Less Religion, Better Society? On Religion, Secularity and Prosperity in Scandinavia.

Kjell O. Lejon and Marcus Agnafors

Linköping University Post Print

N.B.: When citing this work, cite the original article.

This is the authors' version of the work. It is posted here by permission of Wiley Periodicals and Dialog, Inc. for personal use, not for redistribution. The definitive version was published in:

Kjell O. Lejon and Marcus Agnafors, Less Religion, Better Society? On Religion, Secularity and Prosperity in Scandinavia., 2011, DIALOG-A JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY, (50), 3, 297-307.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6385.2011.00619.x>

Postprint available at: Linköping University Electronic Press

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:liu:diva-70398>

Less Religion, Better Society? On Religion, Secularity, and Prosperity in Scandinavia

By Kjell O. Lejon & Marcus Agnafors

Secular Society as Ideal

Historically, it was often believed that the godless society was necessarily a society plagued by all kinds of deprivation and misery. Today, a different view seems to be gaining ground: rather than using the religious society as the ideal, the new ideal is the secular society. This is often manifested through a critique of historical or existing religious societies: where religion is allowed to permeate society, human liberties get curtailed and the society is effectively prevented from flourishing. A society is more likely to be prosperous the less religion it harbors.

Claims of this kind have been advanced in recent works written by the so-called new atheists—public intellectuals who have taken an active stand against religion. In his book *The End of Faith*, Sam Harris boldly states that real religion (not phony, moderate religion) is likely to cause extreme and deadly violence.ⁱ In a similar vein, Richard Dawkins points to the destructive potential of religion, and Christopher Hitchens argues that religion is a path inevitably leading to misery.ⁱⁱ In Sweden, widely reputed as one of the most secular countries on earth, the leader of the Swedish Humanist Association asks, “Had the world been a better place without religion?” and answers, “A Humanist's simple answer is yes.”ⁱⁱⁱ In academic writings, similar claims are made in more subtle language. Philosophers such as Robert Audi, John Rawls, and Jürgen Habermas have, in different ways and to different degrees, advocated restrictions on religious believers when acting in the public realm.^{iv} Uncontrolled religion is treated with suspicion, and needs to be harnessed in civilized society.

Recently, in his book *Society without God: What the Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us about Contentment*,^v sociologist Phil Zuckerman has argued that the secular Scandinavian societies are leading the societal prosperity league. Sweden and Denmark, he argues, are something like secular heavens (p. 2). Secularity is, Zuckerman claims, “actually strongly correlated with impressively high levels of societal health, social well-being, and an admirable moral social order” (p. 20). Zuckerman's book is unusual, as it is written by a scholar within social sciences who is familiar with the field of religious studies, instead of a highly conservative evangelical or an atheist scientist rejecting everything that does not fit into his pet positivistic theory. As such, it is refreshing and intriguing reading. However, we are critical of Zuckerman's use of Scandinavia as a secular ideal.

Whence Scandinavian Prosperity

In this article, we want to qualify the perception of the secular society as an ideal. In particular, we wish to comment on the use of the historically Lutheran Scandinavian nations as secular role models. While not denying that the Scandinavian societies have come a long way in realizing a version of the good society, we are worried that much of the common rhetoric builds on simplifications. Using Zuckerman's book as a case in point, there are three major points we want to make in this article.

First, we challenge the perception that Sweden and Denmark are secular societies. We will not do so by arguing that the Scandinavians are really covertly committed American-style Christians; rather, we seek to add complexity to the discussion. We attempt to do this by referring to some recent studies on the religious situation in Scandinavia. Second, we point to the fact that in order to make a convincing case, one must correlate prosperity with secularity in the right domain of society. Our claim is that the relevant domain is the cultural sphere writ large, not merely the domain of individual beliefs and practices. Third, we argue that any serious argument pointing to the Scandinavian societies as an ideal must also try to explain the causes of their prosperity. Without such a historical narrative, one is easily lured into the mistaken perception that what caused Scandinavian prosperity is secularity *per se*. Our argument is that a reasonable account of such historical causes will have, at its center, the typical Scandinavian brand of Lutheranism. When such an account is provided, it should also be obvious that to the degree that Scandinavia is now secular, it is very much a *Lutheran* secularity.

