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978-0-521-87616-2 - Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy: Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus' c. 900-1200

Edited by Nora Berend

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CHAPTER I

*Introduction*¹*Nora Berend*

I. THE PROJECT

This book is the product of a year-long research project I organized, conducted in collaboration with the Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of Bergen, and with scholars from several countries. Together, we agreed on a set of questions to be addressed, read each other's rough drafts and held a series of workshop discussions in common, so that the book is not a collection of articles, but a coherent whole where all chapters address the same issues. We worked as a team and all the participants contributed more than their particular chapter in this volume; in a way the entire book, including this introduction, is the result of our common work.

The extension of Christendom's frontiers by the Christianization of Scandinavia and central-eastern Europe, a process also linked to the formation of new principalities and kingdoms, was one of the most fundamental stages in the formation of Europe. It resulted in the incorporation of large swaths of land into a political system that eventually gave rise to the European states as we know them. In the medieval 'making of Europe', one can distinguish between several regions: areas that joined Christian Europe under the leadership of their own elite, and those that either remained outside Christendom or were subjugated by force. We focused on the first, where two developments coincided in time: as Christianity was introduced, local rulers also consolidated their power over these areas. Thus we set out to investigate the relationship between religious change and political change, Christianization and the rise of Christian monarchy, around the year 1000 in an interdisciplinary and comparative framework. In order to highlight the specificity of these developments, other patterns of Christianization and political control will be discussed below in section 3.

Denmark, Norway and Sweden in Scandinavia, and Bohemia, Hungary and Poland in central Europe joined Latin Christendom in roughly the

¹ I thank the members of the project, and Susan Reynolds and David d'Avray for their suggestions.

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century and a half between the late ninth century and the middle of the eleventh century. Rus' in the same period adopted Byzantine Christianity. This dating is derived from the conversion of rulers. These 'official' conversions did not immediately entail the Christianization of the population even in an institutional sense, let alone in the sense of an internalization of beliefs. Nor, however, did they necessarily mean the forced conversion of the population. In some cases before, while in others after, the ruler's conversion, Christians and pagans coexisted in more or less easy or uneasy ways for a while. These official conversions however signal what in these cases turned out to be the point of no return, after which, despite pagan revolts in some of the areas, religious change progressed in one direction only, towards Christianization. They also indicate the linking of Christianity and princely power.

The scholars who worked on this project included historians, archaeologists and art historians. This interdisciplinary approach prevented us from either simply using the findings of art and archaeology as illustration or ignoring them entirely in an interpretive framework that hinges on texts alone. The comparative nature of our undertaking questions explanatory frameworks whose perspective is either exclusively national or western European. Causality and historical processes are seen in a new light when viewed across northern and central-eastern Europe as a whole, highlighting the inadequacies of purely local explanations. Regional patterns emerge, within which similarities and differences can be closely analysed. Although on the surface similar processes took place in all these areas, a closer comparison reveals many significant differences. Thus in the interlinked process of the adoption of Christianity and political consolidation, we investigated the relationship between borrowing (especially from western Europe), adaptations and local specificities. Some aspects were common to the whole area, others were specific to particular regions or countries. When local variations are explored in depth, it becomes clear that the process of Christianization and political consolidation cannot be equated with the adoption of a western European blueprint.

Both Christianization and the consolidation of polities are topics with a venerable past in scholarship. I shall not reiterate terminological debates, but use conversion to denote individual religious change and Christianization to refer to the process of the penetration of Christianity into society and accompanying societal change.² Sociological studies of religion inform our

² Russell 1994, 26–30; Sawyer, Sawyer and Wood 1987, 1–22; Sanmark 2004, 13–14. On the contrary, conversion as possible synonym of Christianization: Rambo 1993, 172.

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understanding of religious change.³ Sociologists, however, have primarily analysed modern and most often individual conversions: the sources and the psychological insights available for such studies differ widely from those available to medievalists.⁴ Cultural anthropology, with more research on the conversion of communities and whole societies, provides helpful analogies, as do some sociohistorical studies of the Christianization of societies.⁵ Pierre Hadot drew attention to how conversion is specific to religions of 'rupture', entailing absolute faith in the word of God.⁶ Scholars, however, have access only to the accounts and interpretations of conversion, not to the experience itself.⁷ In our case, we have little data even of views expressed on the individual feelings accompanying conversion. Texts mention a few cases of individual conversions, but we have no evidence matching that on Augustine of Hippo, or Herman-Judah, however riddled they be with difficulties, such as the relationship between literary construct and experience.

