In the 1920s, Nathan Söderblom’s position as the leader of the Church of Sweden was unquestionable. Indeed, his influence reached far beyond Sweden’s borders. Not only was he the Archbishop of the Church of Sweden; his struggle for peace during the First World War and his efforts to bring together the European churches in an ecumenical understanding were widely acclaimed and had already brought him international renown in the 1910s.\(^1\) The gigantic international ecumenical conference in Stockholm in 1925 can be said to have been his crowning achievement.\(^2\) True, some still regarded his theology as dangerously radical, and many within the Church of Sweden were critical. But there can be no doubt that he possessed an exceptionally strong Christian authority.

The year after the ecumenical conference in Stockholm, Uppsala University’s Christian Student Association had cause to celebrate. Founded in 1901, the organisation had now reached its quarter-century and decided to publish an anthology celebrating its history. It is hardly surprising that the editors chose to contact the Archbishop to ask him to contribute to the volume, or that Söderblom’s text was placed at the very beginning of the resultant book.

All the more startling, then, was the tenor of Söderblom’s largely autobiographical text. Looking back to his days as a student of theology in the 1880s and early 1890s, Söderblom wrote of the enormous problems of faith and the religious doubts that had befallen him and other students. New scholarship, known by the somewhat misleading name of biblical criticism, changed the state of knowledge particularly about parts of the Old Testament. The German biblical scholar Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918) was the most influential scholar in this field, not least with his *Prolegome-*

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\(^1\) Karlström, *Kristna samförståndssträvanden.*

 Although Wellhausen was far from the first scholar to call the absolute truths of the Bible into question, his interpretations were more radical, and, crucially, it was with him the field of biblical criticism became known to a much wider audience. Horrified students now learned that the Prophet Isaiah had not actually written the entire Book of Isaiah, that the Prophet Daniel had never existed, and that the Pentateuch had not been written in the same order as the books were arranged in the Old Testament. This new knowledge was not taught by the theologians at Uppsala University, but nevertheless spread among the students. It led to intellectual and emotional problems on a massive scale, as Söderblom recalled.

At the time that Söderblom wrote his memoir, biblical criticism had become an integral part of theological training. Students’ crises of faith were no longer the same as they had been in the 1880s and 1890s, according to Söderblom. He contrasted his own generation of students, who had had to live through intense agonies, with the current generation:

Behind these theological and exegetical studies lay a religious passion that our times can hardly imagine. We wrestled with the fundamental problem ... Nobody gave us any clarity, answers, or guidance. We were reduced to using prayer, to the lonely prayerful struggle with God. ... for us, a holy gravity lay over these issues concerning the nature and history of the Bible. Luther speaks of angustiae et terrores conscientiae [the anxiety and pains of conscience], and denies credit and authority to the dreamers in the congregation, since they knew nothing of such trials and tribulations. Several of us of my generation have sensed something similar. For us, this was not some inherited or easily gained insight, but a revelation from God himself.

There are several ways to read this passage. It can be read realistically and autobiographically as an expression of Nathan Söderblom’s most deeply felt thoughts on the subject. Certainly this reading has dominated in the literature. In conjunction with other autobiographical passages, very thinly strewn across the revered archbishop’s writings, his words have been read as telling the truth about how biblical criticism caused problems of faith for his young self. I do not deny the validity of these readings. What I do wish to raise, though, are fundamental questions which earlier scholarship left unanswered. Why did Söderblom choose to be open about his religious doubts? And in what contexts did he choose to be open-hearted about them? What was the particular purpose of the passage cited above? And, not least, what happens when we consider these utterances from a gender perspective?

1 For a brief presentation of Wellhausen and his work, see Momigliano, “Religious History Without Frontiers”, 49-55.
2 For earlier biblical criticism, see Harrisville and Sundberg, The Bible in Modern Culture, 33-154; Howard, Religion and the Rise of Historicism, 24-43, 78-102.
4 Andræ, Nathan Söderblom, 105-109, 113-114; Ehnmark, Religionsproblemet hos Nathan Söderblom, 144-150; Estborn, Under Guds grepp, 17-21; Holmström, “Nathan Söderbloms självbiografiiska”; Karlström, Kristna samförståndsstrevanden, 144-145; Sundklar, Nathan Söderblom, 29-30; Åkerberg, Omvändelse och kamp, ch. 3-5, and particularly 112-115, 133-137.
This is important, since it would seem to make little sense for a man of Söderblom’s standing to air any problems of faith publicly. Why on earth would he choose so openly to utter things that could be used to diminish his religious authority in the eyes of others? This was not the only occasion Söderblom discussed the qualms and terrors he had felt as a young man, and, as we shall see, he was far from alone in speaking openly and plainly about his doubts. Indeed, several other men wrote in the 1926 anthology of how they had struggled with religious doubts as young men. Men in positions of power and authority - professors of theology, bishops, religious leaders - often invoked their own youthful crises of faith in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century. Their words reveal not only that many young men did indeed have a hard time keeping their Christian faith in the face of biblical criticism. They also reveal something profound and hitherto neglected about men’s religious authority in the period under scrutiny.