Society without God

Despite a common claim, it is hard to find an explicit and coherent argument connecting secularity and prosperity. A prominent exception is Phil Zuckerman's *Society without God*, and we will therefore use it as our point of departure, sometimes straying into more general issues and problems.

Zuckerman's basic claim is modest: "Society without God is not only possible, but can be quite civil and pleasant." He adds: "In fact, a good case could be made that they [secular Sweden and Denmark] are among the 'best' countries in the world, at least according to standard sociological measures" (p. 4). Zuckerman's thesis runs contrary to the opinion of several religious leaders and other influential Christians in the United States, who argue that without religion, society is doomed. Zuckerman names Pat Robertson, Ann Coulter, Bill O'Reilly, William Bennett, and Keith Ward as his opponents.

Religion and Prosperity

However, there is plenty of evidence that Zuckerman really wants to defend another, much stronger, thesis: the idea that secularity actually *causes* societal prosperity, while religion is an obstacle to societal prosperity. This is evident not only from Zuckerman's strong emphasis on the wonders of the secular societies, but from numerous scattered remarks throughout the book: religion is often "one of the main sources of tension, violence, poverty, oppression,

inequality, and disorder” (p. 18); he states that he will “make it very clear that a relative lack of religion in a given society [...] is actually strongly correlated with impressively high levels of societal health, social well-being, and an admirably moral social order” (p. 20); he makes an effort to dismiss the case of the notoriously secular states (for instance, China, the Soviet Union, North Korea, and Albania) as irrelevant, even though this is, strictly speaking, not needed to prove his thesis (pp. 20–23). All in all, it is difficult to get rid of the impression that Zuckerman tries to build a narrative where there are close connections between secularity and prosperity, and where the causal arrow points from secularity to prosperity.

Zuckerman supports his basic thesis with various sociological studies, as well as with his own findings. The actual background of the Zuckerman's book is his one-year stay at Aarhus University, Denmark. Denmark and Sweden are widely recognized as two of the most secular nations on earth; both countries exhibit surprisingly low scores on most measurements of religiosity. Zuckerman confirms the secular nature of the two countries by presenting the result of his own research. While living in Aarhus, Zuckerman conducted 149 interviews with persons he met in various contexts, thereby gaining a picture of the Scandinavians' relation to belief, organized religion, and death. The Scandinavians, he concludes, simply do not care much about religion.

At the same time the two secular Scandinavian countries are two of the world's most prosperous countries. Zuckerman sings the praises of Denmark's and Sweden's prominent positions in a number of areas: child mortality, education, welfare and equality, crime, environmental awareness, economic prosperity, and so on. Compared to the religious United States, secular Denmark and secular Sweden seem to be well ahead.

As mentioned above, the point Zuckerman claims to be making is that a secular society does not need to be plagued by immorality, unhappiness, and severe economical and social problems. Clearly, Zuckerman argues, the case of Sweden and Denmark contradicts such a view. For the Scandinavian societies are clearly secular according to Zuckerman: “most people are nonreligious and don't worship Jesus or Vishnu, don't revere sacred texts, don't pray, and don't give much credence to the essential dogmas of the world's great faiths” (p. 2). The Scandinavians hardly ever attend church, they do not believe in the notion of sin, and they do not think that the Bible is divine in origin (pp. 24–25).

Nonetheless, very little seems to be rotten in Denmark and Sweden: they consistently place near the top of the Human Development Index; they have remarkably high life expectancy and have the lowest child mortality on earth; they sport high levels of both economic wealth and equality; they are at the forefront of gender equality and have some of the best health care on the planet, and it is available for all citizens; crime is low; and so on (pp. 25–29). Bluntly put, the Scandinavian countries appear to be the best societies in the world. From this, the conclusion appears easy to draw: the secular societies are leading the way toward greater prosperity.

What Defines a Secular Society?