Conversion, even in well-documented individual cases, was not simply an individual matter; scholars of all fields emphasize that conversion is contingent on the social context.⁸ A greater degree of instability, sociocultural crisis and a discontinuity of old explanatory structures have been linked to the likelihood of group conversion.⁹ In our context, however, we cannot attribute religious change to dissatisfaction with existing explanatory structures. In order to understand the religious change that took place we must look at a combination of factors, including political motivations and coercion. Our primary concern is religious change as introduced by a ruler and its impact on society.¹⁰ In the societies under investigation, conversion was a question of collective identity, as religion both before and after Christianization was central to social life. Religious change entails the transfer of feelings of awe and reverence to another source and a change in rituals. In our cases, the distinction between the sacred and the profane existed both before and after Christianization, but the content of each changed: for example sacred trees ceased to be accepted as sacred. As Émile Durkheim pointed out long ago, religion does not simply consist of belief;

³ Especially Weber 1969; Durkheim 1965; Berger 1973; Stark and Bainbridge 1987. Cf. Geertz 1966.

⁴ Kilbourne and Richardson 1989; Stark and Bainbridge 1987, 195–202; Snow and Machalek 1984; Rambo 1993, esp. 30–3, 48–65, 81–6, 160–2; Rambo 1999.

⁵ Tippet 1992; Kraft 1992; several studies in Buckser and Glazier 2003; Russell 1994; Stark 1996. Cf. also Cusack 1999.

⁶ Hadot 1981. ⁷ Morrison 1992, 4–5; Rambo 1993, 171.

⁸ Malony and Southard 1992; Rambo 1993; Buckser and Glazier 2003.

⁹ Berger 1973, 54–9; Rambo 1993, 46–7.

¹⁰ Urbańczyk 2003 provides a schematic overall analysis without reflecting on changes in Christianity.

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collective ceremonial and ritual activities, carried out in order to create or reinforce group solidarity, are key elements of religion.¹¹ The latter was a paramount issue in early medieval Christianity, with its focus on public rituals and the close association of religion and secular power, as cogently demonstrated by Mayke de Jong's analysis.¹² Christianization meant that one set of rituals was exchanged for another; and this was accompanied by the imposition of new religious specialists who were initially outsiders, immigrants. Individual conversions mean leaving one social milieu in order to become part of another; collective conversion means a transformation of the social milieu itself. For example, certain social practices including those involving marriage or infanticide were not accepted under the new dispensation.

The more specific meanings of Christianization in our period and area will be discussed below. First, it is crucial to address the key issues concerning definitions of being a 'Christian' and Christianization. Modern studies emphasize the multiple meanings and different types of conversion, and the negotiated nature of Christian commitment.¹³ The definition of who is 'religious' is difficult even for students of modern religiosity: for example different results have been reached by focusing on church attendance or on particular beliefs as constituting religiousness.¹⁴ It is clear that one must avoid defining 'authentic' religiosity by motivation, thus for example denying that behaviour which aims at securing safety, status or good luck is religious, as such an attitude precludes the examination of the meaning of religiosity.¹⁵ Robert Markus demonstrated the need to focus on a given period's own conception of Christianity, and showed how Christianity itself changed during the first few centuries.¹⁶ In the same way, modern definitions of Christianity in the period under investigation need to be based on the medieval understanding of what constituted a Christian, in order to avoid anachronism. Belief, religious practice (rituals and devotion), the experience of the ultimate nature of reality, knowledge about faith and its consequences in one's behaviour have all been cited as parameters of religiosity; but the question is what was crucial at the time in determining the dividing line between Christians and non-Christians.

¹¹ Durkheim 1965, bk 3. Also Turner 1969.

¹² de Jong 2001; others have drawn similar conclusions but often with a negative judgement on the meaning of medieval Christianity, summarized in Sanmark 2004, 31–2.

¹³ Summary in Rambo 1993; Mills and Grafton 2003.

¹⁴ E.g. Stark and Glock 1968, 11–21.

¹⁵ As opposed to the classification by Allport 1960, 33; criticism Stark and Glock 1968, 18–19.

¹⁶ Markus 1990. Also Fletcher 1997.

