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ON THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL CHANGE

Thorleif Petterson as sociologist of religion

Abstract

Thorleif Petterson has been professor of the sociology of religion at the Faculty of Theology in Uppsala since 1988. In conjunction with his retirement in 2007 a symposium devoted to his manifold academic contributions was held. The symposium became a survey of current research and a balance sheet of the development in the sociology of religion in Sweden. In this article, which is based on a paper presented at the symposium, Thorleif Pettersson’s scientific achievements spanning more than thirty years are outlined.

Key words: sociology of religion, Uppsala University, Thorleif Pettersson, World Value Survey.

Doctoral studies

Thorleif Pettersson (henceforth Thorleif) commenced his doctoral studies in 1971 at the Department of History of Religion in Uppsala. The Department was at that time a separate unit within the Faculty of Arts, headed by the then professor Carl-Martin Edsman, who also became Thorleif’s doctoral supervisor. In 1975 Thorleif defended his dissertation entitled *The Retention of Religious Experiences* (Pettersson 1975). The dissertation draws on Hjalmar Sundén’s (professor in the psychology of religion in Uppsala) role theory but shows in contrast to Sundén’s theory that individuals recall religious experiences in accordance with their individual structures of expectations, and not, as Hjalmar Sundén had been arguing, in accordance with the structure of their religious tradition. Already in his dissertation, Thorleif displayed a great interest in quantitative methods and a genuine originality in the study of the place of religion, in this case, at the level of the individual. When working on his dissertation, Thorleif made use of his earlier studies in psychology and statistics. At this time, he considered himself both a psychologist and a sociologist of religion. When he applied for *docentkompetens* in 1978, he became docent both in the sociology of religion and the psychology of religion at the Faculty of Theology in Uppsala (*Docent* equals approxi-
The Stockholm Institute of Sociology of Religion

It was of great importance for Thorleif’s continued research that Berndt Gustafsson acted as opponent at his dissertation defence. Berndt Gustafsson could in many ways be seen as the grand old man of the sociology of religion in Sweden. He was involved in the establishment of the Stockholm Institute of Sociology of Religion (Religionssociologiska Institutet) already in 1963 and has since then published a great number of reports and books on religion and society. Following Thorleif’s dissertation defence, Berndt Gustafsson decided to recruit the theoretically and methodologically knowledgeable young scholar to the Institute. His work there led Thorleif onto one of the paths of research that he has continued exploring throughout his life, perhaps most prominently so in the 1970s and the 1980s, i.e. his research concerned with church sociology. This research was entirely based on surveys and analyses of church statistics that are still being annually recorded by the Church of Sweden’s department for research and cultural affairs.

A number of research reports were published in the 1970s, e.g. *Kristna förkunnares samhällssyn* (Christian preachers’ view of society) (Pettersson and Magni 1976), *Inställning till kvinnliga präster: en sambandsanalys* (The attitudes to female clergy: a correlational analysis) (Pettersson 1978) and *Uträdesbenägenhet och utträde ur Svenska kyrkan* (Propensity to withdraw and withdrawal from the Church of Sweden) (Pettersson 1979). In 1981, a study commissioned by Lund diocese, *Identitet och roll präst-församling-samhälle* (Identity and Role. Clergy-parish-society) was published (Pettersson and Åberg 1981). The report is based on extensive survey material and consists of a comparative study of the expectations of clergy and laity on leadership in the Church. It employs a consistent role theoretical approach and contains an initial presentation of cohort theory, where the sets of values of different generations are compared, a theory to which Thorleif has been returning throughout the years.

