

## SVENSK TEOLOGISK KVARTALSKRIFTS REDAKTÖRSRÅD

**MARTIN BERNTSON**  
Göteborgs universitet

**ANNE KATRINE DE HEMMER GUDME**  
Universitetet i Oslo

**PATRIK HAGMAN**  
Åbo Akademi

**MICHAEL HJÄLM**  
Enskilda Högskolan Stockholm,  
Sankt Ignatios Akademi

**TORSTEN JANSON**  
Lunds universitet

**TONE STANGELAND KAUFMAN**  
MF vitenskapelig høyskole

**STÅLE J. KRISTIANSEN**  
NLA Høgskolen

**ANNI MARIA LAATO**  
Åbo Akademi

**OUTI LEHTIPUU**  
Helsingfors universitet

**KAREN MARIE LETH-NISSEN**  
Københavns universitet

**LINDE LINDKVIST**  
Institutet för mänskliga  
rättigheter

**MARIUS TIMMANN MJAALAND**  
Oslo universitet

**ELSE MARIE WIBERG PEDERSEN**  
Aarhus universitet

**PÉTUR PÉTURSSON**  
Islands universitet

**PAMELA SLOTTE**  
Åbo Akademi  
Helsingfors universitet

**HANNA STENSTRÖM**  
Enskilda Högskolan Stockholm

**KIRSI I. STJERNA**  
California Lutheran University

**DAVID THURFJELL**  
Södertörns högskola

**LINN TONSTAD**  
Yale Divinity School

**ERIKA WILLANDER**  
Umeå universitet



# S|T|K INNEHÅLL 3 2025

## Ledare

Erik Sidenvall . . . . . 217

## Christianity on Display: An Introductory Note

Alexander Maurits & Erik Sidenvall . . . . . 219

## An Archive Beyond the Texts: The Lund University Ecclesiastical History Archive

Anders Jarlert . . . . . 223

## Material Religious Aspects of a Wisconsin Unitarian Household

William A. Christian Jr. . . . . . 232

## Confessing the Deaf: A Visual and Material Approach to Religion and Disability in Belgium, c. 1750–1850

Elwin Hofman & Tine van Osselaer . . . . . 252

## The Materiality of Incorruption: From “Miraculous Bodies” to “Bodies on Display” in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Centuries Italy

Leonardo Rossi. . . . . 271

## Sanctuary Paintings in Dalarna’s Free Churches, 1850’s–2000’s

Janice Holmes . . . . . 287

## Locating the Sacred: Contemporary Materiality and Practice Related to Place-Making in Montenegro

Emil Bjørn Hilton Saggau . . . . . 306

## Crosses and Stones: Material Religion in British First World War Cemeteries

John Wolffe . . . . . 322

## Recensioner . . . . . 338

### Gösta Hallonsten, *Tron söker förstå centrala teologiska frågor*

Stefan Andersson. . . . . 338

<b>Luke Bretherton, <i>A Primer in Christian Ethics: Christ and the Struggle to Live Well</i></b>	
Andreas Bernberg . . . . .	339
<b>Elisabeth Gerle, <i>Vi är inte idioter: Klimat, ekonomi, demokrati</i></b>	
Johan Hylander Thiel . . . . .	340
<b>Darren Roso, Daniel Bensaïd: <i>From the Actuality of the Revolution to the Melancholic Wager</i></b>	
Jayne Svenungsson . . . . .	342

# Ledare

ERIK SIDENVALL

I år är det 50 år sedan ledande politiker från öst såväl som väst ingick den så kallade Helsingforsöverenskommelsen. Till skillnad från delar av östra Europa har minnesåret fått föga uppmärksamhet i Sverige. Så var det också när det en gång begav sig. Nyheten om det avtal som slutits i den finländska huvudstaden bemöttes med sval, och kanske befogad, skepsis i Sverige. Ännu ett till intet förpliktigande dokument, dödsdömt i en antagonistisk värld, hade sett dagens ljus. De senaste decenniernas forskning har lyft fram den oväntade betydelse fördraget och den uppföljande processen kom att få. Helsingforsöverenskommelsen må i sig själv inte ha lett till det kalla krigets slut, men den skapade en grogrund för ett östeuropeiskt civilsamhälle där engagemanget för demokrati stod i centrum. Helsingforsöverenskommel-sens verkanshistoria utgör ett vittnesbörd om den kraft till samhällsförändring som ligger innesluten i en regelstyrd världsordning. Inte undra på att det är just denna politisk-juridiska grundsats som nu kommit under attack i den auktoritära snålblåsten.

I sin sista ledare som redaktör för *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* resonerar Jayne Svenungsson kring universitetets väsen. Med inspiration från den tidigare anglikanske ärkebiskopen Rowan Williams (f. 1950) utmanar hon vår oftast prosaiska förståelse av akademien när hon lyfter fram den medeltida teologiska termen *societas perfecta* – en samhällsinstans som sätter sin egen agenda och självständigt strävar efter att förverkliga sina egna syften. Kanske kan resonemanget också överföras på det som med tiden kom att kallas ”the spirit of Helsinki”, det konglomerat av oväntad aktivism och politisk uthållighet som för en tid formade sin egen agenda på beslutfattandets scen. De samhällskroppar som är uppfyllda av förverkligandet av de egna ändamålen kan verka slutna, självupptagna; men det är paradoxalt nog just denna slutnenhet som utgör ett fundament för deras vidare samhällsbetydelse.

Tack, Jayne, för dina insatser som redaktör för *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift*! Med glädje och ödmjukhet tar jag nu vid.

Det nummer av tidskriften du nu håller i din hand utforskar materiell kultur under temat “Christianity on Display”. Det har redigerats av docent Alexander Maurits och undertecknad. Artiklarna härrör från en internationell konferens som genomfördes i Lund i september 2022. Konferensen, och detta temanummer, har erhållit ett generöst stöd från Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien. ▲

# Christianity on Display: An Introductory Note

ALEXANDER MAURITS & ERIK SIDENVALL

When considering the display of things an immediate reaction is that this is something that is done at a museum, an art gallery or at a shopping centre. At such locations things are shown to the world with a purpose to inform, attract possible buyers, cause people to reflect on their lives and the world we live in and so on. However, display is a seemingly inescapable aspect of human engagement with the world of things, not restricted to peculiar kinds of organised, professional, presentations. It is an omnipresent feature woven into the very fabric of our everyday lives. We frequently, and sometimes routinely, engage in acts of display. Why is that?

A brief and much too simplistic answer points in the direction of subjectivity and its aesthetical trappings. The significance we put into things is presented to the wider world through conscious or unconscious acts of display. Consider, for example, how we organise the material world of our living rooms: these are spaces that we pack with furniture that are supposed to fulfil certain functions, but also with things that we imbue with meaning. Our selection and arrangement of these things is dependent on cultural norms, our individual sense of the beautiful or appealing but also on our self-understanding. Thus, the display of mundane objects can become idealised reflections of our life-stories, habits and aspirations; an image that is shown to the occasional visitor, but also reflected, as a reaffirmation, to ourselves. These arrangements may eventually become part of an unnoticed background, but they are still there with a potential to offer meaning and reassurance – that is, until we remake our worlds and reorder our things.

Display is a rich theoretical construct which cannot fully be explored in this brief introductory note. A few general remarks will provide context

for the articles included in this themed issue. First, the concept of display refers to a set of spatial practices that involve intentionally placing objects in their 'right place' and attaching meaning to these arrangements. Yet the concept of display is not only about the 'sender side'. This takes us to our second point. Display cannot be reduced to the actions and the intentions of the person who arranges particular objects. Inspired by contemporary socio-material theory, we can also focus on the ways in which the material world realises a meaning of its own, beyond our own intentions. Even when things are in their 'right place', they have a certain amount of agency. Furthermore, those encountering our living rooms may grasp certain aspects of our display of things, certain intended meanings always get through, but we can be quite confident that our guests make alternative interpretations of our everyday material worlds. Their world of associations is different from ours, and our spatial-material realm can trigger a different set of reactions than the intended.

Finally, display is often built into the very process of manufacture. Choices of material and design are often influenced by a conscious desire to say something to the world; things cry out to be displayed, so to say. A rich repertoire of familiar symbols is used for this very purpose. The ability to decipher the message built into the object by the maker/sender, rests of course on a sufficient amount of shared knowledge. A display of things may therefore be a way to rehearse these common symbols and representations. But, of course, the symbols built into the material world change meaning during the lifespan of an object and may eventually be forgotten; such transformations open for a different kind of display, or perhaps better, display within a different setting. Moreover, for many (most?) things the manufacturer has a clear idea about their ideal placement. This spatial context contributes to people's ability to comprehend the intended meaning of a certain thing. Consequently, if an object is placed in the 'wrong' location, its intended meaning may be distorted. Yet displacement may also end in an imaginative intertextual play of symbols. New meanings can emerge as a result of an act of display at an unforeseen location, a process that effects both thing and place. What happens, for example, when an Orthodox icon is integrated into our living-room furnishings?

Within the realm of religion, display takes many forms. In many religious traditions, the homes of believers become an important arena for display of things, as do their own bodies. Display is related to devotional practices but may also, for example, be intertwined with collective identity formation and religious socialisation. Many of the things that have been stated above about our everyday acts of display are to a surprising extent also app-

licable for religious organisations and communities of faith. Furthermore, display remains a salient feature of many ritual practices, and the placement and design of buildings designated for religious purposes remains a pivotal form of self-expression in relation to what is perceived as an outside world. Material religion displayed in public spaces can even become bids in a struggle for power.<sup>1</sup>

If we turn our attention to the academic field of the History of Christianity, there is today a rapidly increasing amount of studies heavily influenced by the recent 'material turn'.<sup>2</sup> Materiality as a dimension of the history of Christianity is today studied from a variety of perspectives, yet, save a few studies of ecclesiastical contributions to public exhibitions of various kinds, the concept of display has rarely been touched upon.<sup>3</sup> The articles included in this themed issue thus make an important contribution to an expanding field by exploring some dimensions of historical material display as performed by Christian denominations, institutions and groups of believers. Early versions of these articles were first presented at a conference at Lund University in September 2022 that was generously financed by The Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities and the Pleijel Foundation.

This selection of studies begins with the contributions from two of the keynote speakers invited to the conference. In his contribution, Anders Jarlert explores the religious materiality on display in an archive, Lund University Ecclesiastical History Archive (LUKA), but he also examines how materiality was a subject that was touched upon already in the oral history accounts gathered under the auspices of professor Hilding Pleijel (1893–1988) in the 1940s. William Christian Jr. turns his attention to the material world of a family in the contemporary US. In his minute examination their everyday material surroundings assumes the guise of a habitat, haunted by

---

<sup>1</sup> Sally M. Promey, *Religion in Plain View: Public Aesthetics of American Display*, Chicago 2024.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Joachim Grage, Thomas Mohnike & Lena Rohrbach (eds.), *Aesthetics of Protestantism in Northern Europe: Exploring the Field*, Turnhout 2022; Jan De Maeyer & Peter Jan Margry (eds.), *Material Change: The Impact of Reform and Modernity on Material Religion in North-West Europe, 1780–1920*, Leuven 2021; Christopher Ocker & Susanna Elm (eds.), *Material Christianity: Western Religion and the Agency of Things*, Cham 2020; Minna Opas & Anna Haapalainen (eds.), *Christianity and the Limits of Materiality*, London 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Roeland Hermans, *Civitas dei: De kerk op Expo 58*, Leuven 2008; Charlotte Hylten-Cavallius, "Exhibiting Religion – Displaying Religious Heritage in Postsecular Sweden", *Scandinavian Studies* 90:3 (2018) 403–35; Julie Nicoletta, "Selling Spirituality and Spectacle: Religious Pavilions at the New York World's Fair of 1964–65", *Buildings and Landscapes* 22:2 (2015), 62–88; Lena Liepe, *A Case for the Middle Ages: The Public Display of Medieval Church Art in Sweden 1847–1943*, Stockholm 2018; Martin Wörner, *Religionen auf den Weltausstellungen*, Hannover 2000.

the spirits of the past, that step-by-step ensnares its inhabitants. Agency is, so to say, reversed in this case. In the end, it is the things put on display that hold the displayers captive. Elwin Hofman's and Tine Van Osselaer's article explores an institutional and practical theological setting. They focus on how visual aids were used to prepare the deaf for confession within eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Roman Catholicism. Even though never uncontroversial, pictorial representation became an effective means to introduce this group of people to central spiritual practices.

Leonardo Rossi continues the exploration of the material world of modern Roman Catholicism. His article focuses on the process through which the material remains of the saintly person turns into an “incorruptible body” put on display within liturgical space. Rossi's study thereby becomes a comment on the distinction between thing and living body. Display in connection with the organisation of liturgical space is a theme that returns in Janice Holmes' contribution. Holmes explores a series of changes in the sanctuary paintings found in Protestant free church chapels in the historical province Dalarna in central Sweden. The writer argues for a gradual transformation that reflects the changing social/political ambitions of the congregations themselves.

The two final studies included in this volume address the overtly political dimensions the display of material religion can attain. Both articles focus on expressions of nationalism in relation to a religious material world. Emil Saggau turns his attention to the interconnection between place-making, materiality and re-invented religious practices in recent Montenegrin politics. John Wolffe concludes this issue with a study of how religious, personal, national and military symbols are woven into the material fabric of commemoration at Belgian and French war cemeteries. ▲

# An Archive Beyond the Texts:

## *The Lund University Ecclesiastical History Archive*

ANDERS JARLERT

---

Anders Jarlert is Professor Emeritus of Church History at Lund University.

[anders.jarlert@ctr.lu.se](mailto:anders.jarlert@ctr.lu.se)

---

After the October Revolution of 1917, St. Catherine's Swedish Church and its clergy in St. Petersburg suffered immensely. This was the first Protestant congregation in Russia to experience having its property confiscated and nationalised by the new authorities. In 1934, the building was desacralised into a Soviet sports school. The vessels were handed over to the Soviet authorities, whereas the archives were transported to the Swedish consulate and, in 1938, illegally sent to Stockholm, later to be deposited in the Swedish National Archive (Sw. Riksarkivet). This removal of the archives represents a fascinating historical act that from a cultural perspective may be compared with the *translation* of holy images, vessels, etcetera. The location and preservation of the archives is a question that became important with regard to the renewed memory of the congregation after 2005, when the church was returned to the re-established congregation. These circumstances bring to the fore the quite obvious but important words of Aleida Assmann, that “the archives is the basis of what can be said in the future about the present when it will have become the past”.<sup>1</sup>

Having said that, I have in other contexts stated that an archive is always something beyond the texts. However, below I show that the contents of textual archives could also be a highly concrete bearer of material memory. My example is the Lund University Ecclesiastical History Archive, which

---

<sup>1</sup> Aleida Assmann, “Canon and Archive”, in Astrid Erll & Ansgar Nünning (eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies*, Berlin 2008, 102, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110207262.2.97>.

was founded in 1942 at the initiative of Hilding Pleijel (1893–1988), professor of church history at Lund University 1938–1960. He sought to map out and collect information on ecclesiastical customs linked to older times and which were gradually disappearing. This was consciously done to resemble the gathering efforts in folklore research. The work began by interviewing seniors born in the 1850s, 1860s and 1870s. A total number of more than 5,500 men and women were interviewed until 1970. Pleijel's initiatives also inspired other institutions to launch similar archives, in particular at the Åbo Academy University in Turku, Finland.

Simultaneously with the studies of older church customs, the archive also started to examine changes in contemporary church customs. The first questionnaire was sent out in 1962 to all parishes belonging to the Church of Sweden. It included questions on old and new customs in relation to ordinary services and at church festivals, but also in relation to different ceremonies such as christenings, confirmations, marriages, and funerals. These questions were often concerned with rituals that included the use of material objects, such as the lighting of candles in churches or on graves, the introduction of statues of the Virgin Mary, and different customs during the liturgical year, such as Christmas cribs and Easter candles. Some distinctly regional customs were found, while some questions concerning more recent customs fairly soon became obsolete; for example, whether there had been any services related to pets during the preceding year. Special questionnaires have also been aimed at the major free churches in Sweden and separate activities, such as the special services before the beginning of the annual judicial court sessions. Today, the archive contains thirty different surveys on ecclesiastical customs, the latest focusing on St. Lucia customs and this time answered by the local organists.

It could be valuable to present an example from one of these later surveys. Questionnaire No. 26, carried out in 2006, was created to highlight changes in communion traditions in the Church of Sweden. One of the questions put to the parishes concerned whether certain vessels or furniture were present in the church, followed by how often they were used during communion. The questions concerned a communion rail, separate cushions for kneeling, individual chalices, a separate chalice for intinction, bells, tabernacle, etcetera.

A consecration bell was present but never used in thirty-three cases. In fact, it was only used regularly in five cases. The communion rail was always or almost always used in 200 parishes, while twenty-five used it only in special masses. Twenty-six replies stated that it was only used on rare occasions, and two that they never used it. I would guess that a standing communion

is more frequent today. No one has studied standing communion as a less material or less physical liturgical practice compared to kneeling at the rail. One could imagine that a post-pandemic questionnaire on issues concerning communion would present a slightly different result when it comes to material objects and practices, such as the use of individual chalices.

A tabernacle was always or almost always used in eighteen parishes. As one might expect, fifty-five replies stated that they had individual chalices but never used them. The use of intinction seems to have replaced the separate chalices in nursing homes but also in ordinary church services. Another question concerned non-alcoholic wine. Here, twelve parishes answered: "Yes, but only at special services or special groups of communicants", while eleven answered "[a]lways".

Still, the most thorough collection of replies included in the archive consists of the first questionnaire, which is why I focus on this in the following.

To understand Professor Pleijel's construction of the questionnaire, we must relate to his contemporary position in research, in this field mainly found between two distinct poles. On the one hand, the prospering Lundensian Luther research, carried out in the field of systematic theology and ethics by theologians such as Anders Nygren (1890–1978) and Gustaf Aulén (1879–1977), focused on the concept of motif research, seeking to find the essence of Christian faith in the doctrines and teachings of Christian theology. On the other hand, there was humanistic folklore research, with an emphasis on popular notions of elves and trolls, things that the theologians rejected as vernacular and nothing but popular superstition.

In opposition to these scholarly trends, Pleijel wanted to study popular Christian beliefs and customs among ordinary people in older times. This could not be deducted from the systematic research on doctrines and prescriptive theology, nor could it be found in the results of questionnaires concerning supernatural events, ghosts, and notions of various natural beings. Thus, he started compiling his own questionnaires and creating his own archive. This was long before the term *lived religion* was coined.

Most of the interviews were carried out by students as an alternative to writing a thesis. Some of them were able to inspire their informants to expand on their stories and go into more detail, while others exhibited a stricter attitude, which obviously limited the informants. These efforts were initially looked upon with disbelief and some contempt among Pleijel's colleagues, who found the tales of old men and women to be beneath their dignity. They also justified their criticism by being sceptical of the method used. Contrary to the study of conventional archival material, such as the

minutes from church synods, cathedral chapters, and various committees, the interview material seemed to be lacking in terms of both clarity and consistency. The replies varied from being greatly restricted by the interview guide to long stories heavily influenced by the informants.

What was meant by ecclesiastical custom (Sw. *kyrklig sed*)? Pleijel's use of this term was consciously broad, or perhaps limitless. A positive outcome of this possible lack of methodical strictness was that the informants were not controlled or limited to give the "right" answers. A couple of questions used a terminology that was only understandable in the traditions of Pleijel's own childhood in the Diocese of Växjö, but most of the questions were formulated in a consciously open way to include customs hitherto unknown even to the professor.

What did Professor Pleijel ask?

Almost all questions opened up for material perspectives, while some of them were directly formulated to capture a rich world of things. The very first question concerns which collections of sermons (Sw. *postillor*) and other devotional books were read by "the old ones". Normally, we might not view religious books as the most material of things, but based on the interviews, it is clear that these devotional books were not only read for their spiritual contents but also kept and regarded as bearers of holiness in the household. A key point of interest is obviously which books were read and which clergymen had recommended, sold, or distributed them free of charge. Still, the material nature is nevertheless obvious.

The second question asks for detailed information on how Christmas, New Year, and other festival days were celebrated in the household. The answers could include almost anything from food and drink to which prayers were said, which hymns were sung, and which services at church were attended.

The third question concerns household devotion: What was read, what was sung, which special customs were observed? Did they kneel, say silent prayers? For example, singing hymns is something quite material, insofar that sound may be regarded as material. The combination of hymns with other material elements is also noted in questions such as: Were hymns sung during the meals at a party? In older theology research, hymns have almost without exception been studied exclusively as texts, often combined with a long historical investigation into the author's personal and theological history but without being interested in their practical or material context; that is, how and where they were sung, by whom, and accompanied by which musical instruments. Hymns cannot be understood – neither historically nor as an expression of religion – without the musical dimension. Furthermore,

to understand the nature of a Christian hymn, you have to sing it yourself, not only listen to a recorded version.

The fourth question in the questionnaire concerns funerals and acts of mourning: who was reading when the coffin was carried out, which hymns were sung, etcetera, but also whether the closest mourners sat down during the Sunday service when the rest of the congregation stood up. And, obviously, whether ceremonial rods were used.

The seventh question concerns musical instruments. In the archive, Pleijel included a couple of musical instruments; for example, the psalmodicon, a single-stringed instrument developed in Scandinavia for simplifying music in churches and in schools, thus offering an alternative to the violin for sacred music. It was adopted in many rural churches from the early nineteenth century and onwards. Since the psalmodicon was inexpensive to build, and since it was not used for dancing and could be played by people with little musical training, it was used both in churches and at home. Two psalmodicons were included in the archive. They cannot be used today but are still very decorative.

The eighth question concerns the communion of the sick with an explicit question regarding which names were given to the holy vessels, whereas the twelfth question concerns the variation in dress on special holidays.

The seventeenth question, on the churching of mothers, mixes doctrinal, practical, and material aspects, such as what was the meaning of this rite. Was it purification, thanksgiving, or simply a custom devoid of any meaning? Where was this rite performed? By the church door? In the aisle? By the altar? Was the mother accompanied by a woman? And did she bring candy for her neighbours in the pew? Here, I believe that Pleijel managed to get a rather complete picture of the rite. The intention was obviously not so much about uncovering the material aspects of the rite as such, but to describe regional variations in how this rite was performed. In doing so, however, the material dimensions were presented in detail. The answers to this question were later used by Swedish ethnologist Anders Gustavsson in his dissertation on the churching custom in Sweden.<sup>2</sup>

However, the link between ecclesiastical law and the material dimensions of the churching practise was not established by Pleijel or by Gustavsson. It was not until the 1997 dissertation by historian Marie Lindstedt Cronberg on unmarried mothers in the Swedish countryside during the period 1680–1880 that it became clear that married mothers eagerly wanted to maintain the separate churching rituals for married and unmarried mothers, respec-

---

<sup>2</sup> Anders Gustavsson, *Kyrktagningseden i Sverige*, Lund 1972.

tively.<sup>3</sup> This was definitely a material matter since the stigmatised situation of the unmarried mother was clearly indicated, not only in different words, but also by their place in the church. This example shows how a focus on oral history does not reveal the entire ecclesiastical landscape. It needs to be combined with traditional historical and theological analysis. However, the rivalry between Pleijel and Sven Kjöllerström, a professor of practical theology with ecclesiastical law as one of his specialities, meant that such a combination or cooperation was impossible. Kjöllerström was the most eager colleague to express his despise of the popular, oral tradition.

Question number nineteen asks whether weddings took place at church, in homes, or in the rectory, while the twentieth question concerns the order of pews in church: Did the parishioners change pews? How often? On which Sunday? For how long was the custom of a female and a male side in the church maintained?

By now, it seems to be quite clear that the main focus in the questionnaire was not on the material objects as such, but rather on their use, the ways in which they intersected with the liturgical year, expressions of gender identities, and what they can tell us about the roles of the laymen and of household devotions.

Gender dimensions sometimes constitute the main aspect of the questions; for example, in questions numbers twenty-two and twenty-three: Did the men tip their hats and did the women curtsey when the church bells started to ring? Always or only at the beginning of the main service? And how did the death bell differ for a man, a woman, and a child?

Here, we may note that a material perspective is almost entirely lacking. There is no question concerning fees for ringing or for funeral sermons. Likewise, there are no questions mentioning the material offerings to the clergy. Pleijel's position towards gender perspectives could be described as rooted in a kind of source positivism. This means that when the sources directly reveal gender differences or a gender order, he is eager to analyse this. This is the case already in his 1925 dissertation on Moravianism in Southern Sweden. On the other hand, he was not concerned with the role of women as translators of devotional literature or as donors to churches. Nor did he note the pivotal role played by women in educating children during the absence of their fathers during the Great Northern War of the 1710s.<sup>4</sup>

A markedly material perspective emerges in question number twenty-seven: Did the minister hold a white cloth in his hand at the altar or in the

<sup>3</sup> Marie Lindstedt Cronberg, *Synd och skam: Ogifta mödrar på svensk landsbygd 1680–1880*, Tygelsjö 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Anders Jarlert, "Hilding Pleijels 'genusperspektiv'", *Kyrkohistorisk årsskrift* 2016, 124–131.

pulpit? In his right or left hand? What was this cloth called? What was the name of the clergyman?

To understand the answers to this question, we need to localise them. This does not concern what was done or observed by someone else, in another parish or at another time. The answers should be located as exactly as possible in space and time. This question was often answered extensively by the informants. The reason for this was the discontinuation of this custom in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This was the reason for various speculations in popular tradition as to the reasons why a certain young clergyman did not use the cloth. Was it because of his youth? Was he not fully trained or licensed? Or, more often, had he lost the right to use this item because of some crime, often a sexual offence? This served as an imagined parallel to the unfrocking of severely criminal clergymen. Or did the absence of the cloth in fact mean that this young clergyman had not yet committed any crimes at all? Pleijel wrote a short but thorough study on the liturgical uses of this piece of cloth in which he emphasised that it was not identical to the Medieval *manipulum* but was rather part of the private clerical dress.<sup>5</sup> It is one of the very small number of studies he himself concluded using the material of his questionnaires. This remains somewhat of an enigma since we would expect that he would have been very interested in the differences between the dioceses, as well as differences within minor regions.

A few questions are very open to detailed storytelling, such as number thirty-one concerning the confirmation period. Informants were asked about the children's teachers, the length of the teaching period, which books were used, what the confirmands were supposed to learn by heart, but also how they were dressed for their confirmation, if they were invited into the rectory for food, or even if they were supposed to bring any food themselves. The question on dress has been important for determining the point in time when girls started to dress in white instead of the old black festive dress.

Answers could be very informative with regard to the ministry of individual clergymen. I have elsewhere compared some of these stories concerning certain clergymen to official sources and found that they are often in agreement. In other cases, it could perhaps be said that there is no smoke without fire. There are also obvious exceptions. A free church informant might have heard that a famous high church minister organised private communion services for his followers at home, something that could not

---

<sup>5</sup> Hilding Pleijel, *Det liturgiska handklädet: Dess innehörd i folktraditionen och i verkligheten*, Lund 1948.

have occurred, even though it tells us something about other appreciated pastors in the informant's own environment.

On a general level, the interviews had not been used for pastoral biographies until I started doing so a decade ago. In these efforts, the interviews represent a useful complement to the official sources as emotional experiences are included in a way that is seldom the case in public documents from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The ways in which I use these interviews have been observed and even praised in the academic world. Common academic attitudes have obviously changed since Professor Pleijel launched the archive.

Professor Pleijel's concept to a large extent concerned lived religion. His argument was that religion is not a system of thoughts, not only a collection of texts but everyday practises (that is, lived religion). Even though his purpose was to map out and describe popular religion as such, the results often also included new findings in the world of material religion. This inspired Pleijel to research other material customs not revealed by the interviews. As an example, we might mention his study of the Reformation custom to carry the baptismal child "under the read"; that is, under the read gospel where the prayer book is shown to be viewed as a concentration of holiness that is materialised here rather than in other sacred objects or images.

Another example is the use of metallic tokens for holy communion. Occasional tokens have been found in both Sweden and Finland. They were probably given to the communicants after the examinations in the catechism and delivered as a sign of their proper knowledge before communion. According to other sources, they represent a receipt for having paid fees to the church for wafers and wine. In any case, these tokens were discussed, prohibited in the country churches, but still in use in the cities in the 1720s. According to popular discourses, they could be understood as tokens of worthiness or even as payment for the remission of sins. Comparisons with other European settings, mostly in the Reformed churches, have not solved this interesting riddle. This is a case in which a material item evidently has much to tell us about popular practices and discourses. But what is its meaning?

Today, an archival institution such as the Ecclesiastical History Archive at Lund University may also be useful in a political/cultural situation in which religion is often defined as something exclusively spiritual or internal. In the secularised Protestant opinion, so widespread among politicians and so-called cultural figures, religion seems to have nothing to do with the material world. They view it as an exclusively private and invisible entity. This obviously means neglecting tradition, memory, and knowledge. One

of Hilding Pleijel's intentions with the archive was to maintain and explore religious memory, a memory of both intellectual and material religion, and thus to maintain religious memory as a continuing flow into the future. ▲

#### **SUMMARY**

This article explores the nature of the archive as entity that is always beyond the texts. However, this article will show that also the contents of textual archives could be a very concrete bearer of material memory. My example is the Lund University Ecclesiastical History Archive, founded in 1942 by the initiative of Hilding Pleijel (1893–1988), professor in Church History at Lund University 1938–1960. Parallel with the investigations of older church customs the Archive started to examine changes in contemporary church customs. Today, an archive may also be useful in a political situation when religion often is being defined as something only spiritual or internal. This is, of course, a neglection of both tradition, memory, and knowledge. One of Hilding Pleijel's intentions with the Archive was to maintain and explore religious memory, a memory of both intellectual and material religion, and thus to maintain religious memory as a continuing flow into the future.

# Material Religious Aspects of a Wisconsin Unitarian Household

WILLIAM A. CHRISTIAN JR.

---

William A. Christian Jr. is a Fellow of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

billc@idecnet.com

---

Extensive time with an elderly couple in Wisconsin learning about their things showed ways in which, for them, many objects had invisible, numinous aspects, inflected by emotions. Many of their things were more than what they were, in some cases with attributions of vitality, in others with connections to the absent and the dead. As together we made an inventory of possessions and the memories they held, it became clear that for this American family, things were bound up with people in ways that did not meet the eye.<sup>1</sup>

The inquiry was a result of the death of my parents. When they died I realized that not only was I then unmoored and on my own, but so too were all the things in the house where they had lived and I had grown up. With my parents gone, their things – books, clothes, decorative objects, furniture, plants – had almost entirely lost the invisible ties that related them to people, places and events. While this kind of periodic erasure of family memory was normal, inevitable and even reasonable, as a saver and a keeper I rebelled against it. As a kind of remedy or compensation I set out to find a roughly equivalent elderly couple willing to tell me the memories associated with their set of things.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the extended Cronon family, particularly Jean, William and Robert, to Gillian Feeley-Harnick, Lisa Godson, Adela Pinch, Lotten Gustafsson Reinius, Mary Heimann, Monique Scheer, and to other participants in the colloquia in Pécs, Tübingen and Lund where I presented earlier versions of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> William A. Christian Jr., “Yard Sale: Activation and loss of personal value in

## The Cronons

The people who generously agreed to do this were a retired couple, Jean and Dave Cronon, of Madison Wisconsin. Jean (Mary Jean Hotmar, Princeton, Wisconsin, 1925) was trained as a nurse and had taught nursing, Dave (E. David Cronon, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1924) was a historian who had been Dean of College of Letters & Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. They had raised two boys, who by then were married and living independently with their own children. Between 2000 and 2007 I visited Jean and Dave for eight stays of up to two weeks at a time. During these visits they told me about their stuff, which inevitably entailed a recapitulation of their lives, travels, families and friendships.<sup>3</sup> For me, in addition to learning about things and what they mean and do, it was a way to explore my roots in the Wisconsin of my mother and to get to make two dear friends.

Dave had been brought up a Presbyterian, and Jean a Lutheran. They met at a Presbyterian student group in Madison, but eventually found the less doctrinal Unitarians more congenial. By the time they switched to Unitarianism, neither believed in the divinity of Christ, but they made sure their sons went to Unitarian Sunday school, and Christmas was a major family occasion. As Dave put it cheerfully (on agreeing to a Catholic cousin's suggestion that they bury a statue of Saint Joseph in the front yard to help sell their house): "We're Unitarians, we can believe in anything." In the period of my visits they rarely attended church.

Both Jean and Dave came from families with a tradition of fluidity among different denominations and congregations. Dave's paternal grandfather was brought up a Catholic and became a Presbyterian. Dave's parents switched from being Presbyterians in Minnesota, to Baptists in Cleveland, and Quakers in Washington, D.C. Jean's father had a Catholic father and a Lutheran mother. Brought up as a Catholic, as an adult he attended no church, while two of his brothers were English Lutherans, and a sister and a brother were Catholics. Jean's mother Lillian changed from German Lutheran to English Lutheran. After she married a Catholic she stopped going to church altogether. As a widow she attended a small Evangelical church, then a Methodist one. Jean's sister Wanda started as a Lutheran, married a

---

objects", unpublished lecture, Sep. 17, 1998, Getty Research Institute; Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commodities as Process", in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge 1986, 64–91, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511819582.004>.

<sup>3</sup> William A. Christian Jr., "The Presence of the Absent: Transcendence in an American Midwest Household", in Gábor Vargyas (ed.), *Passageways: From Hungarian Ethnography to European Ethnology and Sociocultural Anthropology*, Budapest 2009 [2011], 223–240.



Figure 1. Lillian (second from left) and Jean (extreme right), with friends and relatives at the Princeton Flea Market. Photo: Cronon family.

