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W(h)ither religious-niche parties? The Nordic Christians' search for the mainstream through an 'unsecular politics' strategy

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ABSTRACT

With the pun intended, this article asks whether, in overwhelmingly secular societies, the four Nordic religious-niche parties created by revivalist Christians before and after the Second World War, and whose strength has been in their countries' Bible Belt regions, have a future as broad-based, religious-mainstream parties or are destined to 'wither on the vine'? If, as the parties' literature suggests, niche-party 'niceness' is variable, can the 'pure type' of religious-niche party modify its niceness and, if so, how, and with what result? The argument made is that i) the Nordic Christian parties have sought to expand beyond their revivalist core by 'importing' continental Christian Democracy as an 'unsecular politics' strategy and ii) that whilst, outside Denmark, support for the Nordic Christians is no longer a proxy for religiosity, and charismatic leadership has enabled the Christian parties intermittently to attract a wider body of 'unsecular voters', they have struggled to retain them in face of competition from a populist radical right playing the 'Christian heritage' card.

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Introduction

The Christian parties that emerged first in Norway, then Finland, Sweden, and finally Denmark before and after the Second World War were the creation of an eclectic mix of revivalist groups, both within and outside the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Arter 1980, 2022; Brommesson 2010, 2020; Hagevi 2017; Halldorf 2021; Karvonen 1993; Madeley 2000, 2004; Richard and Demker 2005), and support for these dedicated Christian parties was predicated on a high level of personal religiosity. As Rokkan (1967, 425) noted, the Norwegian 'Christians (People's Party) derive most of their support from the religiously active'. Minkenberg (2010, 401) states, too, that 'in the predominantly Lutheran countries of Scandinavia [. . .] denominational differences are less salient in the electoral arena but differences in religiosity are, with particular regard to the smaller, more fundamentalist Protestant parties'. In short, the Nordic Christian parties have drawn on, and served,

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a revivalist constituency marked by high levels of religiosity – loosely stated, they have been anchored in, and represented, ‘Bible Belt Christians’.

This article focuses on the process and extent of party change in the religious-niche party type. Across Scandinavia in the post-Second World War era, the twin impact of secularisation and individualisation has meant a sharp decline in the proportion of religiously active persons. According to a survey in *Dagen* in 2020, only 3% of Norwegians attend a church at least once a month and, as one observer put it, the Christian People’s Party has been obliged to reconsider its role in society ‘as biblical values become unfamiliar and controversial’ (Forster 2021). The present study considers the ‘hows’ of this reconsideration process.¹ Two central questions are addressed. 1) How have the Scandinavian religious-niche parties sought to build a new political identity with a view to gaining a broader electoral appeal? 2) How successful has a modernisation strategy been, bearing in mind Kirchheimer’s (1990, 55) claim that it is futile for a religious-niche party to aspire to catchall status?

The argument made is i) that the Nordic religious-niche parties have sought to become religious-mainstream parties by espousing a brand of ‘unsecular politics’ (Van Keesbergen 2008) not strictly predicated on the letter of the Bible but rather on broad Christian values and traditions and ii) that whilst, outside Denmark, support for the Nordic Christians can no longer be viewed as a proxy for religiosity, and whilst charismatic leadership has enabled the Christian parties intermittently to attract a wider body of ‘unsecular voters’, they have struggled to retain them in face of competition from the populist radical right playing the ‘Christian heritage’ card.

By inverse reasoning this would appear to lend support to the recent literature revisiting religion and voting behaviour, which has posited that a ‘religious gap’ will occur when Christian voters’ attachment to a strong Christian Democrat or mainstream non-socialist party creates a ‘firewall’ against the advances of the radical right (Arzheimer and Carter 2009; Cremer 2023; Marcinkiewicz and Dassonneville 2022; Montgomery and Winter 2015; Siegers and Jedinger 2021). The Nordic Christian parties have not been strong – albeit enjoying brief surges in support – and they have been vulnerable in their traditional Bible Belt heartlands to competition from the radical right. The ‘religious gap’ has been small, if ever it existed.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section views nicheness as a variable and distinguishes between two main religious party types – the religious-niche and religious-mainstream party. The following contextualising sections focus in turn on the origination and ecology of support for the nascent Nordic religious-niche parties. Faced with the exponential secularisation of society and a sharp decline of religiosity, the analysis then shifts to strategic party change and the Nordic Christian parties’ adoption of continental Christian Democracy as a re-identification strategy. Lastly, there is a consideration of outcomes and the impact of change on the Christian Democrats’ electorate and intraparty cohesion. The concluding remarks sum up and respond to the ‘w(h)ither’ question.

Nicheness and religious party types

The four Nordic Christian parties emerged after the main thrust of party and party system building, which was complete by the end of the 1920s (Madeley 2000, 40), and they originated as a specific party type – the religious-niche party. Whilst there is a substantial

literature on the niche party (Abou-Chadi 2014; Adams et al. 2006; Bergman and Flatt 2020; Bischof 2017; Erlingsson, Vernby, and Öhrvall 2014; Ezrow 2008; Meguid 2005; Meyer and Miller 2015; Nonnemacher 2023) – particularly pertaining to Green parties (Doherty 1992; Kitschelt 2006; Meguid 2005; Rüdiger 1990; Spoon 2009) and radical rightist parties (Wagner and Meyer 2017) – the religious-niche party has been largely neglected (Kerneckner and Wagner 2019). It may be identified by reference to two primary characteristics – the narrowness of its policy range and the specificity of its electoral constituency. Religious-niche parties are not necessarily single-issue parties (Erlingsson, Vernby, and Öhrvall 2014) but ‘they compete primarily on a small number of non-economic issues’ (Wagner 2012, 848).

They are not necessarily niche parties for life; they can evolve and change. Strategic change will be likely to involve a reduction in nicheness. Meyer and Miller (2015) hold that a niche party marks the endpoint of a continuum of parties ranging from ‘completely niche’ to ‘completely mainstream’. The ‘pure niche party’ does not stress any mainstream policies and only emphasises issues completely neglected by its rivals (Meyer and Miller 2015, 262). In respect of Christian parties, then, we can distinguish between the *religious-niche party* type and the *religious-mainstream party*, which, whilst Christian in inspiration, presents a comprehensive range of policies and seeks a broad electoral catchment.

When operating in a highly secularised and antipathetic cultural environment – as in post-Second World War Scandinavia – religious-niche parties have in principle two strategic options. 1) The ‘defensive status quo’ option, which will entail maintaining policy nicheness and, by extension, seeking to retain a limited core constituency of devout Christians. 2) The ‘offensive catchall’ option, seeking to trade a degree of nicheness for electoral growth with the goal of becoming a broad-based, religious-mainstream party.

