

WELFARE AND RELIGION IN A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE(WREP): A comparative study of the role of the churches as agents of welfare within the social economy

The aim of this project was to analyse the function of majority churches as providers of welfare in a comparative perspective. The background to our work can be found in the progressive deregulation of welfare that asserted itself in the 1990s. This was brought about by a variety of factors: among them the increasing globalization of the economy, and a gradual change in society from production to consumption. Taken together these changes have provoked new questions regarding both the values and the organization of welfare; they have led in addition to new forms of poverty, or social exclusion. A second point runs parallel: a separation between religion and politics is a key element of a liberal democracy. The changes outlined above, however, led to a new position for the churches and other religious organizations. Not only were they drawn into the debate on social issues, they became themselves actors in the social economy. As a result, expectations of the churches are growing, alongside increasing uncertainty regarding their role: precisely which tasks should religious organizations undertake in a modern welfare society?

The project is explorative and uses qualitative methods. The various roles of the majority churches (both as actors in the social economy and as a prophetic voice in society as a whole) have been studied by means of careful observation, followed by a series of interviews – with representatives of a) the local church, b) those responsible for welfare in the locality and c) the wider population in a carefully chosen middle-sized town in eight west European societies. The expectations and attitudes of the different groups of interviewees have been compared first within the town in question and second between the countries under review. Four different welfare regimes and four different Church traditions have been included: the social-democratic welfare regimes of Sweden, Finland and Norway (with majority Lutheran churches); the liberal regime in England (which has an established Anglican Church); the continental welfare regimes of Germany and France (where the Catholic notion of subsidiarity is a dominant feature); and finally the more rudimentary welfare regimes of Italy and Greece (which have Catholic and Orthodox traditions respectively).

Our most important finding – which to some extent has led to a shift in the aim of the project – is that the majority churches of Europe were never totally privatized as the theory of secularization had suggested. WREP also demonstrates that the significance of religion in the public sphere depends not only on the growing activity of churches and religious organizations within the social sector, but also on the increasing presence of religious minorities in Europe. The debate surrounding the place of religion in the public sphere must therefore be widened to include the rights and freedoms of religious minorities. These issues are, however, difficult for secular democracies to handle as – necessarily – they introduce religion into the political

arena. The question of minorities in particular has become the focus of a follow-up study: Welfare and Values in Europe: Transitions related to Religion, Minorities and Gender (WaVE) (2006-2009). This EU-funded project also includes four post-communist countries, namely Poland, Latvia, Croatia and Romania – i.e. twelve countries in total. For more details see www.waveproject.org.

Further results:

1) WREP demonstrates that the theological and organizational outlooks of the European majority churches are central to the formation of modern welfare regimes, an idea that draws directly on Max Weber's approach to economic and social change. Specifically, the project reveals that the contrasts between the Nordic welfare model and the more informal or family-based model of Southern Europe are best explained by taking into account: the Lutheran state churches, on the one hand, which embrace the doctrine of the 'two kingdoms' and welcome the role of the state as part of God's plan for salvation; and the Catholic Church, on the other, which is more resistant to state intervention within the social (especially the family) sector. From this point of view, WREP reflects David Martin's approach to secularization, notably the different 'pathways' that secularization takes in different parts of Europe. These pathways determine the context in which the balance between state, church, religious organizations and the voluntary sector is subsequently worked out – a crucial factor for WREP.

2) WREP reveals the increasingly evident strains in the welfare systems of Europe, despite the economic boom of the early twentieth century. This is one reason why voluntary organizations (including the churches) are becoming more, rather than less prominent in all our case studies – they are seen as important complements to state provision. The process, however, is different in each case, given the nature of the welfare system as such. Germany is perhaps the most eye-catching example – here the diaconal institutions (both Protestant and Catholic) provide about 60% of care. At the same time, it is possible to argue that a process of homogenization is taking place across Europe, as all countries respond to similar pressures: a more liberal economy, demographic changes (an ageing population) and the influence of EU regulations (regarding free competition and the movement of labour). The Nordic countries, for example, are more ready than they were previously to make use of the voluntary sector. Conversely, the continental countries are learning from the Nordic model, in terms of the role of women in the labour force and the implications for childcare. The point should not be exaggerated, however: the four welfare regimes remain moderately stable at a national level, as do the views of their potential customers. For example, respondents in the Nordic countries affirm the role of the state in the delivery of welfare – voluntary organizations, including the churches, are there to fill in the gaps. Further south, the reverse is almost the case: here the family and the voluntary organizations (including the churches) come first and the state looks after the problems that emerge when more informal systems of care no longer suffice. Our findings suggest that social and religious stability is more likely to be found at the national level – a situation explained by long-term political, social and religious traditions. At the local level, there is greater flexibility.