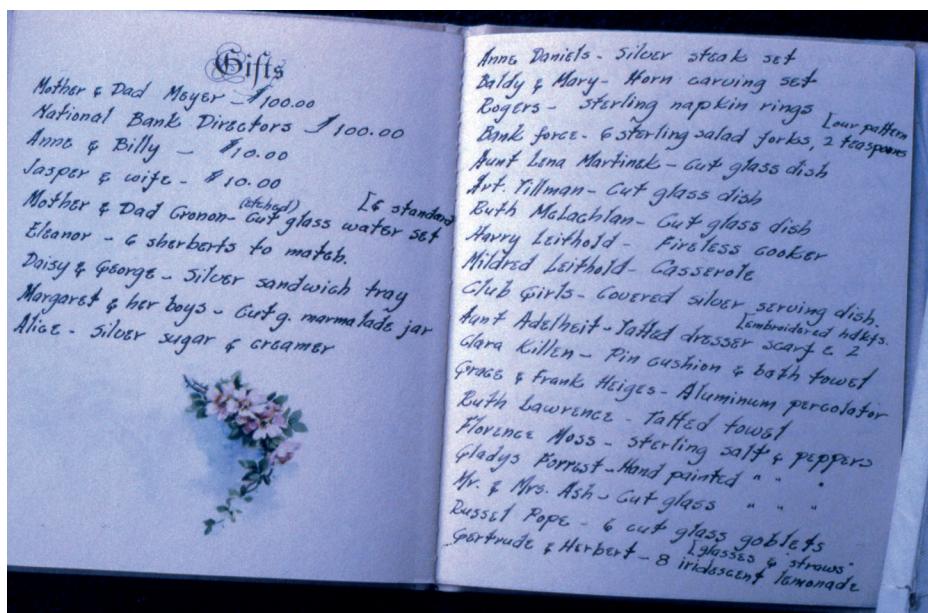


Figure 2. Wedding gifts listed in Dave's parents' wedding book, La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1917. Photo: author.

Catholic, practiced Transcendental Meditation, and then took her mother's place in the Methodist church. Other relatives included pure agnostics and followers of radio preachers.

Jean's mother Lillian, Jean, and her sister Wanda had been bound tight by the suicide of third sister, Jackie, in 1956. One of their great pleasures together was present-hunting and gift-giving, which involved a close attentiveness to likes, preferences, and collections (Figure 1). I arrived three years after Lillian had died, and in 2002, Wanda died as well. In the same period, Jean and Dave decided to sell their house and move to the Oakwood retirement home. On the day of the move into Oakwood, in December 2006, Dave died suddenly. The stories of things were inflected by the deaths of Jackie, Lillian, Wanda, Dave, as well as other, earlier deaths. For many things were material memories of absent loved ones, "the things that make them alive again".

### **Engagement with Things in the Life Cycle**

On my visits with Jean and Dave from 2000 to 2006 and with Jean in 2008, we examined together their engagement with things by considering everything they owned, in their house and their summer house, in the yard and garden, on display or in basement storage, and later in the new apartment. In the process I was helped by the many ways in which things were chronicled and tracked in their lives.

These engagements go way back and were facilitated by the immense commercial apparatus of the American economy at the service of buying, selling and giving. In the basement was the wedding book of Dave's parents in 1917, a commercial production with dedicated pages for listing the wedding presents, duly filled out (Figure 2).

When Dave and Jean were married, Dave had a Fulbright year in England 1950–1951, and they traveled through Europe, including a week in Sweden. They carried with them a commercial travel diary, which included rubrics for purchases and for whom each article was intended.

Christmas is very important in this family, and they had a special notebook for listing the presents so they could be acknowledged. When they opened the presents as a family member noted the items, pen in hand, in the friendly presence of family dogs.

Thousands of slides and family photos, like those illustrating this paper, and including pictures of object arrays on the occasion of birthdays, were powerful indications of the things a given person found meaningful (Figure 3). And an unexpected surprise was a set of slides, a set of color photos, and a videotape in their safe deposit box, taken at ten-year intervals, of



Figure 3. "These are a few of my favorite things." Mantle assemblage for Dave's 80th birthday, 2004, with Philippine carved bookends, lower right. Photo: Cronon family.



Figure 4. Jean and Dave preparing May 2006 garage sale. Photo: Cronon family.

everything valuable in the house for insurance purposes. In the slide of a dish cabinet one can see Jean taking the photograph.

When the boys moved out and became independent, the parents had more income that was disposable, and they traveled more, it became necessary to expand the house, not because it had more people (it had fewer) but because it had more things.

I made the agreement with Jean and Dave to do the study in a long-distance phone call set up by their son, Bill, who was my friend. Months later when I arrived at the house with my video camera, my heart fell. I had never seen a place with so many baubles and kitsch. What had I gotten myself in for? But every single item on display, it quickly turned out, had a story, most were connected intimately to other people, and in a short time, hours if not minutes, the house became a place brimming with magic, and it had become clear to me that it was a kind of nodal network of human connections humming with affection.

### **The Logic of Invisible Aspects**

In this system things (understood very broadly) carry the experience of acquisition: the giver, the testator, the seller, the craftsperson, the moment, the place, the trip; an anchor in time, connection to the I in that period; experience of use: events and anecdotes. As we worked our way through the rooms, cabinets, and closets, the emotional, ethical, and sometimes numinous logic behind the invisible aspects of things would emerge.

When Jean mislaid a little painted miniature, I asked why it was distressing.

J returns, perplexed: Why is this troubling me? It's because these things are reminders of the past, travels, other people: past pleasure. Like that missing book on the Grand Canyon: it changed my life; I lent it out and it wasn't returned. A little piece of us is gone.

These very narratives guide assemblages of meaning on walls and shelves around the house, occasionally in the case of lineage material approaching the status of altars, as Jean describes here:

J: Pictures on bureau, around little poem by Hilary, and grandmother's watch, now under glass. It was grandma's wedding present when she married, and she willed it to me; the watch will go to grand-daughter Carly when I die or maybe before. Carly is named after me. I'm named after grandma. The watch will not go to daughter-in-laws; that

wouldn't mean anything. To blood-line down. If not grandchildren, to my niece. So any way the watch has a new life now, a new place.

A variety of media carried and evoked other people:

- Recipes and tastes as special connections, a distinctive taste bringing back a wave of associations with people, meals, households. We will see the special place of favorite cookies in burials.
- Scents, perfumes. A neighbor, Beatrice Kabler, had a distinctive, closed, vase in her living room. When I asked about it she started weeping. When she was a child, her mother, who had a terminal illness, took her to a rose garden and had her smell the roses, then brought the rose petals home and put them in the vase, where they were still fragrant seventy years later.
- Sounds, the experience they evoke when they have previously heard or sung it, as with the Brahms German Requiem, a part of which Dave selected for his funeral.
- Jewelry as particularly lasting metal and stone connections, especially if pre-worn or shared; pearls as requiring use and touch. When Jean was about to sell a pearl necklace at a garage sale she thought it did not look right on the woman who was buying it, she fingered it, remembered when she had bought it and worn it, and decided not to let it go.

### **Clothes**

For the women in the clan, clothes especially were bearers of connections. These included ritual clothes, which could approach the status of relics. A christening gown was passed around to siblings and down through generations, and it was visible also in the photographs of the baptisms.

Ordinary, non-ritual, clothes bore these connections as well.

J: I want to tell you about this bathrobe. About 40 years ago, I gave this to Dave's mother (now dead for 15 years), for Christmas. She wore it and wore it, even in the nursing home, so when she died, I retrieved it; this is very old, cause I liked it myself. Now I've moved it up here.

D: Recycling.

J: Today I've got that on, I always think of Dave's mother. She loved it. That was her color.

D: You look like my mother.

The sharing of clothes among siblings, mothers and daughters seems to enhance them, and incidentally prepares them for an additional relic-like status when someone dies, as with the christening gown and the bathrobe. All of which made our forays into seemingly mundane clothes-closets surprisingly moving.

One female relative maintained her deceased mother's purse, complete, on the hat rack where it habitually hung, and another treasured the cigarette burns on the desk of her grandmother, who had been a chain-smoker.

When I visited Jean after Dave died, she pointed out items in her new apartment that they had given away and she had felt a special need to recover. Several were wooden carvings that Dave had obtained in the Philippines when he was in the army before he knew her. When the couple was downsizing to move to the retirement home, she had felt no attachment to them, and they had given them to a thrift shop. After Dave's death, items like these that had been particularly his, *because* they were particularly his, took on a new importance for her, and she retrieved them from the shop and put them in the apartment where she could see them.

As Adela Pinch put it succinctly, people die, things remain. And for this and many families, things yo-yo and ricochet between the living and the living and especially between the living and the dead, often gaining momentum and vitality in the process. An example was an embroidered picture of a kitten Jean bought in China with her mother in mind. She first gave it to Lillian in Princeton Wisconsin, then recuperated it when Lillian died, then gave it to her son Robert in Massachusetts, then, after Dave died, recuperated it from Bob for her apartment in Madison.

J: I don't know if you can see that little kitten, embroidered Chinese picture— ... I had first given it to my mother, and then I gave it to Bob after I had taken it back, and he had not hung it, and I had thought about it, so he brought it back when he came, so I put it up there; I had something else above there, but I—

Q: You brought that back from China?

J: Yes. And I'd had it framed for my mother, because she loves cats. I'm not a real cat-lover, but it's— I like it and it looks good in this room. So I'm glad I've got it back.

Since Jean is not fond of cats, surely part of her need for the embroidery ("...I had thought about it...") came from its association with her mother, and perhaps with Bob as well.

## Plants

Plants too are living connectors between the living and the dead, or in some cases stand-ins for the dead. In the American Midwest special attention is given to ferns, with special pedestal-like fern stands.

When I first visited Jean and Dave they likened the ferns to children:

D: Those ferns are all descended from a fern that belonged to her mother.

J: No, my grandmother!

D: Her grandmother, that must date back at least to the latter part of the 19th century and we've kept dividing it periodically and replanting it and so the four plants that we have are only part of what it has become, we have given pieces of it away, but literally it's a fern that goes back to the 1875 or so...

J: I said, "Dave I've got too much to do... And when we go away we have to find somebody to take care of these children and they're like your children" and so that's a little obsessive and so what do you do when...

D: Compulsive obsessive.

J: It really is; it's foolish.

Four years later, as the Cronons were preparing to move, a female relative reluctantly took over.

Plants also seem to serve as healing presences, living bearers of vitality that make them especially appropriate as gifts to the sick and convalescent. This aspect became explicit in the 2006 garage sale, when Jean was selling a plant called Moses in the bulrushes.

J: So the other funny-nice thing is there was another Moses in the bulrushes. I was selling the original one that I had kept for 25 years. It had been given to me by my neighbor Bea Kabler when I had cancer in 1980, and I had kept that going, but I had kept one baby that I was going to take to Oakwood, but I was giving the mother away. And I told this girl that was buying it, I said: "You know I got that when I had cancer in 1980." And she sort of started to cry, and she said: "You know, I'm buying this for my sister, who has cancer, and I was going to take it to her." And I said: "Well tell her that I recovered fully, I was cured." And she had the same kind of cancer even. We hugged and cried together, it was very touching.

## Toy Turtles

The attribution of presence and agency (here the plants are referred to as mother and baby) can also apply to inanimate simulacra. Jean comments on a small metal turtle in her turtle collection:

J: When I see a strange turtle it just makes me want to have it. I don't need it, I've got so many. It's the only metal one I have. I paid actually \$10 for this, which I normally would balk at. So then I put him along with the small turtles over here, that come from all over. What am I going to do with all these turtles? You don't know – I hope my children will find a home for them. It's so silly.

The turtle carries with it the feeling it provoked when seen in a shop, its distinctiveness as a metal one among stone and plastic ones, the amount paid for, its/his incorporation into the turtle menagerie, and a disquiet for its future. Note here its agency: "it just makes me want to have it", and the transition, after acquisition, to a kind of gendered living thing, from "it" and "this" to "him". She worries that when she dies, the turtles, a kind of turtle family, will become homeless orphans, and hopes her human children will adopt them or find foster parents. At the same time, she is totally aware of the ridiculousness of her feelings. "It's so silly."

## Garage Sale

The anthropologist Annette Wiener suggested the term "inalienable possessions", referring to the heirlooms that could not be disposed of outside the lineage because they belonged to the group and not the individual.<sup>4</sup> An example is a table in Wanda's summer house made by her father from a wheel, known as "Daddy's table". As Jean put it: "This is the family's; whatever happens to this we have the right to know."

But here I am getting at an additional aspect of inalienability, stuff tinged or imbued by the presence, invisible or visible, intentioned or unintended, of loved ones.

That table, like the ferns, was common property because it was made by a common, loved, father, grandfather, great-grandfather; that is, things bind people who are alive, by means of their common connection with the dead. Just how loved and how close affects the situation.

From my very arrival at the house Jean and Dave were already thinking of what a move to a retirement home would mean for their things, and how,

---

<sup>4</sup> Annette B. Wiener, *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving*, Berkeley 1992.

in the going usage, “good homes” could be found for what they could not take with them.

A standard American practice, advertised every weekend in newspapers and by signs on residential streets, is the garage sale or yard sale, where used goods are passed on, if possible with some of the memories attached, to friends, neighbors, or dealers who try not to seem like professionals, for prices that are often symbolic. I filmed the preparations and sales of one sale, in 2002, and the hard decisions Jean and Dave had to make in choosing what to sell, how much to ask for and, especially poignant, what to do with the things nobody wanted (Figure 4).<sup>5</sup>

Beforehand, from her pricing table Jean delivered soliloquies on value, including what to do with her grandmother’s hair. As she looked around the house for things to sell, she considered her collection of teacups in a china cabinet in the living room. First, she considered a pink one: “The trouble with this one, this belonged to my grandmother. I even had that appraised: \$35 in 1997...”

Then she looked at a blue and white one:

J: This was brought to me; I was always in charge of our nursing school reunion; 3 others lived in Madison from our class, there are still 2; one, Ginny Showers, helped me with the printing of a little booklet; she died of blood disease; her husband gave me a cup from her cup collection, as he did to other close friends, neighbors, and family. It means something to me; it’s not family and a recent kind of thing, but it’s hard in a way. Two dollars? Would that be sacrilegious for me to put that out there? Yes it would. Just because it was a very sweet gesture that he wanted me to have that. I guess I have keep it for while yet. Maybe our bigger estate sale.

The pink cup, whatever its value, was inalienable as an heirloom. The blue and white one, while “not family and a recent kind of thing”, was still more than just a cup, affected as it was by her friendship for Ginny Showers and the solemn gesture of Ginny’s widowed husband. Selling the cup, even in the friendly market of the garage, at least at that moment, would be a sacrilege against some god or gods (the dead, the loyalty, the sentiments, the conscience), and could simply not be done, yet. We hear Jean, here, calculating with precision the ethical, emotional, and even religious implications of her level of personal attachment to the cup, to the woman it represents,

---

<sup>5</sup> I presented an untitled 45-minute digital video assemblage of the 2002 garage sale on March 17, 2004 at The Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford, California.

and to the woman's husband, using a slide rule that determines when it can be released, under what circumstances, and for how much.

### **Moving out**

The move out of the house also helped make explicit some feelings about things that had heretofore rested unexpressed. Photographs are special condensations of connection, depicting as they do the absent and the dead; and photographic arrays can be like images in a reredos or iconostasis. But when a "stager" came from the real estate company to prepare the house for prospective buyers she suggested clearing the hallways and depersonalizing the walls. The family photos in the master bedroom, she said, had to come down.

Dave described the moment, and even had Jean take a photograph of it for my benefit (Figure 5):

D: For me symbolically, the breaking of the tie to this house came as I was taking down those family pictures, wrapping them up, and there's a picture that I gave you showing me wrapping those pictures in the bedroom. That was when symbolically and psychologically felt, I am moving, I am leaving this place.

And the same in my study, I had all those different pictures and award citations and that stuff on the wall behind my couch, and Jean said: "Well you're certainly not going to take all those to Oakwood." And I said: "Of course I'm taking those things to Oakwood, that's who I am! Without those I'm not me." So psychologically I broke another tie to the house when I put those in a box.

As they got ready for the movers, Jean and Dave realized that there were things, like the family photographs and Dave's memorabilia, that they preferred to put into a separate storage facility themselves. "Now our home is in that little shed there, all of our favorite things, that we personally didn't want any mover to touch, are there." Jean explained why she packed treasures for the storage unit herself; how she wrapped the stone eggs, the ceramic house for the Christmas crèche, the perfume bottles, her box collection. [D: The whatnot shelf; J: Oh the mini shelf! I never would have trusted any movers to move that].

Figure 6 shows the last photo taken of Jean and Dave in the house, after everything had been moved out, five weeks before they moved into the retirement home and Dave died, taken on the hearth where they and the boys had posed for Dave's father when they moved in forty years before.



Figure 5. Dave taking down the family photographs in the bedroom, April 29, 2006.  
Photo, Jean Cronon.



Figure 6. Jean and Dave on moving day, Oct. 26, 2006. Photo: Richard Pearce.

### **The Littlest Angel**

Some the items that had been in Dave's study were on tables at the visitation at the funeral home, and a week later at the memorial service in the Unitarian Church (Figure 7). Note that in some ways the former was a wake and the latter a funeral, but in both, familiar objects and photographs partially stood in for the corpse. Here again the notion of relics comes to mind. We see the stone thrown through his office window when he was Chairman of the History department, on which he mounted a proletarian figurine, which symbolically combined his defense of academic values during the turbulent years of anti-Vietnam war demonstrations and his rejection of the Soviet Communism they saw up close in their year of Fulbright teaching in Moscow in 1974.

Next to it was the book *The Littlest Angel*, by Charles Tazewell, a family favorite that Dave and Jean read to their sons and grandchildren. It is about a scruffy, disobedient 4-year-old angel boy, who does not behave well in heaven because he misses his box of favorite things from earth. When the box is brought to heaven he becomes a model angel, and when the Christ child is born, he chooses to give the box, including his deceased pet's dog collar, to the Christ child, and God is so impressed he converts the box into the star of Bethlehem. As a parable about the intimate connection of things to a sense of self and the religious virtue of relinquishing them, it struck a chord in the United States when it was performed as a radio play starting in 1939, and published in 1946. For the Cronons it was a signal way of transmitting to the next generations the enchantment of objects and their quasi-religious valence.

The family, the sons inform me, had an annual ritual of reading it aloud on Christmas Eve. As Bill Cronon wrote in an email, "...there's a lot going on in this story: not just our parents' association of objects with cherished memories, but our family's love of dogs; the centrality of Christmas gatherings and rituals; and our longstanding tradition of reading books out loud and oral storytelling in general." Both sons, it turns out, maintain the tradition in their own families. And each time they struggle to avoid weeping when they get to the part about the dog collar.

### **Burials**

The more explicitly religious aspect of things and their intimate connection to persons were visible in the family's funeral rituals.

When Lillian's corpse was ready, Wanda put a toy cat (which Jean had given Lillian) by her head, with Lillian's glasses, a \$5 bill, her crochet needles, a ball of yarn, and Lillian's mother Mamie's sweater. They also put a blank



Figure 7. Items on display for the visitation, Cress Funeral Home, Madison, Dec. 9, 2006. Photo: William Cronon.

check, and a bed jacket under her pillow “for passing the pearly gates, so she could go out like the pharaohs did”. Since Lillian had always carried a Kleenex in her hand after she stopped smoking, Jean and Wanda made sure she was buried with a Kleenex in her hand.

Wanda’s funeral was at the Methodist church, but it was rather secular. Family members talked to the minister, a very young woman, “to kind of turn this”, Dave told me, “into a Unitarian church service. She was very cooperative. Instead of a sermon she read a child’s story about a tortoise”. In remarks at the service, someone referred to Wanda’s proclivity for shopping. He said there were two things he couldn’t understand, why this wonderful spirit had been taken from us when she still had so much life; and why the K-Mart Company had gone bankrupt. At the gravesite there was just family, and, Jean said, “they put in little things, including her K-Mart charge card. I put in a note; a sugar cookie (her favorite) and little stones I had, feely stones. Someone brought a crystal Hershey kiss, we all touched it, then put on top, and a flower”. Others put in Scrabble cubes and lipstick.

I myself was present at Dave’s burial, where family members put small things in with the urn (an essay, chocolates, a miniature schaum torte, a coupon from Mel’s Custards), and I too put something I brought from Las Palmas.

In the habitus of this American family, there is a sense, almost completely unformulated, but implicit in feelings voiced and decisions about retaining or releasing, that most possessions are more than what they are. This became explicit when, after systematically inquiring about things on display or in collections I asked about workaday objects in the house that were purely utilitarian, like a fork. As Jean variously put it, “some things are just what they are, some things no”; “utilitarian pure and simple”; “doesn’t mean anything to me.” For Dave this included cars, which were “like any other commodity”. Such things were sometimes dismissed with the word “just”, as, on opening a cabinet: “just towels”.

This absence of connection contrasts with things that “mean something”, “have meaning”, “are meaningful” or “have memories attached”, things that people “have attachments to”, that “can’t be let go” and “can’t be gotten rid of”.

On examination, it turns out that the vast majority of objects in a household like the Cronons” carry with them or within them inflections, associated memories that endow them with a varying power of retention or retentiveness, and the capacity of connection to people, places, times, situations, and events. And of these, many objects, while unrelated to churches, cults, saints, theology, or God, may, I suggest, properly be considered

religious, in the sense that they connect with the deepest of emotions, with invisible or absent beings, and a sense of awe.

### Time and Place

I conclude with some considerations about time and place.

While the Cronon household, the sons tell me, was unusual in their neighborhood for the quantity of “tchotchkies” on display, I do not think it was exceptional for Middle America in its intersection of things, emotions, and memories. And I should add that what I have described here has not at all seemed foreign or exotic to student and adult audiences of presentations I have made in Spain, Hungary, Germany and Sweden.

But some more specific factors may be at work in the particulars.

1. How much is this product of a historical period: recipes, when there was home cooking; accumulation, when there was space and prosperity; and a particular family configuration – a daughter’s/sibling’s/aunt’s suicide.
2. The relative permanence of these people’s presence in their houses may make remembering easier. One thinks of the use of place-locations in memory systems of ancient Greece and Rome, and Mateo Ricci.<sup>6</sup>
3. On the other hand, the Cronons’ mobility as academics made their most special things more important when relocating the household. Before coming to the house I studied, where they resided for 40 years, they had lived in six other places. Dave said that on arrival in each new dwelling they would immediately put out their memories on display. “It was silly, but important to both of us.”
4. When people live somewhere far from their parents and far from their children, even the most vestigial place-holders may mean more. Such a factor would hold for emigrants, migrant workers, refugees, slaves, orphans, military personnel, multinational employees, as well as mobile academics.
5. I knew Jean and Dave and Wanda at a stage in their lives when their parents were not just absent, but gone. Death evokes or enhances the presence of the absent in things. There is an almost physical transformation of comfortable, taken-for-granted stuff to poignant relics at the loss of a wife, husband, parent, or sibling. Or the unbearable poignancy of the things of a deceased child, in the case of Jackie, and Nanni Moretti’s 2001 film, *The Son’s Room (La Stanza del Figlio)*.

---

<sup>6</sup> Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory*, London 1966; Jonathan Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, New York 1984.

6. Among these people the detailed attention to household things, where they are, whom they came from, whom they went to, what memories they bear, seems an overwhelmingly female skill and preoccupation. There is a gendered division of labor. The men tend to have hazier memories, aside for items they themselves may have bought or made.
7. There is great variation from family to family, and within families from sibling to sibling. When an extended family member's mother died, the widowed husband had a bonfire and burned everything. Lillian would be careful what she gave to Wanda, because Wanda was wont to let things go. And Jean was surprised that Dave's sisters showed less interest than Dave in their parents' things.

### Meaningful Things

Rather than decommodified, or enclaved, in the usage of Arjun Appadurai,<sup>7</sup> loaded, charged, or affected objects could be considered (using Jean's term) meaningful. And meaningful possessions seem to serve as mortar for lineages and anchors for a sense of self. I venture to say that these are the vast majority of human artifacts. Goods in stores or on the assembly line, rather than commodities or merchandise, can be understood as things not yet meaningful; and in yard sales, second-hand stores and flea markets, as things somewhat pre-charged with meaning.

A customer at the Cronon's garage sale summed it up. Kathryn Englebretsen picked out a homemade ceramic box made by Jean's father, John Hotmar, as Jean informed her when she paid for it. I asked Kathryn why she bought it.

K: I really like the design of this, it's a very nice shape, I like the color, I have a sister who collects antiques, and she has a bedroom set from the 1930s, and I think this would be beautiful on her dressing table. And then I was just told the story of how it's from Princeton. I grew up in Pardeeville, and when I was in grade school our basketball team would play against the Princeton basketball team. So that makes it even better.

I approached her again as she was leaving: "I want to see the happy customer." Kathryn held up her purchase with a big smile.

---

<sup>7</sup> Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: commodities and the politics of value", in Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life*, 3–63 [24], <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511819582.003>.

K: Well, of course I'm happy. And I go to garage sales because it's an inexpensive habit. Instead of spending my money on cigarettes or alcohol, I like to find interesting little things that may have really meant something to somebody at some time, and use them myself until I pass them on.

Dave and Jean chimed in from the check-out table. "That's the essence of your story." "All in a nutshell."

So, to sum up. These particular people are Protestants in upbringing, and, as Unitarians, particularly short on creeds, saints and religious images. But there is an invisible side to what they are and what they do that does not have much directly to do with religion, but gets at the kinds of things that religion also gets at. They are steeped in and relish things that connect them to others, living and dead, and nourish and practice these connections on a daily basis in a way that approaches religiosity. They are aware of the potential oddness of their activity in the eyes of outsiders and even to themselves, and acknowledge it with words like "funny", "funny-nice", "sacrilegious", "sick", "foolish", "obsessive", and "silly", that may express an awareness not so much of irrationality or childishness, but something else, similar to what Freud called the *unheimlich*, the uncanny. This is paradoxical, as this feeling here is so in fact associated with the home, so *heimisch*. Be that as it may, it seems to be part of their very nature, and they would be betraying themselves, their families, and their ancestors if they did otherwise.

What I am suggesting then, is that, as in these essays we think about more explicitly religious objects, that we remember that all charged things, every meaningful gift, not just the gold, frankincense, and myrrh of the Magi, and all objects, depictions and remains of lost loved ones, not just the relics, statues and icons of saints, have a religious quality and may indeed provide the emotional building blocks for material religious emotions. Or, to turn it around, all of us are ancestors-to-be in the process of bespirtualizing our own homes and things, and are on our way to ourselves becoming Lares and Penates. ▲

## **SUMMARY**

Extensive time with an elderly couple in Wisconsin learning about their things showed ways in which, for them, many objects had numinous aspects. Many of their things were more than what they were, in some cases with attributions of vitality, in others with connections to the absent and the dead. As together we made an inventory of possessions and the memories they held, it became clear that for this American family, things were bound up with people in ways that did not meet the eye. This article enforces the need to remember that all charged things, every meaningful gift, not just the gold, frankincense, and myrrh of the Magi, and all objects, depictions and remains of lost loved ones, not just the relics, statues and icons of saints, have a religious quality and may indeed provide the emotional building blocks for material religious emotions. Or, to turn it around, all of us are ancestors-to-be in the process of bespiriting our own homes and things, and are on our way to ourselves becoming Lares and Penates.

# Confessing the Deaf: *A Visual and Material Approach to Religion and Disability in Belgium, c. 1750–1850*

ELWIN HOFMAN & TINE VAN OSSELAER

---

Elwin Hofman is Assistant Professor of Cultural History at Utrecht University. Tine van Osselaer is Associate Professor of the History of Devotion, Mysticism and Spirituality at the Ruusbroec Institute of the University of Antwerp.<sup>1</sup>

e.l.hofman@uu.nl; tine.vanosselaer@uantwerpen.be

---

In eighteenth-century Belgium, a peculiar technique was developed to allow “deaf and mute” people to take the sacrament of Confession.<sup>2</sup> Religious teachers drew or had them draw the different sins they could commit from a model. These drawings were put together in a book, which the deaf or mute person had to take to their confessor. They could then point to the sins they had committed and receive penance and absolution. In various archives, libraries and private collections, we have located twenty of these books. They have all been drawn in what is now Belgium, between the mid-eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth century. We have not found examples of similar books in any other countries. They are not only interesting as a technology for confession of disabled people, but also reveal much about the visual and material aspects of religion and penance. In this chapter, we analyse discussions on religious communication through images in a period when the religious instruction of deaf people was professionalizing.

In the historiography of early modern and modern Catholicism, not much attention has been given to the implications of disabilities for the

---

<sup>1</sup> The authors express their warm thanks to everyone who helped in the search for the confession books, and especially to Inge Gheysen, Daniela Kromp, and Xavier Loppinet for generously sharing information and images.

<sup>2</sup> Although the term “deaf and mute” is generally considered outdated today, we have followed the historical usage of the term in our primary sources.

history of faith. Specifically for confession, its auricular character has been seen as self-evident. Penance was a key sacrament in the Catholic Church, which played an important role in people's everyday lives, especially so in a strongly Catholic region such as Belgium.<sup>3</sup> Generally three or four times a year, people entered the confessional, where they encountered the priest who asked them about their sins since their last confession. In order to be absolved and receive the adequate penance, they needed to tell him their sins and profess contrition about having sinned. The oral character of this ritual ensured the secrecy of the confession and gave much power to the priest, who could autonomously decide on penance and absolution. Scholars of confession have debated the extent to which this ritual was an vehicle for social control, church power, individualization, and sexual improprieties.<sup>4</sup> But they have generally taken the auricular character of confession for granted.<sup>5</sup>

Recently, religious historians have started to pay more attention to the experience of religion. Faith was not just an instrument of power, but something people felt and sensed. These experiences also have a history.<sup>6</sup> In their studies on religious conversion and enthusiasm, scholars like Monique Scheer and Pascal Eitler have shown how emotional and sensory aspects were entwined: people experienced their bodies as they had learned through religious discourse and practices.<sup>7</sup> With regard to the history of confession,

<sup>3</sup> On the central place of confession in everyday life in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Belgium, see E. Hofman, "A Wholesome Cure for the Wounded Soul: Confession, Emotions, and Self in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Catholicism", *Journal of Religious History* 42 (2018), 222–241 [225–228], <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9809.12455>.

<sup>4</sup> Among many studies of Catholic confession, most influential have been J. Bossy, "The social history of confession in the age of the Reformation", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 25 (1975), 21–38, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3679084>; S. Haliczer, *Sexuality in the Confessional: A Sacrament Profaned*, Oxford 1996, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195096569.001.0001>; W. de Boer, *The Conquest of the Soul: Confession, Discipline, and Public Order in Counter-Reformation Milan*, Leiden 2001, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047400448>; J. O'Banion, *The Sacrament of Penance and Religious Life in Golden Age Spain*, University Park 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780271060453>.

<sup>5</sup> As is evidenced by the title of the archetypical study of confession: H. C. Lea, *A History of Auricular Confession and Indulgences in the Latin Church*, Philadelphia 1896.

<sup>6</sup> Eitler, B. Hitzer & M. Scheer, "Feeling and Faith – Religious Emotions in German history", *German History* 32 (2014), 343–352, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gerhis/ghu063>; S. Cummins & M. Stille, "Religious Emotions and Emotions in Religion: the Case of Sermons", *Journal of Religious History* 45 (2021), 3–24, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9809.12726>.

<sup>7</sup> Eitler & M. Scheer, "Emotionengeschichte als Körpergeschichte. Eine heuristische Perspektive auf religiöse Konversionen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert", *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 35 (2009), 282–313, <https://doi.org/10.13109/gege.2009.35.2.282>; M. Scheer, *Enthusiasm: Emotional Practices of Conviction in Modern Germany*, Oxford 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198863595.001.0001>. For a gendered approach to the expectations concerning (religious) emotions and the senses, see T. van Osselaer, "Sensitive but Sane. Male Visionaries and their Emotional Display in Belgium in the 1930s", *Low Countries Historical*

there has been some attention for its changing “emotional economy”, but wider experiences of confession have remained out of view.<sup>8</sup> The importance of the sensory and emotional aspects of confession cannot be denied. The confessant was to express genuine feelings of repentance and only when the confessor believed them did they indicate the appropriate penance. In the confession practices for deaf people that we are studying here, the confessor would do so by pointing at the relevant picture in the confession manual. The books therefore offer us a glimpse of a confession practice that operated through a combination of visual and tactile elements, quite different from the auricular focus that has long dominated the study of confession.

The history of the intersection between disability and religion offers an exciting opportunity to reflect on the role of the senses in the history of confession. Disability history is a relatively young field, having come to maturation in the past decade with several overviews and handbooks.<sup>9</sup> Disability history often intersects with religious history, particularly because of the important role religious institutions have played in many regions in providing care and education for disabled people. Yet the religious experiences of disabled people, nor the practical implications of disability for religious life and rituals have often been studied. Only a few recent studies analyse specific practices, such as disabilities in convents, pastoral care for disabled people and the role of signing language in the development of preaching culture.<sup>10</sup> This chapter seeks to add to this literature by analysing the ac-

---

*Review* 127:1 (2012), 127–149, <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.1567>. See e.g. also the work on the perception of the divine (“hagiosensorium”): H. H. L. Jørgensen, “Into the Saturated Sensorium. Introducing the Principles of Perception and Mediation in the Middle Ages”, in H. H. L. Jørgensen, H. Laugerud & K. Skinnebach (eds.), *The Saturated Sensorium. Principles of Perception and Mediation in the Middle Ages*, Aarhus 2015, 9–23, <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.608130.4>; on religious visual culture: D. Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze. Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice*, Berkeley 2005, <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520938304>; and on haptic piety: N. Hallett, *The Senses in Religious Communities: Early Modern “Convents of Pleasure”*, Burlington 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Hofman, *A Wholesome Cure for the Wounded Soul*, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> S. Bursch, A. Klein & Verstraete (eds.), *The Imperfect Historian: Disability Histories in Europe*, Frankfurt am Main 2013; S. Burch, M. A. Rembis & F. L. Bernstein (eds.), *Disability Histories*, Urbana 2013; R. Hanes, I. Brown & N. E. Hansen (eds.), *The Routledge History of Disability*, London 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1201/9781315198781>; M. A. Rembis, C. J. Kudlick & K. E. Nielsen (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Disability History*, Oxford 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190234959.001.0001>.

