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"Religion and the politics of the body"

Body awareness and liturgical reform –part I

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A group of people scattered on the floor, sensing stones' weight on their bodies – and a liturgical reform in the Norwegian Lutheran church. How is it that these events are related?

The Norwegian Lutheran church is in a period of change. No less than 3 reforms are executed in the current period: A reform of catechesis, a liturgical reform and a democracy reform. The latter is related to the fact that the church's formal bond to the state is about to be untied. In addition to these specific reforms, there is intensive work going on as to the church's actions and attitudes in a time of climate crisis, and there are new developments in how the church deals with art and cultural activities. Why all this? Why now? And relevant to this article: How can artists' practical experience facilitate The Norwegian Church in its self-reflection in a time of upheaval? A recent workshop gathering artists and church workers, Verksted på Vollen 2009, picked up the challenge from both the liturgy reform and the church's renewed stance towards arts.

According to the church's own foundational statement on culture from 2005¹, artists should be encouraged to be active parts of The Norwegian Church and its life in society. The statement is remarkably radical in its embracement of artistic activity, considering its historical background where the climate between artists and the church in Norway can be describes as one of mutual scepticism². Performative arts – arts based on the active human body in the church space, has a history of being particularly conflict-potent: The most known example of conflict concerning dancing bodies in the ecclesiastic space in Norway, is a debate that issued around Ragni Kolle and Elsa Quales dance in the experimental liturgy "Missa Vigilante" in 1967. Originally intended to be a closed event, the mass drew attention from a wider circle due to conflict between the participating students of theology. The debate demonstrated how threatening dancing, leotard-clad bodies could be perceived when in a church context. Interestingly, when performed again 40 years later, in 2007, "Missa Vigilante"

¹ "Kunsten å være kirke", ed. Norske Kirkeakademier, (Verbum, 2005)

² Onarheim, Leonora: "Kunsten å være en kulturrik kirke", Dissertation, University of Oslo 2007, chapter 2

did not arouse any debate, but was reviewed from an artistic point of view, by the dance scholar Sidsel Pape³. It seems that the dance that was strange or threatening in 1967, in 2007 had received the protection and respect that may follow the “art” label.

The change of attitude that this exemplifies, is a result of several decades of dance and drama experimentation especially in liberal segments of the Norwegian church⁴.

Recently, the positive and active attitude towards arts and artists in the 2005-statement has resulted in increased financial support from the state, aimed at strengthening and professionalizing the church’s cultural work.

The event that forms the background for this paper, *Verksted på Vollen 2009* (from now on: the Granavollen-workshop), may be considered an example of how artists respond to actual and potential opportunities in the 2005-statement.

The Granavollen workshop

Being an active dance artist and MA student of theology, my point of view is that of the reflecting practitioner. Considered together, liturgical reform and changes in the church’s attitudes towards art influence my life directly – as an artist with church as my preferred arena, as an intellectual, writing my MA thesis on performing arts in church spaces, and personally, being a member of the Norwegian Lutheran Church. When I initiated the Granavollen workshop, it was imperative that the orientation was one of artistic practice – set in relation to relevant theoretic reflection. Since the liturgical reform suffers from lack of guided practical exploration⁵, one of the ideas behind the Workshop was to offer ecclesial staff an opportunity to *bodily* explore the possibilities of the church room and the foundations of liturgy, and let this be assisted by competent artists. The planning committee set the following headline: *Liturgy = action – perspectives on art, body and liturgical life*. We engaged experienced dance- and visual artists to lead the sub-workshops in the three fields of movement, sound and – as represented in the Reykjavik conference: Object and sensory perception. In addition a dialogue theologian, a dance scholar, a liturgy expert and the project leader were responsible for the theoretic framing and response to the practical work. Cutting

³ The Sidsel Pape review was published on the professional performing arts website [www.scenekunst.no](http://www2.scenekunst.no/article_4000.nml). http://www2.scenekunst.no/article_4000.nml.

⁴ Per Roar, “Bevegelsens øyeblikk”, (part-report on dance/The foundational statement on art, Oslo 2004). Choreographer Per Roars experimental liturgies in collaboration with Tøyenkirken in 1991-1992 may be highlighted as an example of professional artistic influence in liturgy development.

