

RESEARCH ARTICLE

"A Swedish Voltaire" The Life and Afterlife of Ingemar Hedenius, 20th-Century Atheist

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Ingemar Hedenius (1908–1982) was a professor of philosophy, and one of Sweden's most famous public intellectuals in the decades following the Second World War. This was primarily due to his 1949 work *Tro och vetande* (English: *Belief and Knowledge*) in which he criticized religion, and his subsequent activity in the promotion of atheism and criticism of the relationship between church and state.

This article engages with Hedenius's life and works, but has a particular focus on his "afterlife". The article utilizes theories of cultural memory to examine how Hedenius has been remembered since his death. I argue that Hedenius and his *Tro och vetande* in Sweden have taken the role of a node, or inescapable orientation point, of discussions of atheism, belief and knowledge, and the validity of Christian truths. Hedenius's memory continues to loom large over religion and nonreligion in Sweden to this day.

The material used as primary sources in this article include scholarly works of philosophy, theology and history, by renowned Swedish academics, but it also contains interpretations of Hedenius in the wider public debate, not least as expressed by the Swedish Humanist Association, who regard him as a main inspiration for their activities.

Introduction

What does modern Swedish nonreligion consist of? In a 2009 cultural history of Sweden, Nordin's chapter addressing modern controversies and critiques of religion opens with a satirical sketch of a man with a shrewd facial expression tearing apart a clerical collar (Nordin, 2009, p. 138). This caricature, first published in the newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* in the middle of the twentieth century is of the philosophy professor Ingemar Hedenius. And in this chapter covering "religious debates" in general, Hedenius takes a central and structuring role. This is typical of how atheism and criticism of religion in the twentieth century are covered. Hedenius has been the focal point of both academic and public discussions of atheism and the critique of religion in twentieth-century Sweden. This essay seeks to unpack Hedenius's significance by studying how he has been posthumously remembered.

Sweden consistently ranks among the most secular or atheist countries in the world, measured by the percentage who claim to be non-believers (Smith, 2012; Zuckerman, 2007). Still, in the growing international field of the history of atheism, secularism and humanism, the influential figures and movements which helped shape Sweden's secular society have not received very much attention. The research on the history of atheism and secularism in Sweden, which in itself is not abundant (Björklund, 1942; Nerman, 1960; Ståhle, 1979; Briland, Hellström,

Hoff, et al., 1981; Sanner 1995, ch 4; Lundborg, 2002; Alexandersson, 2014), has been performed in Swedish, with a couple of smaller but notable exceptions (Hiorth, 1995; Hiorth, 2007). So, there is a gap between the Swedish and the international research context. And if we consider the history of atheism and secularism as a global phenomenon, there is a need to include not only the main national and cultural cases, but also peripheral examples, into the field (cf. Gavroglu, Patiniotis, Papanelopoulou, et al., 2008). And, since Sweden as mentioned is one of the most secular countries in the world, it is also a critical case. In this article, I will try to bridge the existing gap somewhat by presenting an introductory sketch of one important part of modern Swedish atheism. My focus will be on the life and the "afterlife" of Hedenius, who is at the center of any educated Swede's understanding of atheism in a modernizing Swedish society.

By focusing on Hedenius, I hope to combine a portrait of the mid-twentieth-century religious-secular polemics with a sketch of the contemporary landscape of nonreligion and debates about the validity of religion. I will do this by both considering Hedenius himself, as well as his posthumous legacy. I argue that Hedenius was not only at the center of the debates of his own time, but continues to play a role as a crucial focal point in the understanding of the relation between belief and knowledge, and between religion and nonreligion in Sweden.

Afterlife: memory and orientation

That the past is not solely past, and that the past is not only history in a strictly academic sense of historiography, has been highlighted in many different theoretical traditions

during recent decades – traditions both within the field of history as such, but also within broader strands of the humanities and social sciences.

Departing from works by historians such as David Lowenthal, who emphasized how the past in modernity was a "foreign country", albeit at the same time one which was integral to us, "assimilated in ourselves" (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 412), the field of heritage studies investigates "the role of the past in the present" (Carman & Stig Sorensen, 2009, p. 17). Not least in focus is the political preservation and reverence of certain phenomena, often material, but also ideational.

Neighboring this is the field of memory studies, or of cultural memory, often influenced by and referring to theoreticians such as Pierre Nora (Nora, 1996). This interdisciplinary field examines "the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts" (Erlil, 2008, p. 2). Historical memory's decisive influence on contemporary political culture has also been underlined by the influential German historian Jörn Rüsen, who has coined the term "history culture" (*Geschichtskultur*) to describe those aspects of history which enter into the social life of national communities. For Rüsen, we orient ourselves in the present by remembering and relating to the past (Rüsen, 1993, 1994).

