

# SENSES OR NON-SENSES. DEBATES ON RITUALS IN PRE-REFORMATION DENMARK

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*In the 1520s the Danish (and Norwegian) politics of religion was a complex matter and under severe pressure both from the Roman Catholic nobility and from radical Lutheran cities. This situation also triggered debates on the meaning and rationality of religion and rituals. The author concentrates on one of these debates: that between the Carmelite Paulus Helie and the Lutheran apostate Petrus Laurentii. Helie focused his arguments around concepts such as tradition, experience, and history. Laurentii argued that historical changes never would occur if tradition and human authority were given priority in the Christian church. Both participants in this debate also referred to the human senses. To Helie, the smells, tastes, and movements of the Christian rituals were instruments of transcendental experience. To Laurentii, the human senses were non-sense: not ritual, but rather true belief and sincere feelings were the only solution.*

Keywords: senses, Denmark, reformation, rituals.

*V 20. letih 16. stoletja je bila danska (in norveška) politika religije kompleksno vprašanje pod močnim pritiskom tako rimskokatoliškega plemstva kakor radikalnih luteranskih mest. Položaj je spodbudil tudi razpravljanja o pomenu in racionalnosti vere in obredja. Avtor se osredinja na eno teh razprav – med karmeličanom Paulusom Heliejem in luteranskim odpadnikom Petrusom Laurentijem. Helie je strnil svoje argumente ob konceptih tradicija, izkušnja in zgodovina. Laurentii je trdil, da ne bi bilo historičnih sprememb, če bi imeli tradicija in človeška avtoriteta prvenstvo v katoliški cerkvi. Oba razpravljalca sta se sklicevala tudi na človeške čute. Za Helieja so bili vonji, okusi in gibi v krščanskem obredju instrumenti transcendenčne izkušnje. Za Laurentija so bili človeški čuti ne-čuti: edina rešitev je v pravi veri in iskrenih občutjih, ne pa v ritualu.*

Ključne besede: čuti, Danska, reformacija, rituali.

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The great changes in religion, political power, and cultural processes that took place in parts of Europe in the first half of the 16th century, and which were already called “the reformation” in the languages of that time – these changes have always interested and even intrigued cultural historians.<sup>1</sup> It is impossible to single out *one* central element of these changes. Politics, economics, religion, and mentalities seem to have been combined and related in ways that modern scholars can hardly grasp with their secularized conceptual framework. This is the broader background for this article, in which I analyze only one small chapter of these changes, a chapter that took place in a rather marginal part of Europe at the time: the Kingdom of Denmark.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A recent example is Edward Muir [1997].

<sup>2</sup> Further aspects are discussed in detail in Amundsen [2006].

## THE LUTHERAN REFORMATION IN DENMARK

In the 1520s the Danish politics of religion was a rather complex matter. The kings of the Oldenburg dynasty, Christian II and his uncle Fredrick I, were under severe pressure both from the Roman Catholic nobility and from leading groups in radical Lutheran cities. The ideological debates intensified, and no one knew what the solution would be: Would Denmark become a revolutionary, Lutheran monarchy, or would this part of Europe remain within the unifying, Roman Catholic Church?<sup>3</sup>

In fact, this uncertainty about political and religious development in Denmark did not end until the 1530s. King Fredrick I died in 1533 and his death was the direct cause of a bloody and brutal civil war. This war (the *Grevens Fejde*, or Count's War) ended in 1536 with the final victory of the Lutheran crown pretender, who was proclaimed the new Danish king with the name Christian III. He immediately decided that his monarchy would be a Lutheran monarchy with no tolerance for the old church and its structures or supporters. The bishops fled or were imprisoned, and within few years a new Lutheran church structure was established.

This is, of course, dramatic enough – seen as a cultural revolution and a breakdown of historical traditions. However, what I find interesting is the situation *before* this Lutheran victory, in the period when no one was able to know exactly what was going to happen. Such situations have a tendency to put values and arguments under pressure, thus making them more clearly explicated than what is normal or even necessary in “normal” situations. I take this as my theoretical and methodological starting point.

## RELIGIOUS COMPLEXITY IN PRE-REFORMATION DENMARK

If we turn to the Denmark of the 1520s, it is not hard to find considerable religious and cultural complexity. During this decade the Lutheran reformation was partially implemented in some important Danish towns, such as Viborg and Malmø (present-day Malmö). The monasteries were occupied and used for new purposes, monks were dismissed, and the Catholic clergy were expelled from their own churches. The city councils proclaimed the new, true religion to be *their* only choice, and King Frederick I partly accepted this choice and partly lacked sufficient power to prevent it.

To the defenders of the old belief and the old church, this situation was regarded as a catastrophe. A Christian monarch should not tolerate the cult of apostates. On the other hand, to the Danish Lutherans the city reformations were signs of a new era, and they expected the king to support them [Koch and Kornerup 1987].

