

K-J Hansson:

Martin Luther's hymns in the lives of the Nordic people

NordHymn is a Scandinavian network for interdisciplinary investigation of hymns and spiritual songs. In the late 1990s NordHymn initiated a research project entitled *Martin Luther's hymns in the lives of the Nordic people*. The aim was to investigate the role of Luther's hymns, not only in church life but in everyday life, also from a social, cultural and political point of view. The investigation was carried out 2002-2005 with financial subsidies, mainly from NOS-HS.

The investigation project was in many ways unique. Is a very large project. Over 60 researchers in theology, musicology, literature, history, sociology, educational sciences and also some clergymen and -women have been involved. It has been a good exercise in hymnological team work. Investigators from five countries and representing eight different languages worked closely together. Different traditions of research came together.

The Nordic countries make a good base for an investigation like this. All of the countries have a common history: on one hand Denmark with Norway and Iceland, on the other hand Sweden and Finland. The countries have many similarities, economically, culturally, politically and according to religious aspects. The Lutheran churches have since the Reformation had a dominating status. The languages are, except for Icelandic and Finnish, easy to understand.

Investigation sections

To be able to hold the project together the 60 investigators were divided into six sections for research, discussion and collaboration. Each group had its own theme and had members from the different countries:

1. *Dissemination*. Which hymns have been translated and printed in hymnbooks and spiritual songbooks and have been used in different sectors of the society?
2. *Dogmatic interpretations*. What is the theology reflected in Luther's own hymns? What is the message in the different translations?
3. *Liturgy*. Which hymns have been connected with the liturgy? Which hymns have been used in the Sunday services?
4. *Teaching*. How have Luther's hymns been used as pedagogical instruments in church and society?
5. *Music*. Which chorals and what musical forms have been used?
6. *Society and culture*. Which role have Luther's hymns played outside church life? In what cultural, social or political context do they occur, i.e. in literature and artistic music, in folk song and handicraft, in danger and conflicts?

Markus Jenny's list

The starting point for the investigation was Markus Jenny's *Luthers geistliche Lieder und Kirchengesänge. Vollständige Neuedition in Ergänzung zu Band 35 der Weimarer Ausgabe* (Köln, Wien: Böhlau Verlag 1985).). It gave, after some critical discussions, a good outline:

- 001 Dies sind die heiligen Zehn gebot/These are the holy Ten Commands
- 002 Nun freut euch, lieben Christen gemein/Dear Christians, one and all
- 003 Mitten wir im Leben sind/Even as we live each day
- 004 Gott sei gelobet und gebenedeiet/Our Lord, we praise you
- 005 Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ/All praise to you, eternal God
- 006 Jesus Christus, unser Heiland, der von/Jesus Christ, our God and Savior
- 007 Wohl dem, der in Gottes furcht steht
- 008 Ach Gott, vom Himmel sieh darein
- 009 Es spricht der Unweisen Mund wohl
- 010 Es wollt uns Gott genädig sein/May God bestow on us his grace
- 011 Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir/Out of the depths I cry to God
- 012 Christ lag in Todes Banden/Christ Jesus lay in death's strong bands
- 013 Jesus Christus, unser Heiland, der den Tod/ Jesu Christ, our Saviour true
- 014 Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland/Savior of the nations, come
- 015 Komm, Heiliger Geist, Herre Gott/Come Holy Ghost, God and Lord
- 016 Christum wir sollen loben/From East to west, from shore to shore
- 017 Komm, Gott Schöpfer, heiliger Geist
- 018 Ein neues Lied wir heben an/A new song shall here be begun
- 019 Nun bitten wir den Heiligen Geist/To God the Holy Spirit let us pray
- 020 Mensch, willst du leben seliglich/Man, wouldst thou live blissfully
- 021 Mit Fried und Freud ich fahr dahin/I leave as you have promised, Lord
- 022 Wär Gott nicht mit uns diese Zeit
- 023 Gott der Vater wohn uns bei/God the Father, be our stay
- 024 Wir glauben all an einen Gott/We all beleive in one true God
- *025 Kyrie eleison
- 026 Jesaja, dem Propheten, das geschah/Isaiah in a vision did of old
- *027 Christe, du Lamm Gottes
- 028 Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott/A mighty fortress is our God
- *029 Die Litanei - deutsch und lateinisch
- 030 Verleih uns Frieden gnädiglich/Grant peace, we prays, in mercy, Lord
- 031 Herr Gott, dich loben wir/ Lord God to you our hearts we raise
- 032 Christ ist erstanden/Christ is arisen
- 033 Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her/From heaven above to earth
- 034 Sie ist mir lieb, die werthe Magd/To me she's dear, the worthy maid
- 035 Vater unser im Himmelreich/Our Father in the heaven
- 036 Christ, unser Herr, zum Jordan kam/To Jordan came the Christ our Lord
- 037 Was fürchtst du, Feind Herodes, sehr