THE GENDER OF RELIGIOUS CRISSES

It would seem, then, that men did not need to feel ashamed that they had nearly lost their faith in their youth. What is more, Söderblom’s passages about his crises of faith as a young man were not covered up by those who followed in his path. In 1931, the year of Söderblom’s death, a veritable plethora of biographical works was quickly produced by some of his many enthusiastic male followers. These books were laudatory and served to emphasise Söderblom’s central position both in Sweden and abroad. One might expect that the men who wrote about Söderblom’s life would attempt to hide the fact that his faith had been wavering and uncertain under the pressure of biblical criticism. Actually, quite the contrary is true. Söderblom’s enthusiastic disciple Tor Andræ instead devoted several pages to the subject of Söderblom’s intense problems in retaining his Christian faith as a theology student at Uppsala University, going into detail on the issue. The priest Olle Nystedt did the same, and quoted the few passages Söderblom had left behind concerning his religious doubts, while noting that “studying theology in those days was not child’s play”. Nystedt’s choice of words serves to emphasise the gravity of Söderblom’s experiences. Indeed, the theme of Söderblom’s doubts was not even hidden from the officially produced and almost hagiographic volume Nathan Söderblom in memoriam, published in the year of Söderblom’s death. Further scholarship on Söderblom, not infrequently

8 See also evidence brought to light by Prestjan, Präst och karl, 155-158, although cf. Ibid., 111 where it seems the theme was perhaps not so widespread.
9 Andræ, Nathan Söderblom, 105-109, 113-114.
10 Nystedt, Nathan Söderblom, 36-39, quote at 36.
written in similar hagiographic vein although of much higher academic value, has continued this intense interest in Söderblom’s religious crises.12

Not only was Söderblom himself explicit about his youthful problems of faith; these troubles were emphasised rather than hidden by those who wanted to laud him posthumously. Yet for what reason? A possible explanation has been offered by Callum Brown, who has analysed how religious men in Britain, and clergymen in particular, were represented in texts in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although Brown does not discuss the particular case of Söderblom, his arguments are still pertinent. Referring to the well-known ‘feminisation’ of Christianity in the nineteenth century, Brown argues that this process led to a disassociation between masculinity and piety. ‘Piety’ became a strictly female quality, and thus pious men had to combine their feminised piety with masculine qualities. It is in this context that Brown points to the fact that piety “never came easy to the clergy of the evangelical century”.13 Clerical biographies often pointed to the problems these men had had in sustaining their faith, particularly during their university years. Brown argues that: “In this way the weakness of ‘holy men’ was most publicly paraded. The spiritual turmoil of clergy, even of the most famous and revered, became an obsession of popular religious magazines. They became an obsession too of Victorian fiction ... it was always men, not women, who were afflicted in the Victorian novel ... The best of men, the most Christian ‘manly’ of men, were being shown to be weak before the Lord.”14 Brown’s conclusion is that “Masculine strength and power was constantly being undermined in evangelical discourse”.15

I would like to invert Brown’s argument. The public obsession with men’s inner religious turmoil does not reveal the extent to which piety had been feminised, but rather, crises of faith became one of several ways in which piety could be given particularly gendered, masculine connotations. During this period, women were believed to be naturally religious. It was thus believed that faith came to women without struggle or critical thought. As the British independent minister John Angell James put it mid century: “It is in the female bosom ... that piety finds a home on earth. The door of woman’s heart is often thrown wide open to receive the divine guest, when men refuse an entrance.”16

Given women’s supposedly natural religiosity, religious crises could then be actively construed as gendered: as particular to men, and different from women’s ostensibly natural faith. Men, but not women, had to struggle for their faith. And, I would argue, it was this very struggle that made them men. The discourse on men’s religious troubles did not indicate that men were ‘weak before the Lord’ or that their masculinity was ‘undermined’. Instead, the discourse reinforced a particular form of religious experience - the (intellectual) crisis of faith - as a masculine domain, as

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12 Ehnmark, Religionsproblemet, 144-150; Estborn, Under Guds grepp, 17-21; Holmström, “Nathan Söderbloms självbiografska”; Karlström, Kristna samförståndsssträvanden, 144-145; Sundkler, Nathan Söderblom, 29-30; Åkerberg, Omvändelse och kamp, ch. 3-5.
13 Brown, The Death of Christian Britain, 100; see also Brown in this volume.
14 Id., The Death of Christian Britain, 101-102.
15 Ibid., 102.
16 John Angell James, Female Piety (London, 1852), quoted in McLeod, Religion and Society in England, 159.
something men bravely and with much suffering had to go through. The discourse points not to “feminised piety”, as Brown formulates it, but rather to *masculinised* piety. That the discourse was present in biographies of esteemed religious leaders should lead us to question why these words were set down in the first place. Did the discourse on men’s religious doubts really circumvent and downplay these particular men’s authority? I will reverse the question, and investigate instead the ways in which men’s authority was *reinforced* by the discourse on men’s religious doubts.

Let us consider Söderblom’s autobiographical text. Luther, in Söderblom’s words, “denies credit and authority to the dreamers in the congregation, since they knew not of such trials and tribulations”. Religious authority is at stake here. Real authority, a legitimate position of power, can apparently only be granted to those who had lived through intellectual crises of faith. Since theological studies were hermetically sealed to women - the first female student of theology began her studies in 1909 - this meant that the act of studying theology and coming to terms with the inner turmoil caused by biblical criticism was de facto a male homosocial arena. It is no coincidence that Söderblom uses the expression “the lonely praying struggle”, and that he prides himself and his generation on having “fought” without any “guidance”. By emphasizing the effort which had gone into reaching a stable faith in God, Söderblom also gave masculine connotations to the act of reading theological works: struggle, independence, autonomy were all intimately connected with the male gender in this period. Apparently it took men to read perilous books. Between the lines, brave young students of theology struggling to keep their faith are set apart from women with their supposedly natural faith.