If one wants to show, with the help of empirical evidence, that secular societies are prosperous, then one must first find societies that are secular. But this is not an easy task. The first problem facing the researcher is which conceptual framework to adopt. When, for instance, is a society to be categorized as “religious,” “secular,” or—more to the point here—as being “without God”? Assuming that the conceptual problems are satisfactorily dealt with, the researcher is then faced with the next difficulty: how to measure religiosity, or secularity, in society. These are well-known and often-discussed difficulties, and there is little point in rehearsing them here. Zuckerman is well aware of them, and explicitly acknowledges the conceptual difficulties involved (pp. 23–24, 95). However, while recognizing the problems, he never attends to them. Instead, he cites Robert Putnam, who sensibly says that we have to work with the material at hand, not lament on all its deficiencies (p. 24). Now, that might be good advice when the material is as good and complete as it gets; not, however, when there is further evidence available. This is exactly what Zuckerman does: he admits to be relying on inadequate material, but does nothing to fix the situation.

Crunching Numbers

Let us give a few examples. Identifying religiosity with certain beliefs and practices is common, as is reliance on large surveys such as the Eurobarometer and the World Values Survey.^{vi} Both build on large samples and questionnaires involving questions such as “Do you believe in God?”, “How often do you attend a religious service?”, “Do you believe there is a life after death?” and so on. Religiosity, or the lack thereof, is thus characterized by propositional beliefs and/or as certain types of behavior. The problem is that most questionnaires do not take into account the cultural differences concerning discourse and concepts—a problem Zuckerman notes.

For instance, it is well-known that Americans have a tendency to exaggerate their religiosity, while Europeans tend to understate theirs.^{vii} Somewhat simplified, Americans wear much of their religiosity on the outside; Europeans (and Scandinavians in particular, we would say) tend to keep their religious convictions private. However, such a problem is a further reason why Zuckerman's account is interesting, as he conducts a qualitative study rather than relying solely on large-scale surveys. He conducted 149 interviews on religion and meaningfulness. Of those, 121 people were interviewed face-to-face (35 couples—usually husband and wife—or in smaller groups) and 28 via telephone. Among his interviews were 75 men and 74 women; 103 were Danes, 39 were Swedes, and 7 were immigrants from Chile, Iran, and Turkey living in Denmark.

Personal Interviews

But although Zuckerman is on the right track when trying to look beneath the numbers, he fails to gather material in accordance with scientific standards; a point he concedes (p. 186). The interviewees were not selected according to strict random criteria. Instead Zuckerman chose to select people at what he considered to be appropriate occasions, or for convenience, such as parents of children in his own children's school classes, his children's teachers, his

neighbors, his co-workers while in Denmark, friends, and so on. When Zuckerman mentions that there are “religious” people in Scandinavia, he stresses the vagueness of the religious content, and the lack of concrete religious expressions among people who call themselves religious, as well as more unusual examples of believers.

One is a man who turned to God in prayer out of desperation after his wife's infidelity—“I was so far out mentally” (p. 129). Another example of a more traditional Christian faith is given—but again, this person is described as a person who has suffered from depression. A third example of a believer is a Danish Lutheran minister's wife who holds a more non-traditional faith; a fourth is an active believer in Norse myths. In all, Zuckerman's portrait of believers is hardly neutral—neither in its methodology nor in description. The section is summarized by the statement that the believers are “of course atypical” (p. 149).^{viii} The number of informants, and the way of selecting them, clearly is not sufficient to generalize the findings. Hence, Zuckerman's argument ends up relying heavily on various large-scale surveys—the type of surveys he himself has deemed problematic.

Specific Beliefs

That Zuckerman not only relies on deficient material, but also dismisses useful evidence, becomes clear when he underpins the secular character of the Scandinavians by referring to their lack of belief “in the very notion of ‘sin’” and argues that “[a]lmost nobody in Denmark and Sweden believes that the Bible is divine in origin” (p. 7). But this is exactly the kind of statistic that must be, and can be, put into context. The concept of sin does not play a major role in Swedish culture in general, and it is also, as a notion, unlikely to occupy a central position in the minds of most Scandinavian believers. Theologically, sin and Christian belief are unlikely to be separable, but this does not stop the average Scandinavian, and the average Scandinavian believer, from stating that they do not “believe in the very notion of ‘sin’.” Right or wrong, the notion of sin is simply seen as secondary to the idea of a loving God. It does not take much of an effort to see this, once one notes the common rhetoric in Scandinavian churches. Thus, trying to bring out the secular character of Scandinavians by referring to “beliefs in the notion of ‘sin’” is clearly not a good strategy.^{ix}

Traditional Language

The average Christian in the United States might view such beliefs with some suspicion, but to argue that Scandinavians are not very religious is to stretch the evidence too far. A further mistake that must be attributed to Zuckerman is his adoption of a rather depressing view of religion in general, and of Christian faith in particular. Scandinavians are not very religious, he claims, since they do not believe in “the literal, punishing, vengeful, merciful, or forgiving God of the Bible” (p. 7). Of course, if all the components in such a description are necessary criteria for Christian faith, then most Scandinavians are indeed secular. The problem is that most Scandinavian Christians would not agree with Zuckerman's characterization of true faith.

