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Church and nation – a fresh approach

Biörn Tjällén, *Church and nation: the discourse on authority in Ericus Olai's Chronica regni Gothorum (c. 1471)*, Stockholm: Department of history, 2007. 152 pp. (Duplicate, available at: <http://www.diva-portal.org/diva/getDocument?urn_nbn_se_su_diva-7176-2__fulltext.pdf>.) (Sammanfattning på engelska, utan titel.)

Ericus Olai is, so far as I can tell, by no means the same "household word" that Saxo is in Denmark. But the historian and canon of Uppsala cathedral has been central in the formation of early modern Swedish identity, and so one might think that every schoolchild would know his name. But perhaps in Sweden there has been the same process of collective forgetting of the past that took place in Denmark from the 1970s onwards. In any case Biörn Tjällén's dissertation is a welcome contribution to a Scandinavian and perhaps even European effort to make a useable past that can shed light on present day questions of nationality, identity and religious belief.

In his introduction Tjällén discusses the concepts of liberty of church and realm. He reviews the chaotic period from the deposition of Erik of Pomerania through the on-again off-again rule of Karl Knutsson and then the aftermath of the Battle of Brunkeberg. Thanks especially to the work of Erik Lönnroth, nationalistic explanations for events in this period have been replaced by a search for "constitutional aspects of the concept of the realm" (p. 12). Tjällén, however, criticizes Lönnroth's work as "conceptually opaque" and refers to Olle Ferm's understanding of the community of the realm. Ferm looked to "the formation of a community of a national kind".

Biörn Tjällén's contribution to this discussion is to see the members of the higher clergy as "members not only of the realm but also of an international ecclesiastical hierarchy" (p. 19). He thus implies that earlier scholarship has ignored the special and separate identity of the elite group to which Ericus Olai belonged. As Tjällén writes, traditional interpretations have failed to distinguish "between the lay actors and the clerical within the political class" (p. 15). Here one might compare the Danish tendency to make Saxo almost into a secular magnate instead of considering his place as a cleric and probably also a priest. Ericus Olai finds his role in this dissertation as a defendant of both church and nation in a concern for ecclesiastical liberty and the *patria*.

In the first of four main chapters, "Text, author and institutional context", Tjällén considers the manuscript tradition and then reflects on who could have

been a "model reader" of the work. We are provided with the biographical facts about Ericus Olai and follow the development of the archbishopric of Uppsala (called here "arch see", a term that is not English). Finally Tjällén reviews the tradition for writing history within the archdiocese of Uppsala, with the fascinating decision of a 1474 synod that each diocese was to appoint someone to write annals (p. 43), an indication of a sense among the members of the higher clergy that it was in their interest to make sense of the chaotic events of the Sweden of their time.

Biörn Tjällén concludes that for Ericus Olai, history basically meant "a history of salvation" (p. 48). Ericus took on his project in order to edify the canons of Uppsala cathedral. His authorial intention was thus not only political. He wrote history and considered it to be for "edification, entertainment and as an historical account [...] of an ongoing history of salvation" (p. 50).

In the second main chapter, "Social and discursive orders", Tjällén goes ahead with his "discourse analysis" the contents of what Ericus called "a compendium" providing "national and institutional history". We get a good sense of the sources that Ericus used, especially Martin of Troppau's universal history. The history of the realm of Sweden is placed within the larger history of salvation. God elected Uppsala as the fountainhead of salvation. Clerics have a dignity that should be respected, but Olai does not provide a dualistic model in which the sacred sphere controls the secular one. He uses the traditional model of the sun and moon to distinguish between religious and secular powers but does not thereby make the king dependent on the priest. Ericus was a moderate.

He also used history in order to moralize. His concern was not constitutional matters (p. 67). He criticized political and economic developments in Sweden, as in lamenting domestic strife as the result of foreigners. He saw Stockholm as a city of newcomers or foreigners (*civitas convenarum*, p. 70). It was God's intention that Sweden be given to the Goths.

Ericus Olai saw authority as being divided into paternal and political. Here Tjällén criticizes Lönnroth for making his famous distinction between *regimen regale* and *regimen politicum* without taking into account that Ericus Olai was also trying to defend ecclesiastical liberty. Tjällén discovered that Ericus was dependent on Duns Scotus's discussion of ownership and property rights. As for the concept of consent, Lönnroth saw Ericus's account as supporting an electoral monarch while Tjällén qualifies the idea: "This may be true, but it is also important to note that in the eyes of Ericus the process of election in itself did not constitute a guarantee for the legitimacy of the candidate extolled" (p. 76).

