

## BOOK REVIEWS

Håkon Lorentzen 2007. *Moraldannende kretsløp. Stat, samfunn og sivil engasjement* [Morality-Creating Circles: State, Society and Civic Engagement]. Oslo: Abstrakt forlag. 146 pages.

«Paradise Lost» is the title of one of the chapters in Håkon Lorentzen's interesting book on civic participation and commitment. The subsequent and final chapter has a more optimistic title («Times Will Come»), but this hopeful headline cannot conceal the overall impression of a book containing an overall pessimistic perspective. The central argument is that the traditional ways of demonstrating civic engagements are deteriorating. This has been caused by general societal processes - especially that of individualization - and by the politics of the Norwegian Labour Party in particular.

Lorentzen's focus is moral circles. His argument is that good deeds emerge from moral norms, and the subsequent acts verify that morality exists. Activity and morals cannot be separated. As he argues, a moral norm without a corresponding practice is like an unused muscle. It will soon wither away. Moral circles existed in the past, most notably in three forms, those being the *dugnad*, philanthropy and collectivism.

The *dugnad* is a specific Norwegian term for organizing activity, and as such is difficult to translate. It originally referred to voluntary communal work, its goal being to perform work within a short period of time (for instance, harvesting or making a wedding dress/suit in the traditional society often found in formerly remote Norwegian communities). In these communities farmers completed a large number of tasks in what was then a non-monetary economy.

The original *dugnad* principle may also be found in the popular movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a method of mobilizing unpaid work. Paying membership dues was not enough; you were also required to participate in a *dugnad*.

The *dugnad* principle and the activities associated with it are continuously being transformed. Even today, *dugnad* is a part of everyday life for Norwegians, for instance when parents perform *dugnad* in kindergartens. Nonetheless, in spite of all the changes, the main characteristic of the idea is a constant one: it is a collective way of performing a task, and all participants are considered as being the equal of one another.

The philanthropic tradition in Norway is similar to those found in other countries, its main idea being that people do something that will benefit others. The activity expresses a feeling of responsibility towards your neighbour (often in the Christian sense of the word). It is gift-giving for which you do not expect anything in return – except perhaps gratitude. In contrast, the core principle of collectivism – where the

workers' movement is the primary example – is based on the idea that humans are characterized by a feeling of solidarity. People allow their egoistic interests to give way to the common good, or to put it in another way: the interests of the collective are put above the interests of the individual.

While these organizational principles are all part of civil society, Lorentzen argues, they are nevertheless threatened today. We are in a transition period as far-reaching as the changes which occurred within the popular movements of the mid-nineteenth century. The development over the last 300 years may thus be described as a transition in the interpretation of life itself, from one that is controlled by destiny to another ruled by self-determination. The liberation from convention took place in the initial phase through the popular (mostly class-based) movements. This was a collective type of liberation; the movement would not only set goals for the collective but also create strong boundaries for the activities of the individuals. Individual liberation appeared later, a movement whose main idea is that people may be liberated as individuals. The purpose of one's activities is to realize your personal potential, stating in effect that «I have the right to decide my own life and it is not up to other people to decide what I should do.» We have therefore been moving away from an ideology of community and towards a «What's in it for me?» individualism.

There are a number of changes in civil society currently taking place. The hierarchical structure in the voluntary associations – the organizational form of the popular movement - has changed. Local organizations are becoming more important, and in some instances members are becoming customers. Voluntary work is in some instances becoming a part of the local government, and the lifelong loyalty felt towards the collective is being replaced by a perfidy anchored in individualism. The collectives used to have a stable set of values but must now realize that such values are deteriorating, and they must therefore compete in a market in which they offer their values as products. Branding is likewise becoming important. Moreover, it is becoming more difficult to interest people in participating in organizational processes. People participate in voluntary associations because of the activity involved and not because the association is connected with certain values or has a democratic structure. An additional fact is that in these associations amateurs are being replaced by professionals because knowledge and professionalism are gradually becoming more important than the mere willingness to volunteer. It is no longer the number of people standing behind a political proposal but rather the knowledge-based professional argument that determines societal influence.

These are general processes in many Western countries. However, in Norway, Lorentzen argues, the colonization by the state of civil society has been particularly strong due to the politics of *Arbeiderpartiet*, the Norwegian Labour Party. In earlier times this party exercised an almost complete domination over the country's political scene, resulting in the situation that all other parts of the population (and not merely the working class alone) became the target for the politics of solidarity. Moreover, the party wished to remove philanthropy. Voluntary associations were perceived as carriers of group interests. Gradually, these same associations came to accept this perception, and they began to think of themselves as claimants rather than cultural platforms for activities and communication construction. The associations developed in turn strong

bonds with the government, which operates in specific sectors where civil servants, politicians and voluntary associations work together. In the associations, there is a focus on professionalism. In sum: «With the emergence of the knowledge-based social democratic welfare state, value-based civic collectivism is deteriorating», p. 111. The good cause is no longer discussed as a moral problem in civil society, but rather is a matter for the authorities.

