In early modern Sweden, blasphemy was regarded as one of the most serious crimes one could commit. It was subject to the death penalty and was termed *Crimen Laesae Majestatis Diviniae* – a “crime against the heavenly majesty.” In the period 1680–1789, 110 cases of blasphemy came before the Judiciary Inspectorate; these cases can be divided into the following categories: blasphemy against God, blasphemy against the sacraments, deliberate assignations to the Devil, and other blasphemies. Of the 117 accused, only nine were women and a significant number were soldiers. Blasphemy could be regarded a common subgenre within an already oral military culture.

Introduction

It is a strange and unexplained oversight that blasphemy in Sweden has not been subject to any systematic study.¹ In Sweden it has been other types of

religious crimes, generally of a more obviously intellectual nature, that have attracted the attention of religious and church historians.\(^2\) Blasphemy in early modern Sweden was termed *Crimen Laesae Majestatis Divinae* — literally the “crime against the heavenly majesty.” In early modern Sweden\(^3\) conscious and intentional blasphemy was regarded by theologians and lawyers as amongst the most severe of crimes individuals could commit\(^4\) and was subject to the death penalty prescribed by law until 1864. Since 1948 blasphemy has no longer been considered a crime at all according to the Swedish law; however it was still punished in Finland after this date.\(^5\)

In general the interpretation of blasphemy in the Swedish context has involved causing injury to something considered holy. In earlier periods the definition of the word was more specific\(^6\) and included elements that in time became obsolete, so that blasphemy in contemporary Sweden has now become no longer punishable by law. In the early modern period the definition of blasphemy was influenced by the medieval scholastic view which argued God was perfect. Therefore, ascribing to God something incomplete or denying characteristics of God, was considered and obvious blasphemy. To worship and therewith give the respect that belonged to God alone to some other party, such as the Devil or one’s ancestors or other gods, was also by defined the authorities as blasphemy.

In the seventeenth century the definition of blasphemy came to include a wide range of transgressions. Blasphemy could be a verbal statement or non-verbal action or attitude, a written offence or a profanation of holy objects. Non-verbal blasphemies could be either showing a specific attitude towards religious matters — such as for example refusal to attend church or refusing to baptise one’s child or some other individual transgression. A quite common non-verbal act considered blasphemy in early modern Sweden was stealing the sacramental wafer at the Holy Communion. Within popular belief a blessed sacramental wafer could be used for magical purposes such as becoming a so-called “free shot.”\(^7\) This a “free shot” was an indispensible method by

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2. The most important work in this field is Hjalmar Holmquist and Pleijel Hilding, *Svenska kyrkans historia, Bd 5, Karolinsk kyrkofromhet, pietism och hernhutism 1680–1772* (Stockholm: Svenska kyrkans diakonistyrelse, 1935). For more recent work see Ingun Montgomery, *Sveriges Kyrkohistoria 4, Enhetskyrkans tid* (Stockholm, 2002).

3. Early modern Sweden at the time included Finland as well, which remained part of Sweden until 1809.

4. Blasphemy as well as crimes against the Majesty of the King, treachery to one’s country and espionage where among the most severe crimes to be committed in early modern Sweden. According to the law these crimes should directly be handled by the High Court because of their gravity. Thunander, *Hovrätt i funktion*, 34.

5. The last time a person was punished for blasphemy in Finland was in 1964. The person accused was sentenced to four years imprisonment, but was pardoned after three months by the president of Finland. According to the law these crimes should directly be handled by the High Court because of their gravity. Thunander, *Hovrätt i funktion*, 34.


7. Jan Wall, “Wilth thu nu falla ned och tillbedia mig,” in *Folkestr tro och kyrkans lära om djävulen. Djävulen*, ed. Ulrika Wolf-Knuts (Diss.; Åbo: Åbo Akademi, 1990), 26. It was considered especially important as the initial words where spoken, as this meant that the substance of the bread and wine according to popular views was thereby considered changed or transmuted. Göran Malmstedt describes how the common people even could demand the elevation to be carried out even if it was a scorned catholic practice. Göran Malmstedt, *Bondetro och kyrkoro: religiöös mentalitet i stormaktstidens Sverige* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2002), 144.
which an unattainable object desired by the individual would miraculously appear and become attainable.

