

CANDLES IN SWEDISH CHURCHES

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The author describes how Swedish churches and society have had different relationships to the use of candles: affirmative up to the Reformation, and negative or ambivalent up to the twentieth century, when candles started once again becoming an important element not only of religious life, but public life as well.

Keywords: candles, Sweden, reformation.

Avtor opisuje, kako so v švedskih cerkvah in družbi v različnih obdobjih imeli različen odnos do rabe sveč: afirmativnega do same reformacije, odklonilnega ali ambivalentnega ves čas do 20. stoletja, ko so postale sveče znova pomemben element verskega doživljanja in tudi drugače v javnem življenju.

Ključne besede: sveče, Švedska, reformacija.

Light is a word that only takes on meaning in relation to its opposite: *darkness*. Creation began with God saying “Fiat lux”. Before that, darkness had prevailed, but now darkness was transformed into its opposite, light.

In the far north, for geographical reasons, there is still a struggle between darkness and light. For a great part of the year, people live in total darkness, until the light – as on the morning of creation – breaks through. For a short time I myself lived out in the countryside, far from any built-up area and without any neighbours. In moonlight or when the stars were out, the darkness of night could have its charm, but when it was cloudy I was completely enveloped in darkness. The night felt dangerous, and I longed for daybreak.

In our thoroughly electrified world it is useful to bear in mind that our ancestors lived in a constant alternation between light and darkness, and they spent a great deal of their time and energy searching for sources of light. This can increase our understanding of what light meant to them. They longed for the light, and they marked the days during the year when the light had its greatest power and when its power was smallest.

Once upon a time people made fire by striking steel or flint and catching the spark in tinder. They also needed a medium for keeping the flame alive. The cressets of the medieval church, small stones with hollows for oil, remind us of the significance of oil. Later on there came other sources of light: tallow and wax. In the allegorical world of the medieval church, the bee was praised as a producer of wax. According to a notion that was widespread in the early church, the bee symbolized the virgin birth. Apiculture and the utilization of wild bees became important. At the same time, a distinction was made between tallow candles and wax candles. In God’s house, only the latter were good enough.

Through cressets and candles of tallow and wax, it became possible for the priest to read the sacred texts and conduct the liturgy in the dark Romanesque churches. The sources of light thus acquired a crucial significance in the cult. The parishioners were obliged to pay their tithes in wax or oil so that lights could burn in the churches. Wax candles were also common offertory gifts. The candles were significant both for the collective – the parish – and for the individual. Olaus Magnus writes in his history of the Nordic peoples from 1555 that *if the skin of a wolf, lynx, or fox, or an animal of another species has been caught in their nets, the price of it is dutifully used for church candles*. He adds that *wolf-skins are also donated so that with the proceeds candles may be bought and burned in veneration of the saints*.

Candles were required on certain set occasions: at Sunday mass, when the status or degree of holiness was marked with a specific number of candles on the altar: two, four, or six. At the high festivals of the year, especially Christmas, the need for candles was particularly great, but also at Candlemas, when the candles were blessed. At festivals of the life cycle, candles were of crucial significance: at christening, churching, matrimony, and in connection with death and burial. In the laws of the medieval Swedish provinces there are detailed regulations concerning candles on these occasions. There is a rich iconography reflecting the use of candles in these contexts. There are also objects, in the form of candlesticks, testifying to the importance of light sources. Olaus Magnus's history gives examples of the medieval use of candles. He writes, for example, how women who underwent "churching", a purification rite after they had given birth, go *with burning candles to give thanks to God*. In the Catholic church the custom is observed by *all women who have borne a child when, after a space of forty days, carrying lights, they must go to be purified before a priest at the church doorway*. The medieval laws simultaneously remind us that candles had to be kept under close watch and that they could be dangerous.

"Fiat lux" is a kind of fire-making formula, and it was repeated at the annual blessing of the candles, which was originally done by rubbing two sticks together. The candles thereby acquired a sacred dimension: they were charged with sanctity. People took their candles to church, where they left some of them, and took the rest home to use there.

As soon as material things enter the picture, prestige comes too. Two wax candles were more than one, four were more than two. At ceremonies for distinguished people, more candles burned than on other occasions. For royal ceremonies a tax could even be levied to ensure that there were enough candles. A wealth of candles became a measure of the status of the living and the dead.

In the late Middle Ages the use of candles increased. In cathedrals, candles burned day and night on the graves of saints, and eternal lamps illuminated the altar as a symbol of God's presence.

