

The makeshift curtain: A generous Christianity: Ecclesiologies beyond the religious-secular binary¹

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Abstract

The article discusses how one might reflect further on ecclesiological impacts from Scandinavian creation theology (SCT). The idea is that the SCT from Gustaf Wingren and Knud Ejler Løgstrup opens for an ecclesiology beyond the secular-religious binary. A generous Christianity appears when practices of non-faith (secularity) take place within ecclesia. The article discusses a concrete case from the Swedish congregation Bergsjøen where a makeshift curtain for visiting Muslims is constructed in the church basement. The makeshift curtain could be interpreted as a representation of creation and in this way being an important part of the ministry as a whole. The article discusses with recent Nordic and international ecclesiological and political theology. The conclusion is that, different from Catherine Keller's proposal of a "weak" political theology, SCT opens for an embodied, generous, Christianity.

KEYWORDS

ecclesiology, multireligious presence, political theology, religious-secular binary, Scandinavian creation theology

1 | GENEROUS CHRISTIANITY

This article discusses how churches can be political in the context of contemporary creation theology. The positions of Wingren and Løgstrup regarding a general and open but not specific faith-based life interpretation must be included in what is needed for a full definition of Christianity. The article argues that, when these general as well as specific faith-based interpretations converge in concrete ecclesial practice, it creates a new space of generous Christianity. This generosity is what goes beyond the religious-secular binary.

The first part of the article presents well-known positions from Løgstrup and Wingren connected to general

aspects in the full interpretation of the meaning of Christianity. The challenge today is to determine whether these positions can be valid in a contemporary multicultural context, or whether they belong to the older monocultural Protestant culture, as many critics claim. To this end, the article discusses a case from the Swedish church in Bergsjøen. In the basement of the church building is a small prayer room for Muslim migrants. This case is then reflected on in light of comments by scholars such as Andreas Holmberg, Gyrid Gunnes, and Svein Aage Christoffersen. The argument is that these scholars, despite their interesting interpretations, pay too little attention to the theological implications of how nonspecific faith-based interpretations determine what

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Christianity means. In conclusion, the article proposes an argument through a dialogue with a leading political theology scholar, Catherine Keller.

2 | BEYOND THE SPECIFIC FAITH

The topic of God's implicit presence in all of life's articulations, independent of the faith/nonfaith binary, belongs to one of the main characteristics of Scandinavian creation theology (SCT).

K.E. Løgstrup claimed that trust and compassion, no matter the religious character of the person, "suggest a religious interpretation."² Thus, faith is not a prerequisite to participating in such phenomena, which then can be shared by everyone. The phenomena themselves "suggest a religious interpretation," though the fundamental position is that the content of this religious interpretation is what keeps everyone part of it. The religious interpretation includes God's implicit presence in the lives of nonbelievers. The interpretation does not undo the thought that truth and compassion can be shared by everyone, no matter what their specific faith or nonfaith.

A parallel position is well known from Gustaf Wingren's writings. One famous topic is his elaborations on Luther's interpretation of vocation. No matter the historical validity of this investigation, Wingren's message is that the calling from the other, independent of the faith/nonfaith binary, is part of God's presence in the world. On the same level lie his reflections on the recapitulation, which, according to Wingren,³ means that God acts through all humans (regardless of the faith/nonfaith binary), that all nature reflects God's creation, and that justice reveals a common sharing and fundamentally profiles what Christianity is about: "Openness and specificity (= creation and gospel) are not leaning in two different directions... They support each other, they are in fact one."⁴

However, both Wingren and Løgstrup today belong to the past. Their active time as scholars ended a generation ago. Their context was the monocultural Protestant Scandinavia. Does this mean that their obsession for defending and discovering the nonconfessional part of Christendom is outdated? This part is often labeled—with good reason—creation theology. Nevertheless, in my view, the position is not primarily about creation but profiles what Christianity means.

In my view, the position is no less significant in the multicultural than in the monocultural world. Below, I focus on the field of ecclesiology, obviously a topic on the edge when speaking about Christianity beyond the faith/nonfaith binary. There is a tendency today to consider faith to be the only relevant and appropriate religious performance in the multicultural context. But multicultural

tolerance accepts specific performances of all religions, the big ones and the small ones. The condition for tolerance is solely that each religion remains within its own terrain and does not pretend to enact what could be suspected as colonial or missionary activities.

