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Church studies and church theory as a topic in Nordic practical theology

Ulla Schmidt

Überblick

In den letzten Jahrzehnten ist das praktisch-theologische wie das kirchliche Interesse an Kirchentheorie in Skandinavien erheblich gewachsen. So gibt es immer mehr empirische Studien zu den Aktivitäten von Kirchen und Gemeinden, zu ihrer Mitgliedschaft und ihrem Verhältnis zu Staat und Gesellschaft. Wichtiger noch erscheint, dass diese genauere Erforschung der kirchlichen Praxis mehr und mehr als theologisch verstanden wird: als wesentlicher Beitrag zu einer sach- und zeitgemäßen Ekklesiologie.

1. Introduction

The massive increase in empirical studies in various aspects of churches: their organisation, interactions and members' religious practices and beliefs – what I will in the following label »church studies« – are among the most remarkable changes to Nordic practical theology over the last decades. Well into the 1980s, Nordic practical theological engagement with the field of church and churches typically reflected on the relatively stable and ideal institutional structures, liturgies, offices and ministries, in light of key sources of Christian doctrine and tradition, i.e. strongly affected by a dogmatic approach.¹ Practical theology was the discipline »bridging« dogmatic ecclesiology with ecclesial realities. This has changed. First, more systematic and methodologically developed empirical studies of actual church realities have emerged, at first within social sciences, but gradually finding their way into practical theology and interdisciplinary efforts as well. Second, a more profound change is that empirical studies of actual church practices are becoming relevant to the understanding of what church is, as theologically productive.

After briefly presenting relevant facts concerning basic church statistics and data, I will go further into two research areas that have been central on the agenda of practical theological and interdisciplinary church studies in the Nordic context in recent years.

2. Churches, members and activities: church studies from church statistics

In the 1960s and especially from the 1970s the near monopoly status of the evangelical Lutheran majority churches in the Nordic countries slowly began to decline, making their position in population and society a question rather than a self-evident given. This situation pressed for knowledge concerning churches, their activities and members' participation in them. Until 1980s, lack of data hampered this kind of research. A combination of irregular censuses, unsystematic surveys on religious issues, and church statistics

¹ A Norwegian textbook in church studies from the early 1980ies, *Olav Skjevesland: Levende kirke. Om nådegaver, tjenester og menighetsbygging*, Oslo 1984, hardly has any traces of engaging empirical insights into actual manifestations of churches and congregations, whereas a recent textbook gives ample space to this: *Hans Raun Iversen: Ny praktisk teologi. Kristendommen, den enkelte og kirken*, Fredriksberg 2018.

that were more or less well developed, more or less extensive, and more or less reliable, constituted the data basis in the early phases of this research.² The more systematic and comprehensive church statistics and surveys that have gradually developed in the Nordic countries since the 1970s, although with considerable variation, have allowed for analyses of tendencies and changes over time.³

These analyses invariably show a slow but steady decline in support of these majority churches in all countries. Percentages of the population that are members decrease, and so do percentages of infants that are baptized, of adolescents that go through confirmation, of marriages celebrated in church, and of deceased commemorated through a church ceremony. And as is well-documented, out of those who are members and do take part in the church rituals, only a few support the classic doctrines of the churches and/or take part in worships or other church activities to any extent.

3. Reforming churches

Institutional reforms, in particular regarding relations between church and state, have been on the agenda for especially the three Scandinavian majority churches for the past decades, and spurred research into the churches' changing roles – and their relations to broader religious and societal change. These were to a large degree interdisciplinary projects that were not limited to practical theology.

A prominent example is the *Swedish* research project »From state church to free folk church«, funded by the public research council, that investigated religious and societal changes in the context of the disestablishment of the Church of Sweden in 2000.⁴ The changing role of institutional church was understood in light of two processes of change. First, a long-ranging historical process evolving since the 19th century, from an agricultural society held together by the traditional authority of the church, to 20th century industrial, as well as secularized society of sector differentiation, welfare secured through state bureaucracy, and freed from religion's institutional authority.⁵ Second, a more contemporary process of change, characterized by late-modern culture's valuing of expressions of freedom, individual meaning, and consumption. For the majority of the population the significance of the institutional church now is that it allows identification with a larger »chain of memory«, it is a place for connecting with a greater collective. The long-term relations with the Lutheran majority churches, which the majority of the population in all Nordic countries still maintain, express valuing of the cultural, collective memory that these

**A larger chain
of memory**

² A comprehensive study of religious change in the Nordic countries from 1930 to 1980 explicates difficulties with insufficient data, especially for the earlier phase. Göran Gustafsson (Hg.): *Religiös förändring i Norden 1930 – 1980*, Malmö/København/Reykjavik/Helsingfors/Oslo 1985.