Having introduced some of the context around blasphemy in Sweden the aim of this article is to analyse the attitudes towards this crime in the early modern period as they are reflected in the written law, theological statements and popular beliefs. The study is based on 110 cases of blasphemy in the Judiciary Inspectorate (Justitierevisionen) — the highest legal institution in the land, during the period 1680–1789. From about 1680 it became possible to be pardoned from the death penalty by applying to the Judiciary Inspection. If an individual was pardoned from a capital sentence, this was commuted to some kind of corporal punishment (flogging, running the gauntlet) or prison on bread and water for eight, fourteen, or twenty-eight days. The intention of these harsh corporal punishments was to demonstrate the power of the state and thereby prevent others from committing the same crimes. Establishing stern didactic examples through public executions was a crucial step in the control of the individual and their behaviour. In the early modern period both capital and corporal punishments exemplified the state’s control over the body alongside its productivity and use for the state. The death penalty and the corporal punishment reminded the common people that the body belonged to the state and thereby to God. This article also focuses upon the changes in the attitudes towards the crime of blasphemy that took place in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and leads finally to conclusions about blasphemy’s relationship to religious freedom and issues of free expression in Sweden.

Blasphemy is a complicated act that should be related to the norms of the society in which it occurs. In early modern society religion became an all pervading presence producing what historians have chosen to see as an emphatically religious culture. The Christian universal hierarchy viewed through the Augustinian image of God as the highest form of existence, was made to appear as self-evident. All parts of society were permeated by church life while within this scheme atheism, in the modern meaning of the word, was supposedly unthinkable. According to a definition of atheism from 1604, atheism was not denying the existence of God, but “living as though God did not exist” that is showing an incorrect attitude towards both religion and morality in general. This has echoes in other areas of Western Europe where

8. The “Justitierevisonen” became the Supreme Court in the year of 1789 and still exists today.
9. The petitions of mercy were sent in mainly from the High Courts, but also from some military courts.
10. For unfavourable attitudes to the death penalty see also Marie Lennersand, Rättvisans och Allmogens (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsala, 1999), 192. Lennersand points out the importance of using the death penalty in this way in order to coerce the common populace deterring them from committing the same crime. Civil servants in elevated positions were never executed since, according to Lennersand, it would have served little purpose.
Epicurean thought and libertine lifestyles emerged during this time. During the eighteenth century however changes in the religious culture occurred as individualisation of religious belief happened alongside the first signs of secularisation.

Defining the Crime of Blasphemy and its Punishment
Not only was blasphemy a crime against the state but also the state took the punishment of miscreants seriously. According to the sixteenth-century German reformation theologian Melanchton, whose influence was strong in Sweden, power had to be divided between the spiritual power and the secular. In practice this meant that these two had separate areas of duties and should not interfere with one another. Nonetheless the state authorities were, according to Melanchton, obliged to be the voice and the custodian of the Decalogue in the Bible and were charged to punish all kind of transgressions against it.\footnote{Sven Kjöllerström, 
*Guds och Sveriges lag under reformationstiden* (Lund: Gleerups, 1957), 4.} As the punishment for blasphemy was death by burning at the stake\footnote{One person accused of blasphemy was also burnt alive in the year of 1693. Riksarkivet Stockholm, Justitierevisionens utslagshandlingar, 1693, 21 April, bunt II, no. W 67 ½ b.} or beheading these could not be enacted by the church, just as in other European countries. Within Lutheran views of the church/state relationship all capital punishment was to be carried out by the state. The “qualified” death penalty\footnote{Qualified death penalty means that the execution is preceded by other sorts of corporal punishments such as the mutilation of the body or torture. Parts of the body — such as hands, tongues, heads, etc. were displayed on stakes as a clear exemplary warning against others contemplating the same crime. Arthur Thomsson, *I stocken. Studier i Stockstraffets historia* (Lund: Acta Regiae Societatis humaniorum litterarum Lundensis, 1972), 79.} with additional pre-execution punishment of blasphemers was used in Sweden as late as the eighteenth century.\footnote{Soili-Maria Olli, “Visioner av världen. Hädelse och djävulspakt i justitierevisionen,” *Skrifter från Institutionen för historiska studie* 17, Umeå universitet (Umeå: Umeå Universitet, 2007), 63.}