The religiosity of Christian religious parties, then, is plainly variable in the extent to which in their policy positions there is a strict adherence to the Biblical Word. In terms of option 1, and perhaps a limiting case of high religiosity – a pure religious-niche party – the Dutch Political Reformed Party (*Staatkundig Gereformeerde Partij*, SGP) has espoused a form of theocratic Protestantism, aspiring to a government wholly based on the Bible, and it has remained reluctant to accept a secular political culture or indeed liberal democracy (Voerman and Lucardie 1992). The party originated in response to the decision by the Anti-Revolutionary Party (*Anti-Revolutionaire Partij*, A-RP) to facilitate female suffrage and the A-RP’s readiness to engage in co-operation with Catholics (Voerman and Lucardie 1992, 222–223). Its strategy has manifested features of the ‘proto-hegemonic party type’ (Gunther and Diamond 2003, 51). Drawing the lion’s share of its vote from the Zeeland Bible Belt, the SGP has registered a very stable 2% of the vote – concentrated in rural areas – since it entered parliament in 1922.

Contrast the SGP’s religious-fundamentalist nicheness with the cross-denominational catchall logic of post-Second World War Christian Democracy – the religious-mainstream party type. Thus, the Christian Democratic Appeal (*Christen-Democratische Appèl*, CDA) in the Netherlands was a merger in the late 1970s of three confessional parties formed against the backdrop of secularisation and the erosion of the *Verzuiling* religious ‘pillarisation’ of Dutch society. The German Christian Democratic Union (*Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands*, CDU) was formed as a political ‘union’ of Catholics and Protestants based on a consensualism of the lowest common denominator – a Christian Democratic ideology that was loosely Christian in inspiration but light years

distant from SGP fundamentalism. Tellingly, whilst large parties in multiparty systems, the West European Christian Democratic parties have experienced mixed electoral fortunes. Fraser (2006) portrays the 1990s as ‘a decade of Christian Democratic decline’ whilst Van Keesbergen (2008) likens the Dutch CDA to the mythical phoenix, rising from the electoral ashes when in apparently irrevocable decline.

Whereas the SGP’s Christian fundamentalism has been ideologically cogent and coherent, albeit based on a narrow core electorate, Christian Democracy is perhaps best viewed as a composite of primary characteristics. Bale and Szczerbiak (2008) identify five main components, of which two appear definitive. First, there is a commitment to an organic notion of society in which individual rights and collective choices gain meaning only within the context of a wider community – that is, ‘social personalism’ and ‘solidarism’. Second, there is support for the family as the bedrock of that community and the use of social policy to support the family. Kalyvas and van Kersbergen (2010) place family and social policy at the heart of Christian Democracy. In their words, ‘Christian Democracy has tended to rely on social policies in order to accumulate power, for which its religious appeal was beneficial. Its distinctiveness was reflected in its political ideology and through it the social-policy regimes it fostered’ (Kalyvas and van Kersbergen 2010, 191).

Whilst high on religiosity, the nascent Nordic Christian parties lacked the theocratic tendencies of the Dutch SGP although initially they were closer to the latter than mainstream European Christian Democracy. From the outset the Nordic Christian parties were predicated on a model of ‘pietistic politics’, albeit one that was set in a pluralist-democratic framework. It was pietistic in the generic sense of a politics based on a strict interpretation of Biblical teaching (the Ten Commandments), personal faith, and the dissemination and defence of Christian values. Prescriptively, the ‘pietistic politics model’ comprises three cross-cutting elements: i) the fundamental tenets of Christian teaching – the gospel of Christ – should always prevail over considerations of party politics; ii) there should be a concentration on religious questions with the Bible as the party’s ‘manifesto’; iii) spreading the Word of God – and, by extension, the moral rearmament of society – is the party’s paramount rationale and politics is a legitimate medium for doing so.

Contributing to the debate about party modernisation in the early 1990s, the Finnish Christian League (*Suomen kristillinen liitto*, SKL) MP Vesa Laukkanen’s views approximated the ideal-type pietistic party model. Writing in the party organ *Kristityn Vastuu*, he envisaged SKL as a party that would be

a voice crying out in the [secular] wilderness. Party members from the newest to the party leader would have their distinctive roles as emissaries of Christ, whose Word is the true meaning of life; the party would not seek popular support but could be called the ‘Light and Salt Party’, drawing together all religious people to pray for the salvation of the Finnish nation.

He then proceeded to pose what might be called the ‘Laukkanen question’: ‘How does it help the Finnish nation – even if it becomes the richest nation on earth – if its citizens file for divorce, commit suicide, engage in crime and drink excess alcohol and the country ends up on the road to destruction?’ (Laukkanen 1991).

Summing up, the pure religious-niche party type will pursue an exclusive strategy designed to represent devout (often revivalist) Christians and to promote and protect

fundamental Biblical values through the ballot boxes. For the religious-niche party, electoral growth may be of secondary importance. The Nordic Christian parties originated as religious-niche parties, albeit without the theocratic tendencies of the Dutch SGP. The religious-mainstream religious party type, in contrast, will pursue an inclusive, electoral-growth-oriented strategy designed to appeal to socially conservative persons adhering to traditional Christian standards, who are not necessarily religious but balk at GAL-style (green-alternative-libertarian) progressivism.

Religious-niche party origins

The next two sections focus on i) the origins of the Nordic religious-niche parties and ii) the ecology of their support. Founded in the south-western Bible Belt county of Hordaland in 1933, the Norwegian Christian People's Party (*Kristelig Folkeparti*, KrF) expanded from its regional base to become a national party in 1945 (Madeley 2004; Richard and Demker 2005). The party grew out of increasing dissatisfaction with the Liberal Party (*Venstre*), the secular elements in it, and in particular the way the party reneged on its strict prohibitionist stance by permitting the opening of outlets selling alcohol – in the order of 300 in Bergen – despite the local option which followed the repeal of prohibition in 1926. The organisational impetus behind the KrF's decision to put up a national slate of candidates in 1945 – the first general election after the Nazi occupation – came from the Oxford Group movement, a Christian revivalist body which provided KrF with two of its most notable figures – Erling Wikborg and Olav Bryn (Madeley 2004).

The Finnish Christian League (*Suomen kristillinen liitto*, SKL) was created in 1958, the year the communist-dominated Finnish People's Democratic League (*Suomen kansan demokraattinen liitto*, SKDL) became the largest parliamentary party (Arter 1980). The electoral advance of an atheist political credo, the relative increase in the numbers withdrawing their membership of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and the ensconced position of the Communist Party in the trade union movement all contributed to an increasingly secular, anti-religious mood in which a dedicated Christian party was deemed necessary. Pilloried in the popular press, Olavi Ronkainen, one of the pioneers in the so-called Fifth Revivalism Movement (*Viides herätysliike*), one of the founders in 1968 of the Evangelical Lutheran Mission (Junkkala 2016), and an architect of SKL, captured the logic of the new party in an interview to mark his fiftieth birthday. Ronkainen recalled how he had entered politics to warn young persons of the perils of mid-strength beer (which in 1969 became available in grocers' shops), to oppose abortion, to campaign against the way [leftist] politics had entered the school classroom, and to condemn the state broadcasting company YLE for ridiculing Christian standards (Kortelainen 2018). The absence of a formal electoral threshold in Finland, when coupled with the open-list PR voting system, enabled SKL in 1970 to elect its first MP, Raino Westerholm, on a joint list with the Centre Party (*Keskustapuolue*) in the Kymi constituency.

