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978-0-521-76514-5 - Reforming the North: The Kingdoms and Churches of Scandinavia, 1520-1545

James L. Larson

Excerpt

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Introduction

At the beginning of the sixteenth century the kingdoms of Scandinavia continued to function within their medieval framework. Social and financial arrangements, and political and religious institutions were essentially what they had been for more than a century. The Union of Kalmar united the three kingdoms in a decentralized administration; the Catholic Church was the most effective instrument of communication and control; and Lübeck and the Hanse vied with the Netherlands for commercial dominance. Dissatisfaction and unrest were rife in the three kingdoms, but there were few warnings of the storm about to break. Then, suddenly, the Union of Kalmar came to an abrupt end. Sweden won her independence and Norway lost hers. Scandinavians toppled the old church and shattered Lübeck's commercial imperium. The crowns of Denmark and Sweden laid the foundations for centralized states on the ruins of old institutions and organizations. All of this in the space of twenty-five years. The quarter-century between 1520 and 1545 is the most revolutionary period Scandinavians have ever experienced.

The mention of church reform as just one element in a very complicated situation will seem questionable to those for whom the Reformation is preeminently the era of religious conflict. I do not underestimate the importance of church reform, but I have become convinced that concentration on the religious transformation underplays and distorts other parts of the story. The Protestant Reformation did not take place in a vacuum. The Reformation was unquestionably a religious movement; it was also part of something much bigger, a complicated *Neugestaltung*, as Ritter has called it, that was only partially religious.¹

From the very beginning, around 1520, that transformation attracted the commentary not only of statesmen and theologians but also officials, prelates, chroniclers, and publicists of all stripes. The principal stages of the transformation have been studied endlessly, and the literature is not only very large but resists summary. At best one can only convey a general impression of the dimensions of this body of material. First and most important is the documentation

¹ Ritter 1950.

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in print. Here let me just mention one indispensable collection from each of the three kingdoms. C. F. Allen's *Breve og Aktstykker* follows the struggle between Christian II and Friedrich I in its European context from beginning to end; in Norway almost all of the documents relevant to the history of the kingdom for the years 1513–1537 are printed in *Diplomatarium Norvegicum*; and the *Registratur* for Gustaf Vasa covers northern history over forty years, always from an engaged and personal point of view. The documentation in print is not limited to the movers and shakers, however; there are collections covering the church, diplomacy, fiefholding, finance, law, trade, and so on, and new works are being added all the time. It would be possible to write a history of the Reformation in Scandinavia using just these sources, but in doing so one would miss an equally large and fine body of commentary. Many older studies are still fundamental. Among these are Erslev on Danish fiefholding, Hammarström on Gustaf Vasa's financial administration, Heise on Christian II in Norway and his imprisonment, Paludan Müller on the Count's War, and Knut B. Westman on late medieval piety and the early Reformation. The quality of more recent work has not fallen off. Lars Hamre's political history of Norway 1513–1537, unequalled in thoroughness and clarity, raises the bar perilously high for aspiring historians. Martin Schwarz Lausten's *Christian 2. mellem paven og Luther* has revived the international ambitions of Scandinavian history with new and surprising references to archives in Holland, Germany, and Austria. Thorkild Lyby's *Vi Evangeliske* studies Friedrich I's foreign relations to throw light on the king's ambiguous position on religion; the chapter on Herzog Albrecht's Preussen alone is worth the price of the book. This is, of course, a mere sketch of the riches available. An account of the reform in the North is unimaginable without an attempt to master this material. My own efforts are spelled out in what follows. Here, I want to indicate some of the problems one confronts in dealing with this documentation and commentary.

In the headlong course of the Reformation, all comment was partisan; there were no neutral observers. After the most pressing issues had been sorted out, however, interested parties established a perspective. Historiographers in the employ of the northern states began to describe the events at the beginning of the sixteenth century as a liberation from the institutions of medieval religion and society, and as a victory for national values and pure Christian faith. The dogma persisted, almost without a break, through the early modern period.

Historians began questioning parts of this tradition in the nineteenth century. Collections of documents showed plainly that events had been complicated and ambiguous, and did not always jibe with

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received truth. When, for example, Paludan Müller dealt with Christian II's despotic treatment of the old church, he conceded that the actions could be seen with a certain satisfaction from a crass Protestant view. But history, he added, also had its claims. The king's actions were "a revolutionary break with formally established law, without justification by result or as a breakthrough to victorious truth."