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Medieval ideas of conversion themselves were not static, and by the eleventh–twelfth centuries monastic theological circles developed sophisticated ideas, which, however, were not common to all members of society. Underpinning medieval understandings of conversion were two key issues: conversion as redemption, and the implementation of conversion, which meant joining a group, the Church. The first notion entailed that conversion led to truth and life, that it was a turning of the heart to God. Two possible conclusions, however, followed from this. One was that because it was not due to human endeavour but only to God's grace, conversion could not be imposed but only voluntary.¹⁷ A different view, however, was advocated by some, and became significant by the thirteenth century (despite contemporary critics), which permitted the use of pressure and even force, because the ultimate aim, the salvation of souls, was seen as justifying such intervention: just as medical procedures causing pain led to healing, pain could be imposed by force to cure the soul, turning military threat and warfare into acceptable means to bring about conversion.¹⁸ The second issue concerned the nature of conversion. Both medieval commentators and modern scholars have been divided in their opinions about whether conversion is an event, a turning point (in this case baptism) or a process, which can even last a lifetime; current consensus tends towards the latter.¹⁹ Although K. Morrison has shown how eleventh- and twelfth-century writers understood conversion in the sense of the self-perfection of Christians (the imitation of Christ), as a process ending only in death, it is equally clear that many missionaries followed a policy of 'baptize first, teach later' when it came to the mass-conversion of pagans.²⁰ The hardening of papal policy in the thirteenth century on baptism as irrevocable even in the case of Jews baptized under duress similarly indicates that baptism was seen as a crucial milestone that had irrevocable consequences.²¹ Baptism, one act, may only be a part of the process of conversion, but in our period and geographical area, baptism was clearly a crucial element of conversion. It is significant that while in the eleventh and especially twelfth century medieval authors were preoccupied by internalized self-perfection, a constant seeking of God, the conversion of northern and central Europe took a radically different form. Breaking down the old and assuming the

¹⁷ Morrison 1992, 81.

¹⁸ Morrison 1992, 81, 79; Duggan 1997; Urban 1989b. Case-studies on the significance of military pressure e.g. Bartlett 1985; Karras 1986 (also discusses contemporary critics); Jensen 2001.

¹⁹ Nock 1933; Hadot 1981; Snow and Machalek 1984; Kilbourne and Richardson 1989; Rambo 1993; Morrison 1992; Russell 1994; Sanmark 2004, 13–14; Rambo 1992, 160; Buckser and Glazier 2003.

²⁰ Cf. similar policies elsewhere Ryan 1997; Sanmark 2004, 43–5.

²¹ First formulated at Toledo IV (633). Ravid 2000.

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new man was a standard part of understandings of conversion – in our case this was to be a lengthy process *after*, rather than before, baptism. We do not, however, engage in charting the internalization of Christianity: this would necessitate another research project and the establishment of exact criteria to avoid an implicit dismissal of certain forms of religiosity, and value-judgements inherent in seeking to distinguish a stage when the population became ‘truly’ Christian.

Christianization in these areas was linked to the rise of polities. Although initially our working title included ‘state formation’, we decided not to engage in argument over whether the emerging units were ‘states’, as it would lead us far from our purpose. Yet, because the wider problem of the formation of states and their characteristics has a bearing on discussions of power and political consolidation, it is worth pointing out where our topic is situated within such a framework. Divergent views are held on the beginnings of states among both social scientists and medievalists. Many argue that it is misleading to call only the modern national state (where government has sovereign power over the citizens of a defined territorial area) and its direct antecedents (which according to some go back to the medieval period) ‘state’, and the word has been applied to the Greek polis, the Roman Empire, Italian city-states and other units. Theories of state formation abound, prioritizing causes as diverse as for example irrigation agriculture, warfare, voluntary subordination or economic exchange.²² Sociologists have argued about the characteristics of states and their differences from other political units. The distinction has been drawn between political centralization without fully developed states, where a warrior- or priest-chief ruled with a council, and people owed allegiance to him; and states, where the ruler had a court and controlled the armed force, and full-time officials carried out administration and justice.²³ Stephen K. Sanderson distinguished between chiefdom and state, defining the former as a form of sociopolitical organization that is an essential precursor to the state. Despite many similarities between states and chiefdoms, he saw a crucial qualitative distinction: the state has a monopoly of violence, whereas the chiefdom does not.²⁴

Not everyone follows such a classification, however. Because states themselves have been defined in different ways, whether a particular polity will be categorized as a state will depend on the definition used. Max Weber saw a state as a compulsory association claiming monopoly of the legitimate use

²² E.g. Tilly 1985; Sanderson 1999, 70–82.

²³ Giddens 2001, chap. 14 (more details in 1993, chap. 10); Mann 1986, chap. 1.

²⁴ Sanderson 1999, 55–7.