The formation of the Christian Democratic Union (*Kristen demokratisk samling*, KDS) in Sweden in 1964 was preceded by two petitions. One, the 'Petition of the 140 Doctors', expressed professional concern about increased promiscuity, the spread of venereal diseases, and the growth in the number of abortions; the other, opposing the planned reduction in the level of religious education in schools, was signed by over two million

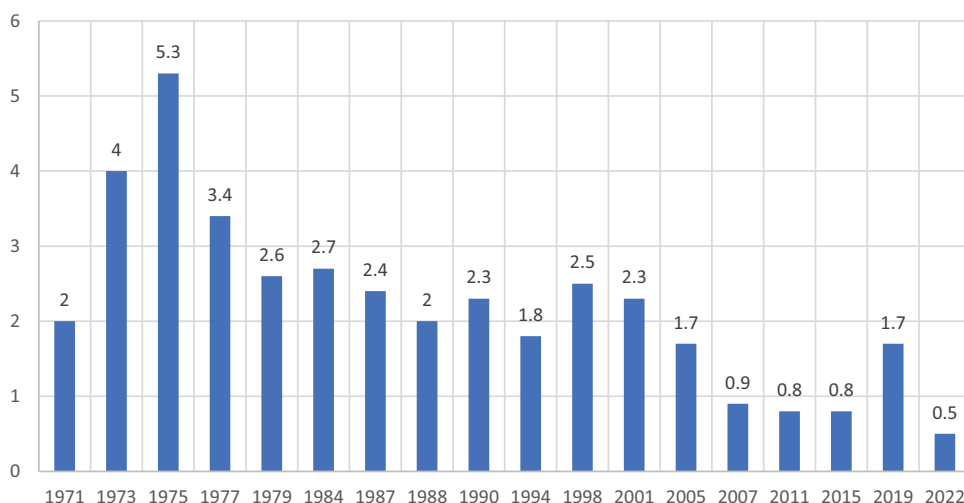


Figure 1. The Danish Christian Democrats' vote at parliamentary elections, 1971–2022%.

persons. Christian revivalists also objected to the general release (albeit in censored form) of the film *491*, which depicted explicit sex scenes. Indeed, the government's decision to lift an initial ban on the film was an important factor in the decision to launch KDS. A prime mover in the creation of the new party was the Pentecostal leader Lewi Pethrus (Brommesson 2010).

For the first two decades, the KDS failed to obtain 2% of the national poll and the introduction of a 4% electoral threshold as part of constitutional reform in the 1960s seemed to condemn the Swedish Christians to remain in the eternal extra-parliamentary wilderness. However, much as in Finland, following a profitable electoral alliance with the Centre Party the KDS leader Alf Svensson was elected to the Riksdag in 1985 representing the revivalist stronghold of Jönköping constituency.

The Danish Christian People's Party (*Kristelig Folkeparti*) was created in April 1970 specifically to oppose laws liberalising pornography and abortion. At the party's inaugural conference, the Inner Mission (*Indre Mission*) – the largest Christian revivalist organisation within the Danish national church – was strongly represented, as were both the low-church Grundtvigian and high-church wings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. The Danish Christians achieved their best result of 5.3% at the 1975 general election but in 1994 fell below the 2% national qualifying threshold. Figures 1–4 present support for the Nordic Christian parties from the year of their first election to parliament.

The ecology of religious-niche party support

In sketching the ecology of religious-niche party support across the Nordic region, the starting point is the first time the Christian parties competed on a national basis at general elections – Norway in 1945 – or the first time the Christian parties ran candidates in every constituency at general elections – Finland in 1972, Sweden and Denmark both in 1973.

The Norwegian KrF ran candidates in only nine of the 20 constituencies in 1945 but it nonetheless gained 7.9% of the national poll. In one-third of the 140 municipalities

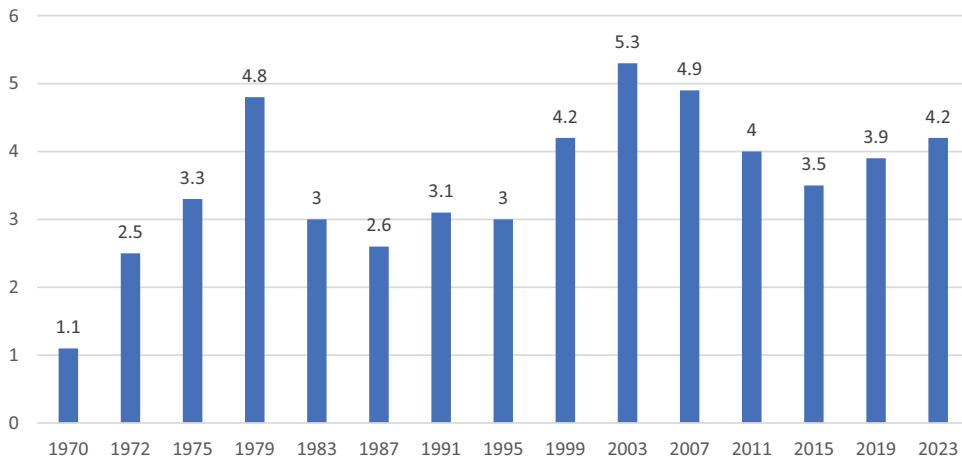


Figure 2. The Finnish Christian Democrats' vote at parliamentary elections, 1970–2023%.

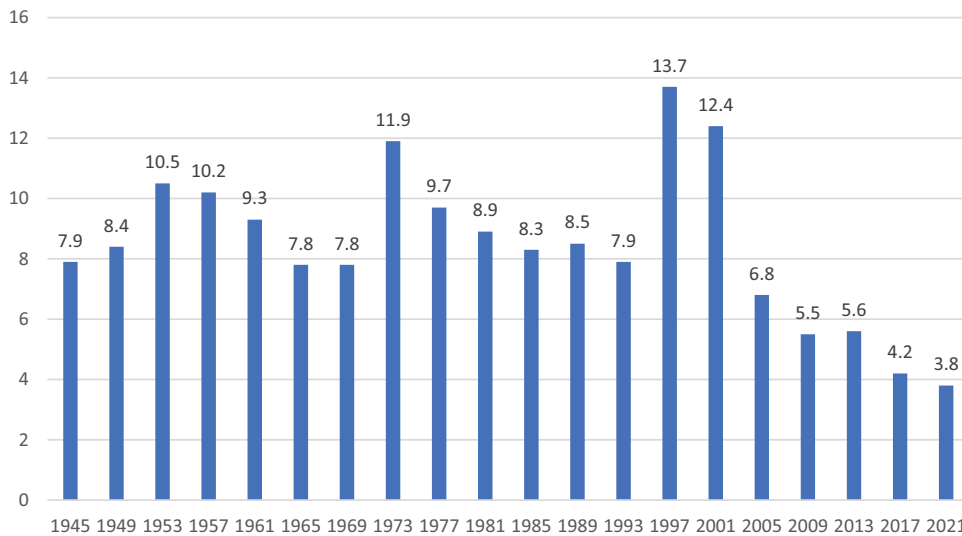


Figure 3. The Norwegian Christian Democrats' vote at parliamentary elections, 1945–2021%.

