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‘The Catholic danger’

Anti-Catholicism and the formation of Scandinavian national identity

Anti-Catholicism is a phenomenon as old as the Protestant church. What makes it into a unique object of study, is its spread and growth during the 19th century, when it was established as a transnational frame of reference articulated all over Europe, as well as in North America. Secular liberals and conservatives, Protestants and others, in both predominantly Catholic and Protestant countries all used well-established negative images of the Catholic Church to position themselves politically and culturally. Tales about treacherous Jesuits and scheming popes were an important and pervasive part of European culture.

The Nordic region constituted a very particular setting for such conceptions. Also here Anti-Catholic ideas and images were widespread. Until the liberalisation of religious legislation in the mid-nineteenth century, it was illegal for the citizens in the Scandinavian countries to belong to other churches than the established Lutheran churches. In Finland this interdict lasted until 1922. Thus, for a long time the Catholic minority represented a numerically insignificant group of foreign believers. If there were no Catholics, where did the conflicts come from?

In my lecture, I will discuss the significance of anti-Catholicism in the construction of Scandinavian identity in the first part of the 20th century, which expressions it took and how it changed over time. Crucial here is the relationship between the existence of a common body of European ideas and developments specific to the Nordic countries. I will show that anti-Catholicism played an important role in the conceptions of Scandinavian national identity that developed during the nineteenth century, and that Catholicism came to serve as a counter-image to the notion of national values articulated in the same period. As an example, I will discuss the impact of anti-Catholicism on German-Swedish cultural relations in the inter-war period. A central aspect is how anti-Catholicism was part of a wider climate of insecurity, relating to fears of Soviet Russia and Communism, which contributed to growing sympathies for National Socialism and the new regime in Germany. In Sweden, concern about the Catholic threat was especially strong in liberal theological circles. These theologians were inspired by German theology, and had close contacts with colleagues in Central Europe.

International research has emphasised the importance of anti-Catholicism for processes of identity formation in the modern era, both within established Protestant churches and national liberal movements. This was very evident in Germany, where Catholicism served as an effective counter image to Protestant national identity and the modernity these groups claimed

to represent. Regarding Great Britain and the U.S., a number of studies have highlighted anti-Catholicism as an important aspect of national culture. Different groups developed their own variants of anti-Catholicism, which were used as weapons in the political debate not only against Catholics but also against other religious and political enemies. The connection between anti-Catholicism and other anti-movements such as antisemitism, anti-feminism and anti-socialism has also been highlighted.

What makes anti-Catholicism such an interesting object of study, is its spread and growth in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, when it was established as a transnational frame of reference articulated all over Europe, as well as in North America. Anti-Catholic literature formed a veritable international canon, which also spread in Scandinavia. Secular liberals and conservatives, Protestants and others, in both predominantly Catholic and Protestant countries all used similar negative images of the Catholic Church to position themselves politically and culturally. This anti-Catholic discourse served as a kind of uniting framework for European and North American Protestantism in its different forms until the 1960's, when the Second Vatican Council and the following reforms disarmed much of the previous anti-Catholic rhetoric. Vatican II thus stands out as a watershed in the Catholic Church's modern history.

Until Vatican II anti-Catholicism was fuelled by the strong language in which the Catholic Church condemned both Protestantism and modern developments towards a secular society. In many countries these controversies resulted in open clashes between the Catholic Church and the state authorities. From a Protestant and secular point of view, the Catholic Church was considered a threat to progress and national integrity. This was especially evident in confessionally divided countries such as, for example, Germany. It has been shown that the proponents of German liberalism portrayed Catholicism not only as an un-German and outdated form of religion but also as a threat to the Protestant, masculine character of the German nation. Similar arguments can be found in the British debate against Catholics and High Church Anglicans, who were accused of encouraging men to adopt effeminate, unmanly attitudes. Such rhetoric was used also in National Socialist propaganda in Germany, and in the eyes of many Protestants, the NSDAP appeared as a Lutheran party.

