
Sweden: growing religious intolerance. The Churches: “Full solidarity with Muslims in our Country”

“Burning books is an act of barbarism. This is especially true for books that are sacred to many.” In a message marked by “full solidarity with all Muslims living in our country”, the leaders of the 13 Christian Churches in Sweden conveyed their “firm condemnation of deliberate violence that targets the religious beliefs of the people.” Since August, protests backed by Denmark's far-right party Stram Kurs (Hard Line), led by Rasmus Paludan, have been raging throughout Sweden, with the burning of copies of the Koran: it happened in Malmö at the end of August, sparking off violent clashes in the city. The incident was replicated over the past few days in Rosengård, Angered, Gothenburg and Rinkeby, albeit less dramatically since the police banned the protests called by Paludan. “These actions pose a serious threat to individual freedom of worship”, while widening “the gap between people and hindering the efforts for integration and consensus at a time when our country must stand together to defend the dignity and rights of all,” the Christian leaders write in their statement. The Swedish Interreligious Council - comprising Christians, Muslims, Jews and Buddhists - has also “firmly” condemned these anti-Muslim attacks. SIR interviewed Fr **Björn Håkonsson**, deacon at the Catholic parish of Vår Frälsare in Malmö.



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[I would very much like to say no. In this city I have met so many wonderful and tolerant people of different faiths! The vast majority coexist in perfect harmony, sharing joys and hopes. And so they should: this city is a growing melting pot of ethnicities, while the Swedish native population is decreasing. Walking down the street or taking a bus, one often has the impression of being in the Middle East or the Balkans. And life goes on just fine. Indeed, it's no secret that some fanatics are trying to fuel hatred. Some of them, I've been told, are well integrated into society but still seek to import conflicts from other parts of the world and exploit frustrated youths to stir up trouble by setting cars on fire or throwing stones at police officers. And there is also anti-Semitism. As a Catholic deacon, I am not afraid to walk around in my habits. But if I wore the garments of an Orthodox Jew, I might be the object of slanderous comments or experience even nastier situations. But this is not the complete picture. Intolerance is also to be found on the "Swedish" side, and there is no mention of it, also caused by a failure to recognize the value of religion. This is a silent factor underlying the tensions. People from all over the world come to Malmö bringing their faiths with them. But a widespread mentality, embedded in an overly secularized "Swedishness", surmises that religion is "the root of all wars". It hurts. As Catholics we are used to it, but Muslims are not, and they suffer more. The media play a dismal role in spreading that image. This is frustrating. In fact, beneath the surface, we find the socio-economic roots of all tensions: Malmö \(and Sweden\) has welcomed countless immigrants since the 1990s but without being able to provide jobs for all of them. Some money, a place to live, but no work. Now we see the young generation grow up without a job. This is](#)

in itself a social bomb ready to go off. What can you live for without a job? Radical Islam? Drugs? Just for yourself? **What is the state of the relations with the Islamic community in Malmö, the "most Muslim city in Sweden", and in the country as a whole?** In the "most Muslim city of Sweden" there are many organizations, some well-known and others unknown. *There are Islamic academic institutions recognized and supported by the government and the city. Then there are some strange groups that meet in basements and there is lack of information as to what they are actually preaching.* I took part in some very inspirational meetings between illustrious representatives of different faiths, promoted by the Church of Sweden to bring together all religious communities, law enforcement, academia, businesses, in a joint effort to strengthen social cohesion in Malmö. It's an example of an exceptional effort that has not received the attention it deserves from the media. The same tensions seen in Malmö are present throughout Sweden, especially in the big cities, although the problems here are certainly greater. The further up north in Sweden, the better the situation. **How did the religious communities in Malmö respond to those episodes?** Religious leaders of the different faiths promptly met and voiced the "social cohesion" I mentioned above, solidarity, and they condemned the violence. **What do Christian communities do about social tensions?** Actually they do very little and we Catholics do almost nothing. What can we do? We say nice words when necessary, but somehow the Christian communities have nothing to do with the conflicts in Malmö. And maybe this is good. Sometimes churches are burgled, windows are smashed, but these are not attacks on Christianity. One day I was delivering an exegesis lecture and a man was shot right outside the building. I ran outside and found him dead, but I didn't know who he was, none of my students knew him. In the same place, our parish priest once asked a man to stop indecent behaviour in front of the church. The man pointed a gun at the parish priest's head, just to scare him (and indeed he was scared!). I don't think that there is a serious form of Christophobia among these troublemakers: they consider Christians to be kind, enemies of no one here, maybe stupid, but not a threat. **Thus Sweden is facing a "crime emergency": what is being done to stop it?** Crime and violence are on the rise and this is very alarming. In some cases harmless people, even children, were killed by mistake. When it happens, the media suddenly wakes up... The police are trying different strategies to take the gangsters by surprise, like suddenly showing up in large numbers in problematic neighbourhoods, but in fact the police is not in control, at least not in every part of the city. The root cause of all these problems is unemployment combined with identity issues, the dissolution of family ties, of religious values and moral norms. As long as Swedish society fails to understand this, the strategies chosen so far will be ineffective. *Moreover, there is a growing demonization of immigrants - especially Muslims. Some people exploit this situation to create problems.* **How are national institutions responding?** In fact many initiatives have been implemented to "entertain" immigrants, such as language courses and so on. But these will never solve the problem. Employment is key. Give people work and they will start speaking a common language, become friends, be proud of themselves, improve their living standards and live the life they were created for. **Far-right parties in Sweden (and in neighbouring Denmark), feed off this situation, do you agree?** Swedish Democrats are seen as a "far-right" movement, they blame immigration for almost all social problems and romanticize everything that is "Swedish." It's a very popular movement, especially among young males of Swedish origin. A similar movement has existed in Denmark for a longer time and now the left-wing (governing) party also speaks their language and reaches political agreements with them. This process of transformation from left to right has just started in Sweden. So far the far-right movement has been isolated from all other parties. But they are too strong and cannot be ignored. I'm afraid that left-wing parties will have to use increasingly far-right language to survive. This is not going to be very helpful, but I fear that we will have to live with it for a while.