in which the party gained votes, moreover, it averaged 21.3% and in nearly one-fifth of these municipalities KrF was the largest party. All the municipalities in which it became the largest party in 1945 were situated in the south-west of the country – the Norwegian Bible Belt. This has been characterised (Mikaëlsson 2009; Repstad 2009) by i) high personal religiosity and higher-than-average levels of churchgoing; ii) strong support for the temperance movement; and iii) the predominance of *landsmål*, the rural language (Rokkan 1967). All in all, then, KrF support in 1945 could be considered a reliable proxy for religiosity, not least in those rural communities in the Bible Belt in which the party gained notable strength. Typically, these were the municipalities of Fitjar in Hordaland, Giske in Møre og Romsdal, Lyngdal in Vest-Agder, and Birkenes in Aust-Agder.

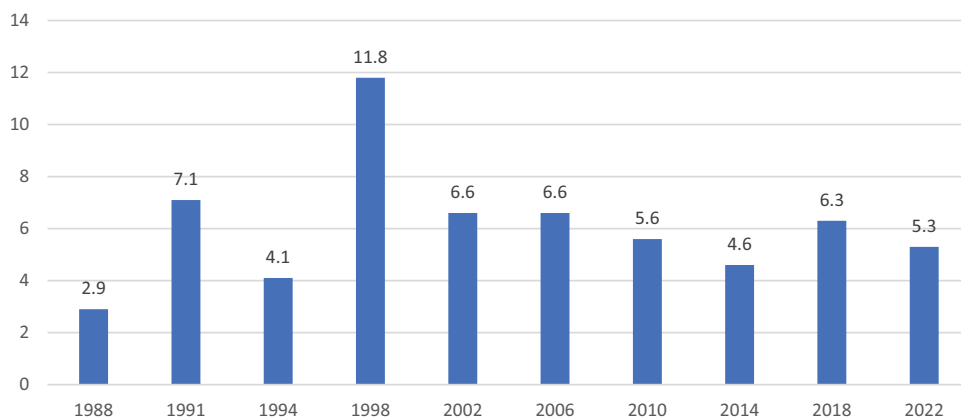


Figure 4. The Swedish Christian Democrats' vote at parliamentary elections, 1988–2022%.

At the December 1973 'earthquake election', the Danish Christian People's Party comfortably surpassed the 2% national qualifying threshold for parliamentary seats, gaining 4% of the total vote (Danmarks Statistik 1974). This was spread unevenly across the three regions used in the official statistics – 2.1% in the capital city region (*Hovedstads område*), 2.7% in the Islands (*Øernes område*), and 5.9% in Jutland (*Jyllands område*). Put another way, approaching two-thirds of the Danish Christians' vote (64.6%) in 1973 derived from the Jutland region and it had particular strength in the rural municipalities of western Jutland where it averaged 9%. These core municipalities, characterised by high levels of religiosity, included Billund (11.1%), Hedensted (16.8%), and the former municipalities of Holmlund (14.6%), Trejhøje (15.2%), and Thyborøn-Harboør (18.4%). It was no coincidence that the Inner Mission, founded in 1861 and, as noted, the largest revivalist movement within the Danish Lutheran Church, had its strongholds in rural western Jutland.

Although running candidates in every constituency for the first time in 1973, the Swedish Christians (KDS) managed only 1.8% of the national vote, which was well below the 4% national qualifying threshold for parliamentary seats. However, in two constituencies – Jönköping (5.5%) in the south-west and Västerbotten (4%) in the north – it polled twice its national figure. Jönköping has formed the core of a [southern] Swedish Bible Belt marked by high levels of personal religiosity – that is, a significantly higher-than-average number of persons who engage in regular prayer – and a higher-than-average proportion of free church members *inter alia* Pentecostals, Methodists, and Baptists (Hagevi (1999). KDS was a minor party in Jönköping in 1973 but it had pockets of undoubted strength in at least four municipalities – Aneby (8.6%), Gnosjö (8.3%), Vaggeryd (8%), and Sävsjö (6%).

KDS also had pockets of strength in a number of municipalities in the northern constituency of Västerbotten in 1973 – Sorsele (9.3%), Storuman (7.6%), Vilhemina (5.5%), and Vindeln (4.3%) – a constituency otherwise dominated by the Social Democrats. These municipalities form part of 'an area of strong(er) religious faith and practices, a so-called Bible Belt in northern Sweden' (Gelfgren 2021, 19) comprising low-church revivalism in the Inner Mission, Laestadianism (which originated in the mid-

nineteenth century based on the Lutheran doctrine of forgiveness and grace) which followed the Finnish border, and free-church strength (essentially Pentecostals) running in an east-west direction from Umeå to the Norwegian border. In short, the nascent Swedish KDS claimed niche support among Christian revivalists in the ‘deep south’ (Jönköping) and the northern periphery (Västerbotten).

The January 1972 Finnish general election was the first in which the SKL ran candidates in every constituency, albeit in ten of the 14 mainland constituencies in an electoral alliance with the populist Finnish Rural Party (*Suomen maaseudun puolue*). SKL gained 2.5% of the national poll but at least twice that figure (5% and over) in 25 municipalities in six constituencies across central and southern Finland (Tilastokeskus 1973). Nearly two-thirds of these municipalities were located in only two constituencies – Kymi and Mikkeli in south-east Finland. Equally, there were pockets of municipal strength elsewhere. However, unlike its Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish sister parties, the Finnish Christians did not enjoy niche support in the historic Bible Belt regions in northern and western Finland.

Summing up, the political geography of Christian religiosity in Scandinavia has been shaped by the impact of old revivalism and ‘new’ post-Second World War revivalism. Old nineteenth-century revivalism was largely integrated into the historic party systems – the Liberals and Labour/Social Democrats in Norway and Sweden (Halldorf 2021) and the Agrarian-Centre, National Coalition, and Swedish People’s Party in Finland (Isohookana-Asunmaa 2006; Snellman 2014; Talonen 2019). Put another way, whilst the nascent religious-niche parties drew their primary support from revivalist Christians, most Bible Belt Christians were accommodated within the existing party system and did not support the new Christian parties.

