

Abstract

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Church, clergy, and society in Finland, 1600–1800

It is generally recognized that in early modern society, the position of the church and clergy was very central. As many historians have stated over the decades, the church and state were closely connected and their power structures and ideologies supported each other. However, when studying the social and public role of the church and clergy, it soon becomes quite clear how pervasive this phenomenon was. The church not only created but also maintained and acted as a part of international, national, and local communities, structures, and cultures that connected people regardless of their social status and gender. The church was a spiritual, administrative, and social institution and experience environment, whose tasks, scope, and meanings changed and intertwined with the development, needs, and requirements of society. In this book, we investigate from different perspectives the motives and different means by which the church and clergy came to play a significant part in early modern society.

In this volume, the church is considered both as an administrative institution and as a social space and cultural structure. Hence, we do not focus on the history of theology or doctrinal questions. Instead, we consider the social and public roles and meanings of the church. The church as such is understood in this book as transnational, a strong national and local institution, and also a space and structure. The church had its own institutionalized place in society and its activities and rights were defined by law (Church law 1696, the Law of the Swedish kingdom 1734) and by the decrees given by the Royal Majesty. The church had its own archbishop-led administrative organization under the Royal Majesty and it worked in close cooperation with the Crown administration and county governors. In this volume, we understand the clergy as church servants, a trained and appointed professional group, a separate estate (social class), and also as a wide social network constructed by their families.

The approach of this book is social science history. In other words, the book examines the church and the clergy as an integral part of society and the individual communities who lived in the current Finnish territory during the early modern era. The topic is examined on the basis of three conceptual themes reflecting important new areas of research in the study of the social significance of the church and clergy: (1) the clergy and family as part of the community, (2) the church as a jointly built space, and (3) the church as an arena for interaction, knowledge, and politics. We approach this multidimensionality using different research questions, sources, methods, and theoretical approaches. The volume focuses on the 17th to 19th centuries, but many of the church and clergy-related phenomena are much older, and some of them extend to the present, so the articles also move beyond this time frame.

The first theme section, “Clergy and family as part of the community”, concerns not only the clergy, but also their families’ and households’ positions, roles, and significance in the local congregations and more widely in society. Early modern society was based on households and the family acted as the basic unit of society. The Lutheran clergy’s ability to marry and have a family was a clear early sign separating it from Catholicism, and a theological significance and basis for this difference was created. The importance of the nuclear family was also stressed in Lutheran education. In this section, the research concentrates strongly on the perspective of gender, family history, and education history. The agency and opportunities of women and girls in the priesthood are clearly highlighted, even though research on the clergy generally focuses on the activities of men. This theme section also shows that new information can be gained as a result of expert source work and the use of new approaches.

The second section, “The church as a jointly built space”, examines the church from the viewpoints of a public space built by local communities and as an experienced community. The space is understood in this volume as socially, culturally, and materially formed, created by human encounters, or else as a built physical structure that enables interactions for people. However, space is always exposed to changes and changing meanings, which both users and external actors

seek to identify. The construction of churches was usually a purposeful and carefully planned action, and therefore the building process describes the goals of local communities and society – it is therefore not a random activity, although afterwards it may sometimes appear to be.

In the early modern era, the construction of churches became a more regulated and planned process. The general changes in society also affected church building, such as architecture and the use of space, but also for the human experience environment and practice: how and where faith was practised. The chapters in this theme section study who actually built and painted the churches – was it professionals, the self-taught, or parishioners? It presents new research results in the field of church art and the history of architecture. In addition, in this section the church is examined as a sacred space, and it asks what made the church building a sacred space during Lutheran times, and who actually dominated the church space and the sacred experience it produced.

The thematic section “The church as an arena of interaction, knowledge, and politics” explores the church and the clergy as part of the effective administrative machinery of the Swedish Realm and as an effective public information channel.

The initiative for interaction or informing did not derive unilaterally from the upper levels, but it was increasingly beneficial to both parties – the authorities and parishioners – to have access to accurate information. Public involvement in interaction and the opportunity to exchange information resulted in discussions, opinions, and the development of a political culture also at the local level. The section discusses the politicization of sermons and the flow of information, the development of literacy and language issues (Swedish/Finnish), and the construction of patriotism and regnalism. It shows more diverse roles and meanings for the church and the clergy in increasing political awareness, administrative practices, and literary political culture during the 18th century.

The three thematic sections of the book and their chapters complement each other. Together they open up a new and more accurate picture of how the tasks, meanings, and roles of the church and the clergy were shaped and entangled with the development, needs, and requirements of society and the surrounding community.