

# Nordic Majority Churches as Agents in the Welfare State: Critical Voices and/or Complementary Providers?

ANNE BIRGITTA PESSI

*University of Helsinki*

OLAV HELGE ANGELL

*Diakonhjemmet University College, Oslo*

PER PETERSSON

*Karlstad University*

## Abstract

The article compares the role in welfare provision of the majority churches in Finland, Norway and Sweden. The Nordic welfare state model implies a large public sector and a correspondingly small contribution to welfare provision by the voluntary sector, of which church-based welfare activities, as defined in the article, are part. The data used in the article are derived from a European project, 'Welfare and religion in a European perspective', concerning the role of European majority churches as agents of welfare provision. The findings show many similarities between the Nordic cases, but also some differences. In all cases it is clear that both the church and the public authorities take the Nordic welfare state model more or less for granted. The Swedish and Norwegian cases, unlike the Finnish one, show that the public authorities at the municipal level are fairly unfamiliar with local church-based welfare activities. The article raises topical questions as to the role of the Nordic churches in social policy and as moral authorities in contemporary society.

Keywords: *Welfare, Church, Finland, Norway, Sweden*

The future of welfare systems is everywhere high on the agenda, while at the same time the future of religion in modern society is being debated. When these are combined, the role of religious-based organisations becomes topical in connection with the responsibilities of various agents in the welfare field. The research project entitled *Welfare and Religion in a European perspective* (WREP) has studied the function of the historic majority

churches<sup>1</sup> as welfare agents in eight European countries, including three Nordic<sup>2</sup> countries: Finland, Norway and Sweden (Bäckström 2003). These countries are especially interesting to compare: all three represent the Nordic social-democratic welfare model, as well as the Nordic religious trait sometimes called the 'Nordic paradox'. This alludes to the fact that the Nordic countries are often classified as being among the most secularized in the world in terms of regular participation in worship, while according to other variables, such as membership and adherence to life rites, they are among the most religious countries in the world (Bäckström & Edgardh Beckman & Pettersson 2004).

The comprehensive Nordic welfare model is founded on the understanding that it is the responsibility of the state, together with the local authorities, to guarantee the basic needs of all citizens (Esping-Andersen 1990; 1999; Rothstein 1994). This understanding is closely connected with Lutheran theology, which has made the Nordic majority churches strong supporters of a comprehensive state welfare system (e.g., Knudsen 2000; Greve 2001; Martin 1978). The main objective of the state has been to create conditions for the just and equal distribution of public resources. This welfare policy includes the promotion of gender equality. Currently, however, the Nordic model is under pressure. Complex economic and structural changes, along with an ongoing transformation of values, are having an impact on the capacity of the state to provide welfare. These changes have resulted in a growing political interest in creating opportunities for private companies as well as non-profit organisations to contribute to the development of welfare society.

Seven specific challenges to the Nordic model can be observed today (Söderström et al. 1999; Pierre & Rothstein 2003). The first and perhaps the greatest challenge is the marked demographic trend towards an aging population, similar to the trend which is causing anxiety in other parts of Europe as well. The second challenge is related to globalisation. The transnational economy makes it difficult to impose taxes on capital incomes, threatening welfare systems built on tax financing. International economic,

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1 The concept 'majority church' refers to churches to which a majority of the population belong. 73% of the Swedish population are members of the Church of Sweden, 81% of the Finnish population are members of the Church of Finland and 81% of the Norwegian population are members of the Church of Norway (2008).

2 As the project included only three Nordic countries, this article focuses on Finland, Norway and Sweden, excluding Denmark and Iceland. We nevertheless use the term 'Nordic' for instance in the title.

political and social networks like the EU tend to harmonise different types of social systems, thus threatening the Nordic model, with its high taxes and strong caring regimes. The third challenge comes from global migration: how can the free provision of public welfare be maintained in combination with open borders? The fourth challenge consists of people's increasing expectations of individualised social services, presupposing a variety of alternatives to choose from. The fifth challenge comes from the consequences of implementing market models and competition in the organisation and management of welfare services and in public management at large: the core values of public non-profit management sometimes come into conflict with values imported from the for-profit sector. The sixth challenge has to do with the number of people either unemployed or with short-term working contracts with minimal social security. The Nordic model is built on a strong link between paid work and the social security system. The seventh challenge, finally, comes from the growing economic and social gaps that are emerging in society through new types of social exclusion and new forms of poverty.

A number of critical issues appear in the circumstances of a simultaneous increase in welfare needs and pressure to reduce public spending. First, *for the majority churches in Finland, Sweden and Norway an important question will be how to react to possible cutbacks in state welfare provision.* Will the churches take on a critical role in the face of reduced welfare ambitions by the state, or will they try to increase their engagement as welfare service providers, taking over areas of service abandoned by the state? A second question for the churches is *what their particular role as a resource in society should be.* Instead of their earlier dominant identity and position as part of the state administration, all the Nordic churches are increasingly becoming visible as independent social agents and resources. Thirdly, *what is the possible specific contribution of the Nordic majority churches to welfare?* In this article we discuss the last of these three questions, using data from three case studies carried out in Sweden, Norway, and Finland as part of the WREP project.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### *Church and State in the Nordic Countries*

Over the past centuries, the relationship between church and state in the Nordic countries has been a close one. The historical background involves changes in ideology and in the power structure in Norwegian and Swedish society during the 16th and 17th century: a combination of the Lutheran

Reformation and the rise of the absolutist state. The Lutheran theology of the 'two kingdoms', whereby God rules the world, assigns responsibility for the provision of welfare benefits and services to the state (Hammann 2003; Manow 2004; Østergård 2005). Thus Lutheran theology served as the ideological underpinning of the changes which paved the way for the Nordic countries as 'state-friendly' societies, in which government is viewed as a necessity rather than an evil (Kramer 1992; cf. Manow 2004). The state expropriated the properties and means of production which previously had been at the disposal of the church. This resulted in a general strengthening of the power and administrative capacity of the state, and a corresponding weakening of the church as a separate societal agent. Against this background, the state early developed a legitimate position as administrator of a national welfare system, which eventually – after the end of the Second World War – developed into the universalist welfare state as we know it. Thus religious history – along with political history, which we shall not go into here – provides an important context for understanding current welfare systems in the Nordic countries.