Anti-Catholic discourses in Scandinavia

In Scandinavia the heritage of the Reformation played an important role in the conceptions of national identity that developed during the nineteenth century. The Reformation was depicted as a break-through of liberty, freedom, and as liberation from religious superstition and Papal oppression. Catholicism thus came to serve as a counter-image to the notion of 'national' values articulated in the period. As in other Protestant countries, the gradual dismantling of the legislation on compulsory religious adherence led to the politicisation of religious issues.

What stands out in this process is, on the one hand, the de-confessionalisation of politics, and, on the other, the re-activation of Lutheran confessionalism. The latter also took secular forms; a term sometimes used in research is ‘secularised Lutheranism’. In this situation the old enemy images took on new functions. This was very much the case with the notion of the ‘Catholic danger’, which time and again surfaced in the Swedish media and in parliamentary debates.

Until the liberalisation of religious legislation the mid-nineteenth century, it was illegal for Scandinavian citizens to belong to churches other than the established Lutheran churches. The connection between Lutheranism and Nordic national identity stayed relevant long after the disappearance of religion as an all-encompassing norm in daily life. Anti-Catholicism was not only important in a religious sense, for, as some historians have shown, such sentiments were also prevalent in politics, not least in the Social Democratic Party. Another interesting feature is that – in the same way as in Great Britain and the USA – anti-Catholic rhetoric and stereotypes were used not only against Catholics, but also against other religious and political enemies and as weapons in political debate.

Negative views of the Catholic Church had deep roots in Scandinavian mentality. In public opinion, even the vaguest possibility of Catholic expansion was considered a threat to national and cultural integrity. The steady growth in papal power in the centralised Catholic Church and the strengthening of political Catholicism elsewhere in Europe merely fuelled these suspicions. One important factor was pre-Vatican II Catholic ecclesiology, which strongly stressed the claim of the Catholic Church to be the only true Church. Other Christian communities were not considered to be Churches, properly speaking. As a consequence, even formally Christian, though non-Catholic areas were regarded as missionary fields. The Scandinavian countries, which until 1953 had the status of Apostolic Vicariates under the authority of the Roman Congregation for mission, the *Propaganda Fide*, were thus subjected to missionary activity.

With the Tolerance Edict of 1781, the public exercise of the Catholic faith was officially permitted in Sweden, but only for foreign subjects. Swedish citizens were still prohibited from belonging to a religious community other than the established Lutheran Church. With the Dissenter Act in 1860, these stipulations were abolished, and defection from the established Lutheran Church, which from now on was called the Church of Sweden, lost its criminal status. But conversion to one of the so-called foreign religious communities was still hedged about by strong restrictions. We find the same pattern in Norway, which was separated from Denmark and joined with Sweden in a monarchical union in 1814. Many of the legal restrictions had an obvious anti-Catholic purpose, and were intended to prevent people from converting to the Catholic Church. Full religious freedom was introduced in the two countries as late as 1951 respectively 1964, a move long delayed not least by the strong

anti-Catholic sentiments in the countries and the fear that the Catholic Church would grow strong under the protection of a more liberal religious legislation.

This fear was not without foundation. In fact, the liberalisation of Scandinavian religious legislation in the mid-nineteenth century opened the way for Catholic mission and conversions to the Catholic Church. This was particularly evident in Denmark, where the new liberal constitution of 1849, which replaced the absolutist and confessional regime with its severe religious regulations, introduced virtually full religious liberty. In the debates that preceded the new religious legislation anti-Catholic attitudes were voiced by a strong minority in the constitutional assembly and also in the media, and it was warned against Jesuit infiltration and Catholic proselytising.

The Catholic missionary work was indeed fairly successful in Denmark, and the numbers of Catholics consequently increased to about 25 000 in the early 1930s. This expansion was partly caused by immigration, but was primarily a consequence of conversion, and at the turn of the twentieth century, the number of Danish converts averaged 230 per year. In Norway and Sweden, where restrictive dissenter laws impeded the activities of 'foreign' religious communities, the Catholic mission was less successful. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Catholic population did not amount to more than a few thousand. A common feature, however, was the prominent role played by native converts, who contributed to give the Catholic parishes, with their foreign, mostly German and French priests and nuns, a Scandinavian character. Among the converts we find artists, academics, politicians, and also former Protestant priest. Yet, the majority came from the lower classes.

