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Ambiguous Memories of the Reformation: The Case of Norway

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Abstract: The Reformation came to Norway along with Danish annexation of political and ecclesiastical power. For this reason, Norwegian history writing seldom appreciated the history of the Norwegian Reformation, and preferred to look further back to the history of the Middle Ages in search of national, as well as religious, roots of Norwegian Christianity. This was already the case in late sixteenth and early seventeenth century Norwegian historical writing. In nineteenth century historical research, the strategy was underpinned by focussing on the medieval period of Christianization: Norwegian Christianity was imported from the West, from England. Here, the Pope was not at all important. Instead, some key Reformation values were addressed in a kind of “proto-Reformation” in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The King was the ruler of the church; native, Old Norse language was used and promoted; and the people (strongly) identified themselves with their religion.

Keywords: Norway, Reformation historiography, proto-Reformation

1 A Special Case

Norway certainly belongs to the periphery of the Reformation movement in the sixteenth century. In terms of late medieval religious topography, the country was quite important due to its ecclesiastical centre at Nidaros, an archbishopric since 1153, with a cathedral built over the relics of Saint Olaf. During the Middle Ages, Nidaros was not only an important centre of ecclesiastical administration in the North, but also a prominent destination for pilgrims from many parts of Europe. This ecclesiastical centre had lost its power with the Reformation. At the same time, Norway was placed under Danish rule, and Copenhagen was

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established not only as the capital of Denmark, but also as the new political and ecclesiastical centre of Norway. In this way, the Reformation contributed dramatically to placing Norway in the peripheries in a way that the country was not at all acquainted with.

But Norway was not just side-lined to a role on the fringe of the Reformation; it turned into a special kind of peripheral role, worth noticing for comparative studies of the Reformation. In most of the countries that converted to Lutheranism or to Calvinism during the sixteenth century, the change of religion was in one way or another fostered by support from the population – most often by social elites. Dukes, princes, parts of the nobility or city councils supported the ideas of the Reformation. In Norway, this kind of support was almost totally absent. However, even with this unfavourable point of departure, the Reformation was not only introduced by the Danish king to Denmark, but enforced in his new lands to the North as well. From 1536/37 on, the king decided that Norway, too, was to be a Lutheran country. New Lutheran church law and a new church order were introduced; new Superintendents were installed; all pastors were to convert to Lutheranism or abandon their positions; and new religious and cultural ideals gradually spread among the people.

On the one hand, Norway did not ask for or want a Reformation, and was unprepared for religious change. On the other hand, only a few generations after 1537, Norway, too, was totally dominated by the ideas and the values of the Reformation, politically as well as culturally. With the outline of this most ambivalent point of departure, this article will take a closer look at a few significant contributions to the Norwegian historiography of the Reformation: How did early modern and modern historians and church historians in Norway deal with this ambiguous history of the Reformation? How did they interpret the Reformation, and how did they relate to the obvious and quite radical tensions between national and confessional values and ideals? The focus will first be on establishing patterns of interpretation during the earliest generations after the Reformation, and secondly on the elaboration of these patterns during the early periods of critical historical research in the nineteenth century.

2 Humanism and Reformation

In Oslo and Bergen, as in many other European cities, humanist circles were established prior to the Reformation. New Lutheran church leaders were recruited from among these people. Hardly any of these first generation

Lutheran humanists showed any particular interest in Lutheran theology, and they published surprisingly few texts aimed at promoting Lutheranism, neither from a theological nor more popular basis.¹ Religious texts supporting the new religion were mostly imported from Denmark and written by Danish theologians.² Norway had no Reformation hero; no theologian who had spent time in Wittenberg before returning back home to have success in promoting the ideals of the Reformation. Even within a Nordic context, this is unusual. Denmark and Sweden had several famous religious leaders of the Reformation,³ and even Finland (with the diocese of Åbo, then part of Sweden) had Mikael Agricola who returned to Åbo from Wittenberg and became bishop there.⁴

In Norway, the early Reformation humanists first and foremost used their academic training to study, collect and edit literary traditions from medieval Norway. In particular, two of these Reformation-minded humanists deserve to be mentioned: *Absalon Pederssøn Beyer* (1528–75) and *Peder Claussøn Friis* (1545–1614). Both of them held important ecclesiastical positions in early Lutheran Norway, and both were loyal to the new church order introduced by the Danish king. Both were Norwegian by birth. Absalon Pederssøn Beyer belonged to the humanist circle in Bergen. Peder Claussøn Friis was a provost in the far south of Norway, and was very well linked to humanist circles both in Bergen and in Oslo.

