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STUDYING RELIGION IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES: AN EXTERNAL VIEW

Abstract

This article was invited by the editors of the Nordic Journal of Religion and Society. It reflects on my experiences as a visiting scholar in the Nordic countries over the past two and half decades. The focus moves between the religious situation as such and the sociological study of this. The importance of a comparative perspective becomes a dominant theme.

Keywords: Religion, the study of religion, research programmes, welfare and religion, the Nordic countries, comparative perspectives

The editors of the Nordic Journal of Religion and Society have asked me to consider the study—and in particular the sociology—of religion in the Nordic countries from a British perspective. I am delighted to respond to their invitation, having enjoyed the hospitality of Nordic colleagues for more than two decades. In this capacity I have adopted a wide variety of roles; these have varied from short visits for lectures or conferences, or for key moments in a doctoral thesis, to longer visits for the preparation of and participation in research projects of various kinds, to extended periods as a visiting professor. I am deeply grateful for these opportunities and have enjoyed every one of them. Above all, they have offered me the chance to learn more about Nordic religion, observe Nordic scholars at work and to participate in comparative study at its very best. At the same time, they have enabled new perspectives on the study of religion in my own country; as ever this has been a two-way learning process.

I have visited all five Nordic countries but I know some of them better than others. My frequent, and at times extended, visits to Uppsala University in Sweden have been the key to this enterprise: indeed Uppsala has in many ways become my "base-camp" for forays in different directions, including a memorable month in an elegant flat in Helsinki in 2007.1 In this connection it is important to record the role of Professor Anders Bäckström in making a great deal of this happen. This is a classic case of one thing leads to another. We had corresponded for some time, but I first met Anders in 1992 at the Nordic Conference for the Sociology of Religion in Skalholt in Iceland. A month or so later, I spent a couple of weeks as a guest of the Faculty of Theology in Uppsala.2 This visit became the first of many, culminating in an invitation to become...
the Kerstin Hesselgren Professor at the then DVI in Uppsala in the 2000–2001 academic session—an opportunity that I seized with both hands.³

At that time, the team at DVI (together with other colleagues) were coming to the end of a pioneering and very successful project entitled "From State Church to Free Folk Church" (Bäckström 1999). The principal goal of this extensive piece of work was to document the constitutional changes that took place in Sweden in 2000—the moment when the Church of Sweden ceased to be a state church and became instead a free folk church—and to examine the implications of this change both for the church and for Swedish society. By the time that I arrived, the team were thinking ahead to the next application, drawing in particular on a sub-theme within the church-state project; this related to the largely unexpected developments in the role of the churches—and in particular the Church of Sweden—in welfare provision and the complex debate that surrounds this.

From these beginnings came the two projects concerned with religion and welfare, in which I participated fully: in the application process, in the research meetings held in different parts of Europe, and above all in the publication of the results. The projects were "Welfare and Religion in a European Perspective" (WREP), which ran from 2003–2006, and "Welfare and Values in Europe" (WaVE), which ran from 2006–2009.⁴ They will be revisited in a later section of this article in that they illustrate clearly not only the distinctive ways in which Nordic scholars work but their interactions with colleagues from elsewhere in Europe. In the meantime, it is important to note that this relatively intense period of research eventually bore fruit in a different way: this time in the establishment of a Linnaeus Centre of Excellence at Uppsala University designed to examine the economic, social, political, legal and—above all—religious changes that were taking place in Sweden and the Nordic countries at the beginning of the 21st century.⁵ I have much enjoyed my role as a Senior Advisor to this enterprise.

Its title—"The Impact of Religion: Challenges for Society, Law and Democracy" (IMPACT)—captures its interdisciplinary essence perfectly. Its existence, moreover, is part of a wider trend as scholars all over Europe come to terms with an increasingly obvious paradox. It is abundantly clear that indices of religious activity are falling in most parts of the continent, but—simultaneously—religion as such is rising in terms of public attention. In other words religion is becoming more rather than less prominent in the public discussions of modern European societies, including those in the North which traditionally have been considered some of the most secular. One reason for this is the growing presence of other faith populations, which are making new demands on the societies of which they are part. It is equally clear that the rising visibility of religion in the modern world order plays a role. None of us can ignore the implications of 1979 (the Iranian Revolution), 1989 (the fall of the Berlin Wall), and 2001 (the attack on the Twin Towers).