A blasphemer in early modern Sweden had still to undergo both secular and church punishment. In addition to the secular punishment there was a church punishment that meant publicly confessing an individual’s shame for the crime committed.\footnote{This kind of punishment was used within the Catholic Church but not abandoned in Sweden when it embraced Lutheran belief.} Like related practices in the Calvinist churches of Scotland and the Netherlands such penances involved standing or sitting at a designated place in church during the service on one or two occasions. The sinner had then to confess their violation and ask both God and the community for forgiveness.

The question of how to define blasphemy in practice was complicated. Sometimes the borders between blasphemy and other crimes such as witchcraft and superstition were so vague that it even caused problems of definition for the lawyers involved. This could be especially problematic around accusations of magic where the names “God” and “Jesus” had been used in spells. This particular crime could also be defined as abuse of the name of God. During the seventeenth century blasphemy could be considered related to the idea of some kind of contract with the Devil. In the seventeenth century such assignments to the Devil could be connected with witchcraft and
covered by the witchcraft code in the old medieval laws. Later such assignations with the Devil started to be defined as blasphemy and came up in court under the accusation of *Crimen Laese Majestatis Divinae*.

The authorities at the time faced huge difficulties in defining the crime of blasphemy’s punishment in accordance with the law. Blasphemy was referred to in the medieval law as an “evil deed” (*missgärning*) against God. There was no systematic church law in Sweden until 1686 and it was only in the year 1734 that the country got its first legal code for the country as a whole. In the year of 1608 the Ten Commandments from the Bible were added to the existing medieval legal code. In practice this meant that several crimes became subject to the death penalty. Before 1686 blasphemers could be condemned by referring to different parts of the Bible, e.g. Lv 24, Dt 5 or Ex 10, instead of a written law, the old medieval laws or the Royal Regulations. The Royal Regulations specifically dealing with the issue of blasphemy were the “Regulation of Oaths and curses” (*Stadgan om Eder och Swordomar År*), the “Regulation of Oaths and Sabbatical crimes” (*Stadgan om Eder och Sabbatsbrott* ca. 1678) and the “Regulation of Religion 1655” (*Religionsstadgan 1655*).

A distinction between intentional blasphemy and injuring God unintentionally was made both within the law and in different theological statements. This distinction was very important since intentional blasphemies were regarded as far more serious crimes, than those which were unintentional. Intentional blasphemy was always potentially subject to the death penalty since this was related to the idea of the perpetrator being evil and beyond redemption. According to an older view there were crimes that were considered so terrible that they simply were unforgivable and the perpetrator was considered an evil and degenerate person without the possibility of redemption; such individuals simply had to be eliminated from society by arranging for their death. Subsequently at the beginning of the eighteenth century a change in attitudes took place as the criminal’s individual circumstances and disposition started to be taken into consideration.

The church law of 1686 contains the following prescription about both intentional and unintentional blasphemy.

Hwilken af uppsåt, med ord eller skrifter, lastar och smådar Gud, hans heliga ord och Sacramenten; miste lifvet. Sker thet obetänckt, och af hastighet, och ångrar han sig: böte etthundrade daler. 19

[The one who by intent with words or by writing blames and injures God, his holy word and the Sacraments, shall die. If it happens unreflected, and by velocity and he regrets it himself: they shall pay 100 daler.]