1 One of the most interesting Norwegian testimonies to the efforts of promoting Lutheranism in the sixteenth century comprises the reports from the visitations of superintendent Jens Nilssøn in Oslo, edited and published by Yngvald Nielsen in 1885 under the title *Biskop Jens Nilssøns Visitatsbøger og reiseoptegnelser 1574–1597* (Kristiania: A.W.Brøggers Bogtrykkeri). Moreover, a few collections of sixteenth century sermons have been published, and also a treatise discussing the question of religious images written by superintendent Jens Skielderup i Bergen, *En Christelig Underuisning aff den hellige Scrifft/om huad en Christen skal holde om Affgudiske Billeder oc Stytter vdi Kirckerne* (København: Matz Vingaard, 1572).

2 Several Danish Reformation leaders were highly influenced by Melancthon. Among them, the first superintendent of Seeland, Peder Palladius (1503–60), was the most influential in the first generation. He published a number of books to transmit and adapt Lutheran teaching to local settings. Many of his books were also read in Norway. In the second generation, the most influential Danish author was Niels Hemmingsen (1513–1600).

3 In addition to Palladius and Hemmingsen, Denmark also had Hans Tausen (1494–1561), who started a Reformation movement in Viborg as early as 1525. Sweden had first of all the two brothers Olaus Petri (1493–1552) and Laurentius Petri (1499–1573). The former promoted the Swedish Reformation decisively during the early years; his brother became the first Lutheran Archbishop of Uppsala.

4 Cf. Simo Heininen, *Mikael Agricola. Hans liv och verk* (Stockholm: Artos & Norma, 2017).

3 Establishing a Patriotic Historiography of the Reformation

3.1 Absalon Pedersson Beyer

Absalon Pedersson Beyer was born in 1528. The first Lutheran superintendent in Bergen, Geble Pederssøn, recognised his talents, and offered him his patronage and support. At the age of 16, Absalon was sent to Copenhagen to study theology under Peder Palladius, the leading figure of the Danish Reformation. After five years of studies there, he spent two years in Wittenberg in order to follow the lectures of Philipp Melanchthon. Finally, he obtained his master's degree in Copenhagen before returning to Bergen. There, he worked as a lecturer and as the rector of the chapter school, as a pastor at the Bergenhus castle and as an academic author for the rest of his life.

As an author he has given us several interesting works, not least a diary reporting on daily life in Bergen in the late sixteenth century. But his main academic achievement is a national history and topography: *Om Norgis Rige* ("On the realm of Norway"), written in 1567 and distributed in a number of manuscripts until it was first printed as late as 1781.⁵ It is a book of no more than approximately 100 pages. Absalon's most important sources were manuscripts from the old Norse sagas (about the medieval kings of Norway) and old Norwegian laws (not least the *Landslov* of Magnus Lagabøte, one of the first medieval codices for an entire country, not merely a landscape). His theoretical approach to history writing is evidently influenced by Melanchthon and by his humanist studies in Wittenberg.

The history of the realm of Norway is like the history of man: it has to be seen as a development comprising of childhood, youth, adult strength and at last old age. According to Melanchthon's *Chronicon Carionis* and also according to Absalon, a country's strong period tends to last for about 500 years. Applied to Norway (described as a lady in Absalon's book), this means that her years of strength are over, and can only be looked back upon. Those were primarily the days of the influential Norwegian kings from the eleventh and fourteenth centuries. The latest developments with the Reformation and the Danish annexation of Norway are to be ruefully interpreted as decay. Here, Norway has changed into a weak old lady, no longer able to defend what she had obtained in her earlier life. "She had become so old, cold and barren that she could no longer bear royal children who could rule

⁵ Here quoted from the edition Absalon Pederssøn Beyer, *Om Norgis Rige* (Bergen: F. Beyers forlag, 1928).

the country. Her nobility, the good warriors and fighters have left her, some by sword and some by the pestilence ... ”⁶

Norway is an old widow who is hardly able to walk on her own. But even if she seems to have lost all her former power, there is still something left. In the second part of his treatise, Absalon wants to demonstrate that “the kingdom of Norway is not yet so old, that there is no more strength, wisdom and power left.” God has still blessed the country with a number of gifts.⁷

The most surprising aspect about Absalon is the way he includes and talks about religion as part of these gifts in the second half of his book. He is a well-trained theologian from the best Lutheran universities, and holds a position as a theological teacher and as a pastor at the court of one of Denmark’s highest ranked representatives in Norway. In spite of all this, he offers an interpretation of recent history where the fact that Norway, owing to the Reformation, has returned to the true religion is part of a tragic development, to be looked upon as the end of a glorious history of Norway. One of Absalon’s interpreters in Norway puts it this way: “Here, the patriot in Absalon is stronger than the Lutheran.”⁸

The miserable current situation explicitly includes religious life: “Item, we tear down the monasteries and churches that our fathers have built up, and where we earlier could maintain 27 churches (that is the number of churches built in wood or in stone previously at hand in Bergen), all of them with roof and ornaments, we can now hardly maintain 4.”⁹