The problem of interpreting religion in Scandinavia is highlighted in Ina Rosén's 2009 dissertation, *I'm a Believer—but I'll be Damned if I'm Religious*.^x It concerns the difficulty of using traditional religious language in interviews and surveys. When the focus groups in her survey/interviews talked about religion, they connected to what Rosén calls “routinized religion,” a category in line with her concept “packed religion.” When using this type of category or conception, religion appears “thin, cultural, declining or diffuse” in Denmark—a statement, therefore, in accordance with Zuckerman's findings. However, when Rosén used an “unpacked” conception of religion, she was able to conclude that three-quarters of the Danes are believers;^{xi} a “glaring contrast” to Zuckerman's results. In sum, after passing a religious language barrier, this recent study shows that a “majority of Danes believe or are willing to identify as religious to a lesser or greater extent.”^{xii} Putting the pieces of evidence together thus allows a critical perspective on Zuckerman's contention that the Scandinavian societies are secular.

A more sophisticated discussion on the dialectics of religion and the secular in the Scandinavian societies is presented in *Katedralen mitt i staden* (The cathedral in the center of the city), with the subtitle *Om ateism och teologi* (On atheism and theology), authored by Mattias Martinson, professor of systematic theology and studies in world views at Uppsala University.^{xiii} When he presents his “atheistic theology,” a sort of immanent study of religion, he also describes the interdependency of religious and anti-religious or atheist arguments in the Scandinavian situation, stating that both religion and atheism are returning to the Swedish stage. This “return” of both secularism and religion can be seen as an uncertainty in the cultural identity, a sign of prevalent cultural “worry” on all sides.

A Post-Secular Society

Some observers would describe the situation as *post-secular*. Religion and faith are still, in the midst of modernity, engaging the Scandinavians; an indication of that is the fact that some well-known individuals in the Swedish cultural establishment recently have written books on their conversion experiences to Christianity (such as Elisabeth Sandlund and Göran Skytte).^{xiv} Again, it is highly problematic, if not impossible, to separate religion from culture in the Scandinavian setting. There are various interdependencies and interactive flows between the two entities that can be described both as indispensable aspects of Scandinavian history and contemporary mentality.

From Martinson's perspective, we should not talk about *either/or* (dichotomize) or *both/and* (synthesize) but of a *neither/nor*; that is, a culture in which neither faith in God nor a life beyond the implications of faith has taken shape. But it also means that criticism of religion by necessity is taken place within the framework of broken theology.

Further, the observations made by Owe Wikström, professor of psychology of religion at Uppsala University, contradicts Zuckerman's shallow argument on Scandinavians' religiosity. In the second edition of his book *Det bländande mörkret* (The glaring darkness),^{xv} Wikström states the following when he is referring to the Swedish situation in 2007 in comparison to

1994: “The public discussion on questions of life, spirituality and Christian Faith has become more open.” In addition, he writes that there has been “an obvious shift” between 1994 and 2007: “While we earlier could find a great interest in alternative, non-European spirituality in ancient civilizations, not least Buddhism, Sufism or Cabbala, I am beginning to recognize a greater curiosity of precisely spiritual life within Christianity.”^{xvi} Thus, it is not a growing secularity that Wikström points out, but merely a shift of interest among the Swedes within the religious realm, and maybe somewhat surprisingly, a greater interest in the Christian belief system. All this contradicts Zuckerman's claim that, in Scandinavia, religion is a “non-issue” (p. 102).

It is also worth noticing the new openings on the religious scene that have been seen lately, both in the media and generally. In Denmark, a bestselling children's book in the spring of 2010 was *Sigurd fortæller Bibelhistorier* (Sigurd tells Bible stories).^{xvii} In Sweden, one of the most respected morning papers, *Svenska Dagbladet*, recently ran a series on the theme that religion is back in Sweden.^{xviii} Well, it could be argued that religion isn't *back*, since it never left. It only changed form, and Scandinavians are now beginning to rediscover a theological language.^{xix}

How Secular is Secular?