Against this background, I have observed the interests, approaches, and ways of working of my Nordic colleagues, both in the sociology of religion and beyond. It is these that form the substance of this article, which will be structured as follows. I will look first at the institutional locations of the sociology of religion, paying attention to the implications that follow from this. The following sections consider the research pri-
orities that have emerged in this part of the world and the dominant ways of working, illustrating both by a series of examples. The final section returns to the WREP and WaVE projects already mentioned. In these, the distinctiveness of Nordic approaches to religion is contrasted with those which have developed in other parts of Europe. A short conclusion draws the threads together.

Two further preliminaries conclude this introduction. The first acknowledges an inevitable Swedish bias; Sweden is the country that I know best and Swedish scholars have been my closest colleagues. The second is related in the sense that this article should not be seen as a comprehensive overview of either the religious situation in Northern Europe, or of the sociological study of this. It is rather a serendipitous account of my experiences in this part of the world and what I have learnt from these. For the sake of clarity I have arranged the article in sections; the narrative, however, is continuous.

Locating the field

It was as a guest in Uppsala that I first became acquainted with a Nordic Faculty of Theology, which included the social scientific study of religion—i.e. not only sociology, but psychology, and potentially at least, anthropology as well. I conversely came from a Faculty of Social Science and had no training at all in theology. It is true that the sociology of religion in most parts of the UK hovers between the social sciences and what has become known as TRS (i.e. theology and religious studies), and is veering increasingly towards the latter, but the disciplinary roots are different.

What then are the consequences of this situation which repeats itself all over the Nordic countries? My answer may seem perverse in that it stresses absence rather than presence. Clearly there is very little constraint from the theologians in terms of what can or cannot be studied; there is also rigorous training in methods which ensure levels of expertise which until recently could not always be assumed in Britain. And taking the Nordic faculties as a whole, a wide variety of work is taking place, producing in turn an impressive array of doctoral theses. What was absent, however, was the presence of social scientific colleagues who were pursuing similar questions in different fields: class, ethnicity, healthcare, education and so on. This could, of course, be remedied through colloquia, conferences and other meetings, but it could never be taken for granted. It followed that parallels between religion and other fields of social science were less frequently made than was the case at home.

Most serious of all, however, was the indirect effect that this situation had on the faculties and departments of social science. Indeed for much of the time that I spent in the Nordic countries, I rarely met a sociologist or visited a department of sociology. Once again there are echoes in the UK and indeed elsewhere—nicely captured by James Beckford’s phrase: “the isolation and insulation of the sociology of religion” from its parent discipline (Beckford 1985)—but the situation was more extreme in Northern Europe. Happily this is now beginning to change, a shift in which Norway leads the way—indeed the situation here has always been more varied both in terms of location
and formation. But in all five countries, a noticeable adjustment is taking place brought about by the two factors already outlined: first persistent debates provoked by the growth in religious diversity in Europe and second dramatic changes in the modern world order. Social scientists, and not only sociologists of religion, have been obliged to pay attention to an aspect of human living that had been ignored for too long.

An important parenthesis should, however, be noted: that is the influence of a number of advanced level and markedly inter-disciplinary institutions, for example the Helsinki Collegium of Advanced Studies, where I spent four weeks in the spring of 2007, and the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in Uppsala. I was never a fellow of the latter, but visited on many occasions to attend seminars. I mention this in particular as it was here that I first came across the notion of "multiple modernities" which has been formative in my work since 2000. Indeed it was this idea that framed the final chapter of *Europe: The Exceptional Case* (Davie 2002) which I wrote during my time as the Kerstin Hesselgren Professor. The shift in thinking that the concept represents is profound, as social scientists with a wide variety of interests recognize that the western—and largely secular—model of modernity should not be seen as a global prototype, but simply as one modernity among many which are developing in different parts of the world.

Returning to the theme of research locations in the Nordic countries, I was also aware of the projects and publications that emanated from the research institutes associated with the Evangelical Lutheran Churches. These have changed over time, but I have noted in particular the very solid series of publications in English produced by the Church Research Institute of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland which have been sent to me on a regular basis. These have been very grateful for these. The continuing work of the Institute for Church, Religion, and Worldview Research in Norway (KIFO) and the Church of Sweden Research Unit are similarly noteworthy, as indeed are a cluster of diaconal institutions. These organizations vary in nature and status, but taken together they indicate a commitment to and funding for research that is much harder to find in the British churches. One reason, of course, lies in the relative wealth of their Nordic equivalents, which—until recently—have benefitted from unusually high levels of membership which brought with it appreciable sums of money from church tax or its modern equivalent. But that, in itself, will influence what these institutes are able (or indeed are obliged) to do and the ways in which they will do it.