Lorentzen documents this shift when regarding a number of political and governmental statements, and his political view becomes clear when he tells about the relationship between government and associations. The Norwegian Conservative government of the late 1990's attempted to loosen the bonds between the state and the associations. It did not succeed; however, according to Lorentzen, the initiative of the Conservative government was vastly superior to the politics of the Labour Party, whose intention was to use voluntary associations to implement governmental policies.

This is ultimately a book about how something has gone wrong in Norway. The author can easily identify the villain: the Labour Party. However, he also shows how voluntary associations sometimes much too willingly have adjusted to the politics of this political party. Morality, Lorentzen argues, must be visible in actions as was the case in the *dugnad*, philanthropy and collectivism. There is perhaps hope for a revival of both the *dugnad* and philanthropy. The modern *dugnad* may become a form of collective economy, i.e. ways for groups to create income. The network society may create new sources for financing philanthropic activities. Nonetheless, Lorentzen does not mention collectivism as a possible source of optimism.

The book places a strong focus on Norway, and even though several of the developments may be found in other countries, this is primarily a book about a specific Norwegian development, including unique institutions such as the *dugnad* and the role of the Labour Party. There is an occasional reference to other countries, but there is no attempt to make a systematic comparative analysis. The book is rather a subjective analysis made by a strongly engaged scholar. While other ways of telling this story may exist, Håkon Lorentzen has given a fascinating and engaging account of the development and future of Norwegian civil society.

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Aud Tønnessen 2007. *Kirkens Nødhjelp. Bistand, tro og politikk* [Norwegian Church Aid. Aid, faith, and politics]. Oslo: Gyldendal. 342 pages.

The role of religion in society is increasingly discussed in European public debate. From being an increasingly marginalized and privatized factor religion has reappeared on the public scene in ways that have surprised many observers. The topics concerning how British legislation can be applied in relation to Sharia laws raised by the Archbishop of Canterbury is but one example. A major reason behind this reappearance of

religion as a political factor has been international migration, contributing to a new presence of Islam in Europe. The role of the more traditional religious actors, represented by the historic European majority churches, has however tended to remain hidden behind the general interpretation of Europe as increasingly secularized.

This is not least true concerning the Nordic Lutheran Folk Churches. The role these churches still have in their countries, permeating many aspects of public life, from public holidays to social ethics, is mostly interpreted as nothing more than a gradually waning cultural influence. Against this background the case of the history of a Norwegian church related humanitarian organization for international aid is the more interesting. *Kirkens Nødhjelp* started in 1947, not as an organization, but as a fund raising action, in order to transfer gifts from Norwegian parishes to the many needy in continental postwar Europe.

Sixty years later the organization has developed into what in English is called Norwegian Church Aid (NCA); a world renowned major actor in international aid, with explicit political ambitions and annual support from individual donors as well as the Norwegian foreign agency and the development agency NORAD reaching well above 700 million Norwegian Crowns.

Aud Tønnessen is a theologian specialized in church history who has written an overview over these 60 years on behalf of the organization, but still as an independent piece of research. Her ambition is to critically discuss the interaction and the mutual influence between Norwegian Church Aid, the Church and the Norwegian state (p 18). The presentation is chronological, but with thematic insertions concerning for example women oriented relief and feminist critique (chapter 7) or fundraising, formation of opinion and influence on decision-making (chapter 11). The book is based on written sources complemented by an impressive number of interviews made with people involved in the work of NCA, not only in Norway, but in a range of countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia.

The stories told refer to a history of remarkable changes in society, in the role of the Church in society, in relations between North and South, as well as in the paradigms ruling international aid. Tønnessen's account highlights a range of interesting aspects of these changes, illustrated by some of the major relief actions performed by NCA, from the postwar period over relief to Biafra in the 1960s, to Guatemala and Sudan in the 1970s and over to recent examples such as the televised fundraising action for victims of HIV/AIDS in 2001. Recurring themes concern how NCA has handled the potential political role of the organization and how the relationship between the donors, NCA and the recipients of relief has been conceived.

An image protrudes of the relief organization as an actor involved in an advanced interplay between a range of different actors, each one with their own interests in the issues at stake. Among these actors have been the Norwegian government and changing policies concerning development aid. Among them has also been the national church, but also ecumenical church bodies. A third type of actor has been the partners in the countries concerned.

