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Embracing the Future: The Church of Sweden in Continuous Reformation

The whole world followed the events in Lund, Sweden, on October 31, 2016, when for the first time a joint ecumenical commemoration of the Reformation took place between the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the Roman-Catholic Church. A photo distributed worldwide shows Pope Francis and the Archbishop of the Church of Sweden, Antje Jackelén, embracing each other. The photo contains both hope and tension. The Church of Sweden tries to balance the tension between its heritage as ecumenical bridge-builder, launched already by Archbishop Nathan Söderblom a hundred years ago, and its pioneering role with regard to issues of gender and sexuality. These seemingly contradictory roles are hereby set into the wider context of the journey Sweden has made from the time of the Lutheran reformation up to the present. A uniform society characterised by one people and one Christian faith, has gradually transformed into a society where faith is a voluntary option. The former state church faces new demands in handling religious as well as cultural diversities. Leadership is increasingly equally shared between women and men. The Church of Sweden holds all these tensions together through the approach launched on the official website of a church in constant need of reform.

Por primera vez la Federación Luterana Mundial y la Iglesia Católica Romana celebraron conjuntamente una conmemoración ecuménica de la Reforma un hecho que ocurrió en Lund, Suecia, el 31 de octubre de 2016 y que fue ampliamente difundido por el mundo, a través de una fotografía distribuida globalmente donde aparecen abrazándose el Papa Francisco de la Iglesia Católica y la arzobispa Antje Jackelén de la iglesia de Suecia, reflejando esperanza y tensión a la vez. La iglesia de Suecia intenta encontrar un equilibrio entre una tradición ecuménica de diálogo – inaugurada hace un siglo por el arzobispo Nathan Söderblom – y su papel pionero en cuestiones de género y sexualidad. En el artículo se desprende que estos roles, aparentemente contradictorios, están presentes en el contexto más amplio de la transformación que ha hecho Suecia desde la Reforma hasta hoy. Cómo cambia la sociedad sueca, desde ser una sociedad uniforme, con una población homogénea en una sola fe cristiana hasta convertirse en una cuestión de opción voluntaria el ser creyente. Esta situación plantea nuevas exigencias a quien fue anteriormente la religión oficial del estado, ya que debe adaptarse tanto a la diversidad religiosa

como cultural. Respecto a las construcciones en las relaciones de género, el liderazgo es compartido entre hombres y mujeres. Para visibilizar los avances en estos temas sociales es que en su sitio web la iglesia de Suecia presenta un enfoque de estar continuamente en Reforma.

Auf der ganzen Welt hat man die Ereignisse am 31. Oktober 2016 im schwedischen Lund verfolgt, als zum ersten Mal in ökumenischer Gemeinschaft an die Reformation erinnert in einer Veranstaltung worden ist, die vom Lutherischen Weltbund und der römisch-katholischen Kirche getragen wurde. Das Foto, auf dem sich Papst Franziskus und die Erzbischöfin der Kirche von Schweden, Antje Jackelén, umarmen, ist um die ganze Welt gegangen. Es zeigt sowohl Hoffnung als auch Spannung. Die Kirche von Schweden versucht, eine Balance zu finden zwischen ihrer Herkunft als ökumenische Brückenbauerin – eine Rolle, die schon Erzbischof Nathan Söderblom vor 100 Jahren für seine Kirche gesehen hat, und ihrer Vorreiterrolle im Blick auf Fragen von Gender und Sexualität. In dem Artikel werden die scheinbar gegensätzlichen Pole in einen größeren Zusammenhang gestellt, der den Weg beschreibt, den die Kirche von Schweden von der lutherischen Reformation bis in die Gegenwart gegangen ist. Eine einstmals einheitliche Gesellschaft, charakterisiert durch ein Volk und einen christlichen Glauben, hat sich sukzessive zu einer Gesellschaft hin entwickelt, in der Glaube eine freiwillige Option darstellt. Die ehemalige Staatskirche ist mit neuen Herausforderungen konfrontiert sowohl im Blick auf religiöse als auch auf kulturelle Diversitäten. Leitung wird mehr und mehr zu gleichen Teilen von Frauen und Männern geteilt. Die Kirche von Schweden hält diese unterschiedlichen Spannungen zusammen durch den Ansatz, der auf für das Selbstverständnis der Kirche grundlegend ist: Kirche zu sein, die ständig Reform braucht.