Church statistical investigations

The affiliation to the Stockholm Institute of Sociology of Religion also laid the foundation for his extensive collaboration with Göran Gustafsson, who, due to the sudden decease of Berndt Gustafsson, became the first holder of a chair in the sociology of religion in Sweden. The chair had been established in 1975 as a so-called national chair located at the Faculty of Theology in Lund. Göran Gustafsson first became pro tempore and then permanent holder of the chair until he retired in 2003. Göran Gustafsson is, i.e., known for his careful studies of church statistics, which have been published annually by the Stockholm Institute of Sociology of Religion. This material has for example been used in the often cited KYLA-project (a research project about church life) (Pet-
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tersson and Gustafsson 1990), which Thorleif had become involved in, but also in a
great number of other studies (e.g. Pettersson 1988a). In the KYLA-project, Thorleif
drew on Dean Hoge and David Roozen’s study Understanding church growth and
decline (1979), in order to show that local church-based long-term efforts to strengthen
congregational involvement by the parishioners do have positive consequences. The
vitality of the local religious tradition is not once and for all determined, a view that at
the time often found its way into notions of the development of religion. Sven Halva-
dersson (1991) would later use this model in his dissertation about the evolution of the
Swedish Covenant Church (Svenska Missionskyrkan). Thorleif’s collaboration with
Göran Gustafsson would also result in studies about the relation between church and
state (Alwall et al. 1991), participation in the church elections (Gustafsson and Petters-
son 2000a), and in the so-called RAMP-project (see below).

Rational Choice Theory

In Thorleif’s collaboration with Eva Hamberg one finds additional examples of how to
use existing church statistics in order to investigate new theoretical models. In a
number of articles, published for instance in Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion
and Journal for Empirical Theology, Thorleif was able to demonstrate statistical cor-
relations that strengthen the plausibility of the American model of competition, the so-
called supply-side theory of religious involvement. This theory is derived from a Ratio-
nal Choice perspective. His discussion revisits Stark and Bainbridge’s study The
Future of Religion: Secularization, revival, and cult formation (1985), as well as later
developments by Stark, Iannaccone and Finke (Stark and Iannaccone 1994, Stark and
Finke 2000). The theory questions the traditional theory of secularization and shows
that increased religious pluralism instead leads to increased religious activity, which is
prima facie not only possible in the U.S. but should also be possible in seemingly
homogeneous European societies. The theory is much disputed and applies arguably
better to the pluralistic and individualistic culture in the U.S., even though Swedish
church statistics point to such tendencies also in a religiously more homogeneous
country (Pettersson and Hamberg 1994, 1997).

The database of demographics in Umeå

Thorleif’s interest in employing existing data in order to assess theories on religious
change is also demonstrated in the article Swedish Church Statistics. Unique data for
Sociological Research (1988b). In this article he demonstrated that local religious trad-
tions in different parts of Sweden were not following identical paces and directions,
but that they depended on local social structures. The title of the study refers to the
The database is based on computerized data from nineteenth century parish registers
and is surprisingly thorough. I have myself written a report on this material which dem-
onstrates the decline in the frequency of Communion practices during the latter part of
the nineteenth century in Sweden. My study shows that popular customs of this kind
are affected by fundamental societal changes, of which the emergence of the industrial
society is an example. Current processes of social and religious change may be
expected to follow similar trajectories (Bäckström 1999a).

Media and religion
In addition, one should mention Thorleif’s interest in the increased role of the media,
and his interest in the communication of religious beliefs and values through media, as
well as the reception of outlooks mediated through the radio, the television, newspa-
pers, and later the Internet. He dealt with these issues with researcher of communica-
tion Karl Erik Rosengren in a project conducted at Lund University, the so-called
KUSS-project (Rosengren et al. 1999). This project studied changes in Swedish political
culture between 1943 and 1996. Before that, he had examined the importance of
television in the mediation of religious services. In addition to an article in the Journal
for the scientific study of religion, the results were published in two reports from the
Stockholm Institute of Sociology of Religion in 1985. The viewers’ uses and gratifica-
tions from watching televised services and religious song and music shows were in
focus (Pettersson 1985a, 1985b, 1986a). The studies show that individual personal
beliefs are of great importance when choosing to watch such programmes. This is an
area of research which has been carried forward by Alf Linderman (1996). The inter-
play of religion, media, and culture has thereafter become an important part of the
research conducted in the sociology of religion in Uppsala through dissertations pub-