Both the old and the new beliefs had to be defended, not only by political means but

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<sup>3</sup> Matthias Asche and Anton Schindling [2003] have thoroughly described the reformation processes in Scandinavia.

also by use of the printed and the spoken word. Of course, a situation like this also called for debates on the meaning and rationality of religion and rituals. If the Roman Catholic Church should be kept unaltered in Denmark, what grounds should this be based on and what were the positive elements of this church? The question could also be posed the other way around: What were the critical arguments of those that wanted radical change? Why was a radical change the only solution? Both factions agreed that this was a question of church rituals and of what, from a modern perspective, one might call the cultural and social functions of the Christian religion. But it was also a question of how Christian believers could communicate with their god.

## TWO MONKS IN DEBATE

Below I concentrate on one of these debates in pre-Reformation Denmark – the debate between the Carmelite Poul Heljesen (*Paulus Helie*) [Heise 1893; Andersen 1936] and the Lutheran apostate Peder Laurensen (*Petrus Laurentii*) [Rørdam 1896]. My interest in them is due to the fact that they represent two clear-cut alternatives in this time of change.

They both had the same background because they had been members of the Carmelite Collegium in Copenhagen established by King Christian II in 1517 [cf. Valkner 1963]. However, whereas Poul Heljesen kept his loyalty to the old church unchanged until his death, Peder Laurensen left the Collegium in the mid-1520s. First he went to Germany to meet Martin Luther, and then he settled in Malmø to participate in the city reformation that took place there in the late 1520s.

## THE LUTHERAN APOSTATE PEDER LAURENSEN

In his book titled *Malmøbogen* (The Malmø Book), which was printed in 1530, Peder Laurensen presented a very fervent and rather aggressive post-factum defence of the city reformation in his new hometown.<sup>4</sup> He described what had taken place in his opinion: The abuse of the sacraments, the mass, and the churches had been stopped, while the citizens kept their loyalty to the king and did not dispute his civil power. The most extreme signs of the old abuse – the ornaments of the churches – had been removed and sold, and the money had been used for the benefit of the poor. Now – Peder Laurensen concluded – the pure word of God could be heard both in the churches and in the streets of the city of Malmø without being distorted by dead things like processions, altarpieces, incense, or golden robes.

To Peder Laurensen, what was regarded as “old” was almost automatically suspicious

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<sup>4</sup> The book was re-edited in the 19th century by Holger F. Rørdam [1868].

– that is: old with regard to the history of the Roman Catholic Church. In his opinion, the only authority was the Bible, the teachings of Jesus, and the Apostles. On the other hand, most periods of church history had represented a moral and ritual decline with the result that the church had developed in directions that were far from the authentic ideals. Sacraments and rituals not explicitly mentioned in the New Testament were simply fantasies constructed by the pope and the clergy in order to keep common men and women in poverty and ignorance. In fact, according to Peder Laursen this development was even worse because it had closed the door to God's grace to most people. And now, during the last years, Peder Laursen argued, God's wrath had turned on Denmark. In a situation like this, the reformers in Malmø had done the only right thing. They had restored the original, simple, and authentic rituals and pious ideals, and had liberated the people of God from their historical prison. Moreover, a very important part of this prison was the rituals of the old church.

#### THE REFORMER'S VIEW ON CHURCH DEFICIENCIES

Peder Laursen's most important strategy was to *reveal* the deficiencies of the old church and its traditions. The clergy were mostly occupied with collecting money and valuables for themselves, thus selling the mercy of God for money or gifts. His advice to the people of God was that they should not put confidence in any priest, monk, bishop, ritual, or ecclesiastical law. The old clergy could be expelled from the reformed city, but the rituals also had to be radically changed.

To be able to detect the meaning of the true word of God, Peder Laursen recommended a return to a *historical starting point*, thus disregarding the centuries of church history between apostolic times and the present. In his argument, true Christian worship was not a question of liturgical traditions, colours and candles, beautiful and shining liturgical vessels, or church decorations. Quite the contrary: such things would confuse the soul, distracting the pious mind that wanted to *understand* the divine word.

In God's eyes – and definitely also in the eyes of Peder Laursen – it was endlessly more valuable if a simple peasant sang a popular hymn on a street corner than if he took part in a church festival or complex ritual led by a priest. In short: the true religious ritual had its origin and legitimacy in the hearts and minds of the participants, not in history, tradition, or external forms. The rituals of the old church were the rituals of monkeys: the laity had been taught to copy what the clergy did without really understanding the meaning of it. The senses would lead the soul astray, according to the Lutheran city reformer Peder Laursen and his Malmø book of 1530.