Contemporary definitions of blasphemy and its severity did also make a difference between blaspheming God directly or indirectly and making others turn away from the true belief through blasphemous words. This was in complete agreement with the definitions used by most of the German theologians

and lawyers. Making others turn away from God through blasphemous speech could be considered as severe as the crime of blasphemy itself. The attitudes of the authorities are revealed in several cases of blasphemy as the persons accused were said to have “upset the true believers and misled the simple minded” (“förargat de rätttroende och vilselett de enfaldiga”). The damage caused by influencing the religious opinions of others was a real threat to the official Lutheran religion. Yet Sweden exhibited more tolerance of adherents of other religions than of blasphemers within the state church.

In addition to the forms of blasphemy mentioned above, that were all directed towards God, there was also a kind of blasphemy that meant turning away from God. This phenomenon, was in Swedish called “avgudadyrkan” and meant worshiping other gods or some other part of creation than God — in other words a species of idolatory or pantheism. In theological terms the phenomena was discussed as confusion between the creator and created things, meaning that created things were given attributes belonging to God. To give the respect and worship that should be given God alone to another body, such as other gods, ancestors, spirits, or the Devil was defined as blasphemy, as it was elsewhere in Europe. The beliefs of the Sámi people would fit this category since their religion included the worship of ancestors and non-Christian gods alongside some elements of Christian belief. In a more well-known case of blasphemy among the Sámi people in early modern Sweden a person was executed in the year of 1693 by being burnt alive at the stake for worshiping his wooden gods. The person in question had turned to the gods of his ancestors to redeem the life of his grandson that had drowned in a river. Through the ritual use of drums he believed that it would be possible to bring the grandson back to life. According to an eyewitness report of the execution the accused had shouted the words in his mother tongue: “Jesu valde falle mun Siälo” (Jesus take now my soul) as he had been secured to the stake. This interestingly shows Christian belief as a central part of his world view alongside the worship of other gods. The ultimate religious transgression of this kind that was classified as blasphemy was to deliberately make a pact with the Devil. Not only was the respect that should be given God alone, given elsewhere, but the pledge of allegiance to God made through baptism was considered broken through entering a pact with Satan.

The Struggle for the Purity of Orthodox Lutheran Belief

Our investigation of blasphemy in early modern Sweden in meaningful depth needs to consider two ongoing processes. The first of these is the centralisation...
of the state and the second one is the unification of religion around the Lutheran confession. These two processes started in the middle of the seventeenth century and are connected to one another, as indeed they are in other Western European countries.

At the time of the great witch hunts in Sweden that took place between 1670 and 1680 significant efforts were made by the authorities — both the state and the church — to eliminate deviant behaviour. Through a political decision of 1527 the Lutheran confession became the official religion in Sweden. Huge efforts were made by the authorities to preserve this Lutheranism and to protect it from competing elements such as Catholicism, what were considered to be protestant heresies, as well as blasphemous and superstitious ideas and practices. Elements of Catholic influence and popular belief were effectively eliminated within what the English historian Peter Burke has called “the reformation of popular culture.” The religious statute of 1655 (Religionstadgan 1655) has been viewed as evidence of a real campaign on the part of the authorities to eliminate the last traces of popular beliefs not in compliance with the official religious confession. Not only was it a question of dealing with deviant behaviour and thoughts, but also of replacing the mental universes of the common people with the new ideas associated with Lutheran belief.

The reorganisation of state administration started in about 1630 as the legal system underwent considerable and significant changes. Among these no less than six high courts were established and the legal process at court was renewed. One of the most dramatically significant changes was the replacement of the institution of “oaths men” (Edsgärdesmanna institutionen) with a committee of twelve individuals. Many European and American states in early modern times managed to legitimate precisely this control of their subjects and Sweden was clearly no exception. In advancing this process Lutheran belief became an ideologically important tool.

