Anticlericalism and Criticism of Religion in Europe, ca 1800-2000

Network Conference in Farfa September 13-17, 2016

PURPOSE OF THE CONFERENCE

The main purpose of the conference is to bring together researchers from different countries dealing with anticlericalism and criticism of religion in northern Europe with the aim to develop a joint framework for performing comparative and transnational long-term historical studies. A second purpose is to publish case studies on anti-Catholicism in an edited anthology, and to initiate local research projects on this subject in the Nordic countries. Whereas there is a growing interest in studying the historical development of anticlericalism in a broad sense in international research, this topic stands out as a neglected field of study in Scandinavia.

AIM AND SUBJECT

Critique of religion and its consequences is a topical theme. The attack on the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo in Paris in January 2015 made the Western media establishment rally in defence of freedom of expression, but it also raised the question of the limits of this freedom. The issue arose again in connection with the attacks in Copenhagen a few weeks later. There are always defined limits to freedom of expression, which change over time and are adapted to the political system that prevails. Ideas that in various ways question or threaten the current value system are not accepted. In Western society, racism is an example of such an illicit opinion, while blasphemy and criticism of the state-sanctioned religion took the same position in pre- and early modern society community. Criticism of the established church and the religiously motivated social order played an important role in the transformation of society that is usually labelled as secularisation and which meant that state and politics gradually became detached from church and religion.

It is this process of cultural change that the planned conference intends to illuminate by discussing various aspects of anticlericalism and criticism of religion in Europe from the late 18th century and up to the present. We will discuss the concrete expressions of anticlericalism and criticism of religion in different countries and how and with what purpose it was used in political and church political debates and rhetoric, but also its role in fiction and popular culture, and its expressions within Protestant revivalism and political radicalism, and last not least, the blasphemy phenomenon and its changing meaning and position.

Anticlericalism in the form of criticism of power-hungry prelates, negligent priests and lazy monks are as old as the institutionalised church, whereas the critical questioning of religion as the foundation of society is a product of the Enlightenment. This new form of anticlericalism, which broke through in the 19th century, took many different forms, ranging from attacks against the established church and the state-church system to radical demands of an
elimination of church power and influence in all aspects of public and political life. The criticism was offered through pamphlets, newspapers and magazines, parliamentary advocacy and public manifestations of different kind. Although the aim of the groups attacking the current state church order and the church’s power could be very different and, in some cases, contradictory, there were similarities in the rhetoric and the arguments used. Anticlericalism was a transnational phenomenon, and the same arguments, accusations and political visions are found all around in the Western world and to some extent also in other cultural spheres.

The gradual dismantling of the confessional system of unity was a lengthy process, accompanied by a politicisation and medialisation of religious issues and related ethical and cultural notions. In the Nordic countries, the transformation from a confessional to a secular social order was marked by the successive liberalisation of religious legislation from the mid-nineteenth century and onward. Until then citizenship was linked to membership of the established national church, and those who “apostatised” by joining another religious community was according to law to be punished by banishment.

There is an extensive international research on anticlericalism and religious criticism. Anticlericalism is used as an analytical tool that accommodates free churches’ criticism of the state church system and Protestant anti-Catholicism as well as internal criticism within the Catholic and radical political movement’s struggle for a secular state. Anticlericalism has also served as a strategy for minority groups in the struggle for political rights and as a way to show patriotism and identification with modern society.

The anticlerical ideas constituted an important ideological foundation for the strong Republican tradition that developed in France and other formally Catholic countries. Here the Freemasons, who strongly supported the concept of ‘laïcité’, played a central role, while the liberal left and the socialist labour movement were the main actors in central and northern Europe. Based on British examples, the church historian Hugh McLeod distinguishes between seven forms of anticlericalism: the radical and the liberal (condemning religion for being opposed to reason and modernity), the plebeian (class conflicts), the Protestant (attacks from within the churches), the anti-puritan (rejecting the church’s moral teaching), the masculinist (accusations of effeminacy), and the realist (religion as a separate sphere apart from ordinary life). The question is what concrete expressions these anticlerical ideas took in the Nordic countries and which similarities and differences that exist in relation to the rest of Europe.

