

Status of the Family in Scandinavian Countries

- Aspects of the Modern Welfare States

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1. Background: The Pillars of the Scandinavian Welfare States

It could be argued that the two main pillars of the Scandinavian welfare states are founded upon Christian, and more specifically Lutheran, thought. The *first* pillar is based upon Luther's teaching on vocation or calling, which includes the importance of work; daily work as the fulfillment of God's vocation. The theme of the welfare state is "full employment". The *second* pillar is based upon Luther's teaching on the priesthood of all believers, which stresses equality, the same worth of all, and lead to the theme of "social security" in the modern welfare system.

Also, a *third* important Lutheran emphasis should be mentioned, namely Luther's doctrine on society. This is based upon the thought of the hierarchy of the three estates, in which the household, the family, is the key estate of the society. This corresponds with the importance of the family at least in the first stage of the building of social welfare system in the Nordic countries.¹

Naturally, the protestant work ethic made its foundational contribution to these societies and formed an economic possibility to create the welfare states.²

All in all, homogeneous Scandinavian welfare societies were created, including a culture of reasonable deals and compromises, and with tenets of a law and order mentality stressing loyalty and obedience to authorities as parts of serving God.³

The Scandinavian societies as well as family policies were heavily built upon foundational Christian values, which can be seen in political and judicial documents throughout Scandinavian history through modern times.⁴

2. Secularization

The secularization process has mainly been led by the powerfully dominating Social Democratic parties, which were profoundly anticlerical and anti-Christian during their formation period, mainly as a result of influence by German Marxists.⁵ Step by step, the Christian value foundation has been dissolved through many means – political, educational and judicial. At the same time the national Lutheran churches were politicized.⁶

The direction, which has led to a major mentality change, can be seen through a study of modern historical documents like political platforms and governmental regulations in the educational sphere during the mid and late 1900s. Christian thought has piece by piece been replaced by secular notions and concepts. The ideological and moral foundation, based upon Christian Lutheran ideas, has been exchanged with post-modern values, as individualism – “the single-minded pursuit of personal autonomy and self-interest”⁷ – emotivism, relativism, and sociological law.⁸

Scandinavians still hold a strong organizational relationship with the Lutheran national churches, but the value orientation is heavily secularized. The family policies, along with supportive laws in various areas, which have led to dissolution of the traditional family, are a window through which this transition can be observed.

3. Exponents of Family Policies

Arnlaug Leira, Professor of Sociology at Oslo University, states in her book *Working Parents and the Welfare State: Family Change and Policy Reform in Scandinavia* that the Scandinavian countries, some of which instituted paid maternity leave already during the nineteenth century, “have moved on to pioneer a range of innovative ideas.”⁹ She mentions a) guaranteed rights to childcare, b) shared access to parental leave, c) ‘daddy leave’ and d) cash payment for home-based care.¹⁰

As professor Leira acknowledges, the care of the young children in the Scandinavian countries is nowadays normally seen as shared responsibility between the parents and the state. Behind the government funding of childcare services, which supports a family model in which both parents work, a so called “dual earner family”, one finds arguments stressing the important educational, social and developmental benefits for the children in the child care centers provided by the government. These ideas uncover the political thought of social engineering fostered by famous and influential Social Democrats, as Gunnar and Alva Myrdal. And it is, of course, in this context needed to add that the economic policies in countries as Denmark and Sweden—these two countries have the highest tax pressure in the world, taxes needed to support the welfare system—laid the foundation of the “dual earner family” situation and deliberately forced both parents out into the labor market, which naturally had an enormous impact on the family situation. Political ideas formed economic, social and educational incentives for this drastic change.

