

Poverty and Churches in Denmark

By Hans Raun Iversen

“Far more of metal, so red and so white
Others got from mountains and plunder.
Danes, anyway, have daily bread,
Even in the hut of the poor man.
That’s when in richness we have gone far,
When few have too much and fewer too
little”.

A Christian vision of social equality?

Thousands of social and political gatherings in Denmark have been opened by the famous national songs, *Langt højere bjerge* (Far higher mountains), which ends up as quoted above. It is composed by the Danish national bard and modern father of the Danish Church and Nation, N. F. S. Grundtvig (1783-1872) at the occasion of a Danish expedition to West India in 1820. Grundtvig was a liberal in his own way. Especially from app. 1830, where he had had his first trip to England, he was for religious, political and economic freedom. The idea of a social welfare state, where each individual citizen as such has the right to economic help from the common basket of state and municipality was far from his mind. Even so, as a Christian, he would like there to be food also for the poor Lazarus – and he surely wanted there to be as few poor people as possible in our small country. Assumable Grundtvig is here drawing on the story of how God nurtured the Israelites by sending Manna to them in the Dessert: The people were instructed to gather as much as needed, two quarts for each member of a household, ending up to the result, that “those who gathered much did not have too much, and those who gathered less did not have too little. Each had gathered just what he needed” (Ex 26:18). It is a similar vision of divine distribution of Gods own gifts which is behind the words of Grundtvig in this famous Danish National national song.

Obviously Grundtvig’s words are open to interpretations. One could be that it is all right to have e.g. ten percent really rich people if we only have less who are really poor. The general understanding is, however, that there should be social and economic equality among the Danes, at least in as far as this demand does not hurt the freedom of the individual to engage in investment, trade and industry. Unclear as it is, it is probably this theological statement, which has, for almost 200 years, been and still is a common norm for social politics in Denmark. Nobody would ever run for election or go for any other higher position in Denmark without swearing to Grundtvig’s statement. On the one hand it is open for manipulations, not least in the world of today, where – in a

global context – the majority of the Danes surely have far too much! On the other hand it seems to have been guiding our society – saving us from getting very many terrible rich people, and also from having many Danish citizens poor enough to die from hunger during the last 200 years. Denmark has no high mountains, nor does it have any deep valleys. We are, in all respects, mentally as well as socially, the plain Danes living on the plains (Iversen 1997:140-143).

When to day in Denmark as in most parts of Europe we have social political slogans like “rights always goes with duties” and “to eat you must work” (or at least have compulsory job training while on social benefit!) this is far from being a Biblical allusion or a theological reflected social political statement, even though 2 Thessalonians 3:10 does say something very similar. This new politics of the 1990’ies is simply a product of economic calculations pointing to the imbalance between the size of the labour force and the expenditures to social benefits in the welfare society of to day and, in fact, in any foreseeable future. One word by Jesus does, however, seem to be true all over, also in Denmark: “You will for always have poor people with you” (John 12:8). In Copenhagen as in all major cities of Europe you can’t get up from the Underground without meeting them. In the countryside you may escape meeting them, but there may be even more of them, where they hide themselves from the busy eyes of the rest of us.

Poverty in Denmark

Generally speaking conditions of life still seem to be improving in Denmark. The percent of households with an automatic dish washer has raised from 23 to 46 from 1989 to 1998 and the percent of families with a Personal Computer has raised from twelve to 60 during the same period. Even though we have high rates of death due to cancer (connected to high rates of smokers) the average lifetime has raised to 75 years for a man and 80 for a woman. When looking at the income available for individual consumption equality improved a bit during the 1980’ies, whereas the tendencies towards inequality have been growing during the 1990’ies, where we had a Social Democratic government (Bonke and Munk: 2002:7f.)!

Placed among the social welfare societies of Scandinavia Denmark ranks rather low in Eurostat’s statistics on poverty. In 1999 among the EU-countries only Sweden, Germany and France used a higher percentage of the BNP than Denmark for social expenditures (Danish Statistical Yearbook 2002:163). We are now approaching a situation where half of the population receives some form of income transfer from state or municipality.