The whole world followed the events in Lund, Sweden, on October 31, 2016, when for the first time a joint ecumenical commemoration of the Reformation took place between the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the Roman-Catholic Church. The chair of the LWF, the Palestinian bishop Munib Yunan, the LWF General Secretary, Martin Junge, and the head of the Roman-Catholic Church, Pope Francis led the service together. The aim was to highlight the ecumenical developments between Catholics and Lutherans during the last 50 years, including the joint declaration on the doctrine of justification from 1999.¹

This starting point for this article is one of the photos taken at the liturgy and distributed worldwide, showing Pope Francis and the Archbishop of the Church of Sweden, Antje Jackelén, embracing each other. Jackelén was the local host for the event together with the Roman-Catholic bishop for Sweden,

¹ <https://www.lutheranworld.org/lund2016>, 5 November 2016.

Anders Arborelius. Antje Jackelén visited Pope Francis in Rome already in May 2015, less than a year after she was installed as Archbishop. Being of German origin, and the first woman in her office, her encounter with Jorge Bergoglio, the first Jesuit pope and the first to come from the Southern hemisphere, raised a lot of attention and had a deep ecumenical significance, which in a way was fulfilled by the meeting in Lund 2016.

The ecumenical role of the Church of Sweden is multifaceted. A photo of a male Roman-Catholic Pope and a female Lutheran Archbishop embracing each other contains many levels of both tensions and promises. Can the two church leaders be actually seen as embracing the future together?

The aim of the current article is to sketch a background to the event from a Swedish Lutheran perspective, with a special focus on how the Church of Sweden handles the tension between its ecumenical commitment and its radical attitude with regard to gender and sexuality.

Bridge-builder

The Church of Sweden has led a tradition of ecumenical bridge-building during the 20th century.² The role dates back to a meeting in Stockholm 1925, initiated by Archbishop Nathan Söderblom. The meeting became the starting point for the Life and Work movement, which came to be an important part of the creation of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948. At the time of the Stockholm meeting, ecumenism was embryonic and the meeting had been a unique effort to build bridges across divides of previous condemnations and bans. One important actor was missing though. In an often-quoted sermon given at the end of the meeting, Archbishop Söderblom addressed the absence of the Roman Catholic Church at the gathering, talking about the apostle Peter being late and of Christianity thus still being sundered, against the will of Christ.³

In Lund 2016, the belated Petrine ministry “was” present, with Pope Francis talking respectfully about Martin Luther and the Reformation in a joint act of commemoration with the Lutheran World Federation. The embrace between the Pope and the Archbishop was thus a longed-for symbol, surely wholehearted and filled with joy from both sides. Still, the divisions were far from finally bridged. Rome does still not welcome Lutherans to the Eucharistic table, and does not formally accept the ministry of Lutheran priests, male or

² Björn Ryman, *Brobyggarkyrkan: Svenska kyrkans engagemang i utrikesfrågor* [Bridge-builder: Church of Sweden’s Engagement in Foreign Affairs] (Artos: Skellefteå 2010).

³ Jonas Jonson, *Nathan Söderblom: Called to Serve* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI 2016), 373.

female. The embrace in Lund was probably as far as Pope Francis was able to reach. He was highly praised in media before and after the event. At the same time, the Roman-Catholic Church has also suffered severe critique concerning the exclusion of women from the ordained ministry, its hostility towards same-sex relations, and its failure to deal properly with sexual assaults committed by clergy.

The Church of Sweden has today an equal share of male and female priests. It has an officially adopted policy on gender equality.⁴ The directives for a revision of the worship manual from 1986 include instructions for using inclusive language.⁵ In 2009, The Church decided to adapt to the new civil law on gender neutral marriages and use the same wedding ritual for all, irrespective of gender.⁶ At the time of writing this article, the Church's official website illustrates its general information about wedding ceremonies with a photo of two women getting married, and the text welcomes "all" to have their wedding in the church.⁷

All of these steps place the Church of Sweden in a pioneering and controversial role with regard to gender and sexuality. The largest church in the LWF, the Ethiopian Mekane Yesus Church, decided in 2013 to break its ties with both the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Church of Sweden, because of their positive attitudes towards same-sex relations.⁸ The Russian Orthodox Church had demonstrated its dislike of the blessing of same-sex relations in the Church of Sweden already in 2005.⁹

⁴ Anders Bäckström, Ninna Edgardh and Per Pettersson, *Religious Change in Northern Europe: The Case of Sweden. From State Church to Free Folk Church. Final Report* (Verbum: Stockholm 2004), 150.

