

Hymns and Hymn-Singing as an Indicator of the Situation of the Church

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Since the formation-years of the Lutheran reformation in the 1520's hymn-singing has been one of the main characteristics of the Lutheran churches. The transformation of the traditional mass dating back to the pre-medieval church meant to Luther on the one hand a change from Latin to the vernacular, on the other hand the take-over by the lay congregation of a considerable part of the liturgy.

In his two masses, *Formula missae* (The Formula of the Mass) from 1523 and *Deutsche Messe* (The German Mass) from 1526 Luther presupposed the invention of German hymns to replace a number of the liturgical elements of the mass. In a letter to his friend Spalatin, the Saxon priest and lawyer at the court of the Elector Frederic the Wise Luther urged him to write German hymns for the new German mass. During the 1520's Luther was himself the most productive evangelical hymn-writer. Luther wrote his hymns according to his own theology and his own understanding of the true nature of a right, evangelical and Christian mass. Even if we did not have other sources to Luther's theology, his understanding of the mass and his hymns would do. In Luther's opinion the mass constitutes the community between the Triune God and man, and the structure of the liturgy tells us how. The congregation comes to the mass to hear the preaching of the gospel, and it responds to the word of God by singing the hymns. Luther could have chosen to let the congregation sing the liturgical elements with their traditional texts and music, but he did not. He re-cast the words into meters which were known and popular at his time and he combined the texts with appropriate tunes by himself, Johan Walter or other contemporary composers. Only relatively few tunes were traditional liturgical music arranged by among others Johan Walter.

The new reformatory hymns by Luther and his collaborators were printed in ad hoc booklets, but soon comprehensive hymnals were published and used in the churches and in the homes. Especially during the winter it was impossible to read a text in the churches and the congregation had to know, and sing, the hymns by heart. Therefore it must be assumed, that the early hymn-booklets and hymnals were mostly used in the home of citizens and farmers, side by side with the Small Catechism. People went to church on Sundays, but lived most of their religious life at home. This remained the sociological fact of the Lutheran churches and the societies formed by the Lutheran Reformation until the beginning of the 20. Century.

The classic Lutheran church was, and in some countries still is, structured as a national established church, that is a church which the state is committed to support at the same time as the church is committed not to interfere with politics while it is educating the population religiously and morally. In a traditional Lutheran church the law and the gospel is preached in the church on Sundays and considered and worked out at home and on the working places, private or public, during the week. A hundred years ago, during the first decades of the 20th century the preconditions of the traditional Lutheran understanding of the relation between church – that is the gospel and the religious life of the citizens – and society - that is the state and the municipal authorities – was changed radically, partly because of the abolition of the German protestant monarchies, and partly because of the formation of the Lutheran immigrant churches in North America. Since then the formation of independent Lutheran Churches in South America, Africa and Asia has underlined this development. Alongside this political and sociological development, the ideological and religious changes since the Enlightenment of the 18th century have had a similar radical impact on the self-understanding of Lutheran people and Lutheran churches.

The project of this paper is to find out whether the changes of self-understanding of the Lutheran churches can be found in similar changes of the editorial principles of the hymnals of some of the Lutheran churches. I have chosen the hymnals of the German, North American, Swedish and

Danish Lutheran churches. The oldest hymnals date back to the end of the 19th Century the most recent are only a few years old. This means that the hymnals cover the dramatic changes from the traditional agricultural based societies before 1900 to the post-industrial societies and ecumenical churches of today.

