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ORDAINED AND BAPTIZED MINISTRIES THROUGH THE LENS OF LITURGICAL SINGING

Abstract. After decades of ecumenical dialogue, the understanding of the relationship between the ministries of the baptized and the ordained continues to be a dividing matter between churches and traditions. This paper suggests that liturgical singing, in which individual and communal song with specific roles become a single and unified liturgical action, offers a model aiming to contribute to the bridging of this persistent divide.

Liturgical theologians have in recent times begun to analyse the fabric of liturgical artistic activities and the complex relationship between the different ministries involved. Here, the dialogue with neurobiological research has helped theology to better understand the roles and functions of the single voice and the group of voices woven into the liturgical texture. This paper proposes that a better understanding of the functioning and the aesthetic nature of liturgical singing puts a new hermeutical tool at the service of the ecumenical dialogue on ministry.

Keywords: liturgical theology; singing; neurobiology; ministries; ecumenism.

“Der Herr sei mit euch”—“und mit deinem Geiste.”—In my childhood village church in rural Northern Germany, it was my father who sang the *salutatio* “The Lord be with you,” and the congregation answered, “and with thy Spirit.” I felt that something happened in this singing, like an aerial tent put up between heaven and earth. Later, as a teenager, when I went to Sweden, I recognized the sung greeting in the Swedish language, while not understanding Swedish. I went to Florence and I recognized the same *salutatio* in the Catholic liturgy in the church of San Minatio al Monte, while still not speaking Italian. With the antiphonal singing of the liturgical greeting I was at home. I was in the same aerial tent that spans heaven and earth.

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INTRODUCTION

Liturgical theology takes the liturgical celebration as the primary place¹ where the assembly can experience God's healing and transforming presence through the manifold and richly interwoven strands of liturgical actions.

This paper suggests a multi-perspective approach to the question of ministries. It draws on literature from liturgical theology on evolutionary anthropology, as well as on insights from neurobiological and ecumenical studies.

The Roman-Catholic theologian Giorgio Bonaccorso introduces evolutionary anthropology into liturgical theology. Insights into the nature of complex and evolving systems of nature can help to understand the complex interplay and functioning of the diverse and interconnected aesthetic strands of liturgy.

Markus Mühling, a Lutheran systematic theologian, engages in the dialogue between theology and science. His model of "open loops" can illustrate how the brain, the body, humankind, and evolution can only function in interconnected and "resonating" ways. Theological reasoning relies on these conditions.

For the Lutheran theologian Gordon Lathrop, liturgy is characterized by poetic juxtapositions and tensions. Liturgical leadership is necessary, but at the same time it needs to be criticized continuously. The relationship between the leader and the group is one of constructive juxtaposition and tension.

Despite certain persistent obstacles, ecumenical theology comes ever closer to a joint understanding of the sacraments. Some theologians, such as the Lutheran Friederike Nüssel and the Roman-Catholic Etienne Vetö, can now find new ways to express common ground in regarding the question of ordained ministry.

Drawing on these studies, this paper will take a deeper understanding of complex aesthetic experiences, such as in liturgical singing, as a vantage point for a renewed approach to an ecumenical understanding of the ordained and baptized ministries.

¹ Cf. Alexander Schmemmann, *Introduction into Liturgical Theology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1966); David Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima. What is Liturgical Theology?* (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2004); Andrea Grillo, *Einführung in die liturgische Theologie. Zur Theorie des Gottesdienstes und der christlichen Sakramente* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006); Dorothea Haspelmath-Finatti, *Theologia Prima—Liturgische Theologie für den evangelischen Gottesdienst* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014).

1. LITURGICAL INTERTWINEMENTS BETWEEN BODY, BRAIN AND ENVIRONMENT

Giorgio Bonaccorso is a liturgist at the liturgical Institute in Padua, Italy. As a liturgical theologian, he has engaged extensively in the dialogue between theology and the natural sciences. His insights into the nature of the complex and evolving systems of nature can help to understand the interplay and functioning of the diverse and interconnected aesthetic strands of liturgy.