The standing of the Bible in Sweden
In the middle of the 1980s, the Swedish Bible society launched a rather comprehensive
study about the Swedish people’s reception and understanding of the new translation
of the Bible, the so called Bibel 81. In this study, Thorleif developed a much used typol-
ogy about different views of the Bible, stretching from fundamentalist to mere literary
views of the Bible. The different views are all represented within the population of
Sweden, albeit existential and literal views dominate. He was also able to show that
those who read the Bible more or less regularly, outside religious services, were
restricted to religiously active members of the churches while nearly half of the popu-
lation only has indirect or infrequent contacts with the Bible. Thorleif has often sum-
marised the results from his Swedish studies and published them internationally, which
was also the case with the Bibel 81-project (Pettersson 1986b, 1990a). In that project,
Jørgen Straarup also contributed with a report, focussing on Bible readers as a category.
His study emphasises differences in the habits of Bible reading between members of
various revival movements and Church of Sweden members. Members of the latter
group are primarily not reading the Bible themselves, but are instead listening to the Bible read to them in services, concerts or in media (Straarup 1987).

Religion and crime
Thorleif also studied the relation between religion and crime, where he shows that geographical areas in Sweden with high levels of church attendance have comparatively lower crime rates. In those studies, church statistics along with official crime statistics at the municipal level were used, a way of conducting research that Thorleif has taken an interest in. The results are perhaps not particularly surprising, but it is nevertheless of interest to get this benevolent social impact of religion confirmed (Pettersson 1990b, 1991).

Practical theology
In 1982 the Council of Research in Humanities and Social Sciences (HSFR), acting i.a. on an initiative of Professor Åke Andrén, instituted a research position in methods of measurement in the social sciences of religion, which proved to be of great importance for Thorleif’s career. He held that position until 1988, which provided him with plenty of opportunities to participate in various projects and became very important for the strengthening of the social sciences of religion at the Department of Theology in Uppsala. Unexpectedly, the initiative originated from practical theology. The sociology of religion at the Faculty of Theology in Uppsala has its roots both in the history of religion (through the earlier integration of the psychology of religion and the history of religion), and in practical theology (to which the sociology of religion belonged until 1975). I belong to the latter branch myself and began collaborating with Berndt Gustafsson already in the 1960s. Göran Gustafsson became my assistant supervisor in the 1970s and when I defended my dissertation in 1983 entitled Religion som yrke (Religion as occupation), it was natural that Thorleif would act as opponent (Pettersson 1984). When I was inaugurated as professor in the sociology of religion in 2000, Thorleif returned to the main argument of my doctoral dissertation, namely, that religious professions are characterised by a tension in the so-called L-structure, i.e. between divergent expectations from the organisation and the society at large. Our collaboration has thereafter continued on a broad basis for example within projects about higher education and within the State-Church project of which the report from the RAMP-project Folkkyrkor och religiös pluralism (National churches and religious pluralism) is part (the State-Church project funded the Swedish part of the RAMP-study) (Bäckström 1999b). Not least has his staunch support for the establishment of Uppsala Institute for Diaconal and Social Studies at the Foundation Samariterhemmet, been important. In 2007, this institute was transformed into Centre for the Study of Religion and Society at the Department of Theology and in 2008, it was recognized as a Centre of Excellence at Uppsala University (Web address: www.crs.uu.se). At this centre, issues pertaining
to the ability of the welfare state to respond to new religious and social challenges along with the question of the role of religious organisations within the framework of civil society, have been examined, especially in the projects Welfare and Religion in a European Perspective and Welfare and Values in Europe. Thorleif has touched upon such issues in studies conducted in the 1990s, studies that have greatly inspired a number of researchers (Pettersson 1992; see also Ungdomars välfärd och värderingar (Statens Offentlige Utredningar 1994).