## THE DEFENDER OF THE OLD CHURCH

What did the situation look like from the other side of the conflict, from a defender of the Catholic faith? In several pamphlets and widely distributed manuscripts, Poul Helgesen responded to Peder Laurensen, his old friend and colleague in the Copenhagen Carmelite Collegium.<sup>5</sup> However, Poul Helgesen had quite another strategy. If we analyze his writings, it is possible to see that he followed three lines of argumentation connected to these *topoi*: the power of the Holy Spirit, the power of the formal structures of worship, and the power of tradition.

Seen from the perspective of Poul Helgesen, the most terrible abuse in contemporary Denmark was not the rituals or the politics of the Catholic Church, but the worldly hubris of the Lutheran reformers. If one believed that the Christian church was ruled by the Holy Spirit, it would be an attack on the Spirit to try to dissolve the existing institutions of this church or to dismiss its legitimate servants [*Skriifter af Paulus Helie*, III: 60f]. Where – Poul Helgesen asked – had the Holy Spirit actually been in the centuries that had followed the first Pentecost if not in and within the Christian church as an institution with its rituals, sacraments, and traditions? In fact, Poul Helgesen argued, the history of the Christian church is also the history of the Holy Spirit. To even think otherwise would result in absurdities and lack of consequence. If the Christian God is one, it also follows that the Church is one [*Skriifter af Paulus Helie*, II: 17]. This is the power of the Holy Spirit.

Poul Helgesen also pointed to the fact that all humans were sinful, not fully capable of true worship. God's own instruments to fill the gap between the ideals and the sinful realities were the rituals, or the "church ceremonies", as he called them. Where the individual human mind and body were restricted and ambivalent, the forms of the rituals could act and speak for them. The rituals gave the human senses a structure. False devotion was the most likely outcome of the individual, de-ritualized activities in the Lutheran churches, while the Catholic churches and their rituals contained the potential for both individual and collective worship [*Skriifter af Paulus Helie*, II: 142]. In Poul Helgesen's argument, this was the power of the formal structures of worship.

## TRADITION AND HISTORY

The most interesting point in Poul Helgesen's discussion, however, is the third line of argument: the power of tradition. In fact, this point is closely linked to the two other points, but it takes them further into questions of history and epistemology.

To start with epistemology, Poul Helgesen argued that man has no individual religious knowledge in the meaning that the human senses are to be trusted alone. In contrast to the

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<sup>5</sup> Several editors edited his collected works in the mid-20th century [*Skriifter af Paulus Helie*, I–VII].

arguments of the Lutheran reformers, Poul Helgesen was of the opinion that it was impossible for individuals living 1,500 years after Jesus and the Apostles to have any knowledge of what *they* said, did, and intended. If the fathers of the Church and the church institution had not carried this knowledge from one generation to another, it would have been lost and lacked any reference to any legitimate reality. The meaning of the Holy Scriptures was a shared knowledge, following the Christian church through history. If the fathers of the Church or the church institution had misinterpreted Jesus and the Apostles, there would be no Christian belief or knowledge left – only an empty, terrifying past [*Skrifter af Paulus Helie*, III: 148f]. In other words: To propagate the dissolution of the old church, of the Roman church institution, would be equivalent to religious suicide, according to Poul Helgesen.

Poul Helgesen also commented on history. To say that the old church as an institution was the only possible guarantee for substantial Christian knowledge and experience was not only a question of formal reasoning, according to him. On the contrary, Poul Helgesen argued that the most important container of the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, the most central element in the power of tradition, was the Christian rituals.

He argued that using these rituals enabled the individual believer to neutralize the limitation of place and time, which is the limitation of the individual mind and body. Kneeling in front of a sacred painting, taking part in a collective church ritual, you are bound to the limits of your body, to the limits of present experiences. However, at the same time, and as a consequence of the formal structures of the ritual, you will be able to experience and make real both past and future realities: The believer might be both on earth and in heaven, and in the past, the present, and the future – simultaneously! Through the rituals of the church, the individual took part in the wisdom and experience of past generations. In the ultimate end, this was actually a taking part in the wisdom and experience of the Apostles. *This* was the inner meaning of the rituals: they were open secrets, God's own channels between Him and his creation, keeping the human senses away from non-sense.

## THE END OF THE DEBATE

It is no wonder that Poul Helgesen was horrified when he was informed about what had happened in Malmø and in Viborg. He learned about empty churches, laymen preaching in the streets, and liturgical vessels and manuals destroyed or sold. To him, the ritual revolution of the Protestants was the first step to cultural, social, and religious chaos. This was a breakdown of history and meaning.

However, in 1530, neither Peder Laurensen nor Poul Helgesen knew what would come of the conflicts and debates. This forced them to be explicit regarding the arguments for what they did – or what they did not want to happen. However, we know what happened! After 1536, Peder Laurensen made a career in the new Lutheran church in Denmark until

his death in 1555. Poul Helgesen, on the other hand, did not give up his Catholic faith. His fate after 1536 is unknown.

