

The Role of Religion in the Establishment and Decline of Social Taboos in Norway, Sweden, and Iceland

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The Nordic countries¹ are among the countries whose populations hold the most liberal attitudes towards moral issues. Moral issues deal with questions of right and wrong in regard to life and death, marriage, reproduction, and religion. Some of the moral issues that are now tolerated (and in some cases embraced) in many Nordic countries include divorce, same-sex marriage, abortion, euthanasia, embryonic research, religious apathy, gender egalitarianism, cohabitation, and single parenthood (Pew Research Center, 2018). This is not to presume that these practices are universally practiced or accepted (see table 3), but rather, the issues raised are generally no longer considered blasphemous or taboo by the population.

In addition to the liberal views held towards moral issues and taboos, the Nordic countries are also considered to be some of the most secular countries in the world (Inglehart, 2021). Fewer people than ever report a belief in God, participate in religious services, pray, or say religion plays an important role in their lives. For several centuries, and up until very recently, Lutheran Protestantism dominated the religious landscape of Norway, Sweden, and Iceland. These countries have all had official state churches that were the sole source of religious authority until the mid-1800's. Since then, religious pluralism, including irreligion, has flourished.

¹ Despite English speakers commonly using the terms Nordic and Scandinavian interchangeably, the term Scandinavian is usually reserved for Norway, Denmark, and Sweden according to the local definition.

This paper was inspired by topics discussed in a Scandinavian literature course at the University of Minnesota. This course focused on how new ideas of social modernity in the Scandinavian countries were often presented first in literature before they became widely accepted. Great authors such as August Strindberg and Cora Sandel used literature not only to critique the idea of rigid moral taboos, but also to explore and demand change at the individual, familial, and cultural level. The role that religious dogma placed on intellectual expression at this time—both implicitly and explicitly—cannot be overstated. Their works reflected the social conditions of the society, and Strindberg’s play *The Father* and Sandel’s short story *Larsen’s* are expositions on the pervasive taboos around marriage, gender inequality, and parenthood.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the role that Christianity played in the development and perpetuation of taboos around moral issues in three Nordic countries—Norway, Sweden, and Iceland. Further, this paper will investigate the interaction between secularization and the introduction of liberal attitudes towards these historically inappropriate behaviors. Evidence drawn from historical accounts, statistics, and literature will be used to support the hypothesis that the taboos of the Nordic countries are and have been inextricably tied to their religious status.

To begin, it is important to define what a social taboo is. According to the Oxford Dictionary, a taboo broadly speaking is a social or religious custom that prohibits the discussion or practice of certain behaviors. Taboos tend to be culturally specific, although there are striking similarities across cultures. Typically, discussion or participation in taboo behaviors are associated with some negative outcome for the individual or the society at large, such as sickness, miscarriage, or poor food production, which are inflicted by a supernatural being (Oxford University Press). Virtually all cultures analyzed for this paper have historically instilled

“pro-fertility” taboos, especially so in cultures where high infant mortality and short life expectancy exists (Inglehart, 2021). One such example is the taboo against incestuous sexual relations. There is an evolutionary advantage to cultures and religions that discourage such relationships because this results in a lower incidence of congenital birth defects from inbreeding depression (Bittles et al., 2002). Taboos against same-sex marriage and abortion are obvious from an evolutionary fitness perspective as well—they are not associated with the production of offspring. However, it is important to note that social taboos were not constructed with an *a priori* understanding of genetics, biology, or fitness. Rather, adherence to certain taboos tended to correlate with an actual, substantive improvement in both biological or societal success and thus they were naturally reinforced by the cultures they operated in.

There are other benefits of upholding social taboos which are worth mentioning. Taboos against divorce increase the likelihood that children will be raised in a two-parent family able to provide them with relative security, stability, and the resources necessary for adequate physical and intellectual development. A litany of research in developmental psychology suggests that children whose parents divorce are at heightened risk for a number of problematic behaviors, lesser academic achievement, and social difficulties (Amato, 2000). Arguably just as concerning is the evidence that these risks seem to carry over into adulthood (Amato, 1991). Taboos against the consumption of alcohol—specifically in Iceland, which enforced prohibition from 1915 to 1989—had much the same objective of protecting young people from engaging in activities detrimental to their health and development (Hansdóttir, 2014). Taboos against these behaviors, therefore, should not be immediately dismissed as backwards or archaic, even from the perspective of today’s standards.

