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# The Discourse of Religion in Swedish Secular Humanism

A Discursive study of religion and the secular  
in the Swedish Humanist Association

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## **Abstract**

This study combines the two scholarly fields of studying atheism and secular humanism and the discursive approach of studying the uses of the category “religion” in socio-political interests. As an empirical case, the study looks at The Swedish Humanist Association, *Humanisterna*, with examples from some of the videos on their official website, as well as examples of articles from debates between the chairman of Humanisterna and critics of the association. By using discourse analysis as a method, the study examines what specific examples and connotations that Humanisterna use to represent “religion”, and what discursive strategies they deploy when their representations of “religion” are challenged by critics. The examination of the material show how Humanisterna’s normatively constructs “religion” by referring to its “true face”, which is conservative, fundamentalist, and oppressive. The study also shows the discursive strategy of separating the category of religion from human subjects, where “religion” is constructed as a disembodied, ahistorical entity that has agency and oppresses people. By relating to previous research and theories the study concludes that “religion” is more than something that Humanisterna criticizes, it is a discourse that fundamentally defines legitimizes their identity. While the previous research emphasized the understanding of secular humanism and atheism as the constructing of a distinct collective identity, this study contributes by showing the function of “religion” within this identity.

**Keywords:** atheism, secular humanism, The Swedish Secular Humanist Association, Humanisterna, identity, discourse of religion, discourse analysis, classification.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

The problems concerning defining religion have prompted some scholars of religion to a more critical approach towards the category “religion”. Theorists such as Talal Asad, Russell McCutcheon, Timothy Fitzgerald and others (below) have turned their attention to the socio-political effects of classification, emphasizing the need for studying the processes involved in the discursive strategies of using “religion” for certain outcome. Simultaneously, there has been a growing interest in religious studies and social science to study atheism and secular humanism – sometimes referred to as “new atheism”, a term first coined by the Magazine *Wired* in 2006<sup>1</sup>. These studies have largely focused on the collective identity-construction of atheism and “non-believers” (Cimino & Smith 2007; Lee 2012, see below). The identity and self-description of these groups is depending on discourses of religion since, as a social formation, they are defined as well as organized in relation to, and/or against, religion. Therefore, I believe that atheism and secular humanism are interesting socio-cultural phenomenon that provides a great opportunity for studying the discourse of religion and the discursive strategies that are involved when the category of religion is being used.

The Swedish Humanist Association, called *Humanisterna* in Swedish, advocates the necessity and need to maintain a *secular* society where religion is kept separate from politics and public schools, and argue that in order to maintain such a society it is necessary to safeguard against the problems and possible dangers that religion posit. In my view, the association’s frequent usage of the term “religion” makes them a perfect empirical object for studying the discourse of religion in a non-religious and secular humanist movement. This study approaches the Swedish Humanist Association – from here on referred to by their Swedish name *Humanisterna* – as a contemporary social formation that uses the category of religion as a discursive tool in socio-political interests.

## 1.2 Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to examine the category of religion in the context of Humanisterna by analyzing the implicit and explicit content that is given to the category. I will therefore focus on normative claims of what religion is. Thus, my general inquiry is what content that is ascribed to “religion”, and what discursive outcome this has. More specifically,

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<sup>1</sup> In the article “The Church of the Non-Believers”: <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.11/atheism.html>

my research questions are:

- What connotations and examples do Humanisterna deploy to represent and give content to “religion”?
- What discursive strategies are used when Humanisterna’s discourse of religion is being challenged?

### **1.3 Selection**

Based on the purpose and research questions I have selected some of Humanisterna’s more normative and assertive uses of “religion”, as in prescribing statements of what religion is. Another criterion in making the selection is cases when their use of “religion” is questioned, since this is where the necessity of a certain use of “religion” becomes crystalized, as opposed to in their own presentations and self-descriptions of the association where their talk is not in dialogue and thus unchallenged. Examples of (1) the so-called unchallenged uses of “religion” is selected their official website, from presentations of Humanisterna as an association and of *Humanism* as a worldview, where I have selected a short (two minutes) introductory video called “Why should you join Humanisterna”, which summarizes the association in a concrete way, and parts from a longer (documentary-style) video called “Humanism och Humanisterna”. Furthermore a blog entry written by the chairman of the association is used as additional comparison to the videos. Examples of (2) challenged situations is selected from debates on religion between the chairman of Humanisterna and critics of the association who questions Humanisterna’s discourse of religion. I have selected two debates between critics of Humanisterna and the association’s chairman Christer Sturmark, published in the Swedish newspapers *Svenska Dagbladet* and *Dagens Nyheter*.

### **1.4 Previous Research**

*The Journal Approaching Religion* (Åbo, Finland) recently dedicated a whole issue (Vol. 2, No 1, 2012) to the study of atheism and non-religion under the topic “The new visibility of atheism”. A number of studies of atheism and secular humanism have also been published in the journal *Sociology of Religion* (Oxford Journals). Lois Lee, a doctoral researcher in Sociology at the University of Cambridge and founder of NSRN (The Non-Religion and Secularity Research Network) refers to this growing interest as “The recognition of non-religion as a significant social, cultural, and psychological phenomenon”, something that she considers to be a huge change in the social scientific approach to religion and modernity. In “Research Note: Talking about a Revolution: Terminology for the New Field of Non-religion

Studies” (Lee, 2012), she suggests some clarifications on definitions and terminology concerning the study of “non-religion”. Lee argues that, as oppose to the terms ‘atheism’ and ‘secularism’, the term *non-religion* should be defined and used as the master concept for the field that includes phenomenon as secularity, secularism, atheism, and anti-religion. Lee defines non-religion in the following way:

Non-religion is anything which is primarily defined by a relationship of difference to religion. [...] Non-religion is any position, perspective or practice which is primarily defined by, or in relation to, religion, but which is nevertheless considered to be other than religious.

In other words, her use of “non-religion” does not refer to everything generally not considered as religion. Non-religion is, instead, a form of response *to* religion; it includes a stance on *what* “religion” *is*, because it cannot get substantively defined without religion. This definition of non-religion, Lee argues, excludes many forms of New Age and spiritual movements since they are usually defined by their own core principles and practices and their differentiation from religion are not of primary consideration (Lee 2012: 131-132).

By referring to groups that are primarily defined in relationship to religion, non-religion does include, for example, contemporary humanism as well as some forms of naturalism. Following the same principle Lee defines ‘atheism’ as “an intellectual or cultural position which is primarily defined by its relationship to a religious phenomenon (theism).” She stresses, however, that much more empirical and theoretical work is needed and that the choice of the category of non-religion is a pragmatic decision. Non-religion, she writes, is not negative, but “like the term ‘secular’, relative”, and therefore she argues that it is “a working concept that should be useful as long as the concept of religion is” (Lee 2012: 133-134). Lee writes:

What are the theoretical and empirical relationships between atheism and other aspects and kinds of non-religion? How and why is ‘atheism’ used as a discursive strategy? Do atheists understand religion in primarily theistic terms or does their atheism reflect a socio-cultural trajectory more than it does a philosophical one?