The study of beliefs and world views

In 1976 Anders Jeffner became professor of a discipline called Tros- och livsåskådningsvetenskap (The Study of Beliefs and World Views) at the Faculty of Theology in Uppsala. Today the discipline is called Systematic Theology and the Study of World Views. He, however, provided additional support for the sociology of religion in Uppsala. In a major joint empirical project about general world views among the Swedish population, Anders Jeffner sought to test his theoretically and philosophically elaborated model of philosophies of life, an attempt that turned into a success not least due to Thorleif’s methodological skills. The project resulted in a number of studies, i.a. Eva Hamberg’s doctoral dissertation (1990): *Studies in the Prevalence of religious beliefs and religious practice in contemporary Sweden*. Anders Jeffner was also one of the promoters of the chair in the sociology of religion, which was established in 1988, and held by Thorleif. This collaboration has thereafter continued with Professor Carl-Reinhild Bråkenhielm within the empirical study of world views.

The European Values Study

Thorleif’s work at the Stockholm Institute of Sociology of Religion also resulted in contacts with the insurance company Ansvar, which funded two life style studies in the beginning of the 1980s, as well as the first Swedish EVSSG-study that was carried out in 1981 in some fifteen European countries. The director of Ansvar, Gunnar Melker, also served as chair of the board of the Institute, and provided, along with sociologist Hans Zetterberg, access to the material of the study. Thorleif was thus set on a course that he has been following until today, i.e. his work concerned with the material of the European values study. The European Values Study was initiated by i.a. professor Jan Kerkhof from Leuven in Belgium (the grand old man of the European Values Study) and much of Thorleif’s work within the EVS project has been in collaboration with him and thereafter primarily with Loek Halman from the university in Tilburg, the Netherlands. Thorleif has gradually been given an increasingly prominent position within the value studies, especially within the World Values Survey (the WVS-study) headed by Ronald Inglehart. In 1999, he joined the executive committee of the entire WVS-study, a position that he still occupies.
Ingelhart’s work came to inspire Thorleif, not least his famous book *The Silent Revolution*, from 1977. In that work, Ingelhart develops the notion of on-going gradual generational replacements from materialist to post-materialist values, which can be studied by comparing different generations or cohorts. In Thorleif’s perhaps most influential work, this theory is taken up within a Swedish-European context entitled: *Bakom dubbla lås. En studie av små och långsamma värderingsförändringar* (Behind dual bars. A study of small and slow value changes), published in 1988 by the Institute for Futures Studies, Stockholm. The book has been highly influential for value research conducted in Sweden. The study draws on Ingelhart’s notion of the importance of socialisation for the development of the individual’s norms and values. In his later research, Thorleif has both affirmed and modified the idea that the fundamental values which are internalised during a person’s upbringing are retained throughout his or her life. The main point, however, is that a generational replacement is taking place in Europe, between different generations that have grown up under poor economic conditions (materialists) and a generation that has grown up along with the welfare society for which issues related to quality of life predominate (post-materialists).

These shifts may be discerned in all countries examined in the EVS-material. The development seems therefore to favour the creation of an increasingly religiously and culturally homogenous Europe, a conclusion that Thorleif has drawn in several comparative studies. The uncertainty of the hypothesis, however, makes Thorleif assume a cautious stance, which is shown in the way he puts it in a report comparing Catholic and Protestant sets of values. In that report (Pettersson 1996: 19) he concludes: «If so, one can argue, that the European Catholic – Protestant divide in ordinary people’s value system is more likely to diminish than to widen.»

**The popular movement project**

An example of a study which deals with generational shifts of values has been published within the framework of the so-called *Folkrörelseprojektet*, (the popular movement or the social movement project) headed by, i.a., Sigbert Axelson, also from the Faculty of Theology in Uppsala. The project was conducted at the Institute for Futures Studies, where the director of research Åke Andersson, i.a. forcefully argued for the emergence of a growing so-called knowledge society, replacing the previous industrial society, a hypothesis suitable for a Swedish 1980s context. The study is called *Mot denna framtid. Folkrörelser och folk om framtiden* (Towards this future. Popular movements and people on the future), published in 1992.