⁵ "Fortsatt arbete med översyn av Den svenska kyrkohandboken. Direktiv beslutade av Kyrkostyrelsen den 19 april 2006". (<https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/kyrkohandboken/dokumentet>, 6 November 2016).

⁶ The new gender neutral wedding liturgy is part of a proposed new worship manual, but is already in effect with the help of an amendment to the manual from 1986, still in use. See www.svenskakyrkan.se/handboken, 5 November 2016. For a more comprehensive information with translations into several languages, see <https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/samkonade-aktenskap>, 5 November 2016.

⁷ <https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/vigsel>, 4 November 2016.

⁸ <https://www1.svenskakyrkan.se/983098>, 5 November 2016; Katherine Weber, "Ethiopian Church Severs Ties with Lutherans over Homosexuality," in: *The Christian Post*, 8 February 2013. (<http://www.christianpost.com/news/ethiopian-church-severs-ties-with-lutherans-over-homosexuality-89745>, 5 November 2016)

⁹ <http://www.ortodokskristendom.se/#moskva>, 5 November 2016.

Bridges are built, but new cracks appear. Below, the ambiguities in the present ecumenical role of the Church of Sweden shall be set into context, with the help of an overview built on quite a huge amount of research which has been produced in Sweden recently, on Luther, the Reformation, and Lutheran theology.

The literature reflects the journey Sweden has made from the time of the Lutheran reformation up to the present, from a society characterised as “one people and one faith” to a society where a variety of faiths are seen as voluntary options.

A Lutheran Church for a Secularised People

Sweden has a double reputation as the most secularised and the most women-friendly country in the world, although both – and the possible relationship between them – may well be contested. The Church of Sweden is the third largest Lutheran Church in the world, with more than 6 million members, representing about 64 percent of the population.¹⁰ However, most of them do not regard themselves as Christians and rarely attend worship.¹¹

Up until some fifty years ago, being a Swede was tantamount to being a member of the national church. The Church of Sweden has been separated from the state since the year 2000. However, people tend to stay on as members, even though they do not go to church very often. Swedes are even said to believe in their belonging to the church, rather than in Christian faith.¹² They tend to share the values of the Church, and respect Jesus as a role model, but shy away from the designation “religious” or “Christian”. Most Swedes

¹⁰ <https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/more-74-million-members-lwfs-145-churches>, 5 November 2016. A little less than two thirds (63.2 percent) of the Swedish population belong to the Church of Sweden. Nearly half (45.5 percent) of all new-born are baptised. A third (27.8 percent) of the young reaching maturity are confirmed. A third (33.5) of the weddings and three quarters (76.5 percent) of all burials are performed in the Church. Data as of 31 December 2015, at: www.svenskakyrkan.se/statistik, 5 November 2016.

¹¹ For a thorough discussion of “the Swedish paradox” of a high degree of belonging to the Church vs. low participation in Sunday worship, see Bäckström, Edgardh and Pettersson, *Religious Change*, and Anders Bäckström and Anders Wejryd (eds.), *Sedd men Osedd: Om folkkyrkans paradoxala närvaro inför 2020-talet* (Verbum: Stockholm 2016).

¹² Anders Bäckström, “Believing in belonging: The Swedish way of being religious,” in: Riikka and Esko Ryökäs (eds.), *Urban Faith 2000* (University of Helsinki: Helsinki 1993), Publications of Church Sociology, A/8, 31-42. The idea was taken up by the British sociologist of religion, Grace Davie, and integrated in her wider idea on the vicarious role of religion. See Grace Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe. A Memory Mutates* (Oxford University Press: Oxford 2000).

prefer choosing their own blend of Christianity, sometimes with some self-interpreted element of Buddhism attached.¹³

Individual autonomy and self-expression are commonly shared Swedish values.¹⁴ Swedish mentality has even been characterised as a kind of “statist individualism”, as the ideal of personal autonomy is combined with a high degree of trust in other people as well as in the public authorities guaranteeing the welfare of citizens in need.¹⁵

The Church of Sweden still holds a privileged position, but in many respects, it has to compete with other faith communities in attracting the interest of people. Popular faith has been characterised as “light” rather than “hard”.¹⁶ It has a great deal to do with belonging not only to the Church, but to the community called Sweden, where Christmas and Easter are celebrated but not necessarily in church, and where the Bible is part of culture but not a book opened very often. The relation of the Swedish people to the Lutheran tradition is deeply enmeshed with these basic traits of late-modern Swedish mentality.