A pioneering study of atheism and secular humanism is “Secular humanism and atheism beyond progressive secularism” (2007), by Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith. The article examines atheist and secular humanist organizations (so called “Freethinkers”) in

recent decades. It shows some significant changes in their rhetoric strategy as well as self-understanding as a result of the pressure of whether or not secularism would survive and thrive in a religious society. Where there used to be optimism and anticipations of the emergence of a fully “secularist” society – understood as the dominance of naturalistic and scientific thought – the movement have now internalized both the failure of such progressive secularist development in the United States, as well as their minority status. The fact that such a widespread secularist society hasn’t been established in the United States is a major concern for these atheist and secular humanist movements, the authors argue. However, they point out that there is no unified response to this fact from these movements, and they explain:

Some leaders have repudiated their earlier optimism about the future dominance of secularism, while others have held onto this optimistic vision, believing that the United States will eventually follow Europe into a more secular mode of living (Cimino & Smith: 408).

The article describes the secular humanisms historical ties with “Religious Humanism” which emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century from theologically liberal and pluralistic Christian denominations and churches, such as Unitarian-Universalism. When the first Humanist Manifest was written 1933 the self-description was “religious humanism”.<sup>2</sup> Eventually, two distinguishable movements would emerge, religious humanism and secular humanism, where secular humanism eventually avoided any form of “religious language” and was defined as a strictly secular philosophy, and thus, as the article state, “disassociated itself from any religious connotations and ties with organized religion.” The study highlights that early on secular humanist movement was optimistic that a future secular “kingdom” would emerge as the “primitive theistic” way of thinking disappeared from society. Expectations of a secular revolution were widespread among organized atheists and humanists who saw themselves as bearers of the light of reason in an otherwise religious and superstitious world (which the article refers to as “progressive secularism”). The future was in their view equal to “secularism”, that is, naturalistic and scientific domination over supernatural explanations. Today some have abandoned the optimism while others stick to the idea that the United States

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<sup>2</sup> In “Humanist Manifesto” written in 1933, humanism is actually referred to as “religious humanism”. Furthermore, the manifest refers to religion as an “inseparable feature of human life”. The manifest also states that religion includes “labor, art, science, philosophy, love, friendship, recreation”, and that “The distinction between the sacred and the secular can no longer be maintained”, and furthermore they even warn the readers *not* to identify the word religion with old and traditional doctrines: “There is great danger of a final, and we believe fatal, identification of the word religion [sic] with doctrines and methods which have lost their significance and which are powerless to solve the problem of human living in the Twentieth Century. Religions have always been means for realizing the highest values of life.” (Bragg, 1933)

will eventually become a full-fledged secular society (Cimino & Smith: 407-408). The article explains how “optimism about the contingent victory of secularism has historically been the rule rather than the exception in organized freethinker-movements”. The decay of optimism is clearly visible in the three humanist manifests, written in 1933, 1973, and in 2000 (Cimino & Smith: 412-413).

The authors of the article argue that there are similarities between secular humanism and evangelical Christians in the perception of their position as being in tension with the rest of society, which strengthens their identity. Both right-winged conservative Christians and secular humanists are reinforced by the perception that they are on the losing side in a culture war (Cimino & Smith: 418-419). In their participant observation it becomes clear that the condemnation of religion served a unifying function for their political identity. The condemnation of religion is such a defining characteristic, they argue, and that it works as an ideological defense mechanism from other tensions and political differences within secular humanists and atheists (Cimino & Smith: 420). The identity of secular humanists and atheists is very much based on the assertion that they are a minority who is fighting for their rights and protection against the overall religious and hostile society. The article concludes that it is not the vision of a fully secularist society what maintains the identity of atheists and secular humanists, but rather culture wars (real and imagined) as well as the shaping of a subcultural identity, that benefits and sustains the secular humanist movement (Cimino & Smith: 423).

In “Discovering Atheism: Heterogeneity in Trajectories to Atheist Identity and Activism” (2013) Stephen LeDrew claims, similarly to Cimino and Smith, that the *social movement* aspects of atheism are fundamental, meaning that atheist organizations are mainly about the constructing of a collective identity. He argues:

While many atheists surely arrive at both their beliefs and their sense of identity more independently, as the atheist movement has become more prominent in recent years we will also surely find more atheists seeking collective identities that converge with their own personal identities and ideological inclinations.

In *Farlig förenkling, Om religion och Politik* (in English “Dangerous Simplifications, On religion and Politics”) (2010), Elisabeth Gerle, Professor of Ethics and Human Rights at Uppsala University, emphasizes how the avoidance of defining religion plays a certain part in the Humanisterna, making it easier for them to make normative claims of what religion is.



“Religion” is frequently associated with ignorance, superstition, and an unscientific approach, whereas knowledge and the ideals of enlightenment are part of the association’s worldview. She shows how the association frequently uses “religion” in relation to conservatism, opposition to homosexuality and abortion, and as opposite to democracy and the autonomy of free choices: all of which atheism and “the secular” are associated with. Gerle shows that when religious people hold “liberal” values the association does not mention it, or simply describes them as “crypto-humanists”, and that those who don't read the bible literally are not really religious, according to Humanisterna. She argues that this is done at the expense of the idea of interpretation, and thus descriptions as “real Christians”, “Christian views”, or “really religious”, are normatively represented by the association as literalism and conservatism. Gerle wants to highlight the dangers of simplifications in talking about groups as homogeneous, or religions in essentialist terms, when those are in fact always situated in historical and economic circumstances. An important difference between Gerle's approach and my own is that although she critically examines the uses of “religion”, her theoretical framework is, from my perspective, actually structured *by* the categories of “religion” and “the secular”. Despite her efforts to critically deconstruct essentialism she, nevertheless, talks about the “post-secular” and “the return of religion” in the public sphere, thus, some neutral definition “religion” is uncritically presupposed.

A last example of previous research is a study made by Teemu Taira (2010) where he shows how the category of religion functions as a discursive technique for social formations. The study examines how the Finnish Wicca-movement strived for public and legal recognition in being “a religion”, and how whether or not a group should be classified as religious or not is strongly tied to many different strong social interests and power relations, both amongst the Wiccans themselves and from the surrounding society. My aspiration is therefore to be closer to Taira’s study than most of the other previous research, in the sense of how he regards the uses and definitions of the categories of “religious” and “secular” as secondary to socio-political strategies and interests – that is, how the category of religion is viewed as a discursive tool.

### **1.5 Disposition**

The thesis consists of five parts. After the introduction follows a theoretical framework for this study, which is based on the last decades’ growing scholarly contribution to what can be called the critical or discursive study of “religion”. The following part is a description of

discourse analysis in general and the discourse analytical method that is going to be used when analyzing the material. What will follow thereafter is a presentation and a discourse analysis of the material, and the last part will consist of a discussion part together with some concluding remarks.

## 2. Theory and the Critical Study of “Religion”

### 2.1 The Problem of “Religion”

Within the academic study of religion there has been a growing strand within religious studies advocating the need for a critical approach to the category of religion itself. These studies emerged partly as a reaction to the problem of defining religion – a problem perhaps most famously expressed by Jonathan Z. Smith when he professed that “there is no data for religion” (1982). His point was that there is no data which can support the idea of religion as a self-evident or unified phenomena, instead, he saw only “a staggering amount of data, phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religion” (Smith, 1982: 1). Following his lead, others have argued that the problem of defining religion is not surprising when taking into account the history of the very concept “religion” – it being a specifically Western, European and Christian concept. In other words, it is a historically and culturally *local* concept which has been widened in its definition and extended into a generic category, and projected onto the world, *as if* it was an empirically cross-cultural and trans-historical, homogenous and uniform phenomenon (Asad 1993; Masuzawa 2005; Fitzgerald 2007). This has given rise to theorists and scholars of religion to emphasize the distancing from – not just essentialism – but from *any* normative claims of what “religion” is and isn’t. These theorists argue that such claims are simply reproducing some historically situated *socially constructed* boundaries of the category “religion”, as well as its conceptual counterpart “the secular”.

