

Abstract

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In situations of sickness and other need people believed the efficacy of their prayer increased if they made an offering to a votive church (*offerkyrka*). Votive churches were traditionally distinguished from other churches, as they were believed to possess special powers. The custom was vivid in several parts of Sweden from late seventeenth century, throughout the most of the following century, and in some places even later.

The ideas behind these offerings are contradictory to those of the Lutheran Church. The belief in some churches being holier, or mightier, than others as well as the belief in the ability to manipulate God's action by certain rituals or deeds do not correspond with the Church's official teachings. Yet the custom was allowed to continue over decades in large parts of the country. The priests were well aware of the offerings, as the donors were registered with name and domicile in the church accounts.

The aim of this study has been to carry out a survey of the offerings to votive churches in Sweden. The focus is on the geographical spread of the votive churches, the extent of the offerings, their form, the social and gender composition of the donors, and attitude of the clergy towards the custom.

In the survey I explore the impact of the Reformation among the lay people and the priests as well as the interaction between the Church and unofficial (popular) religious beliefs and practices. Furthermore, through the analysis of the social composition of donors, the aim is to evaluate changes in the culture and mentality of elite groups, as well as society in general.

Keywords: Culture history, church history, votive churches, votive gifts, superstition, the impact of the reformation, popular religion, popular culture.