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2011

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Citation for published version (APA):

Rydström, J. (2011). “Don’t forget that matrimony is a holy act, even when it is a civil ceremony”: Changes in sexual norms and the conceptualization of gay families in Scandinavia since the 1990s. Paper presented at American Historical Association's 125 Annual Meeting, Boston, Massachusetts, United States.

Total number of authors:

1

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‘Don’t forget that matrimony is a holy act, even when it is a civil ceremony’: Changes in sexual norms and the conceptualization of gay families in Scandinavia since the 1990s

Paper presented at the 125 Annual meeting of the American Historical Association

Friday, January 7, 09:30–11:30 am

By Jens Rydström

[SLIDE 1]

“The next step is the Church,” a headline announced in the Danish daily *Politiken* as the partnership law was voted through in Norway in 1993. Else Slange, chair of the Danish lesbian and gay association LBL, said in an interview that the next step in Denmark must be to convince the Danish State Church to let lesbians and gays marry in Church. Other tasks for the LBL, she said, would be to work for free insemination for lesbian women in the national health system, and to change the law to make it possible for registered partners to adopt each other’s children. Slange concluded that the LBL looked forward to the next parliamentary session in order to make this “adjustment of the partnership law.”¹ She thus considered Church marriages to be a mere adjustment of the law, and that the following steps should be insemination for lesbians and adoption rights for registered partners.

Ironically, Church marriages proved to be not the next step, but the very last step in a long and tortuous process toward gay marriage in Scandinavia. From the quasi marriage that registered partnership represented, to full marital rights, or a gender-neutral marriage law, which recently has been introduced in Norway, Sweden, and Iceland, there was a long process of various adjustments of the laws. Adoption rights, access to insemination for lesbians and

single women, and more liberal rules on citizenship and residency—all these law reforms proved easier to accomplish than the right to get married in church.

The complicated relation between state and Church can be illustrated by the first time the Danish Law on Registered Partnership was rewritten. The new law stated that the divorce regulations in the Marriage Law would “be used correspondingly” when a registered partnership was dissolved.² It had been overlooked, however, that these regulations gave married couples the right to counselling by a priest from the Church of Denmark. As a reaction to the requirements of the new law, fourteen parish priests wrote a petition to their colleagues exhorting them to refuse to negotiate for same-sex couples. Soon after this demonstration, the responsible politicians declared that this consequence of the law was unforeseen and unwanted, and the law was amended only three months after it had first been adopted.³

In Sweden, many negative reactions to the new laws came from civil marriage registrars. In 1994, even before the law had been put in force, two registrars declared that they would refuse to perform the corresponding ceremony for same-sex couples. “Don’t forget that matrimony is a holy act, even when it is a civil ceremony,” one of them told the newspaper, thus using religious arguments to protest against a civil act of registration.⁴ Over the years to come, a large number of rural councils all over Sweden refused to nominate officials to perform registered partnership ceremonies. This provoked a lively debate in local and national media, and the recalcitrant districts were nationally shamed as places where intolerance and prejudice ruled. Politicians on the national level and party leaders publicly disciplined local politicians, ordering them to follow the law. Both nationally and locally, arguments against gay marriage successively lost ground.

This debate had the effect of spreading the concept of possible happy homosexual relationships to the whole national territory. At one point, a local newspaper even advertised for lesbian and gay couples who wanted to be interviewed. Thus the reform created a *demand* for homosexuality in small places.⁵ Homosexuality was traditionally pictured as an unhappy condition, one of the many scourges of life in the big cities, but now it became domesticated and conceptualised as something which could be positive, something which could also exist in a rural community. One by one, the councils caved in to the pressure and nominated the registrars. To be honest, their services were very seldom asked for, but now and then a lesbian or gay couple would register in some little village, creating headlines that proved homosexuality to be present also in rural Sweden.