Söderblom often touched upon the theme of religious authority when he spoke of religious crises, his own and others’. In a sermon given at Uppsala University in 1905, he explained to his audience, many of whom were young male students, that “He who has not fought through a painful and dangerous struggle with traditional religious notions in his own life does not have the same right and authority to judge old or newer forms of theology.” In this obviously autobiographical passage, Söderblom takes his own struggle of faith as the foundation for the authority to judge different schools of theology. Those who criticised Christianity or specific theological schools are denied authority on the basis of their not having lived through crises of faith.

At times, Söderblom put this argument in a more positive turn of phrase. Greeting the theology students upon being nominated professor of theology at Uppsala in 1901, Söderblom congratulated them for choosing such an important and difficult object of study. Instead of shying away from the contemporary problems facing the Church of Sweden, Söderblom described them as an excellent school for how the young men could be turned into real men - and real priests. Explicitly alluding to his own experiences, Söderblom used this opportunity to appear as a serious and conscientious Christian man who had not closed his eyes to biblical criticism or the critique of Christianity; indeed, as a man who had wandered through darkness, but

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17 The first female student of theology in Sweden was Emilia Fogelklou. Hammar, “Kvinnor kräver tillträde till det teologiska samtale”, 365, 370-373.
18 Söderblom, “De stackars dödlige”, 35.
had gained strength and authority - masculinity - from the experience. The same should be expected by the students in their future studies, Söderblom explained, but their experience of doubt and crises of faith would in the end give them true theological and Christian authority. The crises were thus not to be shunned. They were rather to be welcomed as a positive challenge:

To be sure, both in study and in work there are difficult crises and narrow gates to pass through, abysses to be crossed where neither experience nor the help of others, but only the wings of faith, can carry us across; and I believe, as did Luther, that he who, shackled, has himself experienced the pangs and agonies of conscience has priestly authority as the worth of his hard-earned salvation and freedom.19

The words that the celebrated Archbishop chose to include in his autobiographical text published in 1926 were not extraordinary, then. He had claimed similar things on other occasions, and especially when addressing university students, when he could appear as a mature man, a father figure, before younger men. He seems to have believed that students had something positive to gain from hearing about his crises of faith. Indeed, in more private situations he would almost boast about how he had lived through and overcome the experience of having nearly lost his faith as a young man.20

Söderblom also described how the nature of his Christian beliefs was radically transformed by his experience of a crisis of faith. This transformation was intimately connected to gender. To put it bluntly, his faith became manlier. Söderblom described his earlier childhood Christianity as “unhealthy and emotional” and as lacking in “moral power”, and he reacted against this sentimental piety with its “excess of blood and sugar”. His positive understanding of biblical criticism was intimately connected to his rebuttal of this form of piety.21

Jesus, too, became manlier, stripped of what Söderblom saw as his former “pietistic femininity”. He was no longer merely the meek suffering man on the cross, but also the harsh preacher, demanding repentance and atonement from believers. By focussing more on the Sermon on the Mount, Söderblom found “a Christ with authority and power, not the sweet Saviour”; his Christianity “was given harsh gravity and moral salinity”.22 Having had his faith shaken to the core apparently rendered Jesus more masculine. And Jesus’ masculinity helped Söderblom to become manlier - graver, more ‘saline’.

The theme was not peculiar to Söderblom. The notion that religious doubts could lead young men to a useful crisis that would make them manlier was current among other church leaders at this time. To an extent hitherto neglected, the formation of Christian masculinities hinged more on notions of religious crisis than on the

19 Söderblom, “Till de teologie studerande”, 63.
22 Ibid., 89.
much-studied efforts to strengthen Christian men’s bodies. Two other Swedish theological giants of the period, the bishops Einar Billing and J. A. Eklund, both spoke publicly of the problems of faith they had lived through as young men. Söderblom, Billing, and Eklund were the three single most important church leaders in Sweden at the beginning of the twentieth century. They were admired by a whole generation of younger men, students of theology first among them.

Eklund and Billing both argued that the fact that they had ‘survived’ periods of crisis made them better religious leaders, and especially better religious leaders of other, younger men. For Billing, the encounter with biblical criticism was a shock. One of his remarks about biblical criticism has been quoted so often as to become a byword among Swedish church historians: “I shall never forget the anguish that this study brought me. It was like an earthquake: everything seemed to cave in under one’s feet.” Like Söderblom’s comments, this has often been read as autobiographical. And of course it is. But there is more to it than that. Billing also described himself as a daring hero who succeeded in surviving the loss of self-control and the inner turmoil of religious doubts. And he, like Söderblom, was revered for his honesty in sharing the story of how he almost lost his faith.

The fact that religious crises could be used discursively to bolster men’s religious authority and masculinity leads us to a larger question. If crises could be described in such a way that Christian men appeared as manly, then the much-studied tradition of ‘muscular Christianity’ was not the only or the most important way in which Christian men pursued the quest of manlier Christianity at the turn of the twentieth century. Indeed, I believe that muscular Christianity in the English-speaking world has not only been much studied - it has been over-studied, and its importance exaggerated. To explain the supposed process of feminisation, scholars have focused too much on theologians or other men whose Christianity was explicitly adduced as a manly counterweight to feminised piety. Attention has been fixed on Christian men’s movements and on men who have argued for the need for a more muscular Christ and more muscular Christian men. It is as if all attempts to masculinise Christianity were necessarily expressed as a need to masculinise religious culture.