These reflections form the starting point for the conference, which intends to place Nordic anticlericalism in its different forms in a larger European context. All the participants will either give lectures or present papers on the role of anticlericalism and religious criticism in different national and cultural contexts from the late eighteenth to the end of the twentieth century. The German historian Lisa Dittrich (Munich), and the British historians Callum Brown (Glasgow), and Frances Knight (Nottingham), who have been working with these questions in different forms, are invited as keynote speakers.
Preliminary programme 13-17 September, 2016

Tuesday, September 13 p.m.

Arrival of the participants – taxi from Fara Sabina

16.00 Coffee
17.30-19.00 Introduction and presentation of the participant
19.30 Dinner

Wednesday, September 14

8.00-9.00 Breakfast
9.15-10.30 Session 1: Lectures and discussion
Lisa Dittrich, Anticlericalism and secularization in France, Germany and Spain

10.30 Coffee
11.00-12.30 Session 2: Use of history and satire
Dennis Meyhoff Brink, 'Religion’s safe, with Priestcraft is the War': satirical subversion of clerical authority – a long-term perspective
Johannes Ljungberg, Premodern conflicts as anticlerical fuel: the use of history in French and Swedish debate 1840-60

13.00-15.00 Lunch

15.00-16.30 Session 3: Literary discourses
Eva Fjellander, Anticlericalism and demonization of priests in Danish and Swedish novels
Bernt Oftestad, Anticlericalism in Norwegian fiction from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century

16.30 Coffee

17.00-18.30 Session 4: Revivalism and anticlericalism
Erik Sidenvall, Anticlericalism and power: Swedish evangelicalism, 1870-1930
Kristin Norseth, *Radical revivalism and anticlericalism in Norway*

19.30 Dinner

**Thursday, September 15**

8.00-9.00 Breakfast

9.15-12.30 Session 5: Lectures and discussion

Frances Knight, *Understanding English anti-clericalism: Definitions, contexts and change*

Callum Brown, *Humanist-church relations in UK, 1945 to the present*


10.30 Coffee

13.00-15.00 Lunch – thereafter walking tour in the mountains

16.30 Coffee

17.00-18.30 Session 6: Blasphemy discourses

Mikko Ketola, *Finnish freethinkers and their blasphemy trials in Finland*

Yvonne Maria Werner, *In defence of the fundamental values of society: an analysis of blasphemy processes and debates in Sweden in a comparative perspective*

19.30 Dinner

**Friday, September 16**

8.00-9.00 Breakfast

9.15-12.30 Session 7: Popular anticlericalism

Lars Edgren, *Popular radicalism, church critics and anticlericalism in radical Swedish newspapers in the mid-nineteenth century*

Jacob Evertsson, *Working-class anticlericalism in late nineteenth century Sweden*
Alexander Maurits, *Popular anticlericalism in Sweden in the 19th and 20th centuries*

13.00-15.00  
**Lunch**

15.00-16.30  
**Session 8: The use of anticlerical rhetoric in internal church debates**
Anders Jarlert, *Private confession as an instrument of anticlericalism in Sweden*
Priit Rohtmets, *The fight against 'liberal heretics' in the Estonian Lutheran Church during the interwar period*

16.30  
**Coffee**

17.30-19.00  
**Session 9: General discussion**
*Towards a joint framework, publishing and funding*

19.30  
**Feast dinner**

*Saturday September 17*

8.00-9.00  
**Breakfast**

Departure by taxi to Fara Sabina
Participants

Professor Callum Brown, Glasgow
PhD Lisa Dittrich, München
PhD Katharina Ebner, München
Professor Lars Edgren, Lund
Associate Professor Jacob Evertsson, Åbo
PhD Eva Fjellander, Åbo
Professor Anders Jarlert, Lund
Professor Mikko Ketola, Helsinki
Associate Professor Frances Knight, Nottingham
Doctoral student Johannes Ljungberg, Lund
PhD Alexander Maurits, Lund
PhD Dennis Meyhoff Brink
PhD Kristin Norseth, Oslo
Professor Bernt Oftestad, Oslo
PhD Priit Rohtmets, Tartu
Associate Professor Erik Sidenvall, Växjö
Professor Yvonne Maria Werner, Lund