

Hymnological research from a Nordic point of view

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The Nordic countries

The conception "Nordic countries" refers to Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark (with Greenland and the Faroe Islands) and Iceland, the population counting about 24 million people. The five countries are generally grasped as a homogeneous region with regard to cultural, social, economical and religious circumstances. They are rich according to international standards and they have good social networks. Scandinavian language, a mixture of Swedish, Danish and Norwegian, is understood by most - especially educated - people, except for a part of the Finns. The common language contributes to a good relationship between the countries. In the hymnological field there is a close co-operation. A hymnological association, NordHymn, gives a good platform for dialogues between Nordic hymnologists.

About 87 % of the people in the Nordic countries are Lutherans. This implies that Lutheran worship and hymn singing traditions are strong. Most people are, however, quite passive church members and religion is not anymore an integral part in the life of people. Only about twelve percent take part in the Sunday services every month. Even if the countries are considered to be the most secularized in the world most people want to be members of the Lutheran national churches. A large majority of the population are baptized (in Finland 90 %), married (80 %) and buried (97 %) through a Lutheran church ceremony.

Hymnological research

The religious situation has strongly affected hymnological research. Most of the investigations deal with Lutheran hymns and hymn traditions. There are, naturally, also studies about i.e. free church traditions (Pentecostals, Baptists), revival movements (pietism) and the Orthodox church.

A question discussed during the last decades is the focus of hymnological research. It started in Sweden (Hellström, Selander) in the 1980ies with the conception of hymnology. "Hymnology" is not a good term in the Scandinavian language. "Hymn" in the first place refers to "anthem" (i.e. national anthem) and to ancient Christian songs (Ambrosian hymn) but not to Kirchenlied as in German and to hymn as in English. A scientific discipline demands a correspondance according to denomination and content. Therefore some scholars wanted to abandon the term hymnology and wished to create a new conception ("psalmforskning"). There was no success at the end - fortunately. Hymnology is an internationally accepted term for this discipline.

Focus - hymn, hymnbook, liturgy, society

Another question has been the focus of hymnological investigation. Hymnological research can - as we know - be done on different levels and from many different points of view. In a very simple way we can say that the elementary, the first level, of hymnological research is the hymn (a song for congregational singing). The focus of hymnological interest can be on either of the two ground elements of a hymn, the text and the tune, apart from each other or together. The analysis of a hymn text can be made within several disciplines and from different points of view. A theologian can focus on dogmatical matters, on the liturgical context of the hymn or on other aspects of church life. He/she can deal with questions of origin, sources and theological influences. And so on. A literary scholar may examine the literary style, metaphors, meter, rhyme, translations and changes during different periods in history. A musicologist can examine different musical (theoretical) aspects of the hymn, sources and origin, variations, harmonizations, etc.

In this way various aspects of a hymn may be investigated within different disciplines as

theology, musicology and comparative literature. Other research fields could also be involved in the analysis of a single hymn, i.e. aesthetics or ethnology. Individual hymns are usually a part of a second greater totality, a hymnbook. A hymnbook can be examined in the same way as one specific hymn but usually in a more complex and complicated process. Above the aspects of single hymns a hymnologist may examine a hymnbook in view of its general content and special accentuations, redactional work, sources and influences, historical aspects and matters of printing and reception. Hymnbooks are usually investigated by disciplines as theology, musicology and comparative literature, but also historical, pedagogical, social, political and economical disciplines can be involved.

A hymnbook is part of a wider context on a third level, a liturgical. The liturgical context may be confessional (Lutheran, Catholic) or deal with a specific religious movement (pietism). From this wider point of view we can ask questions as: What is significant for a certain hymn tradition? Or in a comparative perspective: What differs the Lutheran tradition from the Catholic in a historical or a contemporary point of view? We might also examine changes within the Swedish hymn tradition in the last 50 years and certify a turn from a German dominated to an Anglican and American evangelical tradition, and a growing accentuation of environmental and global questions in new written hymns (Frostenson, Hartman, Hallqvist).

This is where hymnology often stops - at the liturgical border. But a liturgy, a confession or a religious movement is part of a greater totality on a fourth level, a certain society with its specific history and culture, social life, ideologies and customs. A hymnologist may investigate the influence of a secular society or the political situation on the hymn tradition. Or vice versa. An interesting matter today in the Nordic countries is how religious and secular poetry are related to each other.

Hymnology is thus a typical interdisciplinary field. Hymnological research work is done on different levels and deals with many kinds of problems. Methodologically hymnologists work within the methods of their specific disciplines. I am aware that this is a very simple model but it gives a background for the Nordic discussions of methods and accentuations in hymnology.

Critics

About fifteen years ago Nordic hymnological research was criticized, firstly, for working too isolated from the surrounding societies. Investigations were mostly concentrated on certain hymns and hymnbooks, on their liturgical contexts and on authors connected to hymns. Too little were hymns, hymnals and traditions examined as a part of the society as a whole, as expressions of historical and social surroundings, of cultural, ideological and political currents. And far too much they were historically and eurocentrically orientated.

Secondly: Most of the earlier investigations were made by scholars of practical theology, only a smaller part by musicologists and literary scholars. It had become clear that hymnology is an interdisciplinary field and must not only in theory but also in praxis be worked out in co-operation with scholars from several disciplines. The field had to be widened and new methods had to be used. I shall return to the critics but before that some general remarks.