The strategies of these authorities to preserve the purity and primacy of Lutheran belief involved increased levels of social control of the inhabitants alongside regimes of discipline, punishment, and education. All religious

26. Peter Burke, Folklig kultur i Europa 1500–1800 (Stockholm: Författarförlaget, 1983). This perspective has recently been used in Swedish research by the historian Linda Oja in her work on attitudes toward magic in early modern Sweden. Oja, Varken Gud eller Natur.  
27. Sörli, Trolldoms.  
transgressions were exposed and severely punished. Church ministers were obliged to take on more responsibility for the role of teaching the members of their churches. A certain level of knowledge of Christianity and stricter adherence to doctrinal requirements was demanded. For example active participation in the Holy Communion or obtaining clerical permission to marry became mandatory, whilst the increased use of religious oaths in court or for entering some professions also became a consequence of this. This knowledge of Christianity was controlled and enforced by annual hearings, so called house-hearings (husförhör). House hearings and the so called house-board (hustavlan) was, during the period 1600–1800, the backbone of the religious and moral reforming project. The household was seen as an essential reflection of the religious order of the world with the master of the house responsible for the godly behaviour of all within it. 29 The board’s constitution reflected a gender structure that regulated the relationship between men and women in the early modern period in a way that legitimated the aims of both the state and the religion.30

According to David Lawton heresy is limited to the religious sphere whilst blasphemy has the capacity to include other parts of society.31 Lawyers in seventeenth-century Sweden considered blasphemy the most dangerous crime against the state.32 A person who committed the crime of blasphemy disturbed the balance in society and had to be corrected, punished, or eliminated by execution in order to reclaim order in this society. Several studies in Scandinavia have shown how the state and the church could collaborate in order to protect these societies from deviants.33 This also emphasised that good and compliant behaviour was viewed as an indicator of an individual’s loyalty towards the state.

The ambition of the state authorities to control the inhabitants and to create uniformity in religion was supported by several ideological influences that reached Sweden in the middle of the seventeenth century.34 Among these the theocratic views of kingship were one of the most dominant. According to the prevailing theocratic ideology the king was the monarch’s representative on earth (vicarius dei), and should have a fatherly care of his subjects in the

29. For more about the debate about the house board, see Åsa Karlsson Sjögren, Kvinnors rätt i stormaktstidens Gävle (Umeå: Umeå Universitet, 1998), 31.
30. Sjögren, Kvinnors rätt i stormaktstidens Gävle, 163. See also p. 16 where the idea of the house board as part of a patriarchal offensive has also been pointed out.
32. Lindberg, Praemia et poenae, 491.
34. In the middle of the seventeenth century the theocratic ideology was dominant and became ever more important after 1680 when autocracy reigned and the of the centralization of power reached its climax. Lennersand, Rättvisans och Allmogens beskyddare, 22, 25. The Principles of natural law included rules for how the citizen should relate to the authorities, those that stressed equality were chronologically distant in Sweden. Instead ideas of duty, submission and the fallen nature of the individual people were stressed. For more about the natural law, see Bo Lindberg, Naturrätten i Uppsala 1655–1720, Skrifter rörande Uppsala universitet: C, Organisation och historia, Skrifter utgivna till Uppsala universitets 500-årsjubileum. 2, Studier 7 (Diss.; Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 1976).
same way as God had of mankind.35 This is why maintaining the true religion became one of the most important duties of the king. This relationship with God was considered of decisive importance for the nation, the people and the wellbeing of all individuals.36 Maintaining this relationship became one of the most important duties of the secular authorities.37

Persons accused of blasphemy in early modern times could, as the study of blasphemy in the Judiciary inspectorate shows, still be considered good Christians. Many of the accused had taken part in the church service, had a satisfactory knowledge of Christianity, had been helping their neighbours and in many different ways lived their lives as good Christians. This leads on to questions about how worldviews within the lower classes in early modern times could be constructed. Popular conceptions uttered in cases of blasphemy could be either close to or far away from learned theological ideas. However the same kind of presumptions, attitudes, and behavior were equally present within both the learned and the lower classes. By dividing popular attitudes discerned in the cases studied into four groups corresponding to a kind of mental strata, this shows to what extent Christian ideas have established themselves, and also gives a more varied and detailed image of religious popular culture. All this presuming that one single attitude dominates within each category. The four categories are:

1. Attitudes similar to those of the elite culture
2. Attitudes that are partly the same as the elite.
3. Attitudes that are totally or partly different from the learned.
4. Attitudes indifferent towards religious matters.

