

**Self-understanding and forms of legitimization in the Danish Folk Church  
– ecclesiological perspectives**

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1: The ballad of the parish that wanted a “believing” pastor.

One of the major issues in the public debates in the Danish Folk Church in the early days of January 2013 was an apparently innocent advertisement for a new pastor from the congregation of Mejdal, a small town parish in Western Jutland. Among the qualifications mentioned in the job advertisement – alongside with interest in the various branches of pastoral work – it was stated that they wanted their new pastor “to be a believer”. Hardly had the parochial church council imagined the sensation aroused by their advertisement. But from the strong reactions to the initiative it became apparent that they had hit some sleeping dogs.

Some Danish right wing and international – US and French – church observers - welcomed the initiative as an indication that “classic” Christian faith was returning in a country that has - at least since Thorkild Grosbøll confessed his lack of belief in Church dogma - been internationally infamous for its degree of secularization that even allows for irreligious pastors (Nyholm et al, *Kristeligt Dagblad* 07.02.2013). Others including influential Danish theologians went in the almost opposite direction. Rather than viewing the advertisement as a reaction to the secular climate in Danish church and society in general they condemned the interest in the pastor’s belief as “unsound” or even “unlutheran”. To the critics the very idea that the personal conviction of the pastor should matter seemed improper; or as one of them frankly stated, an expression of a “melt-down of the Lutheran view of ministry” (Garde, *Kristeligt Dagblad* 05.02.2013).

However, what is most interesting about the case of Mejdal is not the advertisement in itself. True, the expectations regarding the pastor's faith or belief have probably not been spelled out so explicitly earlier. But a comparative view of the ways that pastoral jobs in the Danish Folk Church have been advertised over a 10-year period would document a general development from rather dull listings of data – number of inhabitants, homes for elderly people, public schools and/or kindergartens, distances to the nearest high school, hospital and/or crematorium alongside with detailed reports on the building style and materials of the vicarage - towards more vivid descriptions of church life, expected activities and an increasing interest in the pastor's personal competencies and interests. The advertisement seems to be naturally in line with this development.

On the other hand, what *is* interesting is the fact that the beauty (or the horror!) of the advertisement seems very much to be in the eye of the beholder, as apparently neither the critics nor the defenders bothered examining the rationale of the advertisement or its local backgrounds. As noted by one commentator, there seems to be a “missing link” that becomes apparent both when right wing theologians applaud what they see as an expression of renewed consent to church tradition, and when academic experts claim the incompatibility of the initiative with Lutheran dogma (Larsen, *Kristeligt Dagblad* 24.01.2013). Could there be, the commentator ponders, a clue to understanding within the congregation of Mejdal that both its critics and its followers have failed to capture, namely their engagement in a church development project that seeks to engage the members in formation of new visions for the congregation?

In the following I shall try to take these reflections a bit further. Might it be that when the members of the church council spell out their wish to have a pastor that confesses him- or herself as a believer they are in contact with something essential in the way that ministry can be conceived today? On the basis of recent

empirical research I will argue that belief is obviously a relevant category in describing the ways that Danes perceive themselves today, but also that what is meant when denoting themselves believers tend to escape the usual theological framing. With inspiration from contemporary ethnographic ecclesiology I will further argue that as a particular case of the possible Mejdal can open up for new theological understandings of legitimacy.

I shall try to substantiate this through three distinct moves. Firstly, I shall argue that ecclesiology needs to privilege the particular and that this can be done with help from ethnography. Secondly, I will contend that the turn to the particular is in itself fundamentally theological in that represents an ecclesiology from the body, namely the church as the body of Christ. Finally, and perhaps most controversial, I will suggest a recast of roles between the academy and the messy realities of local congregations as the point of departure for theological explorations of the identity and legitimacy of the church today.

## 2. Faith, belief, religion? A snapshot of Danish religion

According to European Value surveys, belief seems to be a quite constant factor in the ways that Danes perceive themselves. Over a 27 year span (1981-2008) the answers to questions concerning beliefs, church and religion in general are remarkably constant which means that there has been a stabilization in the situation since a decline in the previous decades (Gundelach et al 2011, Iversen 2013)<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The percentage responding positively to the question whether they believe in God has been constant around 64% (1990 and 2004) and 69% (1981 and 1999) during the period, a pattern that is repeated when asked for the consent to the idea of a personal god (1981: 27%, 1990: 20%, 1999: 25%, 2008: 22%) and their identity as a believer (1981: 75%, 1990: 73%, 1999: 77%, 2008: 72%).