This is why one of the fundamental challenges for current creation theology is arguing why and how the profile beyond the faith/nonfaith binary is still a valid and unconditional part of Christianity—especially when the context is multicultural. One case from Sweden illustrates the argument.

3 | A MAKESHIFT CURTAIN IN THE BERGSJØEN CONGREGATION

The Swedish Lutheran church of Bergsjøen, just outside Gothenburg, has a huge basement area. In the left-hand corner of one of the basement rooms, a strange mechanical thing hangs from the ceiling, where a makeshift curtain can be inserted. That in turn creates a specific space in the left-hand corner of the basement.

The church staff recently put up this mechanism to allow for Muslim prayer sessions. The Bergsjøen congregation⁵ is the most important one among all the Scandinavian churches that have set up projects for undocumented migrants. The church has cooperated for many years with an ambitious network of professionals, lawyers, doctors, nurses, etc. Every Wednesday, the network professionals and the church staff cooperate and invite all undocumented migrants in that part of Sweden to visit for health, legal, and social consultations. More than 300 people (the absolute majority of whom are non-Christian and Muslim) enter the church building, the cafeteria, and most of the numerous rooms in the building.⁶

The makeshift curtain, in my view, reveals how subalterns both center and churches decenter, all at the same time. Based on Spivak's famous understanding of subalterns as people, who are not having any voice, my point is that the decentering ecclesia is an event where voiceless people can speak.⁷ In my view, this is a significant practice that might have a future in 21st-century Lutheran political theology.⁸ The interesting and important perspective lies in the centering of subalterns and the parallel decentering of ecclesial prominence, which does not mean that the nonbinary specificity collapses. On the contrary, generosity is what constitutes a nonbinary Christianity.

4 | PRAYER ROOM: RECAPITULATION?

Against this background, one might see the makeshift curtain space as a fruitful way of discussing the content of

contemporary Protestant political theology. Practices like the makeshift curtain can be found these days in many churches, both in the North and in the South. Therefore, cases like the prayer room are also being interpreted and commented on as part of an important political-theological trajectory. It would seem, however, that very few political theology contributions actually reflect how practices such as the makeshift curtain space can be interpreted in the context of a presence beyond the faith/nonfaith binary.⁹ What is significantly more common are interpretations that see Muslim prayer rooms as signs of how a specific faith tradition is becoming more liberal and inviting. That, however, is not the same as reflecting on what a nonbinary position means. In the following, my interest for the prayer room is not first of all focused on this room as a specific room for a specific kind of believers (Muslims). Rather, the focus is on the prayer room as something offered to give a recognition (may be also a voice) to people with few voices, to subalterns in the sense of Spivak.

In Wingren's interpretation, God acts in God's recapitulation for all humans, people of faith, and people of no faith. Yet, the makeshift curtain is a practice within a church building. Traditionally, one would think that churches primarily act as communities for people of faith. The prayer room challenges such an interpretation. More than what we find in Wingren's own reflections, and especially more than what we find in Løgstrup's writings, this article asks whether churches themselves can be defined as practices that also—and in particular—might be profiled beyond the faith/nonfaith binary. The reality of the beyond is the lived world where humans encounter each other. It is not enough to claim that the recapitulation happens *extra ecclesiam*: There must be a *recapitulatio intra*. God, the creator, acts, and this occurs among people of faith and people of no faith, whether *extra* or *intra*.

5 | WHEN THE CONFSSIONAL RULES

In 2019, the Swedish theologian—now bishop in Stockholm—Andreas Holmberg published the book *Church in a New Landscape. A Lived Ecclesiology Study*.¹⁰ The Bergsjøen congregation—the church with the prayer room—is part of the data material in this book. One of the key concepts is “community.” However, it seems that this community concept is first of all the community of Christian service.

