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# In Europe, God Is (Not) Dead

## Christian groups are growing, faith is more public. Is supply-side economics the explanation?

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Stockholm

Late last year, a Swedish hotel guest named Stefan Jansson grew upset when he found a Bible in his room. He fired off an email to the hotel chain, saying the presence of the Christian scriptures was "boring and stupefying." This spring, the Scandic chain, Scandinavia's biggest, ordered the New Testaments removed.

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In a country where barely 3% of the population goes to church each week, the affair seemed just another step in Christian Europe's long march toward secularism. Then something odd happened: A national furor erupted. A conservative bishop announced a boycott. A leftist radical who became a devout Christian and talk-show host denounced the biblical purge in newspaper columns and on television. A young evangelical Christian organized an electronic letter-writing campaign, asking Scandic: Why are you removing Bibles but not pay-porn on your TVs?

Scandic, which had started keeping its Bibles behind the front desk, put the New Testament back in guest rooms.

"Sweden is not as secular as we thought," says Christer Sturmark, head of Sweden's Humanist Association, a noisy assembly of nonbelievers to which the Bible-protesting hotel guest belongs.

After decades of secularization, religion in Europe has slowed its slide toward what had seemed inevitable oblivion. There are even nascent signs of a modest comeback. Most church pews are still empty. But belief in heaven, hell and concepts such as the soul has risen in parts of Europe, especially among the young, according to surveys. Religion, once a dead issue, now figures prominently in public discourse.

### CHANGING OPINIONS

*In Europe, the cradle of the Enlightenment and secularization, issues of religion have figured prominently in recent public discourse. Below, some examples.*

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**Sinéad O'Connor**, Irish singer, caused a stir in 1992 by ripping up a photograph of Pope John Paul II on "Saturday Night Live" and shouting "Fight the

God's tentative return to Europe has scholars and theologians debating a hot question: Why? Part of the reason, pretty much everyone agrees, is an influx of devout immigrants. Christian and Muslim newcomers have revived questions relating to faith that Europe thought it had banished with the 18th-century Enlightenment. At the same time, anxiety over immigration, globalization and cutbacks to social-welfare systems has eroded people's contentment in the here-and-now, prodding some to seek

real enemy!" She's now released "Theology," a collection of Bible-based songs:

*"I adore religion and love it. Obviously, like anything, it has all sorts of negatives sometimes, as we all do," she told Beliefnet, a Web site. She described the photo-tearing episode as "an act of love for God, actually. But, also an act of rattling the bars of something that I do love, but I don't love [the Catholic Church] as much as I love God."*

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**Jürgen Habermas**, influential German intellectual, member of the originally Marxist Frankfurt School of philosophy and self-described "methodical atheist," has revised his view that modernization inevitably leads to secularization. In a 2004 book, "Time of Transitions," he hailed Christianity as the bedrock of Western values:

*"Christianity, and nothing else, is the ultimate foundation of liberty, conscience, human rights, and democracy, the benchmarks of Western civilization. To this day, we have no other options [than Christianity]. We continue to nourish ourselves from this source. Everything else is postmodern chatter."*

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**Gérard Depardieu**, French film star known for his chaotic personal life, met Pope John Paul II in 2000 and was urged to play Saint Augustine, a 4th-century North African bishop who, after a dissolute youth, became a pillar of faith and one of the church's pre-eminent philosophers. Depardieu read selections of Saint Augustine's "Confessions" in Paris' Notre Dame Cathedral in 2003.