⁵ A point the journalist Arne Guttormsen was eager to push, probably reflecting the widespread attitude in Norway: “The Lutheran church is too full of *words*”. *Vårt Land*, 18.2. 2009.

edge performing artists gave performances in the two medieval churches that were our main arenas of exploration, and gatherings of prayer and worship were also included in the programme⁶.

The presuppositions underlying the Granavollen-workshop can be described as following:

1. Artists can contribute to liturgical reform through a specific, practical competence in using space, time, body and relation⁷: The shared foundational elements of performance arts and liturgy.
2. The coincidence in timing between the foundational statement on art and the liturgical reform can be beneficial: Exploring arts in the church space and exploring liturgy can be done in the same movement. Arts and liturgy can mirror each other in a fruitful manner.
3. Even though artists may not give direct impulses to actual formation of new liturgy, artists' training in perceptual and bodily presence can contribute to a deepened understanding of individual and collective being in the liturgical context. (The latter aspect is highlighted in Ingunn and Grete's paper)

As it turned out, the Granavollen-workshop became challenging on several levels, according to the participants' different backgrounds. Some were provoked or even hurt by some of the expressions that became part of the programme. Some were simply exhausted by the intensity of daily being activated physically, intellectually and emotionally. The moving between artistic and ecclesiastic codes in language and activity resulted in misunderstandings and confusion. Still, all participants handed in evaluation sheets where "general outcome" was reported to be *great* or *good*. The experience of a heightened *presence* was highlighted by many as a positive aspect of the workshop.

The Granavollen-workshop was, in other words, a close encounter between arts and church discourses. In what particular way did it contribute in a discussion on how the church presents itself in liturgy? I believe the core tension between a collectivistic and an individualistic culture was an "engine" in several of the discussions that surfaced during the Workshop. The

⁶ <http://www.verkstedpavollen.no> has the full list of contributors and programme.

⁷ This description of foundational elements is influenced by the Rudolf Laban movement analysis, where time, space, *force*, constitute movement, but I include *body* and the theatrical element: *relation*.

remaining part of my paper will discuss the relation between individual and collective presence and activity in the church space using examples from the Granavollen-workshop⁸.

The artist in the liturgical “we”

Liturgy is in its foundation a collective event. Sacraments and preaching cannot take place where only a single individual is present. The *sharing* of word and elements is primal. In the Norwegian Lutheran church, there is, however, a strong pietistic history, where simply sharing word and element is not considered “enough”. A shared faith is embedded in the liturgy in the credo, but exceeding the demands of the liturgical credo, is the idea that the congregation should share a certain *understanding*, and maybe even a certain *experience* of the Christian gathering. It is a remarkable fact that the Norwegian church has several members who will bury their dead, baptize their children and get married in church, but who actively resist participating in liturgy⁹. There exists a certain fright to be identified with certain views – and perhaps even certain aesthetic preferences – if one ventures into the active participation in liturgy without a family ritual as an “excuse”. If liturgy is, not performance, but common *sharing*, it is crucial that *what* we are sharing is clear, and I believe that part of the crisis in the Norwegian church is this: Liturgy has become an arena for sharing, not primarily *liturgical action*, but social, aesthetic and intellectual values. When liturgy through artistic influence can become an arena for testing aesthetic preferences, there is a need to be alert.

I believe the inviting attitude towards art in the Norwegian Church at present to some extent is a result of a lack of confidence as to whether liturgical life is able to “hold” or attract Norwegians in a secular age. If the liturgy implies a “we” that very few church members actually identify with, it is attractive to invite contemporary artists, assuming that they are skilled in interpreting the needs of individuals of our time. The liturgy’s collective assumptions are hard to carry in an increasingly pluralistic context, and it is tempting to look for expressions that are more “up-to-date”. The call for artistic participation in liturgical reform may be interpreted as a call for *forms* that appeal to the contemporary individual, admitting that the traditional “we” of the liturgy seems to be crumbling. Contemporary artists

⁸ Note that I know this workshop from several angles: As initiator and leader of the planning, as experienced particularly in dance art in church, as a scholar writing my MA-dissertation on stage arts in church space, as a contributor on a theoretical level, and – not least – as workshop participant in the second group of object/sensory experience workshop.