Seen in a historical perspective the Lutheran churches of Germany have had a great variety of hymnals, each political and ecclesiastical entity having its own hymnal or its own supplement to a common hymnal. I have chosen the hymnal of the northernmost part of Germany, now the federal states of Schleswig-Holstein and Hamburg, one of the most genuinely Lutheran parts of Germany. The oldest German hymnal included in my research is *Evangelisch-lutherisches Gesangbuch der Provinz Schleswig-Holstein* (Evangelical-Lutheran Hymnal for the Province of Schleswig-Holstein) published by the royal (and imperial) synod of the province of Schleswig-Holstein 1883. Compared by the later German hymnals (now and later: compare with the statistical tables) it contains relatively few hymns on the church, and relatively many on the Christian life, indicating that focus was not on the theological or sociological understood church, but on the individual Christian. This corresponds with the fact that the 1883-hymnal has relatively few hymns on the Sunday-service and the sacraments: Traditional Lutheran understanding focuses on home and work as the main spheres of Christian life with the Sunday service as weekly resource of spiritual input, but not as *the* Christian event of the week. It was the Christian congregation which performed the service, not the service that made the Christians.

The next German hymnal, the first German hymnal to be introduced in most of the German-speaking Lutheran churches, *Deutsches evangelisches Gesangbuch* (German Evangelical Hymnal), originally published 1915 for German congregations abroad, was introduced into the Lutheran churches during the years between the end of World-War 1 and the Nazi take-over. In Schleswig-Holstein it was introduced 1930, commemorating the 400th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession. The only major change compared with the 1883-hymnal is a stronger focus on the church. Almost twice as many hymns are placed in the section containing hymns on the church. The church had become visible as a separate sociological entity. This was the case with the German congregations abroad before, as it was the case with the protestant churches of German after the collapse of the monarchial political system in Germany 1918.

After World-War 2 a new, common hymnal for the Lutheran churches of Germany was published 1948 and introduced in the churches shortly afterwards, *Evangelisches Kirchen Gesangbuch* (Evangelical Church Hymnal). This hymnal differs in two ways from its predecessor from 1915.

The focus on the church is almost exactly the same as in 1915, but the percentage of hymns of the section on the Sunday service is more than double as high and more than three times as high as it was 1883. At the same time the percentage of hymns on the Christian life has been more than halved. It is obvious that focus has been moved from the daily life of the individual Christian to the Sunday-service of the congregation. This corresponds with the emergence of new section with Psalms and liturgical texts, *and* with the title of the Hymnal. The successor of the 1948-hymnal, *Evangelisches Gesangbuch* (Evangelical Hymnal), published 1994, has completed the development from a hymnal for church and home (which by the way was the title of the Danish-American hymnal from 1927, as it was of the Danish hymnal of 1897) to a hymnal for church and churchgoers. The number of Psalms and liturgical texts has increased considerably from 3.1% (1915) and 15,8 % (1948) to 23,2 % 1994.

The editorial changes which can be followed during the 20th century in the hymnals of the Lutheran churches of North America are due to the special development of the Lutheran immigrant-churches. As the Lutherans arrived in America they did not speak the official language of the country and they did not belong to one of the mainstream American denominations. Regarding hymns and hymnals, this, combined with the fact that the Lutherans were split up in a considerable number of national synods, meant that firstly they had to change their language and secondly they had to find out how to cooperate as Lutherans before they were able to edit and publish common hymnals.

The first Lutheran hymnals in North America were mere translations of the German, Swedish, Danish and Norwegian hymns in use in the immigrant congregations. The Norwegian-American hymnal which is part of this investigation, *The Lutheran Hymnary* from 1913 is a good example of such an early Lutheran immigrant hymnal. The section “The Church Year” contains more than 60 % of the hymns of the hymnal. The hymnals of this section were needed for the weekly service and therefore translated earlier than hymns on e.g. the Christian life. At home the Norwegian hymns were still used after the introduction of the translated hymns in the Sunday service. The Norwegian-American hymnal reflects the same classic Lutheran liturgical tradition as the Schleswig-Holstein hymnal of 1883: the Psalter and other pre-reformation liturgical elements were not used in the Norwegian-American churches and had therefore no place in the church’s hymnal.