Holmberg's focus is thus different than the community, which develops beyond the faith/nonfaith binary. In the empirical studies presented in the book, Holmberg distinguishes between different kinds of local community building. Nevertheless, when he comes to the more interpretative part, his focus lies primarily on service and liturgy.

This is also the case when he comments directly on the situation in Bergsjøen.

Holmberg claims the following: “There are voices and material that bring nuances into the interpretation of the service as the center of congregational life. However, what characterizes the service in the congregations studied here is that the service is the central event in the congregation.”¹¹

Despite this conclusion, Holmberg also focuses on the different aspects of the Christian social service (the diaconia) in the relevant congregations. The Christian social practice plays a significant role in most of the churches studied. Bergsjøen even presents itself as a congregation that prioritizes cooperation with others.

This cooperation takes an important place in Holmberg's analysis. Historically, the Church of Sweden has always been an institution of control. But today there is a new context. The church needs to address the situation surrounding new challenges with trust rather than with control. For Holmberg, trust means meeting “the others” more as partners than as subordinates: “... relations of trust toward surroundings as well as in relation to God represent a modern mentality that was also inspired and practiced by Jesus and in the Gospel narratives.”¹²

The prayer room was not there when Holmberg did his fieldwork in Bergsjøen. There is, however, good reason to assume that the prayer room would have been interpreted as symbolizing one of the “partners.” What is interesting in Holmberg's study is, first, that he recognizes the significance of other practices, like the diaconia, as important aspects of a contemporary Protestant church. Nevertheless, the partner status is not the status of a God implicit *recapitulatio* (Wingren) or the phenomena of hope (Løgstrup). This is why, despite his openness, he remains within the binary tradition. The service is the center, and “the others” are partners. Practices of generosity beyond this binary are not on Holmberg's horizon.

The Norwegian theologian Gyrid Gunnes presents no fieldwork in her recent Ph.D. dissertation, *Towards a Diaconia of Displacement: An Empirical Theological Inquiry*.¹³ She does, however, include interviews and observations from a similar church in Norway, the Our Lady Church in Trondheim. The local City Mission has organized an ongoing project in this church on weekdays. It engages with people struggling with drugs, psychiatric challenges, homelessness, etc. It serves meals in the entryway of the medieval church building and invites people to services, many of whom participate.

Gunnes' main interest lies in ecclesiology, and how Christian social practice (diaconia) influences ecclesiological profiles. Two concepts are important: the “diaconia of displacement” and the “apophatic diaconia.”

The diaconia of displacement is inspired by Bruno Latour and focuses on how artifacts are used in new and surprising ways. Gunnes claims that both ecclesial artifacts and people display “surprising” behavior in *Our Lady*: “Displacement is a culturally sensitive mode of diaconia that takes into account that in cultures where Christianity and the dominant culture are historically intertwined, ‘incorrect’ or surprising uses of empirical expressions of Christianity as churches, liturgies and objects may facilitate the creation of various kinds of justice.”¹⁴

The “apophatic diaconia” is inspired by the Yale theologian Linn Tonstad, who uses the apophatic as a trinitarian concept. God humbles Godself in the *Our Lady* social work: “If the ontological horizon of the ‘folk’ of the folk church is not only a stable locality given in creation, but also the translocality of the contemporary precariat, it invites for a Christological foundation of the ‘folk’ of the folk church. Seen from the position of a diaconal epistemology, the God of the folk church is not only an embodied creator of God, but also a God who is subjected and submitted to the same kind of ontological instability as the guests of *Our Lady*.”¹⁵

The concepts of displacement and the apophatic diaconia both share a strongly faith-based interpretation of the social work that takes place in *Our Lady*. This article is not the place to discuss whether Gunnes could have collected more nonfaith aspects among the participants. Perhaps they are all converted Christians. They are, however, first of all, people who are trying to create a safer and pleasant life for themselves. This aspect of social interest is what is missing in Gunnes’ study. When the social aspect of a church is given a one-sided spiritual interpretation, the embodied and the social aspects lose significance.

Against this background, we discover an interesting similarity between Holmberg and Gunnes. Both share a strong Christocentric theology. For Holmberg, the people of Bergsjøen comprise part of what he calls a theology of *koinonia*. The participants in *Our Lady* are part of an apophatic diaconia. Both scholars put their focus on participation in a community with the crucified. Dogmatically, there is nothing provocative about such an interpretation.