³ The Church Research Institute of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland every fourth year publishes an elaborate report on many aspects of church activities; e.g. *Kimmo Ketola et al.*: *Luthersk Delaktighet. Evangelisk-Lutherska kyrkan i Finland 2012 – 2015: En undersökning om kyrkan och finländarna*, Tammerfors 2016. Church of Sweden research department publishes shorter, annual reports with basic data <https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/analys> (16.01.20). In Norway, Institute for Research in Church, Religion and Worldviews, used to publish regular reports on basic registered church data (see for example *Sunniva E. Holberg/Ånund Brøttveit*: *Tilstandsrapport for Den norske kirke 2014*, Oslo 2014), but this is now done by the Church of Norway itself. In Denmark Statistics Denmark makes basic church data available, but they are not systematically analysed and researched.

⁴ Vgl. *Anders Bäckström/Ninna Edgardh Beckmann/Per Pettersson*: *Religiös förändring I norra Europa. En studie av Sverige "Från statskyrka till fri folkkyrka"*. Slutrapport, Uppsala 2004.

⁵ Vgl. a.a.O., 154-163.

churches make available for new generations. But at the same time, they are also places of a deeply embedded individual freedom, with low demands on beliefs and practices. The changing significance of church is to be a communicative arena, where individual freedom can connect with larger collective identities.⁶

A more recent *Danish* research project, »What money can't buy«, takes a similar approach.⁷ Here as well a main point is that a dominant function and significance of the majority church is to be an institution of a shared culture and tradition, something individuals can »tap into« in order to connect with a larger, common identity, but without abandoning individual autonomy and authenticity. Several studies of concrete initiatives analyse how actual church practices embody and pursue this significance.⁸

Interdisciplinary research projects of centralized reforms in Church of *Norway*, such as worship and liturgy reform, reform of Christian formation⁹, and reforms of church administration, document how planned reforms can also be understood as intended attempts to develop church structures and practices that sustain this double feature. The so-called democracy-reform tried to engage wider groups of members in church elections and democratic organs by appealing to their

Embodying ecclesiological ideals

»ownership« and stakes in a church according to their perception of relevance.¹⁰ That way, it tried to make practices of church governance embody these dual features of tradition, memory and collective identity, and individual search for meaning and relevance.

In sum, this type of research shows how ecclesiological ideals and principles are embodied through unplanned as well as intended changes, but also how they develop through and are affected by interaction with broader societal and religious changes, not merely a product of ecclesial agents.

4. Studies of local church and congregations

Another cluster of research focuses on local expressions of church, in the sense of congregations and other forms of locally organized Christian religiosity. Early examples emerged within social sciences throughout the 1970s and 1980s.¹¹ A common interest in these often neglected cases of congregational studies, was to map congregations in greater detail as social systems, and not merely as fixed institutions: their activities, patterns of practices and participation, culture and history, and intersections with local community and civil society. A particular interest concerned the ways in which religious faith and practices

⁶ Vgl. a.a.O., 161.

⁷ The project was funded by the Danish Research Fund and led by Hans Raun Iversen, University of Copenhagen. Further information, including forthcoming publications: https://teol.ku.dk/cfk/igangvaerende_forskning/forskning/whatmoneycantbuy/ (16.01.20).

⁸ One example could be studies of »baby hymn singing«, a fairly novel and highly popular initiative in the several Nordic churches. *Aino-Elina Kilpeläinen/Marie Vejrup Nielsen*: Teaching Rituals: New Church Activities and Religious Education, in: *IJPT* 22 (2018), 23-39. Church of Norway's reform of Christian formation can be understood in this light, with their emphasis on initiatives that can gain broad participation and introduce to key elements of Christian tradition at the same time.