As a result, Denmark provided, at the time of Leira’s survey, publicly funded care for 48 percent of all the children less than three years of age. The figure in Sweden and Iceland was 37 percent.¹¹

It could be stated that “the Scandinavian countries were the first to introduce parental leave as an extension of maternity leave, thereby establishing the preconditions for both mothers and fathers to be involved in the care of children.”¹² However, depending on the economic construction of the system, it has been quite ineffective in encouraging men (often the one with the highest income) to take parental leave. It is only in Sweden that fathers use more than ten percent of the available leave days.¹³

As a political response for fathers to take parental leave, Sweden, Denmark and Norway (and Iceland) have instituted defined and non-transferable periods of leave reserved for fathers of several weeks, in Sweden 60 days. These parental days, so called ‘daddy days,’ are lost if not used, and have been used far more than regular gender-neutral days of parental leave.¹⁴

Another example of the welfare system is that maternity, paternity, and parental leave are accompanied by generous wage-linked benefits generally available for the first ten to fifteen months of a child’s life. Since the mid 1980s, a further period of leave has been introduced in

several countries, usually called childcare leave. This is in certain cases accompanied by cash benefits.¹⁵

On the whole, the Scandinavian welfare states provide generous parental benefits that surprise most foreigners: In the case of Sweden, we find child allowance and large family supplement (–the supplement starts already with a second child), a wide range of temporary parental benefits, as parental benefits during 480 days/child, parental benefits if a child is sick and a parent needs to stay home from work, parental benefits if a child has disabilities, etc., etc.¹⁶

It could also be mentioned that the children in Scandinavia have their own Ombudsman, and that child poverty is virtually nonexistent.¹⁷

All this could be seen as tools in strengthening the family, but the larger trend is the dissolution of the nuclear family, and that the state, not only the parents or a parent, is seen a major provider of child-care. Due to the ideological structure of the economic system almost all parents need to leave their children to governmental run or supported child-care centers, which heavily affects the family situation over all.

4. Another side of the welfare states: the termination of the traditional concept of marriage

A major complex concerning the family situation in Scandinavia, pointed at by for example Stanley Kurtz in his article “The End of Marriage in Scandinavia”, is what he calls the slow dying of marriage in this area of the world. Kurtz, a well-published research fellow at the Stanford based Hoover Institution, underlines the Nordic trend of separation between parenthood and marriage. In fact, a majority of first born children in Sweden, Denmark and Norway are born out-of-wedlock.¹⁸

The rise of families based on cohabitation and out-of-wedlock childbearing during the 1960s and on has increased the family dissolution in Scandinavia significantly. By the late 1990s, the Swedish marriage rate was one of the lowest in the world.¹⁹ David Popenoe at Rutgers

University points out that “Sweden leads the Western nations in the degree to which nonmarital cohabitation has replaced marriage.”²⁰

In addition, the divorce rate is high. In Sweden, with a birth rate of just above 100,000 children per year, more than 47,000 children per year experience dissolution of their family: 19,499 in families with married adults, 16,844 in families with cohabiting adults. In 2008, 733,000 children lived in families with both parents born in Sweden and married. 388,000 lived with cohabiting adults, 199,000 lived with a single mother and 54,000 with a single father, which means that 641,000 out of 1,374,000 children, or 47 percent, in Swedish families in which both parents were born in Sweden – the most stable group one could argue – lived in a non-traditional family, i.e. without married adults.²¹ (And this statistics doesn’t include how many of the children in the families who had married adults actually lived with their biological fathers and mothers. In fact, many likely live in a family with a step-father or step-mother.)

As a consequence of the low marriage rate, the divorce rate is only one part of the dissolution of the family. Since so many Scandinavians are rearing children outside of marriage, the truer situation of the family situation includes all separations among (non-married) cohabitation families, and these families break up at two or three times the rate of married parents.²² Accordingly, if a lower divorce rate suddenly appears in the statistics, this doesn’t necessarily mean that the family dissolution rate has changed, only that the pool of married people divorcing is less during a specific period of time. The trend of dissolution of the family is much wider than the divorce rate. Both the out-of-wedlock birthrate and the more complex family dissolution situation—including cohabiting families break up rate—need to be accounted for. Or in other words: More children are hurt than most statistics show. A British scholar, Duncan W. G. Timms, has, for example, found in a study of all children born in Stockholm in 1953, “that regardless of income or social status, parental breakup had negative consequences on children’s mental health.” In another study, from 2003, Gunilla Ringbäck Weitoft, et. al., “found that children of single parents in Sweden have more than double rates of mortality, severe morbidity, and injury [than] of children in two parent households.”²³ Also David Popenoe mentions this situation and comments: “We can only

speculate about the extent of psychological damage that future generations will suffer owing to today's family trends."²⁴