Features in Nordic hymnological research

Since the last ten years there is an increasing interest for hymnological research in the Nordic countries. New hymnbooks for the churches have been approved and there has been a period of creativeness in writing hymns. This has brought a growing interest for hymnological investigations. In Finland a hymn society was founded in 1996, which gives a good platform for information and co-ordination. What has then been on top of the hymnological research? Because of the large field I shall mainly illustrate the situation by some facts from Finland.

Most of the professional hymnological research in Finland - as in the Nordic countries - takes place at the universities. About 60 larger works (theses on different levels) have been completed in the last ten years. What do the works tell about contemporary

hymnology?

Firstly: Today there is little interest in historical problems. A few thesis deal with mediaeval questions and some with problems from the 16th to the 19th centuries. But the greatest part are matters of contemporary time: hymn writing today, hymn singing in the parishes, the use of hymns in schools, hymns in massmedia, etc. On this point there has been a great change in the last years.

Secondly: Geographically some thesis investigate international (outside of the Nordic countries) problems, i.e. Freytingshausen's pietistic hymns or hymn singing in Namibia. But most of the thesis deal with Finnish hymns, hymnals and hymn singing. There is, in other words, a strong emphasis on the national tradition.

Thirdly: According to disciplines we can notice a move from theology to musicology. Earlier the biggest part of investigations were made by scholars of practical theology, but today there is a growing interest for hymnology among musicologists. Very few hymnologists are literary scholars. Some sociologists are involved, too.

Fourthly: What is in focus of the investigations? The greatest part deals with single hymns, hymnbooks, poets and composers and liturgical traditions. Some have a wider cultural and social approach and i.e. describe the hymns from the point of view of politics, ethnology and folkmusic.

This is Finland. The same features with some variations can be seen also in the other Nordic countries. In Denmark the the cultural context of hymns and the process of reception are emphasized. In Norway the social awakening in the churches and the importance of musical matters in hymn singing are in focus. In Sweden both historical and contemporary themes are investigated, especially the reception of hymns and questions of youth hymns. One doctoral thesis to be mentioned is the conception of time in hymns.

An interdisciplinary project - "Dejlig er jorden"

The Nordic hymnological association, NordHymn, is a forum for discussion about hymnological reports, projects and methodology. Here scholars from all the Nordic countries try to come together two to four times every year. In the middle of the 1990ies - and with background of the critics mentioned above - a large interdisciplinary Nordic project was started. The main question to be answered was: Which is the role of hymns in the Nordic contemporary culture and society (not in church but in everyday lives of the people)? Scholars of different disciplines came together. More than 7000 enquires were by sampling sent out in the Nordic countries. Among questions to be answered were: How many hymns do you know by heart? Where did you learn hymns? Do you take part in hymn singing? Which is your most beloved hymn? There were also questions about how certain hymns are grasped.

The main purpose of the project was to get an answer to the question of the role of hymns in a secular society, a description of the situation in each country and a comparative study between the five countries. The task was given to scholars from different fields (sociologists, theologians, musicologists, literary scholars, ethnologists, pedagogues).

The first step was a statistical material. The investigation i.e. shows that 80 % of Nordic homes own a hymnbook. The knowledge of hymns may not be great: 19 % of the population don't know hymns at all (the best knowledge of hymns is found in Iceland), 47 % know 1-5 hymns by heart, 9 % know more than 20 hymns. Every second person regularly takes part in hymn singing when there is a chance, the other half is only listening. Participation in hymn singing is smallest in Iceland (31 %) and largest in Denmark (75 %).

The research also shows the importance of the public school for hymn singing. About 80 % of the respondents answered that they have learned hymns at school. Only a minority had become acquainted with hymns in church or at home. This has an important pedagogical aspect. Hymn singing is still to some extent a part of the education in schools but is a decreasing subject. The research raises the question: Who will take up the role of transmitting hymn traditions when hymns are not taught at school anymore? The investigation also gives a statistical answer to the question: Which hymns are

considered important in peoples' lives? There is a certain group of hymns which people seem to know and appreciate in all five countries. Seven out of ten (among Swedish speaking) and four (among Finnish speaking) on top were similar in Finland and Sweden and two of three in Denmark and Norway.

The statistical results were the first part of the investigation. These were given to sociologists, theologians, musicologists, literary scholars and pedagogues for deeper analysis. Why are these ten hymns on top? Sociologists analysed people's traditions, theologians the main message of the hymns, musicologists the melodies and literary scholars the texts - and came to interesting answers.

One part of the study was to examine how hymns are grasped? The same hymn, i.e. the well known Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott by Martin Luther, was understood very differently in Finland and Sweden. In Finland this hymn has become a very popular song for political church solemnities and used on independence day and at military services. In Sweden it is considered strange and hardly sung at all nowadays. Translations of the same hymn into different languages seem to affect peoples' conceptions of a hymn. One last remark: What makes a hymn popular among people? It is probably not the quality of the text, nor of the music. The crucial point seems to be a general human content, not a dogmatic one, and the situations in which the hymns are used, not at least outside church.

These are some facts from a large investigation. It deals with a Nordic situation, which may be very different from Romania. The most interesting thing may not be the specific answers. What we really are proud of is the methodological approach: a large questionnaire in a specific geographic area, scholars from different disciplines involved with problems from their special point of view and with specific methods. It was a demanding process to exceed from an individual starting-point to an interdisciplinary approach. But it was worth the effort.

A new Nordic project of the same kind has started: Martin Luther's hymns in a Nordic context. The question is which hymns are used, when and how they were introduced, how they were translated and later shortened, which melodies have been used? This project, too, will involve scholars from different fields.

Hymnology is a complex field which demands co-operation in disciplines and methods for valid results.