⁹ Repstad, Pål, ”Religiøst liv i det Moderne Norge”, Høyskoleforlaget, Kristiansand 1996.

trained in a creating potent individual expression are suddenly attractive in the collective culture of the church. In the foundational statement on arts artists are explicitly encouraged to use “any artistic expression”, seeking the extremities in order to express the gospel¹⁰. Seen in relation to church as a *liturgical* space, this is not necessarily constructive.

Breaking convention: A *must* of the arts, a risk for liturgy

The Granavollen-workshop contained experiences that pointed out the trouble of expecting “rule-breaking” from artists. An example:

In the sharing by the last group of the sound workshop¹¹, we experienced a loud cry by all group members in the Nicolai church space. Noise can be extremely upsetting in any context, and even more so in a space commonly associated with tranquillity, or a narrow range of sound expressions, and I personally had problems digesting this experience. When I verbalized my concern about making noise a part of a liturgical setting, the workshop leaders pointed to the fact that it is not uncommon to read Bible passages about crying to God, why is it then that an actual scream is so problematic?

On the argument that churches might need an atmosphere of tranquillity in a “noisy age”, the question was posed back: But where, apart from the therapy-room, in our so-called noisy age, are grownups allowed to cry as an existential expression? We discussed how one might prepare and frame this kind of expression, in order to reduce risk of trauma. One participant mentioned that exposing children to this frightening noise would be irresponsible.

As an artist, interpreting Bible passages concerning pain and despair without making some kind of disturbing expression might seem absurd. It has to do with artistic freedom of interpretation and a basic respect for the material involved. Does, however, this kind of marked break with expectations have anything to do with *liturgy*? It may have relevance in *preaching* – in the traditionally priestly task of interpreting the Scripture with a certain freedom of expression¹². I ask myself, however: Do artists, trained to be unconventional,

¹⁰ “Kunsten å være kirke” p. 61. ”Her kan ein gjere dei mest ytterleggåande ting og ta i bruk eitkvart kunstuttrykk som kan løfte fram heile mennesket, peike på Kristus og gudsbiletet i mennesket og ”male fanden på veggen.”

¹¹ Led by choreographer Per Roar and sound artist Jørgen Larsson

¹² Halvor Nordhaug stresses the *difference* between preaching and liturgy in his book, commonly used by Norwegian students of practical theology “...så mitt hus kan bli fullt” (Luther forlag, Oslo 2000) p.81. ”The preaching should not fit too well into liturgy.”

sufficiently understand the different dynamics of individual interpretation versus common, tradition-based action?

One may very well criticize the Norwegian Church's conventionally careful and limited use of the body in church space, but using liturgy as an arena for protesting against the common atmosphere of liturgy is an example of importing the "rules" of contemporary art to a context where they do not apply. Note now, that the church space is more than liturgy and ritual. The *room* can carry a wide range of expressions, liturgy cannot. This has to do with the framing of the action, the codes that surround an event in order to make them perceivable and potentially meaningful¹³. When an audience pays the ticket to see a new interpretation of Ibsen, the risk is calculated. The art discourse prepares us, and an audience has permission to criticize and even leave the performance. When entering into a contemporary arts context I "expect the unexpected". When entering into liturgy I expect to be part of a sequence of events that are supposed to include me – and ultimately give me hope and comfort. I need to feel some degree of predictability, safety. Artistic "rules" cannot uncritically be imported to the liturgical sphere without risk on a social-psychological level.

And still: Preachers have often hurt and disturbed individuals in their congregations. Should the artist be more restricted than the preacher? How can this be justified in a Lutheran context where there actually is an understanding of the whole congregation being priests? And to point the Norwegian context out more pointedly: Can we really claim that being *scared* in liturgy is so much worse than being *bored*?