In Norway, the debates after the introduction of the law on registered partnership were mainly focused on the question whether persons who lived in a registered partnership could uphold consecrated positions within the Church, that is as a priest, a deacon, or catechist. Already in 1977, the Church Meeting had decided that the Church of Norway could accept homosexual orientation but not homosexual practice, and this was still its standpoint when the registered partnership law was enacted in 1993. In Norway, the Church was exempt from the laws against discrimination on grounds of sex or sexual orientation, and in practice a priest, deacon, or catechist had to leave office if he or she registered partnership. The 1977 decision on homosexual practice was upheld on a stormy Bishops' Meeting in 1995, where three of Norway's eleven bishops voted against the majority. One of them was Rosemarie Köhn, who was also Norway's first female bishop. She challenged the decision four years later when she let a female chaplain return to her job after having registered partnership with another woman.

There is still disagreement between the Norwegian bishops whether a person can uphold a consecrated position and have an active homosexual life, but the Church's unity has been preserved on the question of same-sex marriages. A same-sex couple must marry in a civil ceremony and then they can go to Church to have their union blessed, but the Church of Norway emphasises that a marriage and a blessing in Church are different things.

In Sweden, the Church has no exemption from the discrimination laws, so the question has never risen whether an "actively homosexual" priest can remain in office. Instead, most of the debate has focused on whether to recognise and bless same-sex relationships on the whole. Before 2005, individual priests were allowed to bless same-sex couples in church, but it was explicitly forbidden to perform rituals of registering partnership inside the churches. But then a specific ritual of blessing was introduced in the Church of Sweden, causing one fifth of its ordained priests to sign a petition saying that this was contrary to their beliefs. They didn't leave the Church, however, and it still keeps together. When the gender neutral marriage law was enacted in 2009, the Church of Sweden decided to allow same-sex marriages in church, following the same ritual as for heterosexual couples. Individual priests have the choice of refusing to marry same-sex couples, but in that case the vicar has to appoint another priest to perform the ceremony within the same parish.

[SLIDE 2]

As we see, the acceptance of gay marriage within the Scandinavian National Churches has grown steadily, and coincides with a growing influence of female priests and bishops. Women have been admitted as priests in the Scandinavian Churches since the 1950s, but it has taken them half a century to reach powerful positions.

Rosemarie Köhn was not only Norway's first female bishop, but the first in Scandinavia, and she has meant a lot for promoting lesbian and gay rights within the Church of Norway. She has now retired, but has been followed by four more women, so that there are now four women and seven men at the Bishops' Meetings. The next female bishop was Danish Lise Lotte Rebel in the diocese of Elsinore, ordained in 1995, only months before Sofie Petersen of Greenland. Sweden's Cristina Odenberg, from my home town of Lund, became Sweden's first female bishop in 1997, but as you see she is no longer the only woman in the Bishops' Meeting. Finally, Finland got its first female bishop in September last year, as Irja Akola was ordained bishop of Helsinki.

The presence of women at the Bishops' Meetings has thus grown, at the same time as the acceptance of lesbian and gay rights within the Churches. The same development toward acceptance is clearly seen among the political parties in Scandinavia, and it can be explained by the loss of influence by Christian and rural interests.

[SLIDE 3]

For most of the twentieth century, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden had a fairly stable five-party system following two basic divisions: that between work and capital and that between urban and rural interests. These divisions led to the establishment of large workers' parties, large farmers' parties and large conservative parties that assembled the capital owners. Next to these class-based party formations, smaller ideology-based parties evolved. Leftist socialist parties on the one hand and liberal parties on the other generally attracted between 5 and 10 percent each of the voters.⁶

It was the smaller ideological parties that first supported LGBT rights. When the leftist socialist parties had gotten rid of their Stalinist heritage they were ready work for gay marriage, and the first suggestions in that direction came from the Danish Socialist People's Party already in 1968.

The liberal parties traditionally have been split between an urban electorate, which has been easy to win for a cause involving individual freedom, and rural, more traditionally oriented groups.

