

## **CHRISTIAN HYMNODY IN A CHANGING SOCIETY: EXPERIENCES FROM THE NORDIC COUNTRIES.**

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There was not a great deal of congregational singing in the churches in the western world before the Reformation. At that time Norway was linked to Denmark, with a Danish monarchy and Danish (written) language. University education was undertaken at the University of Copenhagen. The Norwegian culture was in other words strongly tied up to the Danish. The first official hymnal in Denmark-Norway was published in 1569. Following this, a new hymnal was, on average, published once or twice each century. In 1814 the formal link between the two Denmark and Norway was replaced with another between Sweden and Norway.

Primary schools were an important arena for the learning of hymns. These schools were established in the middle of the eighteenth century and were for all children in Norway. The main purpose of schooling was to learn to read about Christianity in order that the students could be confirmed. The learning the hymns was an important element in this education.

This emphasis on the teaching of hymns in school continued for generations, through to the middle of the twentieth century. The state Lutheran Church of Norway has in periods considered the learning of hymns as a part of Christian education satisfactory. Since the middle of the twentieth century curriculums for primary schools have been from one point of view more precisely formed, although still with a certain emphasis on the learning of hymns. However, the possibility for children to gain a real understanding of hymns and their place in the service has changed along with a change of focus in society away from church centrality. Today, the average Norwegian has very little knowledge of Christian hymns and knows only a very few from memory.

Like many other western European countries, Norway is regarded as a Christian nation. This does not mean that everybody confess a Christian faith. The traditions and many of the laws are built around Christian values and views to such a degree that it remains usual to assume that Christianity is the primary form of religious expression.

However, only a minority of Norwegian, at most a quarter of the population, confess the Christian faith. Of these, perhaps half regularly attend church services. A large portion of congregations will be acquainted with traditional hymns. Some will know a few of them by memory.

In recent times a dramatic change has occurred. Norwegian congregations in the Church of Norway are declining, in a similar fashion to other comparable denominations. Only a minority of church members attend church services. However, church life is flourishing in some other denominations. Many people may attend what may be considered joyful, meaningful and popular services in some churches. The primary change is, however, that in most of these popularist churches the use of the traditional hymns has all but disappeared and replaced by the so-called praise or worship songs.

Modern western praise songs often have a straightforward, modern ballad-form. Some would claim that they are quite simple compared to tradition hymns. The texts, often known as lyrics, can be biblical quotes or closely based on biblical passages. Formally the texts are

often loosely structured and do not use metrical patterns or rhyme. The content or themes of these songs are also quite limited. *One honor God as King and Savior*. Central Christian concepts such as sin or judgment are not importunate, and challenges for peace and justice in the world are not, as a rule, emphasised.

This change can have many reasons. Our society has changed very much concerning the demographic development. Half a century ago so to speak all inhabitants of Norway were Norwegians. The last decades there has been a big change in this respect. Now there are several mosques and temples connected to other religions. It is not obvious any more that all the school children should be so acquainted with the Christian faith as a generation ago. Norway has suddenly become more cross-cultural.

A few generations ago the link between state and church was also more obvious. Other religions did not have any position. Non-believers had a lower profile. The Evangelical-Lutheran faith dominated. This situation is again much more complicated now.

The use of these songs causes problems in many congregations. Some congregations prefer the traditional hymns while others the new praise or worship songs. This preference is not just connected with the musical or textual content, but also with they way these songs are sung. Praise songs are often performed standing. Many people will lift their hands, seemingly praying or even entranced. For many of the more traditional churchgoers this behavior has a tendency to seem strange or even weird.

In Oslo, Norway's largest city, this appears to present significant problems. Some people do not find it comfortable to be present in this style of Christian worship, and do not find participation in worship easy.

One may hope that we in the very near future may find a way to include both traditionalists and the praise singers in corporate meaningful worship.