

## The Limits of Democracy in the Kingdom of Christ

THERE CAN BE LITTLE question that the reorganization of religious life that took place at the prompting of preachers like Waldenström served to democratize the way that Swedes of various confessions participated in religion. Both in the free churches, as well as in the Church of Sweden itself, there was a marked shift from leadership by the educated few to leadership by the rank and file members. The churches developed more sophisticated institutions for incorporating lay input in the governance of the local churches and the denomination. Public opinion, often expressed in newspapers, criticized the leadership of clergy and politicians alike. Although working to different ends, a host of critics from outside and from within the churches thus pushed a common agenda of democratization, and created a pluralistic environment in society in general, as well as an increased level of pluralism within Christianity itself.

However, the degree to which this pluralism and democracy could be asserted within Christianity had natural limits. For one, Christianity bore then, and continues to bear now, the essential nature of a monarchy with Christ as king. This is a designation that goes far beyond simply the medieval, feudal language that pervades all of Christian theology and hymnody. Any theistic religion has a snapping point where democracy can only be stretched so far. Submission to a deity entails the idea that the deity ultimately must be obeyed. Even if this worldview is democratized to its extreme, there still remains the reality that the religious participant stands as a subordinate to the deity, even if all of the participants are equal to one another. The other complicated aspect of Christianity is that while Christ is the virtually undisputed king, he is an absentee ruler and his dictates need

to be interpreted. In coming to terms with this absentee situation, Christians invariably have to cope with the reality that they serve a “once and future king,” in which the only guidelines they have to interpret his will are his recorded sayings and the promise of his final return. In the great void between these historical moments, the participants have to be satisfied with “seeing through a glass darkly.” Full confidence is elusive in this kind of pursuit of the truth, in which the individual negotiates between a belief in an inherently objective God, who is only able to be known to the individual through a two-directional approach; on the one hand, through identifying and interpreting revelations from God through the subjective filters of human experience, and on the other hand, by rationally organizing and explaining observations about the physical world and human history.

In the era of absolutist orthodoxy (1600s–on) this was not as acute of a problem, as spiritual leaders could establish consensus on the truth and prevent challenges to those claims (through scholastic argumentation and established precedents for interpretation). In this period in Scandinavia, one factor that made this possible was the commonly held belief that the truth was unified and that the truth could be known. Once this belief in the unity of truth was weakened, however, an unstable environment appeared, in which participants now have the increased ability to choose whether they will submit to a deity or not, and which interpretation of the deity’s wishes they accept as having a claim on their lives. If the individual develops a distaste for submission, or if he or she disagrees as to what the will of the deity is, there exists the option to exit the religion, choose another affiliation, or cease to participate at all. Within Christianity, although Christ may be king, and his will may be communicated through scripture, there is still the potential for different denominations and preachers to interpret this will differently. Thus there is a limitless number of possible ways to organize Christians under their king. As apparent in *Squire Adamsson*, this tension is something that Waldenström’s theology did not try to resolve, but instead to explore and explain as a potentially productive experience. His answer remained that the best response to this confusion was to promote a culture of tolerance, where flexibility would allow conflict to be able to be managed and made productive, rather than destructive. This strategy demonstrates a hybrid heritage, from both the subjective devotional experience of Pietism and the Enlightenment’s insistence on the freedom for scientific inquiry and debate. These traditions have their differences, to be sure. However, they also have something tremendous in common, which is that they each represent the two different, but related, approaches to empiricism; respectively, discernment of truth based on personal experience, and the discernment of truth based on experiment and observation. Both traditions elevated

the empirical, though Pietism retained its deference to the essentials of Christian doctrine. Enlightenment thinkers increasingly sought to free themselves from the weight of binding theories and doctrine. Pietists chose to minimize the number of theological doctrines that were binding, but to embrace the ones that were deemed “essential.” Truth be told, the Enlightenment thinkers also had their own essential doctrines, though they chose not to think of them as such.



Rosenius in the Pulpit at Bethlehem Church in Stockholm. Photo from Ekman's *Den Inre Missionens Historia*. 431.