### 2.2 The Critical Study of the Category of Religion

In *Manufacturing Religion* (1997) Russell T. McCutcheon focuses on the de-contextualizing and de-politicizing consequences with some of the methods and theories developed by the comparative study of religion and phenomenology of religion, which has been predominant in religious studies. He argues that religious studies therefore have played a major part in constructing “religion” as *sui generis* (meaning of its own kind and not reducible to other factors); as a distinct and isolated social phenomenon, separated from other cultural domains. The construction of religion as *sui generis* presupposes that it can it is to be understood purely in its own terms, and that it requires special methods of inquiry, which in turn becomes a de-politicized de-contextualized “study of human beings as if they simply were believing, disembodied minds” (McCutcheon 1997: 13). He highlights the circularity to the way religion is understood as culturally separate and unique, and therefore supposedly in the need to be

studied *on its own terms*, with special methods. The problem, McCutcheon argues, is that the methods and theories that are selected are based on an undefended assumption that religion is a *sui generis phenomenon*: socially and historically isolated, unique, and culturally autonomous. He writes: “The discourse on *sui generis* religion constitutes the representation of human beings not as social, economic, and political beings with certain basic material needs and relations but as essentially believers of creeds” (McCutcheon 1997: 22).

In *Guide to the study of religion* (2000) Willi Braun argues that the problem of religion in popular speech is a problem of “excess and spectrality”, meaning: “there are too many meanings and the meanings are too indeterminate to be of value”. Therefore, Braun goes on to say, we shouldn’t be surprised that the history of theorizing religion has had so many problems. The word religion is a floating signifier that can be attached to a whole range of things and blurry ideas. He describes how the term religion has played peek-a-boo behind equally problematic terms, such as “the holy”, as by Rudolf Otto, or “the sacred”, as by Mircea Eliade. These substitute terms that were popularized by Otto and Eliade only explained one mystery by means of other mysteries, also known as “*obscurium per obscurius*” or “obscurantist strategies”. Other approaches in the study of religion tries to counter such obscurantist strategies by collapsing “religion” into other categories of social life, and instead draws from social science and comparative cultural studies (Braun 2000: 4-5). He summarizes: “If ‘religion’ is substantively empty... let us abandon the eschatological hope, so tenaciously persistent in our field, that by some brilliant hermeneutical can-do we will spook the true genie out of the bottle of ‘religion’” (Braun 2000: 8). Or, in other words, to refrain from any privileged (or intuitive) knowledge about what “religion” *really* is – and instead study such claims, whether made by people identified as atheists or religious.

In agreement with Willi Braun and Timothy Fitzgerald (below), McCutcheon also points out that, first of all, what counts as religion for one theorist is hardly religion for another, but furthermore that there is no “real nature” of religion that one definition can better grasp (McCutcheon 2001: 6-7). He stresses to shift focus how concept of religion is deeply embedded within a system of social classification, and intimately linked to peoples own self-identity. “Religion” is part of the collective classifications that people use when they divide and arrange their social and political world, in other words. It is a category that is used in social and political interests, which people employ to distinguish and arrange various aspects of their life (McCutcheon 2001: 11-12). He stresses the need for studying the *social effects*,

and the interests at stake, of using the category. This means to study “the social effects of those common distinctions that go by such names as religion/politics, sacred/secular, faith/practice, and private/public”, because:

These classifications are understood to be used not because of their uncanny ability to identify some feature in the objects so named, but because, once entrenched in minds, actions, and social institutions, they enable people to distinguish and group themselves and, in the process, to form self-identities and allocate (or withhold) material and social capital (McCutcheon 2006: 1).

The category of religion – how it is understood and used – is therefore an object of study that should be examined in the light of the social and political interests of classifying people (McCutcheon 2003: 235). This study follows precisely this kind of theoretical framework: the aim is to study people as social and political actors who divide the world into spheres of “religion” and “secularism”, just like people separate “sacred” from “profane”, “orthodox” from “heterodox” etc.

### **2.3 The Ideology of “Religion”**

Talal Asad's *Genealogies of Religion* (1993) can be said to be an early attempt to critically analyze some of the implicit ideological strategies in the effort to define the universal essence of religion as individual “beliefs”, or “conscience,” in other words, this made the moods and motivations of the individual believer the “essence” of religion. Asad argues that this is not a neutral description but a normative construction followed by the separation of state from other cultural institutions. The definition of religion as inner belief is a historical product: “This definition is at once part of a strategy (for secular liberals) of the confinement, and (for liberal Christians) of the defense of religion.” In *Guide to the Study of Religion* (2000) William E. Arnal follows Asad and elaborates that the function of the modern concept of religion is intimately linked to the justification of the state. The function of “religion” is to frame the “secular” state in its negative. That is, as an institutional apparatus which intruding on the social body is justified as a means of achievement for common projects and the collective good. The modern definition of religion as an individual and subjective *belief* constructs the modern democratic state as the alter ego of religion (belief), requiring the legitimized authority over the socially collective. The classification of so-called religious phenomena is therefore, Arnal writes, simultaneously a phenomenology of the modern state (Braun 2000: 31-32). In other words, as both Asad and Arnal points out, far from being neutral and

descriptive, “religion” is prescriptive, *normative*, and serves a specific political function.

Timothy Fitzgerald (2011) has argued along the same lines as Arnal, that the modern discourse of religion has the ideological function of legitimating a whole range of ideologies and authorities labelled “non-religious” or “secular”. For him the idea that there is such a thing as “religion” is a modern myth that generates the illusion that distinct religions exist as empirical objects in the world. He argues that this is the result of a transformation from the *metaphorical* language of religion as a *thing* that acts, to a *fact* within in the common sense collective social imaginary. This myth of religion that constitutes modernity in a fundamental way is largely unquestioned according to him. He emphasizes how this religion-secular binary is deeply entrenched in the modern collective social imaginary. It is a thriving populist discourse, he writes, that religion – which is claimed to be irrational, barbarous and violent – threatens the rational, enlightened and peace-loving secular project of progress and liberation. This intuitive belief in the existence of religions as such, as something that exists in the world as empirical objects, is maintained through several powerful agencies (Fitzgerald 2011: 3-4).

Fitzgerald wants to emphasize how the modern myth of religion, as he calls it, is a discourse that simultaneously invents “secular” domains, such as the nation state, politics and economics – all of which is not essentially less metaphysical or irrational, he argues. Political ideologies, liberal capitalism and liberal economic theory are all significantly founded on metaphysical beliefs that are not derivable from empirical observation – which makes it hard to find any essential, characteristic differences between those things generally labelled religious and those things generally labelled secular. Fitzgerald argues that this “modern myth” of religion ideologically legitimates the modern rhetorical construct of the rationality of self-regulating markets, self-maximizing individuals, private property, and the inevitability of capitalism and politics as natural, rational, objectively real. The ideological function of inventing “religions” as a distinct sub-rational domain based on belief in the “supernatural” is the simultaneous invention of the state, politics and economics as factual domains of the “real world”, an ideology which constitutes modernity and continue to generate the typical orientalist opposition between “*our* secular rationality and modernity as against *their* traditional, religious irrationality” (Fitzgerald 2011: 13-14). Thus, the formation of any secular domain imagined as “non-religious” is historically dependent on the conceptualization of religion as a distinct domain, he argues (Fitzgerald 2011: 4).

