EN ANDLIGA TERRA INCognita

Spiritismen i det sena 1800-talets Stockholm

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Akademisk avhandling

som med vederbörligt tillstånd av Rektor vid Umeå universitet för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen framläggs till offentligt förvar i Hum D210, Humanisthuset, fredagen den 9 februari, kl. 10:00.

Avhandlingen kommer att förvaras på svenska.

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Abstract
This dissertation analyses the role that spiritism played in Stockholm, Sweden, during the late 19th century, more specifically between the years 1887–1902. Spiritism was an international movement grounded in the belief that spirits of dead people existed and that it was possible to communicate with them. While spiritism in Sweden was a Christian movement, its followers claimed to be using scientific methods. It is this tension between scientific ambitions on the one hand, and the combined belief in Christianity and spiritism on the other, that is investigated in this dissertation. The source material consists primarily of a spiritistic periodical, notes from spiritistic seances, and three debates about spiritism. The theoretical framework is based on the sociologist Thomas Gieryn's concept of boundary-work, specifically David Hess's extension of it and his concept of the Self and both negative and positive Others.

The study concludes that spiritists constructed science as both a positive and a negative Other, meaning that they wanted to be associated with science, while also stressing that they were doing something beyond science. In relation to this image of science as both a positive and a negative Other spiritists could construct their Self as a kind of scientific pioneer. The study also identifies a similar relationship to Christianity: spiritists emphasised their faith in a Christian God, used Christian symbols, and practised Christian rituals, but they also created their own belief system and criticized the church. Their approaches to Christianity and science were not, however, entirely similar. They did not turn to Christian institutions for acceptance, but rather strived to become part of the scientific community. These differences are interpreted as part of a larger shift in social status and position of science and Christianity.

This dissertation has also identified a change in how spiritism was depicted in the press by its critics. At the beginning of the period, criticism against spiritism was mostly based on accusations of spiritists being imposters and their critics wanted nothing to do with them. As theories about the unconscious spread, however, the approach towards spiritism changed. Spiritistic phenomenon could now be investigated by scientists who wanted to learn more about the unconscious, even though they did not accept the spiritists explanations that spirits were behind them.

By analysing both the spiritists’ relationship to science and Christianity and how spiritism was discussed in the press, this dissertation demonstrates that the belief in spiritism was an integrated part of Stockholm’s cultural landscape in the late 19th century.

Keywords
Spiritism, Spiritualism, Boundary-work, Science, Christianity, the Unconscious.