

ABSTRACT

Another Church – The Church of Sweden reflected through the Church Coalition and the Church Coalition reflected through the Church of Sweden deals with the relationship between the Church of Sweden of the 20th century and a consultation forum, the Church Coalition for the Bible and Confession. The forum originates from the conflict over the ordination of women to the priesthood, which has proved to be a watershed when it comes to identity issues in the Church of Sweden. The conflicts over the understanding of the Bible and its use are, thus, simultaneously conflicts over the Church's freedom as it relates to the state, to political power at large, and to the agenda to create a so-called open, modern and democratic church which conforms to contemporary ideas and values.

The shift from a state church, via a religiously motivated national church, into a church conforming to the norm system of the Swedish Welfare State is described, and the book demonstrates that from the mid-twentieth century and onwards, as this shift has become normalised, committed church-goers have realized what was at stake and worked to resist it. The new normality implies a crucial change in the foundation of the Church of Sweden from a solid grounding in Christian tradition and belief to a volatile structure. Here, the term MTD, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, is used to characterise this new volatility.

This book is not the history of an organization, its activities and structure, in the traditional sense. Rather, it is a study of an internal church organization described in the context of its origins as it relates to developments in the Church of Sweden from the mid-1950s to today.

The account begins with the 1930s and a description of the church normality, the understanding of the church in which those who formed the Church Coalition were brought up. After the Church Synod of 1957, this normality was, as they saw it, under threat of becoming exchanged for a new and different set of beliefs. Consequently, the Church Coalition and its members wishes to gather those who realise that the doctrinal foundation and teachings of the Church of Sweden regarding the Bible and the Confession are being threatened at a fundamental level.

When the decision of admitting women into the priesthood was taken by Parliament and by the Church Synod in 1958, a so called Conscience-clause was appended. However, when this was perceived as an instrument to counteract the new order, it was abolished.

The Church Coalition gave concrete advice to priests who did not accept the new order how to act. These 17 points for non-interaction triggered a storm of protests and created a media image of the Church Coalition as uncharitable, reactionary, and misogynist. Thus, the identity questions that the Church Coalition for the Bible and Confession wished to raise were permanently marginalised. The fact that the 17 points were set up to prevent protest actions against the decision taken remained unnoticed, as were the repeated attempts of the Church Coalition to create ways of reaching mutual understanding.

The first President of the Church Coalition, Bishop Bo Giertz, was a church diplomat and regarded it as an important task to prevent church fragmentation, but he also continued to encourage the members of the organization not to give up its original objectives. During this period, the Bishops' Synod made an inquiry into the authority and use of the Bible. Furthermore, it was still possible for candidates to the priesthood, who were not convinced about the order of women's ordination to the priesthood, to be ordained without mental reservations.

After several vigorous actions, instigated by the fact that there still were dissenting priests and ordination candidates, a ruling was made in 1994 to the effect that acceptance of the order of women in the priesthood is a condition for serving as bishop, priest or deacon in the Church of Sweden. An echo of this still resounded in the meeting of the General Church Synod in 2017, when yet another restricting decision was taken.

For the people, lay and clergy, who rally around The Church Coalition and the internal church movements gathered to consultations under its auspices, the question of the ordination of women is emblematic of the Church of Sweden's manner of diverging from faithfulness to the Bible and the confession; hence the recurring descriptions in the book of how the issue of the ordination of women has ruled the context in which the Church Coalition has worked and acted.

Throughout the book, the Church Coalition is described as a consultation forum and not as a movement for activism. The tension between these two poles is illustrated by an issue that was controversial in the 1960s: a priest's duty to announce the recipient of the collection taken in a service. This tension is also described through the sketching of the history of the Free Synod, the Consistory and the Mission Province.

The Church Coalition has, with limitations, acted as a forum for consultation between various movements within the Church of Sweden. It is the members of the various movements who, in the capacity of their concrete responsibilities in church life and the positions they have as a result of this, can take a stand that is different from the one prescribed by current ideology.

The people of the Church Coalition have been an active opposition, and they have envisaged that the church could have been different from the one at hand. In conversations and consultations the people of the Church Coalition have always sought possibilities and opportunities to let this vision show the way.

In spite of the attempts to create an open, modern and democratic church that conforms to contemporary ideas values, the Church of Sweden has, after severing the bonds between Church and State, become even more politicized than earlier. Political parties dominate in all its decision-making positions and capacities, and the church has also in recent years experienced what can only be described as an avalanche exit of church members.

About the author: The Rev. Dr. Dag Sandahl (1948-), Associate professor of Theology (University of Lund), is a retired parish priest with an extensive theological production on pastoral subjects as well as on the relationship between church, Christianity and political power.

Through the blog "BloggarDag" (2011-2018) and numerous articles in various newspapers and journals, Rev Sandahl's voice is well-known in the Swedish church debate.

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