<sup>10</sup> J. Kuuliala & R. Välimäki, “Deafness and Pastoral Care in the Middle Ages”, in S. M. Williams (ed.), *Disability in Medieval Christian Philosophy and Theology*, New York 2020, 179–202, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429202919-6>; S. T. Strocchia, “Disability Histories from the Convent”, *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 15 (2020), 74–83, <https://doi.org/10.1353/emw.2020.0005>; R. Oates, “Speaking in Hands: Early Modern Preaching and Signed Languages for the Deaf”, *Past & Present* 256 (2021), 49–85, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtab019>.

commodations made to deaf people in confession, and by adding a sensorial perspective to these practices.

As we will see, when they interacted with people with auditory and speech impairments, priests and theologians had to make explicit and reflect on assumptions they often believed to be self-evident. While some stressed the superiority of words, in practice, a more visual approach to faith was often proposed, especially for less well-off people. The confessional aids for the deaf and mute show that in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Belgium, the essence of the Catholic faith was not in words, but in certain attitudes, self-reflections and feelings. The penitent needed to communicate their sins and feel remorse – not necessarily orally express it.

### **1. Can a Deaf Person be Saved?**

Taking a confession from deaf people was a difficult enterprise. Since the middle ages, theologians and other religious writers had discussed whether deaf and mute people could take the sacrament of penance and, even more fundamentally, whether their souls could be saved. Raymond of Penyafort voiced the most common view, listing the deaf and mute among the “dubitabilia” in his *Summa de casibus poenitentiae* (1224–1226). A priest should do what he could to instruct deaf and mute people and lead them to contrition and penitence over their sins, using means such as words, texts, gestures and signs. He could give absolution when this seemed successful. Penyafort’s opinion was influential into the fifteenth century.<sup>11</sup> Others suggested that mute persons who were literate could write down their sins in lieu of an auricular confession, and that this confession was equivalent to that of a hearing person.<sup>12</sup> Not all authors were so flexible, however. If Saint Paul’s maxim was that “faith comes by hearing”, and there could be no salvation without faith, this effectively damned deaf people.<sup>13</sup> How could confessors ever be sure that deaf people properly understood religious teachings? Some scholars even believed that prelingually deaf people were incapable of abstract thought; let alone the finer points of theology. Confessors should not give them absolution.<sup>14</sup>

These questions led to continuing debates on whether deaf and mute people could and should confess and be saved, in the early modern period and in the nineteenth century. The predominant view remained that deaf or mute people should not be excluded from the sacraments.<sup>15</sup> But even in

---

<sup>11</sup> Kuuliala & Välimäki, “Deafness and Pastoral Care in the Middle Ages”, 189.

<sup>12</sup> Kuuliala & Välimäki, “Deafness and Pastoral Care in the Middle Ages”, 190.

<sup>13</sup> See more extensively on this topic Oates, “Speaking in Hands”.

<sup>14</sup> Oates, “Speaking in Hands”, 6–7.

<sup>15</sup> J. A. Fleming, “Seventeenth-century Casuistry Regarding Persons with Disabilities:

1830, for instance, the Abbé de Montaigne argued that prelingually deaf and mute people should be treated as children: since they were unaware of sin, they did not need to confess or receive absolution. Only if the deaf or mute person gave clear indications that they were aware of basic religious doctrines, they should be allowed to take the sacrament of penance.<sup>16</sup>

Most confessors, however, tried to accommodate deaf and mute people as much as possible. If deaf penitents presented themselves, Jean Charles Pallavicino stressed in his conduct manual for priests (1827), the confessor should not send them away, unless he knew of a specialized confessor in the vicinity.<sup>17</sup> For advice on how to proceed, many manuals for the clergy referred to the guidelines of Alphonsus Liguori (1696–1789), founder of the Redemptorist order and the go-to authority regarding confession. In several of his writings, Liguori reflected on the conditions of confession and what this meant in the case of a deaf parishioner. Proper confessions had to fulfil four key conditions, he argued: they had to be oral, secret, sincere and complete. Deaf and mute people could not satisfy all these conditions, but should still be accommodated. Literate people who could not communicate their sins orally, could do so in writing. For illiterate people, Liguori recommended that the confessor visited the household of the confessant in advance. There, he would be able to acquaint himself with the best ways to communicate with the deaf or mute person, for instance through signs. He could then take the confession of the deaf person in a private space. In these cases, Liguori believed that it sufficed if they confessed a single sin with signs at Easter and near death.<sup>18</sup>

Some of the accommodations confessors had to make were also to ensure the seal of the confession. Several authors provided practical advice on this matter. Some argued that due to the risks of exposure, deaf and mute people could not be obliged to confine their sins to paper. Others proposed solutions to reduce this risk. The seventeenth-century Jesuit Jacobus Granadus advised to use two papers, one with numbers and one with the corresponding sins, so that it only became clear which sins the deaf or mute person had confessed if one had both papers.<sup>19</sup> Manuals such as Chrisoph

---

Antonio Diana's Tract 'On the Mute, Deaf, or Blind", *Journal of Moral Theology* 6 (2017), 112–137.

<sup>16</sup> A. Montaigne, *Recherches sur les connaissances intellectuelles des sourds-muets considérées par rapport à l'administration des sacremens*, Paris 1829, 54–56.

<sup>17</sup> C. Pallavicino, *Le prêtre sanctifié par la juste, charitable et discrète administration du Sacrement de la Pénitence*, Avignon 1827, 14–15.

<sup>18</sup> A.-M. De Liguori, *Le confesseur des gens de campagnes ou Abrégé de la théologie morale*, Liège 1833, 226–229; idem, *Oeuvres complètes* vol. 26, Paris 1837, 200; idem, *Theologia moralis* vol. 6, Mechelen 1852, 390, 394, 574.

<sup>19</sup> Fleming, "Seventeenth-century Casuistry Regarding Persons with Disabilities", 129.

Leutbrewer's *Industria spiritualis* (1634), which contained little flaps with sins that a penitent could fold or unfold depending on whether they had committed this sin, could serve a similar purpose.<sup>20</sup> Cardinal Gousset, archbishop of Reims, writing 1853, instead advised the use of a "slate and chalk". The penitent wrote down their sins under the eye of the confessor and could erase them afterwards.<sup>21</sup>

Apart from changing the means of communication from speaking to writing or signing, the confession of the hearing impaired also demanded practical changes to material setup of the church. A well-prepared parish priest, so the Jesuit José Mach believed, had a confessional with a grid in his sacristy or at another location that was visible but not part of the general circulation route. This setting would allow him to hear the confession of deaf women, especially in dioceses where hearing the confession of women without a grid in between the parishioner and the priest was forbidden.<sup>22</sup> By the late nineteenth century, some churches – particularly in or near institutions for deaf people – installed special confessional boxes to allow for seeing penitents communicating with sign language and with enough light to be able to read what they wrote.<sup>23</sup>

## 2. Instructing the Deaf

Even with these accommodations, the key to a successful confession was still that deaf people were sufficiently instructed in religion, that they knew what sinning was and how it could damn their souls, which sins existed, and how they could receive absolution. Up to around 1800, the religious instruction of the deaf was mostly an individual affair.<sup>24</sup> Alexandre Rodenbach, a

<sup>20</sup> C. Leutbrewer, *Industria spiritualis: in qua modus traditur praeparandi se ad confessionem aliquam plurimorum annorum*, Cologne 1634; L. Ceyssens, "La pratique de la confession générale: 'la confession coupée' suivant le Christophe Leutbrewer", in J. Van Bavel & M. Schrama (eds.), *Jansénius et le jansénisme dans les Pays-Bas*, Leuven 1982, 93–113.

<sup>21</sup> T.-M.-J. Gousset, *Théologie morale à l'usage des curés et des confesseurs* vol. 2, Brussels 1853, 189–190.

<sup>22</sup> José Mach, *Le trésor du prêtre: répertoire des principales choses que le prêtre doit savoir pour se sanctifier lui-même et sanctifier les autres* vol. 2, Paris 1874, 114. Similar advice for all deaf and mute penitents in R. Knoll, *Katholische Normalschule für die Taubstummen, die Kinder und andere Einfältigen: zum gründlichen sowohl als leichten Unterricht in dem Christenthume, durch vierzig Kupferstiche; nebst einem dreyfachen Anhange, besonders der Anweisung zur praktischen Beicht*, Augsburg 1788, 179.

<sup>23</sup> B. Demuynck, *Hulpmiddelen met een geschiedenis (1800-1985). Doven- en blindeninstituut Spermalie*, Bruges 2009, 40. One such confessional box from c. 1900 has been preserved, for instance, at the institution of the Zusters van Liefde in Ghent.

<sup>24</sup> O. Claeys, "De eerste decennia van dovenonderwijs in schoolverband in België", in *Liber Amicorum Professor Dr Victor D'Espallier*, Leuven 1979, 187–209 [187]; H. G. Lang, "Perspectives on the History of Deaf Education", in M. Marschark & E. Spencer (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Deaf Studies, Language, and Education*, Oxford 2011, 7–17 [9], <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199750986.013.0002>.

blind man who wrote an extensive treatise on the situation of deaf and mute people in 1829 (and later a member of the Belgian parliament), discussed some examples of this type of education. He spoke to a deaf man in Moorslede, François Delefotrie, by then a septuagenarian, who related that he had been instructed in religious teachings by a deaf cousin in Heule and by a deaf family in Kortrijk.<sup>25</sup> This seems to have been a typical situation: older deaf people often instructed younger people, usually in an informal way. They taught both religious principles and sign language.

This informal instruction occurred in small, local and regional networks: all the places Delefotrie mentioned were in the western part of Belgium, near the French border. Heule was a small village about 14 kilometres from Delefotrie's Moorslede, and Kortrijk a provincial town 16 kilometres away. These local networks of deaf people who knew each other and shared teaching materials facilitated the transmission of a local deaf culture. When the first experiments started, in the eighteenth century, with teaching deaf people in small groups, this was also mostly a regional affair. Much like in classrooms for hearing people, teaching was still mostly individualized, and more advanced students could help their novice peers.<sup>26</sup> In Heule, for instance, Maria-Josepha De Brabanders taught several deaf children in 1762. One of her pupils, Joseph de Caigny, later continued her work as a religious instructor for deaf people.<sup>27</sup>

For this instruction, deaf people primarily relied on images. Delefotrie said that his fellow deaf instructors had lent him forty volumes of engravings, which had been "very useful for my instruction".<sup>28</sup> He himself owned a collection of religious books (including volumes about saints and martyrs, church history and religious dogmatics), replete with images. Although Delefotrie could not read or write, the combination of picture books and sign language had sufficed to allow him to fulfil all his religious duties. He went to confession every month.<sup>29</sup> Methods for teaching religion using images largely developed independently from each other, and we find them in different countries.<sup>30</sup> In early-eighteenth-century France, for instance, Jean Pontas argued that to educate deaf people, "one of the means that seems to us to be the best, is that of images".<sup>31</sup> A practical elaboration of this method

<sup>25</sup> A. Rodenbach, *Coup d'œil d'un aveugle sur les sourds-muets*, Brussels 1829, 205.

<sup>26</sup> A system which Rodenbach favoured: *ibid.*, 183–199.

<sup>27</sup> Claeys, "De eerste decennia van dovenonderwijs in schoolverband in België", 192.

<sup>28</sup> Rodenbach, *Coup d'œil d'un aveugle sur les sourds-muets*, 206.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 207–210.

<sup>30</sup> M. Buyens, *De dove persoon, zijn gebarentaal en het dovenonderwijs*, Antwerpen 2005, 32.

<sup>31</sup> J. Pontas, *Dictionnaire de cas de conscience ou Décisions des plus considérables difficultez touchant la morale & la discipline ecclesiastique* vol. 3, Paris 1734, 968.

## Overview of Confession Books

*This overview includes the short references we use in the text, the date of production (if known), and the current location of the books (if known). Unless otherwise noted, the information is taken from the books themselves or the catalogues.*

Bridwell: Date unknown. Texas, Southern Methodist University, Bridwell Library, BRMS 150.

Cursief: c. 1820. Current location unknown. Auctioned in 2006 by Cursief Auctions, Bruges.<sup>i</sup>

Carton 1: 1767 (?). Bruges, Spermalie Library, BC D3.2.3.2.1 BIEC.

Carton 2: Late eighteenth century. Bruges, Spermalie Library, BC D3.2.3.2.2 BIEC.

Carton 3: 1851. Bruges, Spermalie Library, BC D3.2.3.2.3 DiRAE.

EHC: Late eighteenth century. Antwerp, Hendrik Conscience Heritage Library, 760495 [C2-561 h]. Available online: <https://dams.antwerpen.be/asset/OrTgQekD8KjWcQUaNKxPKio8>.

English: Late eighteenth century. Current location unknown. In private possession of Michiel English, archivist of the Bruges bishopric, in 1953.<sup>ii</sup>

Goetgeluck: 1791. Current location unknown. In private possession of René Vander Plaatsen in Deurle in 1960.<sup>iii</sup>

Izegem: Late eighteenth century. Kortrijk, State Archives, Izegem Church Archives.

Kromp 1: 1803. München, Antiquariat Daniela Kromp.

Kromp 2: 1819. Baltimore, Walters Art Museum, W.963.

Kromp 3: 1821. München, Antiquariat Daniela Kromp.

Kromp 4: 1861. Charlottesville VA, Small Special Collections Library, MSS 16803.

Major Seminary: 1826. Bruges, Archives of the Major Seminary.

Platteau: Date unknown. Current location unknown. In private possession of R. Maes in Gentbrugge in 1976.<sup>iv</sup>

Ruusbroec: 1821. Antwerp, Library of the Ruusbroec Institute, Manuscripts, Neerl. 60. Available online: <http://www.fladrina.be/items/show/1324/>.

SA Bruges: c. 1831–1846. Bruges, City Archives, Hs 31.

Slosse 1: 1748. Kortrijk, State Archives, Goethals-Vercruyse (925), 392. Available online: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/bibliotheekkortrijk/sets/721576100787153581/>.

Slosse 2: 1821. Kortrijk, State Archives, Slosse (927), 33/BIS.

Van de Wiele: 1816. Current location unknown. Auctioned in 2006 by Van de Wiele Auctions, Bruges.<sup>v</sup>

<sup>i</sup> P. Elsen, “Drie biechtboekjes voor doofstommen. Archief Charles-Louis Carton Spermalie Brugge”, *Brugse Gidsenkroniek* 39 (2006), 48–56 [56].

<sup>ii</sup> A. De Meester, “Oude biechtboekjes voor doofstommen”, *Biekorf* 54 (1953), 31–7 [32–3].

<sup>iii</sup> R. Van den Abeele, “Het biechtboekje Goetgeluck”, *Jaarboek Kunst- en Oudheidkundige Kring Deinze* 27 (1960), 153–62.

<sup>iv</sup> Claeys, “De eerste decennia van dovenonderwijs in schoolverband in België”, 193.

<sup>v</sup> Elsen, “Drie biechtboekjes voor doofstommen”, 55.

has been preserved from Innsbruck in 1788, when Romedius Knoll, a Franciscan monk, published a set of 40 copper engravings, specifically designed for teaching deaf people core catholic principles.<sup>32</sup>

In Flanders, one of the books that was used by instructors for the deaf, including probably by Maria-Josepha de Brabander and certainly by Joseph de Caigny, was Joannes Steeghius' *De christelijke leerlinghe*, originally published in 1647.<sup>33</sup> This book was inspired by the so-called "Peasant's Almanachs" (Boeren-Almanachen), which replaced written text with images for those who could not read or write. Short texts in the forms of questions accompanied the images, so that those who could read could help those who could not.<sup>34</sup> Joseph de Caigny used Steeghius' book to prepare many (some suggest 300 to 400) deaf children for confession and communion. He also used sign language, an illustrated Bible and history book (apparently he loved teaching the French Revolution) and, somewhat surprisingly, two walking sticks. He had cut the artworks himself: one walking stick showed passages from the Old Testament, the other the Passion of Christ.<sup>35</sup> The rich existing visual Catholic culture, sometimes destined for children or illiterate people, could therefore be repurposed and added upon for the instruction of deaf people.

Despite these local initiatives, many priests worried in the eighteenth century that only few deaf and mute people received a proper religious education. This concern led to two related evolutions: the development of alternative methods for religious education, including those using a more advanced sign language, and the establishment of dedicated schools for deaf and mute people. A pioneer in this respect was the French priest Charles Michel de l'Epée (1712–1789), who was the first to create an institute for deaf students in Paris in 1770. He taught by means of signs (he had learned the Italian hand alphabet) and writing, and developed a sign language that was later deemed rather artificial. His successor at his school in Paris, abbé Roch Sicar (1712–1822) further developed his method, later called the "French method". Around the same time, Samuel Heinecke (1729–1790) opened a rivalling institute in Leipzig in 1778. Unlike de l'Epée, Heinecke did not be-

<sup>32</sup> Knoll, Katholische Normalschule für die Taubstummen, die Kinder und andere Einfältigen.

<sup>33</sup> J. G. Steegius, *De christelycke leerlinghe verstaenelycker uyt-geleyt door eene beeldensprake*, Antwerp 1647. See C. L. Carton, *Mémoire en réponse à la question suivante: Faire un exposé raisonné des systèmes qui ont été proposés pour l'éducation intellectuelle et morale des sourds-muets; [...]*, Brussels 1847, 13; Claeys, , "De eerste decennia van dovenonderwijs in schoolverband in België", 191–192.

<sup>34</sup> Claeys, "De eerste decennia van dovenonderwijs in schoolverband in België", 192.

<sup>35</sup> C. de Baere, "Het instituut der doofstomme en blinde van Moorslede 1834", *Biekorf* 70 (1969), 193–202.

lieve that sign language was a good alternative to spoken language. Instead, he focused on teaching deaf people how to speak – the “German method”. It was a purely oral method based on speaking and lip-reading. He believed that thoughts could only be stimulated via spoken language and his students needed to be able to speak before they were taught how to write.<sup>36</sup> For all their rivalry, both de l’Epée and Heinecke agreed that religious teachings with images were too imprecise. This was one of the main reasons for developing a special educational system.<sup>37</sup>

In Belgium, the first enduring institutional initiatives for teaching deaf and mute people took root in the early nineteenth century. The most important ones were a school in Ghent, established by canon J. Triest in 1825, and in Bruges, established by the priest Charles Louis Carton in 1838.<sup>38</sup> Like their international examples, these schools were established by clerics hoping to improve the religious education of people with disabilities. Convinced of the limitations of teaching through images, staff at both of these schools adopted L’Epée’s sign system. Carton explained his views on deaf education in a prizewinning essay in 1845. He noted that all teachers of deaf people had had the “simple and natural” idea to use prints and images when starting the instruction of deaf students.<sup>39</sup> For him, however, images worked best in combination with signing. Images, he believed, could only help to communicate something that was already known, they supported the materialization of an idea that was already there. Images could not teach deaf people something new or increase their intellect. On the contrary: they could lead to grave errors and misunderstandings, especially in religious matters.<sup>40</sup>

It is therefore not a coincidence that when Carton explained his plans for a new catechism for deaf people in 1838, he explicitly mentioned that while he would include images, these were not the means to communicate religious truths:

---

<sup>36</sup> Buyens, *De doven persoon, zijn gebarentaal en het dovenonderwijs*, 32–39; Lang, “Perspectives on the History of Deaf Education”, 10–11. On the debate between both schools, see also M. Rietveld-van Wingerden, “Educating the Deaf in The Netherlands: a Methodological Controversy in Historical Perspective”, *History of Education* 32 (2003), 401–416, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00467600304146>.

<sup>37</sup> B. Beelaert, C. Bruyneel & K. Leeman, *Vive la parole? Milaan 1880 als scharniersmoment in het dovenonderwijs*, Gent 2009, 36.

<sup>38</sup> For more details on schools for the deaf in Belgium, see Claeys, “De eerste decennia van dovenonderwijs in schoolverband in België”; Verstraete, “Een bijzondere zorg voor het zelf: Bijdrage tot de geschiedenis van het Buitengewoon Katholiek Onderwijs in België”, *Tijdschrift voor orthopedagogiek* 54 (2015), 272–277.

<sup>39</sup> Carton, *Mémoire en réponse à la question suivante*, 12.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 9.

These engravings are, neither in my intention, nor in the principles of my method of instruction, a means of making a truth understood, they are only a means of conveying more easily the explanations given by the written word.<sup>41</sup>

While institutions such as Carton's did not outright reject the use of images in religious instruction, they found that they did not suffice for proper religious instruction and relied much less on them than in traditional deaf education. Their preferred means of communication and instruction was through sign language. This continued up until the Milan Conference of 1881, when a preference for the German, oral method was made explicit.<sup>42</sup>

The high-level religious education that deaf institutions sought to provide in the early nineteenth century was not for everyone, however. The education they provided was expensive and lengthy, and only a select elite could afford it. Paul Thérèse David d'Astros, the archbishop of Toulouse from 1830 to 1851, was well aware of this. An elite education, he believed, was impossible for many common deaf people. He therefore officially sanctioned the use of images to teach less fortunate deaf people at least the basics of religion. He designed a catechism with images for deaf and mute people, focusing on baptism, confession and eucharist. He left other sacraments to the side to reduce the costs and still teach what was necessary for their salvation.<sup>43</sup> With d'Astros' blessing, many local, more informal initiatives to instruct deaf people, primarily using images, continued in the nineteenth century.<sup>44</sup>

### 3. A Special Technology for Confession

It is as part of these local initiatives that the confession books for deaf and mute people first occurred. Although it seems self-evident, given the pervasive use of images for teaching deaf people throughout Catholic Europe, to use picture books for confession, this does not seem to have been very common. All such books we have found are closely related, evidently cop-

<sup>41</sup> “[C]es gravures ne sont, ni dans mon intention, ni dans les principes de ma méthode d'instruction, des moyens de faire comprendre une vérité, ils sont seulement des moyens de rapporter plus facilement des explications données par la parole écrite.” Bruges, Archives of Charles Louis Carton, 117 (2.80 A 6), 15 Apr. 1838, Proposal for an adapted catechism for the deaf, 12–13. Similar objections against relying on images in Montaigne 1829.

<sup>42</sup> Beelaert et al., *Vive la parole? Milaan 1880 als scharniermoment in het dovenonderwijs*.

<sup>43</sup> D'Astros, *Catéchisme des sourds-muets qui ne savent pas lire*, Paris 1839, viii.

<sup>44</sup> Others were of a similar opinion as d'Astros, referring to the high costs and long duration of a professional education in the apologies of basic education with images, e.g. J. Valentin, *Le Prêtre juge et médecin au tribunal de la pénitence, ou méthode pour bien diriger les âmes*, Brussels 1845, 335; A.-R. Devie, *Rituel du diocèse de Belley*, Lyon 1834, 540; A. Rodenbach, *Les aveugles et les sourds-muets: histoire, instruction, éducation, biographies*, Brussels 1853, 111–20.

ied from one another. Moreover, in those case where there was an indication to their place of origin, they all referred to places in the south of what is currently the Belgian province of West-Flanders: Kortrijk, Meulebeke, Izegem, Ledegem, Bavikhove, Aarsele, Sint-Denijs. The practice seems to have spread bottom-up, through local networks of deaf people, rather than through institutional initiatives.

The oldest of the books we have been able to date with some precision (because the date of production was either mentioned in the front matter or in one of the coins depicted in the book), was produced in Kortrijk in 1748.<sup>45</sup> It was the property of Guillelmus De Deurwaerdere, who lived in the house called “Wit Ketelken” on the Kortrijk market square. The De Deurwaerdere family was a well-known family with many deaf members. It was with them that François Delefotrie learned about religion, as he related to Alexandre Rodenbach. “These people were wealthy”, he knew, and they had lent him many volumes with pictures.<sup>46</sup> Possibly, then, they also started the tradition of using a dedicated book with hand-drawn pictures to use during confession, and stimulated others to do this as well.

De Deurwaerdere’s book started with a request to the confessor, written in Latin, revealing that the user of the book was deaf and mute and wanted to confess his sins. The text asked to take him to a secluded space to declare his sins and receive a suitable penance in hope of receiving absolution. He regretted with his whole heart to have offended God with his sins. On the page next to this statement, there was a picture of a man kneeling before a priest in a chair, with a book in his hand. The confessant is wearing a skirted knee-length coat, breeches and a wig. Over the next pages, different sins are depicted, drawn in ink and painted grayscale, with occasional red accents for hearts or crosses. A Latin caption describes the sin in question for the confessor. The sins depicted ranged from distraction during mass over hating close ones to dishonest thoughts. After 36 sins, several blank pages followed, possibly leaving the option to include additional sins. Then followed possible penances: giving to the poor, hearing masses, fasting, or hitting the chest five times as an act of contrition.

Several other of the books are very similar to the book of De Deurwaerdere, with greater or lesser variations in style or contents, but all in greyscale with red accents. Most were created in the late eighteenth century, some in the first decades of the nineteenth. In the most similar one, the date in the coin has faded (possibly 1767). It was possibly drawn by the same hand and

---

45 Slosse 1. (See the overview at the end for an explanation of the short references.)

46 Rodenbach, *Coup d’oeil d’un aveugle sur les sourds-muets*, 206.



Figure 1. The first page from De Deurwaerere's confession book, with a request to the confessor in Latin and a drawing of the ritual of confession with the book. Photo: Slosse 1.



Figure 2. Eating meat on a day when it is not allowed. A sin depicted in the Ruusbroec copy from 1821. Note the hands signing that only “a little” meat was eaten, as well as the triangle with a dot, a common sign in almanacs referring to vigil days, the days when people had to fast in preparation of a holy day.

contained the exact same texts, albeit with a Dutch translation.<sup>47</sup> After the catalogue of sins, however, this book also contained a catechism in pictures, introducing the Holy Trinity, the Ten Commandments and the Five Commandments of the Church, the sacraments, the seven virtues and the seven deadly sins, death, the last judgment, hell and heaven. Only then did the book proceed (after some blank pages) with penances. Other books variously included or excluded such a catechism, sometimes in abbreviated forms.

Other books deviated more from the De Deurwaerdere copy. Several books were painted with watercolours. There is greater variation among these books, both in the colours used, the clothes worn and the sins included.<sup>48</sup> Overall, these were created slightly later than the greyscale ones, mostly in the early nineteenth century. Other copies have an entirely unique style: one is drawn entirely in pencil and not coloured, another was coloured using crayon.<sup>49</sup> The accompanying texts were most commonly written in Latin, sometimes in French or Dutch (or a combination of Latin with a translation). The introductory note announcing that the penitent was deaf and mute was sometimes absent or rephrased. These books mostly date from the early nineteenth century, with the most recent copies produced in 1851 and 1861. This was well after the deaf institutions had been established, but they were seemingly produced outside them.<sup>50</sup> There were no references to the deaf institutions in the books.

Only rarely do we get concrete information about how the books were produced. We know that some copies were drawn by a priest or religious instructor and sometimes gifted on the occasion of the first communion of the deaf person.<sup>51</sup> For instance, Joannes Petrus Platteau, a local priest in Meulebeke who took a particular interest in deaf people in the 1820s, drew several of the water-coloured books, including one for Theresia De Wulf.<sup>52</sup> Another book, drawn in 1851, was drawn by François de Raedt in Izegem.<sup>53</sup> Others, however, drew the pictures themselves after a model. Theresia Van Daele's book, drawn in 1816, noted that she had made the book herself.<sup>54</sup> In

---

<sup>47</sup> Carton 1. Other copies in a similar style are EHC and SA Bruges.

<sup>48</sup> These include Bridwell, Kromp 2, Kromp 3, Slosse 2.

<sup>49</sup> Carton 3, Izegem.

<sup>50</sup> Although Carton was clearly interested in them, for he collected three examples in his institute's library: Carton 1, Carton 2 and Carton 3.

<sup>51</sup> The Major Seminary copy from 1826 mentions that Jan Baptiste Verhaeghe, deaf and mute, received the book for his first communion.

<sup>52</sup> Slosse 2, preamble. See also Claeys, "De eerste decennia van dovenonderwijs in schoolverband in België", 193.

<sup>53</sup> Carton 3. We have not been able to find information on De Raedt's background.

<sup>54</sup> Van de Wiele.

such cases, the drawing of the sins and penances could itself be part of the religious instruction.

In any case, all the books were individualized. The main protagonists were men or women, depending on their user. Most of them wore nice clothes, suggesting the users were among the better classes. In some cases, clothing changed with the times (although men were depicted in breeches longer than they were fashionable; only in two of the books, one from 1826 and one from 1851, did the men wear trousers). Sins were sometimes added or removed, possibly to reflect the users' disposition. One book dating from c. 1830, for instance, gives particular attention to sins of indecency, including masturbation.<sup>55</sup>

The visual language these books use to depict sins and religious principles clearly drew from a tradition of devotional images for the general population. If we compare them with Steeghuis' popular visual catechism, we see that some scenes such as Hell or the Holy Trinity were quite similar. Some of the symbols Steeghuis' and other devotional books used, such as a triangle to denote a day, also returned in the confession books.<sup>56</sup> The visual sources the books used could also change. Some devotional books depicted hell in a different way (see figures 3 to 6). This different visualization also returns in some of the confession books. It indicates that the confession books were not always just copied from one another, but that their creators also returned to other visual sources of inspiration.

Interestingly, the books also contain traces of sign language: occasionally, hands are drawn that sign an added meaning, such as "a little bit" (one index finger near the top of the other), "give back" (a hand held out) or "a year" (a circle with the index finger). They do not conform to the sign language proposed by de l'Epée, so these signs may refer a local sign language developed within the deaf community.<sup>57</sup> The combination of visualization based on religious traditions with common symbols and hand signs shows that the books for confession were part of an exchange between priests trying to accommodate deaf people and a larger deaf culture.

The books also visualized the ritual of confession itself. In several books,

---

55 SA Bruges.

56 See also I. Gheysen, "De biechtboekjes uit de Bibliotheek Carton (Spermalie)", Brugge in 100 objecten, <https://bruggein100objecten.wordpress.com/2017/04/21/de-biechtboekjes-uit-de-bibliotheek-carton-spermalie/> +&cd=3&hl=nl&ct=clnk&gl=be, accessed 2020-05-06.

57 For comparison with de l'Epée's sign language, we have consulted R. A. C. Sicard, *Théorie des signes pour l'instruction des sourds-muets*, Paris 2008. Other sign languages referred to in Belgian sources also use other signs, e.g. L.-M. Lambert, *Le langage de la physionomie et du geste mis à la portée de tous suivi d'Une méthode courte, facile et pratique d'enseignement des sourds-muets illettrés qui sont hors des institutions spéciales, et des élèves arriérés de ces mêmes écoles*, Paris 1869.



Figures 3–6. Depictions of hell in Carton 1, Ruusbroec, Steeghuis and a detail of a devotional image preserved at the Ruusbroec Institute, Zinnebeelden, Uitersten (by A. Voet and M. Volders)

the deaf person is kneeling with a book in his hands, while opposite the confessor sits in a chair, admonishingly waving a finger.<sup>58</sup> In others, the confessor sits in an open box or confessional, but the setup is otherwise similar.<sup>59</sup> How this worked in practice remains unclear in most cases, but it reveals something about the corporeal nature of confession. Even in their special circumstances, they had to embody contrition before their confessor.

#### 4. What Matters in Confession

Many proponents of deaf education stressed that religious education through pictures could never reach the same level as religious instruction with sign language or through writing. In practice, deaf people and local priests in West-Flanders found that hand-drawn picture books could ameliorate deaf people's religious lives, helping those who could not read and write to confess and receive absolution. As such, they complicated the "auricular" in the "auricular confession". That this practice existed, and continued for over a century, shows the flexibility of confessional practice. The ritual could play to different senses when necessary. Its essence lay in the acknowledgment of sins and in penitence, not in the verbal recitation of sins.

The confession books owed their success in part, perhaps, to the agency they gave to deaf confessants. The confessor no longer needed to check in with the deaf person's friends or family to find out how to communicate with them, as Liguori had recommended. They could be more independent through the use of a book with both text and images. At the same time, their privacy and the secret of confession were guaranteed. The books, moreover, allowed for some individualization. While they could only contain a selection of possible sins, a confessor who knew the deaf person in question well could add new sins if needed.

It should be no surprise that some deaf people developed a strong emotional attachment to these confession books and other visual religious aids. François Delefotrie, whom we already mentioned above, testified about this to Alexander Rodenbach. He had borrowed several religious books with pictures, but they had been stolen by French soldier during the Revolutionary Wars in 1794. Delefotrie's brother added that "this loss had caused him so much grief, that he had cried for more than a fortnight".<sup>60</sup> It shows how material and visual religious culture was deeply embedded in the affective lives of deaf people.

Images, and the books that contained them, were a crucial element in

---

<sup>58</sup> Carton 1, EHC, Slosse 1.

<sup>59</sup> Confessional: Carton 3. Box: Carton 2, Kromp 2, Major Seminary, Ruusbroec, Slosse 2.

<sup>60</sup> Rodenbach, *Coup d'oeil d'un aveugle sur les sourds-muets*, 206.

the accommodations the Catholic Church allowed to include people with disabilities in faith. The view that the Church often preferred the spoken and written word in confession is not entirely misguided, but the confession books show that the reality was often much more complex. Showing an awareness of sinful behaviour and revealing one's sins to a priest put them on the track to salvation, not writing or speaking about them. ▲

#### **SUMMARY**

In eighteenth-century Belgium, a peculiar technique was developed to allow deaf people to take the sacrament of Confession. Religious teachers drew or had them draw the different sins they could commit from a model. These drawings were put together in a book, which the deaf person had to take to their confessor. They could then point to the sins they had committed and receive penance and absolution. We have located twenty of these books, all created between the mid-eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth century, a period in which education of deaf people was increasingly professionalizing and institutionalizing. In the context of schools for the deaf, teaching through images was controversial. In practice, however, the methods using images continued to be used, as not everyone could afford the expensive schools that provided more advanced deaf education. The confessional aids complicate the "auricular" in auricular confession and show how the ritual could play to different senses when needed. Its essence lay in the acknowledgment of sins and in penitence, not in the verbal recitation of sins.