Two further research sites should be mentioned in conclusion to this section. The first is the Nordic Conference for the Sociology of Religion which will hold its twenty third meeting in Helsinki in 2016; this biennial and English-speaking gathering has become an important event in the international calendar of events in the sociology of religion. The admirable practice of inviting speakers from outside the Nordic countries has introduced many of us not only to a new agenda but to a stimulating group of people, enabling conversations which have persisted over many years. I was such a guest in 1992 when the meeting took place in Iceland (see above). The journal in which this article appears is similarly significant—the more so in that it welcomes work from a variety of disciplines that inquire into the changing nature of religion, religious institutions, culture and society. Unsurprisingly it is the primary outlet for the sociology of
religion in the Nordic countries, bearing in mind that Nordic scholars also publish in a wide range of UK or US journals. They are moreover regular participants at the British Sociological Association’s Sociology of Religion Study Group. And at least some of them have assumed leadership roles in the major international organizations in the field: notably the International Society for the Sociology of Religion, and the Research Committee 22 of the International Sociological Association. I will conclude this section with a reference to a widely read text book. Furseth’s and Repstad’s *Introduction to the Sociology of Religion* (2006) is used in classrooms in many parts of Europe and indeed beyond—a reach facilitated by multiple translations.

**Research priorities**

In a preliminary chapter in *The Sociology of Religion* (first published in 2007), I considered in some detail the different "pathways" of the sociology of religion in different parts of the world, contrasting in particular the emphasis on secularization in Europe and the stress on rational choice theory in the US. The point to grasp in this discussion is that each of these theories emerges from a different context and—for that reason—becomes in itself part of the subject matter under review. I rejected very firmly the notion that theory in the social sciences can be compared with its equivalent—or rather non-equivalent—in natural science, where a "law" in physics or whatever applies to all cases, other things being equal. I also considered more specific factors that colour approaches to the sociology of religion across Europe; in this case contrasting Nordic scholars with their equivalents in (say) France, where faculties of theology are proscribed from the public university system and where the dominant political philosophy (*laïcité*) discourages the presence of religion—never mind its study—in the public sphere. A further comparison can be made with scholars from central and Eastern Europe, whose situation—and therefore research agenda—altered dramatically after 1989.

Taking the range of possibilities into account, I would describe the sociology of religion in Northern Europe as recognizably European but distinctive. hugely positive in this respect are the exceptionally complete historical records which complement the excellent, and continuing, sources of quantitative data that exist in most of the Nordic countries, though less so in Denmark than elsewhere and not always covering the religious minorities as comprehensively as the Lutheran churches. The combination has enabled the long-term and impressively detailed tracking of religious change at different levels of society, as the state churches gradually evolved through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Such churches remain, moreover, dominant institutions in terms of membership, though very much less so in terms of belief or practice. This has led Nordic scholars to reverse the phrase "believing without belonging", which for a couple of decades caught the imagination of British observers of religion (Davie 1994). Quite clearly "belonging without believing" is closer to the Nordic norm, and—as Erika Willander (2104) has reminded us—has been so for most of the twentieth century.
Given the relative stability of the underlying pattern, it is unsurprising that Nordic scholars have been attracted by the notion of "vicarious religion" (Davie 2000, 2007b, 2015), which emerged in my thinking as the successor to "believing without belonging". By this is meant the notion of religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, who (implicitly at least) not only understand, but appear to approve of what the minority is doing. Simply by remaining members of their churches and thereby sustaining its personnel and activities seems to me proof of this relationship, which is also expressed by the high—and in some cases very high—uptake of the occasional offices (baptism, confirmation, marriage and funerals) in Northern Europe. But for how much longer? That is the question that we all ask, given the noticeable falls in membership (and the finance that comes with this) in recent years. Seen from a British perspective, however, the decline in the Nordic countries appears modest; it is none the less significant though more so in some countries than others.11

A second indicator of vicarious religion can be found in the appreciation of the churches' role at times of celebration or tragedy. This too is evident in the Nordic countries—a point brought home to me in the sequence of events that followed the sinking of the Estonia (in 1994), the tsunami in South East Asia (in 2004) and—more recently—the Utøya Island massacre (in 2011), noting in particular the role of the majority churches at these pivotal moments. Interestingly, however, Douglas Davies’ penetrating analysis of the last of these events deploys an entirely different theoretical framework to understand what was happening (Davies 2015). In this Davies explores the theoretical links between cultural values, religious belief and the nature of emotion and identity asking what happens to these delicate connections when the community in question is touched by a devastating event. On a more cheerful note, I am always intrigued to discover that the markedly traditional royal weddings in Scandinavia attract similar levels of popularity to their equivalents at home.