But Absalon goes even further than this to defend pre-Reformation religious life. Before the Danish take-over in 1537, the archbishop in Nidaros had removed the shrine of St. Olaf and kept it in his castle at Steinvikholm, close to Nidaros.¹⁰ But in 1567, when Absalon wrote his treatise, the relics seem to have been returned, and they are praised by Absalon as if no religious change had taken place at all with the Reformation: he regards the relics of Olaf as particularly precious among Norway’s still remaining gifts or “ornaments,” since his body according to the

6 Absalon, *Om Norgis Rige*, 40: “[...] hun blev saa gammel, kold oc ufructsommelig, at hun kunde icke nu føde sjelf kongebørn, som skulle vere hennis regentere. Hennis adel, gode kemper oc stridsmend fulle henne ifra, en part ved sverd, en part ved pestilenze ... ”

7 Absalon, *Om Norgis Rige*, 49.

8 Absalon, *Om Norgis Rige*, 19 (Introduction by H. Beyer).

9 Absalon, *Om Norgis Rige*, 43: “Item de kloster oc kircker som vore forfedre haffuer op bygt, bryde vi neder, oc der som man tilforn haffuer kunnit holle 27 kircker ved magt (saa mange kircker smaa oc store aff tre oc sten haffuer i Bergen verit) med tag oc anden ornament, kand mand nu icke, heller neppelig, holle 4.”

10 On the complicated story of what happened to St. Olaf’s shrine after the Reformation, see Øystein Ekroll, “St. Olavs skrin i Nidaros,” in *Ecclesia Nidrosiensis 1153–1537*, ed. Steinar Imsen (Trondheim: Tapir akademisk forlag, 2003), 325–350.

author has been preserved unchanged and untarnished for 537 years. Nothing similar could be said about the holy kings of Sweden or of Denmark: St. Erik or St. Knud. This was only the case with St. Olaf, and it

no doubt happened in order for God to make it clear, that St Olaf's undertakings, his learning, his confession and his warfare had been justified, and that God will wake him up again to eternal life and give him the incorruptible crown of honour. God wants to announce this through Olaf's body: just like God preserves his body unharmed, he will in the same way preserve his soul unharmed and let them come together and be immortal.¹¹

The approval of Norway's pre-Reformation traditions is not restricted to the praise of St. Olaf. Even though Norway, due to its location in the "utmost north of the world," was one of the last countries to convert, Absalon praises it for "true religion and its knowledge of God."¹² "Since the country turned to Christianity, its inhabitants have ever since clung firmly to the word of God, which has sometimes been purer here in Norway, and sometimes darker ..."¹³

Absalon's history of Norway's rise and fall is first and foremost a history of the Norwegian kings. After the Danish annexation of the country, the old and tired lady Norway is no longer capable to bear her own royal children. And the story of the medieval kings of Norway belongs to the most precious parts of the country's heritage. Therefore, humanist efforts were invested in bringing these traditions to new life again.

3.2 Peder Claussøn Friis

The most notable person to be mentioned in connection with this is Peder Claussøn Friis. Trained in the Old Norse language, he was a pioneer in translating the Old Norse sagas. His comprehensive translation, *Norske Kongers Chronica* ("The Chronicles of Norwegian Kings"), was published posthumously in Copenhagen in 1633, and was to become a main contribution to the reception of the saga literature. He also published a short version of the work, *En kort Extract af de norske Kongers*

¹¹ Absalon, *Om Norgis Rige*, 53: "[...] hvilket uden al tvivl er der for skeet, at Gud baade vil dermed give tilkenne, at St. Oluffs sag, lerdøm, bekendelse, krig haver verit ret, oc at Gud vil opvecke hannom til det evige liv, oc give hannom den uforgengelig ærens krone, oc det giver Gud tilkenne udi hans legome, saa at ligervis som Gud bevarer legomet uforkrenkt, saa vil han oc bevare sjelen uforkrenkit, oc lade dennem komme sammen oc blive udødelig."

¹² Absalon, *Om Norgis Rige*, 55.

¹³ Absalon, *Om Norgis Rige*, 56: "[...] have undersaatterne i rigt altid siden hengit hart ved Guds ord, hvilket stundom haver verit renere her i Norge, stundom mørkere ... "



Figure 1: Epitaph for Peder Claussøn Friis in Valle Church, Sør Audnedal in Norway. It is a typical epitaph from the tradition of the early generations of Lutheran clergy. The inscription in the upper right corner ORA ET LABORA is certainly not typically Lutheran, but may nevertheless be most suitable to the hardworking clergyman and writer who was to be remembered by this epitaph (© Birger Lindstad, Riksantikvaren).