The departure point of this article is the need to consider the role of the past in the present. How we relate to the past structures our knowledge of and discussions about political and social phenomena in the present. The empirical work of heritage and memory studies often focuses on places, artefacts, monuments or important events. It is no less possible, however, to apply such perspectives to important intellectual-historical texts and individuals. Like artefacts and places, a person and their work may be a central cultural point of orientation, for how a society thinks about itself and orients itself in regard to specific cultural and political issues and controversies.

Studying the cultural memory of a person entails an interest in the past that is not purely historiographical, but which considers the continuing relevance of the past without necessarily making it a question of provable influence. A task for the intellectual historian thus becomes not solely to examine intellectuals and ideas in their historical contexts and settings, but to consider what continuing role certain ideational expressions of the past exert in the present. This way of combining the past and the present is the strength of this perspective and what makes it suitable for assessing the role of Hedenius in Swedish nonreligion. While it is not a primary aim of the article, applying these perspectives to a person, rather than places, artefacts or monuments may also add something to the theoretical traditions here discussed.

Due to my interest in Hedenius's memory, I will introduce Hedenius and his lived context as a means of situating his enduring afterlife. I will not try in a strict sense to measure the actual impact which Hedenius and his works have exerted, but I will investigate how he has been remembered and valued since his own death, especially in twenty-first-century Swedish public and academic debates. I will show how he is still an orientation point

around which discussions of atheism, nonreligion and the validity of Christian truths gravitates.

The Hedenius research in Swedish is comparatively broad for being research on a single Swedish university professor. Here, I incorporate this academic literature as part of a primary source base that exemplifies Hedenius's significant afterlife. A big part of Hedenius's legacy is within academia, as a figure of major historical stature, and as someone to engage and argue with. In other words, academic historiography is one context in which heritage or collective memory is to be found, and may so be included, as one instance among many ways of relating to the past. In addition to academic writing and debates, I will also consider material from the Swedish Humanist Association, as they provide another major arena for Hedenius's legacy.

While the main aim of this article is to systematize Hedenius's afterlife in the Swedish intellectual and public debates about religion and nonreligion, the article will commence with an introduction to his life. A short contextual biography will be followed by an introduction to his intellectual works, above all one work, the book *Tro och vetande*, for which he is most remembered, and around which most of the following discussion centers.

Ingemar Hedenius in his Swedish context

Ingemar Hedenius was born in Stockholm in 1908 into a well-off, right-wing and religious family. His father was a top physician, and served as court physician to the Swedish King. Hedenius's grandfather had been a professor and for a time served as the rector of Uppsala University.¹ Uppsala University is the oldest and one of the most prestigious in Sweden, and was also where Ingemar Hedenius studied. He commenced his university education by studying Greek. He wanted to become a theologian, but his introduction to Plato, according to himself, led him to lose his Christian faith, as he deemed the Greek philosophy to be intellectually superior to what he found in the New Testament (Hedenius, 1976, p. 111). Hedenius consequently never pursued a theological career; instead, he studied philosophy, earning his doctorate with a dissertation on George Berkeley's sensationalism in 1936.

Hedenius belonged to the generation which, under most of their adult life, experienced no other rule than governments led by the Swedish Social Democratic Party. The same year as Hedenius defended his thesis, 1936, the social democrats began a reign that would last for forty consecutive years, until 1976, three years after Hedenius's retirement, and six years before his death in 1982. Hedenius was not a card-carrying social democrat, but did at least at times identify with the party. In the 1960s, he claimed that he had voted both for the social democrats and the liberal party *Folkpartiet* (Nordin, 2004, p. 314f). While in some ways he was definitely a cultural radical—he opposed both the monarchy and the state church—politically he is probably best understood as a centrist. This is especially so after 1968, when the general cultural and political climate in Sweden took a significant left turn.

In his political centrism, Hedenius resembled another famous public intellectual, the political scientist Herbert

Tingsten, who during the post-war period may be seen as a Swedish Daniel Bell: advocating an end-of-ideology thesis, and arguing against what were perceived as irrational ideological systems such as Nazism and communism (Strand, 2016). These two professors were close friends, shared many ideals, and Tingsten, who was editor-in-chief of the Swedish liberal newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, often let Hedenius publish there. These two central public intellectuals of the twentieth century have been described as a punchy duo in the struggle against what they perceived as the ideological follies of any kind (Hirdman, Björkman, & Lundberg, 2012, p. 399).

Hedenius was also philosophically moderate. He was part of a generation of philosophy professors who were responsible for establishing analytical philosophy as the primary paradigm in Swedish academic philosophy, as opposed to continental philosophy. Hedenius regarded continental strands of philosophy, such as Marxist and existentialist currents, as well as later French structuralism, as obscurantist or incoherent drivel (Nordin, 2004, pp. 133f, 458ff). Hedenius was an admirer of Bertrand Russell, both as a philosopher and as a public figure, and as Russell was the first "media atheist" in Britain (Brown, 2013, p. 241), Hedenius came to take on a similar role in Swedish public life. As I will return to shortly, Hedenius admitted it would be scientifically unsound to claim definite scientific proofs for the position of atheism, and did not use the self-designatory concept of atheist in abundance. But he leaned towards atheism as the most reasonable position (Hedenius 1949, p. 118–130), and in line with a contemporary definition of atheism—as "absence of belief in the existence of a God or gods" (Bullivant 2013, p. 13)—Hedenius was most definitely an atheist.