The Social Democrats were long hesitant to support LGBT rights, but pressure from their youth movements and women's leagues eventually led them to work for registered partnership and successively gay marriage.

The Centre parties, heirs to the farmers' movements, represent rural interests in Scandinavia, and as such harbour more traditional values. But with an accelerating urbanisation, the Centre parties have had to redefine their political base, and increasingly appear like ideological liberal parties, both in economic and social questions. In Finland, however, the Centre Party remains rural. It is clearly in opposition to gay marriage and registered partnership, and managed to stall the registered partnership law for six years, making Finland the last country in Scandinavia to introduce it.

Environmental parties have always been in favour of gay marriage, but the most astonishing development is the conversion of the Swedish Conservative Party, the Moderates. Under its new leader Fredrik Reinfeldt, who was one of two Moderates in Parliament who

voted in favour of the law on registered partnership in 1995, it consistently defends LGBT rights.

The only political force to oppose gay marriage nowadays are the Centre Party in Finland, the Christian Democratic Parties in Norway and Sweden, and the right-wing populist parties. But even they are not altogether unwilling to protect lesbian and gay rights. The Danish People's Party, though it opposes gay marriage, defends tolerance toward lesbians and gays as a specifically Danish trait. And the Sweden Democrats' leadership has made some vaguely positive statements on gay issues—which are certainly not shared by the bulk of their electorate. This is indeed a sign of the “homo nationalism” discussed by Jasbir Puar and others, a political trend in which lesbian and gay rights, narrowly defined, are connected to middle-class nationalist values, propped up against perceived threats from immigrant cultures.

In the new, complex party structure in Scandinavia, Christian interests have lost grounds altogether, in spite of the creation of Christian Democratic parties — or perhaps because of that. As mentioned, the main divide in the Liberal Party in Sweden has been between the urban liberals and a rural, Christian, wing of the party. The Party Congress in 1990 caused the tensions to burst out in open conflict when a majority of congress representatives passed a resolution that forced the party leadership to work for registered partnership. In the following parliamentary elections, the Liberals shrank from 12 to 9 percent of the votes, and the Christian Democrats grew from 3 to 7 percent. These changes were only partly because of the controversies over gay and lesbian rights, but they were definitely the result of many Christian voters' leaving the Liberals to join the Christian Democrats.

In Finland, the tiny Finnish-speaking Liberal Party all but disappeared in the 1980s, but liberal values are held by the ethnic party that organises the Swedish-speaking part of the population, the Swedish-Finnish People's Party (*Svenska Folkpartiet*). There are, however tensions between rural and urban interests in that party as well. In May 2009 the Party Congress accepted a proposal to work for full adoption rights for same-sex couples, but the rural electorate in the northern province of Pohjanmaa strongly opposes the law. One of the Pohjanmaa representatives told the press that he feared the party would lose all voters from his district, and that they would now vote for the Christian Democrats. Another representative, from southern Finland, complained: "This is suicide for the SPP. Now the Finns can call us the homo-party." It is too early to say whether the Finnish-Swedish People's Party will see the same development as the Liberal Party in Sweden, but since it is an ethnically based party, it is probably more stable.⁷

Iceland is a special case in the Nordic community. It does not have the same five-party or eight-party system to begin with, and it seems that all political parties enthusiastically have adopted a pro-gay stance already in the middle of the 1990s. The consensus around gay rights is strong, and has only seldom been questioned. This may be explained by the fact that Iceland is highly urbanised, with almost half of its population living in the capital area, and that the Church has never had any significant influence in politics.

But even the Christian Democratic parties have been forced to follow the change of general opinion in Scandinavia. In Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, they fought in vain to block the adoption of the registered partnership law in the late 80s and early 90s, but when the gender-neutral marriage laws were prepared in the late twenty hundreds they had to defend registered partnership as an acceptable separate legislation for lesbian and gay couples. Their consistent

anti-gay stance became more and more difficult to uphold as the public opinion was rapidly shifting. In the Norwegian parliamentary debate about gay marriage in 2009, many speakers took the opportunity to bring up the Christian People's Party's poor record in gay and lesbian rights issues. The party had been opposed to the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1972, it had been against the anti-discrimination clause in 1981, and it voted against the law on registered partnership in 1993.