Catholic orders and congregations played a significant role in the missionary work. Most of these religious institutes were female congregations, and at the beginning of the 1930s, there were more than 1.300 Catholic sisters working in Scandinavia. Male religious often took over responsibility for the parishes, whereas the female religious mainly dedicated themselves to education, health care, and other social work. Among the male orders, the Jesuits were the most important, and at the beginning of the twentieth century they had five residences in Denmark and Sweden and a college for boys outside Copenhagen. The leading female congregation was the Sisters of Saint Joseph from France. At the beginning of the 1920s, nearly thousand of these sisters were working in the three Scandinavian countries, managing hospitals, private schools and other social institutions. Catholic schools and hospitals were used as missionary tools, and most pupils and patients were Protestants.

This naturally served to reinforce anti-Catholic feelings in the Scandinavia. Anti-Catholic sentiments were expressed in parliamentary debates, political tracts, satirical images, pamphlet literature, and last but not least, in the media. Anti-Catholic media debates were especially frequent in the inter-war period, partly due to the strengthened Catholic position in

Europe after the war, partly because of intensified Catholic missionary activities in the Nordic countries. One of the most spectacular events was the Eucharistic Congress held in Copenhagen in 1932 under the aegis of the prefect of *Propaganda Fide*, Cardinal Willem van Rossum. This triumphant manifestation of the Catholic presence in Scandinavia naturally led to fierce attacks on the Catholic Church in the media, and to intense debates on how to prevent Northerners from being attracted or infected by Catholicism.

Liberal theology and German influences

Protestant liberal theology was a movement that strove to adapt the Christian message to modern society and its mentality, and to bring it into line with the new scientific worldview. The 'liberal' theologians deliberately played down the metaphysical and dogmatic side of Christian faith, and instead focussed on its ethical dimensions. A common feature was that they wanted to create a new synthesis of Christianity and culture. In Europe, liberal theologians took a positive view of the modern state, which they saw as a guarantor of academic freedom and a bastion against conservative dogmatism and clerical abuse of power.

Liberal theology was especially successful in Germany, where it formed the basis of the bourgeois *Kulturprotestantismus* (cultural Protestantism). The movement that came to be known as *Deutsche Christen* (German Christians) was based on liberal theological foundations. The movement, which sought to reshape the Protestant church fellowship in accordance with National Socialist ideas of blood, soil, and race, was not only markedly antisemitic, but also strongly anti-Catholic. The Nazi regime saw the German Christian movement as a way to gain control of the German Protestant churches. But due to the theological struggle that soon started and that led to the formation of the *Bekennende Kirche* (Confessing Church), the regime gradually ceased to support the *Deutsche Christen* movement.

In Sweden, liberal theology was introduced by Fredrik Fehr, who was professor at Uppsala University and from 1884 *pastor primarius* (first pastor) in Stockholm. He was also a very fervent representative of anti-Catholicism, and warned from time to time for the 'Catholic danger'. On the commemoration day for Gustavus Adolphus in autumn 1889 he called for vigilance against Catholic propaganda. A bazaar in Stockholm for the benefit of Catholic sisters of mercy the following spring prompted him to convene the Stockholm clergy to discuss this new threat to 'evangelical freedom' and to pass a resolution urging the Swedes not to support Catholic social activities in the capital.

At the first decades of the twentieth century, Swedish liberal theology was represented by a group of theologians connected to the journal *Kristendomen och vår tid* (Christianity and our

time) that was published in the years 1906 to 1933. Like Swedish theology in general, the movement drew much of its inspiration from Germany and interacted with representatives of the German Protestant churches. This connection was also apparent in the common view of Catholicism and the ‘Catholic danger’, which was a prominent theme in the magazine. In issue after issue, the Catholic Church was presented as a menace to modern society and its principles, and Catholicism was described as an inferior form of religion that hampered the development of society, and as a threat to the autonomy and authority of state power. Anti-Catholic rhetoric was also used against theological enemies within the Church of Sweden, not least against the High Church movement, which was criticised for adopting Catholic rituals and traditions.