However, whereas quantitative studies do tell of generally stable relations between the individuals and the church they say little of how institutional and personal dimensions of belief interact. In her focus group study of belief and religion in the Greater Copenhagen area *I'm a believer - but I'll be damned if I'm religious* sociologist of religion Ina Rosen demonstrates that whereas modern Danes tend to distance themselves from organized and dogmatic forms of religion, or see the participation in organized religious rituals as part of family traditions, the term belief connotes positively personal emotions and subjective reflections over life experiences and the inner life of the individual (Rosen 2009).

The inherent modern quest for authenticity diagnosticized by Charles Taylor which means an increased importance of the personal and the subjective seems also to have made its impact on the ways that faith and belief can be conceptualized today. Although it may be true, as Iversen and others have pointed out, that the often stated claim to believe "in my own way" mostly mirrors general cultural patterns, the point of Taylor probably still holds true: that to be perceived as relevant, belief must be perceived as personal (Iversen et al 2005, Taylor 2002, 2007).

Returning to the case of Mejdal, then it could be argued that when advertizing for a "believing" pastor they simply express the inherent characteristic of modernity

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Asked for the importance of religion the percentage of respondents finding religion very important or quite important, the answers are also here quite stable (9 – 8 – 9 %, resp. 23 – 19 – 21%). Asked for their religious practices, the percentage that frequent the church from once a month to more than once a week are also quite stable on a low level (from about 8% once a month, 2 % once a week and 1% more often). However, it is remarkable that the percentage that frequents the church on special occasions has almost doubled, from 17% in 1981 over 18% in 1991 and 21% in 1999 to 31% in 2008. According, there has been a smaller, but apparently significant, decrease in the number that seldom (under once a year) or never go to church, from 13% to 11%, resp. from 42% to 33%. A possible explanation could be the broad range of religious arrangements that have been developed over the last decades which leaves church members with more possibilities than in earlier years where the high mass was in monopoly.

that to be accepted as true religious belief must also be authentic, that is, in accordance with one's own life experience. Seen in this perspective, neither the call for tradition nor referring to the norms of the church institution seems able to capture what is at stake, as these forms of legitimation seem to be inextricably bound up with pre- or traditionally modern mentalities. Where does one go from here?

### 3. Privileging the particular. The lived and the local as a source of knowledge.

Inspired by the general turn to practice within the humanities and the social sciences, some practical theologians have suggested that theology should pay closer attention to insights gained by contemporary ethnography, that is, taking the lived and the local as the point of departure in the production of knowledge. The underlying basic assumption is that exactly the study of embodied practices in particular contexts can contribute insights that cannot be captured by the detached spectator. As such, they argue, ethnography is not just another tool that can be applied or another research method or strategy to be followed. It is rather a dynamic process of meaning-making that actively questions established structures by the attentive study of the words, practices, traditions, experiences and insights of concrete people as a source of wisdom.

Understood this way the ethnographic approach thus represents an argument for de-centering truth, that is, unveiling and putting aside the assumptions and evaluations of the researcher in favor of the active privileging of other voices and perspectives. This may be more radical than it seems at the first glance, as it highlights the intertwinement of knowledge production with power dynamics. It becomes clear that the idea of the detached researcher and the desinterested "glance from nowhere" is at least partly an illusion, as academic practice is itself embedded in particular contexts and social interests.

By the act of de-centering the researcher herself takes on the role of the learner rather than that of the expert. Ethnographic research thus rests on the fundamental insight that in spite of the structural inequalities inherent in the ordinary cast of roles between the researcher and the objects of study, the traditional academic approach represents only a limited perspective on the world. However important traditional text-oriented hermeneutics may be – and nobody would question this – it is always running the risk of overlooking the importance of the concrete and the particular. Or, even worse, to dismiss the concrete and the particular as being of no relevance to normative reflection. Acknowledging that all human knowledge is fallible, infused by partial experience means that the ethnographic researcher must bring with her an attitude of humility, combined with genuine willingness to put aside what she “knows” and to test her understandings face to face with the real “other”. This is even more necessary as the researcher inhabits a privileged position towards the subjects being studied. An ethnographic approach thus takes leave of the idea, that the researcher alone “owns” truth, seeing knowledge production as a kind of equal and “joint endeavor” (Fulkerson) between the researcher and the subjects being studied towards fuller and more comprehensive understanding of reality in all its dimensions.