Chronica. Here, the story of the Norwegian kings until 1387 is linked to a brief topography of Norway Figure 1.¹⁴

Absalon Pederssøn Beyer had also been interested in topography, and the second part of his *Om Norigs Rige* included quite comprehensive descriptions of nature and natural resources in different parts of the country, including the dominions overseas. All this belonged to the gifts of God, still available to the old lady of Norway. These descriptions are followed up by Peder Claussøn Friis, especially in his *Norrigis Bescriffuelse* (“Description of Norway”), finished in 1613 and published in Copenhagen in 1632. It was an important task not just to deal with the Norwegian mainland, but also with Iceland, Greenland, Orkney and the Faroe Islands. These dominions had all been parts of Norway and the diocese of Nidaros in the old days, and they were well worth remembering and describing – even though all of them now belonged to Denmark.¹⁵

Once again, we see humanist efforts from an important representative of the early Lutheran clergy in Norway, mobilised not in order to study the Bible in its original languages, but to study the classical sources of Norwegian history in the original Old Norse language, primarily the history of its kings. The identity of

¹⁴ Jon Gunnar Jørgensen, “Peder Claussøn Friis,” *Norsk biografisk leksikon NBL*: https://nbl.snl.no/Peder_Clauss%C3%B8n_Friis; accessed June 26, 2020.

¹⁵ *Norrigis Bescriffuelse*, ed. Ole Worm (København: Melchior Marzan, 1632); *Snorre Sturlesøns Norske Kongers Chronica*, ed. Ole Worm (København: Melchior Marzan, 1633).

Norway is closely linked to these royal traditions, but the days of glory once again end in the fourteenth century. The Reformation definitely does not belong to the glorious parts of this history.¹⁶

3.3 Denmark: Erasmus Laetus

For comparative purposes, a brief look at similar humanist contributions with a totally different theological and ideological profile in Denmark may deserve attention. Here, too, history writing was strongly influenced by Melanchthon. But the Reformation is not at all excluded or looked upon as the miserable end of a glorious past. Quite the opposite: the Reformation kings of Denmark serve as a point of departure or as a culmination of a succession of rulers dating back to antiquity.

The dominating pattern is summarised in a preface to a book published by the Danish theologian, poet and historian *Erasmus Laetus* in 1560.¹⁷ The preface is written by Melanchthon himself, starting with some main ideas from the *Chronicon Carionis* before developing them further by adding the success of the Danish Reformation kings to the row of prominent international rulers from earlier periods of history – from David, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah in the Old Testament through Constantine and Theodicius in Late Antiquity and up to Christian III, the first Danish Reformation king. Common to all of them is that they were not just political rulers, they were – as some type of “theocratic rulers” – also supreme protectors of the temple or the church.

In this way, the Reformation kings of Denmark are not only the peak of the development of Danish kings since the Middle Ages, they represent something

¹⁶ The tradition of historiography was continued a few generations later by the Icelandic born *Tormod Torfæus*, who had spent great parts of his life as a historical author and researcher at Karmøy in southern Norway. He is regarded as one of the founders of the discipline of critical history writing in Norway. He, too, focused on the medieval tradition and Norway’s kings in the Middle Ages. His extensive volume *Historia rerum Norvegicarum* ends in 1387 and is mainly preoccupied with the interpretation of the original sources from the saga period. See Tormod Torfæus, *Historia rerum Norvegicarum*, 4 vols. (København: Joachim Schmitgen, 1711). See also Torgrim Titlestad, *Tormod Torfæus – ei innføring* (Stavanger: Erling Skjalgssonselskapet, 2001).

¹⁷ For more on Erasmus Laetus see: Karen Skovgaard-Petersen, “A Safe Haven for the Church – On Melanchthon’s Influence on Historical Discourse in Sixteenth-Century Denmark,” in *Philipp Melanchthon und seine Rezeption in Skandinavien*, ed. Birgit Stolt (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1998), 113–135, especially 114. See also, Karen Skovgaard-Petersen and Peter Zeeberg, *Erasmus Laetus’ skrift om Christian IVs fødsel og dåb (1577)* (København: C.A. Reitzel, 1992).

more. They are to be regarded as an example of ideal rulers of society, realizing the political ambitions of the Lutheran Reformation. As an ideal ruler of this type, Christian III promoted peace and supported learning and the muses. But the ultimate aim of his rule was “pious and salutary Reformation of the church.”¹⁸

4 The New Nation and the Reformation

In 1814, the union between Denmark and Norway was dissolved, Norway was again a country in its own right, and a new national parliament adopted a constitution for the country. Since 1811, a Norwegian university had also been established in Kristiania (now Oslo). How did the historiography of Reformation in Norway evolve in this new political context reinforcing the idea of Norway as a reborn nation?¹⁹

The first extensive Reformation history written in Norwegian by a Norwegian was Stener Johannes Stenersen’s *Udsigt over den Lutherske Reformation*.²⁰ Stenersen (1789–1835) was at this time a lecturer in Church History at the University of Kristiania. His two-volume work on the Reformation is a printed edition of his lectures, introducing the theology of Luther and the history of the German Reformation.

