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The Reception of Martin Luther’s Doctrine of the Three Estates in Niels Hemmingsen, the Hemmingsen-School, and Its Contribution to the Development of a Lutheran Confessional Culture in Early Modern Denmark

This research project investigates the reception of Martin Luther’s (1483–1546) so-called doctrine of the three estates in the Danish theologian, moralist and jurist Niels Hemmingsen (1513–1600), and in Hemmingsen’s students and heirs. The Lutheran doctrine of the three estates, the Dreiständelehre, designates an idea rooted in creation theology that God has installed a certain order in the world, consisting of household, state, and church, and theological and historical research has pointed to this doctrine as being the fundamental “social imaginary” in early modern Lutheranism that regulated every discourse pertaining to social life in its broadest sense. Similarly, scholars have stressed the paramount influence of confession and theology on the formation of early modern European societies, yet admitting that thorough and precise investigations of the impact on theological notions on confessionalization processes are still lacking. Also in Denmark several processes of confessionalization followed in the wake of the introduction of a Lutheran Reformation in 1536, and scholarship has demonstrated that Hemmingsen played an active role in these processes, acting as theological and legal adviser to the king on several occasions. Suggesting that there is a connection between theology and confessionalization politics, the present research project seeks to underline Hemmingsen’s and his students’ crucial influence for the emergence of the early modern Danish conglomerate state – consisting of the dual monarchy of Denmark and Norway, the duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, and the North Atlantic appanages – by focusing on the doctrine of the three estates as a primary form of social theology.

The present research project has been designed to combine the two scholarly interests in early modern Lutheran social ethics and the European confessionalization policies by raising two questions: 1. Does the reception of Luther’s doctrine give a theological legitimacy to the royal confessionalization politics? 2. Does the reception of Luther’s doctrine reflect an ambition that society should be adapted to a “Lutheran” character? The questions rest on the thesis that Niels Hemmingsen and especially his students, who sought to make his teachings available to the public by presenting them in popular formats, should be regarded not only as theological authors, but also as moral-

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2 Cf., e.g., Andreas Stegmann, Luthers Auffassung vom christlichen Leben. BHTh 175 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014); John Witte, Jr., Law and Protestantism. The Legal Teachings of the Lutheran Reformation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Already Ernst Troeltsch drew the attention to the Dreiständelehre, see his Die Sozialehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen. GS I (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1912), 521–524.
ists who wished to “recultivate the vineyard”⁵ and establish a true Christian society after the repeal of the Catholic Church and the introduction of Lutheranism. By raising these two basic research-related questions, the project frames itself by Thomas Kaufmann’s notion of Konfessionskultur. While classic research on confessionalization done by Wolfgang Reinhard, Heinz Schilling, and their students, stressed the connection between processes of confessionalization and state formation, Kaufmann, adopting scholarly traditions from Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch, and Karl Holl, emphasizes changes in the religious culture caused by the 16th century Reformations. Contrasting the classic theories that underlined similarities between the early modern confessions, Kaufmann focuses on the propria, which were unique to the single confessions, and, furthermore not in all cases inter-confessionally transferrable. With regards to Lutheranism, Kaufmann has shown how the doctrine of the three estates was drawn to the centre of the religious culture and became the primary social imagination.⁶

The notion of “con­fessional culture” has been developed as a result of research in German church history, and by adopting it into a Danish context – which, in contrast with the multi­con­fessional situation in the Empire, was marked by a mono­con­fessional law of religion – it seeks to respond to the obvious research task of evaluating similarities to and differences from the German counterpart. Besides from having another law of religion than the Empire, the early modern Danish kingdom was also left relatively untouched by the theological disputes that took place among the second generation of German reformers from the mid-16th century. Through a theoretical embeddedness in the notion of confessional culture, the project obtains partly an expansion of this notion (with regards to its application in other contexts than that of German Lutheranism), partly a modification (the context determines the precise contents of the notion), partly an inauguration of new research perspectives in Danish historiography.⁷ It should also be added that the natures of the reception of Luther’s doctrine in the Empire and the Danish kingdom, respectively, highly differ. Whereas the doctrine in the context of the Empire since the mid-16th century often symbolized resistance and theolog­ically informed political criticism, it clearly belonged to a discourse of order and harmony in the Danish kingdom, probably reflecting the different political situations.