However, while being molded by the forces of the cultural community that a person is born into may increase the prosperity of the group as a whole, the individual is forced to give up a degree of freedom as a result. For example, the drive for sexual reproduction is undeniably one of the strongest drive's that humans experience post-puberty. In historically Christian countries—such as the Nordics countries—the most stringent social taboos tended to be around defining sexuality as an act for reproduction, and only then when certain criteria are met, such as marriage. As the Nordic countries have become less religious, acceptance towards same-sex marriage, divorce, abortion, single parenthood, and cohabitation has increased (Pettersson & Riis, 1994; Russel, 2015). The same trend is visible around views towards (and engagement in) substance use, which have softened in recent decades.

Even though a strong correlation between adherence to social taboos and religiosity has been observed in general (e.g., Olson et. al, 2016), how has this correlation shaped taboos in the Nordics specifically? What were the mechanisms that resulted in the Christian State Churches establishing and perpetuating some of the taboos mentioned above? First, it will be important to briefly explore the Christianization of the Nordic countries and how their state churches came to be the sole source of moral authority within their borders. All of the Nordic countries tend to follow a similar trajectory, although there are notable idiosyncrasies.

Norway, Sweden, and Iceland were all Christianized by Western Roman Catholicism between the 8th and 11th centuries. Conversion from Norse paganism to Christianity was largely a top-down occurrence, with baptism being either required or strongly encouraged. For example, Norwegian King Olav Haraldsson forcefully converted his country to Christianity, destroying pagan monuments and killing dissenters in the process (Lövgren & Edman, 1906). In 1000 AD, the Icelandic proto parliament Alþingi declared Christianity the official state religion (Hunter,

1965, p. 106). Sweden was the last holdout, but by 1060, Christianity had been firmly established throughout most of Sweden after King Olof Skötkonung and his heir to the throne Anund Jakob embraced Christianity (Lövgren & Edman).

The Protestant Reformation of the 1500's significantly changed the dynamics of power in the Nordics. For example, Gustavus Vasa of Sweden used the Reformation as an opportunity to establish an independent national church, free from the influences of Rome. Norway, which at the time was in union with Denmark, forcefully imposed the Reformation in 1537 by persecuting Catholic priests and Bishops at the request of King Christian III. A similar situation occurred in Iceland, which was also ruled by Christian III of Denmark–Norway (Hunter, 1965, pp. 36–37).

For around 250 years following the end of the Reformation, Lutheranism was the only religion allowed to be practiced in the Nordic countries, and there was very little distinction between church and state. Norway, Sweden, and Iceland all had official state churches (Norway, *Den norske morle*; Sweden, *Svenska kyrkan*; Iceland, *Pjóðkirkjan*). While there is some confusion about how best to regard the relationship between the churches and state in the twenty-first century (as either official, national, established, or state churches), in the nineteenth century, the distinction between church and state was inconspicuous. During this time in all three countries, secular and religious institutions were inseparable. The clergy were considered civil servants, bishops were appointed by government ministers, and church buildings were funded through taxation. People acquired automatic membership into the church after birth, and there was also a litany of laws that mandated religious participation, perhaps as a way to ensure cultural uniformity (Hunter, 1965, p. 39).

In 1845 the first piece of legislation permitting some semblance of religious liberty was introduced, first in Norway, then in Sweden shortly later. These laws permitted people to leave

their respective state churches, as long as they subsequently joined another church approved by the state. It was not until the Swedish Freedom of Religion Act in 1951 that everyone in the country had the right to practice their religion freely, and that no one was obligated to be a member of a religious denomination (*Religionsfrihetslag*, SFS 1951:680). Norway and Iceland passed similar legislation in the years following allowing for religious freedom. The Church of Sweden ceased to be the official state church in 2000. In 2012, the Church of Norway was granted additional autonomy from the state, with the current Constitution of Norway no longer referring to an official state religion (Stortinget, 2012).

Compared to Norway and Sweden, distinctions between church and state in Iceland are more difficult to discern but appear to be slowly catching up to their Nordic counterparts. For example, the Bishop of the National Church is still appointed by the President of Iceland, clergy are still employees of the state, and the Alþingi remains in charge of most Church affairs (Alþingi, 1997). In a 2012 constitutional referendum, 57% of voters were for including provisions in the new constitution on the National Church (National Electoral Commission of Iceland, 2012). It should be noted that, while around 62% of the population are members of the National Church, and only 7% formally stand outside religious affiliation (Þjóðskrá, 2021), Iceland is still one of the most secular countries in the world in terms of church attendance and belief in God.