In all the Nordic countries, the Lutheran majority churches have a close relationship with the state. Finland and Sweden have abolished the formal state-church status of the majority churches, while Norway retains it (Angell 2004; Pettersson et al. 2004; Yeung 2004b). In formal terms, the majority churches in Finland and Sweden are established by law, but have a great degree of internal self-administration and self-regulation. In these countries the welfare activities organised by the churches or by church-affiliated agents are usually classified as voluntary or third sector activities. The majority church in Norway, the Church of Norway, in contrast, is not a voluntary organisation, but rather a statutory body. On the other hand, since there are no official directives or guidelines regulating the welfare activities of the Church of Norway, these may likewise be regarded as voluntary or third sector activities. This way of looking at church-based welfare activities is also the way they are categorised in Norwegian social science research (see e.g., Lorentzen 1995; but also Sagatun & Eide 1998).

### *The Role of the Voluntary Sector in Welfare Provision*

Welfare states have been classified under a number of different typologies. One of the best-known is that of Esping-Andersen (1990; 1999), defined in terms of political ideology: the Nordic countries fall into the category of social-democratic welfare regime, as opposed to conservative and liberal ones.

The social-democratic model is characterised by a comprehensive public system of generally universal benefits as social rights, based on citizenship and financed by taxes. Benefits are relatively high. The voluntary sector is usually expected to be of little importance, quantitatively speaking, in the provision of welfare services (Kuhnle & Selle 1992; Lundström & Svedberg 2003; Salamon & Anheier 1998; Sivesind & Selle 2004; Weisbrod 1977).

Kramer's four types of organisational role for voluntary agencies in the welfare state are useful in describing the role of the third sector (Kramer 1981). Kramer distinguishes between the roles of *vanguard*, of *improver or advocate*, of *service provider*, and of *value guardian*. The vanguard is the pioneer, the innovator; the improver or advocate is the critic or watchdog *vis à vis* the state and its services. The value guardian promotes citizen participation and protects special interests, such as those of various minority groups. The improver or advocate and the value guardian roles are associated with the 'critical voice' (cf. Lundström & Wijkström 1995), and may overlap. These roles may involve political action, as in cases where agency relates to power relationships, the construction of social problems, and goals and means in welfare policies. The close historical state-church relationships in the Nordic countries mean that this type of function has been relatively undeveloped among the majority churches. But with the loosening of the relationship between church and state, the political dimension of the role of the churches may become more pronounced.

In discussing the welfare service provider role, Kramer introduces three sub-categories of relationship between the voluntary agencies and the state, three types of provider roles for voluntary agencies: primary, complementary, and supplementary. As a *primary* provider the voluntary organisations are alone, or almost alone, in providing the service; i.e., there are at most only a few public providers. As a *complementary* provider for the public sector, the voluntary agencies offer services that are qualitatively different in kind from those provided by the former. Thirdly, voluntary organisations provide *supplementary* services if these are similar in kind to those supplied by the public sector, 'some of which may offer an alternative choice or serve as a substitute for a governmental service', as Kramer puts it (Kramer 1981, 234). In studying the role of the church in the provision of welfare services in general terms, we can thus investigate the specific roles of the various activities organised by religious agencies. Church-based welfare organisations can be expected to take various roles in their service provision, although primarily complementary and supplementary ones. One area where the churches have traditionally played a primary welfare role, however, is in

providing individuals and society at large with symbolic functions which give people a sense of significance and belonging. The life rites, especially baptism and funerals, have a symbolic function in linking individuals to a collective level (Reimers 1995; Hervieu-Leg er 2000; Pettersson 2000). This function of the church, as a link to collective values, can offer a sense of basic security, not least in times of crisis and disaster (Davie 1994; Gustafsson 1995). As part of the division of labour between church and state, this has been an area in which the Nordic majority churches have been regarded as society's professionals.

In their analysis of the significance of the voluntary sector in the Nordic countries, Helander and Sivesind (2001) conclude that in the welfare field the contribution of the voluntary sector is to 'complement' the public provision of such services. This may be accomplished through innovation, extending the capacity and differentiation of the services. Moreover, and more generally, the authors emphasise the advocacy role as typical of the voluntary organisations in the Nordic countries. They draw a distinction between organisations involved in advocacy efforts and organisations providing service, claiming that the former engage in service provision only to a limited extent (Helander & Sivesind 2001, 62–3).

#### *The Traditional Role of the Church as a Welfare Provider*

So far we have provided reasons for dealing with church-based welfare activities as part of the third sector. It therefore seems useful to take advantage of theories concerning the voluntary sector in the welfare state in analysing church-based welfare service provision. As faith-based welfare agents, church-based actors may deserve special attention. The secular Nordic welfare states have been sceptical of voluntary welfare agency in general at certain periods, and faith-based activities in particular (see Seip 1983). This attitude reflected a traditional, general scepticism in the social democratic movement towards the church as well as a widespread ideology of value neutrality inherent in the ideology of the social democratic welfare state with a correspondingly critical attitude to welfare agents who based their agency on a religious ideology.

