

How Secular Individualism Took Over the West and How the Church Can Respond

How did secular individualism gain such a strong influence in the West? What are the roots of this philosophy? This session will address these questions and suggest ways we as Christians can communicate a Christian worldview as a better and more sustainable alternative for both individuals and society.

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- I. Protestant Europe stand at the forefront of secular-individualistic values, with Sweden as prime example.
 - A. Such values are shaped by several factors, where politics and culture are crucial tools of influencing the values in a nation.
 1. Results in a battle against three forces which oppose autonomy:
 - a. Community
 - b. Authority
 - c. The Sacred
- II. The common denominator on both secular and individualistic values is *autonomy*.
 - A. Autonomous values appear either in an *affirming* version, the intention to increase the independence of the individual, or in a *confronting* version, the opposition towards a threefold antipole to individual independence. In all these, the goal is to replace external authorities with the autonomy of the individual.
 1. This threefold antipole against which the autonomous project rebels consists of the following:
 - a. Community
 - b. Authority
 - c. The Sacred
- III. Different nations have different cultures regarding the relationship between state, family and individuals.
 - A. Germany, family and state connect.
 - B. United States, individual and family connect.
 - C. Sweden, individual and state connect in a system of *state individualism*.
- IV. The strong example of secular individualism in Sweden was shaped by
 - A. Collective political actors, primarily a hegemonous Social Democratic Party.
 - B. Cultural influencers.
 - C. Individual actors, most notably Prime Ministers and devoted politicians in those spheres that stood at the centre of value changes in society. These spheres were – in this order.
 1. The Lutheran State Church
 2. The public school system
 3. The families

- V. The strong value changes in Sweden were made possible by
 - A. A political system that gave a government party a large influence over parliament and legislation.
 - B. Devoted actors, who sometimes waited out opposition, but never retreated from their long term-goals and went to quick action whenever it became politically feasible.
 - C. Initial compromises that were immediately transformed into a new starting-point for complete reform into autonomous direction.
 - D. A too weak confrontation from the political and Christian opposition.

- VI. Each spheres contained a specific battleground, where a traditional or Sacred authority was replaced by a secular or individualistic one. The governing Social Democrats applied different tactics to accomplish their goals, and each victory was considered pivotal by both proponents and critics.
 - A. In church policy: the politization of decision-making in the State Church.
 - B. In education policy: the removal of the teaching of Christianity
 - C. In family policy: the introduction of individual taxation

- VII. Lessons to learn from the Swedish example:
 - A. Secular and individualistic values are intertwined, and as long as autonomous values are endorsed in a society, secularism and individualism propel each other forward.
 - B. The opposition towards either community, authority or the Sacred all build on the same idea of autonomy, and tend to lead to secularization. Likewise, a sound defense and expression of community, authority and the Sacred tends to diminish secularization.
 - C. When a Biblical authority in a Church gives way to a humanistic authority with individual autonomy at the centre, secularization necessary follows.
 - D. When opposition to authority is propagated, it seems to have a natural tendency to fall over into an affirming autonomy and eventually into ultra-progressivism.
 - E. It is vital to understand the foundational values at each decisive battle, regardless of what secondary values or slogans are communicated on the surface.
 - F. The issue on the agenda is rarely the real issue. The real issue for the autonomous reformers is always the complete transfer of authority to the individual.
 - G. Compromises are always temporary for the proponents of autonomy.
 - H. Look out for where the battle between
 - I. Large parts of the different spheres in society do not agree with either the values of radical autonomy or its consequences. Therefore, if all actors who are critical to the autonomous project raise the actual values at stake and join hands on the battlegrounds in question, they will win.
 - J. It takes few individuals to change a nation, if they seek and receive a mandate of change, and if they are relentlessly devoted to their cause.

*Of making many books there is no end,
and much study wearies the body.
Now all has been heard;
here is the conclusion of the matter:
Fear God and keep his commandments,
for this is the duty of all mankind.
For God will bring every deed into judgment,
including every hidden thing,
whether it is good or evil.*
Ecclesiastes 12:12b-14

Suggested Readings:

Ewert, Per *Moving Reality Closer to the Ideal: The process towards autonomy and secularism during the Social Democratic hegemony in 20th century Sweden* Doctoral dissertation, VID Specialized University, Stavanger, 2022.
Seligman, Adam B *Modernity's Wager: Authority, the Self, and Transcendence*. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000.