

# Free the Bishops from the Politicians

## Column: "The Department of Salvation"

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**Nine of Sweden's thirteen bishops** want to abolish the church's legal right to conduct weddings. A reason they have given (*Dagens Nyheter* 6 February) is that the imminent "gender neutral" marriage law was developed without the church's participation. Perhaps they also wish to avoid a new, lengthy, painful internal conflict, such as occurred over the issue of female pastors.

In a normal case, one might think this should settle the matter. A large majority of the church's leaders see this as the best solution. But in ecclesiastical matters Sweden is not a "normal" country. In ecclesiastical matters Sweden is unique, because it is not the church's people and leadership that determine the church's faith and practice. Instead, politicians from the political parties control the church -- politicians who in many cases probably seldom or never set foot in the church.

**This system has not come about by accident.** It is a purposeful effort from the beginning of the 1900s, driven mainly by the Social Demokrat party. Very few Swedes know about this history. I write a little about it in my book *Omvänd [Convert]* (published by Libris in 2008) and I am gathering material for a whole book on the topic. To put it briefly, at first the Social Demokrats wanted to abolish the state church. They changed their approach in the 1920s, deciding to retain the state church and make it a part of the Social Demokrat state. The state church was to be used to "free Sweden from Christianity."

**In the 1930s the Social Demokrat Minister for Church Affairs** Arthur Engberg expressed it this way: "Let's begin by getting rid of the bishops and introducing a supreme board with a General Director for the Royal Department of Salvation."

Here was sown what we reap today, a church in which political groups in the General Synod – the "church's parliament" – control pastors and bishops. Bishops may attend their sessions, but have no vote.

Now nine of these bishops have spoken out. They differ among themselves on the underlying issue, the view of homosexual marriage. But they are united in considering that this issue is so difficult that the church ought to give up its right to perform legal marriages. And what happens next? *Kyrkans Tidning* [the Church of Sweden's periodical] interviews politicians in the church's parliament, the General Synod. A majority of them oppose the bishops on this matter. Forty

percent of them think, putting it a bit more politely, that the bishops should shut up. They “disapprove of the bishops’ action ... finding it both unnecessary and inappropriate” (*Kyrkans Tidning*, No. 7/2009).

Olle Burell, Social Demokrat leader in the General Synod says (*Dagen*, 11 February): “I am astonished that without advance warning nine bishops ... are presenting a viewpoint in conflict with what a majority of the Riksdag [Sweden’s Parliament] supports.”

**The bush league policy-makers in particular** place themselves over the bishops of the church in a great ecclesiastical affair -- deriding them, bullying them, denigrating them. The worst thing is that this is a system that has gone on and developed for decades. And the bishops have let it continue, resigned themselves to it, conformed to it. Therefore it seems a bit liberating that these nine bishops finally express a viewpoint of their own. I don’t want by any means to overstress this feeling of liberation. It is more like galley slaves lifting their oars and asking for ten seconds of rest from rowing.

My conclusion: free the bishops!

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