It is important to note that the separation of church and state in Norway, Sweden, and to some degree, Iceland is a relatively recent occurrence. Up until the late nineteenth century, the state churches of these Nordic countries were the sole arbiter of what was and what was not acceptable behavior. The decisions and dictates of the clergy, with the power of the state and

scripture at their disposal, were rarely questioned, and if they were, it was done privately. To put it another way, such criticism was taboo.

In many ways, the role of the church in Nordic society at this time resembled that of the aristocracy in the old feudal system that it had gradually replaced (Lövgren & Edman, 1906). It wielded immense authority over almost all aspects of life, including but not limited to relationships (through the institution of marriage), sexuality (through its harsh condemnation of adultery, promiscuity, and abortion based on scripture), and public education (which was historically confessional). The Church—both as the institution and the system of belief—was synonymous with tradition, as is emphasized in some American religious traditions today².

The sermons that priests gave in Norway, Sweden, and Iceland were frequently used as a way to reinforce the societal norms of the time and discourage participation in actions that the Bible or the Book of Concord forbade (Lövgren & Edman, 1906). It is likely not a coincidence that eight of the Ten Commandments are prohibitions, while only two involve some call to action³. Since most of the social and moral taboos of the Christianized Nordic countries are also primarily punitive (and prior to Christianization this was reversed), it is very likely that there is a direct causal association between the establishment of the Church and the construction and perpetuation of socially conservative attitudes towards these taboos.

Literature written in this time period provides an additional layer of evidence to support this hypothesis. In Strindberg's *The Father*, the pastor character frequently argues on behalf of

² Moral prohibitions, which have largely been de-emphasized in the Nordic churches over the past fifty years, are reminiscent of beliefs in some American Evangelical Protestant churches like the Southern Baptist Convention, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, and restorationist churches such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. American Mainline Protestants (e.g., Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) more closely resemble the opinions on moral issues of their Nordic counterparts.

³ One could argue that the Third Commandment to keep the sabbath holy is also more prohibitive than motivational, as it discourages any unnecessary work on Sunday.

the male head of household. He tells him, when discussing his wife and daughter, that “You must keep a tight rein on the women folks. You let them run things too much”. This is an obvious defense on the pastor’s part of the patriarchal social structure that defined Swedish society at this time. Sandel’s short story *Larsen’s* does not explicitly mention the church, but the main character suffers the consequences of gender inequality which, as mentioned previously, was buttressed by the religious establishment. Sandel’s piece seems to highlight the juxtaposition between the outward compliance of women and their internal discontent with how they were seen and treated at this time.

This patriarchal structure, while not unique to Christian countries, was certainly supported by the clergy, perhaps because it represented tradition and order. Strindberg seemed to cast the pastor—a personification of the Church—as a collaborator (or at least a bystander) to the injustices that were being allowed to occur in the interpersonal lives of the laity. However, this critique of gender inequality seems to be larger than simple sexism on behalf of the clergy and church officials. The Church pushed back against adopting societal changes in women’s status for the same reason that virtually *all* successful institutions resist change: the current societal standards are working well enough that their existence has been assured. By making radical alterations in the foundations of society (such as giving women more control over their own affairs), the security of those on top suddenly becomes less certain and offers the possibility of a change in society’s power dynamics.

Some may argue that this relationship between the church hierarchy and the people was oppressive and tyrannical, especially so for women, who had far less rights than they do today. However, it is also important to remember that the constraints that the church placed upon people’s life choices were not unilaterally negative. Burndt Gustafsson argues that “...the

[Nordic Churches have] been among the people in all their tasks...the guardian, the conscience, the source of comfort and moral standards". It is significant that, even despite the rigid and arguably immoral prohibitions that the Church enforced, religion was still seen as a largely positive influence on life in these countries.

This strange paradox can be explained well in the book *Beyond Order*. In it, Peterson argues in this book that all hierarchies (including a state's established church) are composed of two archetypal narratives: the wise father and the tyrant. The wise father can be thought of as the component of the hierarchy that acts as a bulwark between the individual and the chaotic, destructive anarchy of nature, while the evil tyrant suppresses those under its influence in order to keep the system properly structured. While Gustafsson seems to be describing the wise father element of the Church hierarchy, Strindberg and Sandel highlight its equally prevalent tyrannical element. Both are important perspectives in order to understand why people are reluctant to give up their belief systems easily, even when those systems constrain individual freedom and perpetuate inequalities.