We would like to make a last point regarding Zuckerman's characterization of Sweden and Denmark as overwhelmingly secular. Zuckerman never makes the obvious observation that although the Scandinavian countries might be the *most secular* countries in the world, it does not necessarily mean that they are *very secular* countries. This is not the same as to say (as Zuckerman does) that Sweden and Denmark happen to be culturally religious. Our point is that even when looking merely to the beliefs and practices among individual Swedes and Danes, Sweden and Denmark cannot be accurately described as thoroughly secular. Looking solely at beliefs registered through large-scale surveys, the studies show that Sweden and Denmark have somewhere between 30 and 50 percent believers, a percentage which has been fairly stable for the last twenty years.

All this raises the obvious question of why the Scandinavian countries are so often—as they are in *Society without God*—portrayed as overwhelmingly secular, or even as totally secular. To use an analogy, few would label a country as, say, overwhelmingly white when 40 percent of the population is black. This means that any correlation Zuckerman believes to exist between secularity and prosperity is faltering, as it is highly questionable whether or not there actually *is* a substantial secularity with which to correlate prosperity. Moreover, it is presupposed, without further justification, that equal shares of the religious and the secular have the same degree of impact on society. At most, Zuckerman is entitled to make the claim that there is a correlation between a country being moderately religious and prosperous.

Admittedly, it must be recognized that Zuckerman makes a series of clever observations about everyday life and Scandinavian everyday thinking. Some of the real differences between the situation in the U.S. and Scandinavia, which Zuckerman mentions, are certainly apt. The

relatively strong position of secular thinking in Denmark and Sweden is very clearly shown throughout the volume—both through the interview results and through Zuckerman's own observations. It is correct that religion, including Christianity, holds a weak position in the public discourse in Scandinavia, as compared to the United States. But this is not the same as saying that the Scandinavian societies are devoid of God or religion. Zuckerman's picture of Scandinavia needs to be considerably more nuanced. He ignores or downplays certain elements of the Scandinavian situation, which causes him to prematurely conclude that Scandinavia is overwhelmingly secular. Using Scandinavia as an instance of a secular ideal thus seems to be a mistake, simply because it can be doubted that Scandinavia is sufficiently secular.

A Religious *Ethos*

There is another—and related—problem in Zuckerman's characterization of Scandinavia as overwhelmingly secular. While Zuckerman readily recognizes that the contemporary meaning of *secular* is dependent on the meaning of *religion*, he appears not to have realized the wide range of applications of *secular* in relation to society. Zuckerman focuses mainly on the areas of individual beliefs and practices. But this is sketchy ground for labeling a society as secular, especially if one wants to point to a link between secularity and prosperity.

Zuckerman presents his work as a reply to various American fundamentalists who see religious beliefs and practices as essential to societal prosperity. Actually, however, Scandinavians are more religious than commonly believed. The argument in this section is thus not so much directed against Zuckerman's reply to the fundamentalists as it is a critique of those who narrowly identify a secular society as one where the citizens lack explicit religious beliefs and practices. Our claim is that a secular—or religious—society is foremost identified through (for lack of a better term) the society's *ethos*.

Religious “Belonging”

Ironically, Zuckerman argues that the Christian faith in Scandinavia is more a cultural than a religious phenomenon.^{xx} This is ironic, since this means that Scandinavia really *is* Christian, provided we do not reduce culture to be some kind of useless surplus we carry around. Religion in Scandinavia is (also) a cultural phenomenon, and that is precisely why Scandinavia is *not* secular. It is true that the Swedes and the Danes belong—and quite a large majority of them—to the Lutheran folk churches, and that this belonging is not necessarily linked to any belief system. It is definitely more of about *belonging* to than *believing* in specific Lutheran doctrines.

But Scandinavian culture and its history are intimately connected with religion, and Scandinavia has a strong Lutheran ethos. Such an ethos involves both a certain mentality and politics, and societal norms and values, expressed through various institutions. This is important, since a society can have a religious ethos, or religious character, while many of its citizens nevertheless profess to be atheists (and *vice versa*). While the religious convictions

of a population are a part of the society's ethos and certainly play a role in shaping the society, the primary vehicle for change and societal design, leading to prosperity, is the public expression of the ethos itself through norms, values, policies, and laws.

