The symphony and the two kingdoms

The church-state relationship in Denmark and Russia in the 15th–20th centuries

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Introduction

This essay in comparison is based on the proposition that Denmark and Russia with specific regard to the relationship between Church and State can each be considered paradigmatic of their respective versions of Christianity: (Lutheran) Protestantism and Orthodoxy.

In the case of Russia, it is evident. After the demise of the Byzantine Empire in 1453, Russia took over the position as the principal upholder of Orthodoxy; the largest, and for the subsequent almost 400 years, also the only country in which Orthodoxy was free to develop on its own terms; the only country where Orthodox theocratic government could be practiced undisturbedly for a long period of time. Russia, therefore, can be considered paradigmatic of Orthodoxy also in a more general sense.

Cathedral of Christ the Savior, Moscow

Marmorkirken, Copenhagen

In the case of Denmark, it is not quite as evident, though. This country cannot be considered paradigmatic of Protestantism or merely Lutheranism as a whole, since Protestant Christianity is present in a number of other countries that have managed to maintain political independence throughout several centuries; some of them are also considerably larger. However, with specific regard to the church-state relationship, the exemplary character of Denmark can be claimed with good reason: in no other country have the Protestant princely state and the Protestant princely church developed more consistently and durably than in Denmark; a fact that can be demonstrated by the enduring existence of the basic organizational structures even in the early twenty-first century. An additional part of the story is the fact that, until 1814, the Danish state also included Norway, and until 1864, also the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, which therefore also partake to some extent in the first almost 300 years, almost 350 years respectively, of the development presented here.

Rune stone, Gripsholm, Sweden, about 1050. Ingvar, the "widely travelled", lead a Viking campaign through Russia to Særkland by the Caspian Sea. The campaign ended in definitive defeat. Ingvar's campaign is mentioned on 30 rune stones in the Mälar Valley

A study of the history of these two states thus facilitates a comparative consideration of the development of the church-state relationship in two versions characteristic of western and eastern Christianity, respectively; two versions sharing another decisive presupposition: independence of Papal influence. In both states the church-state relationship has developed on its own terms within the given national, or rather territorial, framework. This is not disturbed by the fact that the underlying theological and political ideas do not derive from either Denmark or Russia themselves, perhaps even on the contrary. Both countries overtake and promote an external inheritance to which they can hardly be said to provide original contributions even though their respective situations provide the opportunity to take the ideas to radical conclusions.