The chief characteristic for the first group is that Christian ideas have established themselves to a greater extent than in the following categories. In the second group personal interpretations dominate both the image of God and the Devil. The third category puts quite a distance between theological dogma and individual deviant presumptions. The last category contains passive or even arrogant ways of dealing with religious matters.

Instead of perceiving elite and popular culture as opposites they should be studied as worldviews, where the same ideas could be used for different purposes. According to Jacques Le Goff different discourses on the same ideas could exist within the same society due to membership of a different mental strata.38 If we consider the image of the Devil this becomes very obvious since the study of cases of blasphemy in the Judiciary Inspectorate reveals popular images of the Devil that are very far away from the image in the learned doctrines. Within the lower classes Satan was not always considered a dangerous

37. G. Lundkvist, Kyrkan — Lagen — Människan, RA: s rapport nr. 7, Inledningen (Stockholm: Riksarkivet, 1986), 6. Already at the parliament in Västerås of 1544 the king was ordered to take care of the religion, meaning among other things to abolish the catholic service at church and oppose the proclaiming of false religious doctrines. Kjöllerström, Guds och Sveriges lag, 22.
and scary figure, but was often referred to as a genuinely helpful friend, sometimes even considered a stronger power than God. Statements as: “The Devil is my brother,” “The Devil is stronger than God,” “It is no use to ask God for help, one should turn to Satan instead,” etc. occur frequently in the material studied. Within the lower classes it was also quite possible to worship both God and the Devil at the same time, one not excluding the other. It was even possible to enter a pact with the Devil and still say maintain a belief in God.

Within this period nobody questioned the influence of Satan and it was even punishable to deny the existence of the Devil. In the year of 1733 a young boy was condemned to death by the High Court of Jönköping (Göta Hovrätt) for having said that he had no belief in either the Devil or the existence of hell. It was even popularly believed that it was possible to make a pact with the Devil by establishing a contract written with one’s own blood. Several examples survive of such pacts made generally by soldiers and signed in the individuals own blood. In the Judiciary Inspectorate twenty-nine cases of Devil’s pacts, made exclusively by men, exist for the period studied. This pact was serious since it was believed to cancel the pact with God made in the Christian baptism. Turning to the Devil also meant that the respect and attention that had to be given to God alone was given blasphemously elsewhere. Within the lower classes however making a pact with the Devil did not automatically mean that the person who had made a pact had less faith in God, than before making the commitment. For example the young soldier Jöns Hasselgren, who had made a pact with the Devil in the year of 1714, continued saying his prayers to God after he had established his written contract with the Devil. As delivering the contract to the Devil had caused him some hesitation, since he also visited the Holy Communion at church, he had kept the contract folded in his shoe for six weeks before giving it away.

One of the main results of this study is that components of Christian faith were retained or rejected depending on the attitudes chosen at an individual level, creating a synthesized worldview, consisting of concepts that seemed useful to the individual in specific contexts. Noteworthy is also the fact that it seems that blasphemy in early modern times was a crime committed mainly by men. Out of 117 persons accused, in the case studied, only nine were women. A large percentage of the men were soldiers, explaining why blasphemy

39. See for example, Riksarkivet, Stockholm, Justitierevisionens utslagshandlingar, General Auditörens arkiv, 1704, 25.5., no. 23.
40. In forty-six cases studied out of totally 110, this kind of popular statements about the Devil are expressed. Olli, “Visioner,” 174.
44. Olli, “Devil’s Pact.”
could be regarded as a common subgenre within an already oral military culture.⁴⁵

**Secularisation, the Individualisation of Religion and the Path to Modern Freethinking**

The religious culture of Sweden underwent changes during the eighteenth century as forms of secularisation and an increasing individualisation of religion started to occur. At the beginning of the eighteenth century the pietist movement,⁴⁶ which came from Germany, gained ground in Sweden and paradoxically offered a route towards both freethinking and secularisation. The pietism movement put an explicit emphasis on personal conversion and personal belief which broke with the orthodox Lutheran confession. An individualisation of religion meant that religion started to be a matter for the individual’s own conscience instead of being a concern of the state. This altered the country’s religious dynamics from a situation of state regulated collective belief to the supremacy of a personal standpoint in religious matters beyond official doctrine or institutions. The relationship between the individualisation of religion and secularisation has been the subject of several studies. In Sweden this process of the individualisation of religion has mainly been analysed through the coming of religious revival movements.