A second thought, however, is that the consequence of the Christocentric approach is a lack of awareness for the general, the nonfaith, and the embodied in both churches. There is hardly any creation or perspectives of nonfaith. The learning aspect emerging from these two studies is therefore that aspects of nonfaith and the absence of spirituality need to be included in empirical diaconia studies. Nonfaith is not faith irrelevant; it is primarily what is embodied, shared by all, shared by people of faith *and* nonfaith. When the second aspect is missing, the discovery of a generous Christianity is also missing.

6 | K.E. LØGSTRUP AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NONCONFESSIONAL

We can develop a parallel reflection if we turn to interpretations of Løgstrup. As stated above, one of his famous sentences is that the sovereign expressions of life “suggest a religious interpretation.” There have been long and complex discussions concerning Løgstrup, how to read the “suggest a religious interpretation.”¹⁶ Is Løgstrup favoring theistic or nontheistic ethics? The present article underlines a different perspective: The religious interpretation that is “suggested” by the sovereign expressions of life is an interpretation where nonfaith practices are part of God’s implicit performance.

The decisive perspective is that Løgstrup focused on a phenomenological analysis of human relations among everyone and relations between nature (“the universe”) and all humans. Different from contemporary political theologians, Løgstrup is not on the *sub contrario* track; he is not occupied with a theology that “goes dark,”¹⁷ he is not into a “profanation.”¹⁸ This is not a “weak theology,”¹⁹ but rather a theology of abundance, full of the hope that develops from encounters between all humans, beyond faith/nonfaith binaries. This is why one might interpret the makeshift curtain and the Muslim prayer room in Bergsjøen as an expression of sovereign expressions of life that “suggest a religious interpretation.” The prayer room is an expression of nonfaith within a Christian church, but it also provides spatial justice for those who lack such justice in Swedish society.²⁰ It is this perspective of justice that is not based in a Christian faith that “suggest[s] a religious interpretation.” In this interpretative context Løgstrup can support Bergsjøen’s generous ecclesiology beyond the binaries: “History does not decide how we interpret the phenomenon. The phenomenon decides how we can — and shall — interpret history.”²¹

An analysis of sensory data, the strong and the weak phenomena, and the universe as a whole can be seen as ways of making interpretations that are open to all, people of faith and people of no faith. This is why the metaphysics of Løgstrup should be included when we continue a generous Christianity—and especially a generous ecclesiology. Løgstrup himself did not reflect substantially on the ecclesiological consequences of his position. Nevertheless, in my view, that is what is fruitful in our modern multicultural context.

Can there be church communities that act beyond the religious compartmentalization? The basic argument is that ecclesial practices of sharing and solidarity are embodied, and that this embodiment is an inherent value. It is not *koinonia* (Holmberg), it is not apophatic (Gunnes);

it is the significance of the embodied everyday shared by all, beyond binaries. The makeshift curtain spatializes nonfaith-based justice in a Christian church. In Løgstrup's view, these phenomena reflect what is more than human and still human: "How can we revolt against annihilation? What kind of power nourishes the revolt? Why are we not simply run down by annihilation? We are not, one of the reasons being that space comes to our defence through our sensation,"²² Løgstrup says. When such nonconfessional spaces perform in an ecclesial context, then we experience how generous Christianity can be.

7 | CREATIONAL GRACE (CHRISTOFFERSEN)

The Norwegian theologian Svein Aage Christoffersen is one of the leading Løgstrup interpreters. One of his interesting concepts is "creational grace" (partly further interpreting a concept already launched by Grundtvig)²³ (Norwegian: "skapelsesnåde").²⁴ Applied to the prayer room, Christoffersen's concept implies that the justice performed through the room is a creational grace. Performing justice for Muslims means performing a creation that partakes of divine grace. It is a given beyond the merits of those who receive it. Because of the gift character, this creation participates in divine grace.