The *Udsigt* starts with an introduction presenting the entire history of the church prior to the Reformation as a prelude to what took place with Luther. The survey of the Reformation itself concentrates on Luther, and frequently refers both

18 In Norway, this tradition of historiography, resting heavily on Melanchthon and his *Chronicon Carionis* and ending up praising the Danish kings for having introduced the Reformation, also found a representative: Hallvard Gunnarssøn (1550–1608). He had studied in Copenhagen and Rostock, and had been a lecturer for almost 30 years at the cathedral school in Oslo. His *Chronicon regum Norvegiae* deals with the Norwegian kings up to the death of Håkon Håkonsson in 1263, but a final section with shorter descriptions of the Danish - Norwegian kings is also added. This addition was written by the Danish historian Hans Sadolin. And here, Christian IV is praised for having introduced the Reformation. See Inger Ekrem, “Melanchthon – Cythraeus – Gunarius. Der Einfluss de Geschichtsusunterrichts und der Geschichtsschreibung in den deutschen Ländern und in Dänemark-Norwegen auf einen norwegischen Lektor (ca. 1550–1608),” in *Reformation and Latin Literature in Northern Europe*, ed. Inger Ekrem et al. (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1996), 207–225.

19 Cf. here also Tarald Rasmussen, “Erkjennelse og interesse. Middelalderen i norsk kirkehistoriskrivning,” in *Den kirkehistoriske utfordring*, ed. Steinar Imsen (Trondheim: Tapir akademisk forlag 2014), 27–34.

20 Stener Johannes Stenersen *Udsigt over den Lutherske Reformation: med en Indledning om Kirkens Tilstand før samme* (“A survey of the Lutheran Reformation, with an Introduction Concerning the State of the Church before the same”) (Kristiania: Grøndahl, 1818–19).

to his works and to the first Luther-biography written by Johannes Mathesius. Philipp Marheinecke's *Geschichte der deutschen Reformation* is another main source for Stenersen's history of the Reformation up to 1530.²¹ Marheinecke's work was published in 1816 in Berlin on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation, in order to keep the memory alive of "those great days of the history of our fatherland."²² A similar national context is totally absent in Stenersen's work. Norway is not mentioned at all in his two volumes. The Reformation is a German undertaking, and its relevance for Norway has to be stated in general confessional terms.

Celebrations of the Reformation were also held in Norway in 1817, but here again, no link between the Reformation and the re-born Norwegian nation was established. The celebrations instead focussed on the general fruits of the Reformation. The Norwegian church historian Oluf Kolsrud (1885–1945), who thoroughly analysed the 1817-celebrations in an article in 1917, concluded with five important observations: the Reformation brought a) intellectual progress in knowledge and understanding; b) liberation from the tyranny of the papacy (but not in order to embrace republicanism instead of obedience to the legitimate ruler); c) moral progress, compared to the Middle Ages; d) distribution of the Bible in the vernacular of the people; and e) last but not least, Luther's success in promoting a school and learning programme for children. This last merit was, according to Kolsrud, the most important of all in 1817, and seen as the most glorious fruit of the Reformation in the 1817 celebrations in Norway.²³

Stenersen's book on the Reformation was published at a time when a new feeling of national identity was emerging in Norway, as across many other European countries. A new nation was to be established, and historical research at the new university of Kristiania would support these efforts. At the same time, at least theology and church history were supposed to support and underpin the confessional Lutheran framework of the new nation, equally stated in its constitution. Could this double task be accomplished by continuing to talk about the Reformation in general terms, without confronting the fragile question of the Danish introduction of the Reformation in Norway as an attack on Norwegian sovereignty? Was the Reformation more of an enemy than a friend in the process of Norwegian

²¹ Philipp Marheinecke, *Geschichte der deutschen Reformation*, 4 vols. (Berlin: Nicolaische Buchhandlung, 1816).

²² Marheinecke, *Geschichte der deutschen Reformation*, vol. 1, Vorrede p. IV: "[...] mit der Erinnerung an jene großen Tage der vaterländischen Geschichte ..."

²³ Olaf Kolsrud, "Reformationsjubilæet i Norge 1817," in *Norsk teologi til reformationsjubilæet 1917* ed. Olaf Kolsrud (Kristiania: Grøndahl & Søns forlag, 1917), 250–295, especially 293–295.

nation building during the nineteenth century? Was it possible to continue the line of Stenersen, in promoting Lutheranism only in terms of general ideals connected to German history, while disregarding the negative aspects of the Reformation as part of Norwegian history?