In his books *L'estetica del rito. Sentire Dio nell'arte*² and *Il corpo di dio*³ Giorgio Bonaccorso has investigated the relationship between art and ritual, brain and body. He has found how in the arts and in rituals, interwoven aesthetic strands, or “languages” can lead to experiences of transcendence. In his extensive studies in various fields of anthropology, Bonaccorso delved deeply into the human neurological disposition and described it as an extremely interwoven and complex structure. The human senses in their interconnectedness appear to find corresponding interconnections in the artistic strands of ritual behaviors. In this book on the aesthetics of ritual, Bonaccorso calls ritual and liturgy “metaphoric”: “In ritual, the metaphors traverse, synaesthetically, through all the languages and all the senses.”⁴ In religious rituals, as those found in Christian liturgy, verbal and non-verbal languages are linked together in the way of continuous interaction. Therefore, liturgy can be called “a metaphoric whole, [...] a senso-perceptive globality [...], global reality, [...] one unique and grand metaphor, one unique grand symbol, which in the religious and Christian ritual manifests itself as opening to the sacred.”⁵

In his recent book, *Critica della ragione impura*,⁶ Giorgio Bonaccorso has deepened his research into the complexities of human activities. Here, he emphasises that there is no such thing as ‘pure reason’. On the contrary, there are always conditions, and these are never ‘pure’, but always embodied and thus ‘impure’. As human beings, we are body; we are always part of the reality being described. We are always ‘immersed’. However, science, while working within the framework of ‘pure reason’, is expected to find ‘logical’

² Giorgio Bonaccorso, *L'estetica del rito. Sentire Dio nell'arte* (Cinisello Balsamo: Edizioni San Paolo, 2013).

³ Giorgio Bonaccorso, *Il corpo di Dio. Vita e senso della vita* (Assisi: Citadella Editrice, 2006).

⁴ Bonaccorso, *L'estetica*, 99.

⁵ Bonaccorso, *L'estetica*, 99f.

⁶ Giorgio Bonaccorso, *Critica della ragione impura. Per un confronto tra teologia e scienza* (Assisi: Citadella Editrice, 2016).

explanations for every phenomenon. Within this approach, complex realities need to be simplified. Science tries to understand by dividing into ever more simple elements. And indeed, simplification is necessary to explain realities. However, the fields of human reasoning, not only in science, but also in the arts, philosophy and in religions, are complex realities. They are linked to each other and influenced by each other. They cannot be explained through simplification alone.⁷

While for natural sciences, research into the simplest components is essential and cannot be abandoned, it is equally necessary to understand the complexities of intertwinements. In addition, during evolution, new and unexpected levels of complexity have emerged and will continue to emerge.⁸ For Bonaccorso, this fact is important for theology to understand the experience of the interweaving—between the same and the other, between immanence and transcendence.⁹

Drawing on Bonaccorso, we could say that in ecumenical dialogue on ministry there is a certain danger of simplification. Lutherans tend to stress the role of the ministry of the baptized, while Roman Catholics stress the role of ordained priests. With Bonaccorso, the complex aesthetic structure of liturgical activity, as is witnessed in antiphonal singing, should be kept as evidence.

Within the German speaking academic context, Markus Mühling is one of the first theologians to engage with the international dialogue between theology and neurosciences, and evolutionary theories. While he does not refer to liturgy, his insights into the complex relationship between the brain and the body, humankind and evolution can contribute to a deeper understanding of the interwoven fabric of liturgical aesthetics.

In his book on neurobiology, evolution, and theology with the telling title “Resonances,”¹⁰ Mühling engages in recent research in the two fields of brain studies and evolutionary theory. Here, the epistemological concept of the “ecological brain”¹¹ overcomes theories that describe the brain as representing or depicting reality by using certain brain areas for certain activities. As an alternative to these models, Mühling introduces the “ecological brain” theory. Here, the functions of the brain appear to be interrelated not only with the entire body, but also with the environment.

⁷ Bonaccorso, *Critica*, 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁰ Markus Mühling, *Resonances: Neurobiology, Evolution and Theology. Evolutionary Niche Construction, The Ecological Brain und Relational-Narrative Theology* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014).