Not all parts of older tradition were equally open to question. Historians may have been willing to censure Protestantism's unscrupulous trafficking in ends and means, but they continued to invest heavily in narratives of autonomous nationalism. The result was a secularized version of the Reformation. Religion had been a player, one among many, in the internecine social conflict. This secularized narrative was not wrong, certainly not in Scandinavia, but it was a source of problems in relating the kingdoms of Scandinavia to one another and to the continent.

The problems were most conveniently avoided by concentrating on the separate formations of the northern states, and by subordinating outside influences and ideas to the narrative tyranny of these autonomous creations. In this respect, Reformation history, aided and abetted by increasing specialization, stepped back from the ambitions of those nineteenth-century historians who assembled documents from all of the regions around the North Sea and the Baltic, and who wrote histories that followed the course of events in all of the northern kingdoms.

The drive toward specialization is more easily criticized than dismissed. The question of where to focus investigation is dictated by the sheer amount of information. Whole libraries are devoted to the history of the Reformation, and new books are added regularly. Anyone who attempts to master this material finds himself driven along the path of specialization. And this book is no exception. My interest in the general implications of the northern Reformation has, in the end, tended to center on two issues, Scandinavia's integration in the European process of state formation, and the transfer of resources and authority from the institutions of medieval religion and society to those of the princely states and territorial churches.

Let me touch on these issues briefly.

Concentration on the development of separate territorial states favored by contemporary history largely ignores parallel developments elsewhere. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, many of the peoples in western and northern Europe reorganized themselves in more or less extensive states, centrally administered, and without higher or common authority. Within these states the consolidation of authority took place at different rates in different ways, but the

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process was recognizably analogous in many of them, and we can speak of integration in a general process, even when the most obvious external result was a sharper differentiation of the peoples involved. The impulse behind the formation of early modern states was not an autonomous impulse, and the creation of separate identities was a paradoxical result of integration in a general process.

A more complicated issue is the transfer of authority from the institutions of medieval religion and society to those of the princely states and their churches in a way that does justice to the intricacy of the process. When, as in so many accounts, the inevitability of the early modern states is assumed, medieval institutions are seen as destined for decline, powerless against the forces of royal centralism and the new faith.

Reformation history needs to replace these older narratives, which assume the inevitability of reform and its consequences, with interpretations that acknowledge the aleatory nature of the reform process and the contingency of human actions. Hundreds of texts and specialized studies, whose value none can deny, need to be reevaluated. This book aims to contribute to that reevaluation, not by presenting new material or methods, but by rereading the record. My work depends on the labors of many generations of historians in Scandinavia and Germany. I have accepted a thesis central to Scandinavian historiography, and treated the Lutheran Reformation as an integral part in the formation of the early modern states. In essence, this is a political argument, a top-down political argument. It would be difficult, even impossible, to cite cultural, economic, or social studies of the subject that do not assume prior knowledge of this political history. Its explanatory power is so great and is now so well established that historians take it for granted.

My work differs from most Scandinavian histories in that the perspective is Nordic. Each of the three kingdoms has received equal billing. As an outsider, I have my biases, but I am not entangled in national preferences in quite the same way as historians at work inside the European labyrinth. By abandoning purely national perspectives and taking the entire North as my subject, I have tried to give a broad account of the implications of the Protestant Reformation and its impact on northern history.

Some peculiarities of usage in this book should be mentioned. I have used English place names in the few cases where they are well established, as in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and the Sound, but I have otherwise preferred native names: Danish names for all parts of the Danish realm, including Skaane, but not Schleswig Holstein; Swedish

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names for Sweden and Finland; and German names for principalities and towns along the south shore of the Baltic. Norway and Sønderjylland, where the situation was complicated, have required compromises which I think are comprehensible. As for personal names, I have used the native rather than the English version, that is, Albrecht, not Albert, Henrik or Heinrich, not Henry, and Zygmunt, not Sigmund. Here I have followed the lead of David Kirby, whose experience of the decline in readers able or willing to read any language but their own, led him to salt his text with foreign names and phrases. He hoped, he said, to stir an awareness that life was ordered rather differently outside the present age in the English-speaking world.