The place for candles was on the altar and by the baptismal font, but they also had a mobile function. Olaus Magnus depicts the bride riding on a side-saddle with a torch in her hand. The bridegroom riding with his escort also carries a torch. Olaus Magnus tells us that

When they are about to go to church for the priestly blessing, every groom and bride, according to the excellence of their rank and birth, order to be borne before them tall candles of various hues, made with wonderful skill out of soft wax, with similarly coloured silken drapes hanging from them.

At christenings a burning candle was placed in the child's right hand, and when life ended a candle was put in the hands of the deceased. Light thus followed a person all through life.

The Reformation, of course, required taking a stance on the use of candles in church. The Church Ordinance of 1571 allowed candles to remain in use. For images of saints, however, it was not permitted to light candles, but *otherwise one may use candles at the altar when the canonical hours are held*. As for the practice of placing a candle in the hand of a



Fig. 1: A man presents a candle as an offering. Painting by Albertus Pictor in Härkeberga church.



Fig. 2: On the baptismal font in Gumlösa church in Skåne there is an image of the Virgin Mary carrying the baby Jesus in the temple. Behind her is Joseph, holding a candle in his hand.



Fig. 3: Five candle bearers at the funeral of a nobleman. Title vignette in Olaus Magnus, 16:37.



Fig. 4: Mounted bride and bridegroom with torches in their hands. Title vignette in Olaus Magnus, 14:9.

dying person, this could be continued as desired. However, the priest was to inform the people that it did not matter for the salvation of the souls whether one had a candle in one's hand or not. The custom survived well into the eighteenth century.

During the struggle with Calvinism in Sweden in the 1560s, Archbishop Laurentius Pauli prepared a tract on church ceremonies. Here he distinguished between necessary, voluntary, and reprehensible use of candles in church. At the same time, he wrote an entire exposé of the medieval use of church candles. Among those that could well be used but also done without, there were

Candlemas candles, Hallelujah candles, christening candles, bridal candles, churching candles, all kinds of offertory candles, large and small, which are dedicated to God and the saints, candlesticks, torch holders, and chandeliers.

The reprehensible ceremonies comprised all kinds of blessing of candles. The Uppsala Meeting in 1593, however, did not have as generous an attitude. Among the ceremonies that had to be abandoned were *the long torch holders used during high mass and at weddings*. At a synod in the archdiocese of Uppsala on 6 February 1595 it was decided to cease the use of salt and candles at christening and the use of candles at communion.

In Denmark the opposition to candles was not as strong. The Church Ordinance of 1539 and the Church Ritual of 1685 prescribed that the altar should be furnished *with two candles, lit as long as the communion lasts*. When Skåne and the neighbouring southern provinces were transferred to Sweden from Denmark through the Peace of Roskilde in 1658, the heads of the Swedish church strove for uniformity in ecclesiastical practice. A meeting in Malmö in 1681 prohibited the lighting of wax candles on the altar and beside the coffin at funerals. The significant sums used to buy wax candles would instead be delivered to Lund University to be used to support a number of students and scholarships. But the decision was not popular, and the deans remained strikingly passive. There are examples of dummy candles being placed in the candlesticks so that the altar would not be completely bare. Two of these have recently been found in Fleninge church in north-west Skåne. In Denmark the early service on Christmas night had been abolished at the Reformation, mainly because people were far too intoxicated when they came to church. In Sweden, on the other hand, it may be said that all that remained of the medieval splendour were the Christmas candles and torches that people brought with them on the early journey to church on Christmas morning. The significance of light in this context was particularly clear.

Through the central leadership of the church, then, candles had been gradually extinguished in Swedish churches from the end of the sixteenth century to the end of the seventeenth century. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries too, divine service was dominated by the word. The liturgy was plain and the candles remained unlit.

But the situation would change, indeed, to such an extent that the Swedish church today is enjoying a boom in candles, almost rivalling what we had in the late Middle Ages. How did this happen?

Some time into the twentieth century there was a gradual revival of interest in church

textiles and also in the decoration of churches. Albert Lysander, rector of Sankt Petri in Malmö, who was a pioneer in this respect, published an article in *Svensk Kyrkotidning* in 1917 entitled “Living flames on God’s altar”. He wrote:

The lighted candles welcome people, they speak of preparation for the Lord’s service, they give those who enter a powerful, immediate sense of being awaited. Therefore, procure candles for the altar of your church, to which you yourself go and want others to come.