After its separation from the state, the role of the Church of Sweden is still regulated by Swedish law, in which the Church is designated as an Evangelic Lutheran faith community.¹⁷ This is also confirmed in the Church’s own constitution.¹⁸ How this confessional character should be interpreted is less clear. In fact, the designation “Lutheran” was not much used until Sweden’s confessional unity was beginning to dissolve in the 19th century.¹⁹

¹³ David Thurffjell, *Det gudlösa folket. De postkristna svenskarna och religionen* (Molin & Sorgenfrei Akademiska: Stockholm 2015).

¹⁴ Swedish attitudes towards individual autonomy and self-realisation as basic values are clearly shown by the World Values Survey and illustrated in the Cultural map of the world, based on the WVS-data. (<http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp>, 5 November 2016)

¹⁵ Henrik Berggren and Lars Trägårdh, *År svensken människa: Gemenskap och oberoende i det moderna Sverige* (Norstedts: Stockholm 2015), 2nd exp. Ed.

¹⁶ Bäckström and Anders (eds.), *Sedd men Osedd*, 32.

¹⁷ *The Church of Sweden Act*. § 1. SFS 1998:1591. (http://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/svensk-forfattningssamling/lag-19981591-om-svenska-kyrkan_sfs-1998-1591, 5 November 2016)

¹⁸ *Kyrkoordning för Svenska kyrkan*, introduction to the first section. (<https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/kyrkoordningen>, 5 November 2016)

¹⁹ Lars Eckerdal, “Om Svenska kyrkan som trossamfund. Svenska kyrkans beteckning, bestämning och benämning i svensk lagstiftning.” in: *Svensk kyrkohistorisk årskrift* (1988), 87-106. [English summary: “The ‘Church of Sweden’ – its designation and definition in Swedish legislation,” 99-101]

The systematic-theologian, Professor Thomas Ekstrand, emphasises that there is no common theological understanding of the legal paragraphs dealing with the confessional identity of the Church. Based on a study of contemporary confessional material from the Church, he argues that the meaning of “Evangelic Lutheran” ranges from quite narrow confessional statements to much wider cultural interpretations.²⁰ Today, the statement that the Church is Lutheran might simply mean that it has a Lutheran heritage. Another cultural interpretation is that the Lutheran tradition serves as the basis for a society that respects the religious maturity of people. Common interpretations of a more confessional kind are that the Church adheres to the idea of justification by faith alone, or that the Lutheran confessions are normative for the interpretation of the gospel. In-between the confessional and the cultural, one finds the idea that “Evangelic Lutheran” primarily means that the Church is constantly in need of reform, according to the principle “*ecclesia semper reformanda*”. This attitude, it shall be argued, dominates the commemoration of Reformation, both at the national level of the Church and as presented on its official website.

The attitude described above is also commonly used to support reforms related to gender and sexuality. The introduction of a gender-neutral wedding liturgy has been less internally controversial in the Church of Sweden than in many other churches, probably because research-based conversations on attitudes towards homosexuality in the Bible and the Christian tradition have been ongoing since the 1970s. Several bishops have taken a radical stance in the discussions, one of them being the bishop of Stockholm, Caroline Krook. In 2004, she was even invited to inaugurate the popular Pride Festival in Stockholm. In one of the major daily newspapers, *Dagens Nyheter*, she had motivated this role with reference to the 16th century Swedish reformer, Olaus Petri, who had served as a preacher himself in the Cathedral in Stockholm. Olaus Petri had been a deacon (at that time, a temporary office before becoming a priest), and as such forbidden to marry. He revolted against what he perceived to be the hypocrisy of celibacy, in light of the common knowledge of the many unrecognised children fathered by priests. When he was wedded to Kristina in 1525 in the Cathedral of Stockholm, he was threatened with excommunication. Bishop Krook sees Olaus Petri as a role model in defending