The Political Realm

Perhaps the most important sphere is that of policies and laws, which are made in politics. However, Zuckerman attempts to bypass the political level, arguing that in a democracy there is an unbroken chain of decision-making from the individuals in society to the policies and laws governing the society (p. 120). The disregard of the political level is explicit on two occasions in *Society without God*: when Zuckerman discusses the case of atheist states, and when he looks at the causes of Scandinavian secularity.

Zuckerman's discussion of the atheist states contains nothing new. The case of brutal atheist states is frequently discussed by the new atheists, who for obvious reasons dislike being associated with individuals such as Stalin, Mao, and Enver Hoxha. After having expounded the depressing history of self-proclaimed atheist states, Zuckerman claims that such an atheism-related misery should be disregarded as evidence of the depravity of atheistic societies, since the atheism in question was imposed by the political establishment, and was not the expression of a genuine atheism of the people. Zuckerman also claims that the people in the atheistic countries were, in fact, highly religious:

When a religion is repressed by a dictator—that is, when a nonelected cabal or individual fascist takes over a country and attempts to forcibly abolish belief in God—such a country cannot be assumed to be truly void of religion. When we are dealing with a situation of governmentally forced atheism, what we might call ‘coercive’ or ‘imposed’ atheism, we cannot assume the people themselves have actually lost their faith in God (p. 22).

What claims are involved here? Basically two things: first, what matters is the beliefs of the general population; and second, the populations of the destitute societies were actually religious. The problem with the concept of “secular society” chosen by Zuckerman should be obvious here: it seems pretty odd to claim that the Soviet Union was *really* a religious society. Rather, it was a very secular society, manifested primarily through its politics. The general mistake of confusing the individual level with the level of society and politics becomes clear in the above reasoning, but Zuckerman—obviously caught in the mistaken rhetoric of the general discourse—misses it. Add to this the fact that if we decide to go deeper, beyond mere correlation and instead to look at causation, the level of politics becomes even more urgent. In the case of the atheist states—the Soviet Union, Albania, and China, among others—the level of societal prosperity had *everything* to do with the beliefs of the political elite (which were atheistic) and *nothing* to do with the beliefs of the ordinary citizens (which may or may not have been religious).

It is surprising that Zuckerman makes this mistake, although he is hardly the first. It is especially surprising since he himself tries to show that in the Scandinavian case the

connection between citizens and the political sphere is undistorted; an attempt that reasonably is motivated by the idea that the political sphere is, after all, the primary cause of prosperity, or the lack of it. In the case of Sweden, a quite reasonable cause of widespread secularity is the impact of the dominance of the Social Democratic Party, which historically has been both anti-clerical and anti-religious, and which marginalized Christianity step by step. But Zuckerman dismisses such an explanation by arguing that the Social Democratic Party was not an agent in its own right:

The only problem with locating the Social Democrats as a source of Danish and Swedish irreligiosity is that it begs the question: why would Danes and Swedes allow the Social Democrats to dilute or weaken their religion? After all, if religion was so important to them, surely they wouldn't have elected the Social Democrats, year after year, decade after decade. Perhaps the secularity and relative anti-religiosity of the Social Democrats, rather than *shaping* the will and the sentiments of the people, actually *reflected* them (p. 120, italics in original).

In theory, Zuckerman's claim appears reasonable: in a perfect democracy, the beliefs and convictions of the people determine the character of a society's politics. In real life, however, such an argument is not convincing. As any political scientist will tell you, in real life, the political sphere is not merely, or even mostly, about implementing the undistorted will of the citizens. Therefore, arguing that actual policies and laws are, in general, the direct result of the views of the majority is a mistake. As we will see, while Scandinavian politics historically contained secularizing tendencies promoted by the Social Democratic Party, it was also an extension of a manifestly Lutheran ethos.