In church there is a historically, ideologically defined "we": Gods creation, or the members of the congregation. In contemporary art the "we" is more flexible, undefined and very often ranged below the individual artistic expression. The practical decisions on what the artist can or cannot do in church is a complex matter considering that the church's "we" is not adequately represented in any single forum in church¹⁴. Ideally, the meeting between the artist and liturgy should be a dialogic event, reflecting that the two discourses actually are different and need negotiation in practical life.

¹³ Richard Schechner (1985) stresses how a theatrical or ritual event is more than just the "performance". Preparation and aftermath can be included in an event to clarify that the context guides the experience and its reception in a foundational way.

¹⁴ The democracy reform in the Norwegian church aims at making the parish better represented in the formal organ ("menighetsrådet") that is the top authority on how churches are to be used.

The artist in liturgy: Preaching or doing?

This is an extremely difficult discussion, and one known to practical theology through the tension between the relative freedom of the preacher and the collective expression of liturgy. The troubling question is: Can church still be church: Christ' *united* body on earth in liturgy if we allow into our services a pluralisation of *form* and *interpretation*? An unreserved yes to this question negate the very core of liturgy as a collective event. A no means stopping the necessary renewal of the liturgy as an event in a particular context in time and space, and ultimately a dead church¹⁵.

An additional difficulty arises when I want to discuss weather an artist who breaks conventions needs to be placed under the "preaching department" in the church's actions in the world: Practically all modern artists, even one who has personal bonds to the church, will instinctively react against their art being *used as tools* for preaching a certain message. Ideological independency is at the root of a contemporary artist's self-understanding. On the reverse side, theologians cannot regard artists as preachers without risk of loosing authority. It seems safer to place arts in the category of liturgical *form* and *devotional expressions*, like prayer, whereas the preacher takes responsibility for the theological *content*. Music without words is perhaps easiest to place in this abstract formal category, while the moving (or depicted) body cannot thoroughly be abstracted. The performative artist will also instinctively be drawn towards where "the action is" – the liturgy, and not to the intellectual sphere of the sermon.

For my own part, I usually intend to *interpret* Scripture and/or Church rather than pray when I dance in church, but spectators often see a prayer, no matter what my intentions are. This makes me curious: Does this happen when an artist makes an individual interpretation, but *bodily* in church? Lutheran or simply habitual dualism between preaching/Word/content and ritual/body/form is challenged. Contemporary art itself challenges the constructed split between form and content. Liturgical theology, however, does the same: Being church is *being* Word *and* Action. In the sacraments at its most fulfilled: Elements (water, bread and wine) and Word are inseparable. Doing liturgy is doing, bodily, the Word. Preaching is also a bodily activity: The reception and meaning of a sermon is dependent on the preacher's

¹⁵ Theologian Gustaf Wingren stresses the dynamic quality of the Christian congregation. Being followers of a person, Jesus, Christians are defined by *relation*, not by a text. In this way the changing forms of preaching and liturgy reflect a core quality of the Christian movement: That the gospel is always addressed to a certain context, and therefore needs to change with its time and geography.

posture, voice, gender, breath etc. This means that the distance between the “praying” dancer and the “speaking” preacher is shorter than it seems.

Though seemingly an intellectual game of placing art into “safe” church categories of prayer, sacrament¹⁶, preaching/interpreting Scripture, liturgy etc. this part of my paper touches upon fundamental issues in practical preparation and execution of a mass. With or without artistic participation, the different bodily expressions of praying, sharing the sacraments, preaching and other liturgical actions need performative clarity: What is the *direction* of the body or the movement? Who addresses who and when? From where is meaning and authority issuing: from the book, the church space, the persons acting, from the present group?

Though perhaps not directly illuminated in the Granavollen workshop as a whole, all practical workshops contributed to a deepened understanding of the differences and rich possibilities within the basic elements of service: Prayer, procession, song, sacraments and preaching have different directions, sounds, codes of coordinated action. The skilled performative artist knows how to clarify these differences, however subtle, making the potential richness that is embedded in the liturgical structure more accessible.