The Pietists were in effect introducing a version of Christianity to Sweden that had never existed there before, although it had existed elsewhere in Christian history. This version of Christianity was structured as a democratized, constitutional monarchy. Because it came in the midst of the previous culture of absolutism, this was bound to create a crisis of authority. If all citizens of this kingdom had the equal right (more or less) to read, interpret and speak about matters of faith, the net result was bound to be chaos. The strategy developed by Rosenius to counteract this negative trend was to affirm the idea that all Christians have the equal right to speak, but at the same time to temper this by developing a culture of humility, in which the individual learns how and when it is appropriate to defer this authority to others and keep silent. Because everyone in principle had an equal

claim to authority, no one should ever expect to have an exclusive claim to it or to have a monopoly on the interpretation of the truth. As an indication of when it was time to speak formally, Rosenius recommended that one needed an invitation. A person should not get up in the assembly without having received a request from the others to do so. This was an external calling, which also needed to correspond with an inward calling, whether due to pangs of conscience or a revelation from God. Also, just because a person was called once, does not mean he or she is always called, and furthermore, it is not everyone's calling to leave a secular occupation to become a full-time preacher. Some laypeople should not seek to be ordained.<sup>164</sup> This reflects Rosenius's personal opinions, as it was the course that he followed in his own life. He was deliberate in his choice to not be ordained as a minister, and to attempt to follow a principle of only speaking publicly so long as he was invited to do so. In this way he used his life to model what he saw as a lifestyle that, if everyone followed this example, the community could avoid unnecessary conflicts over authority. Admirable as these principles may be, there is a great risk that some people will never be asked to speak, and thereby will be marginalized. However, Rosenius seems to indicate that the desired culture is one in which all people are welcomed to speak and given the latitude to explore the nuances of the truth ("the non-essentials"). If they seek to abandon "the essentials," they simply won't be asked to speak again or at least not as often. This is not a utopian community, but a practical strategy to minimize (not eliminate) disagreement by allowing as much diversity and latitude in the common conversation as possible. Non-essentials may be discussed in a democratic fashion, but certainty about non-essentials is deferred to the distant future (i.e., when the monarch returns).

As Rosenius was not only a preacher, but also an author, one might also wonder how an author can be "invited" to speak. At a basic level, this occurs as often as the reader continues to turn the pages. Readers vote their approval by buying books, subscribing to journals, and by sending letters to the editor. Rosenius as an author intentionally cultivated a narrative strategy that deferred authority to his readers. He speaks, and yet it is the reader who grants him the right to speak. The persona that he adopts in his authorship is never as an expert (he is after all a *bona fide* layman), but as a guide on an equal footing with his reader. At times he points to the Word (the revealed, objective truth of Scripture), at other times he holds up the importance of the confirmation of truth through subjective experience. By doing both, he makes theology into an activity that anyone can participate in because everyone has experiences that can potentially be related to the topic at hand. The objectivity of the essentials is a vertical axis (in which God reveals truth), whereas the subjectivity of the non-essentials

is a horizontal one (in which the faithful are granted the latitude to be able to engage with the implications of this truth without jeopardizing their right to citizenship in the kingdom). This idea that Rosenius sought to be an “author without authority” is similar in some ways to the pronouncements of Kierkegaard on this concept.<sup>165</sup> Though the two differ greatly in their approach to theology, it should be little surprise that they bear similarity to one another on this point, as Kierkegaard is also profoundly influenced by Moravian Pietism. Kierkegaard’s elevation of subjectivity goes to greater extremes than Rosenius ever dared to go, but reflects a similar realization that Christianity in the modern era needed different strategies to establish authority. The modern human being would not be content simply to receive the objective truth passed down by clergy who acted and spoke as absolute monarchs, but instead would increasingly demand that subjectivity be given space to be explored and validated within a more democratic conversation.

Waldenström may have departed from full adherence to the strategy of his more cautious mentor. He was ordained and held advanced academic degrees, whereas Rosenius was a layman through and through. The saintly Rosenius waited to be asked to speak; the bold Waldenström seemed always ready to share his opinions, whether or not they were invited. As a politician, he did not shy away from getting his hands dirty in national politics, or from making his own pronouncements on opinions concerning non-essentials. But the differences between the two are perhaps more a matter of personality. At the core, there is the philosophy common to both of them, that authority is not the private domain of the spiritual leader, but should be deferred to the group as a whole, whose task it is to share in the project of discerning truth in a collaborative process. An important test of the limits of this worldview came in 1904, as Waldenström came into conflict with his close colleague, E. J. Ekman, then current president of the SMF. Ekman had published a book on the eternal punishment, raising the idea that God ultimately would redeem the entire human race, thus even rescuing the damned from Hell.<sup>166</sup> This was an emphasis on God’s grace taken to its absolute extreme. Waldenström identified this as an unacceptable interpretation of the essentials of the faith, and worked to have Ekman ousted from his post as president. However, also demonstrating the Rosenian line of inclusivity, Ekman was not treated as a heretic, but remained a member in the SMF. One apparently had the latitude to have questions even about essentials, though it was going too far to assert these opinions from an official post in the church.

