with historical roots, as the only or best place to procreate and raise children, and as a practice that transcends cultural boundaries. US Evangelical rhetoric resonates in the argument that the opening up of marriage to same-sex couples may lead to a further ‘degeneration’ of marriage to for instance polyamory (the ‘slippery slope’ argument). There are, however, two interesting lines of argumentation which I would argue are quite specific for the PM initiative.

The first is a strong emphasis on marriage as a term or concept. As such, it should be reserved for the relationship between a man and a woman:

Try to imagine the confusion when “bank” suddenly became a word used for all stores, or “trousers” for all clothes. [...] Why not call things by their right name: “marriage” for the union between man and woman, and “partnership” for same-sex couples?¹

What is interesting about this argument, is the implication that same-sex unions as such are not questioned or criticized by PM, but accepted as a matter of fact. An underlying assumption, moreover, is that ‘marriage’ in fact refers to an unchanging reality ‘out there’ which the term adequately describes, an adequacy which would get lost once the term was used for other forms of relationships. This brings us to the second interesting feature of PM argumentation: the understanding of the relationship between marriage and gender. According to PM, marriage is “not just a union between two persons, but between two sexes”. Children (perhaps the most basic feature of PM argumentation) are best raised by people of two different genders. It is for good reason, PM cleverly adds, that in Sweden policies are developed to secure an equal gender balance in schools and ensure that children have both male and female teachers. This argument is clever, because it anticipates a tension which is necessarily part of Sweden’s widely accepted jämställdhet (gender equality) ideology: a tension between stressing sexual difference and the added value of an equal division of women and men in all layers of society on the one hand, and the downgrading of gender in order to counter traditional gender complementarity on the other. Proponents of same-sex marriage in their response will have to choose between either rejecting sexual difference as a fundamental aspect of

marriage (but then what to do about gender complementarity as a central aspect of general emancipation ideology?) or holding on to sexual difference as important (but that strengthens PM’s argument for having partners of opposite sexes raising children).

While in the brochure PM extensively argues what marriage is, it reveals almost nothing about its views on homosexuality. Same-sex relationships are seen as distinctly ‘other’ than heterosexual relationships, but exactly what it is that makes them so different is not made explicit. Same-sex relationships are mostly defined by what they are not: a biological precondition for procreation, or a complementary relationship which finds its expression mostly in the difference between the mother and the father role—though what these roles consists of is not spelled out.

In the document religion, like marriage, is something in need of protection. Same-sex marriage might be used to limit religious freedom in Sweden:

*Will it become a criminal offence to publically or in the context of an organization or church community hold on to a classical definition of marriage?*

The church’s right to perform marriages, it is further argued, is something to preserve as a part of Swedish culture with which ‘political rulers’ should not interfere. Surprisingly, religion is not used in any of the argumentation related to same-sex marriage as such: the brochure contains no Biblical references or arguments based on Christian tradition. The brochure finally concludes with a call to the readers to sign a petition against same-sex marriage legislation, which eventually over 50.000 Swedish citizens (0,7 % of the population), including some celebrities, did.

**Media responses to Protect Marriage**

Religious opposition to same-sex marriage had to voice its opinions in the face of a vast majority of Swedes in favor of same-sex marriage (71% in 2006, Eurobarometer), and the anticipation of sufficient political support in Parliament. The well-organized campaign, however, urged the proponents of same-sex marriage to come with a clear(er) definition of its views on marriage and its relation to sexual orientation and religion. Responses to PM came in two main waves: the first was when the campaign was launched, the second when PM held a public poster action.