Over the past two decades, public services have come to be accused of being bureaucratic, inflexible, and expensive (the efficiency argument). The result, it is argued, is a need for a plurality of service providers to serve a plurality of needs. One concept capturing the alternative to a monolithic welfare state is 'welfare pluralism' (Johnson 1987; Lorentzen 1994). In re-

sponse to growing criticism of ineffectiveness and inefficiency in the public sector, new management ideas and methods have been introduced in public management in the form of New Public Management (NPM), which advocates transferring principles and management techniques characteristic of business and the market from the private to the public sector. NPM is based on a neo-liberal understanding of the state and the economy (Barzelay 2001; Ferlie et al. 2002). These changes have evoked a renewed interest in voluntary organisations as welfare providers, and may have also elicited a new interest in the contributions of church-based welfare agents.

The analysis of the (possible) functions of the church in the welfare state may theoretically be related to the concept of social capital. There are several conceptual understandings of social capital, depending on the theoretical frame of reference. The term is used to refer to characteristics of a social context and elements of societal networks, such as norms, social ties, and trust, all of which contribute to strengthening interaction among individuals (Ruuskanen 2001; Adler & Kwon 2000). Coleman (1988; 1990) brought the concept of social capital to wider notice in the late 1980s with his investigations of social capital and education in social and religious contexts. Coleman defined three elements of social capital: obligations of reciprocity, the flow of information within social ties, and norms (1988, 102–5). Both in its role as a service provider and to the extent that it engages in the role of a critical voice, the church can contribute to maintaining or increasing social capital. This will be the focus of our analysis.

### **Methods and Data**

The data for this article are derived from the findings of the European research project WREP. Methodologically the project builds on case studies in one medium-sized locality in each country. The basic approach of the project has been sociological, focusing on the church as an organisation with particular functions in society. The basic method has been to interview representatives of three types of agents; the local public authorities, the majority church, and the general population. The localities chosen for the study were the towns of Gävle in Sweden, Drammen in Norway, and Lahti in Finland. The case studies documented, analyzed and interpreted interaction within the welfare field between the respective local majority churches and the local authorities, and investigated attitudes towards the role of the church (for previous WREP publications, see Beckman (ed.) 2004; Yeung (ed.) & Beckman & Pettersson (eds) 2006a; 2006b). The collection of the WREP

data proceeded in three phases. The first task was to map the activities of the local majority church within the area of welfare, and to describe these activities in relation to the social situation in the locality. The second part consisted of mapping social activities where cooperation occurred between the local church and the public authorities. These two phases were carried out through the analysis of printed information, newspapers, informal interviews, observation and study visits. The third phase included mapping attitudes towards welfare and the role of the church by interviewing representatives of the local authorities, the church and the public.

The data for this article include a total of 117 interviews: twelve focus group interviews with the local population (three each in Sweden and Norway, six in Finland) and 105 individual interviews. Of the latter, 41 were with the local authorities (15 in Sweden, 14 in Norway, 12 in Finland) and 64 with church representatives (23 in Sweden, 12 in Norway, 29 in Finland).<sup>3</sup>

## Findings

### *Sweden: The Church as Complementary to the State Welfare Monopoly*

As in the other Nordic countries, the role of the Church of Sweden can be described as following *a general principle of complementarity* in relation to the state (Bäckström 2001). Family and voluntary organisations like the Church complement the overarching responsibility of the public welfare system in various ways in areas where the system is inadequate or its coverage is insufficient. Although the role of the Church is supposed to be minor, the Swedish case study in Gävle shows that the Church of Sweden provides a wide range of welfare functions in Swedish society. As in Sweden in general, most of the Church of Sweden's welfare functions are provided by the local parishes. There are also some separate social and church welfare organisations, sometimes ecumenically organised; compared to the official Church of Sweden organisation, however, these are very small, although they sometimes contribute in specific important fields. In Gävle a Church-related voluntary organisation (*Gävle Diakoniråd*) is an example of this, with a function complementary to the local authorities in providing financial support to people in need.

Church-related welfare functions in Gävle can be divided into two major types, material and immaterial welfare provision, the latter being the more

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<sup>3</sup> Although our data are slightly dominated by the Finnish material, in the analysis all three cases were treated equally.



significant. The limited domain of material welfare involves the distribution of small amounts of financial support to individuals in need. The more important area of immaterial welfare consists of both direct activities and more symbolic functions. Direct activities providing immaterial value mainly concern psychological and social needs; they involve such things as social and educational activities for children and young people, day-time activities for the elderly, and individual support, such as bereavement counselling and visits to lonely people in their homes. In addition, the Church, as already noted, also serves traditional symbolic functions, including life rites and rituals on special occasions. A number of interviews in the case study confirm that one's relationship to the Church through formal membership is perceived by many people as a welfare value in itself; this has also been noted in other studies in Sweden (e.g., Pettersson 2000). Previous studies in Sweden have shown that the particular qualities which people perceive in Church welfare activities are related to their connection with these implicit symbolic welfare functions of the Church. The symbolic functions provide links with the transcendent sphere which are regarded as adding a specific quality to church activities (Pettersson 2000). Correspondingly, the Church demonstrates that it takes its own transcendentally anchored values and symbolic functions seriously by its social activities in practice. Thus the Gävle case study shows that the Church is regarded as a guardian of values of caring and solidarity, especially with the underprivileged. Representatives of the public authorities stress that they see the Church as a provider of good values to coming generations. They expect the Church to be a critical voice, defending values of human dignity and solidarity. They also mention the broader role of the Church in community building and especially its work among children and young people, as being important complementary welfare contributions in the local context.