# The Materiality of Incorruption: *From “Miraculous Bodies” to “Bodies on Display” in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Italy*

LEONARDO ROSSI

---

Leonardo Rossi is a postdoctoral researcher at the Ruusbroec Institute, University of Antwerp.

leonardo.rossi@uantwerpen.be

---

One of the characteristics shared by most of the 102 *incorruptibles* traced by Joan Carroll Cruz in two millennia of Christian history, in addition to the alleged absence of material corruption, is the staging of the miracle.<sup>1</sup> Whole bodies or portions of them (hands, legs, organs) are still today – or have been for years or even centuries – on display in precious reliquaries or in stately glass cases. Faces reshaped, softened and covered with wax, bones hidden by fabrics, folded hands and eyes closed in a sweet sleep demonstrate what Alain Corbin called “the meaning of the body in the imagination of fervent Christians” in the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> In the era of ceroplastic simulacra<sup>3</sup> and the efflorescence of the theology of the resurrection,<sup>4</sup> European church-

<sup>1</sup> The results presented in this article are the outcome of the research conducted for “Contested Bodies. The religious lives of corpses”, a Belgian-Swiss project funded by FWO/SNF. Joan Carroll Cruz, *The Incorruptibles: A Study of the Incorruption of the Bodies of Various Catholic Saints and Beati*, Charlotte 2012, VII–X.

<sup>2</sup> Alain Corbin, “L’emprise de la religion”, in A. Corbin et al. (eds.), *Histoire du corps*, vol. 2, Paris 2005, 51–83 [75].

<sup>3</sup> Massimiliano Ghilardi, “The Simulacrum of Martyrdom: Manufacture, Distribution and Devotion of Holy Bodies in Ceroplasty”, *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 183 (2018), 167–187 and idem, “Antonio Magnani and the Invention of Corporeality in Ceroplastics”, in R. Ballestrieri et al. (eds.), *Ceroplastics: The Art of Wax*, Rome 2019, 59–66.

<sup>4</sup> Fernando Vidal, “Brains, Bodies, Selves, and Science: Anthropologies of Identity and the Resurrection of the Body”, *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2002), 930–974, <https://doi.org/10.1086/341240>; Bradford Bouley, “Negotiated Sanctity: Incorruption, Community, and Medical Expertise”, *The Catholic Historical Review*, 102 (2016), 1–25 [5–8], <https://doi.org/10.1353/cat.2016.0056>.

es were filled with prodigious bodies not subject to the laws of nature and putrefaction. Is a corporeal miracle enough to transform a person who died in an “odour of holiness” into an officially recognised hero of the faith? And, above all, does it legitimise public exposure to the devotion of the faithful?

Although a powerful symbol full of cultural meanings and a potential receptacle of sanctity, the dead body has no religious value *in re ipso*, even when it seems to behave out of the ordinary. For the Roman Catholic Church, the lack of corruption, the flexibility of post-mortem flesh and the emission of fragrances are not evidence of divine election or supernatural phenomena; therefore, they do not justify particular reverence or honour on the altars. Alexandra Walsham argues that what gives religious significance to a corpse is the union of “beliefs and practices that accumulate around” it.<sup>5</sup> Thus, it is not a corporeal prodigy that transforms – or re-signifies – a body into a devotional object. In the centuries-old Catholic history, we know numerous legends that tell of corpses that did not rot or stink in the days following their death. After the initial popular clamour, however, the burial marked progressive obliteration from memory, and no one claimed the nature of temporary corruption to be extraordinary.

On the contrary, if beliefs and devotional practices centred around the dead body, the story could take another turn, pushing local communities to ask civil authorities to exhume the remains and ecclesiastical ones to inaugurate the canonisation process. If these dynamics took place, a widespread belief could emerge that transformed a miraculous body into *corpus incorruptus* and sometimes even considered worthy of being exposed to the veneration of believers. The *incorruptibles* described by Cruz exhibited in many places of worship were not only prodigious corpses but embodiments of success stories in which beliefs and practices transformed organic wrappers into objects with religious significance and therefore deserving to be displayed.

In this article, I will illustrate the strategies and steps that led from the perception of the corporeal miracle to its public display through the analysis of the widespread phenomenon of uncorrupted bodies in Italy from the nineteenth until the first half of the twentieth century. In particular, I will point out the elements that allowed this evolution which had four fundamental stages. First, (1) the legal and conceptual shift from organic matter to objects with religious significance. (2) The corpse’s incarnation of the saint’s charisma and community identity, becoming a “cultural capital” with historical and social value. (3) The canonisation process and numerous

<sup>5</sup> Alexandra Walsham, “Introduction: Relics and remains”, *Past & Present; Supplement* 5 (2010), 9–6 [14], <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtq026>.

body analysis practices. (4) Finally, the “making of incorruption” that is the process aimed at publicly displaying the remains. Before examining these steps, I consider it appropriate to analyse the incorruptibles in more detail. Who were they, and what is meant by uncorrupted bodies?

### The Italian In corruptibles

The English Jesuit Herbert Thurston, a famous “investigator” of the supernatural, identified six main categories in which to classify posthumous corporeal phenomena: a preternatural fragrance released by the dead body, the total absence of *rigor mortis*, immunity to natural decay, bleeding after death, the presence of body heat and, finally, the “movement” of parts of the body (such as bent heads, spasms and muscle jerks).<sup>6</sup> These indications of holiness could occur separately, appear jointly, or all at the same time. For the Jesuit, these phenomena, particularly the incorruption of bodies, have always had a significant impact on the faithful. The first testimonies were reported from the fourth century of the Christian era, and since then, hundreds of cases have been traced.<sup>7</sup> The power of this alleged miracle was such that, before the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries reforms to the canonisation process, alone it could be enough to create cults and devotions to saints.<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Woodward agrees, affirming that although “the Roman Catholic Church does not regard an uncorrupted body as a sign of sanctity”, traditionally believers attribute to incorruption “a strong indication of divine favour”.<sup>9</sup> What is meant by incorruption?

Cruz distinguishes three types of incorruption: “the deliberately preserved, the accidentally preserved and the incorruptibles”.<sup>10</sup> By “uncorrupted” we mean the last type, those bodies not embalmed or subjected to conservation techniques, and not naturally mummified but miraculously free from corruption. The absence of decay can affect specific organs (such as the heart), parts of the body (head and hands), or the whole corpse. It can also have a limited duration (a few days after death) or continue for years. While Cruz focuses on the supernatural dimension of post-mortem corporal phenomena, as if the miracle was enough to create cults and legends, the object of this article is not the phenomenon itself but rather the dynamics that have led some corpses to be singled out as religiously meaningful. This deci-

<sup>6</sup> Herbert Thurston, *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism*, London 1952, 233–234.

<sup>7</sup> Cruz, *The In corruptibles: A Study of the Incorruption of the Bodies of Various Catholic Saints and Beati*, XXVII.

<sup>8</sup> Thurston, *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism*, 236.

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth L. Woodward, *Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn't, and Why*, New York 1990, 83–84.

<sup>10</sup> Cruz, *The In corruptibles: A Study of the Incorruption of the Bodies of Various Catholic Saints and Beati*, XXVII.

sive distinction allows me to pay attention not only to the supernatural fact or to its (contested) nature but to the perception of it and how the faithful, clergy, and scholars have approached it. Scholarship has indicated that the concept of incorruption is not unanimous and immutable; it changes according to contexts, historical periods, the evolution of medical discoveries and the interaction between science and religion.<sup>11</sup> What in the past was considered free from decay could now be seen differently. Furthermore, although exceptional, the miracle is not decisively valid proof. That requires it to be approved, remembered and eventually confirmed or replicated. In line with modern studies on relics and the materiality of the sacred, it is more productive to analyse which perceptions, convictions and beliefs were widespread about these exceptional corpses, not only by the authorities in power (religious, civil, cultural) but also – and above all – by pious believers and members of local communities.

In collaboration with Andrea Pezzini,<sup>12</sup> we have identified 186 bodies that behaved in extraordinary ways in the lands that make up modern Italy between the end of the eighteenth and the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> This number does not claim to be definitive but represents the tip of the iceberg of a more complex and underground phenomenon, whose ephemeral or hidden experiences often escape the historian's radar. By "ephemeral" and "hidden" experiences, I mean those cases in which the news of the incorruption did not excite widespread rumours but only circulated within a small circle of the faithful and then disappeared quickly. Furthermore, not all corpses of heroes of the faith are constantly scrutinised or publicly displayed, so there is no official list or other way to identify them. Having made this necessary premise, we can see the distinction between temporary and permanent incorruption even in the traced cases. For some corpses, the exceptional preservation lasts only a few days after death (44,5%), while others were found without decay even years after their demise before becoming dust (8,5%). Today a hundred bodies (53,75%) are on display, often in churches, shrines, and religious institutes. The phenomenon affects men and women, with a slight majority of the former

<sup>11</sup> Bouley, "Negotiated Sanctity: Incorruption, Community, and Medical Expertise", 4.

<sup>12</sup> Andrea Pezzini is a PhD in the history of Christianity and religious studies at the University of Bern (Switzerland) and a member of the international team "Contested Bodies". I would like to take this opportunity to thank Andrea for his meticulous and painstaking research in archives and libraries, which has made it possible to gain a better – though likely not yet complete – understanding of the phenomenon of incorruptibility of bodies with religious significance in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Italy.

<sup>13</sup> In addition to Thurston and Cruz, another attempt to census the uncorrupted, with particular focus on Italian cases, was made by Giuseppe Fallica, *Il miracolo dei corpi incorrotti in 2000 anni di storia della Chiesa*, Tavagnacco 2008.

(56,5%). On the other hand, the number of members of religious orders appears to be much higher, 85% of the total. Unsurprisingly, many belonged to religious orders (Capuchins: 6,5%, Franciscans: 3%, Passionists: 3%, Carmelites: 2%). There were also bishops and archbishops (8%), popes (1,5%), lay people (15%) and above all founders and foundresses of new religious institutions (40%). From a mere quantitative point of view, we observe how the nascent religious communities in nineteenth and twentieth centuries Italy aspired to have the bodies of the founders with them. Immediately after the death of the future saints, they contacted religious and civil authorities asking that their human remains be transported within the foundation and, after a successful canonisation process, publicly exposed to members of the religious institute and the faithful. The shared perception was that their bodies, even if dead, encapsulated the essence of the founding mothers and fathers, keeping their charisma “alive” and thus perpetuating their spiritual model over generations.

From this overview of the Italian framework, I want to underline some essential aspects helpful for this article. First, I focus on a hundred cases in which bodily relics were exhibited and not whole miraculous bodies. Why did only some corpses attract the limelight while others did not? Moreover, as we have seen, most of the uncorrupted bodies on display belong to founders of new religious institutes. Is it a simple coincidence, or is there a deliberate strategy behind it? Finally, it does not seem to be by chance that the Roman Church officially recognises the human remains of these founders and foundresses with post-mortem corporal phenomena as servants of God, blessed or saints. Did their wonders influence the canonisation, or did formal ecclesiastical approval underlie public display? I will answer these questions by illustrating the steps that led to the conceptual and material evolution from prodigious bodies to bodies on display, focusing in particular on the uncorrupted founders of new religious institutes.

### **From Organic Bodies to Relics**

The first step of transforming a body into an object full of religious meaning is to lose its connotation of organic matter, that is, to be declared an inorganic substance by law. We can demonstrate this essential turning-point through the sources kept in the archives of the Sisters of St Dorothea in Rome relating to their founder and future saint Paola Frassinetti (1809–1882). At the urging of the sisters, on 12 March 1903, the first *recognition* of her body took place under the supervision of clergy members and representatives of the Rome municipality. Doctor Gualdi, head of the Health Department, declared that “the body was perfectly preserved and intact, even

if the face was a dark wood colour and the hands were lighter but stripped of skin”.<sup>14</sup> This finding was interpreted in three ways. On the one hand, the nuns acclaimed a miracle: Frassinetti had been divinely graced by another prodigy, namely the incorruption of the flesh. On the other hand, Gualdi asserted that it was natural mummification, while the head of the public cemetery stated that “the remains are still in a phase of putrefaction, so the corpse cannot leave the graveyard.”<sup>15</sup> Despite the heated protests of the sisters, the body was put back in the coffin and left in Verano.

However, the Sisters of St Dorothea did not lose hope but continued to send petitions and complaints to civil and religious authorities until they arranged the second recognition on 24 February 1906. Even in that case, “the body for the goodness of the Lord is perfectly intact as it was three years ago”.<sup>16</sup> Doctors and specialists agreed that “her human remains are to be considered a real inorganic substance and no longer a corpse”. From a legal point of view, “since it is no longer a real corpse, there is no reason to observe those provisions prescribed by the Mortuary Police regulations for the burial”.<sup>17</sup> With these words, the prefect of Rome guaranteed the “conversion” of Frassinetti’s body into an inorganic object no longer subject to Article 72 of the Mortuary Police Regulations of 25 July 1892, so it could leave the cemetery to be transported to the congregation she founded. As we will see later, civil officers and physicians of the municipality continued to intervene, examining the human remains of the saint-to-be, but this passage marks the fundamental step in the shift of both responsibility and perception. For the secular authorities, Paola Frassinetti was simply one of the many deaths buried in the Verano cemetery and their task was to ensure that her body – like that of any other person – was not desecrated. On the contrary, for the nuns, that dead body embodied a multiplicity of meanings: it proved the divine election of the founder, visibly confirmed her miracle, encapsulated her charisma and conferred legitimacy and continuation on the new foundation.

From the convent’s sources, we know that the primary concern of the nuns was to preserve the miracle as much as possible. For them, the fact that Frassinetti’s human remains appeared uncorrupted twenty-four years after her death was no guarantee that this material state would last for-

---

<sup>14</sup> Rome, Archive of the Congregation of the Sisters of St Dorothea della Frassinetti [hereafter ACSSDF], *Relazione della prima ricognizione della salma della Madre Fondatrice*, f. 3r

<sup>15</sup> ACSSDF, *Relazione della prima ricognizione*, f. 4r.

<sup>16</sup> ACSSDF, *Notizie sulla Salma della Fondatrice ricavate dal Diario di Sant’Onofrio dell’anno 1906*, 3.

<sup>17</sup> ACSSDF, Letter from the Prefect of Rome to the Mother Superior, 24 Feb. 1906, unnumbered page.

ever. They adopted two strategies. Through detailed descriptions, medical reports, and photographs, they tried to produce abundant evidence that would certify and remind future generations of the phenomenon. In addition to creating the basis of memory, the nuns did everything to ensure that “the body would remain incorruptible indefinitely”.<sup>18</sup> Under the supervision of Dr Gualdi, the body was subjected to numerous chemical treatments. It was immersed for three months in a special antiseptic liquid based on zinc salts and bleach. Later it was washed, exposed to the open air, subjected to various procedures, but always treated with the utmost reverence.<sup>19</sup> For the religious community, it was not a simple inorganic object as the municipal officials had declared, but a precious relic that had to be cared for and protected. As exceptional as it may seem, Frassinetti’s case is not unique but rather part of a trend. The sisters of another saint-to-be, Maria Crocifissa Di Rosa (1813–1855), appealed to the bishop and the emperor of Austria so that they could return the body of the foundress from the public cemetery of Brescia to the Mother House.<sup>20</sup> The same was done by new congregations recently established who felt the need to possess the founder’s body at their headquarters. This first step marks a practice that may seem obvious but is often forgotten by scholars: long years can pass from the observation of the miracle to the permanent display of the corpse. Before this happens, someone needs to claim the mortal remains, take care of them and keep the saint’s fame alive by promoting beliefs and practices imbued with precise meanings for the faithful community. But what meanings and powers do these prodigious bodies embody?

### **The Body as “Preservation of Charisma” and “Cultural Capital”**

Weberian theories on charisma have profitably inspired sociologists and historians, who have not hesitated to define world-famous political leaders, spiritual and religious mentors, celebrities and contemporary pop stars as charismatic figures.<sup>21</sup> As far as saints, prophets and mystics are concerned, scholarship has dealt abundantly with the Middle Ages and the early modern period,<sup>22</sup> while still little has been done on the more recent saints.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup> ACSSDF, *Seconda ricognizione della venerata salma della Madre Fondatrice Paola Frassinetti*, 1906, f. 10r.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., f. 5v and f. 13r.

<sup>20</sup> Brescia, Diocesan Historical Archive [hereafter ASDBs], Rel. 14, Religiosi, Fascicolo 1, Ancelle della Carità-Ospitaliere, 1855–1859, Letter from the Bishop of Brescia Girolamo Verzeri to Franz Joseph I of Austria, 22 Dec. 1855, f. 11v–12r.

<sup>21</sup> John Potts, *A History of Charisma*, Hounds Mills 2009, 106.

<sup>22</sup> Gary Dickson, “Charisma, Medieval and Modern”, *Religions* 3 (2012), 763–789 [769–772], <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel3030763>.

<sup>23</sup> Among the recent studies on contemporary charismatic leaders with religious see

We might ask how their communities perceived these uncorrupted bodies during their lifetime? Did they enjoy a reputation as charismatic leaders? These questions could deflect our focus on their post-mortem history to return to talking about their earthly story. In fact, this reflection helps us to understand the posthumous dynamics and why these bodies were claimed, preserved, venerated and in some cases even exposed. As is well known, for Max Weber, charisma is one of the possible forms of power.<sup>24</sup> This type of authority – based on the leaders' recognised, proven and extraordinary qualities – is built on the mutual relationship between leaders and followers. As long as they manage to provide for the needs of the community, their power is maintained. Weber calls charismatic religious leaders "religious virtuosi" and argues that they must perform miracles to preserve their special status.<sup>25</sup> The death of the leader, and therefore the cessation of this dynamic, implies for Weber a delicate moment of transition in which the genuine but unstable charismatic authority is routinised, that is, the process in which the power is conveyed to other entities (successors, councils, a bureaucratic office holder).<sup>26</sup>

Dan Lainer-Vos and Paolo Parigi offer a different view. For them, charisma does not die with the leaders, and they can continue to prove their exceptionality even after death with miracles. For this reason, scholars prefer the expression "preservation of the charisma" instead of "routinisation".<sup>27</sup> In essence, the post-mortem miracles are the new way in which leaders' authority is expressed to the faithful, and the community does not replace them with a successor. Stories of miracles and healings, rituals and relics can maintain the relationship of trust between leaders and the audience. These dynamics seem to mainly reflect those related to the bodies of the founding saints of nineteenth-century Italy. In life, founders and foundresses of religious institutes were perceived as charismatic leaders in their communities and already looked upon as saints, even without any formal recognition. Through their individual qualities and the ability to provide for the demands of the audience (spiritual reforms, assistance to the poor and the sick, creation of schools and hospitals), they built their authority, supported

---

*Women's History Review* 29:1 (2020).

<sup>24</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, Berkeley 1978, 244.

<sup>25</sup> Leonardo Rossi, "Religious Virtuosi" and Charismatic Leaders: The Public Authority of Mystic Women in Nineteenth-Century Italy", *Women's History Review* 29:1 (2020), 90–108 [102], <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2019.1590500>.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>27</sup> Dan Lainer-Vos & Paolo Parigi, "Miracle Making and the Preservation of Charisma", *Social Science History* 38 (2015), 455–481 [459–462], <https://doi.org/10.1017/ssh.2015.21>.

not only by their status within the Catholic hierarchy but by their miraculous skills. Most saints-to-be were famous in their lifetime as *machines à miracles*, (miracle machines) capable of prophesying future events, working miracles and embodying supernatural signs. Unlike other saints, where the relics maintain direct contact with the faithful, the phenomenon of incorruption represented the emblem of the posthumous miracle, proof that the Lord continues to give the founder divine grace. Their bodies, devoid of decay, thus encapsulate the essence and power of the saint, becoming what Myriam Nafte called “cultural capital”.<sup>28</sup> For Nafte, the corpses are not only devotional objects but much more. They are a receptacle of holiness and thaumaturgical powers, have an identity and legitimising function and guarantee the institution’s prestige. In sum, they are monuments of memory.

The case study of Maria Crocifissa Di Rosa can help to exemplify this theoretical reconstruction. Di Rosa became famous in her lifetime not for her privileged social status (she belonged to the high aristocracy) but for her heroic charitable activity during the cholera epidemic of 1836. With the support of the local clergy, she founded a pious union of women – called *Spedaliere*, then officially recognised as the congregation of the Handmaids of Charity (*Ancelle della Carità*) in 1851 – devoted to the care of the sick and the education of young people. Her personal charisma was based on her tireless philanthropic work but also on alleged mystical gifts. Numerous witnesses called to testify for her canonisation process stated that Di Rosa was endowed with divine grace (penetration of hearts, knowledge of occult and future things, and thaumaturgical powers).<sup>29</sup> Her congregation grew and expanded during her life, opening numerous houses in northern Italy. When Di Rosa died, however, everyone worried about the foundation’s continuation. The sisters and the clergy defined her demise as “a public misfortune”.<sup>30</sup> In the sources of the trials, we read that “when the Servant of God expired amid the groans and weeping of all the Handmaids, the older Sisters competed with each other for the honour of presenting final services to the body of their Foundress, whose face is still today beautiful and composed, from it breathed a celestial air that inspired devotion and respect”.<sup>31</sup> In the hours following her death, news began to spread that her body was exempt

<sup>28</sup> Myriam Nafte, “Institutional Bodies: Spatial Agency and the Dead”, *History and Anthropology* 26 (2015), 206–233 [206], <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2015.1030636>.

<sup>29</sup> ASDBs, *Processus informativus. Ordinaria Auctoritate constructus Brixiae super Fama Sanctitatis vitae virtutibus et miraculis Servae Dei Sor Mariae Crucifixae di Rosa, Fundatricis Ancillarum a Charitate*, 139–140.

<sup>30</sup> ASDBs, *Processus Super Virtutibus et Miraculis in specie*, 1914, 138.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

from *rigor mortis* and continued to be flexible. The candles near her coffin did not melt, and the flowers remained fresh and fragrant. For three days, the people went to “see and touch the venerated remains, so much so that to prevent riots, guards had to be placed at the gates”.<sup>32</sup>

According to the argumentation set out by Lainer-Vos and Parigi, the miracle of the incorruption of her flesh allowed the preservation of her charisma upon death. As already mentioned, a year later, the nuns convinced the Bishop of Brescia to ask the emperor to transport her body to the convent. The motivation they provided was “the ardent desire that everyone had to keep our mother with us”.<sup>33</sup> The posthumous miracle and possession of the corpse had the function of keeping her charisma alive, preserving the privileged link created by Di Rosa with religious and secular authorities, and attracting the faithful eager to pray at her tomb. The same story can also be read in the sources preserved in the convent of St Dorothea in Rome. Once the body returned, the sisters visited the body of the foundress. The daily agenda rotated around her: morning prayers were made in her chapel as was the “greeting” in the afternoon and evening. Each novice was introduced into the congregation by going to “meet” the foundress, who was a special object of attention. In essence, the community seemed to maintain a relationship with the saint-to-be as if she were still alive and they took concrete action in spreading her fame further, distributing relics and devotional images, organising masses and events in her memory, and financing the canonisation process. Ultimately, we can say that the life of the religious community gravitated around the body-capsule of the saint’s charisma, so much so that it became an emblem of the congregation’s identity.<sup>34</sup>

### **The Canonised Body: Formal Recognition**

In addition to keeping the mortal remains, conserving and placing them at the centre of devotional practices, it was necessary to take a further step to obtain ecclesiastical approval. A fundamental condition in preserving charisma is not to assert authenticity independently but, in the Catholic context, to appeal to the recognition of Rome.<sup>35</sup> Canonisation involves the official creation of new saints and their cult, guaranteeing full support to the beliefs, practices and devotions developed around them. For the faithful and especially the religious communities, it was an almost obvious act to ask the diocesan authorities to open the beatification process. This represented not only new and hoped prestige for the foundation but also the respect of

<sup>32</sup> ASDBs, *Processus Informativus*, 145.

<sup>33</sup> ASDBs, *Processus Super Virtutibus*, 241.

<sup>34</sup> ACSSDF, Letter from Sr Riccarda Chini to the Sisters, 30 Dec. 1990, f. 1r.

<sup>35</sup> Lainer-Vos & Parigi, “Miracle Making and the Preservation of Charisma”, 456.

specific protocols. The seventeenth-century reforms wanted by Pope Urban VIII (1623–1644) strictly prohibited any form of the public veneration of the saint-to-be before the *fiat* of the Congregation of Rites (currently known as the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints) and the pontiff. In particular, news about miracles and supernatural phenomena, visible manifestations of devotional practices and cults went against the decrees of the *non-cultu* and involved the exclusion of the candidate from the race to the altars.<sup>36</sup> Among the condemnable acts were the lighting of votive candles near the tomb, the placement of ex-votos, and the publication of books of miracles or news circulating by word of mouth about posthumous wonders.

From the time of the reforms of Prospero Lambertini (future Pope Benedict XIV), supernatural phenomena were no longer considered proof of holiness, but only the heroic virtues were the *conditiones sine qua non* for a positive outcome of the cause.<sup>37</sup> The uncorrupted corpses do not constitute proof of a miracle; however, some exceptions were recognised (for example, the prodigy of the tongue without decay of St John Nepomucen).<sup>38</sup> Even a well-known sceptic like Thurston thought that “under very exceptional circumstances, the supernatural preservation of a body of a saint is sometimes admitted”.<sup>39</sup> Regardless of possible supernatural phenomena, the material dimension of the body held particular importance in the canonisation process. The human remains were subjected to various exhumations and specific examinations of the body. The goal was to check the conditions in which it was, verify that the body of the future saint was not in danger and that no one had stolen parts of it for illicit purposes. In the cases of the Italian *incorruptibles* studied, we can note that the religious community or the local clergy often requested the analysis of the bodies. In addition to being a preparatory stage for the process, it was seen as a moment in which the community could come into close contact with the founder. In the archive of St Dorothea (Figure 1), some photographs testify how the nuns used to rush in groups to pray around her remains, touch the body, take it in procession in the convent, and show it to novices and the most trusted faithful.<sup>40</sup> These moments could be defined as “community building” as they also were intended to revive and strengthen the connection between

---

36 Woodward, *Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn't, and Why*, 75–76.

37 Mario Rosa, “Prospero Lambertini tra regolata devozione e mistica visionaria”, in G. Zarri (ed.), *Finzione e santità tra medioevo ed età moderna*, Turin 1991, 521–550.

38 Thurston, *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism*, 243–244.

39 Ibid., 252.

40 ACSSDF, *Notizie sulla Salma*, 6.

the younger members and the founding leader. Masses, songs and stories functioned to recall and spread the charisms of the saint-to-be.

In addition to making public cults lawful, officially confirming the saint's charisma and examining the human remains, the beatification (or subsequent canonisation) guaranteed another significant advantage: the possibility of displaying the body. In the previous paragraphs, we have seen how the sisters claimed the corpse of the foundress and did everything they could to obtain it. In 1906, Frassinetti's body returned to the Mother House, and her uncorrupted body was welcomed as a prestigious relic.<sup>41</sup> After analysis and preservation efforts, the nuns asked the person in charge of the canonisation to intercede with the pope to bury Frassinetti above ground and in a crystal coffin. The permission was granted; however, he remembered that although Frassinetti's body seemed exceptionally uncorrupted, it could not – yet – be exhibited.<sup>42</sup> In fact, putting a body on display was considered contrary to the norms of the *non-cultu*. Finally, with the beatification, which took place on 8 June 1930, the nuns could destroy the wall that prevented the faithful from admiring her body.<sup>43</sup> Only with formal ecclesiastical recognition could the uncorrupted body, after almost half a century, be displayed for public veneration.



Figure 1. The Sisters of St Dorothea around the body of the foundress.

Photo: Archive of St Dorothea, Rome.

41 Ibid., 4.

42 Ibid.

43 "Il Messaggero", 6 Jun. 1930, 5, 52, 134.

## The Creation of Incorruption: the Body on Show

The Vatican's recognition of the heroism of the saint was the necessary authority for the exhibition of a prodigious body. However, not all human remains were as well preserved and cared for as that of Paola Frassinetti. In some cases, usually with the last recognition of the beatification, the body was recomposed. On 17 November 1919, yet another intervention was carried out on Di Rosa's body. Sixty-four years after the death and the temporary incorruption, it appeared to have gravely deteriorated.<sup>44</sup> The doctors thus reassembled the corpse for the exhibition after her beatification (1940). However, the difficult period of the Second World War and the transfer of Di Rosa's body to a safer place delayed the exposition operations, which took place only after her canonisation.

Even more particular is the case of Bartolomea Capitanio (1807–1833), co-founder with Vincenza Gerosa (1784–1847) of the Congregation of the Sisters of Maria Bambina. Only a month after signing the opening act of the foundation, the young Capitanio – considered a “living saint” by the inhabitants of Lovere – died, leaving the newborn and unstable institution in the hands of Gerosa. In this case, probably because Gerosa guaranteed the succession of the charismatic power, there was no particular interest in her body, even if – respecting the nineteenth-century hagiography *topos* – it was free of corruption during the days of the exposure to the public.<sup>45</sup> In fact, in the papers of her beatification process, we do not see significant references to her body or legends relating to the phenomenon of incorruption. The story took another turn at the death of the other co-founder. After eleven years of burial in the municipal cemetery and with the introduction of the beatification process, the coffin of Gerosa was transported into the convent on 1 December 1858.<sup>46</sup> When it was opened, the onlookers discovered the wonder. Although inside there was water and mud, her corpse was completely uncorrupted, flexible, and even – from some cuts on her tongue and fingers made by surgeons for tests – blood came out.

The news of the miracle spread in the diocese to the extent that the Bishop of Brescia, Mons. Girolamo Verzeri, opened an investigation.<sup>47</sup> Despite this, the nature of her incorruption remained open and led to frequent examinations of the body. It is important to emphasise that once both foundresses were beatified and the new sanctuary dedicated to them completed (consecrated on 1 October 1938), the sisters asked permission to exhibit the bodies

44 ASDBs, *Exuviarum recognitio canonice*, 9–11.

45 ASDBs, *Acta primordalia super fama sanctitatis*, f. 33v.

46 ASDBs, *Ricognizione della Tomba S. Vincenza Gerosa*, ff. 1r–iv.

47 *Ibid.*, f. 2r.

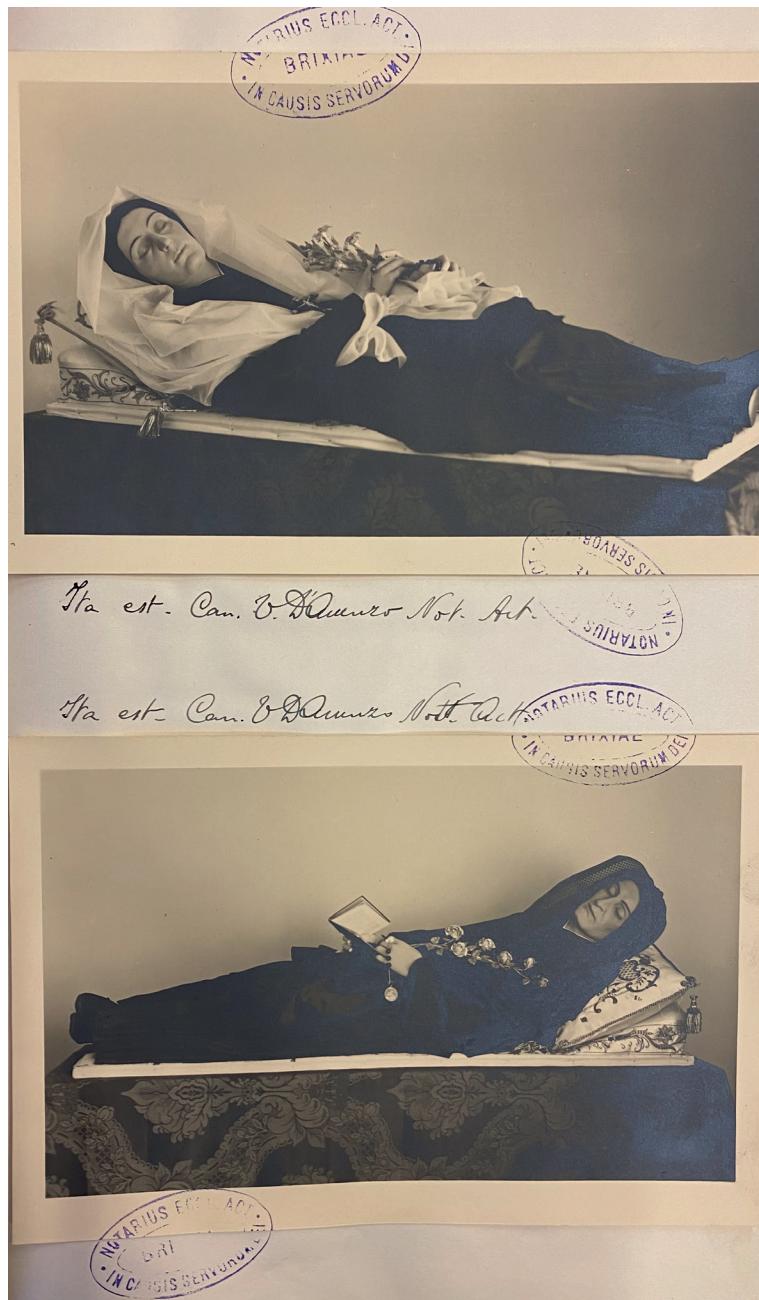


Figure 2. Photograph of the bodies-simulacra of St Bartolomea Capitanio and St Vincenza Gerosa in the sanctuary of Maria Bambina in Lovere.  
Photo: Diocesan Historical Archive, Brescia.

of the future saints. The Milanese sculptor Leonardo Secchi was commissioned to make the death masks to be placed on the face and hands, while other experts reassembled the bodies (especially that of Capitanio, of which only the bones remained), thus making the “miracle” of incorruption.<sup>48</sup> As we saw, while the absence of corruption had already been emphasised in the case of Gerosa, no one had ever talked about the prodigious body of Capitanio before. After the display of the simulacra, like two sleeping women, the inhabitants of Lovere and the faithful cried out for a miracle and considered their preservation extraordinary despite the well-known intervention of artists and sculptors. When on 18 May 1950, Pius XII canonised the foundresses, their bodies were carried in procession throughout the town and made the tour of Lake Sebino by boat to show all believers the miracle of the uncorrupted saints.<sup>49</sup>

The long process consisting of the attestation of the miracle, checks of the body and the opening of the beatification process ends with the creation of incorruption and the public exposure of the body. The beauty of it symbolised to the faithful the Christian victory over death, the triumph of faith over sin and the saint’s holiness.

