

Bishop Atle Sommerfeldt:

Lutheran tradition made alive, the case of the Nordic countries

Part of lecture «Leave no one behind” at Sigtunakonferansen, January 2017

The vision of governance protecting and promoting the common good, could sound like a utopian vision, delinked from real life. History has seen many examples of such utopian vision being transformed to totalitarian regimes, from Munzer to the French revolution to Hitler, Lenin, Stalin, Pol Pot and Mao. However, the vision can also be seen as a process, or a pilgrimage towards the fulfilment of the vision.

The Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden) are a group of countries where the concept of “common good” has dominated the process of forming the society towards inclusion of all people over the last 200 years. These countries top international indexes for “good societies” as measured in human development¹, equality (Gini coefficient)², well-being³ and democracy⁴. They are also on the top when it comes to ODA as percentage of BNI and participation in peace-processes – and they have lived in peace with each other for 200 years⁵.

The Nordic model⁶ is defined by the institutional cooperation between **first** active financial governance in a mixed economy (with the state securing stability, international trade with national ownership in key sectors), **secondly** public welfare built on universal accessibility to health, education, social security and subsidised institutions in critical life-phases (children, old) and **thirdly** an organised labour-market with strong labour unions and employers organisations with strong civil society organisations in addition.

This model has over the decades developed a high level of social capital with many common arenas, and active participation of citizens in civil society organisations from the local to national level and in close interaction with political authorities. The model is marked by high levels of popular trust in the political system, which over time has delivered security, protection and welfare. The key has been the acceptance of a negotiated consensus and loyalty to the results achieved in the negotiations.⁷ This development was not without hard struggle, even with the army used against striking and protesting workers.

¹ UN Human Development Report 2015 has Norway on top, Denmark on place 4, whilst Sweden (14), Iceland (16) and Finland (24) have lost position the last decade, indicating that the Nordic model is under pressure.

² The Norwegian National Budget has a figure (2.18) with Gini-coefficient both on total income and adjusted after tax and subsidies/social support. The figure shows that the low Gini-coefficient in the Nordic countries compared with other countries first becomes clear when tax and subsidies are included – proving that tax and subsidies contributes to lower inequality which leads to higher trust and sustainable growth.

³ Cfr The Well-being Score (The 2016 Sustainable Economic Development Assessment) (job-prospects, quality of housing, feel safe), World Economic Forum): Norway 100, Holland 95, Finland 94.9, Germany 93.6, Austria 92.7, Denmark 91.3, Switzerland 91.1, Iceland 90.4, Belgium 90.0, Sweden 89.6

⁴ Democracy Index published by Economist Intelligence Unit 2015

⁵ The exception is Finland who through her alliance with Nazi-Germany in the Second World War, became enemy of Norway and Denmark. But it was recognised that this alliance was linked to their defensive war against Soviet Union.

⁶ Cfr Døvik/Fløtten/Hippe/Jordfald Den nordiske modellen mot 2030 Fafo rapport 2014:46.

⁷ Charles Villa-Vicencio in his book «A theology of Reconstruction» from 1992 formulated a church strategy in the post-apartheid society with a legitimate state, developing from the necessary “Theology of resistance” during apartheid.

In Norway the ethos of **negotiated settlements** between different actors and interests was expanded in the 1930ties from the community-councils to labour-relations. It was the suffering of the families of striking workers who made the Labour Party in 1935 to seek a negotiated settlement. The experiences in the Nazi concentration camps from 1940 to 1945 of leaders from all walks of life and political views, strengthened the trust and created a unique communication and sense of community across all societal barriers.

Although the model is under pressure, compared with other western societies the basic elements are still valid.

In the following I will trace parts of the Nordic model back to a few characteristics of the Lutheran Reformation claiming that it may not be a coincidence that the success of the Nordic model is linked to the fact that the Nordic countries have had Lutheran state-churches for almost 500 years.

The Lutheran reformation⁸ changed the role of the church in society and the relation between church and state in dramatic ways. Luther delinked social action from merit in salvation. The motivation for giving alms and take care of the marginalised to secure a milder judgment after death, was abandoned. As he formulated already in the theses from October 31, 1517:

“Christians are to be taught (that the pope does not intend) that the buying of indulgences should in any way be compared with works of mercy (42). Christians are to be taught that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better deed than he who buys indulgences (43)”.

For Luther, Living by God`s action of grace alone, implied liberation to actions in society:

“A Christian is not living for himself, but in Christ and his neighbour. The Christian lives in Christ by faith, in his neighbour by love” (On the Christian Freedom).

All baptised Christians were commissioned to act in society and had the duty to care for the neighbour. He modernised for his time the concept from the church fathers, e.g. Chrysostom`s:

“In giving alms to Christ in the person of the poor, we effectively offer a sacrifice on the altar, the body of Christ, that is the poor person”. S 5⁹

Of special importance for the theme of this reflection, is that he strongly criticized the wealthy in church, business and governance and accused them of stealing when profits were too high and causing suffering. They were under the same call as everyone¹⁰. They had to live the love of God in their positions through love of the neighbour just as everybody else.