Most strikingly, the results of the interviews in Gävle show a general consensus concerning the welfare system as such as well as the role of the Church. Interviewees representing all three agents (the public authorities, the Church and the general public) agreed that it is the responsibility of the public authorities to provide basic welfare for all. Secondly, there was general agreement that it is a natural consequence of the Church's mission to be involved in social issues, although not in the same way as the public authorities. A Church representative expressed it as follows: 'I think the churches ought to be there and support, but they should not take over what society cannot handle. A situation can arise that the churches take over, when society is in a bad financial situation, and that I think is totally wrong.'

(f).<sup>4</sup> Thirdly, there was a general consensus as to the role of the Church as complementary to, and preferably in cooperation with, the public welfare system. The most basic role of the Church in welfare was seen by most of the interviewees as providing society and individuals with good values and a sense of meaning and belonging. This role is realised through Church membership and the life rites used by almost all people, such as baptism, funerals and through the Church's work among children and young people generally. As a representative of the general public put it: 'I think it is of great importance [...] it is also a tradition and a sense of belonging [...] I believe that we human beings need someone to hold our hand, whom [...] we can talk to in times of difficulty' (f). Interviewees representing the public authorities saw the Church's contribution as especially important in the area of crisis and disaster management, in individual crisis support, and in defending what are identified as weak groups, such as the homeless and those in need of individual counselling. The Church is regarded as having an advantage in being less regulated by laws than the public authorities, and in thus being freer to act. The Church can add 'that little extra something' (m) through its financial support. The role of the Church is regarded as an important complement to public welfare, sometimes even a crucial one. One representative of the public authorities said explicitly that he was 'convinced that the Church has saved many human lives' (m).

A fourth area of consensus concerns the changed relationship between Church and society during the last decade. The representatives of the public authorities see a more open attitude from the Church, downplaying old hierarchies and paternalism. Representatives of the Church in turn sense a more open attitude from the public authorities regarding cooperation with the Church: 'a typical example is to look at the schools coming to church, which was not possible at all for a time. Today it is a matter of course to come to Christmas services, coming to Easter gatherings and such things.' (m.) Several informants mention the growing role of the Church in the handling of major disasters and crises as crucial for these changed relations (Pettersson 2003). This has even had an effect in other social areas: 'One has somehow discovered a need for the competence that exists in the Church of Sweden. And I think this happened in connection with crises.' (f.)

A fifth area of consensus concerns the role of the Church in the public debate on welfare issues. The Church is both welcomed and expected to take part, as long as it does not interfere in party politics. As a female lo-

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4 F (female) and m (male) indicate the gender of the interviewees.

cal politician and representative of the public authorities said, 'I would be very disappointed if the Church were to keep silent and avoid social issues of various kinds'. A sixth area of consensus is the general opinion that the Church of Sweden is, and should be, a Church for the whole population. This character of the church is in the Nordic countries commonly expressed by the concept 'folk-church' (Sw: *folkkyrka*). The open and broad character of the Church is stressed and defended, sometimes with specific comments regarding its distance from more 'closed' denominational settings. Finally, a seventh area of consensus concerns equality between women and men. This value is seen as so basic that it does not have to be defended. This also goes for the Church interviewees, who tended to think of gender equality as a common social value rather than theologically motivated.

The high degree of consensus shown in the interviews illustrates the prevailing homogeneity of the Swedish welfare society. The Swedish welfare model, meaning that the state should take care of its citizens as if they all were one big family, thus constructing society as a 'home of the people' (Sw: *folkhem*), still has strong support. There are high expectations that the 'folk-church', as a 'church for all the people', will keep pace with developments in other parts of society, as well as general support among Church employees and leadership in responding to these expectations.

There are also tensions in the data material, however, in particular between the ideals expressed in these areas of consensus and the practical realities. One of the tensions concern the conflict between the concept of the 'folk-church' and expectations that it will defend contested values: how can the Church combine its role as a critical voice, as a free agent, while at the same time continuing to represent a large majority of the population? There is also tension over the Church as a gendered social agent: a number of representatives of the public authorities and of the population at large referred to the struggle over the issue of the ordination of women as a problem for the Church. The gender-related problem noted by interviewees representing the Church, however, was almost the reverse: it was sometimes formulated as a problem of 'female dominance'. The quantitative predominance of women in various areas of Church activities is viewed as having several negative consequences: for instance, women tend to recruit only women, whether as employees, as volunteers or as participants in activities.

*Norway: The Church as Complementary and Supplementary Provider and Public Voice*

There are two main types of collective agents acting as church-based providers of welfare services in Drammen: the parishes, and organisations and associations not formally connected with them. In some crucial areas of the welfare state, it is these organisations that run essential welfare activities. Church-based organisations are involved in the care and prevention of substance abuse problems: the Church City Mission and the Blue Cross (temperance organisation), for instance, run preventive activities and a treatment centre for substance abusers. Another domain of activity is social integration, especially of young people (the YMCA/YWCA) and immigrants (the Christian Intercultural Association, 'Kristent interkulturelt arbeid').