In conclusion: from this framework, any social actor (individuals, groups, associations, and institutions), self-defined as religious or not, that ascribes content and meaning to (i.e.

defines), the discourse of religion and the religion-secular binary, plays and active part in the process of the continual construction, reproduction, and reification. “Religion” is a socio-cultural “folk-classification” that people uses to distinguish, divide and arrange the world. In *Guide to the Study of Religion* (2000) William E. Arnal writes: “I think, the academic future of religion as a concept will need to focus on deconstructing the category and analyzing its function within popular discourse, rather than assuming that the category has content and seeking to specify what that content is” (Braun 2000: 30), in other words, precisely the approach, premise, and hopefully contribution of this thesis.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1 Discourse Analysis

The introduction should make it clear that the category of “religion” is not a self-evident, isolated and clear, but a socially embedded category secondary to cultural and political processes. To investigate the meaning and uses of the category is to investigate discourse, making discourse analysis the obvious choice of methodology for this study. Discourse theory and discourse analysis is based on theoretical premises such as our social world being historically and culturally situated, characterized and formed; that there are connections between knowledge and social processes; and between knowledge and social action. Our worldviews and identities could have been different, and changes over time, and discursive action is a form of social action which contributes to constructing the social world and, consequently, changing or maintaining social patterns. The idea of “discourse” can be, somewhat loosely, described as *a certain way to talk about and understand the world* – and therefore can be said to be based on the idea that language is structured in various patterns which our statements follows when we act within different social domains (Winther Jorgensen & Philips 2007:11-12). From this follows that language is not only information which simply communicates facts about the world, nor mediates some underlying state of mind, but rather something that constitutes social identities and relations and the social world. Winther Jorgensen & Philips writes: “There is a battle on the discursive level that contributes both to change and reproduce the social reality” (Winther Jorgensen & Philips 2007: 16).

The basic reasoning in discourse theory is that, since social phenomena are never complete, meaning can never be finally fixed and therefore definitions on identity and society are in constant social conflict. The usage of language is thus a social process that strives for fixed meanings where meaning is locked by its placing of signs (words) in specific relationship to each other, since signs gets their meanings through its separation from, and relation to, other signs – which means that the meaning of signs are never fixed. In this sense, the purpose of discourse analysis is to study the struggle to establish such unity of meaning and of the social, that is, the struggle of constructing a univocal and unambiguous meaning (and social identity) through the process of fixation of meaning and identity. The authors explain: “The purpose of discourse analysis is to identify the processes where we struggle over how the meaning of signs should be defined, and where some fixations of meaning becomes so conventionalized that we perceive them as natural” (Winther Jorgensen & Philips 2007: 31-32).



Simply put, the meaning of all signs is determined by their relationship to each other and their differences from each other. In discursive terms meaning are fixated by their *differential positions*. When the meaning of the signs are fixated and thus determined asserted, the result is a totality where each sign is univocally and unambiguously determined, which excludes all other possible way that signs can be put in relationship to each other and consequently all other possible meanings that the signs can have. The result of this practice is a structural totality, or in other words, a discourse. Any discourse in use, that is, any social act or practice of drawing from a discourse, is called *articulation* (Winther Jorgensen & Philips 2007: 33). Since all signs are always potentially open to a diversity different meanings, a discourse can then be said to be a temporary stopping of the signs drifting of meaning, a temporary closing out possibility of meaning and the signs ambiguity (Winther Jorgensen & Philips 2007: 34). A particular discourse, more specifically, is established when meaning is crystallized around a few privileged signs from which the other signs are arranged around and get their meaning. In discourse theory privileged signs are referred to as nodal points, as in “democracy” as central to political discourses, or “religion” in atheistic or secular humanist discourses.

*Floating significant* refers to nodal points that are especially ambiguous in meaning, that is, words being particularly open to different meanings. To put it in another way, floating signifiers are words that can have so many different meanings that it is practically empty before it is put in relation to other words and ascribed meaning, that is, put to use through articulation, that is, in a specific discourse (2007: 35). Floating signifiers are signs that different discourses tries to give specific content in their own way. There are always other possibilities of meanings that threaten the particularly high degree of multiple meanings of a floating significant. This means that alternative articulations drawing from different discursive formations can compete with, and question, the structure of a particular discourse, and especially in relation to the important floating signifiers that the discourse have struggled to establish itself through (2007: 35-36). How “Religion”, “the secular”, and “society” is used should then be given attention in a discourse analysis as this since those are typical a floating signifier which different social actors struggle to ascribe content to make their own meaning valid and established, or in other words, which social actors struggle to make hegemonic. The authors define *hegemony* as the organization of consent and the processes by which subordinate forms of consciousness are constructed without force or coercion.

The authors explain themselves to be subscribing to a view of the human subject not as autonomous or sovereign, but decentralized. Ideology and subject are closely tied to one another, a perspective which derives from Louis Althusser. To Althusser ideology is a system of representation which disguises or distorts the true relation between people and which brings people under imaginary relationships and to the social formation of society. Through language a social position is constructed for the individual who makes the individual an ideological subject. This is called *interpellation*, described by the authors as: “the process by which language constructs a social position of the individual and thus makes her an ideological entity”. In other words, a subject position that individuals always and necessarily accept through language and discourses (Winther Jorgensen & Philips 2007: 22). It is important, therefore, to look for which social positions that are used in the material, how subjects are interpellated in relation to the religion-secular divide and their use of “religion”, and how social identities are positioned in relation to Humanisterna and their criticism of religion.

From this then follows some questions to keep in mind when analyzing a discourse, such as: which meaning is being established and which is being excluded? Which signs have a privileged status and how are they defined in relation to other signs in the discourse? The authors suggests that one should identify nodal points and look at how other discourses define the same sign differently, that is, to map out the struggle of establishing the meaning of floating signifiers. Also, which meanings are people struggling to define and which meanings are neglected, regarded as being self-evident? (Winther Jorgensen & Philips 2007: 36-37) In other words, when is the meaning of “religion” seen as self-evident, and when is there a struggle of how to define the category?

In discourse theory both individual and collective identities are organized by the same principles. Individuals are put in determined positions by the discourses through the process of interpellation described above. From this follows that *subject* is the same as *subject-position*, and, consequently, *identity* is the same as identifying *with* something. What a subject identifies with, then, or rather is offered by the discourses, that is to say, identity always have nodal points. The term *master signifier* is used for the specific nodal point of an identity. From this, then, follows that identity is established through the same structure as a discourse, which means that identity is established relationally through the discursive processes of linking together a range of nodal points or floating signifiers. By linking, equating and associating a

range of nodal points – in discursive terms *chains of equivalence* – to the master signifier and identity are given content. This means that identity is always potentially open to a diversity of different equivalences and therefore always contingent (Winther Jorgensen & Philips 2007: 51).