In 1941 the hymnal of the Missouri-Synod *The Lutheran Hymnal* brings the entire Psalter in connection with the elaborate liturgies of the synod. It is obvious that even this hymnal of an outspoken evangelical synod has adopted the so-called ecumenical liturgy. The change to the English language was a change to the English religious culture with its Anglican liturgical traditions. The preface to the *Service Book and Hymnal*, published 1958 by a number of Lutheran churches in the U.S.A., mentions that “a vision clearer than was sometimes possible in the turmoil of the Reformation controversy has revealed the enduring value of some elements which were lost temporarily in the sixteenth century reconstruction of the liturgy” (p. vii) and continues: “The Common Liturgy is rooted in the developed worship of the ancient and medieval Christian Church, both East and West, and grounded on the historic German, Scandinavian and American use of the post-reformation centuries” (p. viii). The succeeding hymnal, the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978), characterizes *Service Book and Hymnal* in this way: “It combined translations of Lutheran hymns from Germany and Scandinavia with English versions of Greek and Latin hymns, while giving preeminence to the Anglo-American tradition” (p. 7)- This sounds most of all as a Lutheran equivalent of a high-church Anglican understanding of liturgy. Nevertheless this understanding of liturgy prevails in the succeeding North American Lutheran hymnals, the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978) and *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2006), which were published and introduced by all major Lutheran churches of North America, including the Missouri-synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. Compared with its predecessors the *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* has fully integrated the Psalter and the liturgical pieces into the hymnal, placing them before the hymns, the numbering of the hymnal starting with the Psalter and ending with the hymns. *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* contains relatively few hymns on Human life, and relatively many on Service, sacraments and Christian life, which indicates a hymnal focusing church and service more than every-day life.

It is interesting to follow the changes of title of the hymnals of the North American hymnals. The 1913-hymnal is called “Hymnary” and the 1941-hymnal is called “Hymnal”. The title of the 1958-hymnal is “Service Book and Hymnal” indicating that fundamentally the hymnal is a service-book containing hymns as well as the liturgies for the service. The 1978 and the 2006 hymnals are titled respectively “Book of Worship” and “Worship”. These changes of title indicate that earlier the hymns were a constitutive part of the Lutheran service, now they are only one part among other parts of the service. Earlier the hymns were, together with the readings from the New Testament, the vital link between everyday Christian life and the Sunday-service. Now this relation is considered less essential, if essential at all.

The German and the North American Lutheran Churches are in a global perspective the two trendsetting Lutheran churches, facing all the religious and cultural challenges of the modern world. It is interesting to compare these two churches with the Lutheran churches of Sweden and Denmark. These two churches have been the religious sides of traditional mono-cultures which means that they were and still are typical Lutheran national churches. The two Scandinavian countries are modern, in many ways secular societies, but the two churches are nevertheless on the whole unchallenged majority-churches. In Denmark 82 % of the population are members of the Lutheran national church. In both countries the king – or queen – is formal head of the church.

The Swedish hymnal which was used officially until 1937, *Swenska Psalmboken af Konungen gillad och stadfästad år 1819* (The Swedish Hymnal approved and authorized by the King 1819) was a child of its time and therefore more than outdated when its successor, which bore the same title, was introduced 1937. 1986 this hymnal was replaced by *Den svenska psalmboken. Antagen av 1986 års kyrkomöte* (The Swedish Hymnal approved by the 1986-Synod) which is still in use, supplemented by *Psalmer i 90-talet* (1994) and *Psalmer I 2000-talet* (2006). In Denmark *Psalmebog for Kirke og Hjem* was introduced 1897, *Den danske Salmebog* 1953 and *Den Danske Salmebog 2002* two years after the turn of the millennium.

Statistically the development of the hymnals of the two Scandinavian churches has been relatively stable, and compared with each other the development has been very much alike in the Swedish and Danish Lutheran hymnals. The differences can statistically be seen by comparing the sections on the Church and the Christian life. The Danish hymnals have relatively many hymns on the church, without any doubt due to the influence of the great Danish 19th century theologian and hymn-writer, N.F.S. Grundtvig who combined an outspoken interest in the church with a non-hierarchical ecclesiology. The two sections, the Christian and the Human life made up 56% of the hymns in the Swedish 1937 hymnal with 37% hymns on the Christian life and 19 % on the Human life. In the 2006-supplement the relation between the sections has been reversed. In the Danish hymnals the relations between the sections have been almost unchanged from 1897 to 2002. The differences between the hymnals of the two national churches in Scandinavia are undoubtedly due to the fact, that the Lutheran church in Sweden is very much aware of the challenges from the secular world surrounding the church in the beginning of the 21st century, whereas the Lutheran church in Denmark to a higher degree is focused on the traditional Christian values. The Swedish hymnals of 1986 and 2006 are not only meeting the challenge of the modern secular world, they are also reflecting the ecumenical influence, represented by Psalms and other liturgical pieces, which we have met in the German and American hymnals. This ecumenical influence is almost absent in the Danish hymnals.