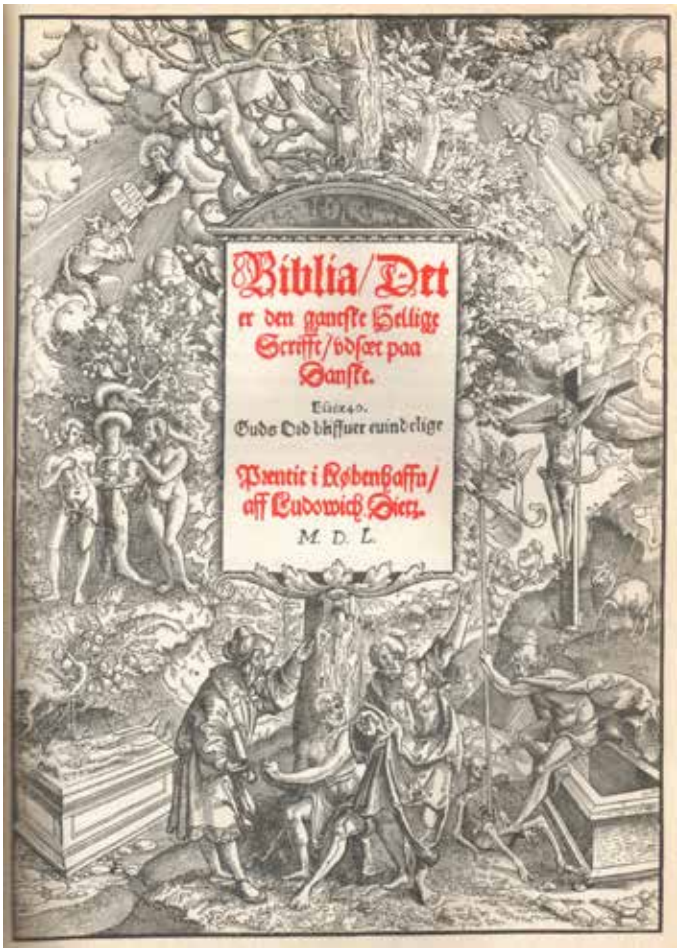
The chronological perspective

The paradigmatic character of the church-state relationship has been developing for several centuries in both states; in Russia since the mid-15th century, in Denmark since the early 16th century. In both cases the development of the relationship in modern times presupposes a kind of emancipation from the original "mother church": in Russia from Constantinople, in Denmark from Rome. In both cases this becomes decisive for the development of the relationship and basic to its evolving paradigmatic character.

In Russia emancipation and independence appear on two levels: externally and ecclesiastically as a consequence of the demise of the Byzantine Empire, internally and nationally as a consequence of the collapse of the Mongol hegemony. However, ecclesiastical independence of Constantinople remains a question only of ecclesiastical law, i.e. of institutional authority, not of Orthodox doctrine, which continues in Russia unchanged. From Byzantium Russia also overtakes the Byzantine ideology of the Christian empire which can now no longer be realized within its original framework. However, the ideology proves very useful in connection with the subjection of the foreign domination of Russia and national integration under the princes of Moscow. This development begins in the second half of the 15th century and is manifested most visibly in the establishment of the tsardom in 1547 under Ivan IV and in 1589 in the elevation of Moscow as an independent patriarchy. In 1552 begins the vast imperial expansion of Russia.

In Denmark and Norway emancipation comes in the shape of the Reformation. Emancipation, thus, is primarily ecclesiastical but, unlike in Russia, it is not only a question of ecclesiastical jurisdiction but also of ecclesiastical doctrine. As the Reformation marks a radical break with Roman-Catholic doctrine, the break with the Roman church becomes both a religious and a political demarcation placing Denmark and Norway among a small group of reformed countries in Northern Europe where church and state have to be re-organized a-new and in a new mutual relationship. This development begins in the 1520s and culminates in 1536-37 with the introduction of the Reformation throughout the kingdom by King Christian III. The Danish and Norwegian archbishoprics are abolished and the king made de-facto earthly head of the church. This becomes the basis of the state-church establishment unfolded by subsequent monarchs and definitively instituted by the introduction of absolutism in 1660 as formalized in the Law of Royalty (Kongeloven) of 1665, the Law of Denmark (Danske Lov) of 1683, and the Law of Norway (Norske Lov) of 1687. This construction remains formally in power for most of the subsequent two centuries.

In both Russia and Denmark-Norway the result becomes a church organized administratively and institutionally – though not doctrinally – on purely national or territorial terms, closely tied to the monarch who more or less formally becomes its earthly head and,



Title page of the Danish Bible of King Christian III of 1550

with time, achieves absolute power. In the first stages of these developments – in the 16th-17th centuries – they occur entirely without mutual influence, as connections between Russia and (Western) Europe in this period remain highly sporadic. However, In Russia, the next stage in the church-state relationship occurs very much under the influence of Western Europe in general and the Protestant countries, including Denmark, in particular. The reforms of Peter the Great in the early 1700s attempt to reshape Russia in the image of Western Europe, involving also a re-organization of the Orthodox Church. The patriarchy is abolished (as were the Danish and Norwegian archbishoprics) whereby the church is deprived of independent leadership, and the Russian church is established as a state-church according to a Protestant model – though retaining its Orthodox confession. As such it exists for the subsequent two centuries.

In both cases the development from the principle of ecclesiastical independence to that of privileged princely state church has been seen as the state's overtaking of the church, which thereby becomes part of the state. The question remains, however, whether it could also be seen as the state becoming church, in as much as the state overtakes the fundamental purpose of the church: to work for the spread and upholding of the gospel, at least to the extent that Christianity is regarded as an inalienable (ideological) presupposition of the state's existence. Within the framework of the system the state cannot abandon Christianity without giving up its own justification. In both cases it is clear that the relationship between church and state formally and theoretically, if not always in practice, retains a highly theocratic character.