If social democracy was in a way the political and cultural framework for most of Sweden's twentieth century (Sejersted, 2011), Lutheran Protestantism had for centuries been the main framework for Swedish religious and cultural life. Sweden adopted Lutheran Protestantism in the sixteenth century, and had a state church as late as the year 2000, when church and state formally separated. Until 1858, any religious gatherings outside of the church were illegal, and when, in 1860, it became legally possible to leave the state church, it was so only for the purposes of joining another congregation. The possibility of being religiously non-affiliated came only in 1951 (Bexell, 2003; Brohed, 2005). So while Sweden today is often understood as being very secular, historically the church has had a powerful grip over Swedish society and cultural life. And this Lutheran establishment was the central object of Hedenius's attack on Christianity.

Tro och vetande

Hedenius started his campaign against both the church in particular and Christianity in general with an article in the newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* in 1949, which prefigured parts of his larger project. In the same year, *Tro och vetande* (Swedish for "Belief and knowledge"), the work for which Hedenius became most famous, was also published.

Tro och vetande consists of around a dozen semi-autonomous essays, most of them dealing with the

topic of belief and knowledge, and the truth content of Christianity.² First of all, it is an attack on certain fundamentals of the Christian faith, such as the existence of God, and the possibility of miracles, such as the resurrection of Jesus. Hedenius also touches on the subject of theodicy, the issue about how an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God would permit evil in the world.

Very early on, Hedenius refers to Bertrand Russell's *Sceptical Essays*, claiming that one should never believe in a proposition when there is no reasonable ground for supposing it true (Hedenius, 1949, pp. 35–36; Russell, 1928, p. 11). Thereafter, he establishes three postulates, which are the foundation for the rest of the book's argument. The first one, what he calls the postulate of the psychology of religion, holds that religion is not only piety (or morality), but also contains certain truths of theoretical reason, and holds certain suppositions or ideas for being true. The second postulate, the postulate of language theory, is that the claims made by religion can be communicated to those who are not believing Christians. The third one he calls the postulate of logic, which is simply that two truths cannot contradict one another (Hedenius, 1949, pp. 64–77).³

From these postulates, Hedenius goes on to discuss what he calls the theory of harmony, the idea that Christian truth claims may harmonize with human reason, or that there may be a harmony between belief and knowledge. Here he claims that this is a long Christian tradition, with different versions from various Christian philosophers, but focuses on Leibniz as the best attempt of the theory of harmony (Hedenius, 1949, p. 79). Hedenius here touches on the problem of theodicy, but also discusses and disqualifies the possibility of miracles and the existence of a God, especially one which acts or intervenes in the world. He concludes that the theory of harmony is untenable; there is a definite conflict between belief and knowledge. He concludes this first part by saying that while one cannot provide a definite proof of the non-existence of God, atheism is "the best motivated standpoint", or even "the only really reasonable standpoint" from a philosophical and scientific point of view (Hedenius, 1949, pp. 130, 128).

It has been pointed out that had Hedenius limited his argument to the rejection of the theory of harmony and theodicy, the book would possibly not have had such an impact as it did. These arguments were not radically new, and were not as eye-catching in the mid-twentieth century as they had been in the 18th and 19th centuries (Nordin, 2004, p. 156f). After this part, however, follows a much more polemic segment, in which some of the main figures of Swedish theology of the twentieth century were specifically attacked.

Hedenius's polemical attacks are presented under the heading "disharmony of belief and knowledge". Here, he refers to and dismisses some of the main figures of academic theology, continually using his earlier postulates to disqualify their theories. The field of Swedish systematic theology during the twentieth century is disparate (Rasmusson, 2007), but Hedenius meticulously goes through all of the main names of his own and an earlier generation, such as Anders Nygren, Torsten Bohlin and

Nathan Söderblom (Hedenius, 1949, pp. 130–232). None of these, not even the Nygren-led Lundensian theology (after the Lund University), which at least in their own self-description pursued an academic theology which was anti-metaphysical and reduced to facts in a kind of almost positivist language, qualifies as solid and valid knowledge, according to Hedenius.

The writers Hedenius attacked were theologians, often people who held or had held chairs at the main universities of Lund and Uppsala, but more importantly for Hedenius's impact, due to the tight relation between church, state and university up until at least the mid-twentieth century, many of these theologians also, for at least parts of their careers, held the most prestigious positions in the state church (Rasmusson, 2007). Among the theologians critiqued by Hedenius were not only bishops, but the current archbishop of Sweden, Erling Eidem, as well as his predecessor Nathan Söderblom. Söderblom was one of the most famous public figures in Sweden, having received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1930 for his international ecumenical work. In the specific case of Söderblom, Hedenius's attacks were less personal as he had passed away in the 1930s. Nevertheless, the objects of Hedenius's polemical ire were persons of high intellectual and social status both within and outside the academy.