### Conclusion

In this article, rather than focusing on the phenomenon of incorruption, I have concentrated on the dead bodies of people who lived in Italy between the nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth century and displayed due to their religious significance. Among a hundred bodies still on display traced, 52% belonged to founders of new religious institutes. One explanation may be that these communities used the posthumous miracles of the founders as a strategy to preserve their charisma. The prodigious bodies were seen as a “vessel of holiness”,<sup>50</sup> and the members tried to bring them back into the institution, starting the “new” life of the body as an object full of religious meanings.

In addition to the perception of the wonder, these corpses underwent a long process before being publicly exposed. The Catholic Church does not recognise any value to supernatural phenomena and prevents improper cults for heroes of the faith not yet formally canonised. Thus, although a corpse was perceived as uncorrupted after death, it was treated as an ordina-

<sup>48</sup> ASDBs, *Canonizationis BB Bartholomeae Capitanio et Vincentiae Gerosa*, Sessio Secunda, 12 September 1938, f. 4r.

<sup>49</sup> Carla Vitali Mandaia (ed.), *Memorie dalla canonizzazione delle sante loveresi alla celebrazione del cinquantenario 1950-2000*, Lovere 2001, 41–47.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains*, Princeton 2015, 45, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400874514>.

ry human body and buried in civil cemeteries. Thanks to the interest of the religious community or the faithful, it could later be transferred to another place, and the steps necessary to verify the miracle could be taken. Among these, there was the examination of the remains, the attribution of specific meanings (such as the preservation of the leader's charisma or the function of "cultural capital"), the introduction of the canonisation process and the creation of incorruption (that is, the material reconstruction of the supposed miracle). When all the stages of this journey were accomplished, the prodigious body could be transformed into a body on display.

Ultimately, the goal of this contribution was to demonstrate that behind these human-shaped simulacra, there is not simply an alleged posthumous miracle. The perception of it and the creation of beliefs are more important than the actual state of conservation of the bodies. Complex and linked dynamics involving the religious community, the faithful and also the diocesan and Vatican clergy transform private and local devotions into formalised cults through the canonisation processes. It is not surprising that the Italian *incorruptibles* with religious significance all belong to saints and *beati* officially recognised by the Holy See, while at the same time, maintaining a solid popular devotion and specific local meanings for each community. ▲

#### SUMMARY

This article examines incorrupt bodies in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries Italian Catholic context, focusing on the founders of new religious institutes. The aim is not to analyse the supernatural phenomenon itself but rather to understand the dynamics that led certain bodies to be perceived as religiously significant and thus displayed for veneration by the faithful. It identifies four key phases: (1) the legal and conceptual transformation of the deceased into religious objects; (2) the embodiment of the founder's charisma and communal identity, creating 'cultural capital'; (3) the canonisation process, including exhumations and examinations; and finally (4) the 'making of incorruption' that is the procedure aimed at publicly displaying the remains. The article concludes that the perception of miracles and the creation of beliefs surrounding them are more important than the state of preservation of the corpses. The cases analysed demonstrate that behind the display of incorrupt bodies lies not merely a presumed posthumous miracle but a social construction of religious meanings.

# Sanctuary Paintings in Dalarna's Free Churches, 1850s–2000s

JANICE HOLMES

---

Janice Holmes is a historian living and working in Falun, Dalarna.

janice.e.holmes@gmail.com

---

Swedish nonconformity has received considerable scholarly attention. The emergence in the mid nineteenth century of a cluster of new denominations and religious organisations under the influence of the transatlantic evangelical revival has been widely understood as playing a key role in the democratization of Swedish society.<sup>1</sup> With many of these groups formally leaving the Lutheran state church in the 1880s, the need for premises led to the construction of many chapels (*bönhus, missionshus, kapell*). While there has been significant interest in the architectural value of these buildings and a sustained effort to catalogue and protect them,<sup>2</sup> very little attention has been paid to this “free church” interior, at least from a material culture perspective.

While there has been some discussion of free church interior materiality, such as the changing location and meaning of the small table often found in front of the pulpit (Sw. *det lilla bordet*),<sup>3</sup> no one has really examined the most prominent feature of the chapel interior: the large, colourful and figurative paintings which can often be found displayed behind the pulpit. Within

---

<sup>1</sup> Sven Lundkvist, *Folkrörelserna i det svenska samhället 1850–1920*, Stockholm 1977.

<sup>2</sup> Torbjörn Almqvist et al., *Vad folket byggde: Ett utkast till folkrörelsernas byggnadshistoria*, Stockholm 1979; Eva Selling, *Bönhus, missionshus, kapell: Kulturhistorisk dokumentation i Kronobergs län*, Växjö 1995; Carl-Johan Ivarsson & Henrik Olsson, *Väckelsens hus i Värmland*, Karlstad 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Sune Fahlgren, “Rum för möten med Jesus och för församlingsgemenskap i frikyrklig tradition”, in Sven-Åke Selander & Stina Fallberg Sundmark (eds.), *Heliga rum i dagens Sverige, Svenskt Gudstjänstliv* 83, Kristianstad 2008.

Catholic and Lutheran churches, where such decorations are common practice, these artistic works are called “altar paintings” (Sw. *altartavlor*) and are part of a long Christian tradition of altar decoration. Within a Swedish free church context, however, the use of this terminology is more complicated. Free church sources refer to these visual works as simply “paintings” (Sw. *tavlor*), or “background” or “backdrop paintings” (Sw. *fondtavlor, fondmålningar*), which seems rather to neglect their religious context. This article, therefore, adopts the descriptive term “sanctuary painting” as a way of bridging these two partial descriptions.

What is not evident from current research is why the free churches in Sweden chose to decorate their interiors with sanctuary paintings. Free church sources have little to say on what, to the movement’s own members, seems to have been a self-evident practice. From an external perspective, however, this decorative practice demands explanation, not least because of its manifestation in *evangelical* interiors, in the buildings of an international religious movement known for its low church theology and its resistance to visual imagery in sacred spaces. Much of the research on free church building practices in Sweden suggests that chapel architects were deeply influenced by the Reformed Protestant building styles of the early modern period and the emerging nineteenth-century fashion for secular auditoriums popularized by English and American revivalists.<sup>4</sup> Such claims, however, can only be based on a comparison of architectural exteriors and the corresponding design of chapel spaces. An examination of international Protestant (and evangelical) *interiors* shows that they are not decorated with anything like a sanctuary painting. In fact, across four centuries, the Protestant churches of the European, British and American traditions have displayed virtually no figurative decoration of any kind, although there are recent re-evaluations of this portrayal in some national contexts.<sup>5</sup>

This article, therefore, seeks to identify the source of the Swedish free church practice of sanctuary paintings and briefly examine its meaning and importance. In order to root this investigation in a particular context, it has been decided to examine sanctuary paintings as they have appeared, between the 1850s–2000s, within the free churches in Dalarna, a county in central Sweden which has a ready availability of source material, where free church affiliation was spread evenly across the county and whose proportion of adherents, when the movement was at its height, was closely represen-

<sup>4</sup> Inger-Britt Holmlad, *Hören Herrens Röst! Svenska Missionsförbundets kyrkobyggande fram till 1915 med tonvikt på Gävle-Daladistriket*, Värnamo 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Jacolien Wubs, “Presenting the Law: Text and Imagery on Dutch Ten Commandment Panels”, *Entangled Religions* 7 (2018), 78–108, <https://doi.org/10.46586/er.v7.2018.78-108>.

tative of the country as a whole (5.22 % compared to 4.79% in 1952).<sup>6</sup> An investigation of Dalarna's sanctuary paintings, therefore, is likely to have a reasonable comparability to other parts of Sweden.

The evidence which has emerged from this study of Dalarna's sanctuary paintings suggests that, rather than looking to foreign missionary influences, the origins of the practice of sanctuary paintings should be attributed to the more immediate influence of existing Swedish decorative practices: Lutheran attitudes towards church decoration and the strong influence of domestic folk painting traditions. Unlike the relative stability of altar paintings as a decorative feature in Lutheran church interiors, free church sanctuary paintings have been subject to significant movement. Many are still in their original form and location but more have been lost through repair, renovation and, significantly since the 1970s, chapel closures. This article concludes, therefore, by examining the discourses used within the free church movement to articulate the changing value of sanctuary paintings. Sanctuary paintings, if they lose their original purpose, are vulnerable to removal and loss unless they acquire a new identity as "precious heritage".

### **Sanctuary Paintings in Dalarna**

In Dalarna, the main source for the identification of sanctuary paintings has been the Free Church Project (Sw. *Frikyrkoprojektet*) which ran in various forms between 1974–2008.<sup>7</sup> In its work to record every known chapel in Dalarna, a complete inventory with interior photographs was carried out for every building still in congregational ownership and basic details were recorded for those that had been sold or demolished. Project material suggests that between 1850–2008, 438 buildings had been used for free church worship. In the late 2000s about three-quarters (322) of these buildings were still standing. Of these only 40 per cent (133) were still in congregational possession and thus warranted an interior photograph. And of these interiors about one third (44) had a sanctuary painting. With the addition of paintings discovered in other sources, from buildings in the Project which lacked an interior photograph, or from decorative schemes which had been lost or renovated over time, more than 100 sanctuary paintings have now been identified. It seems reasonable to suggest that approximately 25–30 per cent of Dalarna's chapels may have at one time had a sanctuary painting.

It is important to be aware that there was no single way for a free church to be decorated. Local congregations were at liberty to design and decorate

<sup>6</sup> Frikyrkliga Samarbetskommittén, *De fria kristna samfunden i Sverige: en utredning*, Falköping, 1958, 236–237. See also Lundkvist, 72.

<sup>7</sup> The Free Church Project collection is part of the wider collection of free church materials located at *Dalarnas folkrörelsearkiv*, Falun.

their chapels any way they liked. Sanctuary paintings, therefore, represent a fairly broad category of artistic works. The free church interiors examined in this study were considered to have a sanctuary painting if a painted figurative representation was affixed to any wall of a sanctuary in a way that was visible in a surviving photograph. Excluded, therefore, was the consistently popular practice of the painted text or motto, because these lacked a figurative or scenic component. Three-dimensional crosses, a decorative practice that became popular in the later twentieth century, were also excluded, because they were not painted. If a text accompanied an image, as it often did, or a cross was placed against a painted background, as it often was, then these were counted as sanctuary paintings. Inclusion was not, therefore, based on size, originality or method of hanging. Small framed prints were included on the same terms as enormous original canvases and wall murals.

The majority of the sanctuary paintings in this Dalarna sample are comprised of a single image depicting a narrative scene in an emotional and colourful style (Figure 1). The majority depict Jesus, often in some kind of an outdoor location, with angels or other onlookers, and displaying some aspect of his divinity, such as his transfiguration or ascension, or acting in his role as a teacher or comforter. These scenes are most frequently displayed on the wall behind the pulpit and face the entrance to the sanctuary, although they can sometimes be found in other locations. Their method of display has been clearly influenced by their size. Smaller works are framed and hang freely while larger canvases are fixed to the wall with wooden battens. There are a number of exceptions to the single framed image norm. In some interiors the figurative depiction is painted directly on to the wall as a mural. In others the decoration incorporates several figurative images into a larger decorative scheme that covers an entire wall or even a whole chapel interior. Some paintings display a non-figurative scene. For example, the interiors associated with the Salvation Army always depict some form of their “Blood and Fire” logo. In other chapels, paintings portray a single cross or, more common in late twentieth century interiors, a neutral abstract design.

Because of the dynamic nature of the free church landscape in Dalarna it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions about the geographical or denominational distribution of sanctuary paintings. For example, the sanctuary paintings in this study are represented in every one of Dalarna’s fifteen councils (Sw. *kommun*) and in roughly similar proportions to their population density. It is unsurprising, therefore, that a quarter of the sanctuary paintings (24) are located in the county’s most populous councils of Falun and Borlänge. However, locating and identifying sanctuary paintings has been highly dependent on the survival and discovery of a relevant photograph.



Figure 1.1. "Come Unto Me (*Kommen till mig*)", a copy of Carl Bloch's "Christus Consolator", unknown artist, Vika chapel (SMF), Mora, mid-2000s. Photo: Photo 612, Free Church Project, *Dalarnas folkrörelsearkiv*, Falun.



Figure 1.2. Depiction of Jesus teaching the people from a boat (Luke 5:1-3), which hung behind the pulpit of the SMF chapel in Falun from c. 1920s to 1959. Here on display at Dalarnas Museum. Photo: author, 2023.

The high number of sanctuary paintings found in the less heavily populated councils of Mora (10), Leksand (14) and Rättvik (13) could be attributed to a greater tendency to church decoration in these areas, but could also rest on the fact that the online digital photograph collections available for these councils made it particularly easy to find “lost” paintings.

Making claims about any denominational preference for sanctuary paintings should also be approached with caution. Dalarna’s two largest free church denominations are the Baptists, whose history stretches back to the beginnings of the evangelical revival in the 1850s, and the Mission Covenant church (Sw. *Svenska Missionsförbundet*, hereafter SMF), who split from the Lutheran church in the 1880s. As expected, about two-thirds (68) of the sanctuary paintings in this study are located in SMF and Baptist interiors. However, twelve other denominations and a number of independent congregations are known to have operated in Dalarna. Sanctuary paintings have been identified, therefore, in Adventist, Philadelphia and Methodist interiors, in chapels belonging to the Salvation Army and Örebro Mission or operated by unaffiliated or ecumenical groups of local believers. Only two denominations stand out as possibly underrepresented in their display of sanctuary paintings. Of the twenty-nine congregations known to have been affiliated to the *Evangeliska fosterlandsstiftelse* (EFS) only four are known to have displayed a sanctuary painting. Despite its rapid growth in the mid twentieth century to become the third largest denomination in the country, only three out of more than forty Pentecostal chapels have been found with a sanctuary painting.

### **Sanctuary Paintings in their International Context**

In order to understand the origins of sanctuary painting decoration in Dalarna’s free churches, it is necessary to explore the practice of altar decoration within the Christian tradition both before and after the Reformation. From earliest times it has been customary in the Christian tradition to supplement the liturgy with visual aids as a means of instruction. In the Middle Ages this practice was formalised into the voluntary custom of decorating the altar of a Christian church with a “framed artistic representation of a sacred subject”.<sup>8</sup> This “altarpiece” could be a wooden cabinet that stood on an altar (a “retable” or Sw. *altarskåp*) or a freestanding wooden structure that stood behind it and covered the entire wall right up to the ceiling (a “reredos”).<sup>9</sup> In countries where Reformed Protestant ideas initi-

<sup>8</sup> Daniel DeGreve, “Retro Tablum: The Origins and Role of the Altarpiece in the Liturgy”, *Sacred Architecture* 17 (2010), 12–18 [12].

<sup>9</sup> Ann Catherine Bonnier and Ingrid Sjöström, *Kyrkornas hemligheter*, Stockholm 2013.

ally took hold, such as in France, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Scotland, altarpieces were swept away as part of the wider rejection of figurative imagery within Protestant worship spaces. As Nigel Yates' study of European religious interiors shows, reformed Protestants reordered church interiors so that preaching was centralized and the altar was marginalized.<sup>10</sup> Altars became moveable wooden tables while grand, elevated pulpits became the permanent central focus. Without a fixed position within the chancel, there was now no place for an altar decoration. For both principled and practical reasons, then, across much of Protestant Europe, the "plain" style of interior decoration became the norm.<sup>11</sup>

Similar trends also held sway in the British Isles. At the Reformation English churches were "stripped" of their decoration and altars were moved out of their central position.<sup>12</sup> Altars were later "restored" to a permanent place in the chancel by a "via media" reached in the early 1700s,<sup>13</sup> but the fashion for altarpieces within Anglicanism never reappeared, although there are some interesting exceptions.<sup>14</sup> Gothic revival churches of the late nineteenth century display, not the single figurative paintings that had become the style in seventeenth-century Swedish Lutheran interiors (Sw. *altartavlor, altaruppsats*), but medieval-style reredos with their detailed treatment of smaller images across multiple rising layers. The Protestant plain style can be seen even more clearly in the buildings of early-modern British nonconformity. Early Baptist and Congregational interiors were conspicuously devoid of visual imagery.<sup>15</sup> A similar style was exported to the United States and can be seen in the early colonial meeting houses of Connecticut and the Anglican churches of South Carolina.<sup>16</sup> Even the most aspirational of the neo-gothic British Victorian nonconformist interiors rejected figurative decoration in favour of a central elevated pulpit and organ with surrounding galleries.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Nigel Yates, *Liturgical Space: Christian Worship and Church Buildings in Western Europe 1500–2000*, Farnham 2008, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315592749>.

<sup>11</sup> Per Gustaf Hamberg, *Temples for Protestants*, Gothenburg 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580*, New Haven 1992.

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth Fincham & Nicholas Tyacke, *Altars Restored: The Changing Face of English Religious Worship, 1547–c.1700*, Oxford 2008, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198207009.001.0001>.

<sup>14</sup> See the Ten Commandment board (attributed to Pompeo Batoni (1708–1787) at Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Weston-on-the-Green, Oxford or the 1840s altarpiece in St. Peter's Church, Leeds.

<sup>15</sup> Martin S. Biggs, *Puritan Architecture and its Future*, London 1946.

<sup>16</sup> Gretchen Townsend Buggeln, *Temples of Grace: The Material Transformation of Connecticut's Churches, 1790–1840*, Hanover 2002; Louis Nelson, *The Beauty of Holiness: Anglicanism and Architecture in Colonial South Carolina*, Chapel Hill 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Christopher Wakeling, *Chapels of England: Buildings of Protestant Nonconformity*, Swindon 2017.

Figurative decoration is also absent from the British and American evangelical interiors of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The large revivalist spaces that became popular after the 1850s, like the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, were largely undecorated auditoriums. Small rural chapels in late nineteenth-century Wales may have adopted the secular fashion for Arts and Crafts-style stencilling,<sup>18</sup> but decorative practice in the “tin tabernacles” of Britain<sup>19</sup> and the “gospel halls” of Northern Ireland<sup>20</sup> extended to no more than a biblical text or religious motto decorating the back wall of the preaching platform. Within international Protestantism, the one place outside of Sweden where an altar painting could be found was in the church interiors of American Lutheranism. Such mimicry provides practical evidence for what Robert Ostergren suggests, in his study of “transplanted” Dalarna communities in the United States, was a network of shared church decorative practices within Scandinavian communities on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>21</sup> International Protestantism may have influenced the external appearance of Swedish chapels, but it certainly cannot take credit for the free church practice of the sanctuary painting. This style of interior decoration was shaped instead by the distinctively local visual and material practices rooted within Swedish Lutheran church and popular domestic decorative traditions.

### Distinctive Sanctuary Paintings

At the Reformation, Lutherans adopted a conservative attitude towards church decoration. In Lutheran Germany and Scandinavia, there were almost no acts of iconoclasm and many church interiors were left nearly intact. In Sweden, side altars and statues were removed but *altarskåp* were frequently left in place. It was only in the 1600s that these medieval altar decorations started to fall victim to the growing fashion for *altartavlor*, large figurative paintings with elaborate architectural framing, and *altaruppsats*, a type of reredos imported from the Italian counter-reformation.<sup>22</sup> Lutheran altars, therefore, never lost their central position and were always decorated, a continuity clearly noticeable in Dalarna. In the late nineteenth century, for example, medieval *altarskåp* were still on display in the churches

<sup>18</sup> John Harvey, *The Art of Piety: The Visual Culture of Welsh Nonconformity*, Cardiff 1995, 12–17.

<sup>19</sup> Ian Smith, *Tin Tabernacles: Corrugated Iron Mission Halls, Churches & Chapels of Britain*, Salisbury 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Judith Cole, *History of Mission Halls throughout Northern Ireland*, Belfast 2017; Tim Grass, *Brethren and their Buildings*, Glasgow 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Robert C. Ostergren, *A Community Transplanted*, Madison 1988, 302–309.

<sup>22</sup> Inga Lena Ångström, *Altartavlor i Sverige under renässans och barock*, Stockholm 1992.

in Gagnef and By, while the one that had decorated the altar in Stora Tuna, Dalarna's ancient diocesan seat, had only been given away in 1757 when a new, more fashionable *altartavla* had been acquired. It was, in fact, in the years after 1700 when the majority of Dalarna's churches acquired their altar paintings and this style of Lutheran decoration was consolidated. The churches around Lake Siljan, in Rättvik, Mora, Leksand and Orsa, for example, acquired their *altartavlor* in 1706, 1750, 1752 and 1757 while those in the south-east, in Stora Skedvi, Hedemora, and Husby, acquired theirs in 1835, 1878 and 1882.<sup>23</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century, therefore, altarpieces were a defining feature of Dalarna's Lutheran church interiors. If compared to the free church sanctuary paintings, there seem to be many similar elements. The altar paintings at Bjursås (1646) and Gustafs (1803), for example, exhibit a central figurative image and have the in-built or gilded framing which also characterises many sanctuary paintings. The reredos in Kristine Church in Falun (1669) could be interpreted as a model for the layered wooden construction installed in the SMF church in Borlänge in 1909 (Figure 2). Indeed, the fact that so many SMF interiors have a sanctuary painting may be because of this group's origins within the Swedish Lutheran church. As Göran Lindahl notes in his study of Swedish church architecture, the SMF as a denomination had in principle no objections towards visual decoration and by the 1920s had "started to closely follow artistic developments within the Lutheran church".<sup>24</sup>

Swedish discussions of free church style often take this imitation of Lutheran artistic practices for granted and suggest that the real decorative distinction between the two groups is merely one of quality and taste. As Lindahl's account implies, Swedish free churches lacked the money and talent to be able to produce the excellent paintings and top-quality craftsmanship that the Lutheran churches could command. In a mocking, yet affectionate, comparison of a fictional Methodist chapel with its Lutheran counterpart across the square, the Swedish writer Martin Koch notes that the chapel was "naturally much smaller" and had not had the same "good advice" about its construction and decoration, but to its advantage was built of stone, had "something that resembled a tower" and had an altar painting that was "almost like a real work of art". It was, in fact, "almost like a real church".<sup>25</sup> Koch's account not only reveals the assumption that the free churches were poorer copies of a Lutheran original. It also inadvertently

<sup>23</sup> Hakon Ahlberg, *Dalarnas kyrkor i ord och bild*, Falun 1996.

<sup>24</sup> Göran Lindahl, *Högkyrktigt, lågkyrktigt, frikyrktigt i svensk arkitektur 1800–1950*, Malung 1955, 140–147. All translations mine.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Koch, *Fromma människor*, Stockholm 1941, 193–194.

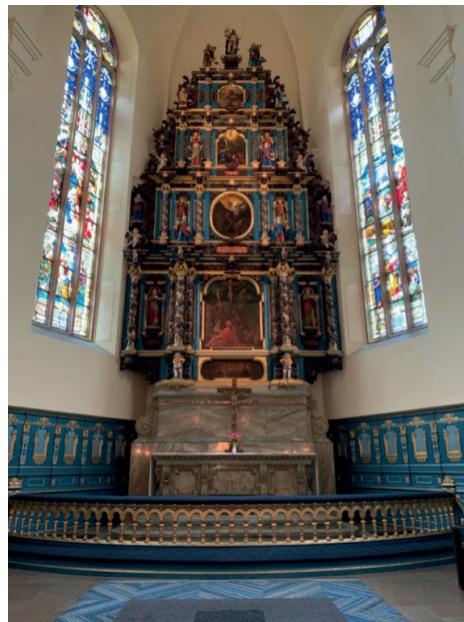


Figure 2. Retable by Ewert Friis (1669), Kristine Church, Falun, 2022. Cf. the sanctuary decoration of Borlänge SMF chapel, Borlänge, 1909. Photo: author, 2022; *1859–1905 Stora Tuna Missionsföreningens 50-års-Jubileum. Minnesskrift*, Borlänge, 1909.

shows that it was not just the SMF who imitated Lutheran decorative practices. Swedish Baptists and Methodists were just as likely to display sanctuary paintings, despite their roots in English Protestantism.<sup>26</sup>

Koch's impression of the free churches as "not quite" Lutheran is not entirely unfair. The majority of sanctuary paintings, certainly in Dalarna, were simply copies of mass-produced religious images made popular through the growing market in Europe for religious books and magazines.<sup>27</sup> Gustave Doré's bible illustrations, which were published in Sweden from the 1870s, proved hugely popular as sanctuary painting subjects, particularly his depiction of Jesus' anguished prayer in Gethsemane "The agony in the garden" (Sw. *Inte min vilja utan din*). Other paintings that proved popular subjects were Heinrich Hofmann's "Christ in Gethsemane" (Sw. *Jesus ber i Getsemane*, 1890) and various interpretations of the "good shepherd" (Sw. *Den gode herden*), such as William Holman Hunt's "The Light of the World" (1854). This fashion for romantic and emotional portrayals of Jesus can be traced to the Danish artist Bertel Thorvaldsen. His 1833 sculpture of Christ in white marble for the Vor Frue Kirke in Copenhagen became an instant success and was extensively reproduced in both print and plaster forms across countless numbers of Lutheran and free church interiors. In Sweden, Thorvaldsen's "Kristus" inspired a short-lived revival in *altartavlor*, notably in the work by the Danish artist Carl Bloch.<sup>28</sup> His "Christus Consolator", an altar painting in two versions produced for the Swedish Lutheran church in 1875 and 1884, portrays in bright colours Jesus with arms outstretched comforting the poor and the sick and the sick (Figure 1.1). Bloch's paintings also became very famous and were widely reproduced across Scandinavia and in Lutheran American contexts.

These images were all highly popular as subjects for Dalarna's sanctuary paintings. For example, the SMF churches in Sågmyra, Vika and Gärdsjö each displayed a "Christus Consolator" while Hofmann's "Gethsemane" could be seen in Bäsinge, Mattsknuts, Lindans and Djurås. Many chapels displayed a Thorvaldsen: as a framed print, embedded into a pulpit surround or standing on the "little table". While it can be argued that such copying reflects the limited artistic aspirations, funds, and reach of small free church congregations, this practice can also be seen as a rejection of the content of Lutheran altar paintings and a searching instead for a new figurative symbolism that would represent evangelical ideals. It was not until later

<sup>26</sup> Göran Alm, *Enkel med värdig: Metodistisk kyrkoarkitektur i Sverige 1869–1910*, Stockholm 1974; Perols Greta Aglert, *Rättviksfolk i rörelse: Om baptismen i Rättvik 1870–1981*, Uppsala 1985.

<sup>27</sup> Hedvig Brander Jonsson, *Bild och fromhetsliv i 1800-talets Sverige*, Uppsala 1994.

<sup>28</sup> Bonnier & Sjöström, 208–209.

in the twentieth century that the free churches began to display more “original” sanctuary paintings. This suggests that as congregations expanded their definition of “appropriate” art so also did artists feel freer to draw on their own ideas when fulfilling their commissions, a trend that was noticeable in the Swedish Lutheran church at the same time.<sup>29</sup>

Dalarna’s sanctuary paintings, however, should be attributed to more than just copying Lutheran altar paintings and magazine illustrations. Free church congregations were also able to draw on a longer tradition of church painting and, in particular, strong local folk art traditions. For example, the “lime” paintings (Sw. *kalkmålningar*) which covered the ceiling vaults and walls of many Swedish medieval churches were widely known.<sup>30</sup> Although whitewashed in the 1700s when they were considered to be extremely old-fashioned, in the early twentieth century many *kalkmålningar* were being restored, like the ones at Vika Church outside Falun. In the eighteenth century covering entire church interiors with biblical scenes and folk motifs was a popular practice in certain regions. Although Dalarna lacks the spectacular examples of this practice to be seen in south-west Sweden,<sup>31</sup> in the 1680s and again in the 1740s-60s the church galleries at Leksand, Mora, Orsa and Rättvik were painted with scenes from the Old and New Testaments by local painters.<sup>32</sup> Such practices provide a context in which free church decoration could be rooted.

The gallery paintings in the churches around Lake Siljan point to the coming popularity of *dalmåleri*, a particular form of domestic interior and furniture painting that became especially popular in Dalarna in the years after 1750. Travelling farmer-painters decorated the walls and furniture of “best” rooms and wedding cottages across the county with biblical scenes and religious texts that drew heavily on the imagery from illustrated bibles and the faith-based world in which much local custom and practice was embedded.<sup>33</sup> It seems not too much of a stretch to see the influence of this popular folk style on Dalarna’s chapel interiors, particularly in the work of Kers Lars Larsson (1867–1945), Dalarna’s most creative free church painter. Born into a family of *dalmålare* from Leksand, Larsson trained as an inte-

<sup>29</sup> Anna Thorell Stärsta, “Den moderna kyrkokonsten: en undersökning om konstnärlig frihet nu och då”, unpublished C-uppsats, Uppsala University, 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Bengt G. Söderberg, *Svenska kyrkomålningar från medeltiden*, Stockholm 1951.

<sup>31</sup> Maud Färnström, *Himlens fröjd eller helvetets fasa: Perspektiv på västsvenska kyrkomålningar från 1700-talet*, Lund 2001; Daniel Carlsson, *Habo kyrka*, Habo 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Mats Bergman, “Mora Kyrka och Oxbergs Kapell”, in Täpp John-Erik Pettersson (ed.), *Mora: ur Mora, Sollerö, Venjans och Värmlands socknars historia*, 1, Mora 1984, 439; Sune Garmo, *Nådagens ordning: Hållmans Nils Nilssons målningar i Rättviks kyrka*, Rättvik 2010.

<sup>33</sup> Sebastian Selvén, “Levd religion på bondens vägg: Åter till Dalmålningarna och deras förlagor”, *RIG* 2 (2020), 83–105.

rior painter (Sw. *dekorationsmålare*) in Söderhamn and worked for a time at Skansen, the open-air folk museum in Stockholm, as their resident folk painter before returning to Dalarna in the 1910s and carrying out commissions for hotel, cinema and domestic interiors.<sup>34</sup> He was prolific, painting folk-inspired interiors across central Sweden, including the free church interiors in By (Avesta), Mockfjärd, Nusnäs, Noret (Leksand), Vikarbyn, Åhl, Strängnäs and Mariehamn. Although he rarely deviated from interpretations of Doré, his decoration of the SMF church at Söderås outside Rättvik in 1904 (Figure 3) shows how the free church interior could serve as a bigger canvas for the traditional folk painter and how folk painting in return could be translated into a modern, more public aesthetic.

Free church decoration in this sense can be seen as part of a contemporary fashion for painted interiors. With the democratization of Swedish society in the early twentieth century and the rise of the labour and temperance movements, so grew the need for suitable meeting places.<sup>35</sup> The interior decoration of these new temperance halls and workers' clubs was carried out by local painting firms or individual artists. Many of these were also hired to paint chapel interiors. For example, Sven Linnborg (1857–1932), well known for his Lutheran church paintings in Jämtland, was commissioned to paint the SMF chapel interior in Rättvik in 1909. Erik Nylén (1881–1955) from Orsa was best known as a *dalmålare*, but he also decorated several Baptist interiors in the Siljan area in the 1910s. In 1917, the Methodist church in Falun hired Richard Bergman, a Stockholm-based graphic artist, to produce their sanctuary painting. The free church interiors these painters produced, therefore, reflected contemporary “folk movement” fashion: whole interior treatments, *jugend* stencilling and strong bright colours framing a room's central focus. Painted decoration was also associated with much of the socializing that took place within this folk movement. In the 1920s and 1930s it was popular to order a “backdrop” painting as a way to decorate a theatrical production, political meeting or auction. In Falun in 1933, for example, the Salvation Army held their annual winter sale. Themed as an Indian bazaar, the venue featured a large backdrop painting of the Taj Mahal commissioned from a local painter.<sup>36</sup> Dalarna's free church sanctuary paintings, therefore, can be seen as a result of distinctively Swedish decorative practices that were embedded within both church and folk traditions.

---

34 “Kers Lars 60 år”, *Falu Länstidning*, 17 Jan. 1927.

35 Martin Åhrén, *Modernismens mötesplatser: Arkitektur i Bergslagen*, Gävle 2012.

36 *Falu Länstidning*, 9 Mar. 1933.