The investigation is based on a comparison of the results from the 1981 and 1990 EVS-material and shows a gradual evolution from institutional, materialist, and religious values towards private, post-materialist, and existential values, a tendency that has been reinforced over time and may be expected to contribute to a more unified Europe as mentioned above. There is also a discernible tendency towards less traditional values when it comes to public morality. In this study, Thorleif also undertook an in-depth analysis of members from seven social movements in Sweden, their values
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and views of the social role of the movement they were members of. These two studies are examples of Thorleif’s bottom-up approach to research, i.e. a focus on the views and values of ordinary individuals rather than those belonging to various institutions and organisations, an approach which he often employs. In several ways, his work at the Stockholm Institute for Future Studies made an imprint on his later work, for instance his research on the consequences of long-term cultural changes in the Western world.

Nordic collaboration

Thorleif has also supported Nordic collaboration which is demonstrated in the report Scandinavian Values based on EVS material from 1994. The RAMP-study (Religious and Moral Pluralism), in which novel Nordic and European material is dealt with, is another example of his collaboration with Nordic researchers. The report from the RAMP-project is, characteristically, called Folkkyrkor och religiös pluralism den nordiska religiösa modellen (Gustafsson and Pettersson 2000b) (National churches and religious pluralism – the Nordic religious model). The study is concerned with a specific Nordic religious model, which in an international context may be seen as somewhat anomalous, since it combines low levels of so-called orthodoxy (traditional religious values) with high levels of prevalence of rituals (and thus existential issues). On the one hand, there is a religious and cultural homogeneity that renders religion invisible and private. On the other hand, there is an increased religious pluralism that renders religion visible as part of global society. The ambiguity of the evolution of religion is evident. In this study Thorleif argues that moral pluralism has weakened the relation between religion and morality.

To study processes of change over time

All of us who have been working on major long-term projects have directly experienced the influence of the surrounding societal developments on our research. Results change and presuppositions have to be analysed de novo. In a sense, that is the spirit of the research enterprise. When reading Inglehart’s studies, it is obvious that his conclusions have been nuanced, even though he largely retains the core argument from 1977. Having previously written about a rather straightforward shift from materialist to postmaterialist values, he is nowadays writing about multiple parallel developments of patterns of values, which at least to a certain extent, originate in religious and cultural settings (Inglehart and Baker 2000). This is what explains the patterns discernable in the cultural maps that he has been publishing over the past years. It is here noticeable that Sweden and the Nordic countries have a specifically Protestant identity through their affirmation of rational-secular and emancipatory values of freedom (Inglehart 1997, 2007). Since such a set of values correlates with positive concepts such as democracy, welfare, tolerance, gender equality, and individualism without egoism, the Swedish model stands out as an almost utopian good society. The question is whether this model
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is exemplary for other countries to follow or exceptional, particularly in comparison with the U.S., and, in reality, with the entire Southern Hemisphere.

Independent research

It is interesting to notice that Thorleif has gradually assumed an increasingly independent stance in relation to Inglehart’s research. For instance, he has developed a broader approach to the study of values, among other things based on Shalom Schwartz’ models (2007). Inglehart argues that religious commitment is mainly influenced by material and individual uncertainty (Norris and Inglehart 2004), which is particularly prevalent in developing countries, where agriculture is the principal industry – reminiscent of a theory of deprivation that could be traced back to Marx. Hence, religion is thought to be declining in developed countries. Thorleif is generally in agreement with this argument but he also believes that it is too simplistic and needs to be further problematised. In a study from 2007, published in conjunction with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the WVS-project, he is able to demonstrate that cultural pluralism, which is part of the characteristic features of modern global society, in fact is related to religious growth. This reflects the social change that has occurred during the time that the EVS and WVS have existed.

Evidently, within modern societies sometimes contradictory tendencies develop. Thorleif has in that respect been influenced by Giddens’ research (1990, 1991) about the reflexivity of modern society. This reflexivity tends to create uncertainty originating from the risks that, i.a., modern science generates – resulting in a so-called risk society (Beck 1992). In turn, this leads to a sort of inner deprivation, in the midst of modernity, which contributes to an increased search for existential security (Pettersson 2007a). Hence, religion does not disappear, as the theory of modernization postulates, but reappears instead in new contextually determined guises, and is therefore in need of redefinition, something which the WVS-study has a hard time coming to terms with.