Tro och vetande immediately roused a lively debate. The newspaper editor Herbert Tingsten himself initiated the public reception by praising the brilliance of his friend's new work in his own newspaper. His was not the only positive reading of the book. But Hedenius also attracted strong criticism. All of the bishops and theologians he attacked in the book (at least those who were still alive) wrote responses in reply, and there were long debates between Hedenius, his opponents and other participants in newspapers and journals, mainly during the summer of 1949 (Lundborg, 2002; Nordin, 2004, p. 163ff).

The debate was soon recapitulated in a volume simply called *The Hedenius Debate*⁴ gathering some of the main texts published by the state church's adult educational organization (Dahlberg, 1951), and more importantly, Hedenius himself summarized it in his next book, *Att välja livsåskådning* ("To choose a philosophy of life") (Hedenius, 1951).

Some parts of Hedenius's later book were inserted into further editions of *Tro och vetande*. *Tro och vetande* appeared in five editions during Hedenius's lifetime, and there have so far been two further additions since his death in 1982 (Hedenius, 2009, p. 217). This is an impressive output for a work of philosophy in Swedish. Hedenius did not stop there; he also published books about the social role of the academic discipline of theology and the church, and one about the teaching of hell in Christian theology (Hedenius, 1958, 1972). It was *Tro och vetande*, however, that was his main work.

The afterlife of Ingemar Hedenius in contemporary Sweden

One of the theological themes in *Tro och vetande* is resurrection and immortality. And while Hedenius does not grant the possibility of an actual afterlife, neither of Jesus Christ nor of any ordinary human beings, he himself has

had an impressive afterlife, albeit in a metaphorical sense, in the public and academic life in Sweden.

Hedenius died in 1982 and received obituaries in all the main Swedish newspapers. These were very laudatory and underlined the importance of Hedenius, something which of course belongs to the genre of obituaries (Nordin, 2004, p. 491f). However, while the attention Hedenius received at his death is interesting, what is all the more fascinating has been his enduring significance since around the turn of the millennium.

If there was a natural interest of Hedenius in relation to his passing away in the early 80s, we can point to two other surges in the attention paid to him and to *Tro och vetande* in the public imagination. A first, smaller surge of interest occurred in the early 90s, when a pair of books were published which continued the polemics with Hedenius. Then in the first decade of the new millennium, there were several other larger works directed at *Tro och vetande*, but there was also a renewed interest in Hedenius fueled by the Swedish Humanist Association.

Rather than to follow this chronologically, I will here group the continued responses to Hedenius thematically. This will allow us to answer the question posed at the outset of this essay regarding how the Swedish public has responded to and remembered Hedenius since his death, and how he has been valued.

Award and canon: The Swedish Humanist Association

One context in which Hedenius's memory and reputation has played a central role since his death is in *Humanisterna*, the Swedish Humanist Association. The association was founded in 1979 and is a member of International Humanist and Ethical Union. They provide information about secular humanism, and publicly debate topics having to do with religion and nonreligion. They arrange youth camps, provide help with secular ceremonies, and publish books and a member journal, which has alternately been titled *Humanisten* and *HumanistInfo*. Since 2000, one of their most public and famous activities has been the prize which they award to individuals who have "helped spread the humanistic message in Swedish society" (Humanisterna, 2017a). The name of this award? The Ingemar Hedenius Award (*Ingemar Hedenius-priset*).

The prize aims to commemorate Hedenius, and rewards people who work in his spirit to promote humanism, rationalism and science. This has meant that the prize has been given to people with quite different areas of activity. Winners include professors who have written popular science works, authors and other public intellectuals who critique religion, as well as activists against so-called honor violence. The latest prize (2016) was given to the initiators of a network supporting LGBTQ refugees who have recently fled to Sweden. The internationally most famous recipient is probably former ABBA member Björn Ulvaeus, who was awarded the prize in 2006 for his public critique of religion and promotion of a humanist philosophy of life (Humanisterna, 2017b).

When the Hedenius prize was inaugurated in 2000, the member journal of the association produced a thematic issue on Hedenius, and put him on the cover. In an introductory text based on a speech by the then-chairman of

the association, Hedenius is presented as one of the great intellectuals of the twentieth century, and as a "Swedish Voltaire" who "with moral courage, pathos and a passion for truth fought against superstition and oppression" (Blomqvist, 2000b, p. 11).

This placing of Hedenius within an intellectual humanist/atheist canon is also visible in other self-descriptions of the organization and their worldview. Hedenius is placed into a canon of intellectuals, with international representatives such as Voltaire, David Hume, John Stuart Mill, Bertrand Russell and Richard Dawkins. These are all said to have contributed to a philosophy of humanism "sharing ideas such as freedom, equality, brotherhood, rationalism, tolerance and compassion" (Humanisterna, 2017a; cf. Lindenfors & Sturmark, 2015, p. 57f).

