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**ECCE HOMO**

**Dialogue as a Theological Practice**

**I would like to share some personal experiences with you about life in the New Era of Communication and the need for developing human skills to cope with a rapidly changing world. I will also share some reflections about the theological turn in meeting with an inner awakening in human life.**

My reference is the secular Swedish society where the knowledge of religion is all but gone. Current research shows that forty percent of the Swedes get their contact with religion through media. Only seven percent are said to have direct access to religious institutions. But reduced knowledge of religion does not mean that Swedes are uninterested in spiritual matters, human values or ethics. The problem is the lack of a language and of meeting places for expressing spiritual matters.

I have a background in news journalism and life view journalism at the Public Service Television of Sweden. I started working as news journalist 30 years ago, and I was fascinated by the powerful communication of televised multidimensional moving images and sound touching the audience mentally as well as emotionally.

Since two decades we are reading, listening, playing and networking on the internet. For the last few years we have mainly used our mobile phones for all kinds of communication. Someone said that we don’t live with the media anymore, but *in* the media. We live a media life, which in many ways is challenging. Not least the fact that it enables us to develop from passive consumption of media to active publishing and distribution in the world-wide field of communication.

**Communication**

Thirty years ago, the late Swedish journalist and author Maurtiz Edström made a prophetic comment about his fear of unconscious behaviour in a society based on communication: *Those who can’t manage their inner communication knowing why they are doing this or that are a great danger to society. To meet yourself, your shadows and weaknesses is a prerequisite for acting in the wider field of communication. Without that ability, you risk driving everything on the wrong track, causing major damage.*

I don´t think I would have recognized this comment if I hadn´t been shaken by a life crisis myself. It happened suddenly while I was working as a news journalist. I got a message about my partner, who was also my colleague, and at that time he was covering the presidential election in the United States. It was a short message saying that he in the middle of the night had died an immediate death in a heart attack.

My mother-in-law was a pastor´s wife and she gave me spiritual advice: *Listen to your heart during grief and the questions that are raised inside your heart and let the questions be your guidance.*

Inner communication was a big challenge for me as a news journalist. There was such a contrast between the existential dimension of grief inside myself and the rational agenda of news journalism occupying my working life. I started to ask myself: What is the life view contained in news journalism? The human perspective seemed so flat and reduced to me who was wrestling with existential issues. News journalism was dominated by economic theories of human beings as *Homo Economicus.* We were perceived as selfish customers counting materialistic advantages for ourselves instead of being interested in life issues.

With a biblical paraphrase from the Psalms one can say that my spiritual journey started with the question: *What is* *mankind* ***in the media*** *that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?*

**Connection**

I am sure you have all heard of the visionary Canadian Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980). He was one of the first and most renowned communication researchers, and he is known for his statement: *The Medium is the Message*.

That is a remarkable observation! What he says is that it isn’t the content of the media that is the message, but its specific form, the fact that it is connecting us. He saw the media as an extension of our body, as if our central nervous system had been stretched out to cover all of humanity - while all humanity is merging into each of us. He predicted that the media development will have a huge impact on our collective perceptions and on society's way of organizing itself institutionally.

Marshall McLuhan was also convinced that this would contribute to human development. Sharing lives and destinies in the great field of communication would make it more difficult to speak in terms of us and them**.**

In a book called *The Medium and the Light*, published after Marshall McLuhan’s death, his son Eric McLuhan shows that his father's message in fact had deep spiritual roots. Marshall McLuhan was a professor of English literature with a deep knowledge of the Bible, the writings of the church fathers, and Catholic philosophy. He was an intellectual but not a believer.

One day he had decided to explore Christian faith seriously on its own terms, which according to him was prayer. He bent his knees in prayer daily for a couple of years asking God: *Show me!* And he was shown. Marshall McLuhan told his son:

*I was shown very suddenly. It didn’t happen in any expected way. It came instantly as immediate evidence… I never had any need for religion, any personal or emotional crisis. I simply wanted to know what was true and I was told…*

This profound experience had two consequences: he became a catholic, a believer, and he changed direction into media research. Marshall McLuhan experienced an almost religious meaning in today's media development. He saw a parallel between the deepest secret of Christian faith - the world being the Body of Christ - and the media development that binds together and enables meetings and interactions across the earth. For Marshall McLuhan the church is a matter of communication. But like the fish in the water, Christians are not aware of their element. At least – not yet!

**Dialogue**

In the mid-eighties, I left news journalism and joined the Evangelical Academy Sigtunastiftelsen to take part in a dialogue practice about life views and values in our society. This dialogue tradition in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Sweden is a hundred years old. It’s sometimes referred to as the Sigtuna heritage, after the Sigtuna Foundation (Sigtunastiftelsen), which was founded in 1917. It is a free foundation with close ties to the church, based on Christian Humanism with an interest in human life in a wide sense. It is known as a facilitator of open and respectful meetings between people of different views.