The paradox is that Christoffersen, even if he interprets the sensible experiences of something that "suggest[s] a religious interpretation," very different from Keller and Robbins, also disregards the implications of the nonconfessional. Christoffersen intends to discuss how closely Løgstrup comes to what Christoffersen thinks is Luther's theology of creation. The argument, in my view, "christianizes" the phenomena too quickly.

Christoffersen claims: "Løgstrup's position is that there is grace in all creation. For Løgstrup, this opens the door to interpreting all life, the visible and the audible, the light and the colors, the landscape and the beauty of the seasons, as expressions of God's gift-giving. The courage for life is not nourished only by the Gospel. The lights and colors of the landscape, the spontaneity of children, the trees, the grass, and the grain also contribute. All this is to be received in gratitude."²⁵ In passages like this, Christoffersen highlights the similarity between Løgstrup and Luther. However, the similarity goes too far. Christoffersen writes: "Creational grace is soteriological, yet not eschatological. It does not express inherent human characteristics, but is God's work alone."²⁶ In my view, Christoffersen's interpretation softens Løgstrup's sharp distinction between the creation, available for all, believers and non-believers, and the specific Christian grace, available for those, who believe.

Different from Christoffersen, I would say the prayer room is practical and material, a space constructed for the benefit of a group of people. Further research should discover what takes place in this specific space, whether it fits the participants' expectations or not, how they intersect with the other parts of the church activities and people, etc. Experience from much empirical research in the field of migration is that practical and material constructions very often have other impacts and a different content than what was planned from the beginning.

In the context of SCT, however, it is fundamental not to spiritualize or "Christianize" the prayer room, but to stay close to the material. Necessary critical empirical approaches are important to improving the quality and the profile of a specific practice. There are, unfortunately, numerous well-known church practices that do not fulfill the ethical requirements expected in a church context. Nevertheless, as long as the specific practice is not regarded as part of a soteriological context (Holmberg, Gunnes, Christoffersen), there is the potential to improve the ethical level of the specific practice. In all cases, the permanent presence of nonfaith practices is the condition necessary to increase and solidify the generosity of the practice. Ecclesial generosity develops in the interaction and intersection of faith and nonfaith. That is an important track to follow for future (Scandinavian) creation theology. A *recapitulatio* that "suggests a religious interpretation" should be discovered and interpreted in surprising places.

8 | NOT WEAK, GENEROUS

Catherine Keller reflects on how a political theology is possible today. She writes: "The conundrum of theology as such exposes then the following assumption of the present experiment: even the most secular versions of political theology expose the impossibility of excepting theology from politics, or then the secular from the religious. We are secular-religious others."²⁷

The makeshift curtain and its practicing context is obviously a phenomena beyond the secular-religious others. It is an embodied interpretation of Catherine Keller's courageous sentence: "Perhaps a theology that counters its own sovereignty of sovereignties can only now, in the time of a weakened Christendom, come into its own."²⁸

The makeshift curtain is a practice that counters the sovereignty of ecclesia. However, different from what Keller thinks, this countering is not part of a weak Christendom. Instead, it is the performance of a generous Christendom and the insistence that justice and shared, embodied hope for the not-belonging are organic parts of what Christianity means. This is how contemporary creation theology can contribute to a future and surprising