Strategic choices and the ‘Christian Democratic turn’

The religious-niche parties, then, were anchored in the narrow niche of new revivalism and by the approach of the present millennium, the twin processes of liberalisation and secularisation had created a type of classic inclusion-moderation conundrum, not altogether dissimilar to that faced by Islamist parties (Schwedler 2011). On the one hand, the liberal stance of the Evangelical Lutheran Church on moral questions – *inter alia* its conduct of same-sex marriages and participation in Gay Pride marches – reinforced the case for the status quo ante of a religious-niche party pursuing a strategy of Bible-based pietistic politics (the ‘defensive status quo’ option 1, see above). On the other, a sharp decline in religiosity pointed to the need to attract the large body of cultural (non-practising) Christians and made a case for party change (the ‘offensive catchall’ option 2).

The scale of secularisation is reflected in European Social Survey data (rounds 7, 2014 and 9, 2018). The proportion of respondents who prayed regularly outside a church service ranged in 2014 from 8.2% in Sweden to a high of 17.7% in Finland, whilst those viewing themselves as ‘very religious’ in 2018 comprised under 3% in all four Nordic countries and those stating they were ‘not at all religious’ approached nearly one-third (31.4%) in Sweden.

Against this backdrop, the Christian parties sought to move in the direction of the religious-mainstream party type by pursuing an ‘unsecular politics’ strategy. Following Van Keesbergen (2008, 267), ‘unsecular politics’ involves ‘stripping off the explicitly and

exclusively Christian ideological baggage whilst at the same time reconstructing a new Christian-inspired package of beliefs, values and norms'. In the Nordic case, unsecular politics involved three main threads. 1. De-stigmatising the religious-niche party by changing its name and tying it expressly to mainstream European Christian Democracy. 2. Shifting the primary focus from moral policy to social policy so as to soften the party's image and appeal to the broad catchment of 'secularised Christians' (Arter 2022). 3. Adopting a less exclusionary position on 'moral questions' without selling out to libertarianism.

Ironically, whilst continental European Christian Democracy has struggled to find a formula for lasting success, the Nordic religious-niche parties, one step behind, so to speak, sought a new identity by becoming Christian Democrats and by adopting the basic tenets of continental social Catholicism (community, transparency, subsidiarity etc). There was no guarantee the strategy would work. However, in what follows the main lines of the strategy are very briefly (and necessarily selectively) outlined.

Ideological moderation and the religious-niche parties' change of name

The Swedish KDS was renamed Christian Democrats in 1995, the Finnish Christian League followed suit in 2001 and the Danish Christian People's Party did so in 2003. The logic of the name-changes was nicely captured by the Finnish Christians' chair Bjarne Kallis (1991), whose argument ran as follows:

I believe there is room in Finland for a medium-sized Christian party. Finns are tired of materialism and have understood that man cannot live on bread alone. Deep down most Finns accept Christian values and Christian standards and want society to be based on them. SKL's credibility is weak, however, and the threshold for supporting it, let alone joining it, is sadly high. We have built this high threshold ourselves and we can lower it ourselves. A programme based on the Divine Word does not need to be, and should not be, changed but the party's profile should be 'lightened up' and appear more positive. It should be possible within the party to speak of alternatives without fear of being branded 'misguided'. The fact is that society is changing and it is also a fact that a business or party that stands still and does not dare to change gets left behind. At the outset SKL sought to mobilise Christians to assume social responsibility at a time when Christian values were under threat. It has been moderately successful in this, with SKL claiming around 85,000 voters. I believe almost half as many are frightened off by the party's current profile.

Clearly, Kallis' aim was to move SKL towards the religious-mainstream party type without jettisoning religious 'first principles'.

The Norwegian KrF, the only one of the four Nordic religious-niche parties not to change its name, campaigned at the 1981 general election on the traditional theme of protecting society from the insidious effects of 'moral pollution' in the form of pornography, drugs, and alcohol. It also refused to participate in a Conservative (*Høyre*)-led coalition because of its principled anti-abortion stance. However, at an extraordinary party conference in June 1983 it relaxed its uncompromising position and entered government (Madeley 1986). Whilst internally divisive, this represented a strategic change promoted by the modernising wing of the party that sought a shift to the centre ground and the political mainstream.

Indeed, after a poor result at the 1993 general election, and having failed to arrest the liberalisation of homosexuality and marriage, the KrF began to promote the concept of Christian Democracy (Solhjell 2008). In 1994 Bondevik published a book entitled 'A third alternative – Christian Democratic politics for Norway' (*Det tredje alternativet, kristendemokratisk politik på norsk*) (Bondevik 1994); in 1998 the party executive set up a working group to develop the idea, led by Janne Haaland Matlary; and in 2003 a 'Christian Democratic manifesto' was produced. However, Bondevik's 'third alternative' was an uneasy compromise that did not involve abandoning the requirement that those in positions of trust in the party should be practising Christians (*bekjennelsesparagraf*). For traditionalist revivalists KrF was moving too far from its origins, whereas for modernisers it was not going far enough (Oftestad 2012).

Prioritising family and social policy

This was the strategy perhaps most actively pursued by Swedish Christian Democrat (*Kristdemokraterna*, KD) chair Göran Högglund. At the 2010 general election Högglund led the KD campaign for a more 'human and caring Sweden' (*Ett Mänskligare Sverige*) to counter what was described as the prevalent 'egocentric culture in Swedish society' and the 'law of the jungle mentality'. The focus was on social justice, a strong welfare state, better care for the elderly, improved daycare facilities for children, and measures to tackle youth unemployment. In 2014 the Swedish KD again prioritised the family and the needs of young-parent families. The potential for a new issue-identity accruing from Högglund's 'soft secularisation' strategy, anchored in a caring European-style Christian Democracy, was blurred to an extent, however, by KD's participation in the four-party 'Alliance for Sweden' governing coalition between 2006 and 2014.

At her re-election speech at the 2023 party conference, the Finnish Christian leader, Sari Essayah, stated that she wanted to build the party as 'Finland's leading family and welfare party'. However, this type of familialism – supporting the family in its caring function – has also been central to the Finns Party (*Perussuomalainen puolue*) agenda, where it has been given a populist flavour and linked to Finland's declining birth rate (Ennsner-Jedenastik 2021; Hien 2013).

Adopting less exclusionary positions on moral questions

The attempt of the Christian parties to reconcile religious 'first principles' – a strict Bible-based stance – with a more pragmatic, less exclusionary approach to moral questions that reflected majority public opinion, has been something that has seriously tested intraparty cohesion. What precise point on a GAL-TAN scale should European Christian Democracy ideally occupy on the likes of, say, same-sex marriage, transgender issues, or immigration? It was striking that whereas Högglund sought to create a social conservative alternative without taking a strict scriptural stance on ethical questions, and without deploying the anti-immigrant rhetoric of the radical right, his successor Ebba Busch had no such qualms.