²⁰ Thomas Ekstrand, “The Construction of Lutheran Identity in Church of Sweden,” in: Anne-Louise Eriksson, Göran Gunner and Niclas Bläder (eds.), *Exploring a Heritage: Evangelical Lutheran Churches in the North* (Pickwick: Eugene, Oregon 2012), 249-264, here 262. Church of Sweden Research Series 11.

what he thought was right and the will of God. She ends her article: “You cannot always wait for theological consensus. Then Olaus Petri would never have married, women would never have been pastors, I would not have been a bishop and homosexuals would have to wait forever outside the entrance of the church.”²¹

The bishop’s phrasing is persuasive and illustrates well how the reformation heritage may be used as an argument for continued reform and readiness to move ahead of other churches in ecumenical terms. This should not be seen as contempt towards ecumenism. Rather, it belongs to the Church’s present understanding of itself as prophet and pioneer with regard to gender issues. This role builds on the image of Sweden as a forerunner with regard to gender equality and of the Church as a church of the people. As such, it is influenced not only by theological traditions, but also by values shared by the population at large.

Lutheranism as Obligation

This usage of the Reformation is, however, of quite recent date. A longer Swedish tradition ties Reformation with the creation of Sweden as a nation. Luther’s nailing of his theses in Wittenberg in 1517 was not even celebrated in Sweden in 1617. Unlike the rest of Europe, Sweden instead chose to celebrate the centennial of Gustav Vasa’s election as “hövitsman” of Dalarna 1621, the starting point for the reforming king in his project of uniting the Swedish nation and defending the country against the Danish king.²²

Another year for which a centennial could be celebrated would have been 1527, when Gustav Vasa gathered a council in Västerås which gave him the right to confiscate Church property. The Swedish province of the Catholic Church, with Uppsala as its centre, was through this process taken over by the king and the relation to Rome had been broken.

The Uppsala Synod in 1593 confirmed and consolidated the reforms. The Augsburg Confession had been officially adopted, and Lutheran faith had become the only accepted form of faith in the country. Lutheranism became an obligation and Sweden celebrated Gustav Vasa, rather than Luther, as the great reformer, even though his interest in the Church had to do with its properties rather than its faith.

²¹ Caroline Krook, “Respektfulla samtal krävs om homovigslar,” in: DN Debatt, *Dagens Nyheter*, 28 July 2004, 4 (translated into English by the author).

²² Carl Axel Aurelius, *Luther i Sverige: Den svenska Lutherbilden under fyra sekler* (Artos Norma bokförlag: Skellefteå 2015), 2nd ext. Ed., 22. Forskning för kyrkan 30.

The Religious Utilisation of Luther's ideas

This narrative has given rise to the idea that Luther was never important in Sweden. The argument is however refuted by the Luther researcher, bishop emeritus, Professor Carl Axel Aurelius.²³ Aurelius studied Luther's image and the utilisation of his ideas in Sweden from the 17th to the 20th century, and concluded that Luther's influence has been immense. His works were not read and used in their entire breadth, but the books that were used became highly influential, in various ways in various epochs.

Aurelius specifically mentions three strands of influence. The "table of duties" in the Small Catechism played an immense role in shaping cultural unity during the first centuries of Lutheran confession. Reading and learning the Catechism was obligatory according to the 1686 Church law. The emancipating feature of this part of the Lutheran heritage has to do with the role played by Catechism in teaching the gospel, and thereby teaching both men and women to read. Other parts of Luther's works were influential in the hands of the pietists, in a period when the cultural unity created by reformation was beginning to break up. For the pietists, the focus had been Luther's words concerning personal faith. Finally, Luther's works were highly utilised by revival movements in the 19th century. With the feudal agrarian society dissolved, the "table of duties" had become outdated and Luther had been quoted in advocacy for the freedom of religion against the monopoly of the state Church.²⁴

As shown by the late historian Inger Hammar, Swedish feminists in the 19th century used Lutheran theological arguments in favour of the emancipation of women. In opposition to male clergy who argued for a traditional Lutheran-Christian interpretation of the relationship between the sexes, female pioneers had asserted that God had not destined women to subordination.²⁵

Luther's ideas have thus been used in Sweden for different purposes in different times, and the image of the reformer has changed accordingly.²⁶ Today, it may be argued, Luther inspires the Church of Sweden to defend the rights of women and LGBTQ-people against what is perceived as outdated ecclesial traditions based on false biblical interpretations.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 171.