A few other terms require explanation. The principal unit of coinage was the *gylde*, a coin on the pattern of the German *Gulden-groschen*. *Gylde* designated the gold Rhenish *gylde* and coin struck on the same monetary footing. *Gylde* also served as a unit of reckoning when the *gylde* was paid out in lesser coin. Of these lesser coin, in Denmark at any rate, the most common ca. 1533 were the two *mark* piece, the one *mark* piece, and the eight and four *skilling* pieces. Until ca. 1531 one *gylde* equalled two and a half marks; thereafter, three *marks*. The *mark*, like the *gylde*, served both as coin and as a device for counting out. The coin was first minted in Denmark in 1523, in Sweden in 1535, in Norway during the reign of Archbishop Engelbrektsson. The *daler*, a coin after the pattern of the German *Joachimsthaler*, was minted in Denmark after 1522, in Sweden after 1534. The *nobel*, originally an English coin, later the oldest gold coin in the North, was used for tolls in the Sound. As a unit of reckoning the *nobel* was worth, according to the tollmaster, two-and-a-half or three *gylde*.²

Of commonly used weights, I have mentioned only two, the *læst* and the *lodh* (*lod*, *lott*). As a unit of weight, the *læst* varied according to the goods involved. On the island of Sjælland, a *læst* of hay was the equivalent of ca. 576 lbs. As a unit of measure, the *lodh* existed at the other end of the scale from the *læst*. A *lodh*, which I have translated throughout as a piece of silver, was actually the weight used to measure a small quantity of silver or other metal.³

One important quantity remains. What I have called a company of *Knechts*, a *Fænnike*, was much larger than a company in a modern army. A fully manned *Fænnike* consisted of 350 to 500 *Landsknechts*.⁴

² Aakjær 1936, XXIX.³ Aakjær 1936, XXX.⁴ "Befalningsmand," KLNMI, 398-410.

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I

The North

Scandinavia stretches like a roomy mysterious attic under the eaves of Europe, from the Karelian Ness in the east to Greenland in the west, and from the polar sea to the Eider River in the south. The vastness of the region has surprised visitors since the days of Pliny, who wrote of immense islands beyond Germany of unknown magnitude. “The inhabitants styled it another world.” Scandinavia was not only remote from Mediterranean civilization, northerners were conscious of occupying a world apart. The geographical configuration, two great peninsulas, heavily indented coastlines, offshore archipelagos, and outlying islands, favored separation, isolation, and regional identity.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Scandinavians who shared this harsh and unyielding region with Finns, Lapps, Germans, Frisians, and Eskimos, were few on the ground. Historians estimate the population of Denmark at about 570,000, with another 200,000 for Norway; Swedish population stood at 441,000, with another 210,000 for Finland.¹ Most of these folk were involved in farming. Fishing, forestry, and mining were the other significant components of the economy.

Climate and soil favored Denmark over the rest of the North, and Danish lands were by far the most densely settled. Because density of settlement favors the growth of towns, Denmark contained many more towns than Sweden and Norway. The towns were not large. Malmö, the greatest town in Scandinavia, contained less than ten thousand. No town in Scandinavia could compare with the great urban centers in the northern Reich or the Netherlands.

Arable land was the key to power and influence in medieval Scandinavia, and the relative strength of the elites who ruled the kingdoms of the North can be gauged in part from their holdings. Before the Reformation, it is estimated that the Catholic Church in Denmark disposed of about 40 percent of the land, in Norway 47 percent, and in Sweden about 20 percent. The church’s rival in landholding, the worldly nobility, held its own in Denmark and Sweden; Danish nobles disposed of 40 percent of the land, Swedish nobles nearly the same

¹ Horby et al. 1980, 377; Palm 2000.

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as the church. In Norway, where the nobility was in decline, nobles held about a sixth of the land. Crown holdings in the three kingdoms were less; in Denmark 10 to 12 percent, in Norway 7 percent, and in Sweden 5.5 percent.² These numbers are, of course, subject to ongoing research.

