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Agnosticism Without Ontology? The Search for New Conceptual Tools to Describe the Semi-Secular Condition in Sweden

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Abstract: This article discusses the future role of agnosticism and its possible meaning in a post-secular, Western cultural sphere, with a special focus on the situation in Sweden. A characteristic of this context, which gives agnosticism a different role than before, is a diminishing interest in traditional ontological questions such as the existence of God. This assumption is illustrated by a comparative analysis of four examples of how atheism and secular views of life are shaped today, all of which in one way or another cross the line between religious and secular but also give philosophical questions about what exists or not a diminished role. It is argued in this article that a revised concept of agnosticism, detached from ontological thinking, together with such concepts as semi-secularity, post-atheism and post-secularity, can offer conceptual instruments for a better understanding of the main tendencies in our time.

Keywords: agnosticism; post-atheism; post-secular; semi-secular; Sweden

1. Introduction

A large group of people in Sweden are not committed to the indigenous Christian tradition, even though they still formally belong to the Church of Sweden (the former state church). Nor have they turned against religion by actively embracing the neo-atheist movements that were at their strongest in the early 2000s but have now diminished in terms of membership of organised atheism and media activity. Rather, the population at large, which used to be labelled the 'secular majority', is now in an intermediate space between these opposing forces.[1]

In this situation in society, there is at least a superficial similarity with the philosophical position of agnosticism, which in its traditional sense can also be said to be in an intermediate space between opposing positions. The question is, is it just a superficial similarity, or are there more parallels to be drawn with agnosticism that can help us to better understand the contemporary religious landscape in Sweden?

The researcher Ann af Burén [1] has coined the term 'semi-secular people' for this group that has so far been somewhat invisible to research; a group she estimates at 70% of the Swedish population [1] (p. 218). Burén's assessment is confirmed by sociologist of religion Erika Willander [2] (pp. 37–38), who estimates the number of semi-secular people at 75%, which means that this group can be regarded as the new mainstream. According to Burén [1], the invisibility mentioned above is because people in the semi-secular group are difficult to fit into ready-made compartments. The usual divisions between 'religious' and 'secular' or 'believers' and 'non-believers' are difficult to apply here. Moreover, few semi-secular people are likely to be interested in older debates about the relationship between belief and non-belief that have made an impression on Swedish society in the past.

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Some of them believe in something, but often no more than that. According to Burén [1], neo-spirituality only seems to be an option for a small group of people.

Why have the neo-atheist movements that gained momentum in Sweden at the beginning of the 21st century not proved particularly attractive to the semi-secular group? Why not take the full step to an atheist position if you have already left the church in practise? The Swedish atheist organisation Förbundet Humanisterna increased its membership in the early 2000s, which at its peak amounted to just over 5000 individuals, in comparison to the Church of Sweden's more than 5 million members in 2024. Interest in organised atheism is therefore marginal. Why are more people not joining?

The lack of interest could be because traditional atheism, including the slightly modified neo-atheist variant, has difficulty filling the void left by established religion.[2] As emphasised by philosophers and others, atheism does not really have a positive alternative to offer but consists more of abstract reasoning [3]. It is therefore not emotionally interesting, but rather 'grey and dull' [4] (p. 71). In terms of the history of ideas, it seems to have already reached its peak through its close connection to the modern era [5]. In its Swedish version, it is also, in my opinion, not very intellectually stimulating due to its weak connection to newer philosophical currents.

If we look at Swedish society today, atheism cannot offer a faith or an intellectually satisfying platform. Contrary to what many may have wanted to believe in the past, traditional atheism does not appear to be the natural step for the semi-secular group. However, the situation is slightly different for agnosticism, to which we will return.

A similar conclusion regarding the lack of appeal of atheism can be drawn from the material in Ann af Burén's thesis [1]. A characteristic feature of the people she interviewed is that they generally oscillate between secular-sounding descriptions and formulations that veer in a more religious direction. They have a 'both-and' mindset, which indicates that they are not particularly interested in participating in a polarising discourse of the 'either-or' type that characterises traditional atheism, where people are encouraged to choose between opposing positions. Burén has recently been criticised by philosophers of religion for not paying attention to non-propositional forms of belief; a view that further widens the register of the intermediate space she explores [6].

To whom or what should people in the semi-secular group turn if they long for meaning and depth in life, for a sustainable basis for living, or if they have any other spiritual needs? How might this group move on and find their own identity? What kind of literature on the issue of worldviews might they find useful and what role, if any, does agnosticism play in all this?