⁸ See Kjell Nordstokke: Reformasjonen i Diakonen – kall og profesjon

⁹ Cfr John D. Jones: St. Chrysostom and the Problem of Wealth p 5

¹⁰ Luther: Large Cathecism. Angus Deaton som vil mene at en viss ulikhet er nødvendig og uttrykk for fremgang, anser allikevel excessive rent-seeking as ”legalized theft”. Word for 2017/ Dagens Næringsliv 29.12.2016

Whilst the traditional practice in the church was that the ministry to the poor was performed by the monasteries and the clergy, Luther gave that responsibility to all baptised members of the church based on the principle of the priesthood of all believers. In the practical implementation the households were obliged to take care of everybody in the household, and the city-councils were given the mandate to distribute the money to the poor outside the household according to registered needs. The money should be collected in the churches.

Of special importance is the Church order for northern Germany by Bugenhagen which served as a model for the ordering of the reformation Church in Denmark (Norway and Iceland were included as Danish colonies). In this ordering of the church, the state through the Christian king (the first among the lay baptised members), became responsible for education and care of the poor.

The Lutheran church in the Nordic countries were organised as state churches. The bishops and the priests had a dual mandate, from the Christian king who represented the lay members in the Church, and from the Ordained leaders who represented the spiritual ministry through Word and sacrament. In practice, these two mandates were not possible to distinguish. This implied that the priest was responsible for the living conditions of the people. They were responsible for education and were central actors in local innovations to improve peoples' life. The introduction of the potato is the best known example.

In this perspective, the Lutheran Reformation laid one of the pillars for the Nordic model by underlining the responsibility of the state to secure the basic needs of all citizens, with taxation as the core source of funding both locally and nationally.

The first contribution of the Lutheran Reformation was therefore the **priesthood of all believers** which laid to the state (king – city-councils) being responsible for taxation and redistribution of wealth.

The **second element** in the Lutheran Reformation with significance for the Nordic model, was the emphasis laid on a new understanding of **work and labour**. Luther was asked: What is the sign of a Christian shoemaker? And he answered: To be a good shoemaker. Luther saw all human activity and work as a service to God, because work enables the worker to cater for his or her daily bread and to take care of the neighbour. Christian life in monasteries was not of a higher form of spirituality than productive labour for once daily bread, and for the benefit of the neighbour. Ordinary work on the land and in the shops expressed Christian life even better than the liturgical practice. Although social divisions continued, the basic element was laid for the equal value of work giving dignity to the farmer, servants and Labourers and then paved the way for all persons participating in political decision-making.

The **third element** in the Lutheran reformation important for the Nordic model, was the space created for **ordinary people to access the Scripture in their mother tongue**. This allowed ordinary people to interpret the Scripture in relation to their own lives, and inspired them to organize in popular movements to struggle against poverty and oppression. Extensive teaching of all children was introduced through the households and later by government paid teachers.

The first to succeed to establish a nation-wide popular movement was a radical lay revival movement started in 1796 by the young farmer, Hans Nielsen Hauge. Persecuted by state officials, the movement met secretly in peoples' home, reading the Bible and tried to interpret the meaning for their lives. Women took part in leadership and it was spiritual competence, not formal education or ordination, that was the criteria for leadership. Hauge called for repentance, but not monastic life in special communities separated from the "world". Rather, he organised projects and activities to secure people their daily bread, marked by his upbringing during hunger years in Norway when he experienced starvation first hand in his own community. The movement became very influential, elected persons to the constitutional assembly in 1814 and then to the parliament.

Increasingly the parliament became a body representing larger and larger parts of the society. This movement was succeeded by the labour movement and trade-unions and together they formed a forceful mobilisation for bottom up change, limiting the freedom of the political and economic elite. Labourers and farmers became political leaders.

The **fourth** element in the Lutheran tradition forming the Nordic societies, is the **realistic anthropology** often regarded as too dark and pessimistic. This anthropology states that all persons and human institutions, being church, business and government, has the capacity of doing evil and must therefore be controlled and criticised when they do not promote the common good and protect the vulnerable against oppression. All humans are both sinner against other people and justified before God by Christ and this will be the reality as long as this world exists. All human institutions are therefore marked by the ability to do evil.

Conclusion

I hope I have been able to show that Lutheran contributions to the struggle for social protection and sustainable development has proven relevance in the Nordic model as it has been developed.¹¹ The model shows the benefit of making all actors responsible for the common good, that excessive inequality is not necessary and that negotiated settlements between different groups lay the foundation for a government with legitimacy to demand tax-contributions from everyone, progressively and according to ability.

¹¹ The Nordic model faces several challenges. One specific for Norway is to handle that the state is a major financial actor both in Norway through ownerships in financial institutions, but more significantly as one of the world largest capital-owners and operator in the global shareholder market. This gives the Norwegian government a special responsibility for participating in developing a global tax-regime on financial flows and multinational investments, especially where local legislation is weak and government officials keep steering from the community.