Secularisation has been taken by some to mean the growing plurality of religious expressions within a society. These are not necessarily organised in an official church so that as a result society becomes less obviously dominated by Christian belief.⁴⁷ The historian Hanne Sanders has pointed out that religious belief in a secularised society will not be totally extinguished but secularisation instead means that the religion loses its meaning as a fundamental worldview.⁴⁸ In that way religion according to Sanders becomes located away from state institutions to become individualised. Personal belief and the emphasis on every individual’s own active commitment towards religion became much more important than earlier simple uniform conformity. Even within the Lutheran state more stringent demands for proof of personal beliefs began to be requested. This offers a slightly different perspective on secularisation since tests of the quality of belief replaced measures of mere attendance.

The manner in which the personal relationship with God through faith had been established among the common people is demonstrated in a case of


⁴⁷ Sanders, *Bondeväckelse og sekularisering*, 254f. Sanders refers here to several definitions of secularisation that have been used by sociologists and points out that there are definitions where secularisation is not the same thing as a society being less Christian, but these only consider changes in the functions of the church or the religion.

⁴⁸ Sanders, *Bondeväckelse og sekularisering*, 256.
blasphemy from 1749. The person accused had explained his refusal to go to the Holy Communion for the last ten years by suggesting that is was of no use for him personally, but that it did not damage anyone if they attended “in a living faith.” The expression “in living faith” was common within the pietism movement and defined a true and devoted believer. But the accused in the case mentioned above clearly did not consider himself a true believer. He doubted many of the fundamental ideas of Christianity, such as life after death, eternal salvation, the meaning of the Eucharist amongst many other things.

Yet personal belief did not necessarily conflict with the official confession. Personal conviction could be proved by active commitment within church life and demonstrating a certain level of knowledge of Christianity. This could be done by leading a life in conformity with official religious belief and the world governed by the rules of “the house board.” However the official requirement for personal belief did not automatically mean permission for the individuals to practice their religion in their own way. A significant event in the history of religious tolerance in Sweden occurred when the workers at Jonas Ahlströmers factories, who were Reformed, were given a limited freedom of Religion in the year 1724.

At the start of the eighteenth century the pietism movement, the reformed immigrants that came to Sweden and a growing indifference around religious matters became a huge threat to the orthodox official belief. Measures were taken by the authorities against members of the pietism movement. A placard — the so called “Konventikel plakatet” — was produced in 1726 forbidding religious meetings outside the official church service. The opportunities for the expression of personal belief should only happen in accordance with the Lutheran church and only within it’s domain of praxis, anything beyond this was potentially blasphemous. An example of expressions outside the organised church service emerge in a blasphemy case from the end of the seventeenth century. Reflecting the pietistic ethos a man was accused of saying that he could talk to God at home in a barn on his own property. As he could talk to God at home there was, according to his own testimony, at court no need to go to church. His blasphemy was complex and besides claiming that he could talk to God he also stated that there was only one God — the one that talked to him at home in the barn — and that Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit were “inventions made up by those who had written the Bible.” The Bible was also in his opinion written in the same way as a legal treatise and could therefore not be the word of God, but the word of man. This exhibited a blend

of ant clericalism, of the type familiar to many historians of Western Europe as well as an open challenge to religious authority.