Another manifestation of anti-Catholicism was the foundation of *Evangeliska Utskottet* (the Protestant Committee) at the meeting of *Allmänna Svenska Prästföreningen*, an association of Church of Sweden pastors, in the city of Norrköping in 1923. The Protestant Committee had ties to *Internationaler Verband zur Verteidigung des Protestantismus* (the International League to Protect Protestantism), which was founded in Berlin that same year and took the struggle against Catholicism as its *raison d’être*. There were close links between these organisations and the Lutheran World Convention, founded in 1923 to assist Lutheran minority churches, particularly in Eastern Europe. Swedish missionary activities in Eastern Europe were funded by church collections and fund-raising by the magazine *Kyrkor under Korset* (Churches under the Cross), which was a mouthpiece both of the Protestant Committee.

Its editor was the chaplain of Lund cathedral, Lars Wollmar, who belonged to the circle associated with the aforementioned journal *Kristendomen och vår tid*. With his colleague Magnus Pfannenstill, one of the leading liberal theologians in Lund, Wollmar had participated in the founding of the International League to Protect Protestantism. The League’s general secretary, Gerhard Ohlemüller, was also chairman of the *Evangelischer Bund zur Wahrung der deutsch-protestantischen Interessen* (Protestant Union for Protection of German Protestant Interests), a Protestant association founded in the 1880s to combat the growing influence of the Catholic Church in Germany. It was this latter organisation that, together with its Dutch counterpart, had taken the initiative in founding this militantly anti-Catholic organisation. Ohlemüller participated at the meeting in Norrköping in 1923, where he gave a speech on the Catholic danger; the same theme was addressed by Pfannenstill, who called for a watch on the Catholic Church’s ‘imperialistic ambitions’, and for a ‘united Protestant front’. These bodies resembled organisations active in the English-speaking world, such as the Protestant Truth Society, which in 1930 the Protestant Truth Society warned against the missionary activities of the Catholic Church.

In *Kyrkor under Korset* both the Catholic and the Communist threats were a constant theme. As editor, Wollmar looked favourably on the Nazi regime in Germany, and like many other Protestant clergymen he hoped that National Socialist policies would lead to a Protestant revival. The situation of Lutherans in majority Catholic countries such as Austria and Spain was often addressed in *Kyrkor under Korset*, with angry attacks on the Catholic Church for perceived bullying, narrow-mindedness, gaudiness, and presumptuous claims to represent the only true faith. Another recurring feature of the magazine was its celebration of the heroic king Gustavus Adolphus, whose noble, open-minded and truly Lutheran character was contrasted with Bolshevik barbarism and Catholic absolutism; while Luther himself was presented as one of world history's great heroes and liberators.

Several articles deal with the Protestant World Convention and the collaboration between Swedish and German Protestant mission institutes in Eastern Europe. An illustrative example of a positive view of National Socialism is an article by Pfannenstill in 1936 entitled 'German Church Reconstruction', in which he stressed the importance of Protestant participation in the construction of a National Socialist people's society. Yet, he also warned of sweeping change, and underlined that the preaching of the Gospel always had to be given priority. *Kyrkor under Korset* was far from being the only church magazine that took a favourable view of the new Germany. Also *Svensk kyrkotidning* (the Swedish Church Journal), which was the mouthpiece of the Swedish Pastors' Association and represented a more conservative Lutheran standpoint, published a series of sympathetic articles on the German Christians and the new political order in Germany.

A positive perception of National Socialism was clearly connected to anti-Catholicism. It was the political dimension of Catholicism that came in for particular criticism. According to prevalent Catholic social doctrine, both church and state were *societas perfecta et completa*, sovereign in their respective fields, and should collaborate on equal terms for the benefit of the public good. *Kyrkor under Korset* stressed time and again the Lutheran principle of a division between the spiritual and the secular, arguing that the churches should not interfere in politics. Besides the Catholic Church's political activities, the Swedish liberal theologians' greatest objections were to its centralist structures and authoritarian management. In *Kristendomen och vår tid*, Catholicism was described as a threat both to the modern social order and individual freedom, while the Roman Church leadership was accused of lust for power, manipulative missionary methods, and intolerance.