The notoriety of Hedenius's *Tro och vetande* and his centrality in the ongoing debates over humanism in Swedish society can also be witnessed in the works of one of the more prominent Swedish humanists, Christer Sturmark. Sturmark is, as of October 2017, the chairman of *Humanisterna*, and a prominent public debater over questions of religion and secularism in the Swedish public space. Trained as a computer scientist, he works at the publishing house *Fri tanke* (Free thought), a publisher close to *Humanisterna*, which have published works by the likes of Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris. This publishing house is also responsible for the 2009 edition of *Tro och vetande* (Hedenius, 2009).

Sturmark taps into *Tro och vetande*, and even borrows the title for his own work. For example, in 2006 he published *Tro och vetande 2.0*, and in 2015, he released a follow-up which has as its subtitle *Tro och vetande 3.0* (Sturmark, 2006, 2015).⁵ Unsurprisingly, Sturmark cites Hedenius as his main philosophical inspiration and role model. And Sturmark's discussions about the nature of knowledge can be recognized from Hedenius' work, though Sturmark's interventions are not as thoroughgoing or rigorous as Hedenius's. Sturmark's books have a wider span and are popularly written for a more general audience. Sturmark's writing ranges across subjects including the theory of science, the history of atheism and humanism, religion and the Swedish state, modern religious movements and religious fundamentalism, etc. But Hedenius appears in these books as the most important Swedish secularist thinker, and is presented as a large contributor to the secularization process of Sweden (Sturmark, 2015, p. 363).

At times, other Swedes are mentioned by *Humanisterna* as important in the forging of secular Sweden, such as the economist Knut Wicksell who was charged for blasphemy at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the mid-twentieth-century sex educator Elise Ottesen-Jensen (Humanisterna, 2017a). But Hedenius stands out in the amount of attention awarded to him in the humanist movement of Sweden today.

The critique continues: philosophical and theological polemics

Ingemar Hedenius's significance does not merely rest on his fame among those who agree with his stances on religion. The first half of the 1990s saw two new books which polemicized against him. The first was *A critique*

of Hedenius: What Ingemar Hedenius did and did not understand about religion (1992) by Hans Nystedt. Nystedt was a retired philosopher of religion, and also, as stated on the back cover of the book, a confessing Christian. His critique of Hedenius is essayistic and deeply personal. Nystedt's own personal acquaintance with Hedenius provides the framework before the discussion starts. Nystedt does not give one clear conclusive, sustained attack, but rather he critiques Hedenius on a number of different points. For instance, Nystedt questions Hedenius's postulates, he deems Hedenius's ethics inconsistent, and he contends that the professor is guilty of a double standard wherein philosophical dogmas are accepted uncritically while religious ones are submitted to sharp criticism. Nystedt claims that Hedenius did not make his epistemological stances clear enough. The essayistic genre means that the text is a kind of free discussion around the theme of belief and knowledge with the occasional explicit polemics with Hedenius (Nystedt 1992). As an academic critique it is thus quite thin and did not attract very much public attention, but is an interesting first example of how the "Hedenius debate" was not over even though its main protagonist was long gone.

In 1994, Peder Thalén published another critique of Hedenius, in *The God of the secular culture: Perspective on Ingemar Hedenius' critique of the Christian tradition*, an academic dissertation from the theological faculty at Uppsala University. For Thalén, Hedenius's philosophy is an "example" of a specific tradition of philosophy of religion, of which Hedenius is a prominent figure (Thalén, 1994, p. 10). There is however no real discussion or deeper presentation of this tradition, but Hedenius is the main thinker which he confronts.

In brief, Thalén's argument is that Hedenius's critique of religion is not false *per se*, but is nevertheless invalid because, as Thalén sees it, religion is not a non-verifiable theory, which according to Thalén is a key claim of Hedenius's. For Thalén, religion is something else (Thalén, 1994, pp. 26f, 154f). When Hedenius paints religion in the way he does, it is a theoretical construct which lacks contact with the "historically existing" religion, or with the "inside" of religion (Thalén, 1994, pp. 27, 154). Departing from Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, Thalén claims that religion is really a different language than the philosophical one for which Hedenius stands. Instead, when Thalén presents positively expressed alternatives, the author—supporting himself on Martin Luther's theology, or Luther's "language"—claims that Christianity is about "self-knowledge", or the possibility to live a "new life" (Thalén, 1994, pp. 70, 132).

In an interview with the journal of the Swedish Humanist Association, Ann-Mari Henschen-Dahlquist, a former colleague of Hedenius's, claims that these books from the 90s contain nothing "which disturbs his [Hedenius's] argumentation" (Blomqvist, 2000a, p. 13). Interestingly, this dismissive attitude is also found in the next generation of philosophical/theological critiques of Hedenius's *Tro och vetande*, two works from the early 2000s.