Judging by the way the parishes describe their own welfare activities, their orientation may be characterised as traditional. The activities most frequently mentioned are directed towards children, the young and the elderly. Parishes run kindergartens as well as activity centres for the elderly, but most activities are not linked to specific physical structures. For elderly people, almost all parishes organise meetings and various other activity-oriented arrangements. In addition, various forms of visiting services (visiting people in their homes or in institutions) are widespread. The parishes are also involved in running groups for the bereaved, in some cases in co-operation with municipal agencies and other voluntary organisations in Drammen.

The parishes thus provide welfare through their organised activities, especially by way of engaging volunteers in social activities, bringing people together, arranging for opportunities for people to meet, talk, and share. Parish involvement in permanent welfare activities, requiring professionally trained staff, seems to be less extensive. In Drammen these activities are the domain of church-based voluntary organisations.

The importance of the activities may be assessed in qualitative and quantitative terms. Quantitatively the contributions are not significant, except in the care for people with substance abuse problems. The in-patient clinic run by the Blue Cross is the only professional rehabilitation centre in Drammen, a typical situation in Norway. At the national level, faith-based organisations provide about 50 percent of the beds in in-patient centres for substance abuse rehabilitation (Angell 2000; 2004).

Qualitatively, the contributions of the Church may be seen as important through their character. At the local level, welfare activities organised by the Church serve several functions. While institutionalised efforts in care for people with substance abuse problems in Drammen serve a primary

and at a more general level more of a supplementary function, most welfare activities organised by the parishes might rather be characterised as serving complementary functions. The Church is not the only collective voluntary actor present on the scene, but its significance, both quantitatively and qualitatively, is clearly recognised and valued by the representatives of the public sector.

One possible indicator of the significance of the Church in welfare is the degree of co-operation between the Church and the public sector in general, which in the case of the overall provision of welfare services in Drammen seems to be of little importance. In some areas where co-operation between church-based welfare provision and the public sector is institutionalised, as in the care for substance abusers, co-operation basically occurs at the regional level, not at the municipal level. On the other hand, formal co-operation seems to be rare, and informal co-operation at the municipal level is sporadic.

Overall, the public authorities in Drammen are not unanimous in their view of the role of the Church in welfare provision. Position in the public system may have an impact, and so may political orientation. Although several interviewees left the impression that the Church plays a marginal role, others saw it differently. For instance, one politician who was influential in health and social policy in Drammen commented: 'This [the role of the public sector, the voluntary sector, and the Church] is a strongly interlocked relationship. The public sector cannot function well without the voluntary sector, including the Church.' The statement is formulated in such a way that it can be interpreted as an evaluation of the current situation. However, in the light of other statements about the current state of affairs, it can also be interpreted in a more normative way, as an ideological statement or expressing how things ought to be.

A high-ranking public official expressed some critical views of the priorities of the Church regarding the choice of target groups for its social welfare work. The interviewee characterised the recipients of parish social care as the 'nice guys' and asked for a commitment to the mentally handicapped and mentally ill. We can interpret this comment as expressing a wish to see public commitment on the part of the Church or the parishes to work for the interests of these groups, which do not proclaim themselves or have advocates who stand up for them and give them a public voice. This brings us to the role of the local Church in the public discourse on welfare issues.

The Church in Drammen has not engaged extensively in action or strategies to influence local public opinion. An analysis of the local newspaper

press indicates that the director of the Church City Mission is the only person who has taken the opportunity to act politically, in the sense of trying to influence public opinion and political decision-making. On the other hand, the public authorities consider almost unanimously that the Church should take an active part in the public debate on welfare issues at the local level. In practice, the Church, with few exceptions, is relatively invisible in the public discourse; this silence was interpreted by some as reflecting an unwillingness to engage in public and political debate. The reasons given by the interviewees for their views tended to be related to the idea of participatory, political democracy. Some interviewees also based their view on the belief that the Church should be the voice of the voiceless or a spokesman for the weak and marginalised.

The answers to the question about Church participation in the public debate on welfare were unambiguously affirmative among church-related interviewees as well. A typical statement is: 'Yes, in principle the Church should engage itself [in the public debate]. It should be active, speak up, be critical and creative.' (m.)

It should be noted that the function of value guardian presupposes a willingness to adopt a critical position in public. It is interesting to note this unambiguous attitude in the light of the criticism raised by representatives of the public authorities, that in practice the Church tends to be silent and invisible. Some of the church-related interviewees claimed that what we might call a spirit of co-operation may have blinded the Church and made it overlook, ignore or play down conditions worthy of criticism. The interviewees appear to have only relatively vague ideas as to how the Church should contribute to the debate.

#### *Finland: a Clear Need for the Church, yet with Mixed Expectations*

The Finnish case study clearly indicates that according to the local authorities the Church, both in Lahti and nation-wide, indeed has a role to play in the construction of welfare: *both* in providing services *and* in reminding people of their responsibilities for the well-being of others. The local authorities considered that in the near future the welfare work of the Church would be increasingly needed. Interestingly, outsourcing contracts with the Church are not really considered to be the outsourcing of welfare. This seems to reflect a 'state-church' image, even though legally this is no longer the case.

The provision of what are considered 'basic services', however, is clearly seen as the responsibility of the local municipality itself. The welfare that the

Church is seen as providing is regarded as 'special practical social welfare services' (m). This refers primarily to psychosocial services, crisis help, and work with special groups, such as the elderly. The public authorities consider the Church to have a unique advantage in three areas: 1) in spirituality and values (especially those of caring and communality), 2) in an ability to encounter people in a better way and more frequently than other agents, and 3) in the voluntary nature of participation and membership. There actually seems to be a certain idealism in the way the welfare services of the Church are pictured; the Church is seen motivated by 'spirituality, love and free will' (m). This idealism was also evident in the comments noting that if the municipality and the Church offer similar services (for example counselling), 'the Church encounters the individual in a better way' (f). Interestingly, one municipal representative spontaneously offered an even more personal perspective: 'If I needed food money for my family, I think I would choose church social work over the municipal agency. I feel they work more based on neighbourly love' (f).