- 038 Erhalt uns, Herr, bei deinem Wort/ Father with all your gospel's power
- 039 Vom Himmel kam der Engel Schar
- 040 Nun lasst uns den Leib begraben
- 041 Der du bist drei in Einigkeit
- 042 Unser grosse Sünde und schwere Missetat
- *043 Der 111. Psalm
- *044 Der 117. Psalm
- *045 Der Lobgesang des Zacharias

Jenny's list contains 45 texts. But all did not come up in the investigation. The interest was focused on hymns, Kirchenlieder, not the liturgical songs (025, 027, 029). The numbers 042-045 have not appeared in the Nordic tradition. Altogether 39 Luther hymns have been investigated. The hymns have in the Nordic countries during different periods in history had various openings, also in the same language. The numbers before the beginning line became a key and gave a code of identification for every hymn in every country in every time.

Dissemination of Luther hymns

The Reformation was received with great enthusiasm in the Nordic countries in the 1520s. And ever since that Nordic church life has mainly had a Lutheran character. Today about 85 percent of the countries' population are Lutherans. Luther's hymns were rapidly translated and printed hymn books:

* *Denmark* had in 1529 translated 26 of Luther's hymns, in the year 1569 the number was 36. Altogether 37 hymns have been used in Denmark.

* *Norway* follows Denmark until 1814, but in 1985 one more hymn was translated. A total of 38 hymns have been sung in Norway.

* *Iceland* had in the year 1555 translated 19 and in 1589 a total of 38 hymns, including liturgical songs. In 1859 one more hymn was added and in 1972 two more. A total of 41 hymns (including liturgical songs) and totally 38 Kirchenlieder have been used.

* *Sweden* had in 1530 translated four hymns, in 1562 the amount was 31. Five more hymns were introduced in 1695. All together there are 36 Luther hymns.

* *Finland*, where two languages must be noticed:

a) Swedish: follows Sweden (until 1886), 36 hymns.

b) Finnish: in 1583 and 1605 all the hymns (two in 1549) which have been used, are already translated. A total of 32 hymns.

Luther's hymns were rapidly spread in the Nordic countries. Generally they took two main directions. One was directly from Wittenberg by young men who studied there. The other was over Rostock. The great interest in Luther's hymns was mainly due to an enthusiasm wanting to shed light upon the new faith. The kings and princes were also excited. Thus they got more power as the head of the churches. An important factor was also the trading and shipping around the Baltic Sea. German tradesmen

were essential links between the countries, not only economically, but also according to cultural and religious communication.

The national reformers played, of course, a crucial role in the dissemination of the hymns. They became, like Luther, hymn writers and translators. They developed and even created written language. The hymns were not always translated directly from Luther's texts but some times via translations from other Nordic languages. A Finnish translation could rely on a Swedish version, which in turn could have been made with the help of a Danish translation.

Luther's hymns today

All the Nordic churches have quite recently introduced new hymn books. How many of Luther's hymns are in use today in the Nordic countries? The amounts in the official hymn books today are as follows:

- * Denmark: 20
- * Norway: 22
- * Iceland: 14
- * Sweden: 16
- * Finland a) Finnish: 20
 b) Swedish: 19

Further it can be mentioned that Luther's hymns nowadays are found also in catholic hymn books and in free church collections. In comparison the German Evangelisches Gesangbuch (1994) contains 36 of the texts listed by Jenny – and still one more, *Die beste Zeit* (319). This makes a total of 37 hymns. Lutheran Book of Worship (LBW, 1981) lists 17 hymns.