Churchmen and the worldly nobility were the dominant orders in Scandinavian society, and they attempted to use the crown, whose resources were limited, as a fulcrum. The overlapping interests and divergent functions of these rival elites resulted in inner tensions and open hostilities. Tensions were increasingly concentrated in princes and prelates, and both parties tried to win the worldly nobility as an ally. Princes consolidated power with a judicious combination of cajolery, concessions, and usurpation, whereas prelates amassed resources and defended the church's economic, legal, and political privileges.

The obvious point of departure for a discussion of the dominant orders in the North is the Catholic clergy, the most effective agent of communication and control in Scandinavia in the late Middle Ages. In principle, every human soul depended on the church for salvation; only the church could mediate and explain scripture and the divine laws that lay at the basis of social life; only the church could maintain divine order in society through its rites and sacraments. These services were the basis of clerical privilege. Churchmen, who were in touch with the entire population, even in remote corners of the three kingdoms, promoted church interests in season and out, and backed the agenda with admonitions, commands, prohibitions, and sanctions. Over the centuries the clergy had created a situation in which every aspect of social life related to the church; there was no issue in which the church, with its conception of itself, might not interfere.

There were jurisdictional disputes and quarrels among groups and institutions in the church, but the bishops, as leaders of the church, exercised unprecedented power and authority over the direction of affairs. Bishops played a central role in politics as a matter of course. Political engagement was part of the church's conception of itself. In each of the Scandinavian kingdoms the bishops were members *ex officio* of the council of the realm. In rank they came right after the king, before the worldly council lords. Visitations gave bishops an opportunity to see that priests lived morally, dressed appropriately, carried out services, celebrated mass, and observed the provisions of

² Research has not yet produced stable percentages for privileged landholders in Denmark. See Rasmussen 1994. Elsewhere the percentages are fairly reliable. See Bjørkvik 1992; Prange 1983; Rosén 1964; Behre et al. 2001, 18–25; Larsson 1985.

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various bequests. At church meetings bishops regulated the tenor of spiritual life.

Church holdings provided the economic basis for the church's exercise of power. To get some idea of the extent of these holdings, suppose we take the archdiocese of Lund. The archbishop disposed of income from the districts of Herrestad, Ljunits, and Vemenhög, plus rents from about one thousand farms, half of them on the fertile plains of Skaane. In addition the archbishop held personal fiefs. The chapter, consisting of four prelatures and thirty canonicates, controlled another 1,330 farms and town properties. One hundred sixty were set aside for the prelates, three hundred fifty for the canons. The archdeacon administered Lund's two hospitals and collected revenue from about sixty farms. Two hundred fifty farms were allotted to the cathedral building fund. And the diocesan holdings funded forty-nine vicariates.³ From these various sources the church collected an annual rent in kind. To this were added tithes, which gave the church a greater income than the yield of her lands. Lund was, of course, among the oldest and richest of Scandinavian dioceses, but just for this reason it provided a model for more recent establishments. Wherever the church took root, it began to acquire a complex of estates; real estate was a major preoccupation of the upper clergy.

The upper reaches of the hierarchy attracted young nobles and ambitious sons of commoners. In the late Middle Ages bishops and canons were astute businessmen, willing and able to manage church holdings profitably. Ground rents and tithes were largely paid in kind. The clergy organized transport for these wares, grain, butter, live-stock, fish, hides, furs, and the like; they were sold in trading towns, or, more profitably, exported. Prelates loaned the returns against security in mortgages and at interest.

Bishops and canons were not just shrewd landlords. They were trained in *ars dictandi*, the art of drawing up public documents, as in canon and secular law. Because of their years of study abroad and their missions with the curia or their service in royal chanceries, they possessed an intimate knowledge of continental politics and law.

The economic, legal, political, and spiritual interests of Catholic prelates often ran counter to those of princes and nobles. Scandinavian kings invariably discovered at the beginning of their reigns that the

³ Johannesson 1947, 62–63. For detail, see Forsell 1869, Styffe 1911, and Westman 1918, 69–74. Westman estimated that one-eighth of Sweden's land was held by the church (not including priests' farms). Of this land, a quarter came under central diocesan institutions, another quarter under the cloisters. Church holdings were greatest in the southern provinces of Götaland, a fact of some importance for understanding Reformation history.