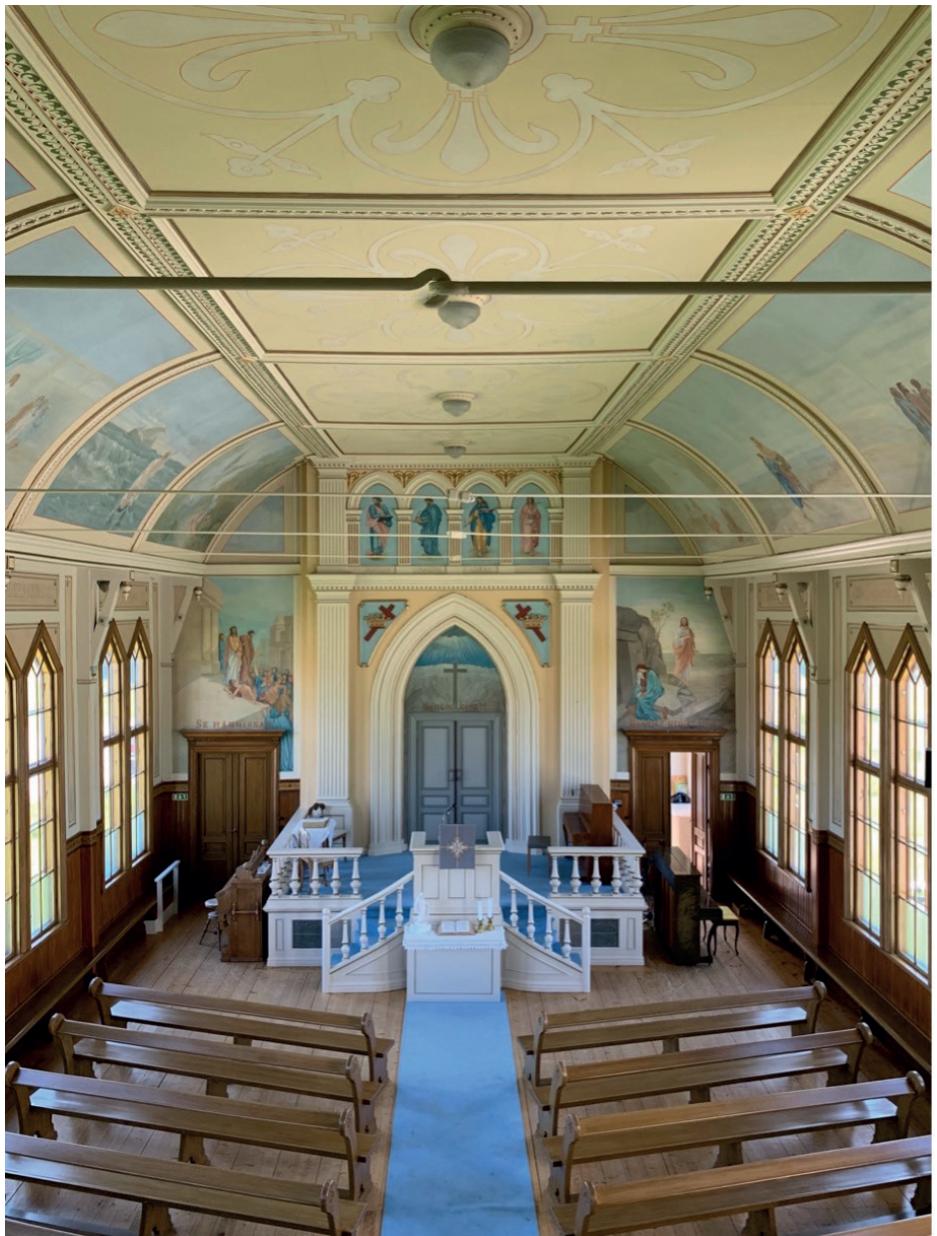


Figure 3. Interior of the SMF church at Söderås, Rättvik, 2023, with figurative paintings and a whole-interior scheme executed by Kers Lars Larsson (1867-1945), Leksand, in 1909. Photo: author, 2023.

## The Survival of Sanctuary Paintings

When a free church congregation decided to decorate their place of worship, this article has so far suggested that they looked to their local Lutheran church or to local folk practices as models for its appearance. But once a decorative scheme was completed and a sanctuary painting was in place, there was no guarantee that it would stay that way. Dalarna's free churches changed their interiors frequently and comprehensively and swopped out, moved or "disappeared" sanctuary paintings on a regular basis. For example, between 1863 and 2022 the SMF congregation in Djurås, outside Gagnef, renovated their interior at least four times. Founded in 1863, in 1893 they tore down their first *missionshus* and built a new, larger chapel. Renovations in 1926 introduced a copy of Hofmann's "Christ in Gethsemane" as a sanctuary painting. In 1953, the Hofmann was replaced by a much older, original work that had always hung in the minor hall.<sup>37</sup> By the 2000s this second painting had also been replaced and the pulpit was now decorated with a modern abstract. Even in the short time between 2015 and 2022, the interior has been subject to several style adjustments.<sup>38</sup>

The need to manage the physical implications of a religious interior was a responsibility which every congregation who owned a building was obliged to consider. The need to respond to physical wear and tear and the costs this involved were weighed against liturgical and theological understandings of a building's purpose and its use. Congregational attitudes towards this responsibility determined the actions they took towards their interior, and by extension, their sanctuary paintings. These can be grouped according to one of three different change narratives: action must be taken to preserve a physical legacy; a place of worship should be comfortable and appealing; and, if a congregation was to fulfil its evangelical mission, its physical space ought to be modern and "relevant".

Historical accounts of Dalarna's free churches, if nothing else, point to the constant attention that a building required. Although an important source of congregational pride, agreeing on chapel repairs was not always easy. Because the Baptist congregation in Rättvik could not decide if they should invest in repairs or not, one of their members, Karin Sköld, is said to have burst out at a meeting in 1949 that "our fathers built this chapel trusting in God's help. In the same way, and with the same faith, we also ought

<sup>37</sup> *Falu Länstidning*, 18 Apr. 1954.

<sup>38</sup> "De startar nytt kulturhus i Djurås", *Dala-Demokraten*, 30 May 2015, <https://www.dalademokraten.se/2015-05-30/de-startar-nytt-kulturhus-i-djuras>; "Sofia har blivit blombonde i Djurås by", *Dalabygden*, 9 Aug. 2022, <https://dalabygden.se/2022/08/09/sofia-har-blivit-blombonde-i-djuras-by/>, both accessed 2023-01-18.

to care for and maintain our chapel".<sup>39</sup> Likewise, members of the SMF congregation in Folkärna in 1928 argued that long-overdue repairs to their chapel were essential "to maintain the inheritance we, a younger generation, have received from our fathers".<sup>40</sup> After a significant decline in numbers that required a merger with a neighbouring chapel in the early 2000s, the Baptists in Falun were deeply reluctant to part with their sanctuary painting, a depiction of Doré's "Agony" which they had owned since the 1930s. The painting, which some now found old fashioned and felt should be placed in a museum, was for them a "precious heritage" which they were honour bound to keep.<sup>41</sup> Sanctuary paintings survive, therefore, because they became material representations of an almost sacred trust.

Congregations also justified change by appealing to a narrative of comfort and beauty. Many of Dalarna's earliest chapels were small, one room constructions which had only the most basic of amenities. Although the result of considerable sacrifice at the time, congregational accounts often adopt a discourse of dissatisfaction when justifying the improvements, renovations, sale or demolition of their physical spaces: the space is too small, the location unsuitable, the necessary repairs too expensive. Congregations in Dalarna, just like those in the Reformed British and American tradition,<sup>42</sup> wanted worship spaces that were comfortable and attractive. Women's groups (Sw. *Sy- och mödrarföreningar*) used the proceeds from their sales of work to not only reduce church debt but also to decorate their chapel interiors. In 1896–1897, for example, the women's group at Salem Baptist Chapel in Falun paid for new heaters, paint and wallpaper for the minor hall and added curtains to the kitchen windows.<sup>43</sup> Such improvements always met with public approval. In a 1930 newspaper account of the renovations which had been recently carried out at the SMF chapel in By outside Avesta, the building's new tower was described as giving it a "church-like appearance". The newly-painted exterior in traditional Swedish red (Sw. *falu rödfärg*) made it look "warmer and worthier". The interior, now painted in "light and attractive colours" had given the sanctuary "a worthy and dignified appearance" which was only enhanced by the "exceedingly stylish"

<sup>39</sup> Aglert, *Rättviksfolk i rörelse: Om baptisten i Rättvik 1870–1981*.

<sup>40</sup> *Minneskrift Utgiven av Folkärna Missionsförsamling*, Folkärna 1932, 26.

<sup>41</sup> Minutes, notes and a lecture relating to the sanctuary painting by David Tägtström, "Inte min vilja utan din", deposited by Christer Arvidsson, Falun, *Dalarnas folkrörelsearkiv* (FAW/50.2006).

<sup>42</sup> Charles Cashdollar, *A Spiritual Home: Life in British and American Reformed Congregations, 1830–1915*, University Park 2000.

<sup>43</sup> Annual Report of the Sewing and Mother's Society, Salem Chapel, Falun, 1896–1897, Falu baptistförsamlings kvinnoförening arkiv, *Dalarnas folkrörelsearkiv* (FAW/43.1988).

sanctuary painting by Kers Lars Larsson.<sup>44</sup> Sanctuary paintings, then, were part of a broader desire for more aesthetically pleasing interiors.

As groups which had emerged from the evangelical revival and which had a strong evangelistic purpose, materiality needed to be useful. For example, when the congregation in Djurås decided to build a new chapel in 1893:

...[i]t is said that a couple of young girls in the congregation said to Jakobs Olof Ersson, "If we don't get a new mission hall we'll go join the Baptists! They have a new and modern chapel". But when Ersson was still reluctant to build Färj Per Ersson said to him, "C'mon, no one wants to have a dirty floor under their feet." And so they built a new chapel.<sup>45</sup>

This subtle reference to inter-denominational competition points to the wider role of evangelistic outreach, particularly among the young, as the spiritual imperative which drove many free church congregations to "revitalize" their interiors. At the turn of the twentieth century, sanctuary paintings were part of what many free church congregations expected from a space dedicated to conversion and outreach. Kers Lars Larsson's paintings in Söderås, for example, were instigated in part by the desire to provide suitable accommodation for the large number of young people converted in a local revival in 1902.<sup>46</sup> In 1977 the Lillmo congregation in Malung decided to demolish their existing chapel and replace it with a modern building in fashionable white lime brick and a set of large glass entrance doors. According to the congregational leadership, it was a case of "New church – new life! The new chapel is one way we aspire to function in a new time".<sup>47</sup> The new building – deliberately designed to be more welcoming, accommodate the disabled, and host community activities – did not include the old sanctuary painting, even though it had been painted by a well-known local artist. As a local newspaper grumbled at the time, "the old altar painting might be put to some use eventually but this seems hardly likely".<sup>48</sup> What the journalist recognised was that unless prominent visual materiality had something to contribute to a congregation's vision and purpose, it held little value, and thus could be easily replaced.

---

44 *Falu Länstidning*, 5 Nov. 1930.

45 *Ett Herrens Verk. Ett Sekel av Djurås Missionsförsamlings Verksamhet 1860–1960*, Djurås 1960, 20.

46 *Minnesskrift Utgiven av Ev. Luth. Missionsföreningen i Söderås till dess 50-årsjubileum*, Söderås 1928, 18–19.

47 *Falu-Kuriren*, 15 Mar. 1978.

48 *Nya Wermlands-tidningen*, 16 Mar. 1978.

## Conclusion

Sometime in the late 1990s Lillmo chapel installed a new sanctuary painting. It was a tall, thin, frameless rectangle depicting a cross in a brightly-coloured paint-splash pattern. It is not clear why the congregation decided to return to a visual decoration of their pulpit space. Maybe the 1970s white brickwork needed a bit of colour. Maybe the congregation wanted to confirm their contemporary relevance by the addition of some “modern” art. Regardless, this action suggests that the sanctuary painting continues to be a meaningful if ambiguous decorative motif within Dalarna’s contemporary chapel culture. According to Michael Thompson, objects can have a “transient” existence. Over time they can lose their value until they become “rubbish”. They can also, through changing social contexts, acquire value and become “durable”.<sup>49</sup> This may be a helpful way to think about sanctuary paintings. As fashions within the free churches changed and the evangelical mission was reformulated for a new generation, paintings lost their value and became “rubbish” to be discarded. Some sanctuary paintings, however, became attached to the more durable values of congregational memory and respect for the past. They have not become sacred objects but many are now a precious heritage. Sanctuary paintings – increasingly only visible in archival photographs or in a steadily declining number of functioning free churches – are a distinctly Swedish religious practice that has the potential to serve as a model for how evangelicalism, surely the least visual branch of the Protestant church, can embrace the figurative image in its religious interiors. ▲

---

49 Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory*, London 2017 [1979], 4.

## SUMMARY

Nearly 25 years after their founding, in 1903 the Swedish nonconformist congregation in Söderås, a small village outside the town of Rättvik in Dalarna, decided to extend and decorate their wood-framed church. While the builders worked on enlarging the sanctuary, a local painter Kers Lars Larsson was commissioned to decorate the interior. By the time the work was finished, Larsson had covered the walls and ceiling of the entire church with patterned detailing, Christian symbolism and, most spectacularly, a series of brightly-coloured tableaux taken from the life of Christ. While the Söderås interior is now a protected national heritage, many other so-called “free” churches, products of the evangelical revival which had spread across Sweden in the 1850s, also decorated their interiors in this way, not always so elaborately, but always with a colourful figurative painting which was affixed to the wall behind the pulpit. Little scholarly attention, however, has been paid to the Swedish free church interior and in particular to the presence and meaning of this widespread practice of interior painting. This article argues that these images are part of process of revitalization, that they emerge during a moment of “crisis” the turning point when a congregation decides to build something new or to renovate and redecorate the old, to renew their existing cultural system.

# Locating the Sacred:

## *Contemporary Materiality and Practice Related to Place-Making in Montenegro*

EMIL BJØRN HILTON SAGGAU

---

Emil Bjørn Hilton Saggau is a research fellow at Lund University and Secretary General of the National Council of Churches in Denmark.

[emil.bjorn\\_hilton\\_saggau@ctr.lu.se](mailto:emil.bjorn_hilton_saggau@ctr.lu.se)

---

The Orthodox Pentecostal celebration in Montenegro in 2005 marked a significant religious, cultural and political watershed in the history of the small republic. In the years before 2005, the ruling party, the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (hereafter DPS), slowly led the country away from its former alliance with Serbia towards full independence from the unstable remains of former Yugoslavia. A major roadblock in terms of gaining independence was the politically active Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro (hereafter SOC), which stressed the sustained close religious and cultural ties to Serbia. The church was supported by a majority of the Montenegrin population, and its attitude could possibly affect the outcome of the independence referendum announced in 2005. At this watershed moment, the SOC decided to build a chapel on the top of the mountain Rumija. A local legend foretold that on this summit, a church would one day rise from the stones having been carried to the top during a yearly pilgrimage. On the day of the 2005 pilgrimage, two Serbian military helicopters flew to Rumija from an airbase in Serbia. They picked up two pieces of a metal church constructed by the SOC in the city below the mountain. The local Orthodox community and their metropolitan waited for the helicopters at the summit, where they quickly assembled the chapel. The metropolitan blessed the foundation of the church and celebrated the first liturgy inside the metal construction. Thus, the foretold miracle had come true. A new church had been raised at the top of the Rumija mountain. The DPS-

led government was taken by surprise. The former Montenegrin deputy prime minister, Novak Kilibarda, wrote that the “church on Rumija was a stab with a bloody knife into the multiethnic being of Montenegro and it shook the very foundation of multi-confessional spirituality in the area above which Rumija proudly rises”.<sup>1</sup>

The Rumija church is one of several reconstructions of holy sites across Montenegro where the SOC and the DPS-led government clashed during the period 2000–2020. These debates ignited by the “sacred” nature of the site were closely linked to the national and religious practice of place-making and materiality.<sup>2</sup> This article studies how the “sacred” is located through place-making and how materiality and practice constitute an essential feature of this process.<sup>3</sup> The analysis departs from Michel de Certeau’s insight into what he has described as the “sociocultural localization of religious ideologies”.<sup>4</sup> The article consists of three parts. The first is a short theoretical and methodological discussion, followed by an overview of the context in Montenegro. The main and last part of this article consists of an analysis of practice, materiality and place-making at two sites in Montenegro, and it ends with a final discussion.

### **History as “a Labour of Death”**

Generally speaking, the place-making carried out by the SOC represents a historiographical endeavour relying on a close and selective re-reading of the Orthodox history of Montenegro. All SOC projects are accompanied by publishing books ranging from scholarly works on specific sites,<sup>5</sup> crosses and icons to biographies and more consumer-oriented coffee table books with glossy pictures of religious materiality.<sup>6</sup> This inevitably points to the crucial role of historiography when it comes to the place-making and shaping of the materiality of the sites, such as the church on Rumija mountain.

---

<sup>1</sup> The theoretical framework of this article originates from Emil Hilton Saggau, *Nationalisation of the Sacred: Orthodox Historiography, Memory, and Politics in Montenegro*, Berlin 2024, <https://doi.org/10.3726/b21847>, supplemented by a new material analysis of the two sites in question.

<sup>2</sup> Novak Kilibarda, *Amfilohije i kosovski mit* (Eng. *Amfilohije and the Kosovo Myth*), Podgorica 2006, <https://novakkilibarda.wordpress.com/ja-i-amfilohije/>, accessed 2019-10-07.

<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, “the sacred” is defined according to Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige*, Breslau 1920. Otto has described the sacred (or holy) as the completely different (*ganz Anderen*) and based on its ability to create both negative fear (*tremendum*) and positive fascination (*fascinans*).

<sup>4</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, New York 1988, 134

<sup>5</sup> Svetigora, *Саборни храм Светог Јована Владимира у Бару* (Eng. *The Saint Jovan Cathedral in Bar*), Cetinje 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Gojko Perović (ed.), *U spomen i slavi Svetog Jovana Vladimira* (Eng. *In Memory and Glory of Holy Jovan Vladimir*), Cetinje 2016.

Religious institutions often shape their historiographies with the isolation or marginalisation of other forms of history in mind. This is an important basic feature of SOC historiography, as it tends to seek to marginalise rival historiographical narratives, such as a Montenegrin nationalist narrative. The theoretical point of departure for this study is Michel de Certeau's (1925–86) theory of history and the social world, which is presented and discussed further below. De Certeau wrote a theoretical guide for studying historiography.<sup>7</sup> He explains that history is a labour that "aims at calming the dead who still haunt the present, and at offering them scriptural tombs".<sup>8</sup> History is not just a recording of the past but it also creates an order and justifies specific contemporary social structures and institutions, such as a church or a state. This order-making "promotes a selection between what can be *understood* and what must be *forgotten*".<sup>9</sup> The "labour" of historiography takes an outward form in the creation of symbols, periods, categorisations and other mental forms.<sup>10</sup> History originates from a place and is a part of place-making. The social, cultural and political world of this place determines the content of history. According to de Certeau, the "social world" determines the interpretation of the past due to the "current events [which] are the real beginning" of history.<sup>11</sup> De Certeau notes how "facts" speak of "choices" and "perspectives".<sup>12</sup> In his study, de Certeau proposes a methodological definition of historiographical studies of places by way of a guideline. The first point is that a study of historiography needs to be aware of both practice and discourse. Practice is here seen as social praxis, which is deeply linked to everyday activities, the performance of rituals and labour related to symbols, places, memories and other materials. De Certeau's second point is that history is related to certain bodies of text. In these texts, a "religious ideology" or the ideologies "already invested in history itself" exist. History "vacillates" between these two options: the social practice of history and the hidden discourse of religious ideology. In some cases, such as the SOC's place-making in Montenegro, both the *historiographical practice* and the *religious ideology* are at play. The material, textual and social forms of religion must be taken into account.<sup>13</sup> History is a "legitimation to

<sup>7</sup> de Certeau, *The Writing of History*; Inigo Bocken (ed.), *Spiritual Spaces – History and Mysticism in Michel de Certeau*, Leuven 2013.

<sup>8</sup> de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>13</sup> See conclusion at the bottom of page 30 in de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 30. "Religion" and "religious" are in this chapter defined according to the functionalist approach. Detlef Pollack and Gergely Rosta summarise this approach: "The functional method relates

new orders of reason”, as Graham Giles notes in an analysis of de Certeau.<sup>14</sup> Towards the end of the first chapter in *The Writing of History*, de Certeau writes: “Such is history. A play of life and death is sought in the calm telling of a tale, in the resurgence and denial of the origin, the unfolding of a dead past and a result of present practice.”<sup>15</sup> History is a maker of a present-day identity that forged or forgot sites, practices and materiality in order to create or maintain a cultural order.

### Sociocultural Localisation and Place-making

The point of departure for de Certeau is that the political, cultural and spatial forms of a given place frame what may be expressed and built – and what cannot. A study needs to address “*sociocultural localization of religious ideologies*”.<sup>16</sup> De Certeau’s theory of space is that a given place is turned into a space through social practice. Place-making is the practice of shaping a habitable space.<sup>17</sup> Practice, on the other hand, is an outward embodiment of a place. De Certeau underlines how social practice constitutes a defence of a certain religious order of power. Human place-making is undertaken in two forms, which allow for two sets of practices. A given place in time is first and foremost formed into a space based on the organised narratives that create a “strategy”.<sup>18</sup> A strategy is an overlaying governing system derived from a certain order or institution. It may be a uniform system instructing the individuals in their practice. In contrast to the strategy, each individual has their own everyday practice, a “tactic”. This everyday practice bends the rules and takes shortcuts.<sup>19</sup> De Certeau describes this in greater detail in his essays “Walking in the City” and “Ghost in the City”, where a strategy is defined as a sort of mental form of infrastructure that can be used to shape both practice and places.<sup>20</sup> Strategy is what shapes a place and imposes a certain

religion onto a problem to which it is the solution. [...] [F]unctional definitions seek to determine what religion does and achieves.” Detlef Pollack & Gergely Rosta, *Religion and Modernity: An International Comparison*, Oxford 2017, 39, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198801665.001.0001>.

<sup>14</sup> Graham Giles, “The Concept of Practice, Enlightenment Rationality and Education: A Speculative Reading of Michel de Certeau’s *The Writing of History*”, *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 46:3 (2014), 255–268 [257], <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2012.753369>.

<sup>15</sup> de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 47.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 134 (emphasis in original).

<sup>17</sup> Marian Füssel, “Tote Orte und gelebte Räume. Zur Raumtheorie von Michel de Certeau S. J.”, *Historical Social Research* 38:3 (2013), 22–39.

<sup>18</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, Berkeley 1988.

<sup>19</sup> Claire E. Wolftreich, “Practices of ‘Unsaying’: Michel de Certeau, “Spirituality Studies, and Practical Theology”, *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 12:2 (2012), 161–171 [164], <https://doi.org/10.1353/scs.2012.0031>.

<sup>20</sup> Philip Sheldrake, “Theorizing Christian Spirituality”, in Ralph Kunz &

order, while tactics are the individual actions and practices that undermine or subvert the dominant strategies. The tactic, conversely, is a way to move around the strategy. Therefore, a tactic provides a means for marginalised actors to navigate and challenge the dominant power structures within a given place or to simply submit to it.

Following de Certeau, place-making is the “*sociocultural localization of religious ideologies*”. The “localization of the sacred” thus requires, on the one hand, a place-making through materiality and practice, which, on the other hand, is heavily entangled with a certain religious ideology. The ideology is the strategy that shapes the place into a space. These “religious ideologies” represent a way of establishing an order and providing legitimacy for a political rule in the way it presents the past to its community. In the Montenegrin context, the SOC has from the outset of the wars in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s been closely tied to the rise of nationalism, and a number of studies have addressed this as a process of sacralisation of the nation.<sup>21</sup> Martin Schulze Wessel summed up this process as one in which “the sacralization of the nation means that the nation takes over the form of expression of religion”.<sup>22</sup> This process, as Adrian Hastings points out, is not a one-way street. Hastings underlines how the idea of a nation draws on older traditions.<sup>23</sup> The link between religious faith and a nation is first derived from the impact of religion on the early expressions of the nation and, second, from the extent to which a religious community has interacted with what can be called the proto-nation. The process of the “sacralization of the nation” exists in a close dialectical relationship with a process of “nationalization of the sacred”. This nationalisation process constitutes a concrete rebuilding of a strategic infrastructure of, to use de Certeau’s terms, sacred materiality, spaces and practices, which enforce a certain “religious ideology”. The analysis and discussion in this article, based on the SOC’s

---

Rebecaa A. Giselbrecht (eds.), *Sacrality and Materiality*, Vienna 2016, 27–40, <https://doi.org/10.13109/9783666570438.27>; de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 91–110; Michel de Certeau, “Ghosts in the City”, in Michel de Certeau et al. (eds.), *The Practice of Everyday Life vol. 2: Living and Cooking*, Minneapolis 1998.

<sup>21</sup> Vasilios N. Makrides, “Orthodox Christianity and State/Politics Today”, in Tobias Koellner (ed.), *Orthodox Religion and Politics in Contemporary Eastern Europe*, London 2019, 235–253, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351018944-14>.

<sup>22</sup> Martin Schulze Wessel, “Einleitung: Die Nationalisierung der Religion und die Sakralisierung der Nation im östlichen Europa”, in Martin Schulze Wessel (ed.), *Nationalisierung der Religion und Sakralisierung der Nation im östlichen Europa*, Stuttgart 2006, 7–14 [7] (all translations by author).

<sup>23</sup> Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism*, Cambridge 1997, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511612107>; Caspar Hirschi, *The Origins of Nationalism – An Alternative History from Ancient Rome to Early Modern Germany*, Cambridge 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139032551>.

“localization of the sacred”, is an attempt to show the dynamics between nationalisation and sacralisation – and how this determines the material, spatial and social practices related to a given infrastructure.<sup>24</sup>

This is underpinned by theories of pilgrimages, such as Edith (1921–2016) and Victor Turner’s (1920–83) major theoretical works on pilgrimage. The Turners argued for a renewed focus on the agents and the *communitas* in studies of pilgrimage and place-making.<sup>25</sup> Pilgrimage formed sites through interaction, political opposition and limitation. Nor was pilgrimage not just a mere sign of the devout or an outlet of a structural system, but the pilgrim was something more, with both the power to establish or contest political and religious orders.<sup>26</sup> The pilgrims – and their rites, parades, liturgies and symbolisms – are part of the place-making of the infrastructure of the sacred and turn sites into embodiments of holiness. What constitutes the holy are the physical form, the architecture, the texts, the movement of pilgrims and the social and political practice (rituals, statements, etcetera) bound to the places. Without it, the significance of the site is lost – and a new place of worship is not constituted.<sup>27</sup> This is particularly relevant in the case of Rumija, as initially described. Here, we have a place where the pilgrims, who had walked to the summit, were crucial for the physical construction of the metal church and the rituals that mark it – and even more so due to the fact that the actual construction was ideologically and historically linked to the historical ritual. The pilgrims’ creation of sites also represents a material practice. The pilgrims approve a strategy and religious order through their movement and actions, which contribute to the construction and maintenance of sacred spaces.

As pointed out in studies of material religion, sites, architecture, crosses, icons, food or drink, etcetera are essential parts in the sacralisation of a given site. Birgit Meyer notes how such a practice represents “very concrete empirical questions about the specific practices, materials and forms employed in generating a sense of something divine, ghostly, sublime or transcendent”.<sup>28</sup> An often overlooked part of de Certeau’s view of place-making is

24 Emil Hilton Saggau, “Unblocking the sacred: New perspectives on the religious revival in South Eastern Europe”, *Journal for Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe* 11:1 (2018), 39–55.

25 Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, New York 2011 [1978]; Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*, London 1995 [1969].

26 For an extensive discussion on pilgrimage and theories of pilgrimage, see John Eade & Michael J. Sallnow, “Introduction”, in John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow (eds.), *Contesting the Sacred – The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage*, Chicago 2000, 1–30.

27 John Eade and Mario Katic (eds.), *Pilgrimage, Politics and Place-Making in Eastern Europe*, Farnham 2014, 8–10.

28 Birgit Meyer, *Mediation and the Genesis of Presence – Towards a Material Approach to Religion*, Utrecht 2012, 22.

the relationship of his theory to the materiality of sites, places and religious practices in light of the material turn. In particular, as argued by Phillip Sheldrake, de Certeau's work on pilgrimage relates to the materiality of religion and spirituality.<sup>29</sup> Both pilgrimage studies and studies of material religion stress the close link between movement, limitation and differentiation (the pilgrimage) to the material form of the holy in a given place or revered item that invoke or are attached to a certain religious ideology. The pilgrim approves the strategy or challenges it through their practice (a tactic). The shaping of a place exists in-between.

### **The Rise of the SOC in Montenegro**

Before turning to the SOC's efforts in Montenegro, a few words on the context might be in order. Montenegro was one of the former semi-independent republics of Yugoslavia and remained loyal to Belgrade throughout the first period of turmoil and wars in the 1990s – only to embark on its own way to independence between 1996 and 2006. In general, former Yugoslavia experienced a *desecularisation* of public space and political life in the 1990s. The SOC assumed a more and more confident position in the public, while it rebuilt and repopulated churches and monasteries.<sup>30</sup>

In Montenegro, the SOC was met with restrictions by the DPS-led government – for example, over the issue of national identity, language, property rights, education and the status of the church.<sup>31</sup> The SOC has since the year 2000 become the main political and cultural opponent to the DPS for people who treasure the ties to Serbia. The SOC in Montenegro embarked upon a grand reconstruction project, which resulted in several monastic complexes, churches and even two new cathedrals being built. This rebuilding of the SOC and its political Serbian-oriented position inevitably put it on a collision course with the growing Montenegrin nationalist DPS-led government. This conflict resurfaced in debates regarding the metal church on Rumija, but also in relation to other sites, such as the central monument dedicated to the Montenegrin prince-bishop, Petar II Petrović-Njegoš (1813–1851) on the mountain of Lovchen. These two mountains, Lovchen and Rumija, are within 50 kilometres from each other and perhaps represent the two major battlegrounds for Montenegrin national and religious identity.

---

<sup>29</sup> Sheldrake, "Theorizing Christian Spirituality", 38–40.

<sup>30</sup> Mirko Blagojević, "Desecularization of Contemporary Serbian Society", in Paul Mojzes & Walter Sawatsky (eds.), *Religion in Eastern Europe* 27:1 (2008), 37–50.

<sup>31</sup> Emil Hilton Saggau, "The Revival of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro from 1990", *Sociološka Luča – Montenegrin Journal for Sociology* 13:1 (2019), 9–25.

## The Making of a Religious Infrastructure

The metal church constructed at Rumija with the help of two army helicopters was part of a larger infrastructure built by the SOC in southern Montenegro. It consists of a larger system of churches, sacred springs and a new line of rituals, as I have described elsewhere.<sup>32</sup> The focus here is not on the project as a whole but on the summit and metal church itself.

Briefly, the site was a renowned place devoted to the local Saint Jovan Vladimir (d. 1016) and part of a historical ritual on Pentecost described by a Russian anthropologist, Pavel Rovinsky (1831–1916), in 1888.<sup>33</sup> The core of the ritual was the pilgrimage to the mountaintop on Pentecost morning, where believers would carry stones in a procession behind a cross allegedly dating back to the period in which the saint was alive. The ritual itself ceased to exist during communist rule but was revived by the metropolitan in 1991, when local Orthodox Christians and Muslims, priest candidates and other members of the clergy resumed the ritual. According to a participant, the ritual culminated in the sunrise and the metropolitan's liturgy to the sound of gunshots in the air fired by the local population.<sup>34</sup> The former Montenegrin prime minister's remark that the metal church was a "stab into the multiethnic being of Montenegro" was related to the ritual and the history of the site, as a ritual in which Serbs, Albanians and Montenegrins across denominations and religious boundaries took part. The newly erected church, according to the DPS government, seemed to serve as a roadblock for this multi-faith celebration – as did the constantly appearing Albanian graffiti at the metal church.<sup>35</sup> However, the church was never removed by the state, and the dispute only escalated.

In 2010–11, a Montenegrin nationalist in parliament called for the dismantling of the church, to which the SOC metropolitan commented sharply in his 2010 Christmas sermon: "Whoever destroys the church, God destroys him and his descendants and the honourable cross will judge him" (Serb.: Ko sruši taj hram bog ga srušio i njegovo potomstvo i časni krst mu

<sup>32</sup> Emil Hilton Saggau, "The Forging and Forgetting the Cult of St. Jovan Vladimir in Contemporary Montenegro", *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 21:1 (2021), 42–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1474225X.2021.1939247>; see also Djorde Pavicevic & Srdjan Djuriovic, "Relations Between Montenegro and Serbia from 1991 to 2006: An Analysis of Media Discourse", in Pál Kolste (ed.), *Media Discourse and the Yugoslav Conflict: Representation of Self and Other*, Farnham 2009, 129–152.

<sup>33</sup> Pavel Apollonovich Rovinsky, *Черногорія въ ея прошломъ и настоящемъ* (Eng. *Montenegro in its Past and Present*), Saint Petersburg 1888, 360–361.

<sup>34</sup> Personal Interview, Montenegrin cleric 1, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Edmond Malaj, "The Cult of Saint John Vladimir Among the Albanians in the present Days", in Djodje Borozan (ed.), *The 1000th Anniversary of Saint Jovan Vladimir, PodgoricaPodgorica 2017*, 239–252.

sudio).<sup>36</sup> The DPS government responded by putting the metropolitan on trial for “hate speech” and for insulting national feelings. He was convicted by the High Court in 2012 and was given a reprimand.<sup>37</sup> The metal church thus stands at the intersection of two opposing systems of order: the SOC and the DPS government. The perspective of the DPS government is perhaps not as strongly situated in a religious tradition as that of the Orthodox Church, but could rather be described as a civic religious part of Montenegrin nationalism. In a similar manner, the Lovchen monument is also located at the end of two systems. Here, however, the roles are reversed. The current modernist monument at Lovchen was put up in the 1970s with the help of local army helicopters after an older Orthodox chapel was removed. The older chapel was seen as a symbol and remnant of the Serbian-led royal dynasty of Karadordević, which stood in contrast to the new communist rule. Instead, a modernist monument was put in place, which in every way possible represents a contradiction to an Orthodox understanding of sacred spaces.<sup>38</sup>

The crumbling of Yugoslav communist power in 1988 meant that the system of order – at Lovchen, the communist order – enforcing the material form of the space ceased to exist. The SOC picked up on this and unsuccessfully tried to reclaim the site from the state. The site is closely related to the memory of Njegoš, who has grown into a secular symbol of the Montenegrin state. The new Montenegrin state in the 1990s refused any Serbian claim to Njegoš, the site and his heritage. This conflict escalated in 2013 when the bi-centennial of Njegoš’s birth was celebrated throughout Southeast Europe.<sup>39</sup> The SOC renewed their claim in 2013 through letters of appeal and even promoted Njegoš to sainthood the same year. The DPS government ignored the request and championed Njegoš as an embodiment of Montenegrin secular values and thirst for freedom, which they argued

<sup>36</sup> Quoted from RTV, 2011: “Amfilohije prokleo svakog ko sruši crkvu na Rumiji”, [http://www.rtv.rs/sk/drustvo/amfilohije-prokleo-svakog-ko-srusi-crkvu-na-rumiji\\_232416.html](http://www.rtv.rs/sk/drustvo/amfilohije-prokleo-svakog-ko-srusi-crkvu-na-rumiji_232416.html), accessed 2011-01-07. The statement was a direct reference to 1 Corinthians 3:17 (“If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy”).

<sup>37</sup> Kenneth Morrison, “Little church causes big trouble in Montenegro”, Balkaninsight 21 Feb. 2011, <https://balkaninsight.com/2011/02/21/little-church-causes-big-trouble-in-montenegro>, accessed 2019-10-07.