Eight of Luther's hymns are represented in all official Nordic hymn books today:

- 005 Gelobet seist du, Jesus Christ
- 006 Jesus Christus, unser Heiland
- 011 Aus tiefer Not
- 012 Christ lag in Todesbanden
- 017 Komm, Gott Schöpfer
- 019 Nun bitten wir den Heiligen Geist
- 028 Ein feste Burg
- 033 Vom Himmel hoch

The investigation has analysed a large number of hymn singings in the services during the last 50 or 60 years. The result shows, which was expected, a decreasing use of Luther's hymns. In Finland, for instance, they have decreased by more than 50 percent from the year 1975 to 2003, from 4,7 percent to 2,1 percent of all the hymns

sung in the services. In Sweden the amount of Luther's hymns is 1,5 percent. The reason for the decrease is, among others, that the hymn books were renewed in 1986. There was another centre of gravity. Hymns of more simple character were introduced, modern songs and old revival hymns. Dogmatic texts gave room for hymns about existential matters – and for joy and praise. Luther's hymns felt heavy and old fashioned. The most commonly sung Luther hymns in the Nordic countries today are in:

* *Denmark:*

019 Nun bitten wir
005 Gelobet seist du
028 Ein feste Burg

* *Norway:*

028 Ein feste Burg
014 Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland
015 Komm heiliger Geist, Herre Gott

* *Iceland:*

028 Ein feste Burg
006 Jesus Christus, under Heiland
014 Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland

* *Sweden:*

033 Vom Himmel hoch
015 Kom heiliger Geist, Herre Gott
014 Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland

* *Finland (Swe):*

033 Vom Himmel hoch
02.8 Ein feste Burg
038 Erhalt uns, Herr, bei deinem Wort

Generally, but not distinctly, there are two favourites, *Ein feste Burg* and *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland*. This just as a glimpse of which hymns are on top in the Nordic services today. And now to another section:

Dogmatic interpretations

Luther formulated an apposite message in his hymns. The point could be summed up in a line from *Ein feste Burg*: “Er hilft uns frei aus aller Not, der jetzt uns hat betroffen” (“He breaks the cruel oppressor’s rod, and wins salvation glorious”, LBW 228, 229). The same kinds of expressions are found in about one third of Luther’s hymns. In the Christmas hymn *Vom Himmel hoch* (“From heav’n above”) the newborn child is the God who “will euch führn aus aller Not” (“who hears your sad and bitter cry ... and from all your sins will set you free”, 51:3). In the communion hymn *Gott sei gelobet* he prays: “Hilf uns, Herr, aus aller Not” (“... sins and sorrows”, 215). According to Luther distress and need are part of human life. Man

can take refuge in many things, but God is the one who helps in distress. Yet Luther does not want to proclaim only a theoretical doctrine. He wants to show where man can find existential help in the middle of life, here and now, through Christ.

The translations of Luther's hymns in the Nordic countries could and can in no way match the original texts. The early translators were at first hand church leaders and not poets. They possessed greater talents as reformers and theologians than as writers. They stressed substance more than rhyme and metre. The results were quite free translations.

The investigation displays that Luther's hymns had a strong position in the Nordic countries during 200 years. But in the 18th century there was a change, especially in Denmark and Iceland. At the end of the 18th century almost one third of Luther's hymns were rejected in Denmark, 11 hymns. In Iceland still more were weeded out, 16 of 38 hymns in use. It was the period of Enlightenment. A new age brought new visions of man – and hymns. Believing in man's reason and capacity, the enlightenment had little use for Luther's message that man is totally dependent upon Christ. Reason, and not the Bible, wrote the agenda of mankind. Christian Gellert with his intimate tune became the model for poets. Luther's biblical hymns seemed antiquated. Incarnation and reconciliation had to be reformulated. Words about evil, devil and death had to be modified. And what use did man have of a Holy Spirit when one could refer to the will of a good heart? Luther became a monument from the past. Many of his hymns were rejected. And others were written out in a new way according to the taste of the epoch – sometimes far from Luther.

But only some decades later, in the early 19th century, there was a renaissance for Luther in Denmark. This was due to the foremost hymn writer Grundtvig. But Luther himself did not return. There was a change in theology. Luther's hymns were reflected by Grundtvig's thinking. Among other things Grundtvig emphasized the church. When Luther in *Nun bitten wir den heiligen Geist* writes "behute uns" ("protect us") then Grundtvig talks about protecting the church. When Luther in the same hymn talks about "Not, Schand und Tot" (distress and death) Grundtvig brings in a much more joyful tune. Several Luther hymns were in the 19th century by Grundtvig brought back into the Danish tradition. But the image of Luther changed. Luther was seen through Grundtvig's prism, it was a different Martin Luther.