The account raises a range of questions concerning the relation between religion and society. It is obvious how the policies of NCA have developed in relation to

ongoing social changes and changed policies concerning development aid. While the relief started in a paradigm influenced mainly by protestant charity, gradually a more rights based model has developed, preferably worked out in partnership between NCA and local churches in the recipient countries.

Tønnessen's book is carefully worked out and gives a reliable overview over a large and complex material. It is well written and richly illustrated, in a way that contributes to the accessibility of the presentation. Some themes could have been more developed. Among them is a comparative perspective in relation to other church related aid agencies. This would have been especially motivated as NCA in comparison for example to the Swedish *Lutherhjälpen* has had a much stronger and more independent role in relation to the recipient countries and also in relation to the worldwide ecumenical movement. Tønnessen observes how the interpretation of the activities of NCA as «internasjonal diakoni» has filled a critical function, guarding the independence of the organization in relation to national and state interests. It does however not seem as NCA has made use of its belonging to a worldwide ecumenical movement in realizing this diaconal mission, but rather guarded its independence as a clearly Norwegian actor on the worldwide scene.

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Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo 2007. *Religionens fremtid*. (ed. and with an introduction by Santiago Zabala), translated (from *The Future of Religion*) and with a postscript by Jens Viggo Nielsen. Århus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag. 151 pages.

*Religionens fremtid* is the Danish translation of the English version «The Future of Religion» (Columbia U.P. 2005) of the original Italian edition from 2004. It consists of different formats: two relatively short articles by philosophers Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo respectively, an additional dialogue between the two led by Santiago Zabala, and an introduction and a postscript authored by Zabala and the Danish translator Jens Viggo Nielsen.

The book centres on and is inspired by one particular strand within contemporary philosophy, theology and philosophy of religion, namely the so-called post-metaphysical thinking. It explores how this approach represents conditions that affect the possibilities and future of religion. And it does so in a critical as well as constructive way, seeking to uncover not only the challenges and constraints contemporary religion might face as a result of this approach, but also the constructive possibilities it offers for religion.

The two protagonists, Rorty and Vattimo, arrive at their post-metaphysical stance along different routes and thereby reveal essential similarities as well as distinctive differences. Whereas Rorty remains inspired by American pragmatism and thinkers such as William James and John Dewey, Vattimo's ideas originate from occupation with

continental philosophy, especially hermeneutics. The view they share, and the reason they represent a post-metaphysical approach to religion, is that attempts to grasp, know and understand reality are always immersed in human practices and therefore are historically and culturally contingent. Given the insights offered by pragmatism and hermeneutics, it is no longer possible, they suggest, distinguishing between an objectively given reality and the descriptions and interpretations of this reality through human language and symbolic patterns. Consequently, human language and human practices seeking to describe and establish meaning in reality should not be viewed and evaluated as attempts at mirroring or corresponding with an independently given metaphysical reality. There is no objectively given reality that is not already immersed in human, historical and cultural practices of language. Neither exists there an objective, absolute description of reality, be it of nature or be it of transcendent entities such as gods. There are only various and competing interpretations of reality. Vattimo captures this in Heidegger-inspired phrases such as «everything is interpretation» and «knowledge is always interpretation». The metaphysical approach where language is used to represent an objective reality in accurate and absolute ways has become obsolete and been replaced by what Vattimo names «weak thought».

When applied to religion, according to Vattimo and Rorty, the implication is that a theistic image of god as a metaphysical reality must be abandoned. Not only is it epistemologically unviable – given the conditions posed by post-metaphysical thinking. It is also morally problematic in the sense that a metaphysical and essentialist form of religion involves the authority and power exerted in the name of absolute claims that cannot be questioned in terms of changing human circumstances, practices and interpretations. Given these conditions, does religion have a future or is it precluded as an epistemologically and morally viable expression of human life, according to Rorty and Vattimo?

Here the two main figures provide us with somewhat diverging answers, however also similar in conclusions. Vattimo supplements the perspectives obtained from Heidegger's hermeneutics with a specific understanding of Nietzsche's famous claim of the «death of god». Vattimo does not restrict this claim to its widespread interpretation implying the rejection of an objective, metaphysical entity as a mere product of a historically situated human consciousness trying – but failing – to accommodate itself to its circumstances. According to his more original reading of Nietzsche's claim, it also refers to the death of god as it is reported in the New Testament gospels to have occurred on Golgotha. The upshot of this reading is an intimate link between post-metaphysical rejections of a metaphysical divine being and essentialist forms of religion, and Christianity's core narrative. The heart of this narrative, according to Vattimo, is the death precisely of the image of god as a metaphysical entity. It is the report of a god who relinquishes absolute power and authority, and gives up radical and sovereign otherness to befriend human life and surrender to its events, history and changeability. This leads Vattimo to claim that not only is post-metaphysical thinking compatible with religion thus understood, it is in fact this religious tradition and its prevalence in a Western cultural setting that enables a post-metaphysical position. Rorty as well as himself, Vattimo claims, are able to adopt a view disallowing absolute and authoritar-

ian essentialist claims precisely because they have lived and thought within a tradition permeated by this narrative of a god who abandoned absolute power and became interior to human reality.

