

---

## Book Review

---

Liselotte Frisk and Peter Åkerbäck, *New Religiosity in Contemporary Sweden: The Dalarna Study in National and International Context* (London: Equinox, 2015), 256 pp., \$80.00 (hbk), ISBN: 978-1781791172.

Liselotte Frisk and Peter Åkerbäck's *New Religiosity in Contemporary Sweden* presents a quantitative and qualitative approach to the multifaceted spiritual and religious landscape of Sweden, focusing on the county of Dalarna. The study is primarily focused on forms of religiosity that exist outside of mainstream and established religious organizations, and only briefly addresses more formally organized new religious movements (although with some exceptions, such as Anthroposophy). The focus of the work is rather on producers of popular religion, or popular spirituality that are often sold and presented less as religion than as alternative health and life therapies, such as mindfulness, yoga, healing, and divination. For this reason, many consumers of such popular religion do not view this as their main religious identity if they even have one. As is shown in the book it is not uncommon for a general skepticism toward being 'religious' in countries like Sweden.

Although the title of the book might suggest that the study concerns Sweden in general, the focus – as mentioned above – is the county of Dalarna, a region in Sweden with slight urbanization and with a population of around 280,000 people, out of more than 9 million. The book was originally published in Sweden under the title *Den mediterande dalahästen* ('The Meditating Dala Horse'). This of course also affects the results; a similar study conducted in one of Sweden's larger urban areas would have generated different results. However, Dalarna provides a compelling case study, as historically the region has been viewed as the epitome of Swedish culture. The iconic Dala Horse, a red wooden horse decorated with painted flowers and which is figured on the cover of both the Swedish and English editions of the study, has become a symbol not only of Dalarna but of Sweden itself, and copies of the horse can be found in any gift shop in Sweden. The most significant aspect of Dalarna for Frisk and Åkerbäck is perhaps that it is mostly rather ordinary, a part of Sweden that is like most parts outside the major urban areas, and for that reason a good case study of how new religiosity looks in Sweden and especially the forms it takes. Liselotte Frisk and Peter Åkerbäck are well-established experts within their field, having previously conducted several studies of new religions in Sweden, from the mainstream to more radical and extreme forms.

The study employs both qualitative and quantitative methods, building on both interviews and case studies of specific movements, like a chapter on mindfulness, and presenting a statistical overview of the number of producers and how they present their products. Although such data runs the risk of quickly becoming obsolete, it

nonetheless provides valuable insight into the current state of popular religiosity in Dalarna, and which products and movements are the most popular. For instance, Frisk and Åkerbäck's study shows that health and less overtly 'supernatural' practices are far more popular than, for instance, communicating with angels, aliens, or dead relatives. This is rather fitting, considering the image of Sweden as a rather secular country, although perhaps a reflection of the actual situation, where popular religion is far more common even if presenting it with traditional religious language is less popular. When it comes to divination, the authors themselves address the issue that most who use, for example, Tarot, are probably not professional people (in that they are using it to make a living) but are using it among friends or for themselves. Recent years have seen an increase in Tarot, Astrology, and other occult techniques among the young urban crowd but as this is not a producer-based practice, or a client cult, it does not show up in Frisk and Åkerbäck's study. Seeing the number of producers is in itself interesting, giving even a Swedish reader new information as to how common this type of spirituality is. Especially with the growth of occulture and interest for these topics in Sweden, further studies addressing popular religion without professional producers would likely create a slightly different picture and engage with a different demographic.

The book presents a multitude of theoretical approaches to the study of popular religion, often in a very pedagogical manner, and for this reason can work very well for both undergraduate and graduate students, as well as for postgraduate courses, since the book can serve as an introduction to these theories and can be used on other empirical material. This also allows the reader to decide themselves what approach is most useful when interpreting the material presented.

Overall the book gives a broad view from a small place over the role of popular religion in a country that is often presented as lacking an interest in religion. Written by two solid researchers, this is a study that will be of interest even to those that have never visited either Sweden or Dalarna.

*Fredrik Gregorius  
Linköping University, Sweden  
fredrik.gregorius@liu.se*