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of physical force within its territories; Charles Tilly as a coercion-wielding organization that exercises a clear priority in some respects over all other organizations within substantial territories; Anthony Giddens as a political apparatus of government ruling over a territory, with a legal system and the ability to use force to buttress its power; and Joseph Strayer used a simple set of 'signs' to detect the existence of states: the long-term geographic stability of a human group, the existence of impersonal and relatively permanent political institutions with political power, and people's loyalty to these.²⁵ Some scholars stress that many different types of states have existed, including ones with little durable state apparatus.²⁶ It is not surprising therefore that, although no one denies that during the medieval period personal bonds and cross-cutting jurisdictions were important, and that exclusive territorial sovereignty was not the form medieval power took, both sociologists and medievalists have proposed different starting dates for the development of European (usually meaning west European) states. One finds views on the existence of states in the seventh century, on the emergence of states in the period 1000–1300 or in the twelfth century, or the birth of the 'modern state' in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, to name but a few positions on the issue.²⁷ Others prefer to speak of stateless or polycentric societies for the medieval period.²⁸ Recent criticism of using the concept of 'state' for the medieval period suggested that it obscures the complexity of the power structure, the fact that other sources of power existed apart from the king and imposes a false image of delegated authority.²⁹

This is not a debate we wish to engage in; clearly, depending on the definition one chooses, these polities can or cannot be defined as states. For example, major administrative structures and complex institutions only came into being later than our period in the areas under discussion; the beginnings of institutions of rule such as chanceries and courts, or ideologies of rulership, on the other hand, emerged during the period we are analysing. Whether or not one decides to call the emerging political units states, they are clearly situated on a continuum of political centralization. Therefore some conclusions from sociologists are worth mentioning here, as they are particularly pertinent to our investigations. Several scholars have emphasized how the development of states can only be understood

²⁵ Weber 1968, vol. I, chap. 1, concept of state at 56 (I was unable to consult the 1979 edition); Tilly 1992; Giddens 2001, 421; Strayer 1970. Cf. Axtmann 1993; Reynolds 1997a.

²⁶ Tilly 1992, 21.

²⁷ Thacker 2000; Strayer 1970; Mann 1986; Zmora 2001 respectively. For a critical discussion, Reynolds 1997a. The entire 2002, vol. 15, no. 1 issue of the *Journal of Historical Sociology* is dedicated to discussion concerning the definition of states.

²⁸ Listed in Davies 2003. ²⁹ Davies 2002; 2003; response: Reynolds 2003.

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in relation to other states.³⁰ The need to view the historical developments of political units treated here in terms of interaction and not in the isolation of modern national boundaries is clear. Norbert Elias underlined the long-term nature of state-formation processes and posed the question of why parts of society became more integrated and functionally more interdependent over the centuries (with each move towards closer integration engendering tension and conflict).³¹ Our project fits into this analytical framework, with its focus on the growing consolidation of the ruler's power and of polities without engaging with the issue of when exactly political centralization turns into a state. The polities that came into being eventually all became 'regnal communities' as defined by Susan Reynolds.³²

Christianization and the rise of polities could be studied independently. However, we are interested in the intersection of the two, and the relationship between them. To what extent were these two processes interconnected, Christianization helping in the consolidation of political units, and/or political consolidation facilitating Christianization? What were the connections between the two in terms of personnel, methods of control and communication (including the use of writing), institutions and structures? Our work offers a detailed comparative study that has hitherto been absent from the scholarship. Although in the extensive national historiographies Christianization and the beginnings of the state take pride of place, comparative work is rare and does not focus on local variations. Thus the analysis of the history of central and northern Europe's conversion has been affected by two separate trends. On the one hand, competing national myths have long held sway over this area of research. On the other hand, medievalists from outside the countries in question primarily studied the process as the expansion of western Europe, be it primarily through the agency of the aristocracy (Robert Bartlett) or missionaries (Richard Fletcher).³³ Scandinavia's Christianization overall has been studied, although most work deals with individual countries, but there is no in-depth analysis of this topic for central and eastern Europe, nor, apart from brief overviews, of all these regions in a comparative perspective.³⁴

The changes in northern and central-eastern Europe were part of long-term processes that resulted in, on the one hand, the rise of Christianity as the dominant religion of European societies, and, on the other hand,

³⁰ E.g. Skocpol 1985; Tilly 1992; Mann 1986; Anderson 1974, esp. 37–8; Elias 2000, esp. 262–4.