The initiative was made ridiculous in Swedish media on many occasions. PM supporters were described as “religious extremists”³, “weirdoes who still believe we live in the Middle Ages”⁴, a collective of “little evil pious men”⁵ who had joined in an “unholy

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² ibid., p. 3
³ Halldin, Martin: “Homofober i (o)helig alians”. In: Dagens ETC, 2007-10-26
⁴ Waaranperä, Ulrika: “SL och homofob reklam”. In: Offensiv, 2007-10-25
⁵ Larsson, Anna: “Världen är full av små onda fromma män”. In: Svenska dagbladet, 2007-11-02
alliance” and whose arguments would “send chills down your spine”. Several journalists argued that PM was simply to be ignored: “If people want to have Yahweh-certified biological sex, just let them”, states one, and “I am fundamentally uninterested in ‘analyses of society’ which are based on dogmatic religion” states another. Still others met the campaign with mockery: if they really want to ‘protect marriage’, it is suggested, PM supporters should have argued for the penalization of divorce. What is striking about these responses, is that they attack PM supporters mostly for being religious extremists, while in fact PM itself had avoided religious argumentation throughout its campaign. RFSL, the Swedish Federation for LGBT rights and responsible for the fiercest opposition, took another tour: that of equal rights and protection against discrimination. RFSL spokespersons called the campaign “distasteful and shocking” and interpreted it as “the right of the masses to suppress minority groups”, which would strengthen heteronormativity and lead to violence and oppression. It cannot be denied that with 50,000 signatures on a population of seven million, PM can hardly be described as a ‘mass’ movement in society, which makes RFSL’s argumentation sound somewhat exaggerated and outdated.

Responses to PM published in national and local newspapers did, however, try to grapple with the content of the argumentation, and tried to come to other definitions of marriage and its relation to raising children. In present-day Swedish society, it is claimed, marriage and procreation no longer ‘naturally’ fit together. Rainbow families are already a reality, whether the parents are married or not, and have proven not to be harmful for children. Others question the ‘long historical roots’ of marriage, pointing to the fact that as a ceremony it was not part of Swedish culture until after the Middle Ages, and state that at that time it was mainly a patriarchal institution which secured men’s ownership and power over women. In opposition to this traditional version of marriage, Swedish media paint a picture of marriage as ‘by nature’ inclusive, a choice people make because they love each other and to which sexual orientation is irrelevant. Same-sex marriage, moreover, is something the majority of the Swedes support.

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6 Editorial, Dagens ETC, 2007-12-28
7 Nordquist, Lina: “Tvetydigt tal om enkönade äktenskap”. In: Upsala Nya Tidning, 2007-10-31
8 Rydhagen, Maria: “Snälla, hur orkar ni bry er?” In: Kvällsposten, 2007-10-26
9 Carlsson, Marie: “Tyck vad du vill men skräm inte hästerna”. In: Motala Tidning, 2007-11-09
10 Berggren, Niklas: “Förvirrande kampanj om äktenskap”. In: Dagens nyheter, 2007-10-27
11 Adbo, Jerry, cited in Tagesson, Eric: “Osmakligt”. In: Aftonbladet, 2007-05-06
12 Andersson, Sören, cited in Melén, Johanna: “Kändisar i uppdrag mot homovigslar i kyrkan”. In: Aftonbladet, 2006-03-10
13 Editorial: “Mama + Papa = Barn”. In: Motdrag, 2007-11-13
14 Nordquist, Lina: “Barnens bästa et svepskål för traditionella äktenskap”. In: Upsala nya tidning, 2007-11-06
16 Wiman, Erika: “Unken kampanj vill konservera kärnfamiljen”. In: Bärgslagsbladet, 2007-11-01
17 Dalman Eek, Cecilia: “Giftemål är kärlek mellan två personer”. In: Ny Tid, 2007-10-29
18 Möller, Marie: “Bevara kärleken!” In: Borås Tidning, 2007-10-31
19 Sas, Mia and Hannah Gruffman: “Alla ska ha rätt att gifta sig”. In: Folkbladet, 2007-10-30
The debate got a new dimension when PM put up posters with the text “Marriage: mom, dad, child” all over Stockholm’s subway stations. In response, a Facebook group called ‘Do not protect marriage at the subway station’ was launched and liked by many. Some journalists suggested their readers that they should ‘creatively alter’ the posters with a marker. “Protect us from their homophobia in the subway!”, others requested. SL, Stockholms public transportation company, refused to take down the posters, but before long most of them were removed by angry citizens. Up until then, the campaign had been limited to advertisements in national news papers and public statements on television and radio by its initiators, and in that sense could be ignored if one wished to. The poster campaign, however, positioned PM firmly in the public space, which proved too much for many proponents of same-sex marriage.