The percentage of relatively poor households, i.e. those having less than half of the median income, is 9,2 in Denmark and thus a little higher than in Germany, France, Holland and Belgium (Bonke and Munk 2002:13). The percentage of those who consider themselves to be poor is only 7,5 – and thus considerable lower than the average for Europe (Bonke and Munk 2002:13) . Thus generally speaking the number of poor people in Denmark is relatively low – according to conventional calculations at least. Poverty has two main courses in Denmark. One course is social heritage. For people who have been poor for a long time, or comes from poor families, it is hard to climb the social ladder towards better economic conditions. There is a considerable tendency for children of poor parents to carry on in the way of their parents and thus remain among the poorer parts of society like their parents (Bonke and Munk 2002: 21f.). The other main course behind poverty is psychological deceases and social de route due to personal disasters or abuse, which make people unable to administer the little resources they have, so that they end up poor off, and maybe even homeless and begging in the streets.

We have no precise figures for the number of homeless people, since homeless people may e.g. be registered as living in a home, where they are not able to stay for psychological or other personal reasons. Dr. Preben Brandt, who has for many years worked with and researched into the social-medical and social-psychological situation in the poorest areas of Copenhagen has suggested the following definition of the group of poor and homeless people in Copenhagen: “They are people who are “wrong” in relation to what we others consider to be “right”; they behave differently. They do not live in a way, that we find right, and can not utilise society’s institutions in the term’s broadest sense. From the point of view of ordinary citizens the homeless are different in a negative sense, and we exclude them from our ordinary social life. We do not like them” (Koch-Nielsen 2002:3).

Among “the outsiders” and “wrongdoers” we also tend to place immigrants and refugees in Denmark. For the last few year things have turned from bad to very bad, when looking at the economic and mental conditions the Danish society is giving its immigrants. Strict discrimination is taking place as refugees and immigrants are now far from having the same civil rights and the same access to social benefits as ordinary Danish citizens. Add to this that it has been suggested that the right to vote at local elections should be taken away from immigrants. When the social right of the 20th century and even the political rights of the 19th century are not respected in the case of immigrants in Denmark it seems to be fairly much connected to the fact, that the Danes tend to behave as a tribal people. To be a proper Dane you have better look and work like us! Even

so we have many strange looking immigrants (the number of Muslims 2002 is estimated to 195.000), but Islam and other immigrant religions have no official recognition in Denmark. This is a major reason why e.g. the Muslims so far have not been able to build Mosques and establish their own funeral places in Denmark. Denmark does not really want its immigrants to feel at home in our country. The lack of civil, cultural and social recognition of the immigrants is most likely to contribute to segregation of major parts of this new group in the Danish society – causing poverty for maybe many generations among major parts of the immigrant population (cf. Ploug 2002: 5f.)

The economy of the nation, i.e. the growth of GNP, is always more important than social equality among the people in Europe of today. Also in Denmark social politics are determined by the capitalist market. First we go for growth and competition, and only as we succeed in gaining a higher GNP, we consider the possibility of doing more for the poor. This is true for a Social Democratic as well as the present right wing (liberal-conservative) government. Only in special cases such as the case of the immigrants there are differences between the political parties in terms of social politics. In spite of nice political statements from the minister of social affairs and a lot of good will by many individual politicians in major parts of parliament, we are not to expect better social politics. In fact we are to expect more cut downs in the income of poor people in the time to come. These are the conditions if you want to compete at the world market and encourage and please the majority of the working and voting population, who think that it is only fair to have good, i.e. better and better, standards of living in return for the hard work, required in most places of work today.