The inadequacy of atheism in its traditional form, characterised by a strong opposition between belief and non-belief, to meet people's spiritual needs has been noted, not least by atheists themselves. The Swedish theologian Mattias Martinson has emphasised that atheism 'has for some time been entering a phase in which it is wrestling with problems that are theologically important in a partly new spirit' [7] (p. 36). In this new phase, it is possible to distinguish different groupings of 'reformed atheists' exhibiting certain differences but united by the ambition to mitigate the opposition in one way or another. One group consists of those who seek to change atheism from within and make it more existentially relevant, while others intend to break with the atheist framework in whole or in part. We begin with examples from the group wanting change.

2. Breaking Away from Traditional Atheism—But Within Its Boundaries

One book that has attracted attention in the Swedish media is Alain de Botton's book Religion for Atheists [8] (translated into Swedish in 2012). It is currently available in 38 libraries in Sweden, which indicates a good distribution. Unlike other atheists who

struggle with similar problems, de Botton does not want to revitalise atheism by trying to construct a comprehensive atheist philosophy of life that will function as a kind of replacement for religion. Instead, he wants to pick and choose what is useful from existing religions when the doctrinal or supernatural framework is stripped away.

In his book, de Botton emphasises that one must be able to be both a committed atheist and at the same time be open to the fact that there is much in the world of religion that is interesting, useful and consoling. He opposes what might be called atheistic fundamentalism, which is characterised by a desire to indiscriminately remove everything that has to do with religion. Instead, he emphasises that even without a belief in God, it is possible to feel reverence for religious concepts and rituals.

According to de Botton, religion was created to fulfil two basic needs: for people to live together peacefully and for us to cope with all the suffering that surrounds us, including our own. These needs, he says, persist even in a secular world. The religiously characterised strategies that have been developed to meet these needs can, he emphasises, also work to some extent for non-believers. Then again, all the stories of miracles can be as false as you like. Alain de Botton also talks about how society has been 'unfairly impoverished' by throwing religion overboard too easily [8] (p. 14).

The open approach to religion found in de Botton thus represents a kind of retreat from the more 'dogmatic' strand of atheism. One consequence of this late-modern and more humble approach is a blurring of the boundary between faith and atheism, which can be said to reflect post-secular tendencies in culture. The focus also shifts from questions of truth to those of practical utility.

According to Mattias Martinson, this retreat is far-reaching. In a review of de Botton's book in the journal Respons, Martinson describes it as 'surprising': 'The avowedly atheist author chooses to present religion in a predominantly positive light, despite the fact that he assumes that religion rests on completely false notions' [9] (p. 60). Furthermore, in the same review, Martinson notes that de Botton 'seems to be more critical of contemporary atheism and secularism than of religion' [9] (p. 60). One of Martinson's main criticisms is that de Botton's book contains contradictions. For example, emphasising the advantages of religion point after point and at the same time distancing oneself substantially from its core is itself contradictory.

In conclusion, one might ask whether an agnostic framework would better harmonise with de Botton's case and make the presentation less contradictory. More generally, if, like de Botton, the ambition is to mix religious and secular elements, would agnosticism be a more appropriate philosophical superstructure or, alternatively, would it be better to go one step further and treat the question of existence as irrelevant (in comparison with questions of practical utility)?

Another book that has also attracted attention in the Swedish media is Sam Harris' Waking Up [10] (translated into Swedish in 2016). Harris became internationally known as one of the initiators of the new atheism along with people like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. The new atheism had a strong anti-religious flavour. In Harris' latest book, there has been a shift in emphasis towards a more selective stance, which I think surprises some of his former atheist friends.

Like de Botton, Sam Harris emphasises that religion contains something important that must not be discarded. What is important here is the core of experience—according to him universal—of, for example, boundless love, compassion for everything that exists and moral goodness [10] (pp. 8–9). This core, Harris argues, can be embraced even if the supernatural framework and doctrinal content are stripped away. Similar ideas appeared in his earlier book The End of Faith [11], where the final chapter is preceded by a 200-page anti-religious diatribe in which Islam is identified as a problem. However, in Waking up,

the human significance of such a universal core has become the main theme. The criticism of religion is now more like sporadic gunfire in the background where its function seems to be to convince other atheists that he has not abandoned his old positions.

Harris also wants to preserve what is useful in religion, but here, as we have already seen, it is a question of what he perceives as an underlying essence rather than elements of concrete religious practise. He links this essence to properties of human consciousness, a kind of inherent potential. Harris' programme also involves replacing what he sees as the religious supernatural framework with a scientific one, based on contemporary research on human consciousness. It is perhaps worth mentioning that, as the book reveals, he experimented with drugs in his youth and had so-called transcendence experiences.