#### 4. Ethnography as ecclesiology “from the body”.

The obligation of theology to engage in ethnography can thus be stated with reference to the common shift to practices that has taken place within culture and anthropological studies in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. However a more explicit theological rationale can be found in the incarnational nature of Christianity itself, affirming the “messy place that is the world” as the locus of Divine presence (Fulkerson 2011 ). The usual application model of theology as a set of unchanging truths that must be translated into different cultural contexts has not

only been rendered intellectually inviable by the development within cultural studies. It is also insufficient for reasons internal to theological thinking, namely the idea of incarnation that affirms the “scandal of particularity”, sacrament that insists on embodied presence, and revelation through personal encounters in everyday life (Ward 2012).

In other words, ethnography with its privileging of the particular should be considered proper theological for three main reasons. Firstly, as it insists on the importance of experience not only as one source of knowledge among others, but as the “primary lens through which human beings access any and all scientific, moral or theological knowledge... experience is not simply a category among others, it is the interpretative vehicle”. As a consequence there is no completely impartial “view from nowhere”, nor in theology. Rather than fearing subjectivity, theologians should acknowledge this and act accordingly (Scharen and Vigen 2011).

Secondly, theology should not primarily be seen as a system of thoughts or propositions but as an ongoing process of interpretation, resonating to pressing issues and “wounds” attending “meaningfully to living and historically rooted traditions, the Gospel, and to contemporary human events, practices, and needs” (Fulkerson 2011). This means that theological texts are not the only key sources of information, but that the lives of entirely nonacademic members of a community count in the same way.

And, thirdly, the ethnographic approach should be welcomed as a protection against idolatry and a way to model genuinely theological virtues such as intellectual and spiritual humility, the safeguarding of transparency and critical examination of one’s work (Scharen and Vigen 2011).

## 5. Reviewing Mejdal: Towards a recast.

To sum up my points I would suggest that in discussing legitimacy and forms of legitimization in the Danish Folk Church today, theological reflection on the church needs to de-center, that is, to direct its attention not only to the normative dimensions of the great books of culture, scripture and tradition, but also and equally important more actively towards the “messy realities” of congregational practices.

Though not one single thing the ethnographical approach to ecclesiology shares the proposal that theology cannot be viewed as separated from the social or from culture as assumed in traditional theories of correlation. In other words, neither the idea of distinct boundaries between “sacred” theology and “profane” social theory nor the idea of the church as an alternative social world uncontaminated by secular society can any longer be maintained. The discussion whether the church absorbs influences from other cultures does simply not hit the nail. The question is not *if*, but *how* (Fiddes 2012) churches are influenced by the cultures they live in, and how it affects their thinking. In line with this it seems no longer feasible to argue a model of correlation that implies a division of work where social and empirical research is allowed to ask questions, but with theology as the only one with the right to answer. Nor is ethnographic research about “digging up empirical information that might serve as particulars for theology’s *a priori* universal or divine truths” (Scharen 2011).

I would suggest that the missing link in the discussion about Mejdal so far has been the willingness to adopt the perspective of the congregation and to learn from it. And I would argue that the lesson learned from this ought to be that to capture questions of the identity and the legitimacy of the church today idealist conceptions of the church must be brought into dialogue with attentive studies of how legitimacy is negotiated in the messy realities of congregational practices, and to let this make out the starting point for theological reflections.

Not only can the ethnographic approach allow for a "soft test" of theoretical claims by providing thick descriptions of congregational life (Ward 2012) as is commonly recognised. In other words, an ethnographic approach to Mejdal will not just help discover whether the shift of legitimacy structures in modernity perceived by Taylor and others can be empirically verified in a Danish rural context. At a more profound level ethnography can itself be seen as an instance of ecclesiology "from the body" that pushes beyond more traditional theological studies "of the body" and thereby places the lived and the local in the midst of the discussion. Not *if* the local congregations are faithful to their Lutheran legacy, but *how* they are. In other words: what it means to be Lutheran today.

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