3) Right across Europe, it is clear that women are the dominant actors in both the welfare system as such and in the voluntary sector. In Southern Europe, for example, it is women who assume the responsibility for children and the elderly, delivering care within the family. In the north, women are still responsible for these tasks, but within institutions provided by the state. In both contexts, moreover, there is a similar division of labour: men are in leadership whilst women are the day to day care givers. Important questions follow from this, as women face conflicting demands: to engage in the labour force and to provide for care. An increasingly noticeable 'care deficit' begins to emerge, which leads in turn to growing levels of stress.

The most important new research question derives from the growing visibility of religion in European societies. The implications of this visibility (a better word than resurgence) are the driving force for the new Linnaeus research programme established at Uppsala University (The Impact of Religion: Challenges for Society, Law and Democracy, 2008-2018) – a direct development of both WREP and its sister project, WaVE. Specifically, the multi-disciplinary Linnaeus programme will look at how the new visibility of religion in the north of Europe will challenge our understandings of: democracy, international relations, (family) law, health care, welfare models and world views. For more details see www.impactofreligion.uu.se. WREP has also contributed to an EU-funded project, concerned with the training of teachers of religion and religious leaders in Europe: Network on Teaching Religion in a European multicultural Society, TRES (2005-2008). Thirdly WREP is linked to the SIDA-funded project Welfare and Religion in a Global Perspective (WRIGP) – a comparative study between South Africa and Sweden (2006-2009).

The two most important publications of the project are: Bäckström, Anders and Grace Davie with Ninna Edgardh and Per Pettersson: *Welfare and Religion in the 21st Century Europe: Volume I: Configuration and Connections*; Ashgate, Aldershot (forthcoming 2009) and Bäckström, Anders and Grace Davie, Ninna Edgardh, Per Pettersson: *Welfare and Religion in 21st Century Europe: Volume 2; Gendered, Religious and Social Change*. Ashgate, Aldershot (forthcoming 2010). The first of these finds its focus in the eight case studies brought together in WREP and addresses the following question: what role should majority churches play in societies where the state, for different reasons, cannot meet the expectations of its citizens? The second volume approaches the same question thematically, using sociological, theological and gender perspectives. The place of religion in the democratic conversation of a modern welfare society is central to these discussions.

The project has resulted in new courses and conferences. The Faculty of Theology at Uppsala University has inaugurated two courses based on the project, one of 7,5 points entitled "Welfare and Religion in a European Perspective" and one of 30 points in diaconal and social studies. One Swedish language conference on the results of WREP (Välfärdens utmaningar – kyrka, frivillighet och stat i samverkan, 31/3-1/4 2008) has taken place, followed by two English speaking events, 22-23/11 2005 and 26-28/3 2009 (the latter was a major international conference held in conjunction with WaVE). The results of WREP have been widely reported, for example at the

International Society for the Sociology of Religion Conferences and at the Nordic Sociology of Religion Conferences.

The internal organization of the project has been highly collaborative. Twenty-four people have worked on the project, including a senior and junior researcher from each of the case studies. The secretariat (Barbro Borg and Maria Essunger) and the Coordination Committee (Anders Bäckström, Grace Davie, Ninna Edgardh and Per Pettersson) have met monthly. Information has been distributed to the whole team every two months. Two research meetings have been held each year, one for the junior researchers (to plan and report the field work) and one for the whole group (to discuss the theoretical implications of the results). A printed handbook and a regularly updated web-site have been the major resources for the project:

<http://web.archive.org/web/20071107195737/http://www.student.teol.uu.se/wrep/>