The phenomenological we

The Granavollen workshop did not make actual liturgies. The Sunday mass that finished the program was perhaps the least prepared event of the whole workshop, admittedly revealing that the distance between basic artistic work¹⁷ and actually doing the service is greater than the artists in the planning committee assumed. What was apparent, however, was how the Sunday mass reflected that the workshop was concerned about creating a “we”. Not a social, ideological “we”, but a group that is actually experienced as a commonly acting group in the shared time and space. I choose to call this a *phenomenological we*.

I mentioned that I believe the crumbling of a “liturgical we” is a key reason for the present uneasy state of the Norwegian church. Churchgoers are uncertain as to *what we are sharing*.

¹⁶ The sacramental base of liturgical dance is thoroughly explored in J.G. Davies, *Liturgical Dance*, SCM Press, London 1984

¹⁷ Sidsel Pape commented in her summary of the Granavollen workshop that the practical exercises were basic seen from an artistic point of view. Learning to listen, to move, to sense more actively is primary to performing artists, but not a central part of church workers training.

If we expect all participants to share social, ideological and aesthetic values, the liturgy cannot “hold” in a pluralistic age. Sharing particular, tradition-based actions and words, however, need not be as invading for the individual as one might fear if the collective event of the liturgy is clearly organized. Though questioning whether contemporary artists have the relevant training to enter the collective code of liturgy, I do believe that insights in performative arts carry keys to activating a renewed understanding of the “we” of liturgy.

Seen from a phenomenological angle, the meeting between art and the receiver has many common features with the meeting between liturgy and the congregation. The expectation to find *meaning* and nourishment for one's life is there in both instances. Traditionally, both art and theology search *behind* (under or over) the experienced event to find its intended and *real* meaning. Whether in traditional theatre or in liturgy the drama can be seen as *underlying* the actual action. Performance theory and liturgical theology actually have a similar agenda when pushing the point that the drama is in the present: in the actual *here-and-now* of the experienced event. Pragmatist aesthetics have a similar stance: the art is in the encounter between the art and the receiver, not essentially in an object or a text. This is threatening to a conservative religious position, because the *meaning* of an experience in this way is handed over to the receiver and his/her body and perception. In philosopher Paul Ricoeur model of text-interpretation¹⁸ he separates meaning-production into two processes: The receiving of a certain text – that can be explained and shared on a structural level, and the individual appropriation that is the actual interpretation of the text. The shared structure may be perceived as meaningful *in itself* if clear in its shape, whereas the appropriation must be admitted to the process of the individual. Applied to the liturgy, you could say that it is fully possible to share the structure of an event and perceive meaning in this structure, without being able to share a certain interpretation of the event. This does not imply that the “script” behind the structure is irrelevant – the underlying drama can still be read with great interest, but the *shared* experience is on another level. And it is a bodily, sensory level.

Contemporary artists urge to break conventions may have the advantage of stirring up our individual, bodily presence in a given situation, enhancing awareness. On Granavollen the sharing experience within the church space was highlighted for me in an uncomfortable manner in the “scream-performance” I mentioned earlier. More comfortable, but still stirring

¹⁸ Ricoeur (1981)

was Impure company's performance at another point in the programme. Without going into detail in their interpretation of the church space, I do want to mention how they through relatively simple instructions and impulses managed to reorganize the situation in the room in a deeply involving manner. Practically wiping out the boundaries between the spectators and the performers, I felt confronted with my own habits and expectations in a way that made me deeply alert to the "we" of this particular event. Urged to make my own choices in the room, I felt uneasy, but also sensitively open to the moment and to the dynamics of this particular group. Speaking about a "phenomenological we" in church brings this experience to mind. The choreographer of this event did not seek ideological unity. On the contrary: He wished to expose the differences, the breaks. It was a call for the individual within a group in a given time and space.

Liturgy has to seek unity, or it ceases to be liturgy, but without calling the individual, what kind of unity can we expect? In the central challenge of balancing individual and collective needs in Christian ritual, the Norwegian church asks artists for help. The exploration is in an early phase, the Granavollen workshop contained several strategies for artistic impulse to liturgical renewal. I will not conclude. Firstly, one of the strategies will be explored in-depth here in conference by Grete Refsum and Ingunn Rimestad.

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