All that said, the emphasis on secularization as the dominant mode of theorizing is well-developed in northern Europe—unsurprisingly in that the Nordic countries appear as some of the most secular in the world on conventional measures of religiousness. Take, for example, the most recent findings from the World Values Survey, which are most easily absorbed as a two-dimensional "map". All five Nordic countries appear towards the extremities of the two axes: the first contrasting traditional with secular rational values and the second contrasting survival with self-expression values. The same map, however, also reveals the differences between the Nordic countries. Specifically, the WVS data indicate that Denmark, Norway and Sweden are similar to each other, whereas Iceland is a little closer to the global norm in terms of traditional values, as is Finland in terms of survival values. Such differences are important and reveal themselves repeatedly in comparative work of many different kinds (see below). Over time, I have learnt not only to distinguish but to appreciate these variations (I term these Nordic "nuances"), which are clearly significant both for the scholars who identify them and for the populations under review.

In Davie (2007a), I argued that secularization is to (west) Europe as rational choice theory (RCT) is to the US. It was interesting therefore to discover two Swedish scholars, Eva Hamberg and Thorleif Pettersson, exploiting the excellent data sets available
to them to test the principal hypotheses generated by the RCT approach. Using these statistics, Hamberg and Pettersson (1994) were able to establish that religious provision varies from one municipality to another in Sweden, depending considerably on the relative presence of free churches in the area. They then examined the relationship between even the modest forms of competition that exist in the Swedish case and levels of religious activity. Their results confirmed the RCT hypothesis:

In those municipalities where the level of religious pluralism was higher than the average, religious participation was also higher. Moreover, where the free churches were stronger, the Church of Sweden tended to offer a more varied supply of divine services and the average level of church attendance was higher (Hamberg and Pettersson 1994: 213).

In other words, the state church and the free churches benefit from each other’s presence, both directly and indirectly, bearing in mind that the overall levels of religious activity remain low. A more recent analysis can be found in Hamberg (2015). 13

One point, however, remains abundantly clear: the religious scene in the Nordic countries is changing fast. All five countries are not only becoming more secular, they are also becoming more diverse. The presence of other faith communities may be more recent in Northern Europe than in Britain, France, (West) Germany or the Netherlands, but it is significant and growing – most noticeably in Denmark, Sweden and Norway. The largest and most visible community in this respect are the Muslims who come from a wide variety of places. Size, moreover, is relative. The absolute numbers may be smaller than most European countries, but in Denmark and Sweden the percentages are comparable to at least some of their neighbours further south. 14 It is unsurprising therefore that both countries have experienced similar difficulties in their attempts to accommodate diversity. Particularly intractable have been the clashes between the freedom of expression and the sensitivities of the Muslim minority to visual depictions of the prophet. The episode that became known as the "Danish cartoons" had widespread repercussions all over Europe, and beyond, provoking in turn a flood of publications.

This is not the place to debate the rights and wrongs of these complex incidents. It is the place to note their effect on the agenda in the sociology of religion. All over Europe, anxiety about Islam has generated an unprecedented degree of publicly-funded research, which acquires a momentum of its own. New data emerge, which provoke new research question, which – themselves – require interrogation. The agenda rolls forwards, opening up new research fields and a marked increase in inter-disciplinary work. In the Nordic countries, two research programmes – as opposed to projects – illustrate this process perfectly. The first is the "Religion in the 21st Century" programme which was located in the University of Copenhagen from 2003–2007, which was established as one of four Research Priority Areas by the University. In this capacity, it "housed" more than 70 initiatives of various kinds, including a strong emphasis on the training of doctoral students. I was more than happy to be a guest as their final conference out of which emerged an important edited book (Christofferssen et al. 2010)
The Copenhagen venture was followed by the "The Impact of Religion: Challenges for Society, Law and Democracy" which is jointly funded by the Swedish Research Council and Uppsala University. IMPACT has already been mentioned and brings together over 40 researchers from six faculties, including the hard sciences, and will run for 10 years (2008–2018). It is organized into six wide-ranging and inter-disciplinary themes: religious and social change; integration, democracy and political culture; families, law and society; well-being and health; welfare organization and welfare values; and science and religion (see note 5).

New fields of interest have been generated in the course of the programme—for example the work on religion and the media, attention to the built environment (notably mosques), and a project on Orthodox Jews and their attitudes to sexualities. Particularly satisfying in this respect has been the emergence of a new generation of scholars interested in the social-scientific study of religion and their capacity to think outside the box. The field is developing fast.