Lysander underlines that what he wants is *living flames, lit at every church ceremony which includes altar service*. ... *If electric light is installed in your church, do not let it be conducted to the altar candlesticks.*

A new situation had thus arisen. The churches had been increasingly fitted with electric lighting. Some churches even excelled in banks of lights and incandescent bulbs. But it was an artificial light, a cold light, not a living light, not a liturgical light, not a light that enriched divine service. What makes wax or stearin candles sacred or popular, or in some cases controversial? The burning candles convey not just a visual experience but also an olfactory one. A visitor to a small Greek orthodox monastery church reports how only two wax candles were burning in it, but they filled the entire church with an aroma of honey. The candle flame is alive, somewhat unpredictable. It interacts with the surrounding atmosphere and can at certain moments be strengthened, only to be weakened the next moment or even turn to mere smoke. Like human life, the light is finite. Sooner or later a candle burns down. Light gives people pause for thought.

The liturgical renaissance that gradually arose, chiefly among high-church clergy, also led to a renaissance for candles and thus for the atmospheric value of the services and ceremonies. In a book about customs and ceremonies used in divine service, Harald Andersson writes that *there has been a return all through our church to letting the altar candles burn at divine service – above all at communion service*. In places, however, it was not until the 1940s that altar candles were lit in the churches. In a handbook for sextons, the rector Gunnar Rosendal dwells on the significance of the candles being lit in a beautiful way.

Whether high or low church, lighted candles are now found at any Swedish service. To guide those who prepare the altar, the diary accompanying the church almanac now gives instructions about the number of candles: two, four or six depending on the character of the day. Recommendations like this are also stated on the radio broadcast of the ringing of the bells at six o’clock on the evening before Sundays and holy days. Traditionally, altar candles are tall and spire-like. Yet this tradition is evidently being broken, as is the principle of symmetrical candlesticks and candles of equal height.

The significance of the gospel as marking the presence of Christ is seen evidenced in the procession with cross and candles. Luther, in his *Formula Missae* of 1523, likewise has the gospel procession with candles and cross. At the end of the twentieth century, especially in large churches, it became common that the reader of the gospel, accompanied by a couple of assistants carrying staffs with burning candles, proceeds down the church to

read the day's gospel. The reading of the gospel can be framed by hallelujah singing in the medieval manner.

Medieval church customs also included a ceremony of dousing the candles in Holy Week. The service on the evening of Maundy Thursday is now once again closed with a ceremony in which the cloth is removed from the altar and the candles are extinguished. On Good Friday the altar candles in 38 per cent of the country's churches are now left unlit. The dousing of the candles can thus be filled with meaning. Yet even the ancient church custom of lighting a big paschal candle on Easter Night has been resumed in the Church of Sweden. On the Sundays after Easter this paschal candle is lit in over 60 per cent of the churches.

At the announcement of the names of those who have died during the week, it has long been common to ring the bells briefly. In several places this is supplemented with a candle being lit for the deceased by the sexton.

Living flames are playing an increasing part in other ceremonies. Handing over a lighted candle to one of the sponsors at a christening was so rare in 1962 that there was no question about it in the survey of church customs that year. Since then it has become so common that almost 100 per cent of churches have it, as a result of which it was included in the service book for 1986, in the ritual for the baptism of both infants and adults. It is now the rule that the altar candles are lit at church weddings. This is also the case at funeral services, when the large candlesticks are placed on the floor on either side of the coffin.

Memorial services for those who have died during the year are now widespread at All Saints. It is then common that the names of the deceased are read out while a candle is lit for each one at the altar rails. This occurs in roughly half the parishes in Sweden. All Saints is now the major holiday on which graves are ornamented in Sweden. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of candles burn in the cemeteries. The grave candles show that the custom of candles nowadays is not a product of central direction by the church; it is a result of individual initiative.

Yet perhaps the most striking expression of the renaissance of candles in Swedish churches in our time is the introduction of candle stands, with room for a large number of candles at chest height. The candles can be bought by churchgoers and lit at services or ceremonies and on other occasions. Usually a "mother candle" is burning as long as the church is open. This can be used to light the individual candles, which means that matches are not necessary.

This custom was unknown when Mats Rehnberg published his dissertation in 1956 about the renaissance of candles in the twentieth century. The first candle stand was lit for the fourth general assembly of the World Council of Churches in Uppsala in 1968. The symbolism was expressed both in the name, "The Tree of Reconciliation", and in the stylized globe. Although the object was designed for a special occasion, it had a wider meaning. The globe could be associated with missionary work, and the payment for the candles could be a small gift to the missions. The 101 candle holders were quickly filled with lighted candles



Fig. 5: A candle has been placed in the hand of the deceased on his deathbed. Painting in Litslena church, Uppland.



Fig. 6: This painting of the Gregorian mass from around 1510, which belonged to the convent of Saint Klara in Stockholm, depicts two candles on the altar and two candles on processional staves.



