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Theology of Psalms – Aesthetic and Systematic reflections

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Theology of Psalms - Systematic and aesthetic reflections

In Luther’s reflections on psalms we find exegesis, dogmatic and poetological reflections combined. Psalms can be considered as discourse as well as performance. So I would like to draw some systematic-theological perspectives on both, from a contemporary point of view.

(I) First of all I would like to introduce Günter Bader’s concept of a theology of the psaltery; in two steps he has presented this advanced project of such a theology of psaltery with respect to medieval and Lutheran concepts: "Psalterium affectuum palaestra" (1996) may be interpreted as a theory of emotions, "Psalterspiel“ (2009) as a theory of meaning based on iconicity, music and poetics. These works are similar in referring to the book of psalms, as the source of naming God and any problems derived from this process of naming. As aesthetics has to do with the proper representation, we can distinguish between vocal utterances or singing and the literacy of claming God, meaning God or addressing God. In every mode of articulation, the inadequacy of naming occurs. So the book of psalms itself and the readers and singers of the psalms work out a training of coming in the right mood of self-understanding. Therefore Bader writes about the psaltery, in the three dimensions of production, literacy and reception as a gymnasion for affects.³ The modes of sung psalms correlate

to the human attitudes towards experiences and everyday life. Baders reflections on psaltery as music and speech include a theory of decadence: Whereas the biblical book evoked expressivity, in reading and singing, there is a sharp diagnosis about the dysfunctions of performing and articulation, not only in contemporary life but starting from late medieval times: „Nicht ohne ein Gefühl der Betrethenheit müssen wir zugeben: Nicht ist der Psalter alles, er war einmal alles. [...] Jetzt dagegen ist der Psalter verstummt. Oder er ist bei denen hängen geblieben, die ihn als wöchentliches Pensum auf sich genommen haben.“ Actually, I won’t be able to resume all aspects of two books, but concentrate just on a few:

From the first "Psalterium affectuum palaestra" I derive Bader’s interpretation of Luther’s prefaces to the German psalter and the final conclusion: the name of God as sound and meaning. From the second "Psalterspiel" I display the interdependence of language and music, and the voice of psalms and psaltery.

(II) Finally, I should present some ideas of tone, voice and form as correlation of liturgy and everyday life.

I Theology of psalms

(a) Falling silent

When we look back to the Reformation era, we consider the development of printing technique as increasing the availability of psaltery. However, in musicological, liturgical and theological sense there has to be added a diagnosis: the falling silent of it. In

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4 Bader, Psalterspiel, p. 43.
5 dt.: Klang und Bedeutung.
details: The singing of gregorian chant has become something miraculous, but is hardly understood in the sense, as mentioned above, as an mode of articulating affects. In most protestant liturgies psalms are read instead of sung. The psaltery is no longer estimated as a storage of experience and naming of God. Instead of the sung poetry of psalms, the prose of the world remains. If someone notices this loss of sound, he may display an attitude of self-tranquilizing and acceptance: That's how things are changing. Alternatively, she could become angry because of the loss of sound, protesting against the degeneration of music and performance. Whereas printing enforces the convenience of reading silently instead of aloud, the effect of translation from Hebrew to native languages is, that the loss of original performances, recitation and chant, cannot find its adequate compensation, neither in new recitation nor in new chant, but it increasingly disappears into silent reading from printed books. So the ability to read, and to read silently, is taken for paradox. The more alphabetization, the less impression.

(b) Praising

The multitude of affects (and their order and disorder) is transferred by Johannes Ger- son into an instruction of playing the psalterium. The relation between emotions and psalm tunes however has been reflected before and set into different models of wind direction, psalm tune and emotion. Related to these concepts, Luther's preface to the psaltery reflects on the forms of praise contained within it. First of all, the psaltery is

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6 Bader, Psalterium, p. 158.
7 Bader, Psalterium, p. 158.
8 Bader, Psalterium, p. 161.
9 Bader, Psalterium, p. 193.
presented as a storehouse of sentiments, the moral relevance is that it evokes reactions of the person, as derived from the metaphor of the heart as a ship on a turbulent sea:


The didactics of tempest is to elate the religious person to express himself in any kind of emotion. As far as the praising is concerned, we distinguish four aspects:11 the psaltery has by itself the named divine effects. God is to be praised as the initiator of the psaltery12, praising is to be announced as enduring illocutionary act and regulatory form of psalms. Most evidently, praising is the attitude towards the psaltery, as it is being performed by the congregation or the choir.