*"I was heavy with spirituality without knowing it. I was touched by the light of Saint Augustine,"* Depardieu told the French Catholic newspaper La Croix. *"Saint Augustine's quest touched me personally because it reflected by own fragility."*

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**Anders Borg**, Swedish Finance Minister, former non-believer and Europe's only senior male official with a pony-tail, left the Church of Sweden when he was about 18. For years he considered himself an atheist. In a recent interview with Dagens Industri, he said he'd reconsidered:

*"Lately, I have decided to consider myself a Christian. For me, the core of the Christian love message is reconciliation, forgiveness and peace."*

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**Sting**, British rock star, was raised a Catholic, turned away from organized religion but has often talked about faith. On "The Oprah Winfrey Show," he said:

*"Religion is an interesting word. It comes from Latin; it means to reconnect, reconnect with the world of the spirit. There are many ways to reconnect with the world of the spirit, not just through going to church or praying, you can reconnect through music, through the woman or the man you love. These are my roots to the sacred."*

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**Oriana Fallaci**, combative Italian journalist and lifelong critic of religion, grew close to the Catholic Church toward the end of her life. She met Pope Benedict XVI and praised him as a bulwark against Islam. She died in 2006, leaving her book collection to a university run by the Vatican.

*"I am an atheist, yes. An atheist-Christian,"* she said in New York in 2005.

firmer ground in the spiritual.

Some scholars and Christian activists, however, are pushing a more controversial explanation: the laws of economics. As centuries-old churches long favored by the state lose their monopoly grip, Europe's highly regulated market for religion is opening up to leaner, more-aggressive religious "firms." The result, they say, is a supply-side stimulus to faith.

"Monopoly churches get lazy," says Eva Hamberg, a professor at Lund University's Centre for Theology and Religious Studies and co-author of academic articles that, based on Swedish data, suggest a correlation between an increase in religious competition and a rise in church-going. Europeans are deserting established churches, she says, "but this does not mean they are not religious."

Upstarts are now plugging new spiritual services across Europe, from U.S.-influenced evangelical churches to a Christian sect that uses a hallucinogenic herbal brew as a stand-in for sacramental wine. Niklas Piensoho, chief preacher at Stockholm's biggest Pentecostal church, says even sometimes oddball, quasi-religious fads "tell me you can sell spirituality." His own career suggests that a free market in faith is taking root. He was poached by the Pentecostals late last year after he boosted church attendance for a rival Protestant congregation.

Most scholars used to believe that modernization would extinguish religion in the long run. But that view always had trouble explaining why America, a nation in the vanguard of modernity, is so religious. The God-is-finished thesis came under more strain in the 1980s and 1990s after Iran, a rapidly modernizing Muslim nation, exploded with fundamentalist fervor and other fast-advancing countries in Latin America and Asia showed scant sign of ditching religion.

Now even Europe, the heartland of secularization, is raising questions about whether God really is dead. The enemy of faith, say the supply-siders, is not modernity but state-regulated markets that shield big, established churches from competition. In America, where church and state stand apart, more than 50% of the population worships at least once a month. In Europe, where the state has often supported -- but also controlled -- the church with money and favors, the rate in many countries is 20% or less.

"The state undermined the church from within," says Stefan Swärd, a leader of Sweden's small but growing evangelical movement.

Consider the scene on a recent Sunday at Stockholm's Hedvig Eleonara Church, a parish of the Church of Sweden, a Lutheran institution that until 2000 was an official organ of the Swedish state. Fewer than 40 people, nearly all elderly, gathered in pews beneath a magnificent 18th-century dome. Seven were church employees. The church seats over 1,000.

Hedvig Eleonara has three full-time salaried priests and gets over \$2 million each year though a state levy.

Annika Sandström, head of its governing board, says she doesn't believe in God and took the post "on the one condition that no one expects me to go each Sunday." The church scrapped Sunday school last fall because only five children attended.

Just a few blocks away, Passion Church, an eight-month-old evangelical outfit, fizzed with fervor. Nearly 100 young Swedes rocked to a high-decibel band: "It's like adrenaline running through my blood," they sang in English. "We're talking about Jesus, Jesus, Jesus."

Passion, set up by Andreas Nielsen, a 32-year-old Swede who found God in Florida, gets no money from the state. It holds its service in a small, low-ceilinged hall rented from Stockholm's Casino Theatre, a drama company. Church, says Mr. Nielson, should be "the most kick-ass place in the world." Jesus was "king of the party."