According to the municipal representatives, the Church should adopt a clear stance on welfare, even municipal services, but should not 'patronize and preach' (f). 'The Church should speak up for those who are weaker, and should represent a sense of solidarity: we do not abandon anyone who needs help' (m). This public voice is understood as the advancement of welfare: maintaining the values of caring and a spirit of solidarity. It is here that the Church, in their view, has special expertise. However, the representatives of the authorities also noted that in close, active co-operation the Church may lose its distance from and its critical voice on other welfare agents. Close co-operation may thus in this sense be a double-edged sword.

But what is the relationship between the welfare activities of the municipality and the Church? In those areas of well-being and welfare where the Church's activities are strong, the resources of municipal social work can be reduced; overlapping activities are viewed as unnecessary and to be avoided. In other words, the Church is seen as having a more or less supplementary function with regard to the provision of welfare services.

How do the representatives of the Church look upon these issues? They consider that the Church indeed has a role to play in welfare and the well-being, but their specific views on this role vary. Some emphasize evangelizing and spirituality, and take the view that ideally the Church should play less of a role in welfare provision. Many are more positive on welfare activities but think that they should be of a temporary, not long-term nature. Yet others emphasize that the Church must undertake both spiritual and social

work equally. A few even noted that in some instances social work should be emphasized more than spiritual activities.

Overall, the Church representatives think that the Church should take responsibility for the weakest individuals, those who are ignored by everyone else. Many interviewees referred to the 'invisible misery which societal and municipal aid channels do not reach' (m). The view of these respondents, very much in line with that of the public authorities, is that it is the Church's responsibility to remind everyone of their personal social responsibilities, since it is considered an advocate of the values of caring and communality. Notions of 'encountering' and 'meeting individuals' were basic here: 'When people are suffering from illness and despair, they soon drop out and lose their connection with the parish. We should really encounter them. This spirit should intimately concern our social work.' (m)

However, views as to the ideal way to encounter people varied greatly among respondents. Some considered that the Church should participate in everyday life as much as possible; for instance, taking part in marketplace events, participating in neighbourhood associations, or simply 'priests walking around their neighbourhoods and offering to help with car repair or church social workers offering cleaning assistance' (f). Others considered that the Church should encounter people simply by way of spirituality or psychological help; simply being close to people is not sufficient, and may perhaps even be harmful. The Church should not act as a 'show producer or stage-manager' (m).

The Church representatives see participation in the public debate on welfare and ethical issues as one part of the Church's social responsibility and welfare activities. However, a few were more opposed to public visibility – or at least *further* visibility. One vicar noted that '[p]eople expect the Church to be more visible in ethical debates. But it is problematic. It may give the wrong impression of the core message of the Church – which is grace alone.' (M.) Summing up: the ideal seems to be that the Church should act as a reactive, flexible societal actor providing resources to cater for unexpected needs not met by others. Only then will it achieve its ideal of being 'a prophetic voice, a cry for help, a sort of challenging shout, an exclamation that speaks for the silent, voiceless ones' (m), in relation to other actors, specifically the local authorities.

Moving on to the public at large: the views of the local inhabitants as to the Church's welfare activities also vary. Some considered welfare activities an integral part of the Church: 'Without welfare work the Church would be like a barren cow. Sorry for this image! But without social work the



Church could not produce spiritual fruit.' (M.) Others, however – in fact the majority of the local people interviewed for this study – felt that the Church's role was not, or at least did not have to be, in social work as such. The elderly in particular considered social work to be the responsibility of the municipality: 'it means a secure future to know that our society and the local authorities are prepared to take care of one entirely, once one's own strength is no longer enough' (f).

Regardless of where the interviewees stood on this, they all seemed very positive about the fact that the Church has indeed done something to help people in need, filling in gaps in welfare. Forms of activity in which the Church was viewed as having a particular role to play were social networks and meeting places, overall psychological well-being, and the needs of special groups. The majority also consider that the ideal role of the Church actually lies in maintaining societal and individual morality and ethics, specifically the spirit of caring for one's fellow human beings. In this respect, the local people are very much in agreement with the authorities.

Contributing to the public welfare debate is thus seen as the heart of the Church's responsibility in the area of social welfare. The local people interviewed overall seemed very satisfied with the Church's recent public and official statements on welfare and collective responsibility (cf. Yeung 2004b, 133) as well as its public visibility and voice. In fact, at the local level, respondents expressed a wish for even more public statements and discussions on welfare: 'The Church must be the conscience of our society. It must dare to stand in opposition. It should march in the front line and wave the flag. At the local level they should have the courage to oppose the clichés uttered by local authorities.' (M.) In the longer run, according to the local people, changes in the Church have taken the right direction, the Church having become much closer to ordinary, everyday aspects of people's lives and to the needs of ordinary people. Furthermore, the fact that the Church today offers its services without asking about people's faith or level of religiousness is greatly appreciated by the local people. The Church aims, in their view, at assisting all people to experience a good life: the Church cares.