Now that the history of Nordic Christianity has been understood, and their role in shaping society's attitudes towards social taboos explained, it is logical to discuss the present day. As hinted previously throughout this paper, Norway, Sweden, and Iceland are becoming increasingly secular societies (see table 1 & figure 1). Church attendance—both weekly and annually—are at all-time lows, as well as belief in God, frequency of prayer, and the importance of religion in day-to-day life (see table 2). While exploring all of the effects that secularization has had on Nordic societies is well beyond the scope of this paper, exploring its effects on views towards social taboos is relevant.

While there is evidence that the establishment of Christianity contributed to the adoption and perpetuation of social taboos, it would be inappropriate to automatically extend this rationale to assume that a decline in Christianity is the reason for liberal attitudes towards historically taboo behavior. While it is the most likely explanation, there are other external factors such as economic prosperity, political movements, and globalization that may have affected religiosity and views on taboos simultaneously. While there does not appear to be a consensus on the strength that each of these factors plays, several hypotheses about the interaction between secularization and moral taboos will be discussed as the contemporary status of Christianity in the Nordic countries is explored. Sweden will be used as an example, but the trend can be observed in both Norway and Iceland as well.

In 1930, 99.7% of Swedes were members of the Church of Sweden, and 10–17% participated in weekly services. In 2019, church membership had fallen to just 56.4%, with weekly attendance hovering near 2%. In 1988, about half of Swedes said they had participated in services once or a few times over the past year. In 2016, that number fell to less than 30%. Prayer to and belief in God, as well as belief in Heaven and Hell, have also declined significantly since the 80's.

What hypotheses have been put forth to explain the rapid pace of secularization in the Nordic countries? One suggests that much of the religiosity observed prior to the 20th century was due to political power and coercion rather than true spiritual influence. People who may have preferred to disassociate with the Church were unable to (recall the strict legislation surrounding religion that most of these countries had on the books until modernity). Today, however, there are no significant legal or societal taboos against leaving the Church. If this

hypothesis is taken to be true, it seems probable that the disestablishment of formal religious practices likely preceded opinion changes around social taboos.

Another way to think of this hypothesis, inspired by Alfred Schutz' work, is that religion is the construction of a consistent and meaningful world view. Secularization therefore is the process by which a society removes the role of religious practice and symbolism in interpreting the world, often replacing it with other disciplines such as rationality and the scientific method. As the laity became more educated, it is possible that they became disenfranchised by some of the claims of Christianity that went against now well-known facts such as evolution and cosmology. It was only when people were free from strict religious doctrine that they felt comfortable discussing certain issues. Not only were there now few social consequences, but arguably more important, people felt apathetic (or disbelief) towards an omnipotent creator that would judge them for their actions.

Another hypothesis about secularization in the Nordics is that religion is simply becoming a more personal, less public practice. This hypothesis seems consistent with a general trend towards increased individual autonomy in modern society. Interestingly, those with more authoritarian views in the Nordics tend to adhere to more religious values. Taking an idea from the previous hypothesis, if one thinks of religion as a "world view", that view is no longer being mandated by the state and has become a matter of personal choice.

It is yet to be determined which of these hypotheses is correct, or if either of them is. What is not in doubt is that the Nordic countries are becoming less religious and more liberal towards discussing moral issues. Long held taboos about marriage and lifestyle established after the Reformation are now openly discussed, accepted, and celebrated. While some argue that openness about taboos suggests that morality is declining, "moral crimes" and violent crime have

actually decreased in Norway, Sweden, and Iceland over the past fifty years, suggesting a more nuanced relationship between moral *taboos* and moral *behavior*.

The evidence presented in this paper suggests that Christianity was originally responsible for the establishment and perpetuation of prohibitions on certain taboos, and as the influence of the Church has waned, a more permissive attitude towards many of them have been adopted by many.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that just because the Nordic countries do not enforce strict social taboos dictated by the Church does not suggest that they lack morality. Citizens of the Nordic countries tend to adhere to the idea of promoting the general good, happiness, and welfare of the individual. Norway, Sweden, and Iceland are ranked among the happiest, healthiest, safest, most equal, and socially cohesive countries in the world (Martela et al., 2020). It appears as though some of the values that the church provided to the people have been built into the framework of the Nordic state, such as generous social welfare and a high degree of interpersonal trust, while those that limited individual freedom like prohibitions on same-sex marriage and gender equality appear no longer prevalent.