In Sweden, as in many other places, the 1960s and 1970s brought, as Kurtz stresses, contraception, abortion, and growing individualism. Sex was separated from procreation. Women moved out into the labor force. People were encouraged to pursue working careers and marry at later age. Married couples put off parenthood. Consequently, early divorce had fewer consequences for children, which weakened the earlier taboo against divorce. Later, many young couples were putting off children. They dispensed marriage and instead cohabited until children were desired. The next step followed: Why marry at all? Isn't it our love that matters? Not a piece of paper. And a step further: "Why should children change this?" The result is: Marriage is not important any longer for many Scandinavians.²⁵ The traditional family is seen as only one of many family constellations, and none of them is preferable over another from many feminists, socialists, radicals and liberals point of view, at least not the nuclear family.

The separation between parenthood and marriage has further been widened by the acceptance of same-sex marriages, clearly described by Kurtz. Also, this so called Nordic family pattern of same sex marriages (and families) is spreading across Europe and elsewhere. Swedish Historian Jens Rydström similarly argues that "gender equality and gay and lesbian rights are Scandinavia's new symbolic export products." He continues: "As social insurance systems collapse, reforms that cost nothing contribute to Scandinavian national pride."²⁶ Apparently, Rydström's choice of words, as "cost nothing" and "national pride," needs to be problematized. In a different lighting than Rydström's it could be argued that the political move on this issue points at tremendous costs, both morally and socially. Additionally, one could argue that a sense of sorrow is a more accurate description among many Swedes than a sense of national pride when it comes to the issue of same-sex marriages. Overall, the institution of marriage has further been undermined by the modern same-sex marriage debate and the following political decisions.

Denmark legalized de facto same-sex marriages, called partnerships, in 1989. Norway followed in 1993 and Sweden in 1994. Sweden went even further in 2009 and redefined marriage by including same-sex marriages under the marriage laws – only one out of seven

parties in the Parliament declared unwillingness to accept this political move: the Christian Democrats. The heavily politicized General Assembly of the Lutheran Church of Sweden followed in the footsteps of the Parliament and announced in October of 2009 that same-sex couples can be married in the Church of Sweden – the former National Church has for long had the legal rights to marry people in Sweden.²⁷

The legal rights to adopt children were accepted by the Swedish parliament on Feb. 1, 2003. However, no Swedish adoption center has implemented – or has been willing to implement – this new possibility in their work, since the countries from where children are adopted do not accept same-sex parents.

In the debate on same-sex marriage the Swedish gay and lesbian community argued that as many as 40-50,000 children in Sweden live in same-sex families. But statistics show that between 1998 and 2008, 706 children between 0 and 21 years of age lived in a family situation with two women, 43 children with a family with two males, in total 749 children under a period of ten years, not 40-50,000 children.²⁸

I think it is needed to say that it seems like it was social approval, not marriage itself that was the goal for the loud gay and lesbian movement. This viewpoint is also stressed by Danish social theorist Henning Bech and Norwegian sociologist Rune Halvorsen. And importantly, Bech, a gay thinker, dismisses the so called “conservative cause”, i.e. that same-sex marriage promotes monogamy. Instead, the “conservative cause” only served chiefly tactical purposes during a difficult political debate.²⁹

Married parenthood has, according to Kurtz, overall become a “minority phenomenon” in Scandinavia: “It has lost the critical mass required to have socially normative force.” Danish sociologists states that “marriage is no longer a precondition for settling a family – neither legally nor normatively... What defines and makes the foundation of the Danish family can be said to have moved from marriage to parenthood.”³⁰ The same could be said of Norway or Sweden.