Similar—if rather smaller programmes of work exist in Norway and Finland. "Post-Secular Culture and a Changing Religious Landscape", for example, was located in Åbo Akademi University in Turku, and ran from 2010 to 2014. It is a qualitative and ethnographic study of the changing religious landscape in Finland. "Religion in Pluralist Societies" (PLUREL) is based in Oslo; it began in 2008 and finds its focus in the issues that arise from the growing plurality of religion both in the Nordic countries and beyond. The pan-Nordic NOREL is rather different and will be discussed in the following section.

Ways of working

I have already mentioned the exceptional historical and statistical sources available to scholars in the Nordic countries, enabling comparative work across time and across space. The NOREL project (2009–2014) illustrates this perfectly. The full title of NOREL is as follows: "The Role of Religion in the Public Sphere. A Comparative Study of the Five Nordic Countries". Its primary goal is to map the religious changes which have taken place in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland since the late 1980s. In order to effect this task, NOREL has gathered together 24 scholars from all five countries including two doctoral students. Finding its theoretical compass in the claims made by Jose Casanova (1994) and Jürgen Habermas (2006) regarding a return of religion to the public sphere, the NOREL team have asked whether or not this true in the Nordic countries. Hence the following question: is it the case that religion has become more visible, indeed more contested, in this part of the world in the past thirty years?

With this in mind, detailed data have been gathered on religion and politics, the media, the state, and civil society since the late 1980s. What emerges is not so much a return of religion to public life as growing religious complexity: on the one hand, Nordic populations are becoming increasingly secular, but on the other religion is more rather than less present in public discussion; it is also more contested at least to some
degree. At the same time there is evidence of continuity. Religion has been continually present in the politics, media, state, and civil society of the Nordic countries both before and during the period under review. There are finally noticeable variations: Sweden, Norway and Denmark are more diverse, and therefore more complex, than Finland and Iceland. Initial findings from NOREL elaborating these features have been published in the *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* (see in particular 2011/2 and 2013/1).

Particularly interesting from my point of view are two points. First is the fact that this project built on an earlier piece of work, itself a comparative study of religion led by Göran Gustafsson (who held the first chair in the sociology of religion in Sweden). In Gustafsson’s study the emphasis lay on the privatization of religion, taking an agreed set of indicators and three selected years (1938, 1958 and 1978) as a focus for the changes taking place (Gustafsson 1985). NOREL has perpetuated this way of working, using 1988, 1998, and 2008 as the key dates. The stress this time, however, is on the continuing—indeed the growing—role of religion in the public sphere, concurrent with the transition from a marked homogeneity to much greater diversity in religious life. At the same time, careful attention is paid to the shifts that are taking place right across society: for example in the effects of migration, in the growing power of the market in economic life, in what has become known as the "subjective turn" in culture, and in new roles for women in the family, the workplace, and so on.

The second point is to remark how very similar these findings are not only to the reasoning set out above regarding the setting up of large-scale programmes of research both in the Nordic countries and elsewhere, but also to my own retrospect on religion in Britain (Davie 2015). This revisits an analysis that initially took place in 1994 under the title *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging*. A comprehensively revised edition appeared just over 20 years later; this time with the subtitle *A Persistent Paradox*. The paradox in question is exactly that articulated here: namely the indicators of religious life move in different directions. Secularisation undoubtedly continues alongside increasingly intense debate regarding the place of religion in a modern democracy—as indeed is the case right across West Europe.

As a footnote to this discussion I will add that I was invited to act as a "critical reader" for a meeting which took place about halfway through the NOREL process. We gathered at the Metochi Study Centre on Lesbos, Greece, which has links with the University of Agder in Norway. (It is hard to imagine a more idyllic spot.) As ever I was fascinated both by the findings that emerged and by the commentaries that was beginning to develop. The latter captured both commonality and difference and revealed very clearly colleagues who were familiar with each other’s work and work habits. Distinctive patterns appeared none the less, which required the close attention of the whole team.