Table 1: Percent of population members of the state church and unaffiliated, 1990–2020

Year	Sweden ¹		Norway ²		Iceland ³	
	Church of Sweden	Unaffiliated	Church of Norway	Unaffiliated	Church of Iceland	Unaffiliated
1990	89.0	-	-	-	92.6	1.3
2000	82.9	-	85.9	-	88.7	2.2
2010	70.0	-	78.0	-	79.1	3.23
2020	56.4	33.5	68.7	18.3	63.5	7.2

Source: (¹Svenska kyrkan, 2019; ²Church of Norway; ³Rósant, 2016)

Table 2: Percent of population by religiosity index, 1994

Country	At least monthly church attend.	Say religion is very important	Pray daily	Belief in God, absolutely certain	Highly religious
Sweden ¹	10	10	11	14	10
Norway ¹	19	16	18	19	17
Iceland ¹	11	34	-	-	-
United States ^{2*}	49	59	54	64	-

Source: (¹Pettersson & Riis, 1994; ²General Social Survey, 1994)

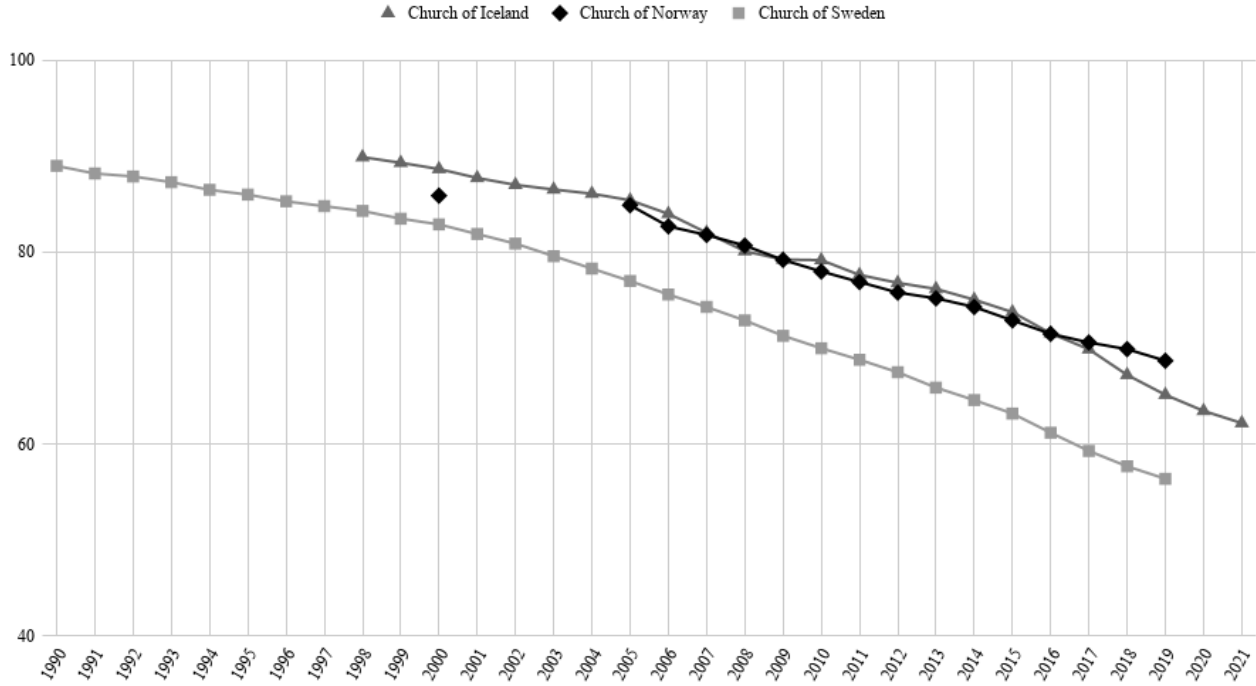
* Included for comparative purposes

Table 3: Justification of homosexuality, abortion, divorce, adultery, and sex under the legal age of consent in Sweden, Norway, and Iceland in 1990 (mean scores on 10-point scale: 1 = never justified, 10 = always justified)

Homosexuality	Abortion	Divorce	Adultery	Sex under 18
4.40	5.24	5.97	2.10	1.09

Source: Pettersson & Riis, 1994

Figure 1: Percent of population adhering to Nordic State Churches by church, 1990-2021



Source: (Svenska kyrkan, 2019; Church of Norway; Rósant, 2016)

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