For several decades in the nineteenth century the attitude to these questions was strongly influenced by an ongoing discussion on how Norwegian theology and church life should relate to the famous Danish theologian Nicolai F.S. Grundtvig (1783–1872). In his thinking, Christianity had to be fundamentally connected to national traditions and national history, not only to the Reformation, but also further back to the Middle Ages. Christianity had to be contextualized in this way in order to come into its own right. Different parts of the world had developed different forms of Christianity, deeply rooted and deeply influenced by national and regional contexts. These various forms of Christianity also found different religious expressions, not least through music and singing. Grundtvig was no less famous as a hymn writer than as a theologian.

In Norway, the Grundtvig way of thinking also had its followers, but the dominant academics at the University of Kristiania rejected it. Stenersen himself had an ambiguous attitude to Grundtvig, but the most influential professor at the Kristiania faculty throughout the 1840s and 1850s, Gisle Johnson (1822–94), rejected Grundtvig's position on fundamental grounds, and replaced it with Lutheran confessionalism. Here, Reformation history was to be studied and taught according to the tradition from Stenersen; it was to be converted to, and treated in terms of, dogmatics and confessional Lutheranism, and not at all in terms of national history.

The price to be paid for this was that Norwegian university theology was to a great extent detached from the national challenge of establishing the academic basis of Norwegian nation building. To Johnson and his followers, it seemed difficult to connect a Lutheran identity to National Norwegian interests without being linked to, or associated with, Grundtvig and his followers. And this price was too high. Therefore, academic theology up until around 1900 frequently preferred to keep the nation building project at a distance, and instead concentrate its efforts on the strengthening of a confessional position.²⁴

The academic discipline of history at the University of Kristiania was closely linked to the project of nation building and to the efforts of defining national and

²⁴ One interesting effect of this strategy was the hiring of the excellent German scholar Carl Paul Caspari (1814–92) from Germany to the University of Kristiania. He was recruited by Gisle Johnson in order to assist in the battle against Grundtvigianism, and to take part in the task of disproving the Grundtvigian presupposition that the words of the Apostolic confession could be traced back to Jesus himself.

political identity. Historical research to a large extent served such purposes, and here again, for obvious reasons, the Reformation in Norway had little or nothing to offer. Instead, the High Middle Ages, the period of Norwegian strength and influence, preserved its position as a major field of historical investigation.²⁵ One obvious hero was king Sverre (1177–1202). His resolute protest against Rome and the pope on behalf of his country could in a Norwegian context overrule and replace Luther's protest against the papacy. Moreover, the specific structure of Norwegian rural society in the Middle Ages, with a smaller degree of feudal subordination of "ordinary people," could serve as a source of identification for the modern democratic Norway, after the long period of subordination under Danish rule.

5 Christianisation as a Substitute for the Reformation

Not only was it the historians in Norway who preferred the High Middle Ages to the Early Modern period and the Reformation. The church historians followed a similar path too. From their point of view, the Norwegian Reformation was nothing to be proud of. The first one to state this explicitly within the framework of academic teaching was professor of church history Anton Christian Bang (1840–1913) in his book *Udsigt over Den norske Kirkes Historie: efter Reformationen*. Bang started out as a professor two years after he had published this book, and in the preface he writes that it is "... the first attempt to offer a comprehensive account of the history of the Norwegian church after the Reformation Figure 2."²⁶

In the introduction to the book, the Reformation in Norway is presented in the following way:

[...] while life on other places is rich and the development prosperous, everything here with us is just meagre and at times almost crippled. [...] The same seed, which under more favourable

²⁵ This way of looking at the history of Norway was promoted not least by Ernst Sars (1835–1917), professor of history at the University of Oslo since 1874. An influential work of his is *Udsigt over den norske Historie*, 4 vols., 1873–91. Several later historians both in the nineteenth and the twentieth century have confirmed and further developed his line of argument, and his strategy of a historical underpinning of Norwegian national identity.

²⁶ Anton Christian Bang, *Udsigt over Den norske Kirkes Historie: efter Reformationen* (Kristiania: Albert Cammermeyer, 1883), V: "[...] det første Forsøg paa at levere en samlet Fremstilling af den norske Kirkes Historie efter Reformationen, ..."



Figure 2: Anton Christian Bang was Professor of Church History before he took over the position as Bishop of Oslo in 1896. This picture is from 1907 (© Szacinski/Oslo Museum).

conditions could flower and give wonderful fruits, is up here only capable of fostering dwarf trees [...] Dealing with the post-Reformation history of our church, one is confronted with the tedious and poor life in a province, in an annex ...²⁷

Four years after the publication of his work on the Church of Norway after the Reformation, Bang published a similar and much more comprehensive work on the Church of Norway “under Catholicism.”²⁸ Being the first to publish an academic treatise on the Church of Norway “after the Reformation” in 1883, he was not the first to write about Norway and the Church of Norway “under Catholicism.” Rudolf Keyser (1803–64), a founding father of academic history writing in Norway,²⁹ had already published a huge two volume (almost 1500 pages) work on *The History of*

²⁷ Bang, *Efter Reformationen*, 1: “... medens Livet paa andre Steder er rigt og Udviklingen fyldig, saa er alt hos os kun magert og til sine Tider næsten forkrøblet. [...] De samme Frø, der under heldigere Omstændigheder udvikle sig frodig og afsætte skønne Frugter, formaa heroppe kun ligesom at frembringe Dvergræer. [...] Det er det ensformige og fattige Liv i en Provins, i et Annex, man har for sig, naar man beskæftiger sig med vor Kirkes efterreformatoriske Historie ...”