²⁵ Inger Hammar, *Emancipation och religion: Den svenska kvinnorörelsens pionjärer i debatt om kvinnans kallelse ca 1860-1900* [Emancipation and religion: the pioneers of the Swedish movement and the debate over a woman's calling c. 1860-1900] (Carlsson: Stockholm 1999).

²⁶ Aurelius, *Luther i Sverige*, 230.

Luther and the Swedes

Despite all that was said above, Luther is far from being a popular figure among the Swedish population at large. This may be due to the long and close alliance between Church and state, associating Luther with the discipline set by the rulers. “Having Luther on one’s shoulder” is an expression still quite frequently used in Sweden to describe an overly strong sense of duty, especially with regard to work.²⁷ As has been shown by Birgit Stolt, professor emerita of German language, this image of Luther has very little to do with his life or his writings. Stolt, a German immigrant to the country, wrote her thesis on Martin Luther’s Table Talks in the 1960s, and found in the texts nothing of the heavy and boring image of Luther she encountered for the first time in Sweden. Quite to the contrary, she found Luther sensitive, tolerant and gentle, points she exemplified by his metaphorical description of God as “changing [our] diapers” in forgiving our sins, and wanting us to “jump and laugh with joy” in response.²⁸

Trends in Reformation Research

The books by Aurelius, Hammar and Stolt are only a few examples of a rather impressive amount of research carried out on Luther and the reformation during the last decade, and to a considerable extent, written by women. The body of research mirrors the ongoing change in Swedish society, from Lutheranism as a uniform costume, obligatorily worn by each and every one, to reformation theology acting as a potentially – but not self-evidently – liberating resource that may be interpreted in diverse ways. While earlier research had a confessional character and was primarily built on official textual sources, recent research has widened scope and aim, sources and perspectives, as the following examples shall illustrate.

A project involving a number of researchers from various disciplines highlighted the liberating potentials of Lutheran theology and ethics in a Post-Christian society.²⁹ Of special interest from a gender perspective is Cecilia

²⁷ Ekstrand, “The Construction of Lutheran Identity,” 253.

²⁸ Birgit Stolt, *Luther själv: Hjärtats och glädjens teologi* (Artos: Skellefteå 2004); Birgit Stolt, *Martin Luther: Människohjärtat och Bibeln* (Artos: Skellefteå 2016).

²⁹ The project involved researchers from various theological disciplines and resulted in several books: Elisabeth Gerle (ed.), *Luther som utmaning; Om frihet och ansvar* (Verbum: Stockholm: 2008). *Forskning för kyrkan 7*; Eva-Lotta Grantén, *Utänför paradiset: Arvsyndsläran i nutida luthersk teologi och etik* (Verbum: Stockholm 2013). *Forskning för kyrkan 20*; Carl-Henric Grenholm, *Tro, moral och uddlös politik: Om luthersk etik* (Verbum: Stockholm 2014). *Forskning för*

Nahnfeldt's gender sensitive discussion of the Lutheran theology of calling, which she relates to the daily struggle of especially women in contemporary Sweden to put "the puzzle of daily life" together.³⁰

Elisabeth Gerle contributes an innovative discussion of Martin Luther's texts in relation to historic and contemporary cultural attitudes towards the body and the senses. She argues that Luther introduced a new anthropology that saw the human being as a unity, in contrast to the mystical medieval tradition. Whereas these practices spiritualised the erotic, Luther reintroduced a positive view of real sexual relations between human beings. Senses and sexuality were not any longer seen as a competition to the love of God. Gerle argues that these resources can be used constructively today, both in relation to ascetic ideals of health and fitness and as a commitment to stand in solidarity with our neighbours.³¹

A large project run by Uppsala University shows the role of Lutheranism in furthering social welfare in Sweden and other Nordic countries. Case studies in eight European countries show the role of the historic churches in the organisation of welfare in Europe. In the final report, Thomas Ekstrand shows how theological factors interact with social and other factors in shaping the sharing of responsibility between Church and state in the Nordic countries. Ninna Edgardh addresses the issues of gender raised in the material and observes surprising similarities across national and confessional borders with regard to the specific role attributed to women concerning care and well-being.³²

The Church of Sweden research unit has produced a number of volumes on the reformation heritage, both in its international and in its Swedish series.³³

kyrkan 25; Elisabeth Gerle, *Passionate Embrace: Luther on Love, Body and Sensual Presence* (Wipf and Stock: Eugene, Oregon forthcoming) - originally published as *Sinnlighetens närvaro: Luther mellan kroppskult och kroppsförakt* (Verbum: Stockholm 2015). Forskning för kyrkan 28; Karin Johannesson, *Helgelsens filosofi: Om andlig träning i luthersk tradition* (Verbum: Stockholm 2014). Forskning för kyrkan 23; Cecilia Nahnfeldt, *Luthersk kallelse: Handlingskraft och barmhärtighet* (Verbum: Stockholm 2016). Forskning för kyrkan 31.