Niels Hemmingsen studied in Wittenberg in the 1530s and was educated by both Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchthon (1497–1560). Even though this is a well-known fact, scholarship, in the fashion of German historiography marked by the inter-Lutheran quarrels following Luther’s death, the Interim period and the Magdeburg writings, has not hesitated in naming Hem­mingsen a Philippist.⁸ Actually, Hemmingsen’s reception of Luther’s doctrine of the three estates

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⁷ Despite the fact that many studies applying the theoretical and methodological apparatus of classic confessionalization research to Denmark exist, no scholars have so far utilized Kaufmann’s approach. A review of the studies on Danish confessionalization can be found in Ingesman, “Reformation and Confessionalization”.
⁸ The fact that Hemmingsen was eventually dismissed from his position as a professor of theology in Copenhagen and transferred to a pre-retirement position in Roskilde by the king, Frederik II, in 1579, allegedly due to sympathies with reformed teachings on the Eucharist, but more likely due to a political game between the king, his brother-in-law, the elector Augustus of Saxony, and other Lutheran princes in Europe, did not give him a good reputation in Danish histo-
reveals that this proposition of modern scholarship is not very accurate; it is right that Hemmingsen e.g. adopted Melanchthon’s idea of a triplex usus legis, but throughout his works he also often employs the doctrine of the three estates, which is not found in Melanchthon. Thus Hemmingsen was indeed a forerunner of younger influential theologians, such as Johann Gerhard (1582–1637), as he combined Luther’s and Melanchthon’s approaches, having no troubles with formulating the doctrines of three estates and of the three uses of the Law side by side.

In terms of genres and discourses, Hemmingsen covered a wide field. He wrote many textbooks, tracts, exegetical and legal commentaries, and disputations intended for the education of theologians and pastors in the University of Copenhagen and abroad. According to these books and in congruence with Luther, God in the creation has ordained a specific structure of the world, in which certain hierarchies and rules of obedience are at hand. Often, Hemmingsen roots his doctrine of the three estates in the idea of natural law. The project sets forth the hypothesis that Hemmingsen’s academic texts constituted the learned, scholarly part of a Danish, Lutheran confessional culture, as they formed the theological and social theoretical basis for the education of the religious and administrative elite.

Hemmingsen also was active in the religious instruction of the lay people, penning a number of devotional and pedagogical texts that exhort a pious and virtuous life characterized by obedience and reverence towards the authorities in the three estates, i.e. parents, public authorities, and the clergy. This framing of the doctrine of the three estates is also pivotal in the writings of Hemmingsen’s students, e.g. the pastor and popular author Rasmus Hansen Reravius (d. 1582), and in other writers from the 17th century. In these writers it is a characteristic that only or almost only the marital household and its internal hierarchies are in the focus. However, this is established already by Luther himself, whose Haustafel appendix to the Small Catechism grounds the social ethical thinking on hierarchies in the semantic network of the household, the housefather instructing and disciplining his family and servants being the fulcrum. The Lutheran concept of household, of course, has a religious and ideological background in both ancient and especially late medieval notions. The project, therefore, furthermore sets forth the hypothesis that the texts belonging to the edifying and disciplining discourse constitute the practical part of a Danish, Lutheran confessional

ography, which, at least to some extent, is marked by the approach of the influential 17th century bishop of Sealand, Hans Poulson Resen (1561–1638), who in the years around 1617, celebrating the centennial anniversary of the Thesenanschlag, would declare the triumph of ‘orthodox Lutheranism’ and the closing of disputes between Gnesio-Lutherans, Philippists, and Crypto-Calvinists, cf. Bjørn Kornerup, Biskop Hans Poulson Resen II, ed. by Vello Helk (Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gads Forlag, 1968), 146–171. Gradually, scholars are beginning to stress that these categories belong to the polemics of the 16th and 17th centuries and are not intrinsic to the texts in question.


culture, because they were a tool of educational aids for the everyday instruction of the lay people, which did not solely take place in the churches chaired by the pastors, but also through the catechization of the household by the housefather. Also, this hypothesis serves as a model of explanation of the intimate connection between the doctrine of the three estates and the concept of household, in that it sheds light on the fact that the marital household was constructed as a particular semantic field in the edifying discourse, whereas such strong focus on one of the three estates cannot be traced in the learned discourse.

This being said, however, the marital household remains the main concept and the discourse regulator, over which the source material, both learned and edifying texts, models its semantic network. The network of interrelated concepts, e.g. “family”, “father”, “upbringing”, and “obedience”, constitutes an overarching discourse of order and perfection. Employing this conceptual framework, the doctrine of the three estates expresses an imagination of how relations ought to be: between the housefather and the household, between the king and his subjects, and between the pastor and his congregation – and, eventually, between God and human beings. The discourse of the Dreiständelehre is, thus, it could be argued, constituted by a specific, human practice, i.e. the relationships in household, state, and church, and constituting this very practice – being a theological motive behind confessionalization strategies and forming a confessional culture. In terms of methods, this approach to early modern social and ecclesiastical history is represented by Luise Schorn-Schütte and Robert von Friedeburg. The project is inspired by this approach and others from Critical Discourse Analysis, mapping the structure and the subjects of the discourse, its normative centre and its visions for realization of the ambitions of a Christian society.