
These are two eminently important volumes on the history of European religion in the modern age. As a consequence of the religious civil wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, stable patterns of relations had developed all over Europe, linking the political sovereigns (in modern terms: the state) and the established religious (i.e. Christian) authorities. Since the revolutions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and in line with the many dynamic developments that led to the establishment of bourgeois society in the nineteenth century, these relations underwent some fundamental changes. Religion became a private matter, dependent only on individual preference and self-determination. Traditional Christian churches had to face a growing number of new actors offering spiritual truth: groups which seceded from the mainstream churches, independent societies, reformatory movements, new free churches and (using the term without prejudice and as a sociological type) sects. This new religious pluralism constituted a great challenge to both the state and the established churches, forcing them to react as constructively as possible: by reforming themselves. Such religious reform is defined by the historians who took part in this project as: “the conscious pursuit of renewal with the aim of adapting organised religion to the changing relations between church, state and society”. In this, they concentrate on Northern Europe, especially Great Britain and Ireland, the Low Countries, Germany, and the Nordic Countries. As we all know, said countries constitute only one part of Europe, but it is in that part of the Continent where the many forms of Protestantism played a much greater, often decisive role than in the predominantly Catholic societies of Latin Europe.

The wealth of topics and interpretations of religious reform offered throughout the individual contributions can only be hinted at. All authors draw highly differentiated and rich pictures, thus leading the reader to ask a great number of new and interesting questions. Many of the authors argue decidedly (and, in my view, rightly) against all those well-known images that depict the established churches as the victims of modernity. The view that reform was forced onto them (primarily by the state) is often inaccurate. In many cases, the churches themselves or at least an avant-garde within them take the necessary first steps when faced with societal changes. The churches can, in spite of their traditionalism, prove to be highly responsive organisations that are capable of learning and growing while actively adapting to new circumstances. In some countries of Northern Europe,
the churches themselves pushed for reform. The authors also succeed in demonstrating that in some cases, it was the state that reacted with hostility to any religious alterations, trying to countervail or delay them.

Both volumes begin with highly instructive introductions. Keith Robbins first explains the term ‘Northern Europe’ and then looks at individual countries, outlining the influence of the monarchs in the ‘Christian Northern Monarchies’ on ecclesiastical policy, and discusses the question whether Northern Europe was faced with something like a “uniform ‘urban’ or ‘rural’ pattern.” He underlines, with great emphasis, the great variety of religious life both across Northern Europe and within the individual countries. “Northern Europe, as envisaged here, embraced in this period both such ‘precocious’ industrial economies as Belgium and Britain, and economies which to a very substantial degree, retained significant agricultural (or fishing) sectors. These countries were manifestly not all ‘the same’” (p. 25). However, some structural similarities can be observed: “Yet, in comparison with literacy levels in Eastern or Southern Europe, their collective attainment was substantially common and high. Until the war of 1914, the incidence of warfare on the soil of Northern Europe had diminished sharply. The likelihood of an attack by one ‘northern’ state, as here defined, directly on another such state, as had occurred in the not very distant past, had not entirely disappeared, but seemed much reduced.”

Some substantial differences also prevailed in the definition of the ‘nature’ of state authority between the countries under scrutiny. Religious freedom was not uniformly defined. Further discrepancies can be made out concerning the role of public financing for clerical activities. And real religious pluralism, as developed in the German Kaiserreich, did not exist in the Scandinavian countries. Here, and in contrast to other Northern European states that were multi-confessional for a number of reasons, the state never had to mediate between different religious groups, even though it was in permanent dialogue with religious actors. In discussing the concept of religious reform, it is therefore structurally important to differentiate between homogeneous and mixed confessional situations.

An individual appraisal of each contribution is beyond the scope of this review. However, one overarching problem should be noted: the question of the role of academic theology or, more generally, the role of academic discourse on religion in the context of these conflict-prone processes of change. It is remarkable that most authors attach only marginal importance to this aspect. Richard Rothe or Adolf von Harnack are as absent as Wilhelm Herrmann or Ernst Troeltsch, to name but a few liberal-Protestant German examples. Far from being overly fastidious, this should be read as a note on how little we know on the perception of academic theologians (who often saw themselves as public intellectuals on matters of religion) by the clerical public.