The Role of History

Zuckerman abstains from discussing the causes of the Scandinavian prosperity. This is a mistake. Zuckerman states that his goal in *Society without God* is to falsify, or to show unreasonable, the claim that only a religious society can be prosperous, as irreligion in a society will entail poverty, immorality, and general misery. By correlating secularity and prosperity, Zuckerman thinks this goal will be achieved. But, in fact, it is far from certain that correlation suffices. To make a plausible interpretation of the view Zuckerman argues against, then the interpretation must include a temporal dimension. Few, if any, believe society to be a static entity—a society is always heading in some direction, most often toward greater prosperity or deepened misery. The claim of the fundamentalists must therefore be that a secular society will fall, *within a reasonable time frame*, into immorality, poverty, and distress. Changes on the level of society are a long-term affair and the causes determining societal prosperity are not to be found in the present or during the last couple of years. This means that Zuckerman's argument is open to the objection that the secular and prosperous society (if it exists at all) is unstable and will soon—due to its lack of religious faith—come tumbling down. That may or may not be the case. Our point is that it is too soon to settle this question, as secular societies are a quite recent phenomenon. Most of us would not hesitate to agree that a secular society surely *can* be decent, at least when using non-religious

measurements. The problem is that even if we should intuitively agree with that claim, we would do so without the backing of solid reasons.

Looking behind the mere correlation to the historical causes of the current prosperity is therefore required. However, such historical reflection is absent in Zuckerman's work. When Zuckerman briefly touches upon the subject, he mentions non-religious causes, such as a small size of the populations, homogeneity, collective farming, successful trade, and “the impressive development of their welfare states,” and adds, almost reluctantly, that the prosperity “could also quite possibly be related to the influence of centuries of state-sponsored Lutheranism” (pp. 29–30). This is, no doubt, an account that suffers from a secular bias. In fact, most of the characteristics associated with the Scandinavian welfare state can be traced back to Scandinavia's Lutheran roots.

The narrative of the causes behind Scandinavia's prosperity is indeed the weakest link in Zuckerman's account. Here, Zuckerman's naiveté and lack of understanding of historical realities and important cultural aspects stands out. Each of the Scandinavian success factors mentioned by Zuckerman is disconnected from its Christian heritage, which has characterized the Scandinavian societies for centuries. This lack of understanding of the Scandinavian cultural, political, and religious history becomes embarrassing on a few occasions. One example is when Zuckerman, taking a cue from Rodney Stark, begins to speculate on whether or not the Swedes and Danes have ever been believers in God, and speculates on faith during the Reformation era (pp. 120–127). As for the former, Zuckerman barely manages to put together an argument *ad ignorantiam*. As for the latter, the fact that the Swedish people initially were not particularly interested in the Lutheran Reformation was not due to a lack of belief in God, but by their unwillingness to leave behind Catholic customs and Catholic faith. It was faith, not the lack of faith or disbelief, which made the Swedes reluctant to accept Lutheran ideas.

Lutheran Influences

Providing a complete account of the ideas, circumstances, and actions leading up the recent prosperity of the Scandinavian societies cannot be done here. Some of the important influences, without which there arguably would not have been a prosperous Scandinavia, have to be mentioned however. Luther's doctrine of vocation can be seen as a cornerstone of the idea of the welfare state theory of the right to a job.

Another cornerstone in the building of the Scandinavian welfare states is the biblical idea that all humans are created equal, reinforced by Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, which created the conditions for the Scandinavian societies' emphasis on social welfare, and for that matter, on equality. In addition, the Protestant work ethic has been a driving force behind economic prosperity, as it contributed to the creation of a middle class.^{xxi}

Apparently, all this is off Zuckerman's secularist radar; no attention is given to this background in his brief account of the prosperous Scandinavian states. Nor does he note that

individualism was driven not only by Enlightenment thought, but also by the theology of the Pietists and Evangelicals. Finally, there is no mention of the strong connection between Lutheranism and literacy, which was one of the most important factors in the creation of a basis for societal prosperity. While Zuckerman notes that Sweden and Denmark were among the first nations to “push for widespread literacy” (p. 118), he fails to link this to Lutheranism.^{xxii} ²² This lack of historical and theological reflection is so evident that the overall impression of Zuckerman's work is seriously marred. Societal prosperity is never built from one generation to the next; it develops over centuries. Secularity, on the other hand, as a Scandinavian social phenomenon, has a relatively short history.