Sebastian Rehnman, in his *God, knowledge and being: Epistemology and metaphysics in Ingemar Hedenius* (2002), explicitly dismisses the critiques of Hedenius from

the 1990s, calling them "strange" and "untrustworthy" (Rehnman, 2002, p. 15).⁶ Rehnman, a university lecturer in theology, aims to provide a better version. He goes into Hedenius' epistemology and his metaphysics, and claims that his purpose is to "constructively understand" them. But it is certainly also a critique. Rehnman finds the epistemology of Hedenius "invalid", and his metaphysics "not final" or "not conclusive" (Rehnman, 2002, pp. 12, 14). Without going into detail of the argumentation, which is quite technical, it may be summed up that Rehnman claims that Hedenius has not proved what he has tried to prove regarding the incompatibility of belief and knowledge, and that his epistemology requires a metaphysics, which Hedenius does not provide in *Tro och vetande*, at least not in any satisfying way.

Rainer Carls, who is a Jesuit Pater and doctor of philosophy, also wields a double-edged sword in his attack on Hedenius, which is to be found in his *On belief and knowledge: Ingemar Hedenius' critique of Christianity in a half-century perspective* (2002).⁷ He claims on the one hand that Hedenius ignored most of the historical debates of the religious-philosophical topic of belief and knowledge, such as the church fathers and the scholastics, and only cared to take into considerations some mainly contemporary Protestant theologians. Secondly, according to Carls, Hedenius's logic is not satisfying and his view of science or scientific reason is not consistent. Carls uses developments in logic and analytical philosophy after 1949 to refute Hedenius's philosophy as insufficient.

It is not necessary to go into detail into these works, and my point here is not to discuss their validity.⁸ Rather, I want to point out how Hedenius's work still lingers: Ten years after his death, and more than half a century after the publication of his *Tro och vetande*, within a decade, there were four books published which tried to refute him in one way or another. For such a small country and language area as Sweden, that is nothing less than remarkable, and shows the centrality of Hedenius as a fulcrum for the ongoing debates over the validity and role of religion in Sweden. And they were not the only works discussing Hedenius around the turn of the millennium.

Historiography and historical argumentation

Apart from polemical works directed against Hedenius, at about the same time in the early 2000s, there were also a number of historical works examining Hedenius published. The first comprehensive biography of Hedenius came out in 2004, by the professor of History of Ideas and Sciences, Svante Nordin. Nordin attempted to paint a portrait of Hedenius "from the cradle to the grave" (Nordin, 2004, p. 8). This was something which Hedenius did not do himself. His memoirs were published posthumously; they were however quite unfinished as they only covered the first twenty years of his life (Hedenius, 1992).

Nordin's biography includes a fair share of Hedenius's academic career as a university philosopher, covering that part of Hedenius's career more narrowly within philosophy, and the politics and conflicts of academic life. But he also points out that Hedenius was not as influential in

academic philosophy as he was in the public debate over religion and theology. *Tro och vetande* stands out as the central point in Hedenius's career, and is the only one of Hedenius's works which Nordin awards a chapter of its own (Nordin, 2004, p. 135).

Another historical work on Hedenius and *Tro och vetande* is Johan Lundborg's *When atheism conquered Sweden: Ingemar Hedenius and the debate around belief and knowledge* (2002). Apart from introducing Hedenius and his *Tro och vetande*, Lundborg systematizes and paints a portrait of the ensuing debate. But Lundborg's work is not solely descriptive, he also presents a kind of normative argument about Hedenius and the debate, namely that it is not correct to say that Hedenius "won" the debate by virtue of his superior arguments, which Lundborg claims has been the main picture of the Hedenius debate. That he was the theoretically superior participant in the debate is, according to Lundborg, a "myth" (Lundborg, 2002, p. 300).

For Lundborg, the myth of Hedenius's intellectual victory became firmly established for four reasons. First, the national liberal newspapers, not least his friend Tingsten's *Dagens Nyheter*, backed him, and this exerted a large influence on the perception of the discussion. Second, Hedenius's book fit within the *Zeitgeist* of a modernizing social democratic Sweden where the Lutheran establishment was perceived as a brake pad. Thus, rather than viewing Hedenius's arguments as objectively superior, Lundborg sees them as succeeding regardless of the intellectual force of the argumentation. Third, Hedenius himself was quick to be his own historiographer. In his following book *Att välja livsåskådning* he describes the arguments of the debate in a way that is favorable to him. Finally, Lundborg points to Hedenius's pugnacious nature, which meant that it was his persona rather than his arguments which triumphed. Lundborg points out that Hedenius did often not describe his opponent's position in a correct way, and that it was rather a show of rhetoric and strategy than one of theoretical and philosophical superiority (Lundborg, 2002, p. 301ff).