Social ethics of the churches in Denmark

As the only Church in the world The Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Denmark is labelled a Folk Church in the national constitution, dating back to 1849. Practically this church is “the weakest monopoly church in the world” (Iversen 1997). Comparatively it is weaker than any church (or major religion) anywhere in the world in terms of attendance, conformity of the population with its teaching and expectations to the church from its members. On the other hand for the great majority of the Danes the church is a monopoly church without any competing alternatives. Due to some hesitation among young parents around the practice of infant baptism during the last three decades and to immigration of Non-Christians the rate of membership in The Folk Church has fallen to 84 percent of the population in 2002. The rate of e.g. church funerals is however very stable around 92 percent, as most people see no other place to turn to at the time of the death of a relative. Even

though the constitution since 1849 has foreseen, that the Folk Church should have its own legal leadership, for a number of reasons the Folk Church still has the state as legislator, administrator and legal subject. This has resulted to the fact, that the Folk Church has no official teaching, except for what can be found in the Bible and the Lutheran Creeds (Confessio Augustana and The Small Catechism by Luther). Thus there are no official statements from the Folk Church concerning modern, ethical and social questions.

The non-Lutheran churches are few and small in Denmark, only amounting to a little more than 1 percent on the population in terms of their membership. The largest among them is today, due to immigration, the Roman Catholic Church, which does of course have strong social ethical teaching – and also undertakes social activities such as relief work in poor countries (Caritas). The same is true for some of the protestant “free” churches in Denmark, such as the Methodist church, which – in spite of having less than 2000 members – carries a good load of social projects. Most well known among poor people and even in the public is the Salvation Army (also with less than 2000 members). The Army is very active in distributing “the sacrament of helping” in poor parts of major towns in Denmark.

During major parts of the 20th century, especially from 1950 to 1990, the secular welfare state ideology has been very strong, not least among members and pastors of the Folk Church in Denmark. This trend, to which the majority of the pastors belonged up to 1990, had a number of reasons and background factors: 1) As in many West European countries the social welfare state was successful in making people believe, that social progress would continue within the framework of the social welfare state and thus private, not to speak of religious, initiatives, looked conservative or nostalgically misplaced. 2) Due to this understanding of social politics and probably even more to the position of the church as a legal part of the state, having the state as its legal subject and the pastors as civil servants of the state, the pastors have been very keen in developing a theology, where preaching and listening to sermons are the only legal activities of the church. Karl Barth, Martin Luther, Søren Kierkegaard and even Grundtvig have been interpreted in a way, so that they legitimized the absolute detachment of the church from any sort of social responsibility. As politics should be separated from Christianity so should social responsibility as it was placed as a political matter, resting with state and municipality – and, of course, to a certain limited extent with the single individual Christian in his or her daily life in family or place of work (Iversen in Nissen (ed.) 2001: 35-39).

After 1990 it has been recognised in growing parts of the Folk Church that the secular oriented, individualistic, kerygmatic theology is very one sided, if not heretic, when seen in the perspective of Bible and church history. There are many reasons behind this change in theology. Some of them are these: 1) There is no need to go for a social welfare state which is better than the communist states, when there are no communist states left. In stead we can try to find a new balance between state, market and civil society as agents in cooperation, also when it comes to social politics. 2) At the same time the state is being reduced as many parts of its work are being “delegated” to agents at the market or in civil society. This is also beginning to challenge the church: It is not safe any longer only to swear to the state, as the state is no longer a sovereign state, but rather a responsive, negotiating and coordinating agent in our society (Bundesen). This means that the church, especially at the parish level, where it has 100 years of tradition for parish boards taking responsibility for local church work together with the pastors, is again taking up local social responsibilities. 3) A long side this political and social developments also theology is developing strongly, discovering and rediscovering social dimensions and ethical challenges in Christian theological traditions as well as in contextual theologies from other parts of the world.

This is some of the background for the decision of the bishops of the Folk Church in 1999 to form a committee to review and give recommendations about the diaconal work of the Folk Church. According to the state church sort of organisation of the Folk Church at the national level there is no board or synod to receive, discuss and officially approve the analysis and recommendations in the committee’s report “Diacony – an integrated dimension in the life of the Folk Church” (Nissen (ed.) 2001). Even so the reports picks ups, registers and points to a new trend in the Folk Church in terms of social responsibility of the church. The social work which has always existed in different shapes in the Folk Church is being recognised, legitimised and encouraged in the report. Briefly speaking the report argues that Sunday service, Christian teaching, mission work and diaconal work are equal as areas of work for any church, even though the actual priority given to different sorts of church work in the Folk Church must always depend on the decisions of parish boards and volunteer church organisation, who carry the practical burden of the work.