The process of collective identity and group formation are principally the same as that of a discourse, that is, it establishes itself by reducing the possibilities of alternative interpretations through chains of equivalences. Group formation is a reduction of identity-possibilities. People becomes constituted as a group when some identity-possibilities are highlighted as relevant. Group formations are therefore always political since “the other” is excluded in relation to what the group identifies with, and other differences within the group are being ignored (2007: 52-53). Group formations are therefore part of the struggle in giving content to the image of society as a whole by implying *how* people should be divided into groups, and representations provides these social images. From this angle I will focus on how such categories as “Christians”, “Muslims”, “religious” and “non-religious” are used by Humanisterna.

From the perspective of discourse theory no discourse can ever be established totally since it is in constant conflict with other discourses and possible ways to define reality differently, which then gives alternative guidelines for social acting. A recurring element in discourse, identity and group formation is therefore the struggle for forming and establishing meaning. Conflict arises when identity and discourse are threatened by other alternative discourses. In discourse theory the term for conflict is *antagonism*. From the perspective of a specific discourse, which is a temporal closing or fixating of meaning-possibilities or identities, the excluded (alternative) discourses threatens its uniqueness by demonstrating its contingency, consequently “antagonism is therefore found where the discourses clash”

When antagonism emerges, it dissolved by a specific articulation that fixates or establishes meaning again, across the colliding discourses and then restores the unambiguity and uniqueness. This is called *hegemonic interventions* in discourse theory. *Hegemony* and *discourse* are therefore similar, but hegemonic interventions is an articulation in “an antagonistic terrain” which aims to give a new discourse – the new fixating of meaning – dominance where there previously was conflict. The authors add: “The hegemonic intervention is successful if a single discourse dominates again where previously there was

conflict, and antagonism is thus dissolved” (Winther Jorgensen & Philips 2007: 55). I will particularly make use of analyzing antagonism and hegemonic intervention by looking at how alternative usage of “religion” and alternative chains of equivalence challenges Humanisterna's (general) discourse of religion, especially in relation to a few debates where criticism is being directed against Humanisterna, that is, to analyze the function of “religion” in responses to criticism.

## 4. Material and Analysis

### 4.1 The Swedish Humanist Association

*Humanisterna* is a member of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) and the biggest secular humanist organization in Sweden. On their official website they explain that the association was founded in 1979 under the name *Human-etiska förbundet* (in English “Human-Ethical Association”), but was later renamed *Humanisterna* (The Humanists). Their current chairman is Christer Sturmark (who frequently gets to debate religion in Swedish public media, TV and is also regularly published in leading newspapers). On their website the association is being described as follows: “Humanisterna cherish the secular society and the separation of religion and politics. We are committed to human rights which must override religious dogmas, norms and values.”<sup>3</sup> Under the heading “*A secular worldview*” it says:

At the core of humanism lies critical thinking and a scientific view of knowledge. Humanism is a secular – non-religious – life stance that claims that there are no reasonable arguments for religious dogma, gods or supernatural explanations. Humanists have a critical view of all forms of religion, New Age spirituality and occultism. (<http://www.humanisterna.se/in-english/>)

Furthermore, it is explained what Humanisterna mean by “A secularized society”:

Humanists want a clear separation of church and state, religion and school. Religion is a private matter and should not be mixed with politics or other state matters. The international humanist movement sees the secularized society as a foundation for democracy. (<http://www.humanisterna.se/in-english/>)

The association also provides non-religious ceremonies such as baby-welcoming, weddings and funerals, which are provided for those who seek alternatives to religious ceremonies. They explain that people have a need for traditions, ceremonies and celebrations, especially in crucial stages of life (<http://www.humanisterna.se/ceremonier/>).

### 4.2 The “true face” of Religion

In the following examples “religion” is related to Christianity and Islam and illustrates a form of essentialist strategy of prescribing what religion *really* is. One example is from one of the association’s video “Humanism och Humanisterna” (Thomé, 2009), which is a 41 minute long

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<sup>3</sup> (<http://www.humanisterna.se/>, my translation)

documentary that “describes what Humanism is and what Humanisterna fights for”, as the website explain. The example is from a segment of the video with the topic “the problem of religion”. One of the interviewees is the chairman Christer Sturmark. He begins by describing Sweden as one of the world's most secular countries – while the following subtitles appear “secular = neutral and non-religious”. In other words “neutral” and “non-religious” are equated. Sturmark adds that people in Sweden have the privilege of being able to relate to religion as just a “nice story”, or “as poetry”. Furthermore he says:

But that’s not how it looks in the world. The Swedish Christianity, for example, is in no way representative for Christianity in the international sense. Christianity is growing worldwide at the moment [...] and it’s a very conservative and dogmatic Christianity that is growing. It is a Christianity that harasses homosexuals; which imprisons women, with long jail sentences, for doing illegal abortion – each year 70,000 women die in the rooms of illegally performed abortions, as they do not have access to any form of legal abortions. *That* is Christianity's true face, internationally speaking; it is not like the Swedish, liberal, soft and modern Church of Sweden, which is obviously much, much better, so to speak. (Thomé, 2009a: at 02:34, my translation)

In Sturmark’s comment we get two signifiers to represent the problem of religion: Swedish Christianity and the international Christianity. Through chains of equivalences these two separate and essentially different ‘Christianities’ are given content. The “true face” of the Christianity found worldwide are thus equated as being a “dogmatic” and “conservative” Christianity that harasses homosexuals and imprisons women. In contrast, the content that is ascribed to the Swedish Christianity is “liberal”, “modern” and “soft”. In addition to the above example it is relevant to compare a blog entry published by Christer Sturmark on his own website, where he talks about “crypto-humanists” when addressing Anders Wejryd, who was the archbishop of Sweden at that time. In the text Sturmark contrasts the Swedish church with “the typical Christianity”. He writes:

But on the whole, the Swedish church has very little to do with Christianity. Do not make the mistake of thinking that the Swedish Church represents the typical Christianity. It is in fact representing a very marginal and rather extreme interpretation of Christianity. Obviously, extreme at the positive side [...] the problem is that the face of Christianity looks very different than what the Swedish Church, with Wejryd in the lead, present. (Sturmark, 2009a, my translation)

As in Sturmark’s statement from the video above, this quote normatively asserts how there is a self-evident Christianity itself, which the Swedish Church are has little to do with. The

Swedish Church is also contrasted with “Christianity's face”. In contrast to “the typical Christianity”, the Swedish Church is described as an “extreme interpretation”, making Christianity itself implicitly disassociated with “interpretation” whatsoever. In the same article Sturmark refers to the archbishop of Sweden (at the time) as well as the preceding archbishop in the following way:

I have met the Archbishop several times and had several conversations with him. I think he is a very likeable man who is actually secular humanist at heart, but who has chosen to work within the framework of the Swedish Church, like his predecessor KG Hammar. My assessment is that both are actually humanists. Let's call them crypto humanists. (Sturmark, 2009a, my translation)

“Liberal” (non-conservative) Christians, as the archbishop and his predecessor, are thus classified as “actually humanists” and “crypto humanists”. The discursive implication seems to be to make sure that any forms of “liberal” and non-conservative examples, such as the Church of Sweden, are to be excluded from the chains of equivalence that gives content to “religion”.