One of many indicators of the position of a hymnal in a church and in society at large is the number of new texts and tunes. The most frequent churchgoers are able to learn not more than 10-20 new tunes a year if they are to remember them and sing them by heart. Most ordinary people are only able to learn a few texts and tunes a year. In former times, in Denmark until 1970, the hymns were learnt in school. When the children – and their parents – came to church they knew the hymns and were able to join the congregational song. This is not the case to-day. To-day you have to learn the hymns during the service which means that most people hardly know any hymns. Having these facts of learning in mind it is amazing how many new hymns the latest hymnals are containing. 61% (i.e. 403 hymns) of the hymns of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2006) come from the 20th century, in the latest German hymnal the percentage is 33 (i.e. 235 hymns), in the Swedish hymnal 1986 43% (i.e. 324 hymns), in the 1986-hymnal including the 2006-supplement 54% (490 hymns), compared with the 15% (i.e. 122 hymns) 20th-century hymns in the Danish 2002-hymnal. The high percentage of new hymns indicates a double uncertainty towards on the one hand tradition, on the other hand renewal. The new hymns are undoubtedly welcomed by many people, but only frequent churchgoers have a chance to learn them not to speak of regarding as them genuine expressions of their own faith and Christian practice.

As can be seen in the statistical tables the trends during the last hundred years or so of the Lutheran hymnals looked upon in this paper are more or less the same. With the Danish hymnal of 2002 as a striking exception. It is therefore natural to consider the probable causes of this common trend to be found in the hymnals of the Lutheran churches in Europe and North America.

It is obvious that the way the Lutheran hymnals have been edited shows how the Lutheran churches since the middle of the 20th century have been searching for a new identity as churches in a new world. The monarchical and agricultural world has disappeared, and a new multilateral, post-Darwin and post-Einstein world has emerged. Searching for a new identity, they are at the same time searching for a new security, as churches in a world with no political or cultural safety net any more.

In this situation the Sunday-service - the mass - and the hymnal as the manual for the service of the church can be an interesting indicator of what has happened and of what is going on. Traditionally Christian security can be found either in the Church or in the Bible. The church offers you the authority of the hierarchy and the mystery of the mass. The Bible offers you the very word of God. In the light of this analysis of the Lutheran hymnals it is obvious that there is a tendency in the Lutheran churches of to-day to try to combine the security of the church, represented by a somewhat nebulous understanding of the Roman catholic – or Anglican – mass and hierarchy, with the feeling that the Biblical texts are the rock on which the Christian faith is founded. The Psalter, the Canticles, the many Biblical verses which form part of the new Lutheran liturgies are strong indicators of this.

The Lutheran solution to the question of where to find security as a Christian is neither the church, nor the Bible. To Luther the church was a setting and the Bible a resource of faith. To Luther the only security a Christian can have is the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ. To meet Him and to be united with Him is the only thing that really matters. According to Luther the hymns are one of the major means to achieve this. This is the reason why it is worthwhile not only to read and sing the hymns, but also to consider what the hymnals can tell us.