Coincidentally, I was asked at much the same time to review a publication emerging from a rather similar endeavour, but one which covered a very different part of Europe. The volume in question was entitled *Portraits du catholicisme: Une comparaison européenne* and the countries in question were Italy, Portugal, Spain, France and Belgium (Pérez-Agote 2012). Here once again was a group of scholars who knew each other well,
but the differences that they found were much more marked than was the case in the Nordic countries. At one end of the spectrum lay the largely intact parish system in Italy, supporting a still strong Catholic culture; at the other were the massively eroded situations in France and Belgium. Spain was sliding fast in the same direction. That said, an overall theme quite clearly emerges in the "Catholic" enquiry: namely the shifting nature of the churches under review as they mutate, albeit at different speeds, from a situation of dominance (one could almost say hegemony) to one in which they are simply one organization among others (secular as well as religious), all of which compete for the attention of different kinds of people. It is quite clear moreover that some forms of Catholicism are more successful that others in this respect. In other words differences within churches are as significant as differences between them. Perhaps the same question should be asked of the majority churches in the Nordic countries, to see which elements of the Lutheran model still appeal and which do not and for what reasons. Whatever the case, each of these studies should be read with the other in mind: taken together they offer insights into a large swathe of European societies.17

A further pairing caught my eye: that is the replication in Sweden of a well-known British enquiry. The latter is known in the literature as the Kendal Project. This was published in 2005 and looked at "religion" in all its manifestations in a particular community in England—Kendal, a town of 28,000 people in the Lake District (i.e. in a rural and moderately traditional part of the country where other faith populations are relatively rare). The project has generated considerable sociological attention, not only in terms of the data that emerge but of the theoretical framing of these findings (Heelas and Woodhead 2005).

Broadly speaking, the facts and figures confirmed the national pattern in terms of religious practice: in any one week, 7.9 per cent of the Kendal population were active in a Christian congregation of some kind, whereas 1.6 per cent took part in what is termed the holistic milieu. The evidence from Kendal suggests, moreover, that the holistic groups are growing fast, while the Christian congregations continue to decline. The detail is clearly set out. But how should these findings be interpreted? Is this—as the authors suggest—evidence of a much larger shift in the sacred landscape of modern Britain or is this something more modest? Opinions differ. To support their claims, Heelas and Woodhead introduce the work of Charles Taylor who talks in terms of a "massive subjective turn" in modern culture (Taylor 1989, 2007). The data from Kendal should—they argue—be seen in this light, noting not only the shift from the congregational domain to the holistic, but the very similar mutation found within the congregational sphere itself (i.e. in the forms of Christianity that, relatively speaking, are doing well).

Much more could be said about this study and the debates that have emerged from it. Rather more central to my argument here, however, is the "Enköping" study, given that it was designed quite explicitly as a follow-up to "Kendal" (see Ahlstrand and Gunner 2008). I must, however, confess that my knowledge of the Swedish project is considerably more limited given that both the data and the ensuing commentary have been published in Swedish rather than English.18 An initial point, however, is relatively simple: the two projects have a great deal in common in that both of them were based in a particular locality in order to map in their entirety the religious and spiritual
meeting places in that place. That in itself is a valuable exercise. That said the Swedish study had the benefit of hindsight. Specifically the authors were able to engage critically with the terminology used by Heelas and Woodhead using a questionnaire sent to a representative sample of people living in Enköping.

Central to this terminology is the distinction between religion and spirituality which is seen as the key to the Kendal study, but is—it seems—much less visible in Enköping. A great deal will depend, however, not only on the definitions of the two terms, but on the ways in which they are "valued". In the UK, spirituality has acquired a very different "loading" from religion; on the whole the former is regarded in a more positive light. As soon as the data are probed, however, it is clear that both concepts are used in a wide variety of ways, not all of which are compatible with each other, leading to multiple confusions when policies that depend on careful terminology are put into practice. With this in mind, I am curious to know two things with respect to the Nordic situation: how easy is it to find equivalent terms in Nordic languages for either/both of these terms and whether similar confusions in their interpretation exist? Preliminary responses to this article indicate that there is indeed a marked slippage in meaning between the British and the Swedish understandings of spirituality, and that translation in this field is a treacherous business.

Comparative perspectives

This doesn’t surprise me given our experiences in the WREP and WaVE projects introduced above, in which the complex terminologies regarding both religion and welfare across a wide range of European societies had to be squarely faced. A persistent problem, however, turned itself gradually into an specific focus as we realized that the use—or indeed the non-use—of certain terms revealed a great deal about the situation under review. So much so that a briefing paper on this question, initially prepared for a research meeting, was included as an appendix in the published account of the WREP project (Middlemiss Lé Mon 2010). "Words" were not simply labels—their presence or absence helped us to unpack the cultural values that lay beneath the surface of our different cases. And for this reason, careful attention to vocabulary became in itself a powerful analytic tool.