However, the terminology used in the book is not exclusively scientific. There is also a clear influence from Buddhism, among others. In contrast to other more traditional atheists, he emphasises that science and secular culture have so far been inadequate for a more detailed understanding of human existence: '... there is more to understanding the human condition than science and secular culture generally admit' [10] (p. 6). Unlike de Botton, there is also a connection to something like New Age, as Harris is interested in what has long been called an altered state of consciousness.[3] Here, the boundary between atheism and New Age is blurred.

As far as I can see, Harris' programme could equally well be carried out using an agnostic framework. This would better harmonise with the influence of Buddhism and the proximity to New Age themes. It is unclear what significance a theoretical rejection of the existence of God, so-called 'positive atheism', has for the implementation of his programme. Perhaps it is a residue that has become superfluous?

Both de Botton and Harris represent a break from traditional atheism but still want to try to stay within its framework. They are both clear that the supernatural framework including doctrines needs to be removed. Whether they then consistently succeed in adhering to this principle is an open question.

The following common features of de Botton and Harris can be discerned:

- A desire to apply a principle of discernment, to discard dogmatism and the supernatural in the literal sense, while retaining what is useful. Thus, in contrast to traditional atheism, there is a clear desire not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. This approach means that so-called metaphysical questions are pushed to the background and replaced by a pragmatic approach.
- The idea that there is a positive core (most evident in Harris) that can be distilled from religion as a historical phenomenon. The belief in the possibility of formulating such a universal core reveals that at least Harris is still firmly rooted in a rationalist tradition of thought.
- Clear tendencies to move beyond the religious/secular divide: no longer needing to choose sides in an absolute sense but instead applying the principle of discernment.
- Both de Botton's and Harris' thinking has some similarities with liberal Protestantism. There too, there has been a tendency to use reason to select what was considered sustainable, a rejection or downplaying of dogma, and an attempt to extract a core. In the 19th century, this core had an ethical character, but today it is perhaps mysticism that is most prominent. It is in relation to this liberal Protestantism, and in Harris' case also the New Age, that the line between the 'reformed' atheists and religion becomes most blurred. Given that de Botton draws his examples primarily from Catholic tradition, as Martinson points out, this intellectual closeness to the liberal Protestant project is somewhat curious.
- In both cases, allying with or designing one's own variant of agnosticism would create a more consistent theoretical framework. There are signs that the emphasis on the

traditional question of God's existence is diminished or treated as less interesting. This heralds a post-atheistic state that corresponds well with the semi-secular situation in Sweden.

What follows is an examination of a group of thinkers who differ from the former in that they do not reject the idea of the existence of God but leave it open or leave it aside. Otherwise, there are many similarities.

3. Breaking Away from Traditional Atheism—But Partly Outside Its Boundaries

One example of people in this group is the Swedish professor of medicine Stefan Einhorn, who published a book entitled En dold Gud-Om religion, vetenskap och att söka Gud (A Hidden God-On Religion, Science and the Search for God) [12] back in 1998. Like de Botton, Einhorn believes that religion holds important wisdom for us, which in our time is needed to deal with the major problems in society. In his later book, Den sjunde dagen (The Seventh Day) [13], he gives many examples of this wisdom and develops it further in his book Konsten att vara snäll (The Art of Being Kind) [14], where he also emphasises that religion is useful for maintaining ethical structures [14] (p. 130). Like Harris, he is looking for a God or specific experiences that will form an underlying core for all the major religions. But Einhorn prefers to speak of mysticism rather than of spirituality. A stronger emphasis on existence as a mystery and an emphasis on the limits of science also distinguishes him from Harris.

Like Harris, Einhorn has some links with the New Age. In the book The Seventh Day [13], structured as a dialogue between father and son, there are what in religious studies are sometimes called neo-Gnostic elements. In it, Einhorn has his father say that 'man is divine in his innermost being' [13] (p. 131) but has him add that this is only a potential, which is all too rarely realised. This talk of the divine core of man is not only connected to the New Age, but is also, as mentioned here in passing, a strong feature of popular culture (see, for example, Dan Brown's book, The Da Vinci Code, and others).

Unlike both de Botton and Harris, Einhorn, at least in his earlier philosophy of life books, is attracted to esoteric traditions, to the idea of a hidden knowledge that existed alongside the great world religions. It is difficult to know, though, just how important this interest is.