Another example of this theme is also taken from the video “Humanism och humanisterna”, also under topic “the problem of religion”, but when moving on to discussing Islam. The videos host (and producer), Henrik Thomé, frames the question in the following way: “The Catholic Church is obviously a major problem, while private faith and the more liberal Swedish Church is a very minor problem, but what about Islam? Are there any more or less liberal elements within that religion?” (Thomé, 2009a: at 03:44). The video then cuts to Sara Mohammad, Chairman of the association against honor-related violence called “Never forget Pela and Fadime”, who provides the following answer:

Islam seem to think it is the last and only true religion, and one must not change a single word of what was written 1500 years ago in the Qur'an. [...] the problem with Islam is that one must not discuss or question the verses of the Qur'an, it is the word of God, and it is he who has sent these words through the prophet Muhammad, and this is what must be applied to the whole world. (Thomé, 2009a, my translation)

In the following scene, after Sara Mohammad, the writer and journalist Dilsa Demirbag-Sten continues by explaining:

Islam, after all, means 'submission,' so a really proper Islamist is a literalist, where no criticism of any kind is included. Instead you are supposed to embrace every line, so the more fanatical you are, the closer you are to the correct interpretation. This means that those who are trying to get close to the religion obviously reject all form of criticism. (Thomé, 2009a: at 04:38, my translation)

There are no other statements, other than those from Mohammad and Demirbag-Sten, to answer Thomé's question of "are there any more or less liberal elements within that religion?" What we get here is thus Sara Mohammad talking about what Islam itself think, which is that one must not discuss or question the verses of the Qur'an, etc. And then, Dilsa Demirbag-Sten answers the question by stating that "Islam" means submission, followed by equating "Islamist", "literalist" and "fanatical" with Islam, all of which are associated with getting closer to "the religion", meaning rejecting all form of criticism, according to her. As with Sturmark's talk about "international Christianity" and "Swedish Christianity" we get the same normative prescribing and constructing of what Islam as a religion is.

#### **4.3 The Impossibility of Criticism in Religion**

In relation to a big ad-campaign by Humanisterna in 2009 called "Gud finns nog inte" (in English "There probably is no God"), a couple of articles were published as a debate in the Swedish newspapers *Svenska Dagbladet* (SvD) and *Dagens Nyheter* (DN). One of the critics of Humanisterna was Susanne Wigorts Yngvesson, lecturer at Stockholm School of Theology. In the article "Humanisterna målar upp en grotesk fiende" (in English "The Humanists paints a grotesque enemy") she writes that Humanisterna are creating an image of religions as enemies, and that they ignore any form of complexity. What follows is an excerpt from her article:

Destructive forces are found within religions as well as the secular, just as constructive and peace-building visions are found in both. Humanisterna wants to build their image on the opposition [clash] between religious and secular. That road leads to conflict and division. Humanisterna describe themselves as victims and as persecuted, when it is in fact they who have access to political power, financial world and public media such as *Dagens Nyheter*. As an example of one of the threats that the religions poses they describe how the UN Human Rights Council previously adopted a resolution that would condemn criticism of religions, the so-called blasphemy paragraph. The resolution itself should be criticized, which also has been done in the Muslim and Christian world. What Humanisterna do not say is that the resolution was removed in spring, before the conference, Durban II, largely due to criticism from, among others, Muslim and



Christian leaders worldwide. [...] I don't think Humanisterna intends to interact with xenophobic forces, but I believe that they run the risk doing so nevertheless. They claim to uphold the importance of individual rights, but bundle together all religious people in a lump. They argue against a grotesque enemy in religious disguise, but do not recognize that religious believers and atheists can defend rights and democracy together. (Wigorts Yngvesson, 2009, my translation)

What we get here is, in discursive terms, a particularly *antagonistic* discourse of religion in relation to Humanisterna. As she argues that the same dangers that Humanisterna are talking about are *also* criticized by Christians and Muslims around the world, she gives very contrasting content to the master signifier “religion”. The hegemony of the connection between oppression and religion generally made by Humanisterna are thus challenged in this *articulation* by providing an alternative set of chains of equivalence. The article mentions Muslims and Christians that would agree with Humanisterna’s critique against the blasphemy law, and furthermore, she suggests that one can find destructive forces “within religions as well as the secular”. Consequently, the religion-secular dichotomy are, in a way, broken down, and thus “religion” does not function as a common denominator and essential explanation of world-problems and oppression, as usually referred to by Humanisterna. Christer Sturmark responded to Wigorts Yngvesson in the article “Dagens Sverige rymmer mer än en sorts tro” (in English “Contemporary Sweden holds more than one than one kind of faith”), and in his response he writes:

The fact that a theologian is critical of Humanisterna probably doesn't surprise anyone. [...] What is so scary about the idea of a society where everyone is entitled to their own beliefs [...] a society which embraces diversity, but to recognize people's rights as individuals rather than as members of religious or cultural collective? [...] Exactly what in the religion's entity is it that Humanisterna do not understand? Exactly what in our criticism of certain religious acts, values and power structures are unwarranted? [...] Humanisterna belongs to a global movement in a world where ideas about the will of God are causing a huge amount of suffering for many people [...] Our campaign highlights that today's Sweden holds more than one kind of belief and that the secular society is a precondition in order to show respect for all people, regardless of beliefs or culture. To accuse us of xenophobia, despite that we obviously represent the opposite, testifies of an almost neurotic fear of criticism of religion. (Sturmark, 2009b, my translation)

Sturmark’s response is a good example of what discourse analysis calls *hegemonic invention*, that is, an articulation that aims to dissolve the clash arising from Wigorts Yngvesson's antagonistic discourse of religion. In contrast to Wigorts Yngvesson's articulation which

suggested *shared* values and critical views *across* the religion-secular divide, Sturmark inscribes the earlier religion-secular distinction as framework again. To reject Wigorts Yngvesson's claim that Humanisterna “bundle together all religious people in a lump” Sturmark describes Humanisterna's criticism of religion as nuanced and non-generalizing; as simply being about *certain* religious acts and “power structures”. From his point of view, therefore, her criticism is misdirected, which in turn allows him to raise suspicion about why anyone would criticize Humanisterna in the first place. To answer this, he draws from a religious/non-religious-categorization, to make sense of criticism against the Humanisterna. In this way, Wigorts Yngvesson can be given the subject-position (*interpellated*) of being a “theologian”, therefore her criticism should not come as a surprise, as he puts it, and suggests that she is having a (neurotic) “fear of criticism of religion”. Sturmark then asks why “the idea of a society where everyone is entitled to their own beliefs” is scary, as if criticism against Humanisterna equals criticism against a society where everyone is entitled to their own beliefs, in other words, criticism against Humanisterna is rhetorically positioned as criticism against their ideas of a society where everyone is entitled to their own beliefs. Wigorts Yngvesson's antagonistic discourse of shared critical values across the religion-secular divide is thereby dissolved by Sturmark's *hegemonic intervention* which (re-)establishes the religion-secular framework.