Church work among poor people

Social work in the Folk Church is basically organised in two ways: at the parish level and at national level in free diaconal organisations – in line with the two traditions which developed in diaconal work in Germany in the wave of pietism (Nissen (ed.) 2001: 7-15).

At the parish level the parish boards in 1903 got the responsibility to have collections in the church for the poor people in the parish. Regular collections for poor people are still required in the church legislation, but practically most congregation collect money for many other purposes than aid to the poor – and some collect very little and very rarely. Especially in Copenhagen and other towns it is common to have a parish based Congregational Care Organisation (according to the German concept of *Gemeindepflege*). 35 percent of the congregations organise aid to poor people at Christmas especially, in major towns 88 percent of the congregations are involved in this (Nissen (ed.) 2001:239). More parishes are, however, involved in different sorts of work for elderly people (74 percent), often social gatherings. In some parishes there are other social activities such as visitation teams, meeting and eating places for lonely and poor people etc. Work at the parish level is to day being strengthened by the introduction of catechetical and diaconal parish workers, who are now taking a lead in the social work in app. 200 of the biggest of app. 2000 parishes in the Folk Church.

The most comprehensive and intensive church work among poor people is organised by volunteer, so called free, diaconal organisations, with little or no formal links to the Folk Church as it is organised within the legal framework of the state. You may distinguish between four sorts of diaconal work carried out by diaconal organisations in Denmark:

The most important part may be what can be called *extreme diacony*, where the organisations provide food, shelter, medical care, human contact and ultimately possibility for help to change the situation of your life, to the most poor and downtrodden among us: homeless peoples, those suffering from abuse, often combined with prostitution, mentally disturbed people, who can not be placed at institutions etc. Especially The Church Army (founded in 1912 with English inspiration) is very active here – with more than 5000 volunteers lead by full time employed social workers and pastors placed in most of the major towns in Denmark. The experience of The Church Army for almost 100 years is that there are always new groups of people who need attention at “the county roads and lanes” (Lk 14,23), where the Church Army consider it its calling to be at work. This work has placed the pastor leading the Church Army as the most respected advocate for the weakest placed among the poor.

The classical form of diaconal work may be labelled *pioneering diacony*. Historically most forms of social and health work known in our society to day have been pioneered by the volunteer church organisations. This is still taking place, e.g. in the introduction of hospices, which are decisive not only for the terminal patients admitted to them, but also for the possibility of

resistance to suggestions about new legislation allowing doctors to give active death help to dying people. Both of the two major old deaconess houses in Copenhagen have spent considerable resources pioneering hospice work during the 1990'ies.

A third form of diaconal work is *alternative social work*, where volunteer organisations attempt to provide better ways of doing things compared to what is provided by state and municipality. This is especially the case in preventive work, e.g. among alcoholics and drug abusers, who are always at risk to end up among the poor and outsiders. Also in terms of creating places for different sorts of job training and protective jobs parish churches and diaconal organisations are involved.

Fourthly some diaconal organisations today also undertake what you could call *competitive diacony*. This is especially the case where state and municipalities want to privatise social work, e.g. home care among disabled and elderly people, who can not care for themselves. Wherever volunteer, including church organisations, can set a better standard, than those found in public or private organisations, it is worth while doing so.

The best parts of the work among poor people are often organised as “welfare-mix”, i.e. having inputs and participants from different agents, such as state, municipality, parishes, church organisations, humanitarian organisation or others. This is a great challenge and at the same time a great opportunity especially for the Folk Church, which is still to a large degree an integrated part of the Danish society (Nissen (ed.) 2001:149-164).