The message has lured some unlikely converts, including a heavily tattooed, self-described former mobster. "I've gone soft," says Daniel Webb, the son of an English father and Swedish mother, who spent five years in jail for illegal arms possession and assault. He was baptized, like most Swedes, in the Church of Sweden but never prayed. He went to church for the funerals of fellow hoods but scoffed at Christian sympathy for the meek.

Mr. Webb first went to Passion Church three months ago with a female friend. Expecting to be bored, he got hooked. "An ocean of anger has calmed," he says. His ex-wife, he says, "thinks I'm ridiculous." He says he's turned his back on crime.

Europe's upstart churches aren't yet attracting anywhere near enough customers to offset a post-World War II decline. But they are shaking up and in some places reviving the market for religion, argues Rodney Stark, a pioneer of religious supply-side theory at Baylor University in Texas.

Mr. Stark first developed the notion of a "religious market" in the 1980s as a way to explain America's persistent faith. It posits that people are naturally religious but that their religiosity varies depending on the vigor of what he calls religious suppliers. "Wherever churches are a little more energetic and competitive, you've got more people going to church," he says.

The notion that Adam Smith's invisible hand reaches into the spiritual realm has many detractors. Steve Bruce, a professor of sociology at Aberdeen University in Scotland, says market theory "works for cars and soap powder but it does not work for religion." Christianity in Europe, he says, has reached the point of no return, like a dying language doomed because too few people transmit its vocabulary to their children.

The Church of Sweden is also skeptical of the supply-side view. "We don't sell a product," says archbishop Anders Wejryd. With 1,800 congregations, he says, his church must cater to a spectrum of views. He says the Church of Sweden's more dynamic parishes, some of which mimic evangelicals' methods, are thriving.

Predictions that Christianity is doomed in Europe date back centuries. Writing in the early 1700s, Thomas Woolston, an Englishman, estimated it would die out by 1900. A century later, France's Auguste Comte proclaimed the end of mankind's "theological stage." Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels viewed religion as a symptom of capitalist ills that would be cured by socialism. More recently, the demise of Christianity in Europe has led to warnings that the continent risks becoming "Eurabia," a land dominated by Islam.

Conservative U.S. preachers and politicians curse European nonbelief and trumpet the religious values of America's pilgrim fathers. But Mr. Stark, the supply-side theorist, says America's religiosity is relatively recent. In 1776, he says, around 17% of Americans belonged to churches. That is about the same as the current proportion of the population in Belgium, France, Germany and the U.K. that worships at least once a month, according to 2004's European Union-funded European Social Survey.

In the U.S., the American Revolution ended ecclesiastical hegemony in the 11 colonies that had an established church and unleashed a raucous tide of religious competition. As Methodists, Baptists, Shakers and other

churches proliferated, church-going rose, reaching around 50% in the early part of the 20th century, he says.

Europe never developed such a religious bazaar. The Church of Sweden, the Church of England, the Catholic Church in Italy and France, state-funded churches in Germany and others lost their de-facto "monopoly" status to other denominations over a century ago. But they retained their ties to the state and economic privileges.

Grace Davie, professor of sociology at Britain's Exeter University, compares them to "public utilities" -- institutions that people look to for basic services such as weddings and funerals but that don't demand day-to-day involvement. The Church of Sweden, for example, has a near-monopoly on death. Its broad property holdings, gathered since the 16th century, include most of Sweden's graveyards. The state still pays it to oversee funerals, even those involving Muslim rites.

Around 75% of Sweden's nine million people are nominally members of the "state church" -- though few ever worship and around 10% are avowed atheists, says Jonas Bromander of the Church's research unit. Sweden's evangelical churches, by contrast, have only 31,000 members, but they worship regularly and are growing, slowly, in number.

Tension between the Church of Sweden and would-be competitors goes back to the early 19th century, when early evangelicals were banished into exile. So-called free churches were later permitted but they remained in the shadow of the state-coddled Church of Sweden.