Indeed, no less a figure than the former long-serving chair, Alf Svensson, was numbered among the critics of an article in the afternoon newspaper *Expressen* in spring 2019 (Knutson 2019) in which Busch, the new Swedish KD leader, wrote, controversially (Busch 2019), that

Christian values are something that belong to the past and, plainly, many see Christianity in a similar light. It is associated with an older generation whose outdated views are an obstacle to freedom. The elderly, however, are not merely reactionary; they provide opportunities. All the rights and freedoms that we safeguard in Sweden today have been shaped by the Christian foundation of society. This means not only freedom of speech, association, religion, the rule of law and democracy, but also individualism, equality and sexual liberation. I know it is unusual to think in this way, but you can put it to the test by asking yourself some basic questions. In what kind of society is it best to live as a woman and a homosexual? In which country is it easiest to belong to a religious minority? Nothing is written in tablets of stone – there are exceptions – but the answers are likely to be ‘in a society based on a Christian foundation’.

This was a curious variant of *religious nationalism*, the essence of which was that Christianity is not a question of scripture and stricture but rather the basis of Swedish and western culture, serving as a counterpoise to multiculturalism and Islamisation (Haynes 2021).

The problem with ‘unsecular politics’

However, the more the Nordic religious-niche parties sought to reduce their explicit religiosity, the more they risked a backlash from an intraparty core of niche-defending Christian revivalists. In Finland, traditionalist opposition meant it took three party conferences to change SKL’s name and ultimately in May 2001 nearly one-third of conference delegates were against the change to ‘Finnish Christian Democrats’ (Pulkkinen 2001; Suvilampi 2001). In Sweden, when at KD’s fortieth anniversary conference in June 2004 the party proposed the deletion of ‘Christian ethics’ from the party rules, this was resisted by a core of committed Christians concerned that the party was seeking to distance itself from its revivalist roots (Hagnestad 2016; Svensson 2015). Ten years later, disillusioned with Högglund’s brand of Christian Democracy and his equivocation on the abortion issue, a breakaway group founded the Christian Values Party (*Kristna Värdepartiet*). In Norway, the KrF’s decision in 2013 that, whilst its representatives should work to disseminate Christian values, they need not be Christians themselves, split its ranks to the benefit of a splinter Christian Party, which in 2022 became the [Christian] Conservative Party (*Konservativt*). There was discontent, too, among traditionalists when, following a poor showing at the 2017 general election, the former editor of the Christian-oriented newspaper *Vårt land* canvassed a new party name that did not have ‘Christian’ in it.

Catchall Christian or personal parties?

The claim in this final section runs that, Denmark apart, support for the Nordic Christian parties no longer represents a reliable indicator of religiosity and that charismatic leadership has enabled the parties to mobilise a body of ‘unsecular voters’. However, in Norway and Sweden in particular they have struggled to hold on to these cultural Christians in the face of competition from a populist radical right playing the ‘Christian heritage’ card. A ‘leadership growth effect’ has been reflected in short-lived surges in Christian party support. Under Alf Svensson in Sweden (1973–2004) and Kjell-Magne Bondevik in Norway (1983–1995) the Christians were ‘personal parties’ (McDonnell 2013) in all but name, the

leader attracting a hefty ‘personal vote’. The Finnish Christian Democrats, too, have contrived a gradual upward trajectory in their support since 2015 under Sari Essayah’s personable leadership.

Evidence of a ‘party leadership growth effect’

By dint of the greater permissiveness of the electoral system, the direct impact of a personal vote for the party leader is most readily calculated in the Swedish case i) because the electoral rules allow candidates to run in multiple constituencies and ii) because since 1998 voters have had the option of backing a particular candidate and not simply underwriting the party list. In 1998 Svensson gained almost 19,000 personal votes in Bible Belt Jönköping and this represented 40.6% of the total KD vote in the constituency. In 2022 Ebba Busch’s personal vote amounted to over one-fifth of the total KD vote in all but three of the 29 constituencies in which she stood. Figure 5 presents data on the personal vote of Swedish KD leaders as a proportion of the total national party poll between 1998 and 2022. A strong leadership dependency is evident. Svensson’s personal vote in 1998 made up 28.6% of KD’s national poll whilst the comparable figure for Busch in 2022 was 22.4%. Indeed, by 1998 the Swedish KD was widely seen as a ‘one man, two-issue party’ – that is, ‘family policy, religion and Alf Svensson’ – and the avuncular Svensson ‘sold’ a soft, Christian-informed message that he aspired to build ‘a society in which the strong do not always win’ (Arter 1999, 298).

A Swedish television exit poll revealed that 75% of those who voted for KD in 1998 stated that Alf Svensson was an important reason for their party choice, whilst among those switching to KD in 1998, 27% had backed the Moderates (*Moderata samlingspartiet*), 10% the Liberals (*Liberalerna*), 9% the Centre (*Centerpartiet*), and 8% the Social Democrats (*Socialdemokratiska arbetarpartiet*) at the 1994 general election (Möller 1999, 266–267).

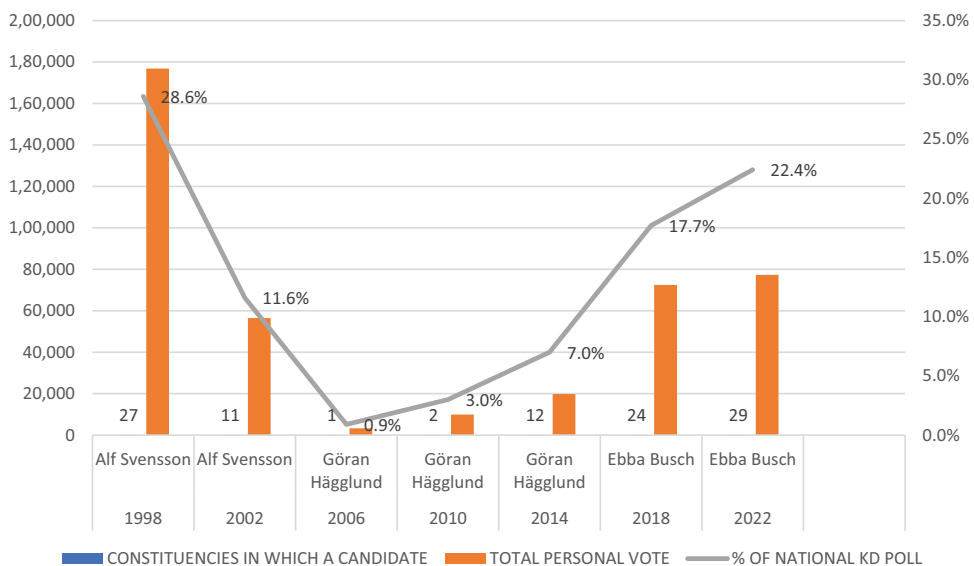


Figure 5. The personal vote of Swedish Christian party leaders, 1998–2022.

Under Svensson's leadership the Swedish KD in 1998 approximated the religious-mainstream party type – at least when viewed from a demand-side perspective. It gained the support of 40% of regular churchgoers, 12% of those who seldom attended a church service and 7% of those who never did so (Hagevi 2018, 30). A party leadership growth effect was evident again in 2018 when 19% of party switchers to KD did so because of Ebba Busch (Oscarsson 2020, 44).