German Lutheran Hymnals

Number and percent	Evangelisch-Lutherisches Gesangbuch 1883	Deutsches Evangelisches Gesangbuch 1915 Gegesangbuch der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Landeskirche Schleswig-Holsteins 1930	Evangelisches Kirchen Gesangbuch. Nordelbisches Evangelisch Lutherische Kirche 1948	Evangelisches Gesangbuch. Nordelbische Evangelisch-Luthersche Kirche. 1994
Praise, General	14 2.8%		48 9.3%	55 7.6%
The Triune God				
The Church Year	112 22.1%	147 25.8%	144 27.9%	175 24.3%
The Church	22 4.3%	40 7.0%	39 7.6%	8 1.1%
Service incl. Sacraments etc.	27 5.3%	40 6.7%	39 16.6%	116 16.1%
The Christian Life incl. the	259	268	121	245

Last Things etc.	51.1%	47.0%	23.4%	34.0%
The Human Life incl. Year and Day etc.	73 14.4%	77 13.5%	79 15.3%	121 16.8%
Total, hymns	507 100%	570 100%	517 100%	720 99.9%
Liturgical Pieces	4 0.8%	18 3.1%	97 15.8%	217 23.2%
Total, incl. liturgical pieces	511	588	614	937

North American Lutheran Hymnals

Number Percentage	The Lutheran Hymnary 1913	The Lutheran Hymnal 1941	Service book and Hymnal 1958	Lutheran Book of Worship 1978	Lu
Praise, General	32 5.2%	16 2.4%			
The Triune God	17 2.8%				
The Church Year	376 60.9%	226 34.4%	148 24.8%	165 30.1%	31.
The Church	57 9.2%	53 8.1%	61 10.2%		
Service incl. Sacraments etc.	50 8.1%	111 16.9%	84 14.1%	84 15.3%	18.
The Christian	39	191	236	251	

Life incl. the Last Things etc.	6.3%	29.1%	39.5%	45.8%	45.
The Human Life incl. Year and Day etc.	46 7.5%	60 9.1%	68 11.4%	48 8.8%	4.4
Total, hymns	617 100%	657 100%	657 100%	597 100%	100
Liturgical Pieces		8 1.2%	2 0.3	21 3.7%	11.
Total, incl. liturgical pieces	617	665	599	569	
Psalter		(150)	(150)	(150)	

Swedish Lutheran Hymnals

Number percentage	Den svenska psalmboken 1937	Den svenska psalmboken. Med Evangeliska Fosterlands-Stiftelsens psalmtilläg 1986	Psalmer i 2000-talet. 2006	Den svenska psalmboken 1986 and Psalmer i 2000-talet
Praise, General	2 0.2%	27 3.6%	2 1.3%	29 3.2%
The Triune God	39 6.4%	81 10,8%	15 9.4%	96 10.6%
The Church Year	121 19.8%	161 21.5%	34 21.3%	195 21.5%
The Church	28	13		13

	4.6%	1.7%		1.4%
Service incl. Sacraments etc.	64 10.5%	98 13.1%	26 16.3%	124 13.7%
The Christian Life incl. the Last Things etc.	226 36.9%	249 33.3%	33 20.6%	383 31.1%
The Human Life incl. Year and Day etc.	120 19.6%	109 14.6%	50 31.3%	159 17.5%
Total, hymns	612 98%	748 99.9%	160 100.2%	908 99%
Liturgical Pieces	12	49	6	55
Total, incl. liturgical pieces	624	797	160	963

Danish Lutheran Hymnals

Numbers Percentage	Psalmebog for Kirke og Hjem 1897	Den danske Salmebog 1953	Den Danske Salmebog 2002
Praise, General	5 2.2%	11 1.5%	14 1.8%
The Triune God	77 13.4%	90 11.9%	104 13.3%
The Church Year	148 21.9%	174 23.1%	199 25.4%
The Church	27 4.0%	69 9.2%	67 8.5%
Service incl. Sacraments etc.	128	89	97

	18.9%	11,8%	12.4%
The Christian Life incl. the Last Things etc.	193 28.6%	228 30.2%	210 26.8%
The Human Life incl. Year and Day etc.	67 9.9%	93 12.3%	93 11.7%
Total, hymns	676 102%	754 100%	784 99.9%
Liturgical Pieces			7
Total, incl. liturgical pieces			791