Another example of this way of reasoning is taken from a seminar organized by Humanisterna in 2010, where they invited politicians from (at that time) all parties to discuss religion and politics. Moderator for the debate was Christer Sturmark and Sara Larsson (editor for the magazine *Sans*, which Humanisterna is partial owner to). One of the issues are freedom of speech in relation to a short film that the painter and performance artist Lars Vilks showed during a lecture held at Uppsala University, which portrayed the prophet Muhammad in provocative ways. The purpose of this film was to highlight the treatment of homosexuals in Iran. Christer Sturmark describes the film and its purpose in the following way:

It was a very provocative film, that is, provocative for those who did not share [the directors] critique against Iran's treatment of homosexuals, where they are executed and hanged. And this film was of course devoted to provoke those who think that it is right to hang homosexuals in Iran. And, as you know, uproar occurred and the lecture had to be stopped. (Thomé, 2010, my translation)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The video was retrieved in September 2011 from <http://www.humanisterna.se/video/religion-och-politik/>, but

Two *subject-positions* are offered in his statement: either one is for Iran's treatment of homosexuals and provoked by the film; or against Iran's treatment of homosexuals and not provoked by the film. In this way, a whole range of other possible views or arguments of why one is offended by portraying the prophet Muhammad are excluded. In the discussion that follows Sturmark ends up using the subject-positions that he established, and this is done in relation to the views of the representative of the Social Democrats, Olle Burell. Burell argues:

If one wants to try to bring improvement to that horrible repulsive situation, then one can ask whether or not this was achieved. [...] Clearly he has the right to do it [show the film], since we live in a free country, and of course no one has the right to forcibly stop him from doing it. But I think that if you really look into the matter of trying to improve their situation, then this provocation could actually take the focus away from what is really extremely important, which is to fight the atrocities committed in Iran. (Thomé, 2010, my translation)

Sturmark then replies: “But the purpose of the lecture was not in the first place to help homosexuals in Iran, but to discuss art and freedom of speech [...] So my question is once again: should he [Lars Vilks] have, or should he not have, shown this film?” Thus, the films purpose of helping homosexuals in Iran is now ignored, and instead the purpose is instead framed as a problem of freedom of speech, and if they *should* have shown the film or not. Burell replies: “The question is if it was suitable to show a film that was intended to stir up emotion in an already upset and infected situation which is very polarized. That is my personal opinion.” Sturmark then counters with: “you mean, because of the risk of offending those who think that homosexuals should be hung in Iran?” Burell replies that this was certainly not his point, and repeats his earlier arguments. This dialogue illustrate another 'either-or' positioning: any attempts to problematize or question this (as in purpose and outcome of portraying Muhammad and its relationship to Iran's homosexuals) are positioned as departing from the values behind their criticism and instead as, on the contrary, are accused of indirectly legitimizing Iran's treatment of homosexuals.

In a similar way, Sara Mohammad (in the video mentioned above, in 4.1) explained that criticism within Islam is impossible. She explains that “it” (Islam) cannot be criticized, and then continues with the following statement:

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the stream is unfortunately no longer available (the page and the description of the filmed seminar still remains on the site). To receive a copy of the video, contact me through [expedition@lir.gu.se](mailto:expedition@lir.gu.se).

It has been tried several times, at different times in the world, with attempts to criticize, discuss, or to interpret in different ways, but there has been so much resistance that even death sentences have been issued, as in the case of Salman Rushdie. Different people have been given death sentences because of their criticism of Islam. (Thomé, 2009a, my translation)

In this quote “Islam” itself is equated with the complete absence of any form of discussion, interpretation and criticism, even to the extent that she is convincingly and normatively arguing why it simply cannot be done. In other words, “Islam” itself becomes by definition incapable of, and immune to, criticism. Thus she ends up reifying and normatively arguing to defend a correct understanding of “Islam”, in which criticism is impossible.

#### **4.4 The Agency of Religion**

In a two minute video “Varför ska man gå med i Humanisterna?” (in English “Why join Humanisterna?”) found on the association’s website we get a short summary of the association. The host of the video, Henrik Thomé, explains:

We fight against injustice and oppression created by religion and superstition. This can relate to, for example, the oppression of women in cultures of honor, where women are being reduced to the man's property, or ban on abortion. 68,000 women die each year from the complications of illegal abortions. It can be about banning contraception and sex education, which makes millions of children and adults affected by HIV and AIDS in Africa and elsewhere. And it can be about discrimination, or in some countries even death penalty, because of homosexuality. This is examples of how religion and superstition creates enormous suffering for many, all in vain unnecessarily. (Thomé, 2009b, my translation)

In this two-minute introduction film provided by their website “religion” is associated with injustice, oppression, old scriptures and death, whereas the secular society is associated with neutrality, reason, critical thinking and facts. Humanisterna is described as fighting a certain *kind* of injustice and oppression, that is, injustice and oppression *created* by “religion” and superstition. The signifier “religion” is used as separate from subjects; something that acts upon, and oppresses, people, and it has causation as it “creates” the injustice and oppression that Humanisterna fight against.

This is also found in the examples from the film mentioned above, in Sara Mohammad's and Dilsa Demirbag-Sten's accounts where the subjectivity of social actors are separated from the

agency of “Islam” itself, or “the religion” itself. Mohammad talks about how Islam itself thinks what people “must not do”. Demirbag-Sten talks about “a proper Islamist” as a decontextualized ideal simply existing in it, and she also explains how “those who are trying to get close to *the religion* obviously rejects all form of criticism” (my emphasis). The subjectivity of social actors are contrasted with “the religion” itself. At the expense of actual social actors or groups doing this rejecting of criticism, or claiming authority of defining a “proper Islamist”, human agency are masked and instead we get “the religion” of Islam itself with its own agency that acts upon people and have opinions.

Below follows an example of an *antagonism* arising from the tension between using “religion” as actual subjects and using “religion” as a depersonalized agent and. This antagonism arose in relation to the ad-campaign mentioned above, “Gud finns nog inte” (There probably is no God), where Göran Rosenberg (a writer and ex-member of Humanisterna) published an article criticizing Humanisterna. Among other things, he writes the following:

What the campaign more or less openly says, and above all signals with the choice of symbols, is that the problem with people who still seem to think that God probably exists (because this seems to be what Humanisterna identifies as the problem) is largely a problem of people of the Muslim or Jewish faith. [...] In the case of Humanisterna it seems like the problem is not only that there probably is not God, but also that the belief that those who believe that God exists is a problem worthy of a million-dollar campaign. (Rosenberg, 2009, my translation)

What is particularly interesting is that, in relation Humanisterna’s ascribing agency to “the religion”, Rosenberg makes the (logical) connection that religion equals (religious) *people*. Rosenberg articulation thus challenges the use of “religion” as a singular agent and as having self-causing agency, and instead depicts actual human subjects as the content of the religions that Humanisterna are referring to. In other words his use of “religion” makes the statement “religion is the problem” to become “religious people are the problem”. When Christer Sturmark responds to Rosenberg, he clarifies the message of the campaign in the following way: “Humanisterna strives for a secular society where people with different background, belief and culture should be able to coexist without any religion having precedence before others”. He also writes that the dividing line goes “between those secular and those who want to subsume other people under their religious belief system,” as well as the following quote:

Rosenberg seems to think that the influence of religion over people's lives is a problem that is too small to be addressed in a media campaign. That is a terrifyingly narrow perspective. Tell women and homosexuals in Iran that the religion is not a problem. Tell that to women in Catholic countries such as El Salvador, Brazil and Nicaragua. Tell that to the children in certain private religious schools, who are taught a distorted perception of reality. (Sturmark, 2009c, my translation)

Here we get a similar 'either-or' positions as in the earlier examples above, where criticism against Humanisterna's claims of religion are positioned as the same as not being against the oppression that the Humanisterna are against. Even more relevant for this theme, however, is how he separates "religion" itself from people, which, in turn, people are victims of. It seems as he seeks to dissolve the discursive antagonism from Rosenberg's discourse of religion (people) by bringing up human suffering, while reintroducing "the religion" in the singular since back into the discussion, thereby ignoring the question Rosenberg tried to raise of why the campaign refers to Judaism, Christianity, Islam, in general as the problem (which he interpreted as necessarily meaning Jews, Christians and Muslims) if they don't defend that claim. It is worth mentioning that, in a last comment to Sturmark's response<sup>5</sup>, Rosenberg tried to keep his point by asking: "if it isn't specifically Jews and Muslims you want to point out, then why do you?" Unfortunately, since that was the final comment in the debate there was no further response from Sturmark.