Sweden and Finland preserved the hymns in the time of enlightenment, almost until the 20th century. Then some of the hymns were rejected. The reason why they were retained so long, i.e. in Finland, is that the Lutheran confession has a strong position in the country, also among members of revival movements. Luther's significance as teacher is emphasized. This has kept the hymns alive. But there have also been theological changes. Finnish translations in the 19th century express the spirit of

pietism. Dark feelings and man's helplessness are emphasized. In our days, in the hymn books of 1986, Luther has come closer again.

In Sweden there was a new translation of *Ein feste Burg* in 1986 (by Olov Hartman). The triumphant approach in Luther's hymn changed into kenosis. No powerful God breaks the thorns when man is squeezed by evil forces. The Saviour does not bear a victorious vestment, he bears a thorny crown. The cross, and not the fortress, is fundamental. By this opposite perspective Hartman wanted to create a hymn which refers to experiences of our time. *Ein feste Burg* became a hymn for the 21st century. It is a powerful hymn. But it also raises the question: What is at all a Luther hymn?

Ein feste Burg

During all periods one of Martin Luther's hymns has dominated in the Nordic countries, *Ein feste Burg*. This hymn was investigated from several points of view: theological, musicological, literary, political, as identification in distress, as a hymn which has attracted peoples' minds and feelings.

Ein feste Burg is above all the battle hymn – as in many countries. It has been sung in wars and trials, in mines and on unsafe journeys. Today its position varies. In Finland it has become almost a second national hymn, which is sung i.e. at patriotic and religious-political meetings, on TV every Christmas and New Year's Eve. It is the religious signature of the Finnish army. It is one of the most popular hymns among the Finns, even if some congregations don't want to use it in services because of its nationalistic character. In Sweden they don't seem to like the hymn. The Swedes feel that it is much too gloomy, serious and strange. In other words the Finns and the Swedes react in an opposite way. One reason is that the Finns have quite fresh memories of wars, crises, distress and sufferings. The hymn has served as a collective consolation and a national identification in difficult situations. The Swedes have experienced good days for a long time. The hymn is not of current interest.

The investigation gives many examples of how *Ein feste Burg* has served as a battle hymn, i.e. in Trondheim in 1942. In January that year the Nazi occupation forces made Vidkun Quisling minister president in Norway. The event was to be celebrated by flying the flag during three days. And a broadcasted service from Nidaros cathedral was announced. Normally the cathedral dean, Arne Fjellbu, would have been celebrant. But the Nazi authorities replaced him with a loyal clergyman. This was political encroachment in church affairs. Dean Fjellbu in his turn announced another service later the same day. But the police locked the doors. People gathered outside the church. It was a cold day, but they did not want to leave, they wanted to express their feelings and fears. From the east side of the church a voice started singing *Vår Gud han er så fast en borg*, *Ein feste Burg*. Others joined in. There was, a newspaper writes, hymn singing as never heard before. Tears filled many eyes. Fear,

annoyance and protest changed into consolation and confidence. “Er hilft uns frei aus aller Not” became concrete.

In Iceland there is an example of how the hymn has worked in an opposite way. In the 19th century Icelandic patriotism grew strong and there was a struggle for independence from Denmark. But this time *Ein feste Burg* did not unite the Icelandic people. It did not become a sign of God’s power but of the Danish authorities. And the hymn was rejected and hated. However, today *Ein feste Burg* is again on top of Luther’s hymns in Iceland. Especially the choral is important. It is used in connection with several hymns, among others a funeral hymn.

Culture and society

One task was to investigate to what extent Luther’s hymns have played a role, not only in connection with church, but in culture and society as a whole, for instance in art and literature and in classical compositions. To which extent do hymns belong to the repertoire of Swedish authors? Do the hymns occur in biographies, memoirs, diaries and letters?

Luther’s hymns do not belong to the common intertexts in Swedish literature, six of his hymns appear. More often Swedish authors refer to spiritual songs from the 19th century, not to the dogmatic type of hymns such as the Lutheran. *Ein feste Burg* is an exception. It is the most quoted hymn in all examined communicative and literary genres through the ages. This is not surprising. The hymn has been taught at school, it has been sung in services, in homes and at regimental prayers. It has been well known.

In the Swedish literature hymns are often quoted in connection with religious rite, a service or funeral, they are sung at work, especially descending and ascending in mines. Immigrants sing hymns when they remember old Sweden. Sometimes a hymn is not sung, only played by an instrument. A hymn can also describe a deep religious or existential feeling.

Luther’s hymns do to a certain extent belong to the literary tradition of Swedish authors, but they are no longer a part of the common knowledge of the Swedes - with an exception for *Ein feste Burg*, even if it is not known by young people. Hymns are less quoted towards the end of the 20th century than before, while the Bible is still often used as a source of quotations.