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bishops' bench meant to limit crown authority, and learned to take clerical professions of fealty with a grain of salt. The clergy's ultimate loyalty was pledged elsewhere. The bishops' fortresses were a check on crown control, potential centers of unrest or insurrection. Financially challenged rulers were not pleased to watch the kingdom's resources swallowed by diocesan treasuries or sent to Rome. They resented the church's exemption from taxes. Princes found it intolerable that an international organization should exercise autonomous legal authority in their territories. As opportunities offered, princes curtailed church freedoms, interfered in church appointments, exacted forced loans, and levied extraordinary taxes on church tenants.

The attitude of worldly nobles toward churchmen was far more ambiguous than that of the crown. Although nobles equated status with land, and the church was a competitor in land acquisition, the nobility as a whole was far from hostile to church interests. Taken together, nobles and prelates were privileged estates; they maintained their status in opposition to the rest of society. In return for their services, both estates were free from taxes and determined to remain so. Both estates strove with all their might to enlarge their legal and political autonomy, especially on their own lands. Worldly nobles regarded the church as a suitable solution to the problem of younger sons and unmarried daughters.

Conflict between the worldly and spiritual nobility was for the most part latent. During the unrest leading up to the Reformation, the crown promoted what Poul Helgesen called "the innate hatred of lay nobles for churchmen."⁴ The quarrels concerned the church's worldly competence. The clergy's appetite for land was as avid as the nobility's; because the church did not suffer from the problem of inheritance, however, what bishops, chapters, and cloisters acquired, the church kept, to be exchanged only if something better offered. Pious bequests were a threat to worldly heirs, and there were prohibitions against donations and church acquisition of noble land. Every level of the church hierarchy loaned money; interest was not always mentioned, but it was certainly included. The ill-gotten gains, technically usury, supplemented by pious bequests, were loaned again, or invested in property. Churchmen preferred tax-exempt land, a sore point with lay colleagues. Sharp financial practice created other points of friction with the prelates' worldly counterparts. Nobles complained that the clergy persecuted noble tenants with unjust exactions and bans, and that prelates did not bear their share of state expenses.

⁴ *Skibylkroniken* 1891, 48.

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These issues were thrashed out at meetings of the councils of the realm, *herredage*, in the three kingdoms, where the lords temporal and spiritual strove for advantage. The ins and outs of their quarrels, and the ups and downs of the contending factions can be followed in the unending stream of recesses and ordinances at the close of their meetings.

Although the interests of the privileged orders overlapped, the source of their privileges was different. Military service was the basis of the worldly nobility's rights and freedoms. In times of trouble, all who held noble land were expected to appear on horseback in armor, sword in hand, accompanied by armed men. In return for this service, nobles were exempt from taxes and could hold fiefs.

The desirability of tax exemption is obvious, but the granting and holding of fiefs needs attention; the subject is inseparable from noble status. In the late Middle Ages the system of fiefs was synonymous with administration, and in this task the crown and the nobility participated in ruling the kingdom. By tradition the crown held the administrative authority, and the nobility aided the crown in exercising authority. At its simplest, the crown granted a greater or lesser region in return for a fee, or for service, mostly military service. The service was determined by the noble's grant, although this was not strictly specified, not at first anyway.⁵ Fiefholders and their men constituted the nucleus of the kingdom's defense. From the farmers in his fief, the fiefholder recruited his men for war service. The fiefholder announced royal decrees and saw to their observance. He held the farmers in law and justice and protected their rights. He collected taxes and passed them along to the crown. He oversaw the upkeep of forests, roads, and bridges. In short, the fiefholder represented the crown in every branch of administration.

As fiefholding evolved, however, the system revealed an unbridgeable gap between crown and noble interests. Fiefs were granted with different conditions. Account fiefs, *regnskabslen*, "lay under the king's chamber;" they were that part of the kingdom reserved for the crown. The fiefholder had to account for every item of income and expense and pay the crown the remainder. He received a set wage, his salary as a servant of the crown. Service fiefs, by contrast, *tjenstelen*, were granted for military service. In return for venturing life and goods in defense of the kingdom, the fiefholder collected fief revenue and pocketed the surplus, great or small. He was otherwise free of crown interference. In fee fiefs, *afgiftslen*, by contrast, the fiefholder collected all the fief revenue, but paid a set yearly fee to the crown. Like the

⁵ Nilsson 1947, 18–21.