### **Cross-analysis: Similarities and Differences between Countries**

The shared contextual background and framework in analyzing the three Nordic cases consists of a comprehensive and generally quite functional basic welfare system. Interviewees in all localities refer, directly or indirectly,

to this common approach to basic social needs in their respective countries. A strong state is taken for granted; the church and church-related organisations are seen as additional resources, complementing or supplementing the basic responsibility of the state (cf. Kramer 1981). However, there are some differences in the degree to which and the way these functions are developed in the three Nordic cases. In the interview material from all three cases, it is obvious that new questions on the role of the church arise whenever social problems escalate and the political agenda involves (relative) cutbacks in the welfare system.

First of all, the survey of the contributions provided by the church in the area of welfare shows that in all three towns the local parish and church-related organisations organise a wide variety of broadly defined welfare activities. Many of these are traditional church activities: work with children and young people, social gatherings for various groups, and individual counselling. Basic material welfare services provided by the church appear only as exceptions from the norm. Interviewees in all three cases and in all groups stress that while the church is not expected to take over responsibility for basic welfare from the state, it is regarded as holding special competence or resources which the public authorities do not have. Thus it is accepted and even expected that the church will provide alternatives to the state, complementing existing public services in certain aspects or within certain fields.

Secondly, in all three cases (in our data, more in Norway and Sweden than in Finland) there are important church-related welfare organisations which are organisationally separate from the parish structure. In Lahti and Gävle most of the church's practical social work is run by the official parish administration, while in Drammen a few church-related social agents provide what is in quantitative terms the main part of church-related social work contributions. Gävle has a church-related voluntary organisation as a separate organisation apart from the parish administration, but the size of the organisation's activities is quite small compared to the welfare work run by the parish structure.

A third finding in our comparative analysis is that the most familiarity with the social work of the local church among the public authorities and the general public seems to be found in Lahti, the locale of the Finnish case study. Second comes Gävle in Sweden, and third Drammen in Norway. In Gävle and Drammen the interviewees had not previously reflected on the possible role of the church in welfare to the same extent as those in Lahti. Many of them commented that the questions were unfamiliar, and that

they knew very little about church activities. The greater awareness of the social role of the church among Finnish interviewees probably has to do with their experience of the publicly visible social role of the Church of Finland during the economic crisis of the 1990s. The growing awareness in Sweden of the role of the Church of Sweden might at the same time be an effect of the general discourse on cutbacks in the Swedish welfare system and the search for new social agents such as the Church. The increasing public conception in Sweden as to the significant role of the Church in major crises and disasters may also have opened people's eyes to the Church as a welfare resource.

A fourth area of comparison is the view of the practical social work provided by the church. What is the special contribution of the church? There is a consensus among many interviewees that the church provides welfare services with a special church-related quality. This quality is usually described in terms of the way church representatives encounter the people they serve. Informants in Lahti repeatedly stress that church welfare services are more personal. In Gävle they stress that the church can act more informally than the public authorities, and can thus individualize the services provided. In Drammen the Church City Mission is regarded as being the agent closest to 'helpless' people on the margins of society.

A fifth element appearing in all three cases is the role of the church in the public sphere as a critical voice on social issues. None of the three local churches takes on a critical role in the public debate in any significant way. The only clear example of a church representative speaking up as a defender of the weak is the director of the Church City Mission in Drammen, Norway, who acts as a value guardian in relation to the authorities (cf. Angell 2007). It is worth noting, however, that this person is not an official representative of the Church of Norway. There is a clear contrast between the obviously passive role of the churches in the public debate and the ideal role as expressed by interviewees in all groups in the three countries.

This contrast becomes even clearer in the final area of comparison, which concerns the balance between the role of practical social work agent and that of a critical public voice on social issues. The interviewees were asked this question in all three towns. Among church representatives, the most common response in all three was that practice is more important than speaking out. Interestingly, the contrary opinion was clearly dominant among both the public authorities and the general public in all three towns. They say that they expect the church to involve itself much more as a critical voice in social issues, representing and defending the values associated with the church.

The church is seen as a guardian of the values of humanity, empathy and solidarity, and is expected to defend the weak and speak out for people in need who are without a public voice. But the church is not heard speaking out on these issues – at least not as much as the respondents wished.

What we see here is the emergence of differing ideal roles of the church in the welfare setting. The fundamental domain of the church is considered to be its spiritual role, but the implementation of this role in welfare is interpreted in two totally different ways. Those arguing that the church should stick to practical social work, not involving itself in the public debate, claim that the welfare debate is a political issue; the church, as a majority church representing all kinds of political views, should not identify itself with any particular political position. The church thus needs to separate its spiritual role from the welfare debate. In contrast, those who argue that the church should take on a public role in defence of its core social ethical values see this role as closely linked to its spiritual character. These people see its role in organising practical social work as secondary to its social 'prophetic' task.

## **Discussion**

The results of the case studies carried out in the three Nordic countries stress the counter-image of secularization in these countries: the religious presence is not disappearing from the public sphere, but is changing and reappearing in new forms. The complex and sometimes paradoxical Nordic religious scene has been further explored by studying the social role of the majority churches in welfare. A number of questions are raised concerning the role of both the church and the state, as well as the particular role of a majority church within the voluntary sector.

Our findings show that the majority churches in the three countries are involved in welfare provision in different ways. They also take part in the public debate on these issues in different ways, either as organisations or through individual representatives.