After World War II, the Church of Sweden followed the leftward direction of Swedish political life. The Ecclesiastical Department, the ministry that supervised the church, was headed for years by a prominent atheist. Liberal theology triumphed. Church attendance plummeted.

In the early 1980s, Ulf Ekman, a Church of Sweden priest, set up Livets Ord, or the Word of Life, an American-style congregation in Uppsala. His strict Bible-based message and charismatic preaching style attracted a flood of worshippers, and also controversy. The Church of Sweden stripped Mr. Ekman of his status as a preacher. The media denounced him as a cult leader bankrolled by America. The government investigated. Today, his church has around 3,000 active members.

A big impetus to the return of faith is fear of the future, says Elisabeth Sandlund, editor of Sweden's main Christian newspaper, Dagen. In Sweden and across Europe, old moorings are coming loose as cradle-to-grave welfare systems buckle. "People want something solid to hold on to," says Ms Sandlund. While working as a financial journalist, she started sneaking off to church and in 1999 eventually told her husband she believed in God. "He was not happy," she says.

Whether competition for believers actually boosts belief stirs bitter academic discussion. Measuring religiosity is difficult and each side cites different statistics. The latest data from a major research project that tracks churchgoing and belief in concepts such as God and soul, the European Values Survey, were compiled between 1981 and 1999. (They show a decline in faith in the 1980s followed by a leveling off and, for some indicators, a slight bump in the 1990s.)

To try to refute the supply-siders, Aberdeen University's Mr. Bruce points to Poland and Ireland, highly religious countries each dominated by a Catholic "monopoly church." Mr. Stark and those in his camp counter that market mechanisms in Poland and Ireland were trumped by the church's role as a vehicle for nationalism. More revealing, they say, is America's boisterous religious market and its high levels of religiosity.

One factor now spurring religious competition in Europe is the availability of state money that traditionally flowed almost entirely to established churches. It still does, but the process is more open.

In Italy, the state used to pay the salaries of Catholic priests, but in 1984 it began letting taxpayers choose which religious groups get financial support. The proceeds of a new "religious tax" of 0.8% are now divided, according to taxpayer preference, among the Catholic Church, four non-Catholic churches, the Jewish community and a state religious and humanitarian fund.

The result is an annual beauty contest ahead of a June income-tax deadline, as churches try to lure taxpayer money with advertising campaigns. Catholics get the lion's share -- 87% of nearly \$1.2 billion in 2004, the last year for which figures are available. But according to a 2005 study by Italian lawyer Massimo Introvigne and Mr. Stark, the system "reminds Italians every year that there is a religious economy."

Sweden has also overhauled church financing. In 2000, the government gave up formal control of the Church of Sweden. With great fanfare it replaced what had been a church "tax" with an annual "fee," still collected by tax authorities, levied on Church of Sweden members.

For the first time, taxpayers were told what they owed in cash -- instead of being given just a percentage figure, which is typically under 1% of household income. Church of Sweden membership dropped abruptly, and the church launched a publicity drive pitching religion. Membership stabilized, though church-going continued to decline. Still, the established church last year received around \$1.6 billion in membership fees via state tax collectors. The church also brings in some \$460 million in funeral-and-graveyard administration taxes.

A government-run commission provides money to 28 registered religious groups outside the Church of Sweden, but these funds totaled only \$7 million last year. Passion Church and other such ventures rely mostly on voluntary donations by their worshippers. This, says Kjell-Axel Johanson, an evangelical priest, keeps upstarts more in tune with their flock. He recently set up a new church that, unable to afford a permanent home, rents a bar for a few hours. "God doesn't care about packaging," he says.

Hotel chain Scandic, meanwhile, has reversed course. Before Christians mobilized, it planned to keep a few copies of the New Testament at the front desk, along with the Quran and Hebrew Bible. With the hotel under new ownership since April, Bibles are back in rooms. The Swedish arm of Gideons, a Bible distribution group, recently gave the chain 10,000 New Testaments in Swedish and English.

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