Yet there were other ways in which men strove to portray Christianity as a religion befitting men, as a religion that was indeed modern, that could indeed succeed in the momentous struggle over the souls of the young generation growing up around 1900. I have briefly discussed how religious doubt could be used as a source for masculinisation. Before we move on to consider other possibilities, we need to adopt a broader perspective on threats to male Christian identity at the time.

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23 Billing, *Herdabref*, 34. This passage has been much quoted, for example by Aulén, “Einar Billings teologi”, 45; and Hidal, *Bibeltro och bibelkritik*, 129.
24 Billing, *Herdabref*, 34; for admiring voices on this theme, see, for example, Björkquist, “Einar Billing”, 89; and id., “Två minnen”, 242.
THREATS TO CHRISTIAN MASCULINITY

Biblical criticism indeed proved problematic for the faith for many Christian men, particularly young students of theology, at the turn of the twentieth century. In order to understand the idea that men’s religious crises could reinforce their masculine identity and their religious authority, we need to understand the gendered map of the time. Gendered threats to Christian masculinity must be understood intersectionally; in other words, the intersections between the various gendered problems need to be taken into account. Several scholars have asserted that it was more difficult than ever for a man to claim to be both a Christian and a real man in this period. If he was a Christian he was feminised, and was seen as a representative of a dying breed of superstitious fools; if a Christian, he was unmodern or anti-modern. In the massive critique of Christianity around the turn of the last century, notions of gender, modernity, and generation intersected.²⁶

First, there was the feminisation of Christianity.²⁷ The process of feminisation has largely been studied as a quantitative problem: men fled the churches before women did, leaving clergymen facing churches filled with women.²⁸ The sheer quantitative dominance of women is then said to have influenced Christian beliefs and doctrines, for example transforming the understanding of Christ, who became milder and softer. Additionally, the new bourgeois hegemony, with its ideal of gender complementarity, meant that Christian ideals that previously had been unproblematically gender-neutral were now regarded as particularly feminine. Where the willingness to weep, to be submissive and tender, had been ideals for Christian men and women alike, these ideals were already seen as gender-specific in some bourgeois circles as early as the turn of the nineteenth century, and they soon became dominant in the middle-class elite. Piety was thus regarded as something that both came more naturally to women and an ideal that was extolled particularly for women.²⁹ Indeed, as already noted, in the nineteenth century even clergymen repeatedly claimed that religious inclination was more natural in women than in men.³⁰

It was hardly a coincidence that angels changed gender at this time, for having been portrayed as strong, warrior-like men they were now painted and perceived as women, placed in domestic settings.³¹ The theme of the feminisation of religion in

²⁶ For the useful concepts ‘intersections’ and ‘intersectionality’, see, for example, Collins, “It’s All in the Family”; Lykke, “Intersektionalitet”; McCall, “The Complexity of Intersectionality”.
²⁷ The term comes from Welter, “The Feminization of American Religion”, and was made popular by Douglas, The Feminization of American Culture. See the introduction to this volume.
²⁸ Lawes, “Trifling with Holy Time”; Ryan, Cradle of the Middle Class, 75-83; Shiels, “The Feminization of American Congregationalism”; for a critique and suggestions for a more nuanced understanding of the process of feminisation, see Bilhartz, “Sex and the Second Great Awakening”; and Braude, “Women’s History is American Religious History”.
³¹ Auerbach, Woman and the Demon, 64.
Sweden has yet to be charted, but anecdotal evidence shows that religion was discursively feminised at least as early as the 1820s, and quantitative studies reveal that in the second half of the nineteenth century church attendance and communion were dominated by women.32

The quantitative as well as discursive feminisation of Christianity was hardly new when biblical criticism confronted young university students with periods of doubt and dejection. Christianity was still largely thought of as a religion particularly suited to the hearts and minds of women - and there were more problems. Not only was Christianity thought of as suited for women, it was also plainly stated that Christianity in itself was lacking in masculinity, as is shown by the fact that Christian men devoted considerable energy to explaining that Christianity was indeed, contrary to popular belief, a religion for men. This phenomenon was international. In the US, radical freethinkers claimed that Christianity deprived men of their manhood, a view that stemmed from their belief that masculinity was founded upon free will and the ability to use reason to decide one’s ideological position. Christianity was thought both dogmatic and superstitious, and hence utterly unbefitting a real man.33 In Britain, the immensely popular Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon lamented that “There has got abroad a notion, somehow, that if you become a Christian, you must sink your manliness and turn milksop.”34 He argued that the notion was both widespread and totally false. In Sweden, similar clerical polemics against the notion that Christianity was unmanly were penned by important Church leaders.35 Like Spurgeon, in Sweden Eklund railed against the “prejudice” that “Christianity is for women and not for men”, and emphasised that “it is important that we also point to what is manly and strong in Christianity”.36

Another gendered threat to Christian masculinity can be summed up in the sweeping phrase ‘the struggle for modernity’. In the Nordic countries, a new literary style and literary ideals were forcefully expressed by a small group of young intellectual men, most of them novelists, beginning in the early 1880s. They may have been few, but they were extraordinarily influential in the debate that followed. They were violently anti-Christian and anti-Church: they claimed that religion was nothing but a superstitious delusion, and they proclaimed the ideals of science in direct opposition to traditional religious beliefs. The natural sciences, rather than the humanities, were now to answer all the questions concerning human conduct, emotions, and the mind - indeed, they were even to explain men’s and women’s religious beliefs.37 Christianity, it was explained, was no longer relevant. Thus, it was completely logical that