Fig. 7: Dummy candle from Fleninge church, Skåne, now in the local heritage museum.



Fig. 8: Easter candles in St Mary's Church, Ystad.

by visitors to the cathedral. Candles can be lit for living friends or dead relatives. The idea of candle stands soon spread throughout Sweden, and in 1995 they could be found in 63 per cent of the country's churches. That they really are used is obvious from the consumption of candles. In a multicultural society, the candle stands are accessible to people of different confessions, evidently not just inside but also outside Christianity. Lighting an offertory candle is simultaneously a form of active and outreaching action with a symbolic meaning.

While candles in churches at the start of the twentieth century could still be regarded as *adiaphora*, that is, actions tolerated because they are dogmatically indifferent, this is no longer true. Both the number of occasions when candles are lit and the geographical spread have increased vigorously. There are evidently several contributory factors in this. The aesthetic decoration of the church increased steadily during the twentieth century. The candles emphasize the changing church year and changes in people's lives. They give a sense of solemnity and calm, which is necessary in our stressful times. The rich use of candles was initially encouraged by representatives of high-church currents and has at times been perceived as an approach to Roman Catholic and Orthodox piety. The different uses of candles in our churches, however, have become so common that they can no longer be associated with any particular type of piety.

At the same time, it is important to point out that the living flames are not just connected to churches, but also to everyday life outside them. There is an old tradition of carrying torches at political and similar evening events. The candlelit processions in churches on Lucia Day have in fact been transferred from the private setting of the home to the public space of the church. The custom of lighting candles at death scenes has accompanied the custom of laying flowers at such places. In Sweden the tragic deaths of both prime minister Olof Palme and foreign minister Anna Lindh gave rise to tributes in the form of flowers and candles, thus setting a pattern. Major international disasters such as the South-East Asian tsunami in 2004 have also been followed by manifestations in which candles have played a significant part. Media coverage makes us aware of this use of candles, which is then copied.

Candles have long been an important part of Christian symbolism. In the Bible it is easy to find texts that associate light with Christ. But no confession can make the flames into its own property. The symbolism of light is thus well suited to our multicultural age. It is particularly effective in a shared social manifestation, for example, in cemeteries at All Saints. But behind every lighted candle is an individual who is able to project thoughts and feelings to someone close. The use of candles therefore has both a collective and an individual function. It is geared to action, which is important, not least for those who find it difficult to express feelings in words. Candles are part of our culture of experience, which in many cases has taken the place of the culture of the spoken word. At the same time, the use of candles is tied to a time and a society, as I have tried to exemplify through the historical development in Sweden. I have confined myself to the Swedish custom, but it needs to be placed in a comparative context, as can happen at conferences of this kind.



Fig. 9: A baptismal candle is handed to the godparents by the churchwarden at a christening in Uppsala Cathedral.



Fig. 10: Candles being lit for those who have died during the past year in Lomma church, Skåne.



Fig. 11: Candle bearers with lighted candles in St Mary's Church, Ystad.



Fig. 12: Girls from Borgarskolan in the Lucia procession in St Peter's Church in Malmö, 1982.

SVEČE NA ŠVEDSKEM

Življenje med svetlobo in temo je zaznamovalo človeka na Švedskem. Do pojava reformacije so bile sveče zelo pomemben sestavni del cerkvenega obredja, njihova raba je naraščala. Uporabljali so jih tako pri branju, na oltarju in pri krstu. Poleg funkcije osvetljevanja so imele tudi simbolno vlogo, na eni strani so s številom kazale na obstoječe hierarhije, na drugi je krščenca njegova sveča povezovala s skupnostjo vernih. Svetloba je človeka spremljala vse življenje. Prižgane sveče so spodbujale ne le vidni čut, temveč tudi čut vonja.

Reformacija je rabo sveč problematizirala in skušala določiti na eni strani vloge, ki so jih imele sveče v srednjem veku, in je s predpisi omejila njihovo rabo v reformirani cerkvi. Ponovno so vlogo svetlobe odkrili v 20. stoletju, najprej z elektrifikacijo in s tem povezano možnostjo osvetliti cerkev, nato z renesanso liturgije, ki je prinesla tudi renesanso sveč in poudarila pomen okolja pri doživljanju obredja. Prav tako so sveče postale sestavni del individualnega obredja na dan vseh svetih ali pa ob počastitvi spomina, tako npr. na kraju smrti Olofa Palmeja ali zunanje ministrice Anne Lindh, in spremljajočih manifestacijah s svečami. Sveče so del naše kulturne izkušnje, njihova raba je pomembna tako za kolektiv kakor za posameznike.

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