Further, our results show some evidence of a shift towards the churches becoming more involved in welfare than previously; this can be seen as part of an increasing public role for religious institutions in general. This is happening at the same time that participation in regular worship and the number of people accepting traditional religious beliefs keep falling in the Nordic countries. In other words, we can see a development towards the increasing importance of the social welfare role for the majority churches in the public sphere, simultaneously with the decreasing importance of the

traditional role for religion in the private sphere. This is in keeping with the findings of the Nordic study on folk churches and religious pluralism (see Gustafsson 2000). A simple interpretation is that people support what they think is important to them in their lives. The development of the Nordic – and other European – societies has been such that people have come to think of security of social welfare as more urgent and important than religious security. It must be noted however, that in two aspects the traditional role of the majority churches in private life is still strong in all three countries: membership/belonging, and adherence to life rites in the context of birth and death – baptism and funerals.

All in all, our findings indicate that the churches' part in welfare provision is regarded as important and essential, but in a different way than the public sector. In all three countries the church is regarded as providing special qualities, an 'added value' not found elsewhere in society. As noted above, the public authorities in Lahti consider the church to have unique know-how in spirituality and the values of caring, as well as in meeting people in a better, more holistic manner than other types of social agents. Representatives of the public authorities in Gävle stress the significant role of the church in providing altruistic values to young people through its confirmation teaching and its work with children and youth. The most prominent voice speaking for the underprivileged in the Norwegian case of Drammen is the director of a church-based organisation. Thus the specific role of each local church and their unique contributions to the comprehensive welfare system is related in various ways to their perceived function as representing and promoting values of solidarity and communality.

But what is the role of religion and religiosity in these elements of uniqueness in welfare provision? Our interviews from all three countries indicate what has been shown in previous research as well: that the specific quality which people perceive in church-provided welfare activities are connected to its character as representing a transcendent sphere (e.g., Pettersson 2000; Bäckström 2001). This transcendent sphere constitutes the specificity of the church and is the foundation of the communal and altruistic values represented by the church. There is thus a two-way connection between the continuing traditional role of the church in certain core functions establishing links between the individual and the transcendent sphere, especially the life rites at the beginning (baptism) and end of life (funeral), and the valued social role of the church in welfare activities. The specific quality in church-provided welfare in daily 'immanent' life is implicitly related to and dependent on the quality of the transcendent anchoring of the church

(cf. Hervieu-Legér 2000). And vice versa: through its social activities in practice, the church proves that it takes seriously its own transcendently anchored values and symbolic functions. This mutual dependence is one of the mechanisms which may contribute to the theoretical interpretation of the 'Nordic paradox', as discussed in the introduction.

Since a majority of the population continue to belong to the church and practice the life rites, a form of religious social capital is being built simultaneously with a decline in regular religious practice and adherence to beliefs in traditional terms. The importance and significance of this social capital is also indicated in the results of our study; respondents refer to the church as providing a symbolic frame of reference for general social belonging and meaning. Thus the Nordic 'folk churches', with their close historical positive links and division of labour between church and state, have implicitly been assigned a role as value guardians in the welfare state. There is a general trust in the church to act as guardian of the fundamental values of society: those of humanity, solidarity and caring. The church mediates this in particular through its welfare activities.

Thus the majority churches, in particular their welfare activities, can be regarded as constituting a major source of social capital in Finland, Sweden and Norway. All in all, as previous Nordic studies on church volunteerism have concluded (Yeung 2004a) the Lutheran churches seem to play a central role in the maintenance of solidarity and altruism, sustaining this societal norm even in the present-day pluralist and somewhat secularized context. Related to this, based on our findings, we would like to ask whether in countries like the Nordic ones, which have done so much to pioneer humanistic values (not least egalitarianism), people value the church for its role in what is increasingly becoming a counter-cultural stand against the various and developing aspects of capitalism. In other words, citizens may view the church as 'moral authority' of a particular kind (see also Pessi 2008). And how might this be related to the 'Nordic paradox'?

In fact, it has even been indicated (Pessi 2009), that the social engagement and welfare activities of the church and citizens' stated willingness to act altruistically and maintain solidarity is more closely related than one might actually think. Pessi (2009) has concluded that the social engagement and teachings of the church may play a role in maintaining the value of altruism and in socializing individuals into (further) altruism through four phenomena: 1) supporting the development of altruism and promotion of extensivity (e.g., via teaching and example); 2) maintaining cultural transition processes that maintain altruism (for instance the growth of social ac-

tion through various rituals and education systems; see also Rushton 1982; Gintis 2003); 3) promoting altruistic values, and thereby constructing an active civil society (see also Cohen 1992); and 4) social capital. The altruism of individuals then supports and further maintains the societal structures of altruism – probably that of the church as well. Further research, however, is needed to analyze these connections. At any rate, this Nordic research has indicated that the connections between church social work and individual-level solidarity and overall societal trust may be quite strong – at least (or perhaps particularly) in terms of expectations.

Further research is needed to obtain a deeper understanding of the specificity of the majority churches in the welfare context as compared to other agents in the social economy. Further research is similarly needed on the commonalities between majority churches and other agents in the social economy.

All in all, our research leads to a major question as to the future role of the churches in welfare provision. How will they react to possible cutbacks in the state welfare provision? Will the church adopt a critical role in relation to reduced welfare ambitions in the state apparatus, or will it enter the scene as a welfare entrepreneur, taking over areas abandoned by the state? Will close cooperation and contracting with the state make them more reluctant to criticize the state authorities and their management of welfare? Further development of the Nordic majority churches in this direction might additionally complicate the already problematic role of a ‘folk-church’ as a critical voice in society (cf. Ekstrand 2002). And, not least: what will happen to the role of the majority churches in an increasingly multicultural context? What will happen to the still persistent idea of a division of labour between church and state in the process of transformation into an increasingly secular and religiously neutral state?

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