Challenges of High and Late Modern Religiosity in Volunteering – The Case of Sweden

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Religiosity, both as personal confession and as a result of the rise of the free churches at the end of the nineteenth century, has contributed to the development of the Swedish civil society. However, in the research on contemporary Swedish civil society there are just a few studies interested in the role of religiosity. Also the interest among European researchers in the significance of faith and religion for volunteering and altruism is still expanding (Yeung, 2004). Explanations of this marginalization of religiosity in the research on Swedish civil society can presumably be found in a liberal understanding of society where religiosity is considered to be a private matter and not a societal force in the public sphere (Rasmusson, 2007). This marginalization of religiosity in terms of research interest (at least in a European or Swedish context) has however recently been challenged by a post-secular understanding of society where religiosity is considered to be central and vital and not marginal and moribund (de Vries, 2006). From a post-secular point of departure, religiosity is an important factor to understand contemporary Swedish civil society. Thus, the aim of this paper is to shed light on the role of religiosity in Swedish civil society by studying its effects on volunteering among young people. We included individuals aged 16 – 24 since younger persons are more likely to be influenced and formed by contemporary society than older individuals. Hence our research questions addressed in this paper are:

- What kind of relationship can be seen between religiosity and volunteering among young individuals in Sweden?
- Are there any differences between the effects of traditional or high-modern religiosity and late-modern religiosity on volunteering?

According to the discourse of late modernity religious belief in high modernity is something that people take for granted since they inherited them from earlier generations (Heelas, 1996). This traditional religiosity has had its havens in primary institutions (Heelas & Woodhead, 2001), in Sweden the Church of Sweden and the Swedish free churches. Traditional or high-modern understandings and expressions of religiosity are however supposed to change. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1996) argued that the individualization of late-modernity is a dis-embedding process, since it means a breakdown of “preconscious collective habitualization”. How the individualistic reflexivity of late-modernity will influence volunteer work is another central, but highly disputed, issue (e.g. Hustinx, 2003). Our contribution to this discussion is to study the impact of late-modern spirituality on volunteering. To do this we will first explore whether religiosity as such has a positive effect on volunteering, but then proceed and compare traditional high-modern religiosity with the presumed contemporary late-modern religiosity in order to see if they differ in their impact on volunteering. To be able to use theories about late-modern individualism in our efforts to find a late-modern understanding of religiosity we use five indicators on how people perceive religiosity and worldviews. These indicators are encounters with faith and religion, self-concept, motives for religious affiliation and influences on one’s worldview.

Empirical data comes from a postal survey addressed to 4000 young Swedish residents. Statistical procedures such as descriptive exploration, factor analysis and regression analysis are employed.

Preliminary results show a positive relation between religiosity and volunteering among young individuals in Sweden. Furthermore, our data support the enhancement theory, i.e. involvement in religious organizations enforces the propensity to be engaged also in secular associations. Our findings are consistent with some other research in this field (see e.g. Park & Smith, 2000; Putnam, 2000). However, the idea of a high- and late-modern rationale does not seem to contribute that much to deepen the understanding of how different
understandings of religiosity influence voluntary actions in a mainly secular country like Sweden. We found that different types of understandings can result in similar activity patterns (see also Hustinx, 2003 for a similar result). We discuss the result in terms of contemporary secularization and individualization processes.

References