³⁰ Nahnfeldt, *Luthersk kallelse*.

³¹ Gerle, *Passionate Embrace*.

³² Anders Bäckström, Grace Davie, Ninna Edgardh and Per Pettersson (eds.), *Welfare and Religion in 21st Century Europe: Vol 2 Gendered, Religious and Social Change* (Ashgate: Farnham 2011).

³³ Anne-Louise Eriksson, Göran Gunner and Niclas Blåder (eds.), *Exploring a Heritage: Evangelical Lutheran Churches in the North* (Pickwick: Eugene, Oregon 2012). Church of Sweden Research Series 5. This volume, taking a specific interest in the situation of women, depicts how the Lutheran Churches in Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden have shaped their identity as Lutheran.

In October 2013, it organised an international conference with the aim to constructively contribute to “a Lutheran theology that can be regarded as reasonable in a multicultural society.”³⁴

Several new books widen the scope from dogmatics to issues of Lutheran spirituality, Lutheran hymns and Lutheran preaching.³⁵ A recent Nordic project examines the relations between Lutheran traditions and the development of secular law in the Nordic region during the last 500 years.³⁶

A book carrying the witty title, *Vid hans sida: Svenska prästfruar under 250 år* [*At His Side: 250 years of Swedish Pastors' Wives*], illustrates the advantages of widening the scope of sources used in research.³⁷ The abandonment of celibacy in Sweden in 1536 resulted in a completely new role in the parishes, namely that of the pastor's wife. These women often became “mothers” for the parishioners, involved in pastoral as well as health care. With regard to gender, the pastor's wife could be a role model for the parishioners, but she could never formally overtake the role of her husband, due to ecclesial law. Her role was limited and seldom recognised in public.

A type of research which had not been thinkable in a uniform Lutheran era is reformation history, written, as expressed in one of the titles, “from the perspective of the losers.”³⁸ Here, the focus is far from seeking “liberating strands” in Lutheran theology, as in the aforementioned projects, but

³⁴ The conference resulted in two anthologies: Carl-Henric Grenholm and Göran Gunner (eds.), *Lutheran Identity and Political Theology* (Pickwick: Eugene, Oregon 2014), 3. Church of Sweden Research Series 9; Carl-Henric Grenholm and Göran Gunner (eds.), *Justification in a Post-Christian Society* (Pickwick: Eugene, Oregon 2014).

³⁵ Bengt Hoffman, *Hjärtats teologi: Mystikens plats hos Martin Luther* (Åsak: Delsbo 1989); Margareta Brandby-Cöster, *Att uppfatta allt mänskligt: Underströmmar av luthersk livs-förståelse i Selma Lagerlöfs författarskap* (Karlstad University Studies: Karlstad 2001) 23; Henry Cöster, *Livsmodets språk: Förkunnelse och sakrament i en luthersk teologi* (Arcus: Lund 2009); Sven-Åke Selander, “Hjärtats tillit: Trosförmedling i luthersk tradition,” in: *Årsbok för Svenskt gudstjänstliv*, 82 (Artos & Norma: Skellefteå 2007); Sven-Åke Selander and Karl-Johan Hansson (eds.), *Martin Luthers psalmer i de nordiska folkens liv* (Arcus: Lund 2008); Tomas Appelqvist, *Bönen i den helige Andes tempel: Människosyn och kyrkosyn i Martin Luthers böneteologi* (Artos: Skellefteå 2009).

³⁶ The project, titled “Protestant Legacies in Nordic Law: Uses of the Past in the Construction of the Secularity of Law” (ProNoLa) is financed by HERA (Humanities in the European Research Area), and described at <http://heranet.info/pronola/index>, 5 November 2016.

