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Church of Sweden is thriving on its own

by T.R. Reid

Washington Post (29.12.2000) / HRWF International Secretariat (04.01.2001) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - For more than four centuries, to be Swedish was to be Lutheran. Every newborn here was automatically registered as a member of the Church of Sweden, the official Lutheran denomination. The marriage between church and state was so strong that it took an act of parliament to change the prayer book and bishops were chosen by the cabinet.

But Sweden, like the rest of Western Europe, has been transformed in recent decades by a wave of immigration. The Stockholm phone book is still full of Larsons and Ericssons, but there are also listings now for people named al-Ghusan, Ng and Singh. Many of these newcomers have brought their own religions. To the Swedes, who have an unbending commitment to egalitarianism, it no longer seemed fair to give official favor to one faith over the others.

We were using tax money to support one church, and that was fine when everybody belonged to one church," said Minister of Culture Marita Ulvskog, whose portfolio includes religious affairs. "But in a multicultural society, there was no justification for unequal treatment. So we made the leap."

The leap of faith the Swedish government made last New Year's day was to "disestablish" the Church of Sweden, pulling the plug on guaranteed public subsidies and government control over a faith that maintains a church in virtually every city and hamlet.

Also dispensed with: an official religion in the palace. The Swedish monarch was not the head of the church but was required to be a member. Now the monarch may be of any faith.

A year later, church leaders say that the separation they feared has been a blessing. "I think we all see a stronger sense of commitment now," said Pastor David Olson of St. Jacob's Church in Stockholm. "People realize it's up to them to maintain our churches, not the government."

"Leading up to this," Olson continued, "everybody said, 'People are going to leave the church in droves.' But just about everybody who was a church member stayed with us."

This is not to say that a lot of people show up at church on Sunday morning; that's not the Swedish way. "It's a secular society," shrugged Olson, who routinely preaches before three dozen people in an imposing old church that seats 900. "People don't go to Mass. They don't even know how to go. They call me up and say, 'Do I need to reserve a seat for Sunday morning?'"

Still, the church has traditionally played a key role in Swedish life. "People go at the special times -- Advent Sunday, Christmas, Easter and baptisms, weddings, funerals," said the Rev. Christina Berglund, the church's director of parish development. "The Church of Sweden is strongly rooted in people's consciousness. They feel an attachment to the church building itself in their hometown, and to its graves."

Particularly in smaller towns, the church building tends to be a community center, serving as meeting hall, theater, nursery school and finish line for the ski races that fill the dark winters of rural Scandinavia.

One of the major concerns about the disestablishment was how to maintain these key local facilities after the cutoff of a mandatory "church tax" that had been funneling about \$500 million a year to the church. To solve this problem, the government has agreed to continue collecting from individual taxpayers the annual payment that has always gone to the church. But now the tax will be an optional checkoff box on the tax return.

And now the government will allocate the money collected to Catholic, Muslim, Jewish and other faiths as well as the Lutherans, with each taxpayer directing where his or her taxes should go.

"The key point is that the Church of Sweden no longer has the legal power to tax," said Carl-Einar Nordling of the Ministry of Culture. "The state is now merely helping the church collect voluntary contributions -- and [for] other faiths as well."

About 85 percent of the 9 million Swedes still call themselves members of the Church of Sweden, but there are also more than 200,000 Muslim citizens or residents, about 160,000 Roman Catholics, about 100,000 members of Orthodox Christian churches and about 16,000 Jews.

By delaying the change until 2000, Sweden was one of the last countries in Western Europe to sever the connection between the state and an officially sanctioned church. Although many European countries subsidize churches and religious schools, most long ago did away with the concept of an "established church."

"Sweden is now closer to the modern European norm," said Prof. James Beckford of Britain's Warwick University. "The pattern of subsidy for a variety of different faiths is now established, as populations become more diverse."

Italy has a "concordat" between the government and the Vatican that recognizes the Roman Catholic Church's independence. The Church of England is still an official religion, with the queen as its head, but even that may be changing. Constant leaks to the British media suggest that the heir apparent to the British throne, Prince Charles, is inclined to change his ecclesiastical title when he becomes king.

Rather than standing as "Defender of the Faith" -- a title originally accorded by the Roman Catholic Church but now taken to apply to the Church of England -- Charles reportedly wants to be known as "Defender of the Faiths," signaling respect for the rights of all religious people in an increasingly multicultural society.

That's essentially the position that Sweden has now adopted.

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Changed relations between the State and the Church of Sweden

Efforts to bring about the historic reform of the bond between State and Church have been on the political agenda in Sweden for many years. In 1999 this work was concluded and the reform took effect as of 1 January 2000.