32 For discourse, see Wallin, *Qvinnans ädla och stilla kallelse*; for quantitative data, see Gustafsson, *Socialdemokratien och kyrkan*, 77, 88, 90.
33 Kirkley, “Is it Manly to be a Christian?”, 81-82.
34 Spurgeon’s sermon ‘A young man in Christ’ in the posthumous *A good start: A book for young men and women* (London, 1898), quoted in Springhall, “Building Character in the British Boy”, 55 (Springhall does not record when the sermon was first delivered). For more on Spurgeon’s arguments for a manlier Christianity, see Bradstock, “A Man of God is a Manly Man”.
35 For example, Danell, “Mera manlighet i vår kristendom!”.
women’s greater propensity for religion was now explained in scientific language, and particularly by referring to women’s physiology. Herbert Spencer, who popularised Charles Darwin’s theories, explained that women were more religious than men because of their relative physical weakness. Evolution had therefore given women a greater inclination to marvel and wonder at phenomena that were stronger than themselves. Hence women were more religious than men.  

It is important to note that these scientific beliefs and ideals were explicitly extolled as modern, in line with the times, while religious beliefs were thought largely to be remnants from the past. And, what is more, the new prophets whose ideals spread like wildfire among radical students at the universities asserted their critique of Christianity not only in terms of modern versus outdated, but also as gendered. It is no coincidence that the radical author August Strindberg claimed that his youthful “ascetic religion had killed even the man in him” in his autobiographical novel The Son of a Servant (1886). Manhood and religion were, apparently, mutually exclusive. The Danish critic Georg Brandes, without a doubt the most influential of all Nordic intellectuals in the so-called “modern breakthrough”, put it in even plainer language. When discussing the spiritual difference between Greek antiquity and the appearance of Christianity in world history, he compared Christianity to a “disease” and claimed that Christianity was like “a nervous exaltation”. The consequence was the loss of masculinity: “The masculine character of imagination in Greek antiquity disappeared, one dreamt, cried, kneeled, felt longing for limitless tenderness ...”

For the radical young men busily claiming cultural hegemony over the concept of modernity, it was important to point out the incompatibility between Christianity and masculinity. A final example is given by the novelist Gustaf af Geijerstam, who specifically attacked the Faculty of Theology at Uppsala University, where “the soul became poorer, the thinking less audacious, the courage more tamed”. Poverty of the soul, lack of audacity, and courage: af Geijerstam was not only attacking theology as a discipline, he was explaining that theology turned men into weaklings. When the priest Olle Nystedt, quoted above, claimed that “studying theology in those days was not child’s play”, it should be read as a counter-statement, reinserting masculinity into a field of knowledge that the authors of the modern breakthrough had worked hard to feminise, or perhaps rather to unman. It comes as no surprise that the young radicals filled their novels and short stories with pathetically impotent priests, and contrasted the failures of these men with another group of men, the new heroes of the age: physicians.

38 Lundbergh, Kom ihåg att du är underlägsten!, 73-74.
39 The original reads “Hans asketiska religion hade dödat till och med mannen hos honom” (Strindberg, Tjänstekvinnans son, 187). In Sprinchorn’s unfortunate translation it becomes “His ascetic attitude had deprived him even of his manhood” (Strindberg, The Son of a Servant, 131).
40 Georg Brandes, Hovedstrømninger i det 19de aarhundredes litteratur, I: Emigrantlitteraturen (Copenhagen, 1872), quoted in Ahlström, Det moderna genombrottet, 164.
41 Gustaf af Geijerstam, Erik Grane (Stockholm, 1885), quoted in Ahlström, Det moderna genombrottet, 197.
42 Ahlström, Det moderna genombrottet, 406-408.
Last but not least, the rise of Socialism and the creation of Sweden’s Socialist Democratic Party in 1889 constituted a threat to the gendered identities of young Christian men by the end of that century. If the intellectuals who attacked Christianity were an influential minority, Socialists were extremely successful in spreading an anti-Christian and anti-Church ideology. Priests were now attacked for legitimising and even praising the poverty of the working classes even as they themselves were more than well off.\(^43\) This was classical anti-capitalist rhetoric. We often fail to see the gendered content of the words. Yet consider the vices that priests were said to embody. They were said to be heavy consumers of inordinate amounts of alcohol; they were said to be lazy; and above all they were described as hypocrites.\(^44\) In an age that praised men of character who worked hard and stood by their word, these critical attacks meant that priests were described as ‘un-men’, as something much less than men.\(^45\)

So, in order to be a Christian and a man without undergoing some kind of gendered identity crisis demanded particular efforts around the turn of the twentieth century. Christian men had many reasons to try and stress that, contrary to what people believed, they were indeed manly men. As we have seen, the discourse on men’s religious crises offered Christian men an opportunity to claim that they were indeed intellectual, modern, manly men. With this broader context in mind, we shall now turn to some of the ways in which one particular man, J. A. Eklund, set out to explain to his contemporaries that Christianity was a modern and manly religion.