<sup>38</sup> Emil Hilton Saggau, “A Shrine for the Nation – the Material Transformation of the Lovčen Site in Montenegro”, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 20:5 (2017), 495–512, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2018.1385934>.

<sup>39</sup> Bojan Baskar, “The Third Canonization of Njegoš, the National Poet of Montenegro”, in Jón Karl Helgason & Marijan Dović (eds.), *Great Immortality Pages*, Leiden 2019, 269–293, [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004395138\\_014](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004395138_014); Andrew Baruch Wachtel, “How to Use a Classic: Petar N. in the Twentieth Century”, in J. Lampe and M. Mazower (eds.), *Ideologies and National Identities: The Case of the Twentieth-Century South-East Europe*, Budapest 2004, 131–147.

was evidenced by his somewhat controversial literary legacy. On Njegoš's birthday, the prime minister of Montenegro staged a large celebration at the monument, which was broadcast in the entire country. This celebration was devoid of any form of SOC presence.<sup>40</sup>

### **The Role of Materiality and Practice**

In both cases, materiality and practice are key for understanding how the two opponents, the SOC and the DPS government, tried to solidify and enforce their "religious ideology" through a *sociocultural localisation*. In the following section, the analysis digs deeper into how materiality and practices are related to the history of the sites, which forms the sociocultural background.

#### *Place-making at Mountains Using Army Helicopters*

The most significant part of the place-making of both sites is that army helicopters were used to construct both locations. This construction practice highlights two aspects of the sites. They are difficult to access by ordinary construction workers, and they are visible from afar. This turns the construction into an extraordinary effort, but also one that is highly visible. The construction work constitutes an attestation to the resources and the power of the institutions behind the space, which have chosen difficult, but symbolic sites to mark their physical control of space. Furthermore, the construction of both sites follows an already established Orthodox tradition. Orthodox monastic communities generally seek out isolated and inaccessible sites as their place of worship in order to be closer to God. The area is referred to as the "Montenegrin Jerusalem" due to the large concentrations of monastic complexes in the mountain range.<sup>41</sup> The two mountains are centres of this local ecclesial tradition, where the inaccessible mountains are primary sites for "locating the sacred" in Orthodox place-making. This process has turned them into a specific habitable space for either the SOC or the DPS. Both ritual and discourse are closely tied to this space. This space provides a site at which the "religious ideology" can be played out and made into a physical form.

#### *Rituals*

The two places are marked by the rituals and religious celebrations associated with them. These religious and civic religious rituals enforce and

---

<sup>40</sup> Saggau, "A Shrine for the Nation".

<sup>41</sup> Alice Forbess, "Montenegro versus Crna Gora – The Rival hagiographic Genealogies of the New Montenegrin Polity", *Focaal – Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 67 (2013), 47–60, <https://doi.org/10.3167/fcl.2013.670104>.



Figure 1 (left). A helicopter destroying the roof of the chapel at Lovchen in 1974. Photo: SOC archive. Figure 2 (right). A helicopter carrying the metal church to Rumija in 2005. Photo: Wikimedia commons.

support the space as a habitable one for a certain group adhering to the “religious ideology” of the site. The metal church at Rumija is founded as the end point of a pilgrimage ritual mentioned above that occurs on Pentecost, which can be dated back to at least the late nineteenth century but might be a remnant of older religious practices. The ritual centres around the legend about the church and site attached to the cult of Jovan Vladimir.<sup>42</sup> The current ritual, however, represents a revival of the older one, which is part of the greater SOC rebuilding project. The pilgrims have in the Rumija case been the source for the physical reconstruction, as their movement has served to attest to the “sacred” nature of the site. However, this pilgrimage is not a bottom-up process. It was launched by the local metropolitan, who also oversaw the construction of the church.<sup>43</sup> Hence, both the physical building and the pilgrimage form part of an overarching strategy of the SOC to claim, mark and define this site – and thus the entire area. This is not entirely without historical justification since the ritual is based on previous practices. The strategy is a process of revival and rewriting

<sup>42</sup> Saggau, “A Shrine for the Nation”.

<sup>43</sup> Svetigora, *Саборни*.

history. This reinvented practice, and the sacred site it relates to, thus also offers a point of departure for the local reading of the history regarding the cult of Jovan Vladimir, which now needs to support the pilgrimage and the new space. The present practice defines the “unfolding” of the past and the recreation of a “tale” that is both a “resurgence” and a “denial”, as de Certeau describes such a process.<sup>44</sup> The pilgrimage, as inclusive as it might be from the perspective of the SOC, is viewed by other ethnic and religious groups as a “denial” of their joint history.<sup>45</sup> The pilgrimage and the site now constitute a boundary towards other ethnic and religious groups. The situation is somewhat different at the Lovchen site. The monument was built in the 1970s in the aftermath of the debates concerning the heritage of Njegoš during a jubilee festival. The site already offered a symbolic and habitable religious space, but in this case for the SOC. The demolition of the chapel in 1974 was thus an attempt to enforce a different “religious ideology” at this site, which the later DPS government picked up on.<sup>46</sup> It should be noted that almost everyone in the DPS leadership used to belong to the league of Montenegrin Communists, which ruled prior to the 1990s (there were not any clear breaks in the country’s ruling elite until the DPS lost the election of 2020).<sup>47</sup> Hence, the DPS leadership in one sense carries on the preservation of the site as a state site at which the civil religion of the Montenegrin state was played out. The celebration of Njegoš in 2013 revealed the various layers at play here. The celebration was a salute to the Montenegrin state, its independence and in particular its distance to Serbia proper.<sup>48</sup> This alienation of the “Serbian” is an essential part of the DPS’s political programme for an independent Montenegro. This, however, entails an alienation and boundary vis-à-vis the SOC, which has close ties to Belgrade. The celebration in 2013 thus assumed a particularly secular form, where SOC clergy was not invited to the “party”. Religious symbols were replaced by Montenegrin state symbols and traditional folk customs. The civil religious ritual at the site in 2013 revealed how the DPS government still supervises, maintains and enacts a certain practice enforcing a specific understanding of the site, which “denies” the SOC access. The DPS government continues to create a discourse that places the site, its “history” and the heritage of Njegoš in a civic Montenegrin discourse. The state continues to sacralise the nation

---

44 de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 47.

45 Pavicevic & Djurovic, “Relations Between Montenegro and Serbia from 1991 to 2006”; Malaj, “The Cult of Saint John Vladimir Among the Albanians in the Present Days”.

46 Baskar, “The Third Canonization of Njegoš, the National Poet of Montenegro”; Wachtel, “How to Use a Classic”.

47 Kenneth Morrison, *Montenegro – A Modern History*, London 2009.

48 Saggau, “A Shrine for the Nation”.

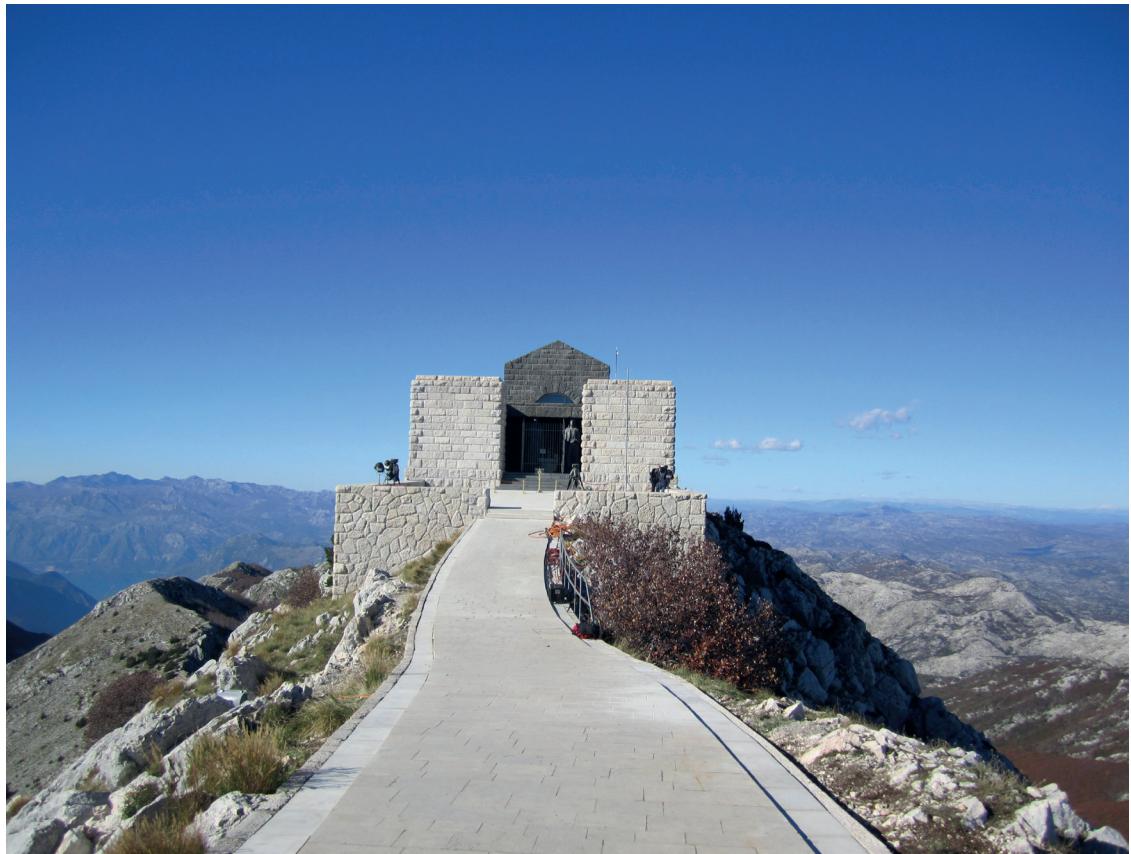


Figure 3 (above). The monument at Lovchen. Photo: Wikimedia commons. Figure 4 (below). The metal church at Rumija vandalised by Albanian graffiti. Photo: SOC twitter profile.



through rituals and symbols, whereas the SOC nationalises a sacred space at Rumija in order to prevent the presence of other religious and ethnic groups.

### *The Monuments*

The physical appearance of the monument reveals the same two different strategical “religious ideologies”. The Lovchen monument is a modernist building inspired by classical temples and stripped of any references to Orthodox architecture. It is an artistic vision of a new system of order, which the Yugoslav communist and DPS governments interpreted as their own political and cultural order.<sup>49</sup> The metal church at Rumija follows a more traditional Orthodox architecture. The church is structured around a classic type of road church or chapel, which can often be found along mountain roads in Southeast Europe. This minor religious building provides a space for religious services but is not a significant construction – unlike the larger infrastructure of SOC religious sites below the mountain summit in and around the city of Bar. However, it is still a concrete manifestation of an SOC presence at a former multi-religious site.

### *Icons and Images*

The Lovchen monument is stripped of religious symbols. At the centre of the monument, there is a statue of Njegoš. The statue lacks the usual religious symbols that may be expected in any depiction of an Orthodox metropolitan of Montenegro. Rather, the metropolitan Njegoš is presented as a statesman and poet deep in thought, whose only symbol is the Montenegrin cap – a feature of Montenegrin folk costume. Above him rises a one-headed eagle. This eagle is the symbol of the republic, unlike the classic imperial and Orthodox two-headed eagle. It is a display of a generic Southeastern European leader. The situation looks different at Rumija, where the so-called Jovan Vladimir cross and icon represent an essential feature of the site, the pilgrimage and the material culture around the site. The cross can be dated back to at least the nineteenth century but is said to be a specific cross mentioned in the older hagiography of the saint – despite this cross being constructed out of wood and the present one, used in the ritual, being made up of some sort of metal. The cross of the saint is depicted at the top of the metal church and the cathedral below the mountain, which are bound together by the ritual and pilgrimage, where the cross is carried from bottom to top. The cross is thus not a generic one, but a highly symbolic cross with a history of its own. The saint is also depicted with this cross on

---

49 Saggau, “A Shrine for the Nation”; Wachtel, “How to Use a Classic”.

an icon inside the cathedral and in the tourist examples in the local religious souvenir shop next to the cathedral. The SOC has also promoted an icon of Njegoš, as a saint, which contains references to similar those at Lovchen. In these Njegoš icons, the saint does not hold a cross, but rather a prototype of the chapel that was destroyed in 1974. The icon thus points back to the religious space existing before the mausoleum – and perhaps towards what might one day return. Through the symbolism and materiality of the icon, the SOC seeks to contest the DPS's claim to Lovchen. To make things more concrete, the SOC has rebuilt the older chapel in Bar close to one of its main cathedrals in order to physically remind the faithful of what should have been standing at Lovchen instead of the mausoleum.

### **Conclusion: Weak Spot or Position of Strength?**

The analysis of the material culture and the related place-making at the two sites in Montenegro underlines the process of “*the sociocultural localization of religious ideologies*”, as de Certeau phrased it. Both sites contain a physical and material localisation of certain systems of religious thought, which have taken form with specific references to a system of strategical infrastructure, symbols and discourse. The cross at Rumija serves as an example of a material localisation. The cross holds meaning due to its reference to the saint's hagiography and due to its role in the historical ritual at the site recorded in the late nineteenth century. The use of the cross of Jovan Vladimir by the SOC localises the discourse of the hagiography in the material, and through the pilgrimage it becomes a spatial practice reshaping the site. This process is one of differentiating and marking certain orders – known or forgotten. The DPS government in the same way seeks to promote a different perception of sociocultural order. The DPS argues for a Montenegrin nationhood (an order) through materiality, rituals (performance) and text (speech). This order is used to make spaces for the order and secure that it is known, while the challenged order is forgotten. The SOC seeks to create and counter the DPS government by resorting to a different narrative and a kind of place-making that includes rituals, objects and discourse. Each one is a system of strategic infrastructures that tell ordinary Montenegrins what to believe, do and think about themselves. In a sense, both of these rival systems seek to enforce and strengthen their positions in Montenegro through the same practices, but the process reveals that neither the SOC nor the DPS has prevailed. Any reconstruction process, and the related place-making, is constantly undermined by the other side, but also by rival systems (the Albanians who paint graffiti at Rumija, to just mention one). Place-making is in this case the creation of sacred sites imbued with weak-

nesses. Their habitability as a sacred space depends on the ritual upholding the sites, supervision of the material world and constant enforcement in discourses. The sociocultural localisation not only requires rebuilding, but actually a constant pilgrimage – a “communitas” – that supervises and supports the strategic infrastructure or else it might fall into pieces. ▲

### **SUMMARY**

This article examines how the “sacred” is located through place-making, materiality, and ritual practice in contemporary Montenegro, focusing on two contested sites: the metal church on Rumija and the Lovchen monument. Drawing on Michel de Certeau’s theory of the sociocultural localization of religious ideologies, the study analyzes the the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in Montenegro shaping of national and religious identities. This procees entails material symbols, spatial strategies, and ritual performances to assert physphical control of nationhood and sacred heritage. The findings reveal that these sacred spaces are sustained only through continuous ritual, symbolic reinforcement, and political contestation, making them sites of both strength and vulnerability.

# Crosses and Stones: *Material Religion in British First World War Cemeteries*

JOHN WOLFFE

---

John Wolffe is Professor of Religious History at The Open University (UK).

[john.wolffe@open.ac.uk](mailto:john.wolffe@open.ac.uk)

---

The present-day visitor to the meticulously maintained British war cemeteries in Belgium and France can be forgiven for perceiving something of an inevitability about their design and layout. In reality though this was very much an accident of history and the result of extensive debate and controversy in the closing months of the First World War and in its immediate aftermath. Central to the debate was the question of whether and to what extent the cemeteries should appear distinctively Christian, given that the war dead were of all faiths and none. The material religion of the resulting cemeteries thus suggests hitherto underexplored insights into the dynamics of secularization and religious resurgence in the years immediately following the First World War.

First World War cemeteries have been viewed through a variety of scholarly lenses. Philip Longworth's institutional history of the Imperial (later Commonwealth) War Graves Commission remains a valuable point of reference, complemented much more recently by David Crane's account of the work of the Commission's founder Sir Fabian Ware.<sup>1</sup> The cemeteries have also attracted attention from historians of memory and commemoration<sup>2</sup> and from architectural historians, drawn particularly by the substan-

---

<sup>1</sup> Philip Longworth, *The Unending Vigil: The History of Commonwealth War Graves Commission*, London 1967; David Crane, *Empires of the Dead: How One Man's Vision Led to the Creation of WWI's War Graves*, London 2013.

<sup>2</sup> George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*, New York 1990, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195071399.001.0001>; David W. Lloyd, *Battlefield*

tial involvement of Sir Edwin Lutyens, the leading British architect of his generation.<sup>3</sup> However, the place of the cemeteries in the religious history of the period hitherto remains underexplored.

### **Creating the Cemeteries**

Planning for the cemeteries began before the end of the war with the establishment of the Imperial War Graves Commission in 1917. From the outset there was agreement that the cemeteries would need “some recurring symbolical object”. The question was what should it be? Many thought it should be a cross, but Lutyens proposed rather that it should be “one great fair stone of fine proportions ... flanked with sentinel cypresses or pyramidal oaks”, giving equality to men of all faiths “in one vast cathedral whose vault is the sky”.<sup>4</sup> Lutyens’s flights of eloquence were brought down to earth by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Randall Davidson, who with uncharacteristic bluntness dismissed his proposal as “meaningless and useless”.<sup>5</sup> The solution, proposed in a report by Sir Frederic Kenyon, Director of the British Museum, was to include BOTH a cross and a stone. The readiness with which this compromise was adopted, despite the obvious additional expense and arguable aesthetic awkwardness, is indicative of the sensitivity of the issue. Subsequently, indeed, it was recognized that it would be “inartistic” to include both in the smaller cemeteries, and it was decided that these would have the cross but not the stone, a partial victory for the Christian lobby. There was however something of a compromise in Reginald Blomfield’s standard design incorporating a sword within the cross – thus implying a militaristic and nationalistic interpretation of the central Christian symbol.<sup>6</sup>

There was intense wider public debate over the memorials to individual soldiers. Many bereaved parents, including Anglican bishops and their wives, wanted to be able to design or at least to choose crosses, but the Imperial War Graves Commission insisted on having uniform rectangular headstones to “carry on the military idea”. They did though concede that they could be engraved with a cross or other religious symbol and also with

---

*Tourism: Pilgrimage and the Commemoration of the Great War in Britain, Australia and Canada*, Oxford 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Jeroen Guerst, *Cemeteries of the Great War by Sir Edwin Lutyens*, Rotterdam 2011; Tim Skelton & Gerald Gliddon, *Lutyens and the Great War*, London 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Commonwealth War Graves Commission Archive [hereafter WGC], WGC18/238, Memorandum by Lutyens, 28 Aug. 1917.

<sup>5</sup> WGC, WGC18/206, Note on interview with Davidson, 17 Oct. 1917.

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed account of these discussions see John Wolffe, *Sacred and Secular Martyrdom in Britain and Ireland since 1914*, London 2020, 24–25, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350019294>.

a short inscription chosen by the bereaved. Their rationale was that uniform rectangular headstones would imply the solidarity of soldiers on parade, which would be inconsistent with the admission of crosses and other potential variants. Moreover, rectangular headstones would be cheaper and easier to transport. If wealthier families were allowed to pay for their own more expensive alternatives this would also undermine the illusion of social as well as national and religious solidarity. This issue was only settled by a debate in parliament in May 1920, which upheld the War Graves Commission's position.<sup>7</sup>



Figure 1. Étaples. Photo John Wolffe, 30 April 2015.

### The Material Religion of Cemetery Design

How then did these decisions work out in the layout and appearance of the cemeteries themselves?<sup>8</sup> At Étaples (Figure 1), the largest and most impressive of all the cemeteries in France, designed by Lutyens himself, the so-called war stone and the cross were incorporated into the same monumental assemblage on the steep hillside overlooking the graves. The cross

7 Wolffe, *Sacred and Secular Martyrdom in Britain and Ireland since 1914*, 25–28.

8 The subsequent analysis of the cemeteries is drawn from personal observation during a research visit to France and Belgium from 30 Apr. to 2 May 2015, supported by the plans and photographs available on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website.

stands proud at the top of the hill and is the first thing the visitor sees when entering on the higher level from the road. The war stone is immediately below the cross, which makes it seem like an altar. More usually however the cross and the stone were separated in different parts of a cemetery, hence providing alternative focal points of secular and religious symbolism. For example, at Tyne Cot, another vast cemetery where many of the dead from Passchendaele are buried, they are separated by an avenue of trees. The cross, placed on top of the remains of a blockhouse left from the battle, dominates the whole site, while the stone is sited in the centre of the long semi-circular colonnade that commemorates the 35000 men who died in the Ypres salient and have no known grave.

At Terlincthun (Figure 2) near Boulogne, the cross and the stone are on opposite sides of the cemetery – the image shows the war stone viewed from the cross. This is also the view that King George V would have seen as he spoke standing by the cross when at the close of his “pilgrimage” to a number of the cemeteries he visited Terlincthun in May 1922. The moment was rich in religious and political symbolism – in his poetic account of the event Rudyard Kipling evoked the official narrative when he wrote of “a stark sword brooding on the bosom of the cross/Where high and low are one”. And as the King looked down the central axis of the cemetery towards the war stone and the column on the hill beyond commemorating Napoleon’s grande armée he eloquently evoked his surroundings. The King affirmed Anglo-French solidarity by acknowledging the presence of that monument to the “greatest … of all soldiers” standing guard over the dead of the British empire and saw the cemeteries as “potent advocates of peace upon earth” that with faith in “God’s purposes” would serve to bring all peoples together.<sup>9</sup>

In smaller cemeteries such as that by the roadside at Elzenwalle near Ypres the stone was omitted, while the cross serves a practical as well as symbolic function as anyone looking for such cemeteries in the flat landscape of Belgium and northern France quickly realizes that the crosses, sometimes visible at quite a distance, are a valuable navigation aid. In the absence of a stone, the prominent cross gives such sites, often somewhat reminiscent of a churchyard, a more unambiguously Christian character, albeit with the presence of the “brooding” sword a Christianity of a particular militaristic kind.

---

<sup>9</sup> *The King’s Pilgrimage*, London 1922, no pagination. Kipling had a hand in drafting the King’s speech: see WGC, WG1544 Pt 1, Ware to Kipling, 28 Mar. 1922. The elaborate polished language is internal evidence of drafting by hands other than the plainspoken monarch himself.

There remained the question of how to acknowledge the presence of casualties of other faiths. Jews appear to have implicitly concurred in Kenyon's judgement that they "would not be offended by the presence of the Cross in the cemetery", provided their religious identity was recognized on their own headstones.<sup>10</sup> With regard to Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, however, at an early meeting of the War Graves Commission, Lord Islington, the Secretary of State for India, said – as reported by Kenyon – that:

...in regard to the treatment of the graves of Indian soldiers and the erection of memorials and buildings in Indian cemeteries, it was most important that the religious requirement of the different castes and creeds should be scrupulously respected ... [H]e considered that there should be nothing in the nature of a disparity between the cemeteries of Indians and those of Christians.<sup>11</sup>

There was accordingly initial discussion as to whether alternative central memorials should be provided for members of the Indian Army who had died on the Western Front.<sup>12</sup> In the event, however, considerations of cost but also of the complexity of fairly representing all the different faiths involved led to the recognition that any systematic provision would be impracticable. Hence Indian casualties interred or commemorated (if they had been cremated) in otherwise predominantly Christian cemeteries, were not given any distinctive central memorials. However, in the layout of cemeteries with substantial numbers of Indian casualties, such as those at Gorre and La Chapelette, the cross was made the focal point for the Christian graves and the war stone for the Indian ones. Smaller entirely Indian cemeteries, such as those at Neuville-les-Montreuil and Zelobes, lack any central monument although they do have some distinctive features, such as a seat set into the wall at Neuville-les-Montreuil. The cemetery at Noyelles-sur-Mer for casualties from the Chinese Labour Corps has a Chinese-style gateway and inscription. On the other hand, the larger Indian cemetery at St Martin-les-Boulogne has both a war stone and an alternative central monument that commemorates the Hindus and Sikhs who were cremated at the site.

From the outset there was an awareness that provision for Indian casualties in the various individual cemeteries needed to be complemented by some overall memorial. Initially it was proposed to construct both a mosque and a Hindu temple, but there were multiple objections to this plan, both

<sup>10</sup> Frederic Kenyon, *War Graves: How the Cemeteries Abroad Will be Designed*, London 1918, ii.

<sup>11</sup> WGC Minutes, 18 Feb. 1918.

<sup>12</sup> WGC, WG 909/7, note dated 19 May 1919.



Figure 2. Terlincthun. Photo John Wolffe, April 2015.



Figure 3. Fort Pitt, Chatham, Kent. Photo John Wolffe, August 2015.

from Anglicans at home who opposed the provision of non-Christians places of worship at public expense and from the government of India that did not want to bear the expense of a “lavish” project and pointed out that Sikhs too would expect their own provision.<sup>13</sup> In the end therefore the single Indian memorial opened at Neuve Chapelle in 1927 was designed to avoid identification with any particular religious tradition. The war stone was a central feature of a circular enclosure, while the cross was replaced by a column modelled on the pillars erected in India by the ancient emperor Ashoka. Ashoka’s edicts inscribed on the original pillars advocated religious tolerance, a spirit that is reflected in the universalistic sentiment of the inscription on the column at Neuve Chapelle: “God is one: his is the victory”, in English and in three major Indian languages.

### **Headstones as Personal Religious Statements**

What then of the headstones? It is instructive first to compare the impression produced by the normal uniform headstones at Étaples or Terlincthun with the unusual example of Fort Pitt in Kent (Figure 3) where the standard headstones were mixed in with individually designed ones. This situation arose at Fort Pitt because it was already a military cemetery before the First World War and so had existing burials from earlier conflicts, and indeed some from the earlier years of World War One itself before the Wars Graves Commission was established. It is easy to see from the example of Fort Pitt how the relatively disorderly appearance was unattractive to the military mind, and how the personal choices of relatives would have undermined the aspiration to convey an impression of social, national, and religious solidarity.

Nevertheless, the headstones themselves did give scope for some limited personal expression. A form circulated to relatives offered them the option of choosing an inscribed cross, star of David, or neither. These examples (Figure 4) show the two ways in which the cross was incorporated, either as a separate incision in the stone, or with the deceased’s regimental badge in the cross bar. The overwhelming majority, apart from Jews, chose a cross, showing near universal acceptance of at least a conventional Christianity. Only in a small minority of cases, just two from a sample of 216 at Terlincthun cemetery, did relatives choose not to have a cross inscribed. Such a decision, however, was not necessarily indicative of atheism, as it appears quite as likely to reflect staunch Protestant rejection of a perceived Catholic symbol. One of the two examples identified at Terlincthun, the

---

<sup>13</sup> For a fuller account of these discussions see John Wolffe, “Forever England beneath the Cross of Sacrifice” in John Carter Wood (ed.), *Christianity and National Identity in Twentieth-Century Europe*, Göttingen 2016, 61, <https://doi.org/10.13109/9783666101496.53>.

grave of a gunner from Nova Scotia, has the inscription “My Saviour has my treasure and he will walk with me”.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, an example at Tyne Cot, of a sergeant from an Ulster regiment, carries the inscription: “Thy will be done”.<sup>15</sup> The second example from Terlinthun, with the single inscribed word “Mizpah”, is more enigmatic, but the absence of either a cross or Star of David suggests that despite its biblical origins it was intended as a love token without religious significance.<sup>16</sup>

The short inscriptions that the bereaved chose for themselves are a particularly interesting feature of the headstones. By no means all the headstones have them, as the bereaved were expected to meet the additional cost, which is likely to have deterred poorer families. Nevertheless, there are many thousands of such inscriptions which provide a fascinating cross-section of personal secular and religious responses to the tragedy of bereavement in the war, but have yet to receive any serious attention from academic researchers. A sample of 216 headstones in block 10 at Terlinthun, of which 145 or 67.1% have a personal inscription, was selected for detailed analysis.<sup>17</sup> This was a particularly high proportion, probably accounted for because the casualties buried in this block all died in the last few days of the war, in November 1918, or from their wounds soon after it ended, so bereavements still felt quite recent when relatives were invited to request inscriptions in 1920. By contrast in a sample of 100 headstones for men killed in the first year of the war – 39 from Terlinthun, 61 from Gorre – only 35 had a personal inscription. More than five years after they had died, some parents would have died themselves and widows remarried and other next of kin presumably emotionally reluctant to re-engage with their loss by devising an inscription.

The 145 inscriptions from the 1918 sample consisted of 83 that were secular in nature, and 62 that made some kind of religious or supernatural reference, ranging from conventional reference to God (for example “Thy will be done”) and hopes of heavenly reunion to explicitly Christian sentiments or quotations from the Bible or a well-known hymn. The proportions were

<sup>14</sup> Ervin Newcomb Hendry. This and subsequent references to individual headstones are referenced by the full name of the casualty as providing the most straightforward way to access supporting detail including images of the original grave registers on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website: <https://www.cwgc.org/find-records/find-war-dead/>. The inscriptions quoted below are all from the Terlinthun sample unless otherwise stated.

<sup>15</sup> Robert James Leslie.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas W. G. Williams. *The Oxford Essential Dictionary of Foreign Terms in English*, Oxford 2002, defines Mizpah as “a ring, locket, etc., given as an expression or token of association or remembrance, originally and especially one with ‘Mizpah’ inscribed on it”.

<sup>17</sup> The samples from Terlinthun and Gorre were identified by observation of the actual headstones during site visits on 30 Apr. and 1 May 2015 and subsequently facilitated by study of the online grave registers.



Figure 4. Example headstones at Terlincthun. Photo: John Wolffe, April 2015.



Figure 5. Examples of Muslim and Hindu headstones at Neuville les Montreuil. Photo: John Wolffe, April 2015.



Figure 6: Muslim headstone and Christian crosses at St-Charles-de-Potyze French cemetery near Ypres. Photo: John Wolffe, May 2015.

quite similar in the 1914–15 sample of 35, with 20 and 15 respectively, indicating that even though fewer of those bereaved earlier in the war provided inscriptions, the sentiments of those who did were not significantly different from those bereaved in 1918. The categorization was inevitably made in the absence of any evidence of the actual beliefs of the next of kin. For example, several relatives chose the phrase “until the day breaks”, which has been classified as religious. We cannot know whether the allusions to the Bible (Song of Songs 4:6) and perhaps to Bishop Walsham How’s well-known lines “But lo! there breaks a yet more glorious day/The saints triumphant rise in bright array” were intentional, or whether the phrase should be understood in a more limited secular sense of hoping for better times to come. The currency of the phrase was, however, evidence of the cultural diffusion of biblical and Christian language. Overall while the above classification of the inscriptions therefore involved subjective and, to some extent, arbitrary judgements it nevertheless indicates that although secular sentiments predominated, a substantial minority of relatives responded to their loss in more or less religious terms.

Inscriptions classified as secular included factual statements of parentage and hometown (“To the dear memory of the only son of Mrs E. Kay of Preston”),<sup>18</sup> patriotic statements (“He fought and died at his country’s call”),<sup>19</sup> or a sense of enduring memory and love (“Ever in our thoughts”; “Loved for ever”).<sup>20</sup> Jewish inscriptions, for example “Mourned by parents brothers and sisters and relatives”<sup>21</sup> on a headstone at Étaples, tended particularly to emphasize a family context amidst the militaristic male solidarity of the orderly gravestones. Indeed, the blending of secular patriotism and Christianity apparent in the overall design of the cemeteries was seldom echoed in the personal inscriptions: only one headstone – perhaps significantly that of an officer – in the two samples from Terlincthun and Gorre explicitly linked “God and country”.<sup>22</sup> In general relatives who chose religious inscriptions avoided military or patriotic allusions. The theme of rest and union with Jesus was common and in striking juxtaposition to the brutality of the battlefield in inscriptions such as “Safe in the arms of Jesus”<sup>23</sup> and “Jesus in thy tender care we leave our soldier Daddie there”.<sup>24</sup> Also widespread were expectations of eventual reunion, such as “Our loss,

---

18 Charles William Kay.

19 Reginald Clarke.

20 N. Lightfoot; George Arthur Barrow.

21 R. Levy.

22 Duncan Gillies Forbes MacBean (at Gorre).

23 James Mitchell.

24 Peter McKerracher.

Christ's gain but we shall see him again".<sup>25</sup> Other inscriptions struck a note of faithful resignation, for example: "Dear Lord how could I give him up to any but to Thee".<sup>26</sup> Biblical texts quoted included "For ye are dead and your life is hid with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3),<sup>27</sup> "The Lord is my Shepherd therefore can I lack nothing" (Psalm 23:1),<sup>28</sup> and "Because I live ye shall live also" (John 14:19).<sup>29</sup> Allusions to well-known hymns included "Father in thy gracious keeping leave we now our loved one sleeping"<sup>30</sup> (adapted from John Ellerton's "Now the labourer's task is o'er") and "Peace perfect peace with loved ones far away"<sup>31</sup> (from Edward Henry Bickersteth's "Peace perfect peace"). Relatives who chose such texts were, it seems, responding to their loss in a spirit of Christian devotion and acceptance rather than finding comfort in a narrative of nationalistic sacrifice.

Nevertheless, some inscriptions were ambiguous, probably deliberately. Some had a biblical origin and spiritual meaning but could also be interpreted in a secular and military sense such as "Fight the good fight"<sup>32</sup> or "Greater love hath no man than this".<sup>33</sup> The wording "He died that others might live"<sup>34</sup> on a headstone at Étaples carries the biblical resonance of 1 Thessalonians 5: "For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us that ... we might live with him." It can equally well though be construed as a straightforwardly secular statement on how the deceased sacrificed himself in war in order to secure the lives and freedoms of others. A quote from the Te Deum, "The noble army of martyrs praise thee",<sup>35</sup> appears to identify the war dead as Christian martyrs. Perhaps significantly though this particular gravestone, is that of one of the few women to be buried at Étaples, a nursing sister who died from burns sustained when the Germans bombed a military hospital. The idea of martyrdom was more plausibly associated with a non-combatant.