¹¹ Mühling, *Resonances*, 71–85.

Further, the topic of interrelatedness cannot only be found in concepts of brain studies, but also in evolution theories. While the Darwinian theory is based on the adaptation of individuals to pressures of selection, more recent concepts now focus on kinds of interactions called “niche construction” activities.¹² It is not only organisms that change and adapt to pressures, but also the environment that changes and is changed by numerous influences.

Both theories, the “ecological brain” and the “niche construction,” are described as open systems, or “open loops.”¹³

Here, I propose taking Mühling’s “open loops” as a way of describing what happens in the context of liturgical singing. The theory on the brain and the body, as introduced by Mühling, can illustrate the personal experience of singing. While singing, our brain functions within the body, words are pronounced, melodies are brought forth while the sound already reaches our ears, and our bodies receive the sounds, vibrating. We produce and receive emotions while singing. Our brain functions as an “open loop,” in connection with the entire body and with the environment. In antiphonal liturgical singing, the assembly and the leader function as “open loops” in relationship to one another and to the world around them.

The niche construction theory can illustrate the communal experience of worship singing: we sing within our church community. However, in singing, a Christian community is all “open loops.” In singing, each community is linked to other Church communities, to humankind and creation. In singing, we already praise God as the one church.

2. LEADERSHIP RE-ORIENTATION

The North American Lutheran liturgical theologian Gordon Lathrop, former president of our *Societas Liturgica*, is well-known for his eye-catching expressions and metaphors. One might say that his theology is thoroughly poetic. The term he became famous for is “juxtaposition.”¹⁴

In liturgical juxtaposition, two “things” are put next to each other in correlation but and at the same time in tension. Juxtapositions are manifold. In liturgical celebrations, the “word” is put next to “the table”. In liturgical time,

¹² Ibid., 144–166.

¹³ Ibid., 81.

¹⁴ Lathrop introduced this term into liturgical theology in his book *Holy Things* from 1998. Cf. Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things. A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1998).

the seven days of the week are juxtaposed to Sunday. The gospel word and the eucharistic table are put next to each other—in mutual interpretation, but also in tension. The same is true for the week and Sunday and other liturgical juxtapositions.¹⁵

Lathrop also points out that the relationship between the leader and the group is one of constructive juxtaposition and tension. For Lathrop, the four biblical gospels are written for the early Christian liturgical assemblies, with the aim of reform. Liturgies are in need of constant re-orientation. This includes liturgical leadership. Liturgical leadership is necessary, but at the same time it needs to be continuously criticized. The gospels abound in criticism of leadership. Jesus calls Peter to be the leader of his church, but he also calls him “Satan.” Leadership needs to be criticized. However, if we think we can simply do without leaders, leadership will go into hiding—and thus can no longer be criticized. Lathrop writes:

It is right, [...] to be suspicious of leadership and authority. [...] But we will fool ourselves to think we can do without leaders. They will rise up all the more, in disguises we will not recognize and in situations where open criticism is not possible.¹⁶

For Lathrop, Christian leaders are never perfect leaders. They are vulnerable and prone not only to failure but also to suffering. They are servants of the one who died outside, and they need to come back to that truth. Protestants are right: leadership needs to be criticized. But Catholics are also right: if we deny the existence of leadership, leaders will rise up anyway, in an un-orderly way. Criticism will not be possible.

In the art of antiphonal singing, however, the assembly and the leader are engaged in a vivid juxtaposition. According to Bonaccorso, as singing is more complex than speaking, the sung aesthetic engagement is more open to experiences of transcendence than a spoken dialogue would be. The single voice and the group of voices, in dialogue, might experience the Christ who makes himself present among their singing, in the translucent tent of the *antiphonon*. Re-orientation, for assembly and leaders, to the holy one present, will take place.

¹⁵ Lathrop, *Holy Things*, 40.

¹⁶ Gordon Lathrop, *The Four Gospels on Sunday. The New Testament and the Reform of Christian Worship* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 188.