**Same-sex marriage, religion and Swedish identity**

Taking into account the fact that the introduction of same-sex marriage in Sweden was already a foregone case when Protect Marriage launched its campaign, one wonders what was actually at stake in this debate. One of these stakes might have been the struggle for representation of conservative religion in Swedish public debate and public space. The Church of Sweden had left this space open. It had moved toward a more liberal attitude and decided to introduce the blessing of same-sex unions. It had to make this decision as an institution, and once it was taken, conservative members and clergy had no other options but to comply or, as some did, convert to Catholicism or join an Evangelical denomination. PM filled the vacuum that originated when the Church of Sweden moved to a more progressive stance.

The responses to PM in the media show the uneasiness of the greater public confronted with this firm stance taken by conservative religious representatives. PM hindered the smooth introduction of what most Swedes seemed to regard as only a logical next step in the emancipation of gays and lesbians. Though PM did not present its argumentation in religious terms, this was neglected by the press and the initiative was immediately labeled as an extremist form of religion – the ‘wrong kind’ of religion in Sweden. When PM physically claimed space in the public space by putting up posters, reactions became even more fierce.

PM, in the meantime, could comfortably surf the waves of protest. They managed to use the stubborn protest of RFSL -who maintained the discourse of equal rights and the struggle against discrimination- for their own purpose. Not gays and lesbians, but conservative Christians became an oppressed minority. PM pointed at the posters which were torn down, their website which had been hacked and the threatening phone calls they received and could ask: what happened to democracy and freedom of speech in

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20 Bivald, Katrina: “Vi kan förbättra budskapet – med humor och tuschpenna”. In: *Aftonbladet*, 2007-10-26
21 Waaranperä, Ulrika: “SL och homofob reklam”. In: *Offensiv*, 2007-10-25
Sweden? Staying clear of the Bible and a direct condemnation of homosexuality (with
the exception of the occasional ‘letter to the editor’ from a Romans 1:27 quoting local
pastor who had not quite grasped the strategy), PM spokespersons could piece by piece
construct conservative religion as a minority position. Being a minority is a big deal in
Sweden. It involves privileges, people are afraid to exclude you or your perspective,
legislation will be developed to secure your needs and rights. As such, it is a desired
social position. During the debate, RFSL had to stand by and watch how its up until then
unchallenged minority position came under threat, until finally, at the time of ‘poster-
gate’, the media started to do some self-reflection and wondered why responses to PM
had been so unusually sharp.

The main question of the debate seems to be: is the acceptance of sexual diversity the
main feature of Swedish national identity or the acceptance of religious diversity? Up
until the debate on same-sex marriage, Swedes were never forced to choose between
either of the two. Only in the face of well-pronounced conservative opposition did this
question present itself, as did the paradox that conservative religion challenged the very
basis of Swedish values (democracy, freedom of speech, equality) upon which once the
protection of lesbians and gays as a social minority was based. One could say that this
indicates that the tables in Sweden are turned. Where once lesbians and gays may have
been a minority which was indeed, as RFSL argued, oppressed by the masses, it is now
conservative religious people who may have the strongest case to claim this space.

Evangelical Christianity has been a familiar ‘other’ to the Lutheran majority in Swedish
society ever since it found its way to Sweden in the mid 19th century. With the debate on
same-sex marriage, however, this ‘other’ got a distinct conservative face and politics to
which Swedish media did not immediately have an adequate response. After the
‘liberalization’ of the Church of Sweden, religious conservatism now seems to be in the
hands of the free churches who showed a remarkable self-confidence in expressing their
views and who sought the public arena much more purposefully than perhaps the
Church of Sweden would. The question rises what the implications of this small
earthquake in the Swedish religious landscape might be for the future. In many
countries, same-sex marriage is seen as the ‘end station’ of lesbian and gay
emancipation. Protect Marriage might have won the struggle over public recognition in
this debate, but can other debates be imagined which offer the same opportunity for the
profiling of traditional religious views? Or, perhaps more interesting: can there be a
space for religious conservatism in Sweden which does not have to be negotiated though
polarized debate?
**Literature**