Another example of a break from atheism that departs from the framework is the philosopher Mark Vernon, who in 2007 published a book entitled After Atheism. In the autobiographical elements, he describes his earlier background as an Anglican priest, but how he then lost faith in the teachings and lifestyle of the Anglican Church [3] (pp. 1–7). He then left the priesthood and describes in his own words how he became a hard-core atheist of the old school. This, he says, felt liberating for a while. But even that did not give him peace of mind. He soon realised that traditional atheism lacked what he needed, namely a sense of purpose and something to nourish him spiritually.

The third phase of his life, which explains the title of the book, is characterised by a willingness to go beyond both traditional Christianity and atheism. What he comes up with he calls 'agnosticism'. But it is not agnosticism in the narrow sense we know from, for example, the Swedish philosophy of life debate, which is merely an intellectual opinion according to which we cannot know whether there is a God or not. In his case, it is rather a question of cultivating a daily openness to life in which we constantly remind ourselves that reality is so much more than we can understand with the help of science and our current knowledge. Like Einhorn, he thus emphasises the idea of existence as a great mystery and stresses the limits of science.

One source of inspiration for Vernon is Christian mysticism in the Middle Ages, and, in particular, apophatic mysticism, which cultivated so-called negative theology—we can only say something about ultimate reality by saying what it is not [3] (pp. 122–127). However, unlike these mystics, he believes that one does not need to embrace belief in the existence of God in order to appreciate and use their reasoning. In this respect, there are some similarities with Harris, although their works differ in other respects. Vernon, for example, has a much stronger critical attitude towards science.

Vernon's high regard for Christian mysticism causes him similar difficulties as de Botton. Can one be so appreciative of mysticism and at the same time leave the question of the ontological reality of mysticism completely open? The question is further complicated by the fact that the Christian mystics themselves could sometimes feel hesitant to speak of God as existing, since according to some classical thinkers, like St Thomas Aquinas, the term 'existence' is applicable only to phenomena of finite reality. But this hesitation belongs in a different intellectual context from modern atheism's rejection of God's existence, and these contexts should not be confused. How Vernon's agnosticism is to be related to this somewhat intricate problem of the concept of existence is difficult to determine.

The following common features of Einhorn and Vernon can be discerned, features that characterise them as a distinct post-atheist group:

- A critique of scientific fundamentalism (scientism). Instead, they emphasise reality as mystery.
- A preference for mysticism. There is a bridge to Harris, but they do not clearly distance themselves from God and there are no links to modern consciousness research. The endeavour to find a scientific framework for the mystical experience is thus lacking.
- The belief in God that one is open to but has not taken a definitive stand on (nor does one feel the need to take a stand on) has an impersonal character—it does not denote a personal God.
- The boundary between religious and secular in the current culture is even more blurred, since the spiritual attitude to life that one wants to advocate is not based on or does not presuppose a position on the question of whether God exists or not. The question of existence therefore seems to have lost weight.

4. Beyond Fixed Pairs of Opposites?

Is it possible to discern trends in the literature that could constitute the next step for the semi-secular group or characterise an approach they could adopt? All four of the thinkers discussed here can be characterised as a 'rediscovery' of religion. But this rediscovery is not characterised by an uncritical return to an established religious tradition, but rather by approaching the existing religious tradition from new, self-chosen starting points. These are characterised by selectivity, rationality (rationalism), a strong emphasis on personal experience or existential relevance, a functional approach in which older doctrinal boundaries become uninteresting and, in some of them, a prominent critique of tradition (most clearly in Harris and Vernon). Tradition is valorised in all of them, although not the existing one, but in a personally 'reformed' version. For some, this valorisation goes hand in hand with a downplaying of the importance of science in shaping personal attitudes to life.

If these four examples are used to discuss the question of the return of religion to society, it is not a matter of trying to copy the past, but, as in the case of traditional atheism, one of trying to detach oneself from a historical heritage. But the detachment itself in this new cultural phase has taken on a much less absolutist character and includes an openness to incorporating elements of an older religious tradition. A prominent feature is the blurring of the line between the religious and the secular. The more the functional approach and the principle of discernment prevail, the more irrelevant this demarcation

becomes on a practical level. The fact that it may continue to live on in people's minds for some time is another matter.

Both the new openness to tradition and the loosening of boundaries that previously helped to define people's identities could be described as a post-atheistic condition; a description that could fit a country like Sweden and complements the sociological use of the term 'semi-secular'. On a cultural level, at least in a Northern European context, there can be no return to an atheism characterised by absolute opposites.