It is calculated that 1.2 million people are involved in some form of volunteer work in Denmark. Of these 300.000 are active in social work. 50.000 of the volunteers being active in social work are in social work organised by churches and diaconal organisation. In spite of fears of the opposite there seem to be a growing number of people who will let themselves be recruited to volunteer social work in church and society, provided that there are leaders in church and society, who organise good structures for the work and call on volunteers to join it. If we like it or not volunteer giving of money and not least time seems to be a necessary way forward if there shall be any hope for a better future for the poor among us (cf. Habermann 2001 and Nissen (ed.) 2001:240f.).

Conclusion

At the time of Reformation in 1536 the conquering King Christian III and thus the state expropriated the church and all its belongings in Denmark. The state took the property, the right to

tithe, the solid infrastructure, the pastors and thus the ideological apparatus from the church. This may be the most important historical precondition of the modern Danish social welfare society. It is arguable that the state also took over the social project of the church, even though the state only 400 years later was economically and politically in a position to realise the “Christian” vision of social equality in the form of the social welfare state (Knudsen 2002). To day it seems obvious, that state and municipality will never be able to realise the full vision by caring properly for those poor people, who are most vulnerable. Even if the state will give them enough bread and money to survive from day to day, they can not live from that alone. In order to have a life with the experience of love and at least some hopes for changes to the better some day, other must step in. The Churches in Denmark, including the Folk Church, are challenged to be among these others – teaching church members social responsibility and organising work among the poor.

Last but not least it must here be pointed that there is a strong connection between experiences from volunteer social work, the general attitudes towards the poor in the public and the actual social politics of state and municipality (cf. Nissen (ed.) 2001:230). Only those who give their time and have the courage to be close to the poor and outsiders can convincingly argue that the poor are at least as human as the rest of us. If we don’t care for the poor we destroy the human standards of our society! Only if the experience from work among the poor is kept alive among ordinary people, they will have the strength to demand social justice and ethical standards in our society. And the politicians, who are after all people from the people, depending on the goodwill of the people, will adjust the social politics accordingly. Diaconal practice among the poor is thus a cornerstone in the fight against the many forms of Social Darwinism, which are sneaking in all over. Only those who attend to the poor, can be proper advocates for the poor.

Literature:

Bach Iversen, J. C. et al.: Kirken og det civile samfund, Det Økumeniske Center, Århus 2000

Bonke, Jens and Munk, Martin D.: Fordeling af velfærd I Danmark. Resultater og perspektiver fra Socialforskningsinstituttets forskning om velfærdsfordeling, Socialforskningsinstituttet, Copenhagen 2002.

Bundesen, Peter, Henriksen, Lars Skov og Jørgensen, Anja: Finaltropi, Selvchjælp og Interesseorganisering. Frivillige organisationer i dansk socialpolitik 1849-190'erne, Odense Universitetsforlag, Odense 2001.

Good News Bible. The Bible in Today's English Version.

Habermann, Ulla: En postmoderne helgen? - om motiver til frivillighed, Lund Dissertaions in Social Work 3, Lund 2001

Iversen, Hans Raun: Leaving the Distant Church: The Danish Experience, In: Bar-Lex, Mordechai and Shaffir, William (eds.): Leaving Religion and Religious Life, Jai Press Inc, London 1997

Knudsen, Tim (ed.): Den nordiske protestantisme og velfærdsstaten, Aarhus Universitetsforlag, Århus 2002

Koch-Nielsen, Inger: Danish literature review on research in access to housing and homelessness. Unpublished Paper, Danish National Institute of Social Research, Copenhagen 2002

Nissen, Karsten (red.): Diakoni – en integreret dimension i folkekirkens liv, Aros, Copenhagen 2001

Ploug, Niels (red.): Velfærd I Europa. Resultater og perspektiver fra Socialforskningsinstituttets comparative velfærdsforskning, Socialforskningsinstituttet, Copenhagen 2002

Statistical Yearbook, Danmarks Statistik, Copenhagen 2002