An Unconvincing Argument

Without a doubt, Zuckerman's book makes for interesting reading. But the arguments it delivers are unconvincing. It is full of weaknesses, and despite arguably being one of the strongest attempts to connect secularity and prosperity, it nonetheless fails to do just that. Even though methodological shortcomings are scholarly failures and have to be pointed out, perhaps a bigger problem with Zuckerman's view is the inability to ensure proper historical context and causality. A more deepened and nuanced perspective would, in some important respects, lead to partly different results when it comes to the fundamental issue of the Scandinavian approach to faith and the relation between religion and prosperity.

Endnotes

ⁱ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (London: Free Press, 2005).

ⁱⁱ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam, 2006); Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007).

ⁱⁱⁱ Christer Sturmark, *Tro & vetande 2.0: Om förnuft, humanism och varför människor tror på konstiga saker* [Belief and knowledge 2.0: On reason, humanism and why people believe in strange things] (Nora, Sweden: Nya Doxa, 2007), 256. Our translation.

^{iv} Robert Audi, *Religious Commitment and Secular Reason* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Jürgen Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere,” in *European Journal of Philosophy*, 14:1 (2006), 1–25; John Rawls, “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” in John Rawls, *Collected Papers*, ed. Samuel Freeman (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 573–615.

^v Phil Zuckerman, *Society without God: What the Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us about Contentment* (New York: New York University Press, 2008). All page numbers in the text refer to this book.

^{vi} European Commission, “Public Opinion,” http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm (accessed May 25, 2011); World Values Survey, “World Values Survey,” <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/> (accessed May 25, 2011).

^{vii} Peter Berger, Grace Davie, and Effie Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe? A Theme and Variations* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008), 12.

^{viii} There might be a possibility to interpret Zuckerman in a different way, i.e., that he sees his religious informants as atypical religious Scandinavians. However, a more obvious interpretation is that he sees a believer as an atypical Scandinavian.

^{ix} It can be added that while “sin” might not be a popular notion in Sweden, the notion of “salvation” (Swedish: frälsning) is gaining ground among young people, who increasingly regard it as an important concept. See Magnus Hagevi, “De postsekulära generationerna,” *Det nya Sverige* 41 (2007), 59–73.

^x Ina Rosén, *I’m a Believer—but I’ll be damned if I’m religious: Belief and religion in the Greater Copenhagen Area. A focus group study*, vol. 8 of *Lund Studies in Sociology of Religion* (Lund, Sweden: Centrum för teologi och religionsvetenskap, 2009).

^{xi} *Ibid.*, 157.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, 163.

^{xiii} Mattias Martinson, *Katedralen mitt i staden: Om ateism och teologi* (Lund, Sweden: Arcus, 2010).

^{xiv} Elisabeth Sandlund, *Drabbad av det oväntade* [Struck by the unexpected] (Stockholm: Cordia, 2005); Göran Skytte, *Omvänd* [Converted] (Örebro, Sweden: Libris, 2009).

^{xv} Owe Wikström, *Det bländande mörkret* (Örebro, Sweden: Libris, 2007).

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, 17f. Our translation.

^{xvii} Sigurd Barrett, *Sigurd fortæller Bibelhistorier* (Aarhus: Politiken/Danmarks Kirkelige Mediecenter, 2010).

^{xviii} “Guds återkomst” [The return of God], in *Svenska Dagbladet*; February 23–25, 2010 and March 2–4, 2010.

^{xix} The inability to articulate religious beliefs, which Zuckerman attributes to a “gentle agnosticism” (p. 163), is arguably due to this loss of theological language.

^{xx} Zuckerman claims that the religiosity in Scandinavia is “cultural;” that is, the Scandinavians identify with historically religious traditions, and engage in ostensibly religious practices, without truly believing in the supernatural content thereof (p. 155).

^{xxi} Dag Thorkildsen, “Religious Identity and Nordic Identity,” in *The Cultural Construction of Norden*, ed. Øystein Sørensen and Bo Stråth (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1997), 138–160.

^{xxii} For a historical account of the links between the Lutheran church and education, see Todd Green, “The Partnering of Church and School in Nineteenth-Century Sweden,” in *Journal of Church and State* 50:2 (2008), 331–349. See also Bo Stråth, “Nordic Modernity: Origins, Trajectories and Prospects,” in *Thesis Eleven* 77:5 (2004), 5–23, who links Lutheranism not only to education, but also to Scandinavian social liberalism with its mix of freedom and equality.