**J. A. EKLUND’S MODERN, MANLY CHRISTIANITY**

First a few words by way of introduction. J. A. Eklund (1863-1945) was a towering figure in the Church of Sweden, especially in the thirty-odd years between 1890 and 1920. Born into the rural peasantry, he would come to rise to the position of Bishop of Karlstad in 1907. Yet his most influential work was with the younger generation, and especially innumerable university students. Already in the 1910s he had acquired the nickname ‘The Bishop of Youth’ or ‘The Youth Bishop’, perhaps for his particular devotion to the younger generation, but even more for the devotion that many young men felt for him.\(^46\) He was arguably the most visible and prominent Church official in the public debate about Christianity, modernity, nationalism, and culture.\(^47\) His significance lay not in his theological work - he only produced three or four books in the field, none of which were particularly widely read - but in his constant polemics


\(^{45}\) For the then dominant notions of character, see Tjeder, *The Power of Character*, 39-63.

\(^{46}\) UUB, JAES: Letters to Eklund from Josef Källander, 16 November 1914; Gustaf Ankar, 1 April 1915; Claës Törner, Gustaf Kyhlberg, and Manfred Björkquist, 29 June 1915; Elin Gustavsson, 5 January 1917; Nils Sandblad, 10 March 1918; and Folke Holmström, 12 March 1933. The earliest example I have found is from a foreign source (Wordsworth, *The National Church of Sweden*, 433).

against those who criticised Christianity, as well as in his ever-popular sermons and frequent lectures on current cultural and religious problems. There can be no doubt as to his formidable influence on the young.

In the present context Eklund is important for his attempts to masculinise Christianity. Many aspects will be omitted for reasons of space, including Eklund’s at times virulent nationalism and, in the 1910s, his racism; his conscious and gendered use of historical examples of Swedish, manly, Christian men; his gendered comments on other confessions, particularly the unmanly nature of Catholicism; and not least, the controversial way in which he presented his polemics, which brought stiff criticism from his peers and shock to many a listener, but also limitless admiration for what was understood as his manly candour. Instead, we turn our gaze to how Eklund actively effeminised those who attacked Christianity; how he portrayed the struggle with modernity as a manly struggle; and what I call his pessimistic optimism.

MODERN MEN AS ENERVATED MEN

Eklund’s interest in modernity and his struggle to rewrite its content is evident in one of his first published texts. In line with the medical scholarship of the day, Eklund wrote about nervous disorders, medical men, and moral purity. Again in line with modern thinking about health, nerves, and the body, Eklund emphasised that it was man’s duty to have a healthy body as well as healthy nerves. He rejected religious asceticism on the grounds that it was simply not healthy, and criticised those Christians who, instead of doing gymnastics, despised the body as being mere flesh. And yet, separating himself from at least the most masculinist promoters of muscular Christianity, he was very clear that Christians absolutely should not over-emphasise their interest in developing muscular bodies, without paying due attention to man’s moral nature.

All of these ideas are part and parcel of modernity: the concern with nerves, health, and the body, and even the medically based criticism of asceticism. Asceticism now became something amounting to a pathology. Indeed, in France the world-renowned professor of medicine Jean-Martin Charcot and his collaborators were busy pathologising many kinds of religious phenomena, both past and present, and asceticism was among them. In France, this medical research was an essential part of an explicit politics of anti-clericalism. Eklund referred to this medical and modern framework; his arguments that “each psychological function demands a certain quantum of nervous energy” and that “it is certain that there is no sharp distinc-
tion between what is normal and what is madness” could be taken from any medical textbook of his day. Eklund, however, used this framework to pathologise the young modern authors who criticised Christianity. Modern materialistic fiction, he argued, could only be the product of men who had taken no care of their bodies, their health, or their nerves. No man with a healthy body could produce such a pessimistic and life-denying ideology.

Eklund further argued that materialist ideology begat ill-health, for once one began to think that there is no God, there is no meaning to life, and when there is no meaning to life, the body suffers. Writing himself into the position of the truly modern physician of both the body and the soul, he explained that the most modern of creeds - secularism - was in fact pathological, the mere effect of nerves not kept in order. Eklund thus rendered materialists as unmanly: they are described as weak in both mind and heart; as men who have “destroyed their nervous systems through sensual excesses”; indeed, he claimed that their abnormal views on morality were caused by their bodily lack of health. Eklund thus claimed that materialists were mere slaves to their nervous systems, and drew a parallel with the pathological ascetics of old.

These criticisms are all gendered. We often fail to see it, for it is a man writing about other men. Yet Eklund’s critique of materialists is a critique of their masculinity. While truly moral, Christian men ought to take care of their bodies as well as of their spiritual lives, the modern authors are portrayed as beasts, but weak beasts pessimistically whimpering about their poor nerves, and lacking the stamina and character to withstand their passions. Eklund’s argument is at once modern and a struggle to redefine the content of modernity; it is at once a critique of materialism and an argument that Christian men are better men than the materialists.

THE MANFUL STRUGGLE WITH MODERNITY

Eklund’s perceptions of masculinity become very clear when seen in the light of the twin concepts ‘character’ and ‘modernity’. In a speech given at a YMCA gathering in 1904 entitled “Should Christians follow their times?” Eklund made his point emphatically. The very phrase that it is imperative to keep up with the times, Eklund asserted, was itself very modern. Yet many did not know what this meant, since societies did not move as streams in but one direction: “Rather, life is like a turbulent ocean, where the streams become swirls that constantly shift and break upon one another in massive breakers. He who just follows blindly does not know where he ends up.”