In 2009, its representative Bjørg Tørresdal explicitly apologised for these past actions and wished that the debate would be about the present decision, not about things in the past:

[SLIDE 4]

I am not proud of everything the Christian People's Party has said about homosexuals over the years. There are, without doubt, many who have been hurt. I am sorry for that. At the same time, one should respect the fact that the Christian People's Party, like all other parties and society at large, has changed its views on both homosexuals as such and their right to live in binding relationships.⁸

There has thus been three distinct movements within the Christian right in Scandinavia in regard to gay marriage. First, the acceptance of gay marriage has grown steadily within the national churches—a movement, or a shift of opinions that most likely has to do with an ongoing generational shift and an increasingly important influence by female priests and bishops. When female bishops take place in the Bishops' Meetings, the most powerful organ of the Scandinavian churches, they carry with them memories of their own struggle for

acceptance. Not all of them are pro gay, but due to women's contested situation in Church they are most often inclined to adopt a more liberal position on minorities rights within the Church.

The second movement is a concentration of Christian political forces to the Christian Democratic parties. Especially in Norway and Sweden, Christian members of the Centre parties and the Liberals have tended to move to the Christian Democratic parties, where the opposition to gay marriage has been clear and outspoken. This has been a favourable development for those who have worked for the introduction of gay marriage, since the number of political allies has grown and it has been easier to counter the arguments from only one political grouping.

The third phenomenon is a defensive movement by the Christian Democratic Parties themselves, away from the opposition to gay marriage and toward a more accepting position. Secularisation is so strong in Scandinavia, that it becomes very problematic to stand for political views grounded in the Bible alone. When even the right-wing populist parties adopt tolerant positions vis-à-vis gay rights, one may even be worried that the homo-nationalism discussed by several scholars will lead to new conflicts and exclusion mechanisms.

¹ “justering af partnerskabsloven.” “Næste skridt bliver kirken,” *Politiken*, 19 May 1993.

² “finder tilsvarende anvendelse.” “Vedstesens som kronjurist,” *Jyllands Posten Morgenavisen* November 16, 1989.

³ “Præster opfordrer kolleger til at nægte mægling,” *Kristeligt Dagblad*, October 20, 1989.

Among the 14 vicars who signed the petition was Søren Krarup, later one of the leaders of the Danish People’s Party (*Dansk Folkeparti*). “Præster skal ikke mægle for homoseksuelle,” *Vejle Amts Folkeblad*, December 7, 1989.

⁴ “Glöm inte, att äktenskapet är en helig handling – även vid en borgerlig vigsel.” “De vägrar viga homosexuella,” *Nordvästra Skånes Tidningar*, December 23, 1994.

⁵ “Homosexuella par—titta hit!” *Mölnåls-Posten*, 7 December 1994.

⁶ Rokkan 1970.

⁷ “Det här är rena självmordet för SFP. Nu kan finnarna kalla oss för homopartiet.” Carl Gustaf Aminoff to *Hufvudstadsbladet*, 17 May 2009.

⁸ “Jeg er ikke stolt av alt Kristelig Folkeparti har sagt om homofile opp gjennom årene. Det er sikkert mange som er blitt såret. Det er jeg lei meg for. Samtidig må man ha respekt for at Kristelig Folkeparti, på lik linje med alle andre partier og samfunnet for øvrig, har endret syn på både homofile og deres rett til å leve i forpliktende samliv.” *Stortingets Forhandlinger* 2007–08. Odelstingets møte onsdag den 11. juni 2008 kl. 10. Bjørg Tørresdal (KrF) [11:30:55].