Here, I would also like to return to some of Hedenius' critics discussed in the previous section because, while they mainly countered Hedenius with philosophical argumentation, they also appealed to what we may call historical arguments similar to those of Lundborg's, especially his second argument. Thalén, for instance, claims that Hedenius was a child of a certain optimistic *Zeitgeist*. While his solutions to the problem of religion were, according to Thalén, invalid, they became popular because of the situation of the church and society in Sweden in this time. His critique of religion was an intellectual "fortress" which made people who were anyway disaffected by or who had already deserted Christianity feel safe and happily confirmed in their opinions (Thalén, 1994, pp. 30, 162).⁹ Carls makes similar arguments, when he claims that Hedenius was conditioned by a Swedish secular bourgeois Protestant culture of his own time, and in that way only was following the paradigm of his time in an unreflective way (Carls, 2001, pp. 245–249).

The historiographers Nordin and Lundborg both point out that Hedenius was influential in Swedish academic theology, and this is confirmed by other historical narratives, more focused on the topic of academic theology itself. The development of academic theology in Sweden has in one work been claimed to be "in the shadow of belief and knowledge" (Girmalm, 2006, p. 119). Hedenius's influence has been seen to consist in how scholars at the theological faculties, most notably in his own Uppsala, have followed his postulates, accepting them or tweaking them and giving them a new meaning. The further argumentation by Hedenius about the theological faculties has also been cited as one key aspect of the development and reforms of the academic discipline of theology (Hedenius, 1958; Girmalm, 2006, pp. 79–93).

One of the key figures in the shaping of the Hedenius legacy within the university theological departments, Anders Jeffner, is repeatedly mentioned by all of the authors cited here. Jeffner was a student of Hedenius, and his writing highlights the influence of the philosophy professor on his own thought in both biographical (Jeffner, 1993) and systematic works (Jeffner, 1988, p. 40).

The centrality of Hedenius for Swedish academic theology is confirmed by the fact that most of the main figures of contemporary Swedish theology have discussed or at least mentioned him in their discussion about the field, and drawn similar conclusions regarding his centrality for the development of the field (Martinson, 2010, p. 27f; Rasmusson, 2007, pp. 132, 145; Sigurdson, 2000a, 2000b). One of these theologians, Ola Sigurdson, has also included Hedenius as a paradigmatic case in his study of the specific ethical tradition of the modern Swedish welfare state. In this work, Hedenius and Tingsten are linked with figures such as the Nobel laureates Gunnar and Alva Myrdal, who were important architects behind the Swedish welfare state (Sigurdson, 2000c).

Finally, discussing historiography, we can return to the text mentioned at the outset of this article, that in a chapter nominally about a century of "religious debates" in general, Ingemar Hedenius takes a central and structuring role (Nordin 2009). Here, two further examples may be mentioned where Hedenius is the main focal point in a narrative which is nominally much broader. In a recent much-attended book on "post-Christian Sweden" by a prominent scholar of religion, there is one chapter on the history of the critique of religion. And in a very broadly painted global historical narrative of such critique, Hedenius is the only Swedish figure present, and is awarded a large chunk of the narrative (Thurfjell, 2015, pp. 95–99). Similarly, in a central textbook on religion for upper secondary school, Hedenius is the only Swede mentioned in the historical narrative on critiques of religion, and is given the lion's share of attention (Björclin & Jämterud, 2013, pp. 348–352). So, also in more general treatises on the religious history of Sweden, Hedenius is the representative of the critical position.

Hedenius is thus an inescapable point of orientation in both the academic field of theology as well as in the

narratives of religion and Swedish secularity and thus more widely the story of the modernization of Swedish culture.

Conclusion and discussion

"One wonders, why precisely Hedenius?" This question was posed in response to Sebastian Rehnman's book in a review essay by the theologian Mattias Martinson (Martinson, 2002a, p. 599). Martinson's question is reasonable in one way – Rehnman could have discussed metaphysics and epistemology, and the relation between knowledge and belief without at all invoking Hedenius.

In another way, Martinson's question is answered by the main argument of this article: even decades after his own death, and more than half a century after the publication of his main work, Ingemar Hedenius and his *Tro och vetande* have taken the role of the node, or inescapable reference point or orientation point, of all discussions of atheism, belief and knowledge, the existence of God, and the validity of Christian truths. Therefore it is easily understandable why Rehnman turned precisely to Hedenius as the object of his criticism.

Scholars have argued that the *lieux*, the places which Pierre Nora speaks about as making up the cultural memory of a people or culture, need not only be places in the narrow sense, but also a *locus* in the sense of a *locus classicus* – something authoritative to return to, a locality around which the collective memory and the understanding gravitates (Redin & Ruin, 2016, p. 27). In Swedish discussions about atheism and secular society, Hedenius is such a *locus*, where both the historiography and the academic self-knowledge of theology gravitates, but which is also invoked outside of narrow academic discussions, in the public debate, and in certain movements and cultural communities.