WREP and WaVE were not only significant for language. They were rather excellent illustrations of the frequently repeated claim that comparative work in the sociology of religion is the most rewarding form of social-scientific engagement, but—a large but—it is also the most demanding. Our linguistic difficulties illustrate the latter point perfectly. So also did the fact that both projects were conceived, constructed, led, and in the case of WREP funded by the Nordic countries. They had, however, to find ways of accommodating not only the very different situations in other parts of Europe (in terms of religion and welfare), but very different approaches to research.

This is not the place to rehearse the details of either project (see note 4). I will rather offer selected illustrations from the research process, underlining what these episodes tell us about the challenges of comparative work. The first is taken from WREP, which
was relatively tight ship in terms of its research structure. For the record, WREP contained eight case studies, all from West Europe (in the pre-1989 understanding of the term) and research was restricted to the majority churches. Seven common questions were devised to be asked in all individual and focus-group interviews. The remaining questions were more flexible, depending on national and local context. By and large the approach worked well and elicited the required information. That said it is clear that many respondents had never thought about the issues under review until the moment of questioning. Were we, therefore, "making" connections when there were none? And—more profoundly—were our questions understood in similar ways by very different populations? I ask as one point was abundantly clear: Nordic assumptions no longer held in the majority of cases under review.

For example, the researchers were also asked to collect similar types of material in all eight cases. At one level this was a simple enough request. But almost immediately it became clear that sources that existed routinely in the Nordic countries were not so readily available elsewhere. Indeed in France there was a degree of difficulty in eliciting any information at all from the public authorities, given the reluctance of local government employees to engage the question of religion—a situation that required a degree of ingenuity on the part of the researcher in question. In Greece and Italy, the situation was very different. Here the churches were playing a significant and recognized role in welfare provision, for which reason the data existed in profusion but not in the systematized form discovered further north. Far from it! Germany and England were different again: the former with its very significant diaconal institutions (Caritas for the Catholic Church and Diakonische Werk for the Protestants), with their highly developed professional codes; the latter with a much more pragmatic—one could almost say improvised—set of arrangements, relying more often than not on volunteers. Each way of working generated different types of data, not all of which could be considered comparable.

WaVE went in a rather different direction—indeed two directions. For at one and the same time a decision was made to include four post-communist countries on the one hand (in addition to the original eight from "West" Europe), and a range of minorities (religious and other) in all twelve cases. With hindsight this was probably a mistake; we should have done one or the other. The question of whether or not we should have imposed a more rigorous framework for comparison (i.e. a set of common questions as was the case in WREP) is more difficult to answer. I fully respect those who argue that we should have. I am nonetheless convinced that the data that emerged from WaVE is far richer than that discovered in WREP, but is—for exactly the same reason—very much more difficult to deal with in terms of comparison across all cases, though sub comparisons (i.e. between selected cases) are more straightforward. Quite clearly, our experience in WaVE was not unique: there is always a tension between the richness (indeed authenticity) of each particular case and the need for at least a modicum of comparability across the project as a whole. A second point follows from this. The fact that we got as far as we did is very largely due to the patience and skill of our coordinator: Effie Fokas, who kept us pretty much together on a sometimes sinuous path.
I will conclude this section with three further remarks, which pertain to my experience in both WREP and WaVE. The first concerns the growing realization that we were working in a research field which was gradually establishing itself as a sub-discipline in its own right. All over Europe—and indeed beyond—it was becoming increasingly clear that the welfare-states established in the immediate post-war period could no longer sustain care from the cradle to the grave as had been so readily assumed, and nowhere more so than in Nordic Europe. The combination of demographic change (leading in turn to increasing demand) and financial insecurity (brought about by global recession) was taking its toll. But who—or which organizations—were to fill the ensuing gap? The answer can be found in a mix of for-profit and not-for-profit groups, among which the churches and other religious organizations play an increasingly important role. It was our privilege to address these questions and the debate that a shift of this nature provokes. At the very least, two very different literatures in the social sciences (the sociology of religion and social policy) were brought together.

My second remark is related and concerns the theological issues that underpinned our work. I will always be grateful that we tackled these very directly—an approach that is relatively rare in the sociology of religion. But it was fascinating to discover not only how theological ideas influenced the ways in which the churches addressed questions of care, and who should or should not be responsible for this, but how different bodies of theological—or more precisely ecclesiological—knowledge were formative for the welfare states themselves. Thus emerged a classic Weberian insight: namely that to pay attention to religious belief (as well as to practice) is an essential part of the sociological task. Beliefs—or if you will theologies—have important implications beyond as well as within the religious sphere as such.