The two men never reconciled but, from one perspective, both of them turned out to be wrong. The Lutheran reformation in Denmark and Norway became much more moderate than the radical experiments in Malmø and other Danish cities might have indicated in the 1520s. King Christian III was a clever politician who knew that radical changes would threaten the political stability of his kingdom. The ritual politics of the new church, then, ended in a position between that of Poul Helgesen and Peder Laurensen. It was conservative, and it altered ritual traditions only slowly and with caution.

### RITUALS AND CULTURAL VALUES. THE POSITION OF THE SENSES

To conclude this analysis, I would like to go a step further in this study of the ritual debate in pre-Reformation Denmark, and ask the following question: Which cultural values were actually attributed to rituals by the two adversaries? Poul Helgesen concentrated his arguments around phenomena such as tradition, experience, and history. What would the results be if a contemporary ritual revolution actually dissolved the wisdom of the forefathers? According to Poul Helgesen, the paths to the past then would be closed and forgotten. The Lutheran Peder Laurensen, however, argued that historical changes never would occur if tradition and human authority were given priority in the Christian church. In his view, any ritual was the possible object of change.

The interesting point here is that both participants in this debate referred to the human senses. To Poul Helgesen, the smells, tastes, and physical movements of the Christian rituals were instruments of transcendental experience. They kept the senses from being non-sense. To Peder Laurensen, the appeals to the human senses were non-sense. To God, any ritual would be sufficient, but Christian believers should not confine themselves to them. Not ritual, but instead true belief and sincere feelings were the only solution.

I regard this discussion of the 1520s as astonishingly modern. Under the pressure of a possible religious revolution, the two adversaries were forced to argue deeply and explicitly. The question of ritual, senses, and history was turned into a question of how individuals should communicate with the divine, of how human language and human acts might neutralize the distance between the experienced world and the transcendental world. The Lutherans pointed to one solution to this problem, and the Roman Catholics chose another. The debates in the early 16th century even in a remote place like Denmark shed light on important and long-lasting differences in European religious cultures.

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ČUTI ALI NE-ČUTI. RAZPRAVE O RITUALIH  
V PREDREFORMACIJSKI DANSKI

*V 20. letih 16. stoletja je bila danska (in norveška) politika religije kompleksno vprašanje. Kralja oldenburgske dinastije, Kristijan II. in njegov stric, Fredrik I., sta bila pod močnim pristiskom tako rimskokatoliškega plemstva kakor radikalnih luteranskih mest. Nazorske razprave so se ostrile,*

*vendar nihče ni imel rešitve. Bi morala Danska-Norveška postati revolucionarna luteranska monarhija ali naj bi ta del Evrope ostal v enotni rimskokatoliški cerkvi?*

*Položaj je spodbudil razprave o pomenu in racionalnosti religije in obredja. V prispevku se osredinjam na eno od razprav, namreč tisto med karmeličanom Poulom Heljesnom (Paulus Helie) in luteranskim odpadnikom Pederom Laurensenom (Petrus Laurentii). V analizi je v središču naslednje vprašanje: Kakšno vrednost sta nasprotnika pripisovala obredju? Paulus Helie je strnil svoje argumente ob konceptih tradicija, izkušnja in zgodovina: kakšni bi bili nasledki, če bi sodobna revolucija razkrojila modrost prednikov? Po Heliejevem mnenju bi bile poti k preteklosti zaprte in pozabljene. Luteranec Petrus Laurentii pa je trdil, da do historičnih sprememb ne bi prišlo, če bi imeli tradicija in človeška avtoriteta prvenstvo v katoliški cerkvi. Skladno s tem je vsak ritual podvržen spremembam.*

*Zanimivo je, da se pri tem oba razpravljalca sklicujeta na človeške čute. Za Paulusa Helieja so bili vonji, okusi in gibi v krščanskih obredih instrumenti transcendenčne izkušnje. Za Petrusa Laurentiija so bili človeški čuti ne-čuti: za Boga zadošča vsak ritual, vendar rituali za krščanske vernike ne morejo biti edina stvar. Edina rešitev je v pravi veri in iskrenih čustvih/lobčutih, ne pa v ritualih.*

*Razprava v 20. letih 16. stoletja je presenetljivo sodobna. Pod pritiskom mogoče verske revolucije sta bila nasprotnika prisiljena argumentirati poglobljeno in eksplicitno. Vprašanje rituala, čutov in zgodovine se je spremenilo v vprašanje, kako naj bi posamezniki komunicirali z božanskim in kako lahko človeški jezik in dejanja nevtralizirajo razdaljo med svetom doživetega in transcendence.*

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