Christian Manliness, a Paradox of Modernity: Men and Religion in a Northern-European Context, 1840 to 1940

SUMMARY AND RESEARCH RESULTS

Until recently religious issues have been generally ignored in the rapidly expanding field of men's history, particularly in research on masculinity in the modern period. There has often been an unspoken assumption that religion was a private matter connected to the home and the female sphere, and therefore lacking relevance to the public life of men's domain. But was this really the case? How to explain the large groups of men committed to the Church and to the Christian faith?

It was to answer this question that the research project Christian manliness - a paradox of modernity was set in train. Its aim is to shed light on the relationship between Christianity and the construction of manliness in Northern Europe in the period 1840 to 1940. One starting point is the theory launched within gender and religious studies of the feminisation of Christianity in the nineteenth century, which runs counter to the religious revitalisation and re-confessionalisation that for other researchers characterises the same period. The feminisation theory holds that religious life became feminised and that men distanced themselves from the church, whereas the confessionalisation theory stresses men's engagement in the church and religious life.

Ten scholars, nine from various Swedish universities and Olaf Blaschke from Germany, have been engaged in the project, led by Yvonne Maria Werner at Lund University. Our research group, which has collaborated with researchers working on similar issues in other European countries, has arranged two international conferences in 2004 and 2006. The results of our work have been presented in two anthologies, seven monographs, and numerous articles; some are already published, others will follow in 2010 and 2011. Most important are the two collections of essays, one in Swedish and one in English, which summarise the research done by the project members.

1. The project has shown the close connection between confessional culture and strategies to stabilise, defend, and renew Christian ideals of manliness. This stands out very clearly in Blaschke's work. He uses the example of imperial Germany to show that confessionalism was used as an instrument to masculinise the religious sphere. Protestantism proliferated as a specifically male religion because of its connection with the nationalist discourse of the dominant bourgeois culture, whereas the strategy used within Catholicism was to re-code the religious actions and attitudes regarded as feminine as something masculine and to instrumentalise traditionally male characteristics and actions for religious purposes.

Several project members have pointed to similar tendencies in Swedish Protestantism. Thus David Tjeder shows how J.A. Eklund and other prominent Swedish church leaders, by referring to a nationalist ideology, invoked a masculinised image of Christ and a Christian rhetoric of struggle in order to create an up-to-date male ideal that was modern, manly, and Lutheran. Similar efforts to masculinise Christian ideals by employing middle-class, liberal concepts of
masculinity are found in Erik Sidenvall’s investigation of the Swedish evangelical missions in China and in Anna Prestjan’s study of the clergyman Eric E:son Hammar and his religiously motivated settlement in Northern Sweden. The opposite strategy is at the fore in Elin Malmer’s investigation of the evangelical Swedish Mission Covenant’s missionary activities among converts and in the construction of soldiers’ homes. Here the main point was to demonstrate the genuinely male character of Christian virtues, but also to recruit men and to counteract the feminisation of the movement’s membership.

2. The project has established that confessional culture played a central role in the construction of gender, a fact born out by the religious missions. This is illustrated in Werner’s work on manliness and Catholic mission in Scandinavia. Most of the male missionaries were members of religious institutes in Catholic countries, whereas converts from Protestantism dominated in the Catholic parishes. It is a humble, pious, obedient, strong-willed, and self-sacrificing kind of manliness that appears as the ideal in the reports of these celibate missionaries. These ideals stood in sharp contrast not only to modern, Protestant ideas of manhood but also to the prevalent, middle-class understanding of masculinity, which regarded these virtues as proper for women but not for men, and celibacy as both unethical and unmanly. In several of our studies, anti-Catholic rhetoric is a conspicuous factor in the construction of Protestant masculinity.

Where the Catholic tradition stressed the masculinising character of celibacy and asceticism, it was Lutheran household ideology that was the important marker for gender construction in Scandinavian Protestantism. This is in evidence in the conservative movements of the Church of Sweden: the high-church men analysed by Maurits; and the revivalist tradition associated with the priest, Henric Schartau, studied by Jarlert. The high-church theologians adhered to an ideal of manliness that was characterised by paternalism, a Lutheran ethic of duty, and political engagement to defend the prevailing Christian social order. In the Schartau tradition, the construction of lay ideals of manhood were firmly rooted in the realities of ordinary life and manifested in an everyday piety. The gender perceptions of the Lutheran household doctrine, although mixed with elements from middle-class, liberal gender ideology, also left their imprint on the constructions of masculinity common to the evangelical missionaries to China and the settlement movement. But while the bourgeois ideology built on the presumption of gender differences and separate spheres, the older ideals were based on the idea of co-operation within the framework of the household.

This kind of mixture between different gender ideologies is also apparent in Scandinavian fiction, as illustrated by Inger Littberger Caisou-Rousseau in her analysis of the work of three famous Swedish authors. The different concepts of Christian manliness in these works were all characterised by a combination of male and female qualities. The same pattern is apparent in Jarlert’s investigation of Sweden’s Queen Victoria, whom contemporaries described in a way that echoed the gender-crossing ideals of the old-church Christian tradition. This is further demonstrated in Gösta Hallonsten’s study of new feminism in the Catholic Church, which points to the fact that Western gender constructions can be seen as an extension of a longstanding Christian pattern of interpretation. The idea of male primacy in the order of Creation motivated female subordination, and the stipulated spiritual gender equality has been interpreted as an expression of a spiritual manliness that was linked to celibacy and asceticism.

3. Another of the project’s important findings is the crucial role played by piety and activism in the formation of Christian masculinity. Tjeder shows how Eklund and other leading Swedish theologians described the intellectual struggle to keep the faith as something specifically male,
natural female religiosity. While the advocates of feminisation theory have viewed men’s religious problems as an expression of secularisation, in Tjeder’s reading they are an example of religious modernisation and re-masculinisation in the spirit of Christian activism—a theory also confirmed by Prestjan’s study.

Missionary work can also be seen as an expression of a more activist ideal of manliness. Sidenvall argues that for evangelical missionaries to China, who all came from rural, working-class backgrounds, missionary work was an alternative to emigration, and their commitment should be understood in part as an attempt at middle-class respectability. Another feature was the discrepancy between the ideals and realities of missionary life, something also demonstrated in Werner’s work, which exposes the complex connections between confession, national identity, and gender.

A conclusion shared by all our studies is that social and missionary engagement on confessional grounds—whether interpreted in terms of a Protestant state church, revivalism, liberal theology, or Catholicism—were key components in the construction of Christian manliness. Another feature was the striving to re-code feminised ideals of classical Christian ethics into contemporary male values, and to instrumentalise the masculine combat spirit to Christian ends. In Catholicism, where regulated religious life served as the normative ground, classical Christian ideals such as humility, obedience, and self-sacrifice played a more central role than in family-orientated Protestant gender ideology, with its sharp demarcation between male and female. For the most part, Protestant ideals of manhood were closer to nationalist and gender ideologies of contemporary bourgeois society, whereas piety and willingness to take up the political fight for the sake of the church were the most significant features of Catholic constructions of manliness. Our research thus illustrates not only of the importance of religion in understanding gender constructions, but also the need to take into consideration the confessional and institutional aspects of religious identity.

Our project has generated a raft of new research questions, as for example the question of the discursive and practical break-through of a practical break-through of feminisation in Nordic church life; the importance of anti-Catholicism for the construction of Christian manliness in Scandinavia; and the relationship between manhood and feminism.
COMMON WORKS

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