Expressions of personal interpretations of God and personal opinions on religious matters like this were not acceptable. Popular beliefs however often included similar invented interpretations, such as for example; “there is only one God because the Bible says so — Jesus and the Holy Spirit can therefore not be real Gods,” “life after death is only for the ministers at church,” “if God has created everything he must also have created the sin,” “the bread used at the Holy communion is the same as the bread eaten at home,” “it is equal to pray to God and to the Devil,” “God is not fair since he has taken both my wife and my child away from me by letting them die,” “God does not have more influence over the weather than a beggar,” etc. Having one’s own ideas about religious matters did not always mean that the intention was to injure God, even if expressions of this kind often could be judged as blasphemy.

As changes in the religious culture started to occur the attitudes towards people accused of blasphemy also started to change. There was a change in the religious climate but also in the way criminals in general were treated. Different models for explaining deviant behaviour have been used since early modern times.53 This search for explanations started during the end of the eighteenth century and did also have an influence on the attitudes towards blasphemers. As attitudes towards criminals in general changed in the beginning of the eighteenth century, the attitudes towards blasphemers also changed. A pathologisation of the crime of blasphemy took place.

In the first half of the seventeenth century blasphemy could be explained by using a demonological model of explanation and was thus regarded as invoked by the Devil. In the year 1699 a person accused of blasphemy was pardoned from the death penalty since the court came to the conclusion that the Devil had ruled his tongue and he could therefore not be held responsible for his blasphemous words.54 A young boy accused of blasphemy in the year 1731 was also pardoned as the council came to the conclusion that he had committed his crime due to being led on to it by Satan and because of the foolishness of his youth.55

After this date the courts considered mitigating circumstances such as lack of education in Christianity, drunkenness, illness, madness, melancholy, and other kinds of personal circumstances in cases of blasphemy. Within the elite the belief in the Devil started to lose influence. Satan was no longer considered as dangerous as at the height of the witch hunt and a demonological model for explanation was therefore no longer useful. During the first half of the eighteenth century the reasons for expressing blasphemous opinions and behaviour started to turn around the medical history of the perpetrator. A pathological/medical model for explaining religious crimes started to be used

55. Riksarkivet, Stockholm, Justitierevisionens utslagshandlingar, 1731-11-11, no. 25. According to the hearings his blasphemy was spoken of as “af Satans förledande och ungdoms oförstånds begåne synd” (“as led onto by Satan and sins comitted because of his youthful foolishness”).
more and more frequently and this also fits with evidence in the rest of Europe. Considerable efforts were made by the authorities to find out whether someone’s blasphemy could have been caused by some event or circumstances in the medical history of the accused. All this meant that the blasphemers were not always to be held responsible for their words and actions.

The last execution for witchcraft in Sweden was carried out in 1740.56 With the end of witch-hunting a change in the attitudes of the authorities took place. The waning belief in the Devil and several other changes in attitudes led to a new situation as many crimes were redefined. Making a pact with the Devil, for example, earlier considered the ultimate blasphemy, became after 1789 defined merely as an act of superstition. At the beginning of the seventeenth century blasphemy was connected to swearing oaths and cursing, as one swore at God or the name of God. In the later period swearing was no longer considered such a serious crime compared to blasphemies directed towards God or those who had some kind of connection to the Devil, or using magic, or superstition.

Even if parts of the definition of blasphemy underwent changes towards the end of the eighteenth century, executions of blasphemers were carried out even late into the eighteenth century in Sweden. This simultaneously indicates two things — blasphemy was still being considered a severe crime, if no other excuses for this behaviour (demonological, medical etc.) could be found and also that the acceptance of modern freethinking and religious toleration was still comparatively far away.

The history of blasphemy in Sweden demonstrates some of the characteristics of the crime in other European societies. It was considered a public nuisance and its modernisation occurred alongside well understood wider phenomena such as the arrival of state sponsored discipline in the seventeenth century and its integration into forms of ecclesiastical discipline. Yet there are differences — the institution of disciplining the blasphemer within the familial patriarchal unit with specific and in some instances unique punishments was a particular feature of the offence in Sweden. Similarly the severity of punishment which persisted way beyond its eclipse in other parts of Western Europe suggests that the conduct of this offence in European peripheries deserves further study.

56. Sörlin, Trolldoms.