The role of *Ein feste Burg* is investigated in the research, in serious contexts but also in irony and sarcasm. The investigation also followed discussions and writings about hymns on Internet, where sometimes hate against Luther is shown. And also ideological irony. There is i.e. a fictitious description of how Finland has become a member of NATO. When the solemn ceremony at Helsinki airport is coming to an

end the enormous mass of people take off their hats and start singing *Ein feste Burg*. The ceremony reminds of the use of the hymn in Finland in political connections. The aim of this kind of investigation was to find out to what extent Luther's hymns belong to the repertoire of the Nordic people.

Music

Much effort is used in investigation of the music of Luther's hymns. Generally, traditional melodies were used in the Nordic countries, but also others. In Finland some folk melodies were sung to Luther's hymns in the 18th century. But usually Luther was respected. Choral books are a late phenomenon in the Nordic countries, except for Denmark. In Sweden and Finland the earliest hymn books with melodies were printed at the end of the 17th century. Instead there were handwritten choral collections. They show that Luther's melodies had a strong position, even if they did not always follow the models from Wittenberg.

One investigation of the music dealt with the question of Luther's hymns in classical compositions, in cantatas, symphonies, operas, oratorios and in Finnish films. Rather many musical compositions contain Luther's hymns – there is also a Luther opera with five hymns. Mainly two melodies are used, *Ein feste Burg* (028) and *Vom Himmel hoch* (033). In Finnish films *Ein feste Burg* occurs nine times and *Vom Himmel hoch* in eight films.

A cultural aspect in Iceland is to be mentioned. The Reformation was introduced in Iceland with great enthusiasm in the 16th century. All of Luther's hymns, except one, were translated and printed in hymn books. There is also a great number of old handwritten manuscripts in Iceland, many are copies of printed hymn books. But it is interesting to find that Icelandic women already in the 17th century were inspired by Luther to write hymns. Female hymn writers were rare in those days. But their hymns remained manuscripts and were not printed. In the Faeroe Islands Luther's hymns as late as in the 20th century inspired a reformation in the use of Faroese language.

Liturgy and teaching

The divine service on Sunday was above all a place where people met Luther's hymns. They spread information about essential points of the evangelical-Lutheran faith. The hymns played an important role in the services during the first 300 years after the Reformation, but later they were often replaced by other hymns. Today Luther's hymns are sung especially on Christmas and Pentecost, in Finland also on Reformation's day.

This also concerns Luther's hymns at school. In the Swedish hymnal of 1695 catechism hymns, especially *Dies sind die heiligen zehn Gebot* (001) and *Wir glauben all an einen Gott* (024) were important. In the 19th century the hymns lost their function, partly when school was separated from church and partly when

religious teaching became more independent. In Swedish schools Luther's hymns are since 1919 treated as historical material. Today they are hardly used, except for *Vom Himmel hoch* (033) and *Vom Himmel kam der Engel Schar* (039). The strongest position Luther's hymns have in Danish schools.

Bibliography

The investigation has listed over 1000 titles of Nordic books and articles containing research about Luther's hymns, of hymn books and liturgical books with Luther hymns. The material is found also on the net: www.locus-dei.dk.

Conclusion

The investigation has deepened and widened hymnological knowledge in many ways:

- 1) The informal discussions about Luther's hymns and about hymnological research and methods in interdisciplinary groups is a fruitful way of working.
- 2) The comparative perspective investigated differences and similarities in the Nordic countries. It shows how dependent translations, receptions and influences of hymns are of the cultural environment.
- 3) Interdisciplinary team work in hymnology gives an overall impression when researcher in theology, musicology, literature, sociology, education and history meet together. This can also lead to a methodological renewal.
- 4) The picture of Martin Luther was discussed from many points of view. His hymns have inspired hymn writing during centuries, but have they also slowed down the attempts to renew hymn singing? What kind of questions would Luther express in his hymns today? Ecumenical matters? Humanitarian questions? Environment? International solidarity? Hope for the future? What kind of music would he use?

In Luther's own days and later in history his hymns have had a great effect. An investigation of this kind does not give facts only about Luther's hymns in the Nordic countries in history and until today, during 500 years. On the whole it raises questions about the content, form and function of hymns. It shows that it will always be necessary to reflect history against present times - and why not hymn renaissances in modern time against their consequences in the future.