52 Ibid., 519.
53 Ibid., 522.
54 Since masculinity is the dominant norm it is often less visible (in much the same way as whiteness and heterosexuality are taken for granted). See for example Brod, “Studying Masculinities”, 174; see also Connell, Masculinities, 212-213; Hearn, “Theorizing Men”, 786, 788 and Kimmel, “Invisible Masculinity”.
Not only does Eklund’s description of his time reverberate with the threats that were so prominent in all his writings, he also succeeds in rendering modern men unmanly - for they are characterised by precisely that volatility, that lack of an inner core built on moral principles, which transforms them into mere flotsam caught in the currents of their times. This was precisely what ‘modern’ men did, according to Eklund; they read every new book, every new newspaper, and kept up with the times so closely that they lost what was most essential in a man: character. Modern men, by Eklund’s standard, appeared effeminate. He described them as anxious, as lacking any form of inner strength, and as more bent on pleasing others by knowing what was right for the moment, than on letting their real selves and moral principles guide their actions.57

Yet modern, secular (and preferably urban) men were not the only types against which Eklund railed in this lecture. He heaped imprecations on the men within the Church of Sweden who did not have the inner strength to partake in the spiritual struggles of the day. His demand for Christian action is surpassed only by his disgust with those men in the Church of Sweden who were afraid to stand up like men and fight for Christianity:

Would it not be a peculiar sight if the divine race of God’s children, which was once able to speak such mighty words of faith, were to become a race which, terrified, hid itself away from their times. Shall the kingly priesthood become a race which does not dare touch a thought or use a word without asking whether it is old or novel - does not dare to lift their heads to see the roar of the life of the living world for trepidation of catching a cold and being corrupted in one’s weakly soul. ... the real danger lies [not the spiritual forces of the times but] in the weakness of our own Christian life, and that of the entire Church. How rarely does a young man come of age, who even dares to utter a Christian thought of the day - and is able to do it, for he grasps and understands the life of his times.58

This line of reasoning, focussed on criticism of the weakness of many Christian men, but designed to instil character and strength in the breasts of young Christian men in particular, resounds through many of Eklund’s activist speeches, sermons, and articles.59 If materialists and other modern men only appeared to be strong but were in fact enfeebled by their shattered nerves and sexual debauchery, then the real problem lay among the ranks of Christians, who should behave like soldiers, but did not dare to question the thinking of the times, did not dare truly to be of their time and fight the good fight.

57 See, for example, Stockholm, Kungliga biblioteket (hereafter KB), Lotten och Urban von Feilitzens samling: Eklund to Urban von Feilitzen, 17 July 1894; KB, Adrian Molins samling: Eklund to Adrian Molin, 10 April 1907.
58 Eklund, “Skall en kristen följa med sin tid”.
In Eklund’s assessment, there was a third category of problematic men: those who combined Christianity with modernism, and those who joined foreign Free Churches.\(^60\) He actively gendered non-Church confessions by describing other confessions as lacking in masculinity. Above all, Christians in Free Churches are given feminine characteristics. These movements not only blended different forms of Christianity so that the result was said to be a bland religious ‘nothingness’ which amounted to a total lack of character, they followed forms of Christianity which in Eklund’s understanding were un-Swedish and hence alien to the Swedish national character. He clearly gendered the Free Churches, but did not single out the male members of their congregations. Without any explicit sexual attribution on Eklund’s behalf, it seems that the entire group of Free Churches was described as vessels of effeminate forms of Christianity\(^61\); forms which, notably, did not struggle with modernity, but rather, to Eklund’s alarm, embodied its very lack of stamina.

**EKLUND’S PESSIMISTIC OPTIMISM**

Eklund’s many texts can be analysed as standing for a pessimistic optimism.\(^62\) For Eklund it was always imperative to act, and to act now, for things were always on the brink of disaster. He had faith that Christian men could turn the tide, to be sure, but this faith was conditioned by the fact that the current situation was grave indeed. This was an optimism that thrived under constantly darkening skies; it was optimism founded upon pessimism.

And yet his pessimism was not of the ontological variety. For Eklund it was merely a matter of stating the truth about the order of things. Indeed, he was very sceptical about pessimism as an ideology and as a principle. At one point, he even claimed that pessimism was ‘an immoral theory’.\(^63\) He also mocked modern forms of theatrical pessimism by asserting that “it is modern to be a pessimist. It is modern in the same manner that it is modern to carry a pince-nez.”\(^64\) In much the same manner he criticised young men’s shallow, theatrical, and superficial pessimism for leaving them blasé and bereft of their capacity for true admiration of others. Pessimism rendered them unable to carry out actions worthy of men, and made them lose that precious quality, enthusiasm, which should characterise the younger generation.\(^65\)


\(^{62}\) We should note that Eklund was wary of using the concept ‘optimism’, at one point claiming that ‘The true opposite of pessimism is not ‘optimism’. Rather, the true opposite is the philosophy which lies behind the Christian admonition: ‘Repent and have faith!’’ (Eklund, “Om kyrklig pessimism”, 458).

\(^{63}\) Eklund, “Några tankar om nervlifvet”, 519.

\(^{64}\) Id., ‘En pessimist i gamla testamentet’, 1; see also Id., “Det centrala i människans värld”, 336.

\(^{65}\) Id., “Det centrala i människans värld”, 249-250.
Eklund argued that there was far too much of illegitimate pessimism within the Church of Sweden. He criticised the form of churchly pessimism that paralysed men and left them passive. When men within the Church complained about contemporary society, this only “makes the enemy of the Church brave”, Eklund explained, and “when pessimism infects the fighters and friends of the Church, it makes them powerless in their struggle”; he thus concluded that “One must arm oneself against pessimism with every lawful weapon.” This pessimism was in his view wrong in its blind conservatism; it was a pessimism that sought to shut its eyes to the real world. To Eklund, this was little more than rank, unmanly cowardice.