My third comment is more personal. Working with the team that was responsible for WREP and WaVE was a hugely enjoyable process. The team as such was composed of senior and so-called junior researchers. The former acted as a guiding presence; the latter were responsible for gathering the data, the preliminary analysis, and the drafting of the case studies. But round the table, everyone contributed as equals, each playing a central part in furthering the research process. It is worth remarking that many of the "younger" generation are now leading teams of their own in different parts of Europe in a wide variety of projects, a number of them combining this with the nurture of a young family. It has been a real pleasure to watch their careers develop year-on-year. All of us, moreover, not only benefitted from but learnt to model the organizational skills of the home team in Uppsala. WREP and WaVE were formative projects in every sense of the term.

Conclusion

It is quite clear that the quarter of a century in which I have been associated with colleagues in the Nordic countries has coincided with a step change in the study of religion. As indicated above, the reasons for this are sometimes questionable in the sense that religion has been seen more as a problem than as a solution. That said, the "new"
situation has offered all of us new opportunities for research, which have generated
innovative and varies sources of data. Thinking about such data has led to new research
questions, which require in turn sustained attention to theory. The sometimes heated
debates surrounding the notion of the post-secular are a case in point.

Quite clearly this is happening all over Europe, and indeed beyond, but it has been
my pleasure to share this journey with a wide range of Nordic scholars, some of whom
were of my own generation and some of whom were younger. All of them have made
me welcome in their places of work and very often in their homes as well. I have been
evertheless grateful for their hospitality. I am equally grateful to the editors of the
*Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* for allowing me an opportunity to express this.

Notes

1 During this time I was a visiting researcher at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies.
I am grateful to Eila Helander and Anne Birgitta Pessi for making this possible.

2 In the course of this visit Anders and I attended a conference on urban religion in Helsinki–
enabling a rather different perspective on Nordic religion. The proceedings of the confer-
ence are published in Räby and Räby (1993).

3 More information about the Kerstin Hesselgren Professorship is available from: http://
www.vr.se/en/english/researchfunding/applyingforgrants/callforproposals/closedgrants/kerstin-
hesselgrenandolofpalmevisitingprofessors.5.4b1cd22413cb479b8056668.html [ac-
cessed 24 June 2015]. Diakonivetenskapliga institutet (DVI) was the predecessor of the
current Uppsala Religion and Society Research Centre (CRS). See http://www.crs.uu.se/
?languageId=1 for more details [accessed 24 June 2015].

4 More information about both projects is available from http://www.crs.uu.se/Research/for-
mer-research-projects/ [accessed 24 June 2015]. See also Bäckström and Davie (2010,
2011).


6 A rather more systematic account of the sociological study of religion in the Nordic coun-
tries can be found in Beckford (2006). Though nearly ten years old, this article offers a useful
point of comparison. To an extent Beckford’s perceptions still hold—the Nordic countries re-
main distinctive. That said an increasingly ambitious research agenda is undoubtedly mak-
ing its mark.

7 One of the most pleasurable aspects of my work in the Nordic countries has been my in-
volvement with a wide variety of doctoral students, in several places, and at very different
stages in their doctoral careers.

8 More information is available from: http://sakasti.evl.fi/sacrista.nsf/

9 More information is available from: http://www.kifo.no/index.cfm?id=266050 and http://
www.svenskakyrkan.se/forskning [both accessed 24 July].

10 See http://www.kifo.no/index.cfm?id=266300 [accessed 24 July]. There are of course a
number of other journals, notably *Temenos: The Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion*,
temenos [accessed 24 July].

11 British observers are always astonished by the high levels of membership in the Nordic
dhurches. I appreciate that these are falling especially in Sweden, but 65% is very different
from the single figures found at home. The crucial point of course is that the meaning of membership is different in each case.


13 Sadly Thorleif Pettersson—a fine scholar in the field—died in 2010.


16 More information is available from: http://www.uio.no/english/research/interfaculty-research-areas/plurel/about/ [accessed 24 June 2015].

17 Interestingly precisely this combination can be found in Vilaça et al. (2014), which deals with migration into different parts of Europe.

18 In what follows, I am relying on the outline account in English given in Erika Willander (2014). Willander was one of the researchers on the original project, who—interestingly—revisited the data as part of her doctoral thesis.

19 There are close parallels in this respect with interdisciplinary work which is equally challenging, but (if done well) yields rich rewards.

20 There were in fact thirteen case studies in all: Finland, Norway, Sweden, England, Germany (one Protestant and one Catholic), France, Italy, Greece, Latvia, Poland, Croatia and Romania.

References


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