³¹ Elias, 2000, 257–362; 1972. ³² Reynolds 1997b. ³³ Bartlett 1993; Fletcher 1997.

³⁴ Scandinavia: Sawyer, Sawyer and Wood 1987; Sanmark 2004; Kattinger, Olesen and Wernicke 2004, with a list of previous volumes. Overview notably Kłoczowski 1993, positing the link between state and Christianization.

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the development of a system of states as the political structure of these societies. The process started well before the period we are focusing on, and in some respects continued after it. But the transformations we discuss were crucial in the creation of 'Europe'. Constantine's conversion to Christianity and introduction of single dynastic rule started the political ascendancy of the religion and forged the link between Christianity and power, although the connection was played out in a variety of ways over the centuries. The subsequent spread of Christianity entailed compromises and accommodations at every stage, as eloquently analysed by Peter Brown.³⁵ Among a series of turning-points, the eighth century was significant in the rise of political systems that were no longer linked to the ancient world, with aristocracies that had no knowledge of Latin, and the establishment of ties between the Franks and the popes. This local Christendom was then expanded, first along its peripheries through the Christianization of Frisia and Saxony, entailing submission to the Frankish rulers. Christianity and kingship were associated, as were paganism, brutishness and a kingless society. Missionaries under the patronage of rulers started to go out, first to put an end to the coexistence of Christian and pagan practices, and eventually to persuade pagans to convert. It was the time of 'the emergence of a distinctive Christianity in the west . . . characterized . . . by the alliance of a substantially new Church with a new political system',³⁶ both intent on their further expansion. The spread of Christianity involved serious education in the core areas, but quick baptisms along the frontiers; 'Christianity had become part of the language of power throughout north-western Europe.'³⁷ The conversion of northern and central-eastern Europe was the last step in this 'rise of Western Christendom'.

The development of Christendom consisted of more than the spread of a new religion. Numerous scholars have pointed out that the ninth to the eleventh or twelfth centuries was the period of the 'birth of Europe': the political units that took shape then continued with some variations to become the Europe as we know it.³⁸ Our investigations fall into the period that R. I. Moore calls the 'first European revolution',³⁹ laying the foundations of the *ancien régime*. It was an era of significant new developments in western Europe itself: the development of papal power, of parishes, of monastic orders. Some of these innovations rapidly arrived in the newly joined lands. The period of the 'expansion of Europe' was not simply one of adding new territories, however. It meant further diversification, bringing

³⁵ Brown 1997; also Herrin 1989; Fletcher 1997. ³⁶ Brown 1997, 275.

³⁷ Brown 1997, 306. ³⁸ Bartlett 1993; Fried 1991; Leyser 1994a; Le Goff 2005.

³⁹ Moore 2000 (for the period 970–1215).

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about even more variety in religious practices and increasing the number of political players.

2. SCANDINAVIA AND CENTRAL-EASTERN EUROPE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The following chapters discuss the same set of issues linked to Christianization and the rise of Christian polities country by country. Each of us is bound by our particular expertise, and therefore the only way to produce a comparative analysis was to rely on a framework based on modern nation-states. Readers can draw their own conclusions from the material presented in the chapters; here I present key comparisons and overall considerations.⁴⁰ Open questions remain of course, and further research may shed light on issues of pagan religion or the importance of missionary centres for example, leading to new answers.

The nature of our sources, whether written, archaeological or artistic, poses particular problems. They often provide only fragmentary evidence which is open to conflicting interpretations. The biases of the written sources and the problems of interpretation relating to archaeological finds need to be weighed constantly. Wherever possible, comparing the testimony of different sources can offer clearer insights; for example, when analysing the Scandinavian pantheon of gods, the place names give a different picture of locally important gods than the narratives constructed during Christian times. However, such comparisons are not always possible; for example, archaeology provides the only evidence in many cases. Similarly, what is reliable and what is later invention in the Christian narrative sources often remain a matter of guesswork. In the same way, the linking of artistic influences to political or religious impact is often speculative. By laying bare the source-base of our work, and indicating doubts, problems, uncertainties and rival interpretations, instead of creating a smooth narrative, we aim to demonstrate how we know what we know, admit what we do not know and signal the possibilities in between.

A). Pre-Christian religions and the first contacts with Christianity

Looking at Christianization and the rise of Christian monarchies in a comparative perspective, it is clear that striking similarities and equally

⁴⁰ I shall not footnote the material that can be found in the individual chapters; references will only be included to primary and secondary sources I have drawn on for this section.