

# There Is an Urgent Need for Studies of the Bible in Swedish Politics: A Response to Karin Neutel

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In my oral response to Karin Neutel's lecture at the Exegetical days 2021, I expressed my gratitude for an interesting and important lecture. The lecture convinced me that the analysis Neutel presents makes the Bible serve as a lens to make this transition from religion to culture visible.<sup>1</sup> The published article strengthens my conviction. I look forward to reading the book where the results of her project are published.

## GENERAL REFLECTIONS

Neutel shows how biblical scholars can contribute to current dialogues between different academic disciplines and to the creation of knowledge about changes in contemporary societies but also, I hope, to public debate and reflection in the churches. I do hope that Neutel's essay, as well as the future monograph, will be read by scholars working with the same issues in different disciplines but also by others concerned with the issues discussed, outside of the Academy. In addition, I hope that the study will contribute to a development in biblical studies through which reception studies are generally accepted as central to the discipline.

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<sup>1</sup> So Karin Neutel, "The Bible in Migration Politics in Northern Europe", *SEÅ* 87 (2022): 85–105 (85).

## THE FOCUS AND PRESUPPOSITIONS FOR THIS RESPONSE

I am a Swede living and working in Sweden, so this is the context I know best. Therefore, I will here (as in the original oral response) focus on the Swedish examples in Neutel's essay and add some reflections from a Swedish perspective.

Formulating a response is not easy for me, since the issues discussed by Neutel are of great concern to me. I am involved in forming theology and Christian practices which actively resist the interpretations and practices described in Neutel's paper and essay, so it is difficult for me to stick to my task as a scholar and not to turn normative and angry. I will try, though, since I find it important that studies such as Neutel's—scholarly analyses of anti-immigration rhetorics and their use of the Bible—are carried out in a way that takes them seriously as examples of biblical interpretation, and not just dismiss them as arbitrary use of biblical passages. Such studies contribute to our understanding of contemporary society, an understanding that is necessary if wanting to resist anti-democratic movements of our time.

Neutel's work and the material she studies can be related to two wider contexts: contemporary public debates in various countries on the one hand; and earlier research, that is, certain academic contexts, on the other. These two contexts will provide a structure to my presentation. I will begin by focussing on public debate, and continue with the relation to earlier research. I will also discuss possible ways forward for Neutel's study and, maybe, for other studies of similar questions and materials. I know that Neutel herself has good knowledge of the earlier research I mention, but I present it here for the benefit of the readers of this response who are not acquainted with this research.

## CLAIMING CHRISTIANITY AS SUPPORT

I grew up in a Christian family that related to the liberal Protestantism of the Church of Sweden in a secular Sweden in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s, so I am always surprised when Christianity and interpreta-

tions of the Bible are discussed in secular, progressive press—unless the aim is to show once again how *bad* the Church, or Christian faith, are for one reason or the other. Today, however, there is an increasing amount of examples of different ways of writing about Christianity and the Church even in such contexts. This change may be part of the development Neutel studies, a development where Christianity is regarded as a part of the culture, rather than as a religion, but there are differences between the examples I will mention below and Neutel’s material, since they have different political perspectives.

In April 2019, *Syre* (“Oxygen”), a progressive, green magazine, published an editorial by Valdemar Möller (who does not tell us about his own relation to Christianity) with the title “Don’t turn Christianity into a racist battering ram.”<sup>2</sup> In this issue, most of the articles are about themes connected with climate change, but the editorial shows that a struggle about the right to claim Christianity for one’s purposes and agendas is obviously going on here between persons with different political convictions.

Möller’s point of departure is an empirical study by the political scientist Magnus Hagevi.<sup>3</sup> Hagevi shows that a growing number of Swedes think it positive that “Christian values” are important in the Swedish society, despite the fact that a significant number of these respondents do not themselves self-identify as Christians. Notably, there is also, as Hagevi shows, a correlation between appreciation of “Christian values” and the opinion that immigration politics should be more restrictive, while persons who self-identify as Christians are generally more positive to immigration and refugees.

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<sup>2</sup> My translation of the original Swedish: “Gör inte kristendomen till ett rasistiskt slagträ.” The editorial can be read online: <https://landetsfria.nu/2019/nummer-12/gor-inte-kristendomen-till-ett-rasistiskt-slagtra/>.