Ministry of Culture of Sweden (February 2000)/HRWF International Secretariat (31.08.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The reform is based on a decision in principle taken by the Riksdag in 1995, following consultations, *inter alia*, with the General Synod - the Church of Sweden's highest decision-making body. As a result, the Ecclesiastical Act was abrogated and replaced primarily by two new acts on religious communities and an act on the Church of Sweden. Amendments have consequently been made to the instrument of Government and the Freedom of the Press Act. The amendments to the Instrument of Government mean that regulations on religious communities and the bases for the Church of Sweden as a religious community shall be laid down in law. The enactment, amendment or abrogation of such a law requires a qualified majority vote in the Riksdag.

Wide support for the reform

A general aim, when drawing up the terms of the reform, was to secure wide support both from the State and the Church. More than three thousand advisory bodies had the opportunity to comment on the proposal, thus making it the biggest circulation process ever. The response was predominantly positive and the decision was passed with broad majorities, both in the Riksdag and in the General Synod.

The decision means that the Church of Sweden has left the public sector and is thus on more of a par with other religious communities. The principle of public access to official documents of the Church of Sweden will nevertheless be retained. The basic identity of the Church will not change and has been defined in the Church of Sweden Act in keeping with the Church's own picture of itself. The aim of the definition was to emphasize that,

despite the change in its relations with the State, it is still the same religious community as before the reform. The change does not affect the membership of all those who already belonged to the Church of Sweden when the reform was implemented. On the whole, the reform has not had an impact on Church property either.

The reform has given the Church of Sweden full freedom, within the framework of the new legislation and existing system of rules, to decide over its own business. This means, among other things, that the Government will no longer appoint bishops and deans or decide over other ecclesiastic appointments. Certain state bodies that have been responsible for the administration of Church matters will be wound up or integrated into the Church of Sweden. The Church has adopted a church ordinance which supersedes the abrogated Ecclesiastical Act and sets out the basic structure and decision-making procedures of the Church of Sweden.

Parish tax replaced with a fee

Parishes and church associations no longer enjoy their status as local authorities and their right to levy taxes has been abolished. However, the Church of Sweden will continue to receive free help from the State with the collection of fees from its members. The Government can also decide to grant help to other religious communities, provided that they fulfil certain conditions. The parish tax has been replaced by an income-related church fee to be paid by all members of the Church of Sweden. The fee consists of both a local and a regional charge.

Funeral activities

The Church of Sweden parishes will continue to be principals for almost all funeral activities in the country. At present, as before, only the municipalities of Stockholm and Tranås have assumed responsibility for these activities. Funeral activities will be financed by an income-based, compulsory funeral fee. Special rules have been created for those who are not members of the Church of Sweden in order to provide for their interests. As principal for funeral activities, the Church of Sweden is responsible for ensuring the availability of burial grounds for all and of premises that are free from religious symbols for the holding of funeral ceremonies.

Ecclesiastical heritage

As of 2002, the Church of Sweden will receive financial compensation from the State for the care and maintenance of its cultural heritage. Between 2002-2009 a total of SEK 1.9 billion will be paid out for this purpose. The State and the Church of Sweden have reached a long-term agreement on issues concerning Church property of cultural value.

Support to religious communities

The new Act on Religious Communities makes it possible for all religious communities that want to, and that fulfil certain - mainly organisational - requirements, to become registered. A registered religious community can, *inter alia*, receive help from the State with the collection of fees from its members or followers. The principles governing State support to religious communities have been laid down in a special act of law.

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Church of Scientology Registered as Religious Community

HRWF (13.03.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - All Churches of Scientology in Sweden were registered today (March 13) as "religious communities" by the National Judicial Board for Public Lands & Funds. The registrations were made under a new law on religious communities that took force on January 1, 2000, with the purpose of further establishing equal rights for all religions in Sweden.

These registrations follow the granting of tax exemption to the Church by Swedish tax authorities last November and confirm the status of the Church of Scientology as a religion in Sweden.

The law, titled the Act on Religious Communities, mandates a separation of the Lutheran Church, officially called the Church of Sweden, and the State. The Lutheran Church and the Church of Scientology are among the first religious communities to be registered under the new Act.

The Church of Scientology of Sweden as well as local churches of Scientology in Goteborg, Malmo and Stockholm all received registrations. The same day, registrations were also issued for the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Salvation Army.

According to the new Act, "A religious community in the sense of this law is a community for religious activity which includes organizing religious services."

The Church of Scientology in Sweden celebrated its 30th anniversary last year. In November the same year, Swedish tax authorities declared the Church a non-profit organization with a religious purpose that serves a public benefit, and is therefore entitled to exemption from taxes.