The dissertation's third main chapter, "Patrons of archdiocese and realm", is its longest and, in my mind, most original contribution. Tjällén admits that most of the Chronicle is a straightforward narrative, but he does time and again find the use of language and persons to characterize Olai's understanding of rightful authority. Here the two saints Erik and Henrik are central figures. Tjällén considers

the liturgy for Saint Erik's feast, which included the biblical image of the holy mountain of Zion. Uppsala became the Lord's mountain, *Mons Domini*, the Zion of the North (p. 82). Bishop Henry was thought to have lived at the same time as Saint Erik. So we have a bishop and a king who were believed to have worked together to bring Christianity to the North, as indicated in a disappeared altar front in Uppsala cathedral.

The cult of Saint Erik was central in the *Chronica regni Gothorum*, which has direct quotations from the legend of Erik. Ericus Olai admitted he had problems in establishing an unbroken line of kings in Sweden, but Saint Erik had a special role in sanctifying the monarchy. At the same time, however, the historian did not claim that the saint held patronage over the church. Here it was convenient to maintain dualism with the legend of Saint Henrik.

Tjällén points out that Ericus Olai completed his chronicle relatively soon after the deaths of Karl Knutsson and Archbishop Jöns Bengtsson in 1467 and 1470. He considers Lönnroth's suggestion that the struggle between the two was not meant to be "homogeneous with the rest of the historical narrative, it was a concluding example, a theological-historical meditation on the theme of discord" (p. 99). This is a fascinating possibility, and I wish that Tjällén made clearer whether he was in agreement with Lönnroth. The latter is a constant presence in this dissertation, and it is not always apparent, at least to this reader, to what extent Tjällén is following him and to what extent he rejects Lönnroth.

The question of tyranny is one that was central for Ericus Olai, especially because of his dislike for Erik of Pomerania, who is compared to the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. In the figure of Engelbrekt Ericus provided reminiscences from the Apocryphal Book of Maccabees (p. 104). King Erik was especially hateful because he deprived the church of Uppsala of its rights and liberties. Thus the national cause and that of Uppsala joined each other. In *Karlskrönikan* King Karl Knutsson was seen as God's chosen instrument in Swedish independence. Ericus Olai disagreed with the praise given King Karl and instead lauded Engelbrekt. Karl Knutsson is accused for having acted as a tyrant. For Ericus, the Goths were "eager to be extolled but inept to govern".

In this attempt to praise good government and defend ecclesiastical authority, Ericus Olai had a problem with archbishop Jöns Bengtsson, who was regent in 1457 and again in 1465–66. Jöns claimed to be defending ecclesiastical liberty, but he was at the same time a central player in secular politics. Tjällén points out that Ericus did his best "to lessen Jöns's responsibility". Ericus tried to defend the archbishop's actions and the Chronicle never deals directly with "the mix of spiritual and temporal leadership in his person" (p. 118). The archbishop is not condemned for engaging in warfare, even though elsewhere in the Chronicle the combination of episcopal office and war is criticized, as in the career of the Danish archbishop Absalon.

Tjällén's conclusion is that Ericus's discourse on authority is characterized by "ambiguities and complexity" (p. 120). Political authority necessitated strong kingship for him, and so Tjällén does find a "nationalist trajectory". Ericus's denunciation of Erik of Pomerania came in connection with the king's misuse of the electoral rights of Swedish cathedral chapters. So in the Chronicle "the matters of the liberty of the church and of the liberty of the realm were conterminous" (p. 121).

Tjällén thus provides a portrait of Ericus Olai seen through his Chronicle as a cathedral canon with a fierce devotion to liberty in both church and realm. "Liberty" might have been more closely defined as respect for rights and privileges so that different social groups could carry out the tasks entrusted to them by God. But all is not so simple: "there are conflicts in authority discourse" (p. 121). Devotion to the cathedral of Uppsala and its bishop "and perhaps personal loyalties" led Ericus Olai to deemphasize the responsibility of Jöns Bengtsson for his contradictory actions.

The final main chapter, "Dualism and monarchy in 1528" looks back on the Chronicle in terms of the events of the Swedish Reformation. Tjällén shows deftly how the coronation oath was changed in order to eliminate the Church as a special body that the king was encharged with protecting. The Chronicle played a momentary roll in an attempt to use it to defend ecclesiastical privilege. The Uppsala prebendary Laurencius Laurencii copied the full text of the Chronicle. His marginalia show interest in Ericus Olai's view of Uppsala "as a Zion in the north, a place of special importance in the history of the salvation of the realm" (p. 129).

Tjällén concludes this chapter in conceding that Ericus Olai, Olaus Petri and Gustav I "were all propagandists taking recourse to historiography as a political means". Ericus had insisted that kings had to limit themselves and respect the prerogatives of the Church, while King Gustav felt no such restrictions. He saw the Chronicle of Ericus Olai as "too benevolent towards the idea of authority as shared between a secular and an ecclesiastical lordship" (p. 132).

In his general Conclusion, Tjällén points out that the discussions about political and ecclesiastical power which took place among Swedish churchmen in this period "have so far received little attention". For myself as an outside reader who has not been brought up in Swedish medieval and early modern history, this statement is quite amazing. How can one avoid such a central discourse?