<sup>3</sup> An introduction to the study and its main results, as well as links to the material can be found online on <https://hagevi.wordpress.com/2019/03/11/allt-fler-vill-satsa-pa-ett-samhalle-med-kristna-varden/>.

Möller discusses what “Christian values” actually refer to. He mentions biblical texts about taking care of refugees and the fact that many churches in history and at present support refugees. The negative attitude to immigrants held by those who do not identify as Christians but like “Christian values” is put in contrast to biblical texts, the values held by “Jesus as we know him” (if Möller’s words are translated) and the practices of churches in history and in the present. Möller also mentions biblical texts which advocates of “Christian values” cannot refer to because they say, for example, that women who do not follow certain rules for sexual relations shall be killed by stoning. In other words, it is very difficult, Möller claims, to know what is actually meant by “Christian values,” although there is strong support for the claim that they are not racist or xenophobic.

Möller’s conclusion is that you must “become wary”<sup>4</sup> when people who are not believers talk about “Christian values” because it is very probable that they actually mean “racist values.” This is, in my opinion, an example of a struggle about Christianity in Sweden today, a struggle which is, in a sense, also the topic of Neutel’s article and project. My example thus shows that Neutel’s work is concerned with issues of relevance for people outside both the academic world and the churches.

Relating this more explicitly to Neutel’s work, she identifies a problem in works by political scientists; namely that the distinction made between “Christendom” and “Christianity” is neither based on solid empirical studies or a usable theoretical tool. It is actually rather based on normative assumptions saying—to put it bluntly—that true, real, Christianity is good. If one argues for something bad, such as racism, in the name of Christianity and calls this “Christian values,” one is simply wrong. This is, in my opinion, an important point, and I will return to it below. Here can be noted that the distinction is also present in Möller’s editorial.

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<sup>4</sup> In Swedish, Möller uses the idiomatic expression “dra öronen åt sig.”

That Möller's editorial is normative is obvious and not problematic: editorials by definition express opinions and convictions held by the author and try to convince the readers that s/he is right. What is interesting in this context is, however, that Möller also uses the empirical study by Magnus Hagevi, where "Christian" is used as a self-identification. Put differently, persons are not identified as "real Christians" by the scholar because they have certain convictions or behave in a certain way. Perhaps such a seemingly simple empirical approach may be a possible way forward, especially since Neutel's Swedish examples also show how persons who do not self-identify as Christians affirm "Christian values," although their understanding of those values is part of nationalistic, right-wing, and anti-migration politics.

#### ADDITIONAL REFLECTIONS ON THE "CHRISTIANITY– CHRISTENDOM" DISTINCTION

Neutel's critique of the distinction between Christianity and Christendom in works by political scientists is actually a critique of a kind of defense for Christianity which has parallels in defenses of other religions, including Islam. To put it bluntly, the argument is that true Christianity, real Christianity, is Good—"good" according to modern democratic values—and if something is claimed to be Christian but is not Good it is actually a distortion of this true, real Christianity. Thereby, Christianity—and often also the Bible—is idealized. The understanding of Christianity can also be regarded as "essentialist": the essence of Christianity is good, in spite of the fact that even churches and Christian individuals have participated in a number of evil deeds and unjust structures. Neutel mentions examples.

One good reason for working with studies of biblical reception is, I think, that it makes it possible—indeed necessary—for us to move beyond this kind of idealization of the Bible and/or Christianity as well as beyond an essentialist understanding of Christianity. Related to practitioners of faith, it could be said that any Christian must, therefore, be

willing to recognize this, and take responsibility for how they interpret and use a mixed heritage without escaping into idealization or essentialisation.

I am convinced that the same holds true for being a European, even a secular European who identifies with the heritage from the Enlightenment—with democracy and humanism. Those heritages are also mixed, they can be idealized and essentialized, but it is important to move on from apologetic strategies and learn how to live with them as such mixed heritages which, in turn (as Christianity) must be subjected constantly to critical assessment from ethical and political perspectives.

### NEUTEL'S WORK IN RELATION TO EARLIER RESEARCH

I will relate two themes in Neutel's essay to earlier research. The first is *nationalism* and the second is connected with her overall question of what happens to the Bible in a context where Christianity is transitioning from being primarily conceived as something religious, to something that is presented more as culture.