Shifting perspective: on the future historiography of Swedish atheism

In a series of articles about Hedenius from 2002, Mattias Martinson, a professor of theology at Uppsala University, expressed fatigue with the constant reiteration of more or less the same arguments about atheism, that the debate which blew up in 2002 followed the same old positions: theologians tried to refute Hedenius in familiar, if slightly refined, ways, and the humanists defended the legacy of Hedenius in the media. From a theological point of view, Martinson suggests that academic theology, which after all still exists, needs to work in new ways, and discuss richer questions than those conditioned by a Hedenius-centric debate of belief and knowledge (Martinson, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c).

Since Martinson expressed his exhaustion, fifteen Hedenius prizes have been awarded, *Tro och vetande* has come out in yet another edition, with a foreword by one of Sweden's most famous public intellectuals, Lena Andersson, who underlines its pressing relevance (Andersson, 2009). Adding to this, at least one dissertation in theology has touched upon Hedenius's role for the development of the Swedish academic theology

(Girmalm, 2006). There has also been a special issue on Hedenius of the Swedish journal of philosophy, as well as a hefty book about the philosophy professor of a more curious nature, focusing on the philosopher's love of art (Stenström, 2011). So it seems that Hedenius has not yet been forgotten.

While I have included some historiography about Hedenius and atheism in this article, I have primarily sought to discuss Hedenius and atheism from a broader standpoint, where historiography plays merely one part in the memory of this figure, but is not all. This conceptualization of Hedenius as a *lieu de memoire* can be connected to a discussion about the academic historiography of atheism, secularism and humanism in a more narrow sense, and I would like to conclude by doing that.

If I am to suggest for historiography something similar that Martinson did for theology: we should avoid centralizing Hedenius too much. Ingemar Hedenius certainly needs to be dealt with in any historiography of atheism and humanism of Sweden's twentieth century. But the long shadow he has cast has probably meant that historiographical nuance has been lost. The history or intellectual history of atheism and humanism in Sweden, should be able to get beyond the One Great Man narrative, however large and important his legacy has become as a *lieu de memoire*. Illustrative of this long shadow is that Lundborg's work on Hedenius is called "When atheism conquered Sweden," and thus the conquest appears as the work of one person, something which is quite reductive.

In the postwar period when Hedenius was active, there was a much larger and broader set of debates around atheism, religion, and society which need to be inserted into their specific contexts. And before Hedenius, there is nearly a century of attempts to forge an atheist or humanist position in the Swedish public arena.¹⁰ Some of this has of course been covered (Ståhle, 1979; Sanner, 1995, ch. 4; Alexandersson, 2014), but a broader and deeper intellectual historiography of atheism in Sweden which taps into recent historiographical developments in the international arena is lacking. Such an endeavor will give a rich picture of the contexts and traditions which produced an intellectual figure such as Ingemar Hedenius, and which has kept his legacy alive long after his own death.

Put another way, this article has shown how central one important figure has been in the Swedish intellectual history of atheism, but the task for historiography in the future should be to unpack the conditions for the formation of Hedenius as an inescapable axial figure and the conditions for the success of his irreligious agenda.

Notes

¹ The biographical details come from the main biography of Hedenius, which the author has called a "full-length portrait" (Nordin, 2004).

² The first edition contained some essays towards the end which were quite unrelated to the main topic: essays on Plato, and on the world war. These were removed in later editions.

³ It could be noted that Hedenius uses religion as a general term, but still more or less exclusively exemplifies with and discusses Christianity. As I try to stay close to Hedenius's own text, this time- and culture-typical conflation of religion and Christianity is retained in this recapitulation.

⁴ For works other than Hedenius's own, I hereafter give English translations of the titles in the text. The original Swedish titles are found in the References section.

⁵ The full titles in English translation are "Belief and knowledge 2.0: On reason, humanism and why people believe in strange things: a small book about big questions", and "Enlightenment in the 21st century: Belief and knowledge 3.0".

⁶ The Swedish words here are "märklig" and "överdriftig".

⁷ It may be pointed out that neither Rehnman nor Carls hold central positions in contemporary Swedish academic theology or philosophy; their works however were given attention in public and specialist debates.

⁸ It has been done elsewhere. In a review in the Swedish philosophical journal *Filosofisk Tidskrift*, the reviewer is highly critical. Even though he thinks that Carls's critique does not really fly, it has its merits and is superior to Rehnman's, which according to the reviewer is "beneath contempt", full of "useless arguments" and should never have been published (Johansson, 2003, p. 57).

⁹ In the English summary, Thalén uses other terms for this, nearing a Marxist terminology which is not used elsewhere in his work; he calls Hedenius an "intellectual superstructure", and says that *Belief and Knowledge* worked as "an ideology justifying the cultural change of dechristianization." (Thalén 1994, pp. 180, 182).

¹⁰ It may of course be discussed when this forging started, but one possible position a century before Hedenius could be the introduction of the philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach in 1850, when the introducer was arrested and accused of blasphemy and tried for (but never sentenced to) the death penalty (Gamby, 1978, p. 220).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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