Another point of tension between Christianity and democracy is the traditional role that Christianity has come to serve in many periods during the history of Europe, which is to support and endorse the actions and

laws of earthly governments. In Sweden, as elsewhere, the Lutheran church endorsed the legitimacy of the Swedish kings as God-given rulers. This ruler was to be obeyed as a representative of God, a prominent feature in Lutheran sermons that was backed up with sources in the gospels. As a result of this relationship with the government, the Church of Sweden and the free churches frequently defaulted to this position when trying to dissuade political reform groups from challenging the legitimacy of the government. Waldenström, especially in his confrontation with the Socialists, took this traditional approach to dissuade Christians from participating in “anarchistic” movements. This is the primary area where Waldenström has been criticized and accused of being conservative, particularly toward the end of his career, when debates about the establishment of universal suffrage coincided with an intensified Socialist call for a dramatic revision of the political order. His brand of classical liberalism, forged during the 1860s and informed by the humble Rosenian piety of the revival, now seemed hopelessly dated, as well as too deferential to the Swedish establishment.



A skillful depiction of E. J. Ekman as Saint George being defeated by Waldenström as the Dragon. “Sankt Görän och Draken.” Edvard Forsström. *Puck*. 10 March 1904. Reproduction: Svenska Missionskyrkans Arkiv.

Erland Sundström, in a concise but eloquent explanation of the contradictions within Waldenström's political philosophy, emphasized the great deference that Waldenström had for the traditional Lutheran perspective on obedience of the citizen to the government. Sundström also pointed out the fact that while Waldenström urged obedience to the temporal authorities, when it came to obedience to the Lutheran church itself, Waldenström was far from obedient. Sundström made reference to a dissertation by William Öhrman, which made the interesting hypothesis that Waldenström's strong support of the Swedish government was a sort of compensation for his radical rebellion against the Church of Sweden.<sup>167</sup> Sundström also pointed out that while Waldenström discouraged any revolutionary challenge to the Swedish government, this did not mean that he was an anti-reformist.

*Waldenström was very Lutheran in the area of social ethics. Even so he saw boundaries to submission [to the governing authorities]. When the authorities place themselves over the laws of God and restrict freedom of belief and conscience, then the Christian has the right to civil disobedience. Further it applies that the Christian citizen has the right to use legal means to replace a bad authority with a better one. A Christian is in general responsible for the development of his society. It is a Christian civil duty to use political means to introduce Christian values in legislation and reforms.*<sup>168</sup>

In short, Waldenström was evolutionary in his understanding of reform, which is a theme that frequently appears in his explanations of politics. No drastic, overnight revision of the social order was advisable. Both in the context of religion and in the context of political activity, the best way to ensure stability and protect the individual from the dangers of absolutism was to identify a limited number of "essential" principles and prioritize those principles while using existing channels to pursue reform of those aspects of society that needed reform. Once again, the "unity in diversity" principle as expressed in the Moravian Pietist motto manifested itself in very practical ways in Waldenström's philosophy. In the case of the reform of the church, the defense of essential principles involved defending the scriptures themselves by freeing them from the weight of the Lutheran creeds so they could be engaged with in a living process of interpretation by all Christians. In terms of political reform, Waldenström identified other texts which he thought needed defense, namely the national constitution (*grundlagar*), which provided the only proper channels through which Swedes could reform their government.<sup>169</sup> He treated these secular texts as though they too contained a set of essential principles that had to be conformed to as long as they were the accepted constitution of the state (more on this in Part III).

In Part II, the focus has been on the ways in which Pietism informed the transformation of religious practice in the direction of increased strategies of pluralism. In the next section, the focus will turn toward understanding how these religious changes went far beyond religious reforms, and impacted the development of pluralism in the secular, political arena, as well.

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