#### **Nationalism**

I start with nationalism. As Neutel shows, it is important for Mattias Karlsson that the "national position" still has a place in the Church of Sweden. Actually, he claims that it has been represented in this church for at least 600 years, while the multi-cultural and multi-religious, non-nationalist orientations which have power within the present church have been there for no longer than a century. I hope Neutel will make some critical comments on this claim in the final presentation of her results, since this claim presents something as a fact although the realities he refers to are more complex.

I am not a historian specialized in modern nationalism, but what I have learned from historians is that the nationalism formed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was not only a continuation of something pre-modern—it was not even simply anti-modern. Although

there are certainly examples of certain kinds of nationalism in different societies long before the modern era, modern nationalism is also different. Modern nationalism is part of modernity, or at least a reaction to modernity, and not just a preservation of a society and ideals that can be traced back 600 years or more.<sup>5</sup>

It is certainly the case that conservatism and nationalism had a strong position in the Church of Sweden at the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and it is also certainly the case that the Church of Sweden was central in the nation building project of Gustav Vasa (1496–1560), the king who integrated the reformation in his political project. It is certainly true that the state church was central in the formation of Sweden and Swedish identity from Gustav Vasa and onwards, but it does not follow that Swedish nationalism today is therefore identical with Swedish nationalism in either the early twentieth century or the politics of Gustav Vasa (or Gustav II Adolf, 1594–1632).

Therefore, the Swedish examples Neutel studies may be understood as a new phase in the process discussed in Halvor Moxnes' *Jesus and the Rise of Nationalism*.<sup>6</sup> Briefly, Moxnes shows how nineteenth century research about "the historical Jesus" was in various ways part of, or at least influenced by, various kinds of nationalism, including liberal nationalism—that is, forms of nationalism different from the conservative or reactionary forms that are so prominent today. There are certainly consid-

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<sup>5</sup> For some short surveys of nationalism, see "Nationalism" in *Nationalencyklopedien* 14 (Höganäs: Bra böcker, 1994), 40–41; or in *Britannica* online: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/nationalism>. For nationalism in Sweden, see Bo Stråth, *Sveriges historia 1830–1920* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 2012), 28–32, 104–105. For nationalism and the Church of Sweden in the early twentieth century, see, for example, Ingmar Brohed, *Sveriges kyrkohistoria: Religionsfrihetens och ekumenikens tid* (Stockholm: Verbum, 2005), 26–35; Urban Claesson och Sinkka Neuhaus (ed.), *Minne och möjlighet: Kyrka och historiebruk från nationsbygge till pluralism* (Göteborg: Makadam, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Halvor Moxnes, *Jesus and the Rise of Nationalism: A New Quest for the Nineteenth-Century Historical Jesus* (London: Tauris, 2012).

erable differences between the scholarly works discussed in Moxnes' book and the political rhetorics discussed by Neutel, but the notion of a new phase is still valid.

### From Religion to Culture

Another study which can be related to Neutel's project and her article in this issue of *SEÅ* is Jonathan Sheehan's *The Enlightenment Bible*.<sup>7</sup> In this work, Sheehan establishes the concept "the Cultural Bible" and describes the processes in Germany and England from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries where the authority of the Bible was understood in new ways. In contexts—even Christian—where the Bible could no longer be understood as divine revelation, its authority was reformulated as the authority of the foundational document of Western culture. The similarities with the contemporary processes described in Neutel's essay are obvious, but what still remains to be done is a more sophisticated reflection on, for example, the relation between these two processes. Is the process Neutel describes the latest phase in the history described by Sheehan? What is actually similar and are there substantial differences between the development now and the development in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries?

### FINAL REFLECTIONS

One possible further line of investigation would, of course, be to look at how official documents from the Church of Sweden and the Christian Council of Sweden (an ecumenical body with twenty six member churches from several denominations) argue for the rights of refugees and generous migration politics. Does Karlsson argue against what the Church of Sweden or the ecumenical movement actually says, or does

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<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).



he rather attempt to argue that the parable of the Good Samaritan cannot easily be made into a political programme? That would, though, be the focus of another study, one I hope someone will be inspired to carry out.

I have to stop here, hoping that my response has given both Karin Neutel and the readers of this article some food for thought that may lead us all further in our respective works. I look forward to reading Neutel's book when her project is completed.