This view was not confined to liberals, but was shared by virtually all Protestants. In debates on the Swedish dissenter legislation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, conservative churchmen and politicians alike constantly stressed the need for more rigid religious legislation to protect the individual's freedom of conscience from Catholic proselytising. The Catholic principle of authority was emphasised as one of the main factors

that made Catholicism a danger to society and public order. There was particularly sharp criticism of Catholic monastic orders with their strict rules and demands for absolute obedience, and articles on the ‘monastic question’ overflowed with the usual anti-Catholic stereotypes: manipulative confessors, oppressed nuns, and ecclesiastical thirst for power. Moreover, Catholic religious orders and congregations, which established themselves in the Nordic countries from the 1850s onwards, were seen as tools of ‘Roman propaganda’, not least the female institutes, which were described as insidious in their attempts to entice Nordic women to convert and join Catholic orders. Even in the 1960s, Catholicism in general and convents in particular were still depicted as a threat to Nordic identity and values. This was clearly expressed in newspaper reports and comments arising from the founding of a Carmelite monastery at Glumslöv in southern Sweden. Opponents stressed the Catholic Church’s political aspirations and the incompatibility of monastic life both with Sweden’s legal tradition and with modern notions of individual rights and freedoms.

These kinds of anti-Catholic sentiments were in part due to the traditional Nordic view of women’s role in society. The Lutheran doctrine of vocation and the household (*tabula oeconomica*), which strongly emphasised the reproductive and domestic duties of women, still functioned as a generally recognised social ideology in Nordic society. Marriage was given prominence, while celibacy and monasticism were condemned as unnatural and unethical. In pamphlets, schoolbooks, fiction, and debates of all kind, and, of course, in several articles of *Kristendomen och vår tid*, monastic life was portrayed as a refuge for lazy monks and oppressed women, while the Reformation was depicted as affecting liberation from spiritual darkness and religious despotism. The ideal of celibacy, together with the strong position of the Catholic priest, was described as a threat to family life and to the authority of the husband and father. In some articles, Catholicism was presented as effeminate and unmanly and prominent churchmen – liberal as well as representatives of the nationalist Young Church movement – stressed the need to masculinise Christianity and to create a manlier image of Christ. This is in line with the argumentation of the German Christian, who in their efforts to defend Christianity against Nazi and neo-pagan critics insisted that the Protestant church should be a manly church that promoted masculine qualities.

Final reflections

The liberalisation of religious legislation and the disintegration of Protestant religious unity in the 19th century led to a shift in the perception of the Catholic Church. Whereas anti-Catholicism in the early modern era had been based on religious convictions, twentieth century anti-Catholicism was closely connected to ideas of progress and modernisation. Hence, anti-Catholic rhetoric came to focus on the political and ideological dimensions of

Catholicism and the supra-national character of the Catholic Church and its demands for independence from state power were regarded as a threat to national identity and integrity. Through its missionary activities in Protestant countries and its rejection of the liberal principles on which modern development was based, the Catholic Church contributed to increasing these kinds of anti-Catholic sentiments and to their spread to non-religious and secular groups in society.

Liberal theologians played a major role in this transformation process. They wanted to develop a more civic-minded and less dogmatic form of Christianity in step with modern society and the new scientific worldview. In Sweden, liberal theology, which represented a mixture between confessionally motivated anti-Catholic perceptions and secular anticlericalism, were very much engaged in the fight against the 'Catholic danger. From their point of view, the Catholic Church appeared as a dangerous enemy not only in a religious but also, and that first and foremost, in a political and ideological sense. The liberal theologian's anti-Catholicism was further linked to anti-Communism and fears of Soviet Russia, which lead to sympathies for National Socialist ideas and the new regime in Germany. It is further interesting to note that the anti-Catholic rhetoric and arguments used by Swedish liberal theologians for a great part were taken from the German debate.

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