By contrast, true pessimism was to dare to see the truth about modern, decadent Sweden without closing one’s eyes. Such sound pessimism was the foundation upon which young men could ground their optimism for Sweden’s Christian future. By discerning the depraved nature of contemporary Sweden, one also had the opportunity to change this sad state of affairs. Eklund could then claim for instance that “Pessimism is but the winter, pregnant with spring; the night, pregnant with dawn and day” - and that Luther came with the light at exactly the moment when religious darkness was at its peak.

So, people had the right, indeed the duty, to see the future possibilities for Sweden and for Christianity, to see what little light there was to be found in for instance the Christian life of young men. In a sermon delivered in 1908, Eklund gave this its clearest expression: “You may be in your full right to claim that the Church and churches and all of us fulfil our calling of clemency poorly. But you shall not say that nothing is to be done. … You may perhaps respond - So what? … The world of men is too sick for Christ and his congregation to be able to remedy it. To that I say: it is the business of faith to believe.”

Eklund’s stance here is unequivocally optimistic. It is sanguine on a programmatic level: a Christian simply had no right to be a pessimist. One had to believe that things could indeed be different. Yet one should not be generally optimistic about the situation at large. Pure optimism of this kind was as sapping as despicable, illegitimate, action-hindering pessimism. In a revealing letter to his friend Sam Clason, a conservative historian and member of parliament, in 1913 this is especially clear. Eklund counselled his friend on the choice of priest to be used in the confirmation of his son, and claimed: “I was fairly content with [Claës] Törner, even though I must admit that due to his optimistic character he perhaps tends to view everything from so light and positive a perspective that I believe there is not much room for the kind of force that enables decisive steps.” Apparently, those decisive steps could not be

69 Id., “Kyrkan och den sociala frågan”, 429.
70 Id., “Betesda - barmhärtighetens hus”, 406.
71 Stockholm, Riksarkivet, Sam Clasons arkiv: Eklund to Sam Clason, 5 December 1913; Törner had recently confirmed Eklund’s son Nils (UUB, JAES: Claës Törner to Eklund, 28 March, 5 June, and 10 July 1913).
taken if one’s character was all optimism, but rather, as we gather from Eklund’s writings, from the optimism that lived and breathed pessimism.

Eklund’s ethics, such as they were, were clearly ethics of action. Systematically, he judged ideological positions by the sort of action they produced:

- Modern, shallow pessimism ➔ Blasé lack of action
- Illegitimate pessimism ➔ Lack of true force, which also strengthens the enemy (often displayed among men of the Church)
- Naïve, ‘pure’ optimism ➔ Inability to carry through decisive actions
- True, manly pessimism ➔ Optimism and action

The last position is Eklund’s. It is, given his world view, the only truly masculine standpoint, since all other positions paralyse men and render them useless in the ongoing battle for the survival of true Christianity. Eklund’s thought is thoroughly gendered, although it does not revolve around women and he only occasionally wrote about masculinity and the need for manlier men in specific terms. It is gendered because his entire rhetoric and the ways in which he diagnoses his times are infused with ideas that compare Good Men with Bad.

CONCLUSIONS

We have seen how Christianity and the Church in particular were under several gendered forms of attack in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century. The much-studied process of the feminisation of Christianity was not only a question of men leaving the churches, but also of some men’s fears that the prevalence of women had made Christianity far too ‘namby-pamby’. What is more, young radical authors announced that religion in general and Christianity in particular were scarcely consistent with modernity. Christian beliefs, these influential radicals claimed, were mere delusions, little according with the scientific data. Christianity was said to emasculate men. Socialists added fuel to the fire by invariably depicting priests as lazy and unmanly hypocrites. To many men it seemed difficult, perhaps impossible, to be both a Christian and a real man.

Detailing one’s experience of religious doubts and how these doubts were ultimately overcome was, as I have argued, one of the most important ways in which Christian men and Christian leaders of men could lay claim to being real men. Biblical criticism was described as modern, as a difficult intellectual endeavour, and as something that demanded courage. Thus by boldly daring to study biblical criticism and by exposing oneself to the anti-Christian attacks of the radicals, Christian men were no longer anti-modern or unmodern, but part of modernity. By struggling with their own beliefs, they separated themselves from women’s purportedly natural Christianity. And by overcoming religious doubts, they gained the authority to lead younger Christian men in the struggle for the survival of Christianity.
It comes as no surprise that Eklund, the most outspoken and well-known of church leaders to make a stand for manlier Christianity, often discussed the religious doubts of his own youth and how he had overcome them. He, a leader especially of younger men, worked hard to counter the attempts to describe Christianity and Christian men as unmanly: he argued forcefully that it was the radical authors, not Christians, who were lacking in masculinity; he extolled an ideal of Christian activism replete with military metaphors. His many polemical texts, sermons, and lectures amount to a coherent and wide-ranging effort to make Christianity manlier, to make Christian men manlier, and to make instead the critics of Christianity appear less manly. He returned repeatedly to the theme of his own youthful struggles to keep his Christian faith, and how he had succeeded. Such experiences, he explained, were necessary in the formation of young men’s characters. Doubts were dangerous but absolutely necessary obstacles to be overwon. This was how real men were made.

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72 This is explored in greater detail in Tjeder, “Det manliggörande tvivlet”, 100-112, and also in my forthcoming book, Manlig man i en omanlig tid.