3. SINGING FOR HEALING AND COOPERATION

Neurobiological research into singing can now help to analyse the function of singing within the complex fabric of liturgy.

In the study on Buddhist chanted meditation for family dementia caregivers,¹⁷ Helen Lavretsky and her colleagues conducted research into the effects of Buddhist meditation on a group of caregivers who were themselves affected by mild symptoms of depression. One part of the group participated in a brief daily meditation, consisting of an ancient, chanted mantra. A control group listened to a CD with relaxing instrumental music for the same time span each day.¹⁸ The most impressive result of this study is found in the influence of meditation on cellular aging and thus on longevity: the study can lead to the hypothesis that singing, in a context of repetition and ritual, is beneficial for both mental and physical health. It underlines how both are interrelated. Some of the benefits may also be achieved by the regular exercise of listening to music. However, so-called telomerase activity, which is responsible for cell health and is linked to longevity, was found to increase significantly more in the chanting group. The reason could be the interlacing of several activities within this kind of Buddhist meditation practice.

Buddhist chant, as used in this study, interlaces ritualized singing with words carrying religious faith content. The same is true for liturgical singing.

According to Giorgio Bonaccorso, joint aesthetical and cognitive religious activities can lead to experiences of transcendence. Elizabeth Blackburn and her team were able to confirm that regular Buddhist chant that includes important words from religious tradition can improve mental and physical health and lead to improved longevity, even in people with the demanding task of family caregiving.

In the second study, “Joint music making promotes prosocial behavior in 4-year-old children,”¹⁹ psychologists Michael Tomasello and Sebastian Kirschner at the Leipzig Max-Planck-Institut for evolutionary anthropology explored the effects of joint music-making, in this case in young children. They hypothesized “that music evolved into a tool that fosters social bonding and group cohesion, ultimately increasing prosocial ingroup behavior and coope-

¹⁷ Lavretsky Helen et al., “A Pilot Study of Yogic Meditation for Family Dementia Caregivers with Depressive Symptoms: Effects on Mental Health, Cognition, and Telomerase Activity,” *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* 28 (2013): 57–65.

¹⁸ Lavretsky, “A Pilot Study of Yogic Meditation,” 57.

¹⁹ Sebastian Kirschner and Michael Tomasello, “Joint Music Making Promotes Prosocial Behavior in 4-Year-Old Children,” *Evolution and Human Behavior* 31 (2010): 354–364.

ration.”²⁰ To test their hypothesis, they compared the behaviour of two groups of children with nearly identical tasks.²¹ The only difference between the two playful activities the children engaged in was that one group, but not the other, used music. As a result, the study made it clear that joint music making “increases subsequent spontaneous cooperative and helpful behaviour.”²²

What becomes clear through these studies is that singing has a healing function and promotes prosocial behaviour. When the question arises why liturgical dialogues should still be sung and not simply spoken, these studies could provide some surprising perspectives. The reason why liturgies continue the tradition of antiphonal singing could be linked to the evolution of humankind—where prosocial behaviour, against all odds and all first impressions, seems to be growing. Singing is an activity that changes and transforms us. In singing, we are much more at the receiving end than in speaking, and even than in listening to music. Our bodies change. Our social behaviour is changed. We are transformed through our singing. In the aesthetic activity of singing, both the congregation and the ministers are affected and changed: healing takes place. Cooperative behaviour augments. Priests and assemblies are formed a little more into the image of Christ.

4. ORDAINED PRIESTHOOD AS TRANSLUCENT MINISTRY

At the ecumenical conference in Rome on “Luther and the Sacraments”²³ in 2017, I was one of those privileged to become witness of a moment, or *kairos*, of unexpected interconfessional harmony. The two theologians tasked with speaking about the topic of ministry, one Catholic and one Lutheran, were surprised by the astonishing coincidence of some of their main arguments. Both the Lutheran Friederike Nüssel and the Roman-Catholic Etienne Vetö had expected to speak about important remaining differences regarding the understanding of ministry. To the great surprise not only of the two speakers, but also the other theologians present in the lecture theatre at the Gregorian University, those obstacles to an ecumenical understanding of ministry seemed to have vanished. What were these newly found communalities? The first was that, surprisingly, Lutherans, together with Catholics, can now consent

