

CONTRIBUTION TO THE CONTRIBUTORS OF SOCIETY

Åke Göransson, director of the Swedish Agency for Support for Faith Communities, views government grants to faith communities not as support for religion – but for the role they play in civil society.

One argument that is often heard in the debate about whether and why the Government, or, for that matter, local authorities and county councils, should provide financial grants to faith communities is that the secular state should not subsidise religion. This is true, and even if what I would like to begin by saying here may jar in the ears of some religious leaders, it does not do so either.

The government supports the role that faith communities play in civil society. The government supports the initiatives of

individuals and groups whose social commitment and co-existence is warranted by and based on religion. I would like to claim that the government does not support sport but the individuals and groups for whom sport is the key to and basis for individual development and social co-existence.

I do not deny, however, that civil society includes stakeholders that the state subsidises in order to serve its own intrinsic or instrumental interests. Examples can be found in popular educational or temperance movements, stakeholders that complement the state's

undertakings in the field of education or health.

The challenge they face is to avoid being stifled by the state's benevolence so that their prophetic voices are not silenced.

FAITH COMMUNITIES IN CIVIL SOCIETY

The Government Bill *A policy for the civil society* (2009/10:55) contains the following: "It is impossible to imagine Swedish democracy with its cornerstones of universal suffrage, gender equality and the right of access to public documents without the voluntary endeavours of committed individuals. The history of Swedish democracy is largely the history of civil society in Sweden. [...] By the end of the nineteenth century a number of national and local free church, temperance and labour movements had been established, as well as cooperative societies and popular education organisations. Sports associations and agricultural cooperatives are also normally included among the classical popular movements. These emerged as vehicles for protest that challenged the political establishment". (pp. 24–25)

Our society and our democracy was not a concept floating in the air that suddenly landed on a meadow and engendered civil society and the popular movements. Indeed not, it is the product of people's commitment and impatience. Frustrated by their own lack of power, they succeeded through their own actions in making their voices heard.

It is not odd that faith communities, like

sport, popular education and culture, receive subsidies from the state as they form part of civil society, a civil society that in Sweden we have opted to support from tax revenues, as this is the way in which we have jointly created the society in which we live.

WHY DO THE GOVERNMENT SUPPORTS FAITH COMMUNITIES?

Now and then, the idea of subsidies for faith communities is questioned in public debate. Before the reform that disestablished the Church of Sweden in 2000, the issue of state support for faith communities was also the subject of inquiry.

In its bill (1998/99:124) the Government describes why state subsidies should continue to be provided: "Faith communities participate, together with other positive forces, in the never-ending process of establishing norms that is necessary for the maintenance and enhancement of the fundamental values on which our society rests. Current social research also clearly shows that active associations and organisations help in many ways to strengthen the democratic system. It is therefore very important for the vitality of Swedish democracy to encourage and develop different ideologies and faiths that actively contribute to the maintenance of our democratic system of government so that they can make their voices heard. One of society's tasks is to provide for the varied needs of its citizens. The activities of the

faith communities help above all to meet their religious needs and to provide individuals with a fundamental identity and social and cultural affiliation. Resort to the activities of the faith communities may become particularly conspicuous in times of catastrophe and crisis. Active and robust faith communities also reduce the scope for various forms of religious extremism.” (p. 60)

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The wording of the bill demonstrates continuity from 1971, when state subsidies for faith communities were introduced. The arguments are more or less the same. It is interesting to note, as well, that two other forms of state support were initiated at about the same time. Press subsidies

were introduced in 1971, and in 1972 support for political parties in the form that we know it today.

It is important to remember that these forms of government support were established at the same time and focused on furthering democracy, the possibilities of individuals and the development of society. That is why it is odd in today’s debate to see those who believe that state and society are the same thing wanting to use state subsidies for the faith communities to whip them into ideological identification with the state and not as one aspect of social development and dialogue.

I have not heard, nor hopefully am I going to hear, anyone wanting to make the same demands when it comes to press subsidies or support for the political parties. In the case of grants to political parties we can see that a party may receive considerable funding at different levels even though in the opinion of many, perhaps of the majority, its ideology and policies do not endorse the equal value and rights of individuals. And as recently as 2013 in its final report “Review of state subsidies for the daily press” (SOU 2013:66), the parliamentary committee on press subsidies rejected a proposal to introduce a stipulation about democracy and declared that: “Democratic values are protected in Sweden mainly through the open discussion of social issues and other questions about values and not by state imposed hindrances to the publication and circulation of anti-democratic statements, which for instance challenge

the belief that individuals have equal value. [...] However important it may be to oppose anti-democratic tendencies within the parameters permitted in a democratic society and through lively discussions of democracy, the issue at stake still nevertheless primarily involves the free formation of opinion.” (pp 406-407)

WHAT DEMANDS SHOULD THE STATE MAKE?

In addition to the question of whether faith communities should receive any state subsidies at all, a question that is sometimes raised is what demands the state should make for entitlement to them. The Act on Subsidies to Religious Communities (SFS 1999:932), an act that enjoys constitutional protection, distinguishes between the purpose of these subsidies and the terms on which they are granted. “The support should help to create conditions in which religious communities can pursue active and long-term activities of a religious nature in the form of services, pastoral care, religious instruction and social care.” This is what SST has to take into account in allocating government grants. I often say that the description in the act of the reasons for the support are as far as one can get from the project hysteria that often prevails when grants are awarded. In laying down the terms on which a faith community is entitled to state support, the act stipulates that grants may only be awarded to a religious community that contributes to maintaining and strengthening the

fundamental values upon which society is based, and is stable and robust. Faith communities apply to the Government for entitlement to state support and if this is granted they are registered by the Government as laid down in the Ordinance on Government Grants to Religious Communities (SFS 1999:974 with amendments).

What has given rise to most discussion is the meaning of “contributes to the maintenance and enhancement of the fundamental values upon which society is based”. First and foremost, the wording says contributes to maintenance – not compliance. What this means is analysed in the text of the Government’s bill prior to the act: how the autonomy of a faith community and freedom of belief is to be observed, and the importance in a democracy of being able to take part in a dialogue on the basis of different standpoints. The conclusion reached is “that it is highly important for a faith community to act so that its members and those it serves play an active role in society and that it clearly shows its repudiation of anti-democratic tendencies in society” (Govt. Bill 1998/99:124, p. 64). The grants are to enable the faith community to contribute to the development of society and of democracy.

CONTROL OR SUPPORT?

The government grants that are allocated are divided into three kinds: organisational grants, operational grants and project grants. The government bill states that a considerable proportion of

the funding is to be awarded in the form of organisational grants. This is in order to reduce the influence of the government to merely deciding about entitlement to support. The reason for this is to make it clear that the Government has no control over the internal affairs of a faith community (Govt. Bill 1998/99, p. 68). When it comes to the smaller amounts awarded in the other two forms of grant, the bill states “that there are activities undertaken by the faith communities that may be of the kind that the state has a particular interest in supporting in different ways” (p. 68).

In conclusion, the contributions of the faith communities as one element in civil society could be described as creating social affiliation, complementing state undertakings, providing confessional alternatives to public services and as critical voices and shapers of opinion.

The faith communities add yet another tone to the harmonic dissonance that civil society embodies.

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