The theocratic establishment exerts a decisive influence on the development of both Russian and Danish-Norwegian society, although in highly different ways. This becomes clear also in the latter stages of the church-state relationship as increasing modernization and secularization create a demand for dismantling of theocracy. The close connection between Church and State inevitably causes the simmering revolt against the state and the existing social order also to involve the church. As unfolded in practice the differences between the two countries and their churches here become highly visible.

In Denmark the dismantling of theocracy occurs in connection with the abolition of absolutism in 1848 that paves the way for the first democratic Constitution of 1849. With this follows the substitution of the state church of absolutism with the "people's church"

Peter the Great. Portrait by Jean-Marc Nattier, 1717

(folkekirke) of democracy that, in consequence of the new freedom of religion, can no longer be vested with formal monopoly status. Even so, by virtue of the near total de-facto domination of the folkekirke in the population, this church still retains a privileged constitutional position and as such remains supported by the state. However, the ecclesiastical charter promised by the Constitution and meant to define the situation and leadership of the church is never realized, despite repeated attempts. Even though the introduction in 1903 of popularly elected parish councils has had considerable practical importance for daily church life, the fundamental situation of the church and its relationship to the state still remain formally unclarified. In 2016, remains of the formal theocratic order still live on side by side with democratically determined practice.

In Russia, the dismantling of the old order occurs in a much different and much more violent way. In consequence of the revolutions of February and October 1917, initially the monarchy and then every remaining connection between church and state are abolished. The Orthodox Church hardly manages to find its own feet in its new independent situation before the state's relationship to the church is turned into one of unremitting hostility. In the socialist October Revolution power is seized by the radically anti-religious Bolshevik party, which right from the beginning, and since 1922 within the framework of the newly established Soviet state, launches a comprehensive and systematic campaign of anti-religious propaganda and persecution; something that remains a recurring phenomenon almost throughout the duration of the Soviet Union. The purpose is the total annihilation of all religion that is seen as an obstacle to the achievement of the aim of the new regime: the construction of a socialist society. Despite enduring persecution at great human and material cost, the regime never succeeds in definitively obliterating religion. When, in an attempt at reform of Soviet society, the Soviet leadership under Mikhail Gorbachev decides, in 1987-88, on a change of course by concluding peace with the church, the latter is therefore still left with some foundation in Russian society. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 religion in general and the Russian-Orthodox Church in particular have achieved a remarkable renaissance and an explosive institutional growth that have turned this church into a significant player in present-day post-Soviet Russian society. According to the Russian Constitution of 1993, church and state remain separate but many indications suggest that the relationship is becoming increasingly close and mutually beneficial.

Theological and political perspectives

As mentioned above, it is characteristic of both Russia and Denmark that the fundamental theological, ideological and political ideas that have shaped the development of the church-state relationship, have been overtaken from outside. In Russia the introduction of Byzantine Christianity entails the idea of the symphony or harmony, formulated in 535 by the Emperor Justinian as the Orthodox ideal of integration of state and church, which as equal partners collaborate harmoniously on the achievement of their shared goal: the construction of an earthly premonition of the Kingdom of God that is to come. In Denmark and Norway the introduction of the Reformation entails the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms, the spiritual and the secular, externally represented by church and state, which according to the principle may not interfere with each other's affairs. These two principles are thus obvious opposites. Whereas the doctrine of the symphony proposes the ideal symbiosis of church and state, thus formulating a theocratic norm, the doctrine of the two kingdoms is theoretically about the polar opposite: the proper distinction between spiritual and secular government in all relationships, including that between church and state. This is not a theocratic ideal.