Tjällén suggests the answer in the change from a nationalist to a constitutionalist interpretation of the Swedish rebellion against the Kalmar Union monarch (p. 133). Thus the figure of Erik Lönnroth has played a central role in escaping the old nationalism. Instead he used Ericus's Chronicle to represent a "republican conception" of the state.

It is the achievement of this dissertation to challenge Lönnroth's reading and

to insist that clergymen such as Ericus Olai had their own independent agenda which was more than an assertion of political power for the magnates against the king. Tjällén claims he is on virgin ground here, because of "the dearth of studies of Swedish clergy as a separate power elite". In making use of Ericus Olai's Chronicle Tjällén insists on "the educational concerns of the Uppsala institution". It was Ericus Olai's intent to educate first of all his fellow canons and secondly anyone else who could read Latin. "A history of the vicissitudes of the realm written from the perspective of the Uppsala arch see provided principles to dispose its members to act for the benefit of their institution" (p. 135).

Tjällén shows here that the writing of history in a medieval context was more for edification and education than for entertainment. We think today of history as an activity either for research or for fun (the two are, alas, all too rarely combined). But in the Middle Ages, history was the story of God's dealings with humankind, and Uppsala was prophetically placed as the Zion of the North. Here history could be told in the right context.

It is the thesis of this important dissertation that it is wrong "to equate ecclesiastical with aristocratic concerns" (p. 135). At the same time it is necessary to return to "the importance of national thought in fifteenth-century politics". Tjällén sees "nationalist and dualist assumptions [...] at the core of the *Chronica's* narrative structure". He argues for a *via media* in the Chronicle between monarchic and papalist claims.

Surely, as Tjällén himself implies, this attempt to reconcile nationalism and constitutionalism is an aftermath of the conciliarist debates of the first half of the fifteenth century. The author might have considered in greater detail the link between the Swedish ecclesiastics who attended the councils and their successors. In medieval studies in general the conciliarists have been isolated in their corner, but a dissertation like this one opens up a perspective that deserves further work.

Tjällén ends his dissertation with the reception of the Chronicle in 1528. The attempt to make use of Ericus Olai in order to counter the claims of the new Swedish monarchy invites the question how it was possible that the entire structure of late medieval political thought, with all its subtleness, so easily could be dismantled. This dissertation does not ask such a question but merely shows what happened. Was Ericus Olai ultimately just a loner whose thoughts and discourse are peripheral to political and intellectual developments in late medieval and early modern Sweden? Or is he a neglected figure whose understanding of history is relevant for Swedish identity?

Tjällén implies that Ericus Olai is a forgotten giant, one who has been primarily appreciated in terms of constitutionalism. This dissertation can be seen as a challenge to Erik Lönnroth's tendency to secularize the late medieval church in Sweden and see it as almost solely a part of the political aristocracy. Tjällén

builds on a foundation of new insights begun by his thesis supervisor Olle Ferm.

I would question the notion of discourse analysis, which Tjällén considers to be a basis for his work. So far as I can tell, what Tjällén has done is to read the Chronicle of Ericus Olai carefully and to look upon it in relation to the person behind it. The result is the discovery of Ericus Olai as a canon at Uppsala cathedral, a man who had a vision of Swedish history in terms of the salvation of a people. At the same time Ericus Olai's Chronicle "fostered allegiance to an impersonal, perennial political entity". Tjällén sees "institutional interests" identified with "national concerns". Thus the church of Uppsala and the Swedish nation are defended and celebrated, as in the cults of Saints Erik and Henrik.

Would it be too bold to ask whether the rejection of a nationalist element in Ericus Olai was a reflection of a vision of post-World War II Sweden which cherished its international role and suspected nationalistic feeling? If so, it is Tjällén's achievement to return to "national concerns" in trying to understand the Chronicle, while also insisting on a religious element. The defence of the liberty of the church was the special mark of Ericus's position at Uppsala. He was even willing to go easy on Archbishop Jöns Bengtsson for combining his roles as religious and secular leader.

In the end the vision of authority, monarchy, people and church was replaced by the ironclad new monarchy of the sixteenth century. As Tjällén ends his dissertation: "The Swedish state authority that Ericus did much to support nationalized the church whose autonomy he had intended to protect" (p. 142). Tjällén provides no explanation for how this process happened so relatively quickly and easily. Again one would like to ask if this development indicates that Ericus Olai's intellectual construction was a weak one that had no roots outside of Uppsala. Here, of course, the place of Vadstena might have been considered, but that would have been another dissertation.

In spite of a few occasional infelicities of language, Biörn Tjällén writes excellent English and brings his subject alive with clarity and incisiveness. I congratulate him on a study of history that does much-needed justice to the church of Uppsala and one of its most distinguished and all-too-little known clerics.

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