²⁰ Kirschner and Tomasello, “Joint Music Making Promotes Prosocial Behavior”, 354.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Cf. Felix Körner and Wolfgang Thönißson, eds., *Vermitteltes Heil. Luther und die Sakramente* (Paderborn and Leipzig: Bonifatius and Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2018).

to an understanding of ordination as an act of “inferring power,” or a certain *potestas*—namely the power or *potestas* to proclaim the gospel and to preside at the celebration of the sacraments.²⁴ The second was that during the liturgy, the ordained minister can be regarded as one who represents Christ. However, it is important to underline that this presentation relates to Christ who is present—and not to an otherwise absent Christ.²⁵ Both churches can now say: the ordained minister is one who, in the liturgy, becomes transparent for the present Christ.

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, I propose taking the liturgical art of antiphonal singing not only as a model, but as a lens through which an ecumenical understanding of ministries can be envisioned.

Based on Bonaccorso’s studies, we can say that in the sung dialogues between the minister/pastor/priest and the congregation, the aesthetic complexities of liturgical actions can lead to experiences of transcendence and to the emergence of faith.

Based on Mühling’s work, we can say that the “open loops”—the resonance between the brain, the body, and the environment through evolutionary history—can serve as a model to better understand the functions of the diverse liturgical ministries.

Based on Lathrop’s liturgical theology, we can say that in sung dialogues the juxtaposed leaders and assemblies can enrich one another, while leadership—and assembly—will experience both critique and re-orientation.

Based on research from neurobiology and evolutionary anthropology, we can say that liturgical dialogues, while sung, have healing effects on the singers and can foster human cooperation. Thus, singing transforms the singers and their environment.

Together with the theologians engaged in ecumenical dialogue we can say that in the antiphonal liturgical singing, the priest or pastor can be experienced as transparent for the Christ who is present in the liturgical celebration.

Thus, the practice of antiphonal singing itself can become a kind of *theologia oecumenica prima*. This is because the singing itself can bring forth what is

²⁴ Friederike Nüssel, “Amt und Ordination bei Martin Luther und in der lutherischen Dogmatik,” in *Vermitteltes Heil*, 155.

²⁵ Etienne Vetö, “Ministry and Priesthood. The influence of Luther on the Roman Catholic understanding of ministry and its ecumenical stake”, in *Vermitteltes Heil*, 162.

confessed between the churches as our common hope: that healing takes place and brings forth new ethics through the sung call and response between God and his people, in the translucent tent of the liturgical celebration.

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POSŁUGA OSÓB OCHRZCZONYCH I WYŚWIĘCONYCH
W KONTEKŚCIE ŚPIEWU LITURGICZNEGO

Streszczenie

Po kilkudziesięciu latach dialogu ekumenicznego zrozumienie relacji między posługą osób ochrzczonych i wyświęconych nadal stanowi kwestię dzielącą kościoły i tradycje. W niniejszej pracy autorka stawia tezę, że śpiew liturgiczny, w którym pieśni o określonej funkcji wykonywane indywidualnie i wspólnie stają się jednoczącym elementem liturgii, stanowi model, którego zadaniem jest zniesienie tych podziałów.

Od niedawna teologowie liturgii analizują oprawę artystyczną liturgii i złożoną relację pomiędzy różnymi rodzajami posługi. Odkrycia w dziedzinie neurobiologii pozwalają teologom lepiej rozumieć rolę pojedynczego głosu i grupy głosów przenikających liturgię. Autorka artykułu sugeruje, że lepsze zrozumienie funkcjonowania i estetycznego charakteru śpiewu liturgicznego daje nam nowe hermeneutyczne narzędzie, przydatne w prowadzeniu ekumenicznego dialogu o posłudze w Kościele.

Słowa kluczowe: teologia liturgii; śpiew; neurobiologia; posługa; ekumenizm.