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<sup>5</sup> See Sturmark 2009b (in the article "Christer Sturmark: 'Ateismen ingen religiös tro'" in Dagens Nyheter), Rosenberg's response "Så vilka religioner har vi anledning att frukta?" is included at the bottom. Retrieved from <http://www.dn.se/kultur-noje/kulturdebatt/christer-sturmark-ateismen-ingen-religios-tro>

## 5. Discussion and Concluding Remarks

As Cimino & Smith, as well as LeDrew, argues (*1.3 Previous Research*), secular humanism as a social movement and Humanisterna as an association is not simply about views and visions of a secular society, but largely about the construction of a distinct social identity, and part of this identity is the condemnation of religion. However, it is not enough to argue that the condemnation of – or critique against – religion is part of their identity since they are far more actively part of constructing the discourse of religion as it plays such a central role – since the identity cannot be substantively defined without “religion”. This point is made in Lois Lee’s definition of “non-religion” as “any position, perspective or practice which is primarily defined by, or in relation to, religion, but which is nevertheless considered to be other than religious.” If we add the critical and discursive approach to this (*2.1 Theory and The Critical Study of “Religion”*), that is, theorists such as Asad, McCutcheon, Fitzgerald and others, it is not simply “religion” which Humanisterna are critical against, it is rather, as McCutcheon argues, a classification intimately linked to their own self-identity, a category they employ because it is entrenched in our minds and social institutions, and which enables them to “form self-identities and allocate (or withhold) material and social capital.” In other words, “religion” is a concept that Humanisterna desperately needs.

My analysis shows some of the discursive strategies that are being used when Humanisterna are normatively defending the discourse of religion. The use of “criticism” against oppression, framed in ‘either or’-positions, seems to be one such strategy. When Humanisterna's use of religion are challenged or questioned, as depicted in *4.3 The Impossibility of Criticism in Religion*, when Wigorts Yngvesson suggests that there are shared values as well as critical views between religious and non-religious people, and that the religion-secular distinction does not contribute anything when understanding or explaining the world-problems that Humanisterna refer to,, Sturmark avoids generalization of religion and instead describes Humanisterna’s criticism as being about *certain* acts, and asks “Exactly what in our criticism of certain religious acts, values and power structures are unwarranted?” He then shifts focus to why anyone would question Humanisterna’s criticism of religious oppression in the first place. Sturmark’s response re-establishes the religion-secular distinction and defines criticism against Humanisterna as being against their visions of a society where everyone is entitled to their own beliefs. The example from the issue of portraying Muhammad (in general) is in a

similar way framed in ‘either or’-positions, as in either *agreeing* with portraying Muhammad and thus being against Iran's treatment of homosexuals, or being *for* Iran's treatment of homosexuals. The logic here seems to be that any critique, or problematizing, of the associations discourse of religion are positioned as *not really* being against all those terrible things that Humanisterna are against.

Humanisterna can also be regarded to be exemplary of Fitzgerald's point about how the reified idea of “religion” is in turn founded on the assumption of there being clear and distinct religions that exists as empirical objects in the world – which in turn is based on the idea of religions having essences. In other words, religion as a sui generis phenomenon seems to be robustly unquestioned in Humanisterna's worldview. In 4.2 *The “true face” of Religion* we see how Humanisterna *normatively* defend “the religion” of Christianity and Islam, as having a “true”, “real” or “typical” form, that is, having essential features with clear boundaries. It is important to note that such constructions of sui generis religion can clearly be used to justify and legitimize moderate or liberal interpretations as “true” Christianity or Islam just as well. In the case of Humanisterna it is clearly the other way around. My analysis in 4.2 therefore supports Gerle's (1.3 *Previous Research*) description of how Humanisterna frequently uses “religion” in relation to conservatism, homophobia, and anti-abortion attitudes. Just as Gerle's study shows how those who don't read the bible literally are not really religious, where “real Christians” or “really religious”, 4.2 show how non-conservative Christians are dismissed as not really religious or not religious at all. *Interpretation* only appears when Sturmark calls the Church of Sweden an “extreme interpretation of Christianity”. In other words, any idea of liberal Islam or liberal Christianity seems to be an *antagonism* to their discourse of religion. Instead we get a *normative* reasoning of why fundamentalism, literalism and fanaticism *should* represent “the religion”.

The de-politicizing and de-contextualizing function of sui generis religion is apparent in 4.4 *The Agency of Religion*, as in, Sara Mohammad's and Dilsa Demirbag-Steen's platonic talk about “Islam” itself, and “the religion” itself one can “get closer to. In their highly essentialist approach, religion is constructed as a depersonalized agent withdrawing the focus from the actual social actors. The debate between Rosenberg and Sturmark also reveals an interesting rhetorical strategy. Sturmark only mentions human subjectivity or people, in relation to being either oppressed victims, or free individuals in a secular society. This tends to create a sense that people who are victims of the religious oppression are not themselves religious.



Rosenberg, on the other hand, goes against this use of religion as an agent that causes problems, and argues that Humanisterna's criticism are generalizing and constructing Jews, Muslims and Christians as being a problem in society. However, in Sturmark's response he insists on referring to "religion" as the agent of oppression, and refers to "the influence of religion". This discursive strategy of ascribing agency to "the religion", as something separate from concrete social actors, seems to function to downplay the actual people that the phenomena consists of, since that would mean to take into account the complexities of the socio-political context. In short, I would therefore argue that the ascribing of agency to an abstract religion is a strategy that (1) avoids targeting any specific religious groups or communities, or individual as being a problem, while it (2) keeps the possibility of explaining oppression by referring to "religion" as a force that acts upon people, as an *explanatory* category – which seems to be the fundamental basis of the secular humanist identity.

As McCutcheon argues, the concept of religion is deeply embedded within a system of social classification, and Humanisterna is an example of an identity that is intimately linked to this classification system. In order for them to make sense of the world (and its problems) they use the category of religion to divide and arrange their social and political world. De-politicized in the sense that Humanisterna by-pass or ignore any discussion of socio-political processes as an analysis or explanation of religious oppression, and instead refer to "religion" as an explanation itself.

When Cimino and Smith argued that it is culture-wars, real and/or imagined, that benefits the secular humanist movement and maintains their identity we should put emphasis on the "imagined" part, and in the Jonathan Z. Smith's sense of "Imagining Religion", since that is a crucial part of the identity of Humanisterna, because it relationally keeps the idea of a "secular" worldview alive in a fundamental way. I would therefore like to end by putting an emphasis on the need for studying the interests of how the category of religion is being used in order to construct self-identities and allocating or withholding material and social capital – this being of equal importance in relation to secular humanists and atheists, as well as to religious groups – which is due to the fact that these groups clearly contribute to the contemporary societies general use, reproducing and reifying of the sui generis discourse of "religion".

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