Clearly this implies a new understanding of the character of religion. The power and authority associated with religion understood as essentialist and absolutist claims are replaced by the love associated with the self-giving surrender that is the basis of post-metaphysical religion. Post-metaphysical religion manifests itself authentically in loving and giving relations in human history, not where it invokes authority and power to proclaim absolute descriptions of reality's essence. Rephrasing Vattimo, one could perhaps say that diaconal existence is the authentic form of post-metaphysical religion.

At this point there is a close connection between morality and religion's epistemological basis. A post-metaphysical idea of religion obviously precludes religious truth as being grounded in correspondence between statements and a metaphysical reality. Instead truth is obtained historically, established through human practices of dialogue and exchange over different interpretations. Religious truth equals intersubjective consensus, thus implying an inherent connection between religious truth, and love as the underlying principle and driving force that inspires us to seek truth in the company and dialogue with others.

This point leads Vattimo as well as Rorty to criticise institutionalised forms of religion. Rorty is apparently critical of any institutional form of religion, at least to the extent that it implies possessing the truth or seeking influence in a political context beyond the purely privatised realm of the individual. What remains is the individual, intersubjective pursuit of truth in a public arena from which institutionalised religion with its claims to authority must retreat. And «truth» is here understood in its modest, pragmatic form as the ability to cope with the worldly conditions of human history and life, and to create a better human future.

Vattimo on his part criticises the Catholic Church (to which he belongs) for what he believes is its failure to understand its post-metaphysical condition. As he sees it, the church represents precisely the illegitimate claim to authoritarian and disciplining power-structures incompatible with post-metaphysical conditions of religion. Consequently he also sees the problem of religion's future as closely intertwined with the future of the church and, it seems, its willingness to give up its position of power and authority emerging from its dogmatic rule, and instead adopt an appropriate attitude of loving solidarity. Especially interesting is his critique of its view on bioethics and sexuality, which he believes illustrates the ways in which a church wrongfully assumes the role of defining with absolute authority an objective nature and essence of human life, deducing norms and regulations from this nature.

In spite of representing a broader strand of creative and constructive approaches in contemporary philosophy of religion in a brief and accessible way, *Religionens fremtid* is riddled with problems that are left unanswered. To mention but a few Vattimo's claim that it is the Christian core narrative and its prevalence in western culture that enables a post-metaphysical position and represents a post-metaphysical religion, leads to the obvious question whether Christianity and Christian culture is in effect the only possibility for a religion appropriately void of abuse of power and marked by love and

solidarity (a criticism also offered by John Caputo in *After the Death of God*, co-authored with Vattimo). If so, does this imply that from a perspective appreciative of religion as a mode of love and solidarity rather than power and authority, only post-metaphysical Christianity is an acceptable form?

A further problem pertains to the assumption that metaphysical positions of theism are inherently related to power, authority, anti-democratic and even violent stances. This assumption seems less convincing. It is unable to make sense of the fact that there are fervent theistic believers, endorsing a metaphysical version of theism, who are at the same time deeply committed to principles of democracy and participating in its practices. The inherent link between metaphysical theism and anti-democratic, authoritarian positions seems to presuppose that these believers are either insincere about their theistic beliefs, or that they are covert anti-democrats, neither of which are fully satisfying explanations, to say the least. Furthermore, it seems to imply that the only hope for metaphysical theists in order to escape forcefully imposing their metaphysical beliefs and convictions on others is to abandon their theistic beliefs. Metaphysical theistic beliefs and non-violent, democratic culture and practices are inherently at odds, and metaphysical theism is inherently violent and prone to the use of oppressive force to forward itself, if we are to believe Vattimo and Rorty. One wonders how they envisage the possibility as well as the measures needed to persuade believers in metaphysical theism to eventually give up their beliefs. And given the unlikelihood that it will ever happen, at least not in a fashion congenial with the principles of loving solidarity, one might have preferred some reflections on the more practical issue as to how metaphysical religion can manage and administer its beliefs in ways that avoid authoritarian, anti-democratic and violent implications.

Further critical discussions, mainly from the perspective of philosophy of religion, are offered in the postscript, which might be a reason in itself to prefer the Danish version of this book, otherwise also available in English.

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