



*Strong Religion and Mainstream Culture: Youth, Education and Technology.* Daniel Lindmark, Umea University, 09.11.2017–10.11.2017.

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## Strong Religion and Mainstream Culture: Youth, Education and Technology

The conference “Strong Religion and Mainstream Culture: Youth, Education and Technology” was organized by Daniel Lindmark (Umea) as part of a research network on “European Bible Belts.” The European Bible Belts initiative consists of research teams at the universities of Umea in Sweden, Amsterdam in the Netherlands, and Siegen in Germany. Research is premised on the observation that in European countries, just like in the United States, people with strong religious faith and adherence to strict norms are clustered in specific geographic locations that can be described as Bible Belts.

Following an initial conference in Amsterdam last year, the conference in Umea was opened up to researchers outside the network to discuss the relationship between strong religion and mainstream cultures, especially in regards to youth, education, and technology. Borrowed from the American Fundamentalism project (directed by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby), “strong religion” refers to religious communities characterized by a search for purity as well as uniformity of belief and practice that distinguishes them from the society they live in.[1] In his keynote, WOLFRAM WEISSE (Hamburg) recounted the scholarly career of sociologist Peter L. Berger, who famously coined and then retracted the secularization thesis. Weisse highlighted that highly secularized and pluralized societies like many European countries harbor pockets of strong religion, an observation further elaborated by the conference participants.

In the first session on education, JOHN EXALTO (Amsterdam) introduced the particular case of reformed schools in the Netherlands. Constituting about 2.5 percent of all schools, these religious institutions are fully

paid for by the government and constitute a pillar of Dutch Bible Belt culture. Exalto concluded that despite their conservative countercultural character, these schools contributed to a pluralist society and good citizenship. LINDA VIKDAHL (Stockholm) reported on religious education in Sweden where a supposedly neutral class on world religions is compulsory for all students. She found that in one particular case, where students hail from many different immigrant backgrounds, the class did not lead to open dialogue and understanding. Instead, students felt pressured into the role of spokespersons for their particular religious group, whether they were personally observant or not. Rounding out the session was a contribution from Kenya, where JOSEPH MISATI AKUMA showed that church-ed youths were less likely to contract AIDS or become teenage parents than their unchurched peers.

The school was also the setting for ORI KATZIN’s (Tel Aviv) study on conceptions of ultra-orthodox Jews in Israel. Pointing out that ultra-orthodox believers segregated themselves from the rest of Israeli society, she investigated the attitudes that students in public schools, who had no personal contact with them, had towards the ultra-orthodox. Katzin found that despite the fact that students gleaned their information from TV reports and public sentiment that was often prejudiced against them, students were willing to be open-minded about the ultra-orthodox and emphasized a shared history and Jewish identity.

JAKOB DAHLBACKA’s (Turku/ Vasa) was the first of several presentations on the Laestadian reform movement in Scandinavia. Named after Lars Levi Laestadius

(1800-1861), the conservative Lutheran movement has strong pietistic and Moravian influences and today dominates Bible Belt cultures in Norway, Sweden, and Finland. Dahlbacka focused on Finland, reappraising the prejudice that people in the so called Ostrobothnian Bible Belt were adverse to education. He found that the Laestadian communities' emphasis on family life and local ties paired with a very low rate of unemployment led them to take up professions close to home. This combination might explain why the people seldom ventured far to take up higher education at universities outside the region but instead took up artisan and social professions in their home communities. ANDREAS HÄGER (Turku/ Vasa) added another dimension to this discussion by portraying the Finnish media discourse on Laestadianism. While Laestadians complained that they were mistreated by the local press, he argued that these rural communities were so close knit that identities could be gleaned from news reports even when journalists were careful not to reveal them. TIINA HARJUMAA (Rovaniemi) also focused on Laestadians in Finland, showing that the religious community was striving to "seek the peace and prosperity of the city" (Jer. 29:7) and therefore was highly involved in local politics. Finally, LIS-MARI HJORTFORS (Umea) introduced her study on Laestadianism amongst the indigenous people of the Lule Sami area, arguing that converting to Laestadianism allowed the Sami to carve out their own space in the face of colonial and missionary developments.

As part of the European Bible Belt network, VERONIKA ALBRECHT-BIRKNER (Siegen) and her colleagues presented their work on Christian music in Germany. Combining theological and musicological approaches they analyzed the career of the band "Damaris Joy" between 1975 and 2005. They analyzed the lyrics regarding their biblical references and theological content and compared this to the musical style and the history and associations connected with it. The band adapted any style popular at a given time – including rock, pop, blues, and country – and used them more or less appropriate to the genre to transport a Christian message.