²⁸ Anton Christian Bang, *Udsigt over Den norske Kirkes Historie under Katholicismen* (Kristiania: Albert Cammermeyer, 1887).

²⁹ Cf. Per Sveaas Andersen, *Rudolf Keyser, embetsmann og historiker* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1960).

*the Church of Norway under Catholicism*³⁰ in 1856–58. Bang could lean on Keyser for important academic support, but he also set his own priorities.

In Bang's book, it is of particular interest to observe the way he praises the period of Christianisation of Norway in the tenth and eleventh centuries. It is true, he writes, that some of the new religious impulses coming from the South that Danish and German missionaries had brought, had a certain influence in the southern parts of the country around Kristiania. But on an overall and national level, it is important to conclude that the decisive influence came from the West, from England:

It was from the Anglo-Saxon Britain that Christianity found its way into the Norwegian people as a whole. Among all the peoples, that during the first half of the Middle Ages took the Christian faith, there was hardly any nation where such a deep, warm and beautiful Christianity could take root like it did among the Anglo-Saxons. There, a rich Christian life flowered, God's word was translated into their language, and several prominent poets emerged and praised the Lord with their songs. The most characteristic part of the Christianity of the Anglo-Saxons was the wonderful merging of the Christian and the popular, which has to be admired even today. [...] In this way, the daughter-congregation in Norway could receive a beautiful heritage from its mother-congregation in England.³¹

This focus on the Christianisation of Norway from the West also had support from Keyser, and had been further underpinned by an important contribution from the German professor of legal history Konrad Maurer in his two volumes work *Die Bekehrung des Norwegischen Stammes zum Christenthume, in ihrem geschichtlichen Verlaufe quellenmäßig geschildert*.³² Maurer visited Norway several times, and he also spent a semester at the University of Kristiania in 1876. To Bang, he was a most

30 Rudolf Keyser, *Den norske Kirkes Historie under Katholicismen*, 2 vols. (Kristiania: C. Tønsbergs forlag, 1856–58).

31 “Det var fra det angelsaksiske Britannien, at kristendommen fandt sin indgang blandt det norske folk i sin helhed. Af alle de mange folkeslag, der i første halvdel af middelalderen antog den kristne tro, var der maaske ingen nation, hos hvem en saa dyb, varm og skjønn kristendom slog rod som hos angelsakserne. Et rigt kristeligt liv blomstrede blandt dem, Guds ord blev oversat paa deres tungemål, og der opstod flere betydelige digtere, der paa modersmaalet kvad sine sange til Herrens pris. Hvad der gav angelsaksernes kristendom sit mest fremtrædende præg, det var den skjønnne sammensmelting af det kristelige og det folkelige, som man endnu den dag idag maa beundre. [...] Dattermenigheden i Norge kunde saaledes modtage en skjønn arv fra modermenigheden i England.” Quoted from a combined and illustrated edition of the two books: Anton Christian Bang, *Den norske kirkes historie* (Kristiania: Gyldendal Boghandel Nordisk forlag, 1912), 31–32.

32 Konrad Maurer, *Die Bekehrung des Norwegischen Stammes zum Christenthume, in ihrem geschichtlichen Verlaufe quellenmäßig geschildert*, 2 vols. (München: Christian Kaiser, 1855–56).

important international authority, who went into much more detail on the topic of the Christianisation from the West than Keyser had done in his work.³³

There are obvious similarities between Bang in 1883–87 and Absalon Peder-ssøn Beyer in 1567; both in their way of looking – not at the Middle Ages, but at the Reformation as a dark age of decay; and in their way of praising the Middle Ages and the period of Christianisation as those parts of history where the Church of Norway could find its most precious roots. Even though Bang operates within a modern university and finds support both in German and Norwegian historical research, much of what he has to say follows in the footsteps of his sixteenth century predecessor.

But there are differences too that are worth noticing. Bang's strong focus on the fact that Christianisation in Norway came from the West is remarkable, and not present in the work of Absalon. This question had been discussed in detail especially by Maurer, and Bang appreciated Maurer's conclusions not only for their contributions to historical research, but also for ideological reasons. It was a good thing for a Lutheran church with a most ambivalent relationship to the Reformation to be convinced that the religious roots of the country before the Reformation were not primarily linked to Rome and to the pope. The Church of England was definitely a much better alternative. Any support of this way of interpreting the Christianisation of Norway, be it from historians or from legal historians, was most welcome.