The Law of Royalty, Lex Regia; was the formal juridical foundation of Danish absolutism, dated 14 November 1665

Against this background it is possible to observe a marked contrast between theory and practice in Russia and Denmark(-Norway). Although the theocratic ideal has not been unchallenged in Russia and hardly ever fully realized, it is not surprising that the character of the church-state relationship in this country during the course of several centuries has been so decidedly theocratic. In other words, there seems to be a wide degree of coincidence of theory and practice, at least until the reforms of Peter the Great, which to a certain extent challenges the terms of the symphony.

In contrast to this, it is striking to observe in the Danish-Norwegian development how far the divide is between the official theory of the two kingdoms and actual practice. Although the doctrine of the two kingdoms is mentioned explicitly in the confession of the Lutheran churches, the Augsburg Confession of 1530, by which the Law of Royalty of 1665 obliges the Danish-Norwegian kings to abide for "all time", the principle is ignored in practice in favor of the more politically determined principle of princely church government. Introduced already at the Reformation, this principle was later confirmed in Germany at the Augsburg Settlement of 1555. As a result, the Lutheran princes formally took over the episcopal rights formerly belonging to Catholic bishops. Within his domain, the individual prince acquired the status of a sort of supreme bishop (summus episcopus) with the power to decide both on ordinary administration of the church and on doctrinal issues. It was this principle, though not under this name, that was realized with great consistency in Denmark and Norway after the Reformation. With the subsequent introduction of absolutism, the result is the virtual disappearance of the church as an independent institution. Where the two kingdoms according to Lutheran doctrine had to be clearly distinguished from each other, they are in practice amalgamated into a unity that, at least on the surface, makes the Protestant princely church remarkably similar to the Orthodox theocracy. This is confirmed by the fact that precisely the Protestant state church could become relevant as a model for Tsar Peter's administrative reform of the Orthodox Church whose government, therefore, became a hybrid of Protestant and Orthodox principles. Inspired by Protestant models, Peter's reform dictates the subjection of the church under the tsar with whom the church thus looses its formal equality. The reform thus initiates a development that actually leads away from theocracy in its ideal Orthodox form in the direction of absolutism. The opposite takes place in Denmark and Norway where the introduction of absolutism – for the same reason: the king's subjection of the church – initiates a development towards theocracy, hardly granted by earlier tradition.

The fundamental difference between the principles of the two traditions, the symphony and the two kingdoms, is not therefore without significance, however; it just only becomes visible in connection with the dismantling of the theocratic establishment. As mentioned, this took place in very different ways in the two countries and even though these developments have many and complex explanations, the perception of the ideal character of the church-state relationship is likely to be one of them. Here the two principles evince a fundamental difference as to which possibilities may by permissible. Whereas the doctrine of the two kingdoms entails the possibility – and, as a point of principle, even the necessity – of perceiving theocracy as a theological misunderstanding, the doctrine of the symphony does not seem to allow this possibility. On the contrary, the symphony expresses the very principle of theocracy and thus assumes an absolute character. In practice, this means that where the doctrine of the two kingdoms makes it not only possible but also desirable to dismantle theocracy – also from a Christian perspective – and possibly to let this happen in a slow gradual process, the principle of symphony makes it neither possible nor desirable to dismantle or merely modify theocracy. On the terms of the symphony, a dismantling can therefore only acquire the character of total and radical abolition.

No matter how conscious of this problematic the actual Danish and Russian actors in the dismantling of theocracy may have been, this was what actually happened: in Denmark a peaceful, gradual development, which has in practice done away with theocracy, yet has also permitted remains of it to exist in the close connection between church and state still in existence; in Russia an abrupt, violent, radical abolition of theocracy, which throughout most of the 20th century entailed a total break of relations between church and state and came close to annihilating the church altogether as an institution.

This difference is also connected with the relationship of the two principles to the concepts of modernity and secularization. Considered in this light, it seems obvious that the doctrine of the two kingdoms is in itself a presupposition of modernity and also has a role to play in the secularization process, whereas the doctrine of the symphony is of premodern and perhaps even anti-modern character. Likewise, it is equally evident that this difference emanates from a more fundamental theological difference in the understanding of the nature of the church and the aim of the Christian life, in the church as well as in the state. However, an unfolding of this theological difference between East and West will lead too far in this connection and can therefore only be suggested here.

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