Music was also a focus in IBRAHIM ABRAHAM's (Helsinki) presentation. He gave an episodic overview over Pentecostal youth culture in English speaking countries, especially in the United States, Australia, and South Africa. He showed the tensions Christian bands had to negotiate between delivering a hip musical style to their youthful audience and maintaining orthodox views and demeanors in alignment with the churches that invited them. In the same session, ANJA-MARIA BASSIMIR

(Mainz) reported how the foremost evangelical magazine in the United States, Christianity Today, in 2014 gave out a new maxim of „Beautiful Orthodoxy“ – presenting Gospel truth and maintaining journalistic ethics. Using interviews and field notes, she showed how the young editorial staff adapted the dictum to their areas of work and integrated it in the various fields of publishing, from the traditional print publications and advertising to podcasts and social media.

In the final session, THOMAS LINDGREN (Umea) contrasted the stereotype of peaceful Islam in Indonesia before the Islamic terrorist attacks of 2002 with the later stereotype of Indonesia being a hotbed of religious terrorism, rejecting both images. Instead, he analyzed the radicalization process, arguing that cognitive radicalization generally did not lead to violence. An emotional radicalization, however, fed by feelings of victimization, marginalization, oppression, and humiliation created a predisposition that could lead to violence. His colleague MATTIAS DAHLKVIST (Umea) focused on nonviolence in the thinking of Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, the founder of the Delhi-based Center for Peace and Spirituality. He traced how Maulana Wahiduddin Khan became increasingly outspoken on nonviolence after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, engaging in interreligious dialogue and increasing and professionalizing his digital presence to spread a message of peace.

While the papers were of different scope and quality, the conference managed to bring together an impressive international group of scholars to discuss the relationship between strong religion and mainstream culture. The term "strong religion" proved to be wide enough to connect studies on heterogeneous groups and highlight the existence of pockets of strong faith all across Europe and the world. Just what counts as extraordinarily strong religion depends on the "mainstream culture" in light of which a religious group is viewed. This concept, however, remained largely underexposed and revealed rather the particular bias of the perspective from which scholars spoke. While the ambiguity and contingency of the terms precluded direct comparisons, individual papers sparked interest in future comparative studies for example in the political involvement of Laestadians in different Scandinavian countries. Another topic that emerged was the comparison of attitudes towards religious education in various countries, especially the funding of religious schools or different models of religious education in public schools in various European countries. Whereas youth and education received much attention, the aspect of technology was rarely dealt with in

conference papers. References to increasing use of social media or keen understanding of market and media mechanisms, however, indicate that the topic deserves further investigation. The conference succeeded in introducing scholars to each other and finding a larger platform for shared problems and ideas that might lead to future collaborations.

#### Conference Overview:

##### *Keynote Lecture*

WOLFRAM WEISSE, Religious pluralization and secularization: Opposites or two sides of the same coin?

##### *Session One: Education and Socialization*

GERDIEN BERTRAM-TROOST and JOHN EXALTO, Strong religion in liberal society: The case of strong religious schools in the Netherlands

LINDA VIKDAHL, There is much at stake: About interreligious dialogue in school between upper and secondary pupils south of Stockholm, Sweden

JOSEPH MISATI AKUMA, Religion, modernity and socialization of adolescents and young people in Kenya

##### *Session Two: Conceptions and Attitudes*

JAKOB DAHLBACKA and GERD SNELLMAN, Youth and education in the Ostrobothnian Bible Belt

ORI KATZIN, Mainstream Israeli teenagers' conceptions of Ultra-Orthodox Jews: humanism, criticism, respectfulness

ANDREAS HÄGER, Laestadianism in the news: Media and strong religion in a Finnish case

##### *Session Three: Class, Politics and Identity*

SVEIN IVAR LANGHELLE, Self-confident farmers and Nordic revivals

TIINA HARJUMAA and TAPIO NYKÄNEN, Conservative Laestadianists in regional politics in Northern Finland

LIS-MARI HJORTFORS, Sami identity and Laestadianism in the Lule Sami area in Sapmi, Sweden and Norway

##### *Project Presentation*

VERONIKA ALBRECHT-BIRKNER, FLORIAN HEESCH, REINHARD KOPANSKI, HANNAH STRUNK, RUTHILD STÖHR, Why should the devil have all the good music? Strong religion meets rock

##### *Session Four: Encounters with Pluralism*

IBRAHIM ABRAHAM, Ambiguity, instability and translatability in Pentecostal engagements with contemporary youth culture

ANNEKE PONS-DE WIT, Sincere and accessible: Believing in plurality in the Dutch Bible Belt

ANJA-MARIA BASSIMIR, Beautiful Orthodoxy in an ugly universe: position and implementation of this new directive by the evangelical magazine Christianity Today and its young staff

##### *Session Five: Strong leaders, radicalization and nonviolence*

ANSSI OLLILAINEN, Strong leaders: Authorization of leaders among neo-charismatic revivalism

THOMAS LINDGREN, Mechanisms of religious radicalization: Pathways toward violence

MATTIAS DAHLKVIST, Islam, peace and nonviolence: the thinking of Maulana Wahiduddin Khan

##### Note:

Gabriel A. Almond / R. Scott Appleby / Emmanuel Sivan, *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalism around the World*, Chicago, IL, 2003, e.g. p. 17.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/>

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