In addition to the extremes of silence and praising, counterintuitively the psaltery does not only activate hearing and singing, but even smelling, tasting and feeling.13 Making

11 Bader, Psalterium, p. 164.
12 not: the author!
13 Bader, Psalterium, p. 169
sense out of - has a multiperspective meaning. Religion is holistic and specifically expressed and evoked by psalms as they provide various reflections on human experience.\(^{14}\)

The music, and in fact the psalm modes alterate the singers’ and hearers’ affects from one to another.\(^{15}\) Music therefore is not a decoration of contents or words, but the medium of both with its own logic. Apart from this we learn, that there is neither in understanding and performing psalms, or in any kind of understanding and performing, an affectless attitude to which we could either perceive or refer.

Following this argument, there is always an emotional attitude to what is expressed in religious experiences, and articulating these experiences by singing psalms, is a way of reframing an attitude and self-understanding.

(c) the name of god

The psaltery is precious as a storage what to mean by the name of God. As the psalms are present in tone and understanding we have to deal with both. As sound and meaning make use of the naming of God\(^{16}\), they both become parts of a dynamic equilibrium: the more precise the meaning is, the more is the sound diminished.\(^{17}\) As the calling quality of music might be assumed to be a deixis, music seems to refer to something, so we have to consider its resemblance to language.\(^{18}\) Nevertheless Adorno pointed out that there is merely a metaphorical use of resemblance, for „Music

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\(^{14}\) Luther, DB 10/I, p.105.
\(^{15}\) Bader, Psalterium, p. 181-182.
\(^{16}\) Bader, Psalterium, p. 186, 251.
\(^{17}\) Bader, Psalterium, p. 233.
\(^{18}\) Bader, Psalterium, p. 236.
is a language of a completely different language.”¹⁹ In this elliptic way of expressing this resemblance, the alterity of meaning and sound within these circumstances is the unavoidable circumstance of how the name of God may occur at all. Also, training with psalms means that there is no difference between the relevance of exercise beside the process of exercising.²⁰ Abrupt expression may also be found there as _pausa_, silence in motion.²¹ The tone and the modes suggest systematic discipline, and even order in quietness, both of which are in contrast to the affecting presence of life’s mutation and variations.²² Again the contact with the psalm has a symbolic meaning. How to say something relevant about God, in various everyday situations, resembles the articulations, silences in liturgy where psalms and psalmistic ways of evoking the name of God occur.

(d) voice

The form of articulation in psalms is voice, and paradoxically instrument, if we consider melismatic performances, like the _jubilus_.²³ In the case that the language of music is music on its own, not explicating thoughts or expressing affects, we come to the conclusion of a relational network of voices:

Within the psalms we can distinguish between four relations -
the own voice combined or confronted with an alien voice; the expression of the own voice as an alien voice; the experience of the alien voice as alien; the voices of god -

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Bader, _Psalterium_, p. 239.
²² Bader, _Psalterium_, p. 245.
the Trinity.24

With a view on Luther’s preface we infer an interpretation of psalms, comprising falling silent, praising name of god, voice.

These four dimensions have in itselfes social consequences, and not restricted to the category of „voice“. Saying and singing religion both refer to a common ground of practising religion together. Moreover, the practises do belong to situations of copresence, with arguments about religion, expressing religion. The absent speakers, replaced by personal pronomina, in the psaltery allow the stability of externalized belief, by religion media. The copresence of voices in liturgy distributes, what is said about God, into a cluster of attitudes.

II Aesthetics of misbehaviour

Whereas Bader has far developed the embarrassments of articulating something concerning God, I shall proceed to some aspects of theological meanings in liturgy. For a long time and tradition of organ performances we are used to sounds by technique, and as we appreciate style and character, we imagine an artistic person’s attitude to performing whatever instrument or even dance, video or installations. In consequence

the problems of authenticity are not restricted to media trends. Also, the voice, acting and participating in liturgy, has been replaced, was cut, altered for a long time as well, e.g. the paradox effects of *Vox humana* in the organ, of electronic music such as *Gesang der Jünglinge im Feuerofen* by Stockhausen. The established liturgical function of psalms as *Introitus* initiates a catalogue of emotions, of attitudes towards religion, proper and alien, and the curiosity of liturgy: after praying the psalms the prayer hardly would arrive at the doxology, if he truly has attention on what he is singing and saying. And it has been not an effective solution to outsource this phenomenon to the expert choir, for it returns by perceiving in concert as well as in liturgy. In a strategy of deescalation, a desire for dilettantism may arise. However, the anthropological meaning of liturgy fortunately remains: The opposition and resistance of the body against the rules of articulation, a resemblance that liturgy deals with in many of the occurrences in human life, which, hopefully, can be solved, but cannot be offset. For this reason, participants of liturgy should be enabled by musical and theological training, with discussions and exercises in performance, to share their views and attitudes in order to contribute to liturgy.

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27 The text is dedicated to Henning Steinhardt. For their help with corrections I am grateful to Jason Breed and Jonathan Kirschke-Biller.
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