To this, the intensified forces of globalisation pull churches and religious organisations into the construction of a future sustainable world. These kinds of policy questions are easier dealt with by global rather than national organisations, a factor to consider in the debate about the increased public and political role of religion (Pettersson 2007b).

Migration to Europe

Thorleif’s studies of Islamic value systems, as well as those of Muslims who have migrated to Europe, confirm the complexity of the issues at hand. Islamic countries do also exhibit a kind of preference for democracy, according to Mattias Gardell at the Faculty of Theology in Uppsala (Gardell 2005), somewhat resembling the Nordic model, even though religious values are affirmed to a much greater extent compared to the Nordic countries. Migration to Europe contributes at the same time to a certain,
albeit moderate, adjustment to European or, in our case, Swedish values, especially values related to work, politics and gender equality. In order to facilitate for the immigrants’ integration into society, it is important that Swedish society is open, tolerant and economically equal. This is most plausibly part and parcel of the general welfare society (Pettersson 2004; Pettersson and Esmer 2005; Pettersson 2007c).

Social capital

I would finally like to mention that the data from the European Values Study and the World Values Survey has provided the basis for interesting studies confirming and qualifying important social theories, not least about the importance of social capital for democracy and tolerance, as Putnam (1993) has described it. In relation to Rothstein’s study (2003) about the significance of inter-personal trust in order for corruption not to develop and society not to disintegrate, Thorleif shows that Sweden is a good example of a country with high levels of trust in the social system and low levels of corruption. Despite increased privatization, this trust has not been significantly eroded. A well-functioning civil society is on the whole important for the working of social capital in local settings, something of which Sweden also is a good example. Hence, judging by the Swedish experience, there is not necessarily a contradiction between a strong state and a robust civil society (Pettersson and Halman 2001; Pettersson and Riis 2002; Pettersson and Halman 2003).

In his research on horizontal social trust and social capital, it is interesting to note that Thorleif has returned to his earlier research on differences and similarities between Swedish local communities. In a new research project he has started investigating various structural factors which may explain local variations in trust. In a way, this new project can be seen as an offspring of his earlier studies where he sought to explain local variations in church involvement in a similar way (e.g. Svedberg et al. 2007).

Another general theory that Thorleif has engaged with is Huntington’s (1997) notion of the «clash of civilizations» allegedly following in the wake of the demise of the cold war or communism in 1989. Even though this theory is far too pessimistic when postulating an almost inevitable future «clash of civilisations», it nevertheless holds a certain value. Huntington takes culture and therefore religion seriously into consideration in an ongoing development of a coming world order. He highlights that «culture matters», something which Thorleif often seeks to affirm (Pettersson 2004). By engaging with such grand theories, Thorleif has become part of the international community of researchers.

In conclusion

In this review, I have sought to highlight Thorleif’s different areas of interest within the sociology of religion and the theoretical awareness that has permeated his research, as well as his methodological competence, which has gradually evolved into a display of
brilliance within the WVS-study. Thorleif pioneered the development of church socio-logical material in Sweden. Already in the studies from the 1980s, there are theoretical areas of interest, which have been given increased weight in his later research. But gradually, Thorleif has moved on to the WVS-material, which has provided plenty of opportunities for international comparative cultural studies - the very basis of Thor-leif’s research. At the same time as Inglehart has been an important source of inspiration, in particular in his first studies, Thorleif has gradually taken a certain amount of distance to the rather broad generalisations characteristic of Inglehart’s later work. He has skilfully made use of the WVS-material in order to cast light on theoretical models and policy issues for instance related to the Millennial Development Goals. His comparative studies of Western and Islamic culture have even attracted attention from the United Nations since they point to the possibilities of peaceful coexistence between religious groups and nations (Inglehart and Pettersson 2006). The programme of research that I have formulated (2008) for the coming years demonstrates that the knowledge that has been accumulated over time will last and will be passed on to future generations of scholars. With this article I wish to congratulate Thorleif on his prominent achievements, and also to his decision, as emeritus, to carry on with new projects within the framework of our Centre for the Study of Religion and Society in Uppsala.

References


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