If we take the four examples presented above as indicators, the future is neither religious nor secular but needs to be described in some other way. A similar observation in a Nordic context has been made by the theologian Tage Kurtén, who, in an article first published in 2013, writes: 'At the beginning of the 21st century, people's lives must be understood beyond the secular-religious distinction' [15] (p. 259). He envisions an 'increasingly holistic way of understanding society, culture and human life' [15] (p. 259). Similar reasoning recurs in the debate on post-secularity, which has been going on for almost 20 years in the academic world.

Perhaps we are now in a cultural situation where even the non-religious person is disappearing in societies previously described as 'secular'; a situation where the choice of 'non-religious' as a personal identity no longer seems an authentic possibility. This is not because established religion or religious fundamentalism is taking over, but because the sharp division between religious and non-religious and the associated dichotomies are breaking down. If the question of existence is losing its weight, what is the point of presenting oneself as 'non-religious'? Reformed atheism is one of many phenomena to blur these cultural boundaries. Similar loosening tendencies can be found in popular culture–film, computer games, and literature [16].

In the examples raised here, there are implicit or explicit (Vernon) strands of agnostic thinking. But not primarily agnosticism in the sense of an epistemological stance or an intellectual position that is about the impossibility of finding out whether God exists, but rather about letting the question of existence take a back seat and being replaced by a new focus, a new form of openness without clear stances. How then should this shift be understood? And how does it affect the meaning of the concept of agnosticism?

5. Conclusions: Agnosticism Without Ontology

To shed light on this question of the meaning of agnosticism, a distinction needs to be made between the following:

1. Agnosticism as a philosophical position in an ontological discourse that deals with questions about what exists and does not exist (in an absolute sense).
2. Agnosticism as a broader cultural phenomenon, a collective change in meaning that deals with how a historically inherited problem—the question of the existence of God—has lost importance or interest. The four examples presented here illustrate different aspects of this cultural shift in the academic and popular science spheres.

The distinction above reflects a transition from an ontological discourse to a way of speaking about questions of meaning and existential significance. Not taking a clear position for or against the existence of God can thus be formulated on an epistemological level or a level of meaning. What has here been called a 'post-atheistic' condition in parts of contemporary Western culture can be said to reflect this transition.

If we detach the term 'agnosticism' from the ontological framework (i) and instead insert it into a context of meaning of the type (ii), the term naturally acquires a diluted content, which is then primarily about not choosing a side because one sees no point in this choice. At the same time, though, opportunities are created to give the term a new, richer meaning, as exemplified by Vernon's new interpretation 'apophatic agnosticism'. In

his case, it is a hybrid between (i) and (ii) in that the mystical tradition he starts from is linked to a traditional ontological discourse, above all Neoplatonism. However, nothing prevents other forms of apophatic or mystically coloured agnosticism in the future, where the impossibility of saying anything about God in positive terms is given a different philosophical or theological guise in line with newer philosophical currents that have distanced themselves from ontological thinking.

The meaning of the concept of agnosticism that (ii) represents is an excellent fit as a further description of the state that Swedish society exhibits. But it also gives a hint of the direction the spiritual climate could take and what might be the natural step for the semi-secular majority: an increased openness to the fact that '. . . there is more to understanding the human condition than science and secular culture generally admit' [14] (p. 6).

In a pluralistic society like Sweden with significant religious and other diversity, the word 'secular' has become increasingly difficult to use. The changed meaning of the concept of agnosticism can therefore, together with terms such as 'semi-secularity' and 'post-atheism', contribute to a changed cultural self-understanding and a new narrative about the present that better reflects people's attitudes.

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Notes

[1] The term 'secular' has a twofold use in this article, one sociological and one as a philosophical or analytical tool for classifying worldviews. In the former case, the term can be applied to society as a whole or groups of people and denotes a cultural phase or condition and appears in word combinations such as "secular culture" or "secular majority". In the analytical use, the term is used to classify a certain type of life view; see, for example, the expression 'secular views of life'.

[2] The expression 'traditional atheism' refers here to a radical rejection of religion, which is based on an absolute opposition between religious belief and atheism—two binary opposites are set against each other. Non-traditional forms, as exemplified in this article, attempt to mitigate or bridge this opposition to varying degrees.

[3] New Age is a broad term that can refer to a variety of elements of a new spirituality, which also includes reinterpretations of older traditions. The elements primarily referred to in this article are an interest in Eastern mysticism, especially the belief in the possibility of reaching a higher consciousness, and neo-Gnosticism.

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