⁹ For a presentation of research on this, see Afdal's and Tveito's article.

¹⁰ Vgl. *Ulla Schmidt*: Evaluering av demokratireformen i Den norske kirke. Sluttrapport, Oslo 2011; *dies.*: Church Reforms and Public Reforms, in: *Harald Askeland/Ulla Schmidt* (Hg.): Church Reform and Leadership of Change, Eugene 2016, 38-55.

¹¹ Vgl. *Otto Hauglin*: Rapport fra Nærby. En religionssosiologisk analyse av en norsk drabantbymenighet, Oslo 1970; *Knut Lundby*: Troskollektivet: En studie i folkekirkens oppløsning i Norge, Oslo 1987; *Inger-Marie Borge-sen*: Folk og folkekirke. Kirkens plads i menneskers hverdagsliv og tankeverden, n.p. 1991.

unfolded – or not – among church members with different kinds of relations with congregation, in particular, how larger groups of »distanced members« practiced and assessed their relations with church. They all asserted that these less active members were not an indication of decline and disappearance of religious sentiments and outlooks, but a different form of religiosity, primarily connected to specific, extraordinary events and situations, and less likely to be displayed in regular religious activities or fervent beliefs. According to Hauglin's very early study of its kind, what separated the most committed members from the less committed, was differences in participation rather than differences in beliefs.¹² Inger-Marie Børgeesen's Danish study of four urban and rural congregations interestingly uncovered the fluctuating character of people's relation with the church through different life situations and circumstances. Knut And Lundby's study of an inner-city Oslo parish argued that initiatives aiming at strengthening relations, participation and beliefs among members, in fact risked alienating these segments of less active members who would feel unable to »live up to« expected levels of commitment.

Harald Hegstad's study from 1996, »Folkekirke og trosfellesskap« [folk church and community of belief]¹³ combined an ethnographically inspired investigation of congregations with a more explicit theological objective. The study analysed three strategically selected congregations with regard to practices, organizational structures, members' participation, beliefs and relations with the congregation, interactions with local environment, and religious culture more generally. The overall question was to understand how relations between church and congregation as a place for religious affiliation for the majority of the population, and as an arena for a smaller group of religiously active believers, played out in these three congregations. The study described these as two relatively distinct forms of affiliation, existing side by side in all three congregations, but also concluded that they mutually condition each other rather than conflict. These empirical findings were then developed into a theological argument, suggesting that a viable ecclesiology needs to comprise both understandings, and not prioritize one over the other as a more »genuine« expression of church.¹⁴ This study was – and still is – a pioneering contribution to ethnographically inspired, practical ecclesiological studies in a Nordic context and beyond. However, in today's Nordic majority churches, a study like this would probably not find those forms of affiliation in two relatively distinct groups of church members.

Double binding in parish

Swedish Jonas Idestrom's study of a local Church of Sweden parish at the outskirts of Stockholm further intensifies an explicit theological perspective in empirical studies of congregations.¹⁵ He focuses on how the congregation as a »social body« can be viewed as a local, concrete manifestation of the identity of Church of Sweden: Who belong to and constitute this body, how is it formed, and how does it relate to its surroundings? The objective is to identify an »implicit ecclesiology« as a combined result of these local manifestations and ecclesiological theory.¹⁶

¹² Vgl. Hauglin 1970, 168. A Danish report also saw popular religion rather than no religion as typical for the Danes, but unlike Hauglin claimed that the two were opposed and mutually exclusive; *Jakob Rod/Per Salomonsen/Bent Smidt Hansen: Folkereligion i Danmark i dag*, København 1980.

¹³ *Harald Hegstad: Folkekirke og trosfellesskap. Et kirkesosiologisk og ekklesiologisk grunnproblem belyst gjennom en undersøkelse av tre norske lokalmenigheter*, Trondheim 1996.

¹⁴ Vgl. Hegstad 1996, 411-413.

¹⁵ Vgl. *Jonas Idestrom: Lokal kyrklig identitet. En studie av implicit ekklesiologi med eksemplet Svenska kyrkan i Flemingsberg*, Skellefteå 2009.

¹⁶ Vgl. Idestrom 2009, 24.