Finland abolished multiple candidacies in 1969 but, under the present intraparty preference electoral system, citizens are required to cast a ballot for a candidate on a single party list, making it straightforward to measure the 'candidate vote'. The Finnish KD has witnessed a modest increase in support in recent elections, rising from 3.5% of the national poll in 2015 to 4.2% in 2023, and the party leader Sari Essayah has contributed materially to this growth. Running in the small, rural, up-country Savo-Karelia constituency, Essayah's personal vote exceeded 10% of KD's national poll at the 2015 and 2019 general elections and rose to 12.1% in 2023. Essayah, a former international athlete, presidential candidate and MEP, has been the KD's public face and projected a pragmatic but sympathetic party image. At the 2023 party conference she was selected as KD's candidate for the 2024 presidential election.

The Norwegian KrF's surge to a record poll of 13.7% in 1997 – an advance of 5.8% points on four years earlier – was indebted in no small measure to the former party leader, Bondevik, a Lutheran minister, who personalised a set of caring values that, as with Svensson in Sweden, attracted a wider body of secular Christians and social conservatives. Shortly before the 1997 election, several opinion polls indicated that Bondevik was a more popular candidate for the post of prime minister than the incumbent Torbjørn Jagland (Labour) and that crucial for KrF voters were family issues, not least the promise of cash support for the care of young children (Aardal 1998, 371–372). Significantly, in the four Bible Belt counties of Aust-Agder, Vest-Agder, Rogaland, and Hordaland KrF averaged 21% in 1997 and in Vest-Agder it was the largest party with over one-quarter of the vote.

Party leaders can of course have a 'negative personalisation effect' as well as a positive one. At the 2023 general election the Finnish Christian chair Essayah registered the highest *popularity index rating* of all the party chairs – calculated by subtracting the mean value of the party's popularity from that of the party leader (Karv 2023). In contrast, her predecessor as party leader, Päivi Räsänen, contributed to the public perception that the Christian Democrats were a religious-niche party for the religious only. In a party-commissioned poll in March 2020 that explored the reasons for not voting Christian Democrat at the 2019 general election, the top four explanations were i) KD mixes religion and politics; ii) KD has a hard-hearted attitude towards homosexuals; iii) KD's view of marriage does not correspond to ours; iv) KD promotes only those matters of importance to religious persons. It was no coincidence that just before the election Räsänen had posted on social media a picture of the Bible open at Romans 1: 24–27. She had been incensed at the way the Evangelical Lutheran Church had joined a Gay Pride march and felt the need to remind it of Saint Paul's view of homosexuality.

Denmark has been the exception to the 'growth spurt' of the Christian parties in Norway, Sweden and, to a lesser extent, Finland. Despite the change of name, the Danish Christian Democrats have continued to pursue a religious-niche party strategy, taking a pietistic stance on, and prioritising, moral questions. It did not reach the 2%

national qualifying threshold for parliamentary seats at the 2022 general election, averaged only 0.8% in the four Jutland constituencies where in 1973 it had recorded an above-average performance, and gained its best result (2%) on the island of Bornholm, east of the Danish mainland, which has a population of under 40,000 persons.

'Secular Christians' on board?

In large part a function of the 'leadership factor', it is assumed here that a *significant growth* in Christian party support in its historic Bible Belt municipalities would almost certainly represent evidence of a wider appeal to 'secular Christians'. In the Swedish case the evidence is persuasive. In 1998 the Swedish KD became the largest party for the first time in two of the four core Bible Belt municipalities in Jönköping discussed earlier – Gnosjö and Aneby, where in both it edged the Social Democrats into second place – and it gained over one-quarter of the vote in the other two, Sävsjö and Vaggeryd. KD advanced by an average of 13% points in these four municipalities compared with its general election performance four years earlier. In all four northern Bible Belt municipalities of Sorsele, Storuman, Vilhemina, and Vindeln in 1998 KD became the largest non-socialist party and it gained an average 6.2% points compared with its 1994 result. It was much the same story in the Norwegian Bible Belt in 1997. In the core municipalities of Fitjar, Lyngdal, Giske, and Birkenes, KrF advanced by an average of 7.3% points compared with four years earlier.

Competition from the radical right for the religious vote

The problem for the Christian Democrats has been holding on to their increased support when faced with a challenger competing in the same electoral marketplace. Put another way, in Sweden the populist radical right Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*, SD) have developed a clear strategy to capture the KD vote in its Bible Belt heartlands. The SD leader Jimmie Åkesson has described himself as 'an agnostic that defends Christian cultural values' (Thurfjell 2013) and until 2022 he was accompanied on the campaign trail by the well-known Norwegian Evangelist Runar Søgaard, who staged revivalist meetings in local ice-hockey stadiums. In many ways, the SDs have presented themselves as more socially conservative than KD by, inter alia, distancing themselves from Pride marches, pointing to the identity problems of children brought up by same-sex couples and, more generally, criticising the liberal attitudes of the Lutheran Church. In a speech in 2013 Åkesson claimed that the Church of Sweden had become less Swedish and less Christian and was actively supporting the Islamisation of Swedish society (Haugen 2015; Lindberg 2013; Nilsson 2020): 'One needs to respect our Christian heritage and be prepared to nurture it for future generations' (Thurfjell 2013).

Crucially, the SDs have pursued a *religious identity politics strategy* (Haugen 2015) which has involved the active use of the notion of Christian heritage (Minkenberg 2018). The central thrust has been that Christianity is integral to the national culture whereas Islam is alien to it (Hagevi 2017). In this last connection, Cremer (2022, 539) has posited 'the possibility of a new social cleavage [...] in which religious belonging – though less so believing – can be used politically as a secularised cultural identity marker'. [Figures 6 and](#)

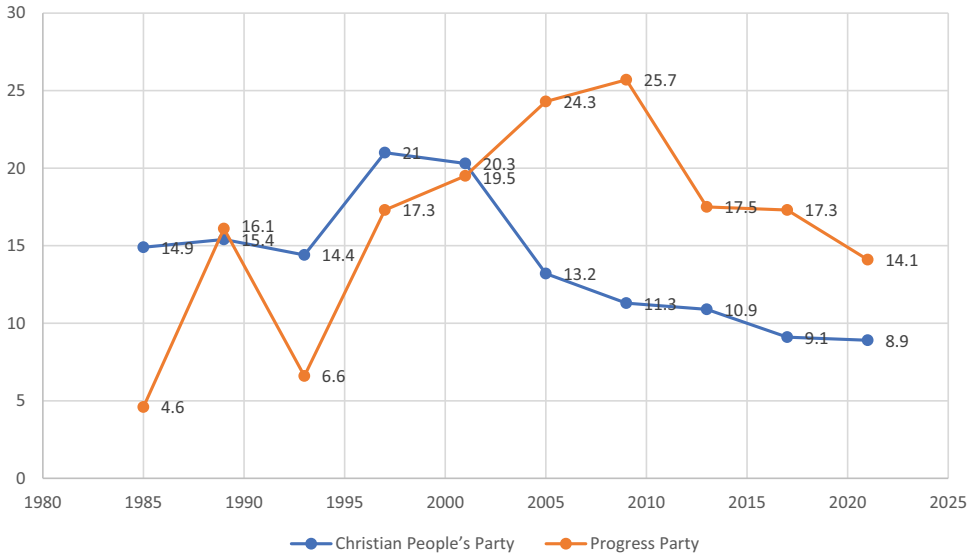


Figure 6. The Christian People’s Party and Progress Party vote in the Norwegian Bible Belt, 1985–2021 % (the constituencies of Aust-Agder, Vest-Agder, Rogaland, and Hordaland).