From this point of departure, it was also easier to appreciate medieval Christianity on a broader scale from a positive perspective: not as a dark prelude to the re-discovery of the Reformation, but rather as a positive prelude to – and partly even as a *medieval substitute* to – the Reformation. In several other Lutheran countries, the Reformation meant a new start of a national history, liberated from Rome. It also meant a return to, and a new start for, use of the native language, rather than Latin. And it meant closer connections between church and people: Christianity did not belong to the clergy, but to the people.

In Norway, little of this came with the Reformation. The situation was rather opposite, at least when it came to Norwegian sovereignty and the use of the Old Norwegian language. The royal traditions of Norway and the Old Norse language were studied by the sixteenth century humanists, but for practical purposes all this had been overruled by the Danes and the Danish language.

When starting to write national church history again in the nineteenth century, Bang could conclude that these essential fruits of the Reformation had already

³³ In 1890, the Norwegian legal historian, Absalon Taranger, further developed Maurer's theories in his: Absalon Taranger, *Den angelsaksiske kirkes indflydelse paa den norske* (Kristiania: Grøndahl & Søn Bogtrykkeri, 1890). The book was dedicated both to Maurer and to Bang.

been present in the Norwegian church since the high Middle Ages. The idols of Roman Catholic Christianity that Luther had to fight in Germany in the sixteenth century, had already been conquered in Norway during the process of Christianisation with the destruction of Old Norse idols.

The Christianisation implied the subordination of Norway into a supranational church structure only to a limited extent. Far more important was the national aspect, which was already evident in the eleventh century. The king was already at this time the primary agent representing the new religion, a characteristic part of Protestant Lutheran societies in the Early Modern period. Christianity more or less accompanied the birth of the Norwegian nation, for the first time united under a strong king (Olaf Haraldsson, i.e. St. Olaf), who together with his bishop was also in charge of religion in the country. And Christianity in the eleventh century was even accompanied by a new life given to the native Old Norse language, which was from the outset used in most of the religious texts. In this way, the religion of eleventh and twelfth century Norway could be interpreted as a kind of proto-Lutheranism, closer to nineteenth century Protestantism than to nineteenth century Catholicism Figure 3.



Figure 3: Ecclesiastical decay in post-Reformation Norway. A priority task for the new Norway of the nineteenth century was to restore the Cathedral of St. Olaf. Etching by August Meyer of the west front of the Nidaros Cathedral from 1839 (© Henning Grøtt, Nidaros Domkirkes Restaureringsarbeider).

These were more or less the same national advantages as the ones that in other Nordic countries (and in Germany) could be attributed to the Reformation. But since the character of the Norwegian Reformation was so particular, a different writing of national church history was needed. And in Norway, the intense pre-occupation with the period of Christianisation to a considerable extent replaced the research on the Reformation period. As with the historians, the Norwegian church historians also found what they needed (i.e. the close and positive link between religion and national identity) in the Middle Ages; not in the Reformation.

6 Conclusion

A. C. Bang's and Absalon Pederssøn Beyer's way of thinking about the Reformation in Norway; and Bang's interpretation of the Christianisation as a kind of prelude or substitute to changes that took place elsewhere with the Reformation; have continued to influence Norwegian historiography as well as Norwegian church politics. The most popular person from the Reformation of Norway is the Catholic Archbishop Olav Engelbrektsson. He defended national interests, but had to escape in 1537 when the army of the Danish king was on its way to Nidaros.³⁴ Also, the preparations for the celebrations of the millennium of St. Olaf's martyrdom in 2030 is a huge undertaking in Norway,³⁵ as it was with the celebration of the 900th anniversary of St. Olaf in 1930 as well.³⁶ Remembering the Reformation, be it the Reformation in Germany in 2017 or the Reformation of Denmark and Norway in 1937, is a small event in comparison.

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³⁴ See, for instance, Halfdan Koth, *Olav Engelbriktsson og sjølvstende-tapet 1537* (Oslo: H. Aschehoug, 1951).

³⁵ The preparations have already started a long time ago and are being coordinated by the national cultural centre in Stiklestad ("Stiklestad Nasjonale Kultursenter"). <https://stiklestad.no/nasjonaljubileet2030/> A comprehensive report on the preparations of the national jubilee in 2030 was published in 2018. <https://stiklestad.no/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/sluttrapport-forstudie-nasjonaljubileet-2030.pdf>.

³⁶ A number of books were published in Norway on this occasion. One of the most significant was once again edited by Oluf Kolsrud: *Nidaros og Stiklestad. Olavs-Jubileet 1930. Mindeskrift*, ed. Oluf Kolsrud, Norvegia Sacra 10 (Oslo: Steenske forlag, 1937). Here, preparations and celebrations in Norway, as well as abroad, are comprehensively documented.