political theology. Generosity must lie in the characteristics of the spaces of the other. Therefore, these characteristics inhabit embodied landscapes beyond the religious-secular binary.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The title kindly borrows from and somewhat reprofiles: N. H. Gregersen, *Den Generøse Ortodoksi: Konflikt og kontinuitet i kristendommen*, (København: Gyldendal, 2015).
- ² Danish: "Livsyttringerne ligger en religiøs tydning nær." In K. E. Løgstrup (Eds.), *System og symbol*. (København: Gyldendal, 1982), 117.
- ³ Wingren, G. (1997). *Människa och Kristen: en bok om Ireneus*. Skelleftå: Artos.
- ⁴ Wingren, G. (1979). *Öppenhet och egenart: evangeliet i världen* (p. 140). Lund: Liber.
- ⁵ Concerning the ministry in Bergsjøen, see: Wyller, T. (2014). "The undocumented embodied: Shaping the space where the sacred and the secular intertwine." In T. Wyller & R. J. Casanova (Eds.), *Secular and sacred? The Scandinavian case of religion in human rights, law and public space* (pp. 221–236). Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- ⁶ Wyller, T. (2017). "The discovery of the secular-religious other in the Scandinavian creation theology." In N. H. Gregersen, B. K. Uggla, & T. Wyller (Eds.), *Reformation theology for a post-secular age*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- ⁷ Spivak, G. (1988). "Can the subaltern speak?" In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271–313). Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- ⁸ For a deepened reflection on the decentering process, see my article: "The heterotopic creation: A short contribution to a subaltern ecclesiology." In E. M. Wiberg Pedersen (Ed.), *The alternative Luther: Lutheran theology from the subaltern*. (New York/London: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2019), 89–99. This book presents also a number of other reflections on how to develop a Lutheran theology in the context of subalternity.
- ⁹ Interesting contributions in this category are: Tanner K. (1992). *The politics of God*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress and Robbins, J. (2011). *Radical democracy and political theology*. New York: Columbia University Press. See also the other articles in this thematic issue that all in different ways emphasize that Scandinavian creation theology points beyond binaries.
- ¹⁰ Holmberg, A. (2019). *Kyrka i nytt landskap. En studie av levd ekklesiologi i Svenska kyrkan*. Skelleftå: Artos.
- ¹¹ Holmberg (2019, 198); (My translation, TW).
- ¹² Holmberg (2019, 347); (My translation, TW).
- ¹³ Gunnes, G. (2020). *Towards a diaconia of displacement: An empirical theological inquiry*. Oslo: Vid Specialized University.
- ¹⁴ Gunnes (2020, 108).
- ¹⁵ Gunnes (2020, 122).
- ¹⁶ Stern, R. (2019). *The radical demand in Løgstrup's ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ¹⁷ Keller, C. (2019). *Political theology of the earth*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- ¹⁸ Robbins (2011).

- ¹⁹ Vattimo, G. (2003). *After Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- ²⁰ Soja, E. (2010). *Seeking spatial justice*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.
- ²¹ My translation to English from: "Det er ikke historien, der bestemmer hvad vi skal forstå ved fænomenet, men det er fænomenet der bestemmer, hva vi skal forstå ved historie." In K. E. Løgstrup (Ed.), *Ophav og Omgivelse*. (Århus: Klim, 2013), 206.
- ²² Chhristoffersen, S. Aa. (Ed.). (2003). "... hvordan kan vi klare å gjøre oppstand mot tilintetgjørelsen? Hva slags kraft næres oppstanden av? Hvorfor løpes vi ikke rett ned av tilintetgjørelsen? Det gjør vi ikke fordi blant annet rommet kommer oss til unnsetning gjennom sansingen, sier Løgstrup." In "Sanseløs og klaustrofobisk. Noen sentrale perspektiver i K.E. Løgstrups sansefilosofi" (p. 37). Oslo: Kirke og kultur.
- ²³ Cf Stockholm, Anja. (2003). "Om forholdet mellem skabelse og syndefald hos Grundtvig og Luther." In *Grundtvig Studier* (pp. 88–125). København: Grundtvig-selskabet. Thanks to Else-Marie Wiberg Pedersen for this information.
- ²⁴ Christoffersen, S. Aa. (2011). *Skapelsesnåde Om den sansbare verdens erfaringsform* (pp. 3–4). Oslo: Norsk Teologisk Tidsskrift.
- ²⁵ Christoffersen (2003, 37).
- ²⁶ Christoffersen (2011). "Skapelsesnåden er soteriologisk, men ikke eschatologisk. Den er heller ikke et uttrykk for menneskets iboende egenskaper, men er helt og holdent Guds verk" (p. 275).
- ²⁷ Keller (2019, 66).
- ²⁸ Keller (2019, 66).

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Recent books: *Borderland Religion. Ambiguous Practices of Difference, Hope and Beyond* (edited with Daisy Machado and Bryan Turner) Routledge 2018 and *Contested Hospitalities in a Time of Migration. Religious and Secular Counterspaces in the Nordic Region* (edited with Synnøve Bendixsen), Routledge 2019.

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