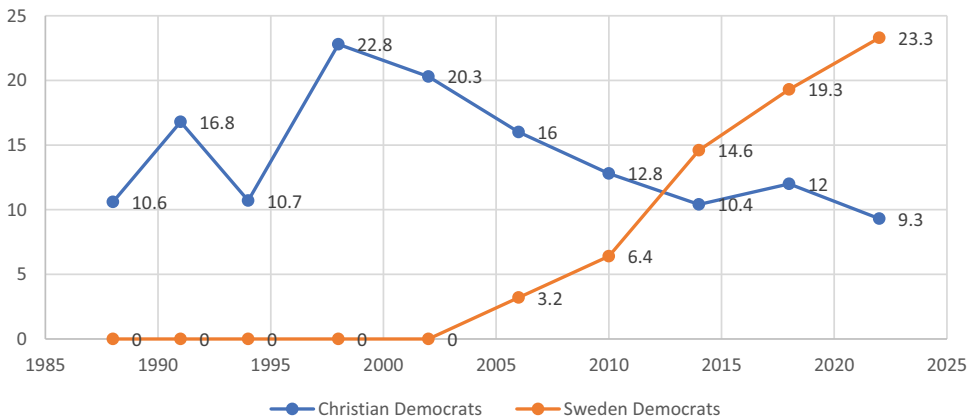


Figure 7. The Christian Democrat and Sweden Democrat vote in the Swedish Bible Belt, 1988–2022 %.

7 juxtapose the Christian and radical right vote in the Norwegian and Swedish Bible Belts between 1985/88 and 2021/22.

This religious identity strategy (Schwörer and Vidal 2020) has been notably successful. In 2014 the SDs overtook KD in its core Bible Belt municipalities of Aneby, Gnosjö, Sävsjö, and Vaggeryd in Jönköping constituency, advancing by an average 8.9% points compared with the 2010 general election. By 2022 SD was the largest party in the three of these four southern Bible Belt municipalities. In the northern Swedish Bible Belt municipalities of Sorsele, Sturuman, Vilhemina, and Vindeln over the period 2006–2022, the KD vote fell by an average of 3.9% – albeit from a significantly lower base than in Jönköping – whereas the SDs advanced by no less than 21.8%.

Clearly, SD expansion in both Swedish Bible Belts has not been exclusively at KD's expense. Oscarsson (2020, 13) has calculated that 16.3% of those who voted KD in 2014 voted for the Moderates in 2018, whilst 10.1% backed the SDs. But the relevant point is that KD has surrendered much of the Bible Belt support it attracted in the late 1990s and a not insignificant portion of it has swelled the ranks of the Sweden Democrats. The same applies in the Norwegian Bible Belt constituencies where in 2005 the KrF vote plummeted to 13.2% compared with almost one-quarter for the radical right Progress Party (*Fremskrittspartiet*).

Concluding remarks

With the pun intended, a generic question was posed at the outset: 'W(h)ither religious-niche parties?' The religious-niche party type was identified by reference to a 'pietistic politics model' and the point made that nicheness is variable and niche parties are not necessarily niche parties for life. They have the potential to evolve towards a religious-mainstream party type. Then, against the backdrop of the accentuated secularisation of Scandinavian society, the central question asked: How have the religious-niche parties that emerged across the region before and after the Second World War sought to build a new political identity with a view to broadening their electoral base, and how successful has this modernisation strategy been? The focus, in short, has been on the process and extent of religious-niche party change.

A few concluding remarks are in order. First, the status quo ante of a religious-niche party pursuing pietistic politics (option 1) is a perfectly coherent strategy – in the manner of the Dutch Political Reformed Party – but it is tenable only if the parties are content to operate at or below the threshold of representation. This has been the experience of the Danish Christian Democrats (*Kristendemokraterne*). Indeed, in both Denmark and the other Scandinavian political systems, significant *niche expansion* – in the sense of attracting a larger core revivalist constituency – has been unrealistic since the Christian parties' religious niche has been narrow and delimited from the outset by historic patterns of religious voting behaviour predating their formation, which have tied 'old revivalist' groups into the existing party systems.

Second, progression towards the religious-mainstream party type (option 2) through the pursuit of an 'unsecular politics' strategy has been far from straightforward. There has been a backlash from core revivalists, diminished intraparty cohesion and indeed some party splintering. In addition, the necessary full-throttle election campaigning has been hampered to a degree by the inability of grassroots' activists to comprehend and internalise the central concepts of Christian Democratic ideology (familialism, subsidiarity, transparency etc). Importantly, there has been strong competition for 'secularised Christians' from a populist radical right defending the national Christian heritage against the spectre of Islamisation. The Christian parties have also struggled to take an unsecular stance when confronted with a GAL-based agenda including the further liberalisation of abortion, transgender reforms, and gay marriage, all of which have threatened to dash their softer middle-of-the-road image. This has been particularly problematical in view of the tendency of a younger generation of Christians to be more tolerant and flexible on moral issues. All this is not to suggest the wholesale absence of change. But whilst support for the Nordic Christian Democrats no longer rests exclusively on high levels of personal

religiosity, and there has been ephemeral support from ‘unsecular voters’, the evidence does not point to sustained catchall expansion.

As Pedersen (1982) observed, parties are born, parties live, and parties die. The Nordic Christian Democrats are currently small parties and the only one in 2023 to surpass a German-style 5% threshold – and then only narrowly – is the Swedish KD. The prospects for the Danish and Norwegian Christian parties look bleak. Small parties are not necessarily ‘irrelevant’, of course, and both the Swedish and Finnish Christian Democrats presently form part of centre-right coalitions. History may be instructive, moreover, since the Norwegian and Swedish parties more than doubled their support under Bondevik and Svensson respectively. Indeed, the experience of the Nordic Christian parties suggests that in highly secularised societies, the extent to which religious parties can prosper – even survive – at the polls may be contingent less on an innovative brand of ‘unsecular politics’ than on the extent to which an entrepreneurial, media-savvy leader can personalise a caring Christian-informed message which captures an electoral mood (however ephemeral) for a traditional values-based party. The size of the personal vote for Svensson in 1998, Busch in 2018, and Essayah in 2023 bears testimony to the force of the ‘leadership effect’. Without such charismatic leadership – not least to combat the advance of the populist radical right – the response to the ‘whither question’ would appear likely to be ‘wither’.

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