³⁷ Ulrika Lagerlöf Nilsson and Birgitta Meurling, *Vid hans sida: Svenska prästfruar under 250 år – ideal och verklighet* (Artos & Norma bokförlag: Skellefteå 2015).

³⁸ Magnus Nyman, *Förlorarnas historia: Katolskt liv i Sverige från Gustav Vasa till drottning Kristina* (Veritas förlag: Stockholm 2002), 2nd slightly rev. ed.

quite the contrary. In this new strand of research, primarily produced by Roman-Catholic scholars, popular resistance against the 16th century reforms is uncovered and attention is given to what was lost, rather than gained, by the reforms.³⁹

The Reformation Year 2017

The Church of Sweden's ambition to combine ecumenical bridge-building on a national level with a pioneering role with regard to issues of gender and sexuality is manifested in various more or less successful ways. On the archbishop's official website, Antje Jackelén is presented as the 70th archbishop in a long line originating from 1164, when the first Church province was established in Sweden with Stefan av Alvastra as its bishop.⁴⁰

A possible interpretation is that the church wishes to underline continuity rather than break, quite in line with the document *From Conflict to Communion*, which laid the basis for the event in Lund.⁴¹ Roman-Catholic scholars in Sweden have however reacted strongly against this historical narrative and accused the Church of Sweden of unjustly claiming continuity with the Catholic tradition in Sweden. Not only had the reformation been a severe break with the Catholic past, according to their view, they also see it as a brutal reform imposed from above against the will of the people.⁴²

From the perspective of this article, it seems clear that the Church of Sweden aims to stress continuity, not only with its reformation heritage, but also with a longer tradition of the presence of the Christian Church in what is now called Sweden. This continuity helps to authorise the simultaneous ambition of ecumenical bridge-building and playing a pioneering role with regard to a number of ecumenically sensitive issues. From this perspective, it is quite logical that the Church presents 2017 as "The Reformation Year 2017". The Church does not, according to its website, "celebrate", or even "commemorate" the Reformation,

³⁹ Fredrik Heiding SJ and Magnus Nyman (eds.), *Doften av rykande veckor: Reformationen ur folkets perspektiv* (Artos förlag: Skellefteå 2016).

⁴⁰ Antje Jackelén was elected on 15 October 2013 and installed in office on 15 June 2014. (<https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/om-arkebiskop-antje-jackelen>, 6 November 2016)

⁴¹ *From Conflict to Communion - Including Common Prayer. Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017. Report of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity* (Evangelische Verlagsanstalt and Paderborn: Bonifatius GmbH Druck – Buch – Verlag: Leipzig 2013).

⁴² Anders Piltz and ten other Roman-Catholic scholars, in: *Dagen*, 10 September 2014. (<http://www.dagen.se/debatt/svenska-kyrkan-forsoker-ta-monopol-pa-historien-1.92453>, 5 November 2016)

but presents it as an ongoing event, which has been in process for 500 years and will continue still. The Church declares it will put extra energy in the course of 2017 into the weaving together of past, present and future.⁴³

In a document published on the Church's official website, Professor Cristina Grenholm, in charge of theology and ecumenics at the national Church office, writes that the Christian confession starts not with letters, but with life. A living confession is a prerequisite for a tradition that will not be forgotten, but rather remain important.⁴⁴

That the Church is in need of continuous reform — *semper reformanda* — thus seems to be the dominant paradigm of the Reformation year 2017, at least at the national level of the Church of Sweden. It might fit well with the expectations of those people who “believe in belonging”. Parish journeys to Wittenberg in order to walk “in the footsteps of Luther” are popular nowadays.⁴⁵ But what “walking in his footsteps” really means is open for interpretation. The photo of Pope Francis and the Archbishop of the Church of Sweden embracing each other may be a sign of a new era of reformed walking together. Roman-Catholics and Lutherans in Sweden might need a longer process of truth and reconciliation in preparation for the walk, negotiating many and contradictory images of short-term and long-term winners and losers, not only with regard to spirituality, but also to gender, sexuality and human dignity.

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⁴³ <https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/reformationsaret2017>, November 5 2016 (translated into English by the author)

⁴⁴ Cristina Grenholm, “Bekännelsen börjar i livet.” (<https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/bekannelsen-borjar-i-livet>, 6 November 2016)

⁴⁵ Göran Agrell and Peter Strömmer, *I Luthers fotspår: En resebiografi* (Cordia: Stockholm 2010).