In sum, most of the institutional bonds, have been taken away from the marriage institution- “economic dependence, legal definitions, religious sentiments, and family pressures.” The family situation is severely hurt through a changing of values brought on by the

secularization process. The main losers are, as Popenoe point out, the children. He argues that the very low marriage rate and high level of parental breakup should be “a cause for national soul searching.”³¹

What is said is of wide importance, especially since “Scandinavia has long been a bellwether of family change.” Kurtz argues that “scholars take the Swedish experience as a prototype for family developments that will, or could spread throughout the world.” Therefore, the situation in Sweden and Scandinavia might be of larger importance than a simple description of a small country in Northern Europe.

5. Conclusions

- Scandinavian countries have long have been leading examples of social welfare planning, including government supported child-care, generous parental rights and benefits.
- Scandinavian countries have also been leading when it comes to the modern or contemporary status of the family.
- Due to the fact that the Scandinavian countries have been heavily secularized, there are many signs of dissolution of the traditional family institution. Cohabiting, out-of-wedlock childbirths, liberalized divorce laws, same-sex marriages, etc., are all parts of the same trend, a political and societal journey on a road that leads to some sort of an end of the traditional marriage, including dissolution of the traditional family as a societal norm.
- This voyage has been, and still is, lead by socialist and liberal media and pressure groups, strongly supported by the celebrity culture and influential politicians from a wide spectrum of the political scenery.
- The impact on the family situation is enormous. Under the surface of the modern Scandinavian welfare states, the pillars of traditional values have eroded and many families are scattered and individuals, especially children, are spiritually wounded and psychologically hurt.

- Despite the present Scandinavian family situation, it might not be the family that is in the center of the crises – though the traditional family is and always will be a center piece of a healthy society. Instead, and more fundamentally, it is the secularized soul of the Scandinavian societies that is in deep, deep trouble.

¹ See Dag Thorkildsen, "Religious Identity and Nordic Identity" and Henrik Stenius, "The Good Life Is a Life of Conformity: The Impact of the Lutheran Tradition on Nordic Political Culture" in Sörensen & Stråh (eds.), *The Cultural Construction of Norden* (Scandinavian University Press, 1997).

² As a background, see for example the thought of sociologist Max Weber in *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (English editions appears from 1930. Weber particularly stresses the ethics in the Calvinist tradition.)

³ Henrik Stenius, "The Good Life Is a Life of Conformity: The Impact of the Lutheran Tradition on Nordic Political Culture." Article in Sörensen & Stråh (eds.), *The Cultural Construction of Norden* (Scandinavian University Press, 1997)

⁴ Kjell O. Lejon, "The Shifting of Value Foundation in Modern Swedish Policies: Political Parties and Family Policies." Article to be published in 2010.

⁵ Hans Wahlbom (1999), *Socialdemokratins och kyrkans första möte*. Stockholm: Carlsson Bokförlag (1999).

⁶ Kjell O. Lejon, "The Shifting of Value Foundation in Modern Swedish Policies: Political Parties and Family Policies." Article to be published in 2010.

⁷ David Popenoe, "Marriage and Family in the Scandinavian Experience." *Society*, May/June 2006, 72. Individualism, Popenoe argues, "takes place at the expense of established social institutions such as marriage", 72.

⁸ Kjell O. Lejon, "The Shifting of Value Foundation in Modern Swedish Policies: Political Parties and Family Policies"; Kjell O. Lejon, "Folk – Kyrka – Kyrkorum. Reflektioner om folkkyrkan och kyrkobyggnaderna" in *Pastoraltidskrift*, No. 46, 1999, 685-691.

⁹ Arnlaug Leira, *Working Parents and the Welfare State: Family Change and Policy Reform in Scandinavia* (Cambridge University Press, 2002). The Deborah Brennan's review in...

¹⁰ Arnlaug Leira, *Working Parents and the Welfare State: Family Change and Policy Reform in Scandinavia* (Cambridge University Press, 2002). Quote from Deborah Brennan's "Balancing work and family: A Scandinavian perspective." <http://www.australianreview.net/digest/2003/05/brennan.html> [2010-01-10].

¹¹ The figures were significantly lower in Norway (22 per cent) and in Finland (18 per cent). The differences can be explained by the fact that the parents in Norway and Finland have access to a cash benefit instead of using governmental supported childcare.