Great care was taken to provide appropriate headstones for non-Christian burials. For Jews the cross was replaced with the Star of David and other faiths were given religious inscriptions in the appropriate sacred language (Figure 5). Jewish relatives were contacted on the same basis as Christians

<sup>25</sup> George Elliott.

<sup>26</sup> Walter J.W. Carter.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas John Honeybun.

<sup>28</sup> Harry George Street.

<sup>29</sup> Frank Albert Broad.

<sup>30</sup> William Anderson.

<sup>31</sup> A. Durrington.

<sup>32</sup> Frederick Charles Wood; cf I Timothy 6:12.

<sup>33</sup> Harry Johnson; cf. John 15:13.

<sup>34</sup> George William Phillips.

<sup>35</sup> Gladys Maud Mary Wake.

and were able to provide personal inscriptions if they so wished, but relatives in India do not appear to have been given any such opportunity. Hindu and Sikh soldiers who were cremated were sometimes given a headstone with the wording in English “The following soldier of the Indian army is honoured here”. Crucially though, although these graves were usually in separate plots from the Christian interments, the headstones were exactly the same shape, so they look identical from a distance, and it is only the inscriptions that distinguish them. At St Martin les Boulogne, however, in an apparent adaptation to perceived Muslim custom, all the headstones were more rounded than in the other cemeteries.

A recent Commonwealth War Graves Commission report has concluded that there were significant inequalities in the treatment of non-European casualties in other theatres of war, especially in Africa, but that in Europe itself equality of treatment was “effectively achieved”.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, this analysis has suggested a need to nuance that assessment in relation to the material religion of the cemeteries. Although non-Christian casualties were given a headstone consistent with their religious tradition, many of them were buried in cemeteries centred on a Christian cross of sacrifice or without any central religious memorial. The essentially secular Lutyens war stone, if present at all, was the only alternative focal point provided. Moreover, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh headstones lacked the personal religious inscriptions, which as we have seen, gave an intriguing individuality to some of the Christian and Jewish headstones.

### **Comparison and Conclusion**

It is instructive to compare British war cemeteries with their French counterparts, which demonstrate contrasting approaches to the same underlying challenge of bringing together religious, personal, national and military motivations in the material fabric of commemoration. It is somewhat paradoxical that whereas the British, with continuing close links between church and state, opted for rectangular headstones (albeit with inscribed crosses), the French, despite the 1905 separation of church and state, chose crosses as the standard provision for casualties who were not identified as Jews, Muslims or atheists. Moreover, the different shapes of the headstones for these minorities – rectangular with rounded tops for Jews and atheists, and with an outline suggestive of an Islamic arch for Muslims – means that they stand out in cemeteries as immediately distinguishable from the majority (see Figure 6). In that way the French approach rendered religious minor-

---

<sup>36</sup> George Hay & John Burke, Report of the Special Commission to Review Historical Inequalities in Commemoration, Maidenhead 2021, accessed online at <https://www.cwgc.org/non-commemoration-report/>, 2022-09-30.

ties more visible, while diminishing the visual impression of uniformity and solidarity characteristic of the British cemeteries. On the other hand, individual ornamentation was forbidden, and the French cemeteries did not allow any scope for the kind of distinctive expression enabled by the British personal inscriptions. Memorials only carried a standard inscription giving the casualty's name, rank, regiment and date of death, with the words "Mort pour la patrie" (or "Mort pour la France" in cemeteries outside France). In this way the secular republic asserted itself even on the cross bar of the Christian cross.

The only official central feature of these cemeteries was a flagpole and tricolour. However, whereas the British cemeteries were tightly controlled by the War Graves Commission and entirely funded by the state, in France individuals and organizations were given permission and land to add their own central monuments to the cemeteries.<sup>37</sup> The most conspicuous outcome of this arrangement was the massive ossuary at Douaumont near Verdun, the initiative of the local bishop and funded predominantly by public subscription. The complex incorporated a substantial Catholic chapel. Similarly at the centre of the massive cemetery at Ablain St Nazaire, near Arras, the small chapel dedicated to Notre Dame de Lorette, which was already a Catholic pilgrimage site before the war, was replaced with a much more substantial building.<sup>38</sup> At St Charles-de-Potyze in Belgium there is not only a secular monument erected by the grateful inhabitants of the nearby town of Ypres, but also a calvary in the Breton style, depicting Christ on the cross and grieving women, which was added in 1968.<sup>39</sup> At Douaumont too there were later additions, here recognizing the religious diversity of the burials on the site, with a Jewish memorial opened in 1938 and a Muslim one in 2006.<sup>40</sup>

This article has highlighted the significance of the cemeteries as material evidence of the complex dynamics of national religious life in the aftermath of the First World War. The compromises made in the design of the British cemeteries are revealing physical evidence of the uneasy balance between Christian and secular understandings of national identity among the elite groups responsible for making decisions. They are also evidence of an awareness of religious diversity, in some ways ahead of its time, but with

<sup>37</sup> Antoine Prost, "Les cimetières militaires de la Grande Guerre, 1914–1940", *Le Mouvement Social* 237 (2011), 135–151 [147], <https://doi.org/10.3917/lms.237.0135>.

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.greatwar.co.uk/french-flanders-artois/cemetery-ablain-st-nazaire-notre-dame-de-lorette.htm>, accessed 2022-09-29.

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.greatwar.co.uk/ypres-salient/cemetery-saint-charles-de-potyze.htm>, accessed 2022-09-29.

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.landofmemory.eu/en/sites-historiques/douaumont-ossuary/>, accessed 2022-09-29.

its expression constrained by the practical realities of limited resources and the desire for uniformity and architectural coherence. However, alongside the official narrative conveyed by the carefully constructed cemeteries, the personal inscriptions provide more varied impressions of the attitudes of the bereaved. Fragmentary though this evidence is, it is suggestive of diverse popular religious attitudes. While some relatives felt it apt to apply the biblical language of fighting the good fight or of a man laying down his life for his friends, many others asserted the ties of family rather than those of patriotic military service or placed their faith not in a God of battles and sacrifice, but in a gentle Jesus caring for their loved one and giving them hope of heavenly reunion. Herein lie alternative readings of the material religion of the cemeteries to that suggested by the “stark sword brooding on the bosom of the cross”, and the orderly headstones intended to “carry on the military idea”. ▲

#### SUMMARY

This article analyses the diverse religious messages conveyed by the physical layout and material details of British war cemeteries as they developed in the aftermath of the First World War. On the one hand the ubiquitous central monument of a sword within a cross conveyed an image of Christian militarism. This was reinforced by the orderly layout of the uniform headstones reminiscent of a regiment on parade. Meanwhile the central memorial stones included in the larger cemeteries signified a more secular and pluralistic nationalism that gave tacit recognition to the presence of significant Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh casualties among the dead. The inscriptions on the individual headstones gave scope not only to recognise diverse religious identities, but also for the bereaved to include brief epitaphs. The substantial minority who used these to express religious sentiments in general demonstrated a Christian faith that was more personal than nationalistic in tone. The article concludes with a brief comparison between British and French war cemeteries: paradoxically in view of the recent separation of church and state the latter used cruciform headstones except for non-Christian casualties thus highlighting diversity whereas the uniform rectangular headstones of the British cemeteries implicitly affirmed the solidarity of their dead.

**Gösta Hallonsten.** *Tron söker förstå centrala teologiska frågor.* Stockholm: Veritas förlag, 2023. 188 s.

Gösta Hallonsten (f. 1949) är en meriterad katolsk teolog och professor emeritus i systematisk teologi vid Lunds universitet. Under åren 1992–2002 var han medlem i Katolska kyrkans internationella teologkommission, 2002–2005 var han Carl J. Peter Professor i systematisk teologi och ekumenik vid the Catholic University of America (Washington, DC), och efter pensioneringen har han undervisat vid Newmaninstitutet i Uppsala. Han har gett ut flera böcker inom systematisk teologi och patristik med särskilt fokus på östkyrkornas teologi och historia, är fast medarbetare vid tidskriften *Signum* och har varit sakkunnig granskare av *Katolsk studiebibel*.

De tolv kapitlen i denna bok har tidigare publicerats som en serie i tidskriften *Signum* under den övergripande rubriken "Centrala teologiska frågor". När artiklarna nu återpubliceras är det med en komplettering av referenser och litteratur. I texten har endast några smärre ändringar gjorts. Rubrikerna till de tolv kapitlen är: (1) "Gud – vem är det?", (2) "Övernaturligt?", (3) "Skapelsen", (4) "Människan", (5) "Synden", (6) "Frälsningen", (7) "Kyrkan och sakramenten", (8) "Det universella frälsningssakramentet", (9) "Anden", (10) "Sonen", (11) "Fadern – Treenigheten", samt (12) "Härligheten".

Avsikten med artiklarna och boken är att i kortfattad form orientera om centrala problem som diskuterats inom dogmatiken och den systematiska teologin. Den teologi som här presenteras utgår från den katolska kyrkans tro och lära. Därför spelar också hännvisningar och citat från *Katolska kyrkans katekes* (KKK) en viktig roll i framställningen. Författaren understryker den nicenska trosbekännelsens centrala plats i kristen teologi. Denna kallas också den nicensk-konstantinopolitanska trosbekännelsen och antogs vid konciliet i Konstantinopel år 381.

Jag ska här endast ta upp vad Hallonsten säger i första kapitlet om den kristna guds-

bilden och vad han säger om det så kallade "mellantillståndet" i det sista.

Hallonsten inleder det första kapitlet med att ställa en fråga: "Om Gud verkligen existerar, hurdan är han då? Eller hon, för ingen tänkande människa har väl någonsin trott att Gud är en man" (s. 11). Att Gud inte är en människa förefaller självklart, för Hallonsten, även om Jesus påstås vara helt gudomlig och helt mänsklig, hur det nu kan anses meningsfullt och möjligt. Kristna teologer talar om Kristus "dubbla natur". Denna uppfattning ska i bästa fall kunna harmoniseras med talet om den treenige guden: Fadern, Sonen och den Helige Ande. Dyligt tal om Fader och Son leder lätt till slutsatsen att det manliga i gudomen betonas på bekostnad av det kvinnliga. Vi ber inte "Moder Vår" och talar inte om Guds dotter. Hur kommer det sig?

När man läser bibeln inser man snart att den i huvudsak skrivits *av* män, *om* män och *för* män. Du ska inte åtrå din grannes hustru! Det sägs inget om att kvinnorna inte ska åtrå sina grannars män. Kvinnornas position i det judiska samhället var mycket svag. När man ser på kristendomens organisatoriska utveckling finns det vissa ljusa punkter i begynnelsen, men ganska snart etablerades en ordning där kvinnorna var uteslutna från alla betydelsefulla positioner. I ljuset av dessa och andra reflexioner är det inte svårt att förstå dem som tror att Gud inte är en man, men väl representerar det manliga som en egenhet som övertrumfar det kvinnliga.

"Mellantillståndet" refererar till det tillstånd som människan befinner sig i efter den kroppsliga döden men före den slutgiltiga uppståndelsen vid tidens slut. Enligt katolsk tro definieras människans död som skiljandet mellan hennes kropp och själ. Ordet "mellantillstånd" saknas i de tre ekumeniska bekännelserna och i KKK. Hallonsten, som inser frågans relevans, använder begreppet för att beteckna den spänning som råder mellan tron på kroppens uppståndelse och själens odödligitet och talar om "mellantillståndet" på fyra ställen i sin bok – dock utan att kunna harmonisera den judiska antropo-

login med den grekiska. Hallonsten skriver: ”Tiden är en dimension av den tillvaro vi nu lever i. Med kroppens död upphör tiden. Men hur kan då Skriften och traditionen tala om ett mellantillstånd där själen fortlever i väntan på den kroppsliga uppståndelsen?” (s. 162)

Det är en bra fråga, men faktum är att Skriften inte har ett utan flera sinsemellan oförenliga svar på frågan var och i vilket tillstånd en mänskliga befinner sig mellan döden och uppståndelsen och hur den uppståndna kroppen kommer att se ut. Hallonsten ansluter sig till Katolska kyrkans lära att själen i dödsögonblicket skiljs från kroppen och tillbringar det följande Mellantillståndet antingen i ett saligt tillstånd i väntan på den slutliga uppståndelsen och domen, i ett osaligt tillstånd i väntan på uppståndelsen och domen eller i skärselen där vissa själar under en begränsad tid renas såsom genom eld innan de kan ansluta sig till de frälstas skara.

Stefan Andersson

Fil. dr., Dalby

DOL: 10.51619/stk.v10i13.28241

**Luke Bretherton. *A Primer in Christian Ethics: Christ and the Struggle to Live Well*. Cambridge University Press, 2023. 377 s.**

Den brittiske teologen Luke Bretherton har de senaste åren varit verksam på andra sidan atlanten vid Duke Divinity School men blev under 2024 utsedd till Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology (Christ Church, Oxford). Hans tidigare publiceringar inkluderar *Christ and the Common Life: The case for democracy, Resurrection Democracy: Faith Citizenship and the Politics of a Common Life*, samt *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness*. Ämnesmässigt befinner sig Bretherton i gränslandet mellan politisk teologi och teologisk etik.

Som titeln indikerar är hans senaste bok, *A Primer in Christian Ethics: Christ and the Struggle to Live Well*, en introduktion till kristen etik. Även om det ligger i genrens na-

tur att inte kunna ge uttömmande svar på alla frågor, och Bretherton själv medger att hans verk förmodligen väcker fler frågor än det ger svar, så finns det, menar jag, några distinkta drag som utmärker boken.

Ett sådant drag är hur själva bokens disposition i sig är ett argument för hur etik och politisk teologi bör bedrivas. Det ska sägas att Bretherton inte gör någon knivskarp distinktion mellan dessa ämnen. Till att börja med betonar Bretherton vikten av att kunna beskriva väl: beskriva vad som händer i en given kontext för att förstå vad det är för utmaningar som etiken behöver svara upp mot. Här finns hos Bretherton en förståelse där etiken och politiken inte tar sin primära utgångspunkt i en viss teori utan snarare i redan existerade praktiker och former av liv. För att kunna beskriva väl, menar Bretherton, är vår första uppgift att lyssna. Lyssnandet är också temat för den första delen av boken (”Describing well”). Vi behöver lyssna på såväl skapelsen, skriften, främlingen, de förtrycktas rop efter befrilelse och slutligen de som gått före. Redan här syns ett utmärkande drag hos Bretherton: nämligen viljan och ambitionen att hålla samman olika teman och traditioner. Svaret på våra frågor är sällan antingen eller, utan ligger i hur kreativa spänningar och paradoxer kan skapas. Här finns också en implicit kritik av Immanuel Kants förnuftsbaserade, universella etik. Enligt Bretherton är denna etik en etik som kringgår behovet av just lyssnandet. Inte minst lyssnandet till kontext, uppenbarelse och tradition.

Bokens andra del (”Acting well”) handlar om etisk agens. Även om det finns en tydlig förkärlek till dygdetiken hos Bretherton framgår här återigen ambitionen att hålla samman olika traditioner och perspektiv. Vi blir moraliska varelser genom att hörsamma Guds kallelse att älska Gud och vår nästa, menar Bretherton, och kärleken till vår nästa bör formas av såväl regler och föreskrifter som av dygder och moraliskt omdöme. Ett för boken centralt argument är att regler och procedurer aldrig kan ersätta behovet av om-

döme. Vad som behövs är en sorts praktisk klokhet, vad Aristoteles kallade *fronesis*, för vilken såväl dygder som regler och befallningar har sin roll att spela (s. 228).

I bokens tredje och sista del tillämpar Bretherton de perspektiv han presenterat tidigare i boken på en rad aktuella frågor: Intimitet och sexualitet, arbete och ekonomi samt politik. Värt att notera här är hur Bretherton vidgar politikbegreppet till att omfatta mer än statens angelägenheter och praktiker. Politik för Bretherton handlar om varje människas och varje sammanhangs behov av ett gemensamt liv med andra. Med andra ord är politik grundläggande och ofrånkomligt för ett gott gemensamt liv.

En viktig del av hans argumentation handlar om att våra politiska praktiker och överväganden teologiskt sett behöver ta hänsyn till tre dimensioner av politiken. För det första behöver den politiska teologin ha en apokalyptisk dimension. Det vill säga att den behöver kunna gestalta och peka på hur något kan förstas utifrån Guds levande närvaro här och nu. Politiken behöver ha en profetisk karaktär. Vidare behöver politiken ta hänsyn till vad Bretherton kallar den tragiska dimensionen, vilket innefattar livets brustna och ofullkomliga karaktär. Den tredje dimensionen benämner Bretherton som "the pastoral" (s. 320). Den handlar om vardagslivets realiteter och hur politik kan befrämja och uttryckas i och genom det vardagliga. I sina bästa stunder, menar Bretherton, kan politisk teologi inkorporera dessa tre dimensioner samtidigt. I sin renodlade form kan den apokalyptiska dimensionen skapa ohälsosamma polariseringar, medan ett ensidigt fokus på den tragiska dimensionen riskerar att negligenza hoppet om förändring. Samtidigt, understryker han, riskerar utelämnandet av den vardagliga dimensionen att skapa en politisk praktik skild från verkligheten. Ytterst sätt, menar Bretherton, behöver politiken vara sekulär: inte i den meningen att den är fri från metafysiska övertygelser, utan i bemärkelsen att den inte är evig. Det finns ingen gudomlig politik – ett faktum som för

Bretherton understryker nödvändigheten av en demokratisk politik där en mångfald av röster och perspektiv får komma till tals.

Sammantaget erbjuder *A Primer in Christian Ethics: Christ and the Struggle to Live Well* en utomordentlig introduktion till ämnet kristen etik. Liksom Brethertons tidigare verk är boken dessutom teologiskt allmänbildande i det att Bretherton, i sitt författarskap, förkroppsligar sin egen demokratiska övertygelse: Det är många röster som får komma till tals. Många frågor som ibland framställs som "antingen eller" får här ett "både och" till svar. Då verket i stort sätt saknar redogörelser om dop och nattvard och deras betydelse för kristen etik är den också ekumeniskt tillgänglig.

*Andreas Bernberg  
Doktorand i praktisk teologi/kyrkohistoria, Enskilda Högskolan  
DOI: 10.51619/stk.v10i13.28242*

**Elisabeth Gerle. *Vi är inte idioter: Klimat, ekonomi, demokrati*. Göteborg: Bokförlaget Korpen, 2023. 269 s.**

Elisabeth Gerle är en svensk etiker och präst, som har engagerat sig i många olika frågor på lika många arenor, inom både kyrka, akademi och samhälle. Hennes forskning gäller så skilda områden som skolpolitik, mänskliga rättigheter, Martin Luther (1483–1546) och kroppsighet. Flera av dessa sammanstrålar i hennes senaste bok, *Vi är inte idioter*, där Gerle menar att demokratin backar och klimatkrisen fortgår eftersom vi blivit vad som i antikens Grekland kallades idioter: Vi värderar alltför mycket det privata eller idiotiska (*to idion*) på bekostnad av det gemensamma eller politiska (*to politikon*). Enligt Gerle varken måste eller borde vara så.

Bokens källmaterial är varierat till både innehåll och genre: teologiska och filosofiska klassiker, aktuell statistik från olika myndigheter, debattartiklar, samhällsvetenskaplig forskning och mer därtill. I tolkningen därav använder Gerle dessutom flera teoretiska perspektiv, både från teologin och från andra

discipliner. Med detta breda underlag blir hennes argumentation något svårsammantattad, varför bara några nyckeltankar kan lyftas här.

Teologiskt återkommer Gerle bland annat till Luthers klassiska ord *simul iustus et peccator* (samtidigt rättfärdig och syndare). Hon ser detta som en allmänmänsklig princip: Vi gör inte alltid det goda vi vill, utan ofta det onda vi inte vill (Rom 7:19). Eller, med särskild relevans för klimatkrisen: Ofta vet vi vad som är gott, samtidigt (*simul*) som vi gör det onda. Erfarenheten säger att vi ändå kan göra gott, men det kräver samverkan där vi hjälps åt att prioritera det politiska över det idiotiska. Gerle hämtar även teoretiska redskap från andra discipliner, särskilt statsvetaren Sofia Näsströms idé om ”demokratins anda”: Hållbar demokrati kräver inte bara allmän rösträtt, utan att vi aktivt arbetar för emancipation för dem som lever i utsatthet.

Gerle använder båda dessa tankar, *simul* och demokratins anda, för att underkänna dagens samhälle: Vi prioriterar ofta individens frihet på bekostnad av emancipatoriskt arbete. Samtidigt innebär detta en möjlig väg framåt: Vi kan och borde prioritera det gemensamma högre.

Problemet, enligt Gerle, är strävan efter frihet. Människor önskar autonomi. Det är förstås inte alltid av ondo, men om samhället enbart utformas för att maximera våra negativa frihet, frånvaron av begränsningar, vad händer då? Utifrån Gerles människosyn, centrerad kring *simul*-begreppet, är risken uppenbar. Människor kommer ofta göra det onda, även om de vet bättre, och inte nog prioritera den demokratiskt nödvändiga emancipationen.

Gerle anser att följderna därav blir tydliga i en nyliberal ekonomism, där ekonomin är så fri som möjligt och dess normer (konkurrens, valfrihet, privat ägande) blir alltmer styrande även på andra områden. Hon lyfter exempelvis hur *new public management* alltmer blivit normen inom offentlig och civil sektor, hur toppolitiker och lobbyister står varandra mycket nära och hur den fria mark-

naden prioriteras på bekostnad av andra värden. Detta gäller stora delar av världen, inte bara Sverige, men delar av analysen gäller Sverige specifikt: Det svenska folkhemmet har alltmer utvecklats i nyliberal riktning med det fria skolvalet och den ökande privatiseringen av värden som tydliga exempel. Frågan är vilket värde obegränsad frihet och tillväxt har. John Stuart Mill (1806–1783) angav att människors frihet enbart bör begränsas om den skadar andra. Det fria skolvalet har dock lett till ökad segerering, otydligare pedagogik och vinstdrift på bekostnad av elevernas lärande. Friskolesystemet och en alltmer privatiserad sjukvård kräver en omfattande administration. När myndigheterna inte själva genomför samhällstjänsten ökar behovet att kontrollera att den sker på rätt sätt, vilket kräver resurser som kunde gått direkt till värden och undervisningen. En ohejdad konsumtion spår på en fortgående miljökatastrof. Enligt Gerle leder nyliberal frihet alltså till enorm skada för andra – precis det som enligt Mill kunde motivera begränsningar.

Gerle diskuterar även religionens roll i det nyliberala samhället. Hon kritiserar särskilt amerikansk framgångsteologi, tolkad som ett resultat av evangelikalismens särskiljande av kyrkan från samhället i stort. Om kyrkan då är ekonomiskt välmående tolkas det lätt som tecken på Guds välvilja, medan resten av samhället upplevs som främmande och ont.

Gerle förespråkar i stället en luthersk etik, utan skiljelinjer mellan kristna och andra: Alla är *simul* goda och onda. Som historisk tolkning av Luthers *simul*-begrepp är det knappast trovärdigt. Luther avsåg specifikt att just kristna är rättfärdiga (genom Kristus) och syndare. Avsaknaden av gränser mellan kristna och andra är dock en naturlig följd av Gerles mer allmänmänskliga *simul*-begrepp, som tycks mer inspirerat av N. F. S. Grundtvigs (1783–1872) ”människa först, kristen sedan” än av Luther.

Gerle medger visserligen att en tydlig åtskillnad mellan kyrka och samhälle kan vara konstruktiv. Svenska frikyrkor har historiskt

sett använt sig av en motsvarande åtskillnad för att utmana samhället i emancipatorisk riktning. Detta kräver dock att en prioriterar det gemensamma framför det privata, vilket framgångsteologerna misslyckas med. Trots denna möjlighet håller Gerle fast vid det lutherska alternativet.

Bokens bredd av källmaterial och teorier är både en styrka och en svaghet. Den ger henne förstås många belägg för sina teser, och dessa teser får i sin tur relevans för många olika områden. Samtidigt kan hon inte göra en djupgående analys av varje område. För en politisk-teologisk bok med ”klimat” i undertiteln innehåller *Vi är inte idioter* exempelvis förvånansvärt lite ekoteologi och miljöpolitik; de diskuteras ganska kortfattat. Det framgår heller inte tydligt varför en luthersk etik, utan åtskillnad mellan kristna och andra, är att föredra framför det svenska frikyrkliga alternativet, där kyrkan kan utmana samhället till emancipation. Med tanke på den roll åtskillnaden mellan kyrka och stat spelar i en del samtida teologi (till exempel i Stanley Hauerwas etik) är detta olyckligt.

Vidare varierar kvalitén på Gerles källmaterial. Vissa delar baseras på högaktuell forskning medan andra är betydligt mindre välgrundade. I kapitlet ”Klimatet och mänskans villkor” utgörs exempelvis en majoritet av källorna av dagstidningar, radiointervjuer och annat källmaterial som i bästa fall kan beskrivas som populärvetenskapligt. Flertalet akademiska referenser i kapitlet är dessutom teologiska eller filosofiska, inte empiriska, vilket gör samhällsanalysen något skakig.

Trots dessa brister anser jag boken vara ett viktigt bidrag till det etiska och teologiska samtalet om nyliberalism, som sammanför en mängd relevanta erfarenheter, forskningsresultat och teorier. Gerle är långt ifrån den första etikern eller teologen som kritisar nyliberalismen, men en av få som gjort det med fokus riktat mot Sverige. För den som vill förstå det svenska samhället ur ett teologiskt perspektiv är *Vi är inte idioter* värdefull läsning.

Johan Hylander Theil  
Teol. mag., Göteborgs universitet  
DOI: 10.51619/stk.v10i13.28243

**Darren Roso, Daniel Bensaïd: From the Actuality of the Revolution to the Melancholic Wager.** Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2024. 822 s.

Hur förblivit revolutionär när den revolutionära eran är över? Frågan drevs till sin spets bland marxistiska intellektuella mot slutet av 1980-talet. Att detta skedde i Frankrike mer än någon annan stans är inte så märkligt. 1989 firades tvåhundraårsjubileet av franska revolutionen med pompa och ståt, och året dessförinnan blickade många tillbaka på de tjugo år som förflutit sedan studentrevolutionerna i maj 1968. För de som förblivit sina radikala ideal trogna var dessa jubileer dock vidhäftade med melankoli och tvetydighet. På den internationella arenan rusade nyliberalismens segertåg fram och på hemmaplan hade François Mitterrand just tillträtt sin andra mandatperiod. Den intellektuella parnassen fylldes sedan ett årtionde tillbaka av en växande skara forna maoister – de ”nya filosoferna” – som nu ägnade hela sin kritiska energi åt att gissla sitt eget radikala förflutna. När Östblocket inom loppet av ett par år föll samman som ett korthus fick dessa tänkare vatten på sin kvarn: revolutionärt tänkande leder per automatik till totalitarism. Dags att begrava Marx en gång för alla.

Så hur förblivit revolutionär eller åtminstone radikal när den politiska och ekonomiska liberalismen fått sista ordet och alla alternativa samhällsordningar dödförklarats? Ett av de mer välkända försöken att svara an på frågan återfinns i Jacques Derridas skrift *Marx spöken* som kom ut på franska 1993. Att just Derrida författade ett verk om Marx vid den här tiden uppfattades nog av en och annan som både förvånande och otidsenligt. Förvånande därför att Derridas tänkande i hög grad hade vuxit fram i kritisk kontrast till 1960-talets marxistiskt präglade klimat. Otidsenligt därför att kommunismen, enligt den dominerande liberala retoriken, en

gång för alla bevisat sin egen ohållbarhet. Otidsenligheten var emellertid Derridas själva poäng. Var inte det närmast tvångsmässiga upprepandet av att vi var färdiga med Marx om något ett tecken på att vi inte alls var färdiga med Marx – på att de oreserverade segerropen över marknadsliberalismen bara tjänade till att skyla över den inbyggda orättfärdigheten i den framväxande globala världsordningen? Med tiden har *Marx spöken* kommit att bli något av en modern klassiker, ett närmast profetisk dokument, och en självklar referenspunkt i nutidens politisk-filosofiska debatter.

Mindre känt, åtminstone i den engelskspråkiga akademiska världen, är ett annat djärvt och originellt försök att återvända till Marx vid samma tid: Daniel Bensaïds bok *Marx l'intempestif* ("Den olägglige Marx") från 1995. Precis som Derrida kom Bensaïd från en sekulär judisk-algerisk bakgrund, men till skillnad från Derrida hade hans intellektuella bana inte varit den snävt akademiska. Istället hade han ett långt liv bakom sig som politiskt aktiv inom den Fjärde Internationalen, både som ledare för dess franska sektion och som verksam för internationalens räkning i det demokratiska återuppbryggandet av Brasilien och dessförinnan Argentina. Det var först i skiftet mellan 1980- och 90-talet som hans mer omfattande filosofiska författarskap började ta form, bland annat som en följd av att han smittats av HIV och tvingats trappa ner på resande och fysiskt ansträngande åtaganden. Det var också den decennier långa behandlingen av bromsmediciner som till sist skulle förorsaka hans alltför tidiga död i cancer 2010.

Om Bensaïds namn hamnade i skymundan efter hans bortgång pågår sedan några år en betydande återupptäckt av hans verk som en av de viktigaste ansatserna att förnya det marxistiska filosofiska arvet. År 2023 ägnade tidskriften *Rethinking Marxism* ett temanummer åt hans tänkande och för närvarande förbereds ett symposium på det internationella nätforumet Political Theology (politicaltheology.com). I fjol gjordes

också det första försöket att ge en omfattande presentation av Bensaïds liv och verk: Darren Rosos drygt 800-sidiga studie *Daniel Bensaïd: From the Actuality of the Revolution to the Melancholic Wager* (Brill, 2024). Med förbehåll för att Rosos akademiska prosa bitvis är tungrodd och upprepande (boken hade med fördel kunnat kondenseras ner till färre sidor) är detta en utmärkt systematisk genomgång av Bensaïds filosofi – från hans masteruppsats om Lenins krisbegrepp 1968 till hans sista skrifter i kölvattnet av 9/11 och vad som då ofta beskrevs som det postpolitiska tillståndet.

Som grundläggande grepp för sin framställning delar Roso in Bensaïds tänkande i två faser: före och efter 1989. Att denna tid rent biografiskt var en brytningstid för Bensaïd har redan antyts. Men det var inte bara sjukdomen som betingade ett skifte i hans liv och verk mot slutet av 1980-talet. Lika betydande var det inledningsvis antydda politiska klimatet och insikten om att den revolutionära eran definitivt var över. Om det var så att det radikala tänkandet nått en återvändsgård kunde man fråga sig om detta inte i viss mån hade att göra med att detta tänkande alltmer kommit att stelna i sina egna former. Precis som för Derrida blev insikten om det revolutionära projektets kris för Bensaïd en sporre att återvända till Marx. I tydlig parallell till Derrida gjorde han det också genom att ta en omväg via judisk-filosofiska källor, i synnerhet Walter Benjamin, men även Franz Rosenzweig, Gershom Scholem och Ernst Bloch.

Roso visar hur den "messianska vändning" som sker i Bensaïds tänkande vid denna tid mer än något annat är det som lägger grunden för hans förnyelse av det marxistiska filosofiska arvet under de efterföljande åren. I Benjamins messianska tydningar av historien finner Bensaïd resurser för att bryta med den dogmatiska, deterministiska och positivistiska anda som genomsyrat stora delar av det franska marxistiska tänkandet under efterkrigstid. Den messianska tiden, i Benjamins tappning, är inte en kronologisk resa mot ett

framtida fullkomligt tillstånd. Den är istället nuets tid, enigmatiskt fångad i de berömda avslutande orden i hans *Historiefilosofiska teser*: ”Ty varje sekund ... var den lilla port genom vilken Messias kunde inträda.”

Den hållning som fångas här ska inte förväxlas med historielöshet. Istället handlar det om att bryta med fantasin om att historien skulle följa en given väg mot den perfekta revolutionära omstörtningen. Bensaïd läser Benjamin som en djupt anti-utopisk tänkare. Att förlägga den förlösande tiden till nuet är att kalla till handling i varje ögonblick, hur provisoriskt och otillräckligt det än må vara. Det är också att säga att vi aldrig blir färdiga med det förlösande arbetet. Och just här finner Bensaïd svaret på frågan om hur förbli revolutionär när den revolutionära eran är över. Vi behöver helt enkelt släppa fetischiseringen av det revolutionära ögonblicket och erkänna att verkligt revolutionära förvandlingar sker över tid och kräver tålmod och ihärdighet. Här kan man tänka på en av de mest genomgripande omvälvningarna i människans historia: de gångna hundra årens förvandling av kvinnans ställning i stora delar av världen. Samtidigt påminner oss just detta exempel om att det revolutionära arbetet aldrig är fullbordat och att rätvisan i varje stund måste erövras på nytt. Eller som Derrida formulerade saken med anspelning på en berömd talmudpassage: om vi en dag plötsligt skulle stöta på Messias skulle vi bli tvungna att fråga honom: ”När kommer du att komma?” (Quand viendras-tu?).

*Jayne Svenungsson*  
Professor i systematisk teologi,  
Lunds Universitet  
DOI: 10.51619/stk.v10i13.28244

Clemens Cavallin et al. (red.). *Thomas av Aquino. En introduktion till hans teologi och filosofi*. Skellefteå: Artos. 2025. 362 s.

Robert Barron. *Den stora berättelsen om Israel. Utvaldhet, frihet, helighet*. Stockholm: Veritas förlag. 2025. 361 s.

Mattias Sommer Bostrup et al. (red.). *Kirkehistoriske samlinger 2024*. Selskabet for Danmarks Kirkehistorie. Odense: Syddansk Universitetsforlag. 2024. 201 s.

Bengt Pohjanen. *Filokalia IV*. Skellefteå: Artos. 2025. 82 s.

Hartmut Rosa. *Demokrati behöver religion*. Skellefteå: Artos. 2025. 64 s.

Fredrik Santell. *Att bygga sitt liv i skuggan av kriget. Heribert Jansson – En existentiell biografi*. Skellefteå: Artos. 2025. 272 s.