In the early modern period the far north of Europe was divided into three political regions. The Union of Kalmar, which combined the kingdoms of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden in 1397, broke apart in 1520 after a rebellion in Sweden. Henceforth, Denmark dominated the west, eventually reducing the territories of Norway and Iceland to the status of provinces. Sweden controlled eastern Scandinavia, including Finland, most of which had come under its control in the 13th century. The Baltic peoples living in the coastal areas south of Finland had been conquered during the Middle Ages by German colonizers and were ruled by the Livonian Order and the Teutonic Knights until the 16th century when these religious administrations were secularized. The resultant dissolution of the confederation of Livonia incited a long struggle between Sweden, Poland, Russia, and Denmark for control of the eastern Baltic territories. Further south, a Lithuanian state had formed during the 13th century, but, after 1569, it existed as a grand duchy in union with the kingdom of Poland.

As a result of extensive interactions with Germany, Lutheranism spread to all of these territories within a few years after the start of the Reformation. Many coastal market towns were interconnected by the Hanseatic League, and itinerant Lutheran preachers found an entry into the north through contacts with the resident German merchant population. Even more importantly, numerous scholars returned to their Scandinavian and Livonian homelands, particularly after studies in Wittenberg, with a commitment to the reform proposals initiated by Luther. They were able to disseminate evangelical ideas and influence governmental policies when they took up positions within churches and schools.

Developments in Germany continued to influence Scandinavian and Baltic Lutheranism throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, but the evolution of religious life and the formation of ecclesiastical institutions were also shaped in distinctive ways by social dynamics and political forces that were peculiar to each of the northern regions. Lutheran sympathizers forged their own paths in the development of policies
for church administration and adapted their theological message to the local settings in which they worked.

In Germany the death of Martin Luther in 1546 and the subsequent Smalcauld War marked the start of a new stage in the development of the Lutheran Reformation. In the far north of Europe the following decade was also a period of transition. In 1550 the last major effort to extinguish the Lutheran movement in Iceland failed when Jón Arason, the Catholic bishop of Hólar, was captured and beheaded after attempting to oust Martein Einarsson, the Lutheran bishop in the southern diocese of Skálholt. In 1552 Olaus Petri, the Wittenberg-educated reformer who introduced Lutheranism to Sweden, came to the end of his life. In 1557 Michael Agricola, the schoolmaster and bishop who played a similar pioneering role in Finland, died. Beginning in 1558, Denmark and Sweden made their first territorial conquests in the Baltic region of Livonia, thereby adding strength to the Lutheran movement in the territories of Estonia and Latvia. 1559 marked the end of the reign of Christian III, the first king of Denmark to decree that all of his subjects would become Lutherans. A year later, in 1560, Gustav Vasa, the king who had separated the church of Sweden from papal control, died, as did Peder Palladius, one of the most influential early Lutheran bishops in Denmark. 1561 was the death year of Hans Tausen, the former monk, also educated in Wittenberg, who first stimulated grass-root support for Lutheranism in northern Denmark. An era had come to an end. During this period the three regions of the north continuously interacted with each other; but in order to avoid confusion in the recounting of the continually developing story, this overview will look successively at the interplay of politics and religion in Denmark, Sweden, and the Baltic states.

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