<http://www.australianreview.net/digest/2003/05/brennan.html> [2010-01-10].

¹² <http://www.australianreview.net/digest/2003/05/brennan.html> [2010-01-10].

¹³ <http://www.australianreview.net/digest/2003/05/brennan.html> [2010-01-10].

¹⁴ "Thus, extended leave, interrupted careers, prolonged part-time work, and absence from work for family reasons are overwhelmingly associated with women. "Men, it seems, are more likely to take up father-specific rights such as paternity leave and 'daddy leave', than to claim a share of gender-neutral entitlements such as parental leave.

<http://www.australianreview.net/digest/2003/05/brennan.html> [2010-01-10].

¹⁵ However, "cash benefits for childcare have been controversial in Finland and Sweden," since particularly feminist groups and women in the Social Democratic parties have seen this as means of "undermining publicly subsidized childcare and encouraging a gendered division of labor within the household." In Sweden, a center-conservative government introduced this kind of childcare allowance in 1994. It was abolished by the Social Democrats when they returned to power after the election the same year. It came back on July 1, 2008, as a possibility on the local governmental level after the return of a new center-conservative government in the election of 2006 (SEK 3,000/child 1-

3 years of age). Quote from <http://www.australianreview.net/digest/2003/05/brennan.html> [2010-01-10]. Recent development and figures can be found via governmental links, as <http://www.forsakringskassan.se>.

¹⁶ <http://www.australianreview.net/digest/2003/05/brennan.html> [2010-01-10].

¹⁷ David Popenoe, "Marriage and Family in the Scandinavian Experience." *Society*, May/June 2006, 71f.

¹⁸ Kurtz, "The End of Marriage in Scandinavia". *The Weekly Standard*, Vol. 9, Issue 20, 2004.

TheWeeklyStandard.com/content/Public/Articles/000/000/003/660=zypwj.asp [2010-01-10].

¹⁹ David Popenoe, "Marriage and Family in the Scandinavian Experience." *Society*, May/June 2006, 68.

²⁰ David Popenoe, "Marriage and Family in the Scandinavian Experience." *Society*, May/June 2006, 68.

²¹ Statistiska Centralbyrån, <http://www.scb.se> [2010-01-10].

²² Kurtz, "The End of Marriage in Scandinavia". *The Weekly Standard*, Vol. 9, Issue 20, 2004.

TheWeeklyStandard.com/content/Public/Articles/000/000/003/660=zypwj.asp [2010-01-10].

²³ Kurtz, "The End of Marriage in Scandinavia". *The Weekly Standard*, Vol. 9, Issue 20, 2004.

TheWeeklyStandard.com/content/Public/Articles/000/000/003/660=zypwj.asp [2010-01-10].

²⁴ David Popenoe, "Marriage and Family in the Scandinavian Experience." *Society*, May/June 2006, 70.

²⁵ Kurtz, "The End of Marriage in Scandinavia". *The Weekly Standard*, Vol. 9, Issue 20, 2004.

TheWeeklyStandard.com/content/Public/Articles/000/000/003/660=zypwj.asp [2010-01-10].

²⁶ See for example the abstract of National and Gay Marriage in Scandinavia.

http://allacademic.com/meta/p_mla_apa_research_citation/0/2/8/4/9/p28490_index.html [2010-01-10].

²⁷ The decision by the General Assembly of the Church of Sweden can be found via <http://www.svenskkyrkan.se/default.aspx?di=310271>

[2010-01-10]. The website includes links to some relevant documents in the debate on this issue.

²⁸ See information via <http://www.scb.se> [2010-01-10].

²⁹ Kurtz, "The End of Marriage in Scandinavia". *The Weekly Standard*, Vol. 9, Issue 20, 2004.

TheWeeklyStandard.com/content/Public/Articles/000/000/003/660=zypwj.asp [2010-01-10].

³⁰ Kurtz, "The End of Marriage in Scandinavia". *The Weekly Standard*, Vol. 9, Issue 20, 2004.

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³¹ David Popenoe, "Marriage and Family in the Scandinavian Experience." *Society*, May/June 2006, 70.