The study is in line with a number of ethnographic studies of congregations, especially within an Anglo-American context,¹⁷ in seeing local churches as doing ecclesiologies, and not only reflecting them as preconceived theories.¹⁸ But it also illustrates a frequent dilemma of these approaches, namely how to relate theological perspective and empirical analysis. Following an abductive approach, Ideström sets an ecclesiological starting point in the church as the body of Christ as confessed in the Eucharistic liturgy, and further explicated into an idea of church as »social body«.¹⁹ But whereas the empirical analysis

The dilemma of empirical theology

is used to uncover and account for concrete manifestations of church as social body, it is not used to challenge or modify this idea as a basic starting point itself. The possibility of alternative, supplementing or even rivalling ecclesiological starting points, or rivalling interpretations of this key idea about church as body of Christ, is not explored in the concrete practices. In other words, to what extent this particular congregation views being the »body of Christ« as its most fundamental identity, is not in itself made subject to empirical study or practical criticism, or really of any interest.

This illustrates a more profound dilemma that continues to haunt this kind of empirical ecclesiology. Eager to study congregations empirically and ethnographically as a form of theology, they still worry that without invoking principal theological ideas external to the empirically described actual practices, it will not be a theological study, but »merely« a social scientific one. Clearly this dilemma, and how one responds to it, is highly significant to the understanding of empirical church studies as practical theology.

5. New developments

Without any ambition of doing justice to current trends, at least two seem to stand out. First, various forms of participatory research or *action research*, where trained researchers work together with untrained »co-researchers« in the field, seem to be growing. In Norway, a first phase of a decade long project on »congregational development in the folk church« has recently ended.²⁰ The idea of this project was to develop a model for exploring, challenging and developing congregational life and practices, as well as researching the implementation of this model together with the congregations. In Denmark, projects that both implement and research developmental initiatives in congregations »as they happen« are on their way.²¹ It is probably still too soon to assess the merit of this kind of studies in terms of their contributions to research in church theory. But it is clearly an approach that is gaining traction, also due to its potential in connecting »professional« researchers, institutional stakeholders and agents.

Second, research where churches, congregations and communities are *compared* across denominational traditions as well as across national boundaries, has a clear potential for understanding connections between actual expressions and practices of churches, and

¹⁷ For instance Mary McClintock Fulkerson, Todd Whitmore, Christian Scharen and several others.

¹⁸ Referring in particular to *Roger Haight: Christian Community in History*, Vol. I – III, New York/London 2004–2008; *Nicholas M. Healy: Church, World and the Christian Life*, Cambridge 2000.

¹⁹ Ideström 2009, 35–46.

²⁰ Vgl. <https://www.mf.no/kom/utvikling/muv-utvikler-menigheter> (16.01.20). Unfortunately not presented in non-Scandinavian publications yet.

²¹ E.g. a doctoral dissertation is developed at University of Copenhagen: <https://teol.ku.dk/ast/ansatte/?pure=da/persons/205332> (16.01.20).

their wider cultural, societal and historical – as well as legal and economic – contexts. This approach has already been widely exploited in a Nordic context, where two larger projects have compared religious changes and religion in public spheres, including religious plurality as well as church-state-relations for majority and minority churches.²²

What is so far much less explored, is comparison which looks beyond a Nordic context, as well as comparison of churches of different denominations as well as religious traditions with regard to practices, organisation, beliefs and values. A newly established network, Consortium for International Surveys of Congregations,²³ is intended to do just that. What this kind of research can bring into practical theology is on one hand to look at churches and congregations less as defined and integrated by a shared, common identity (the way Ideström and others have assumed them to be), and more in terms of collectives of different practices. On the other, to improve understanding of how different factors affect not only ecclesial life, but also practiced ecclesiologies.

Prof. Dr. Ulla Schmidt ist Professorin für Ethik, Diakonie und Praktische Theologie an der Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaftlichen Fakultät der Universität Aarhus. Sie leitet mehrere interdisziplinäre und internationale Projekte u.a. zur Kirchentheorie sowie zu religiösen Praktiken im Umfeld des Todes. E-Mail: teous@cas.au.dk

²² Vgl. Gustafsson 1985; *Inger Furseth* (Hg.): *Religious complexity in the Public Sphere. Comparing Nordic Countries*, London 2018.

²³ Vgl. www.cas.au.dk/cisc (20.02.20).