When I joined Sigtunastiftelsen I asked:

- What is the mission?

The answer was:

- The mission is: Never stop asking the question *What does it mean to be a human being?* Wherever this question is raised, we want to take part. That is the possibility for the church to have its say and defend the inner dimension of human beings.

The problem according to Christian Humanism is the inner poverty of modern man. The alienation from one’s inner life threatens life values and the sense of meaning in a serious way.

One of the most influential persons of the Sigtuna heritage was one of its directors, Olov Hartman (1906-82), a pastor and cultural personality. He wrote hymns, church dramas, articles etc. Unlike many Christians of the last century he didn’t view theology as “an ideological weapon”. For him, theology was adialogue tool**,** which he used as director of Sigtunastiftelsen for more than twenty years. He was guided by the words in the Gospel of John (19:5) *Ecce Homo*, *Behold the man,* pronounced by Pontius Pilate presenting Jesus as tortured, bound and crowned with thorns. Hartman practiced theology as a continuous dialogue with artists, filmmakers, architects, authors and musicians, regarding them as fellow humans. Meeting them as equals or, as he said, as cultural deaconsreporting from the outposts of human life where the situation is open and unprotected by social and personal backdrops.

**Inner Meetings**

My contribution to this cultural deaconry was inviting journalists and media workers, opinion makers and others to seminaries, workshops and retreats focusing on self-awareness and human values. We developed a form of non-confessional retreats which we still practice. These retreats are placed in Christian surroundings and focused on contemplation and sharing.

In a non-confessional retreat based on human equality, we are invited to an authentic participation as individuals with multiple perspectives, and

to refrain from dominating the conversation

to listen empathically to each other

to practice listening to ourselves

to share life experiences, feelings and thoughts without being interrupted or questioned

This dialogue helps us to develop an increased sensitivity, self-awareness and responsibility for one’s feelings and thoughts. This is of course an opportunity for personal development, but for the journalists taking part it was also an inspiration to develop their professional communication.

**Spiritual Growth**

What happened during the nineties was that news journalism in Sweden widened thematically with topics related to inner development in human life. The chief editor of the national newspaper Dagens Nyheter, Bengt Dennis, asked expressly his staff for a special focus on the inner life to *enlighten people about the Homo Interior*.

Many daily papers and Public service companies created special sections, for example *The Inside, Faith and Existence* (Dagens Nyheter), *Life and Soul* (Uppsala Nya Tidning), *Soul and Heart* (Svenska Dagbladet) etc. The life view journalism brought up themes like life stories, ethical dilemmas, psychological and spiritual knowledge and reports about social commitments, always exemplified by individuals and their individual stories.

I remember once we had a course for the editors of these special sections in the daily papers, a course called *The Meaning of life.*By chance, the Bishops’ Conference was held on the same premises at the same time. Opposite to us, across the narrow corridor, thirteen bishops were dealing with the development of the church, while we, the twenty journalists, discussed the communication of the meaning of life…

Traditionally the journalists would have asked the bishops for the answers about the meaning of life. But in the mid-nineties there was no need for adaptation to the demands of the religious communities anymore. The task was just to practise good journalism on life issues as committed seekers in a dialogue relation with the readers and the viewers.

A well-known Swedish theologian, specialized on media studies, Susanne Wigorts Yngvesson says:

“What’s important is not if a programme or an article is Christian or Muslim but if it concerns the meaning of life. We don’t seek a certain church, we are seeking the answers of the eternal questions. The religious interest in our society is basically not about religion as such but about ourselves.”

Media not only reflects new approaches, but it also creates values. I want to claim that through journalism on life issues an inner awakening was made visible and acknowledged in our society. In the midst of the secularization, a spiritual development was in progress, an inner search for human growth corresponding to a rapidly changing world.

**Church Response**

The most crucial question for me is the one of the spiritual response. In what way are the churches responding to the quest for spirituality among people today? Is there still a way of being church side by side with modern people?

I notice that sociologists talk about a theological turn in people's relation to

church's spaces and environments. It is not so much about what to believe (*fides quae*), according to them. Churches today are being perceived (*fides qua*) as places full of energy for contact with the inner dimensions of life.

Some of us have been inspired by a unique dialogue practice called *Kunst-Station St Peter* in Cologne founded by Jesuit father Friedhelm Mennekes. It takes place in what used to be an average church in the city centre, with very few people taking part in the services. The church was about to be closed, but thanks to the visionary Jesuit they decided to make it a cultural experiment. Kunst-Station St Peter is an inspiring place for dialogue between faith, liturgy, contemporary art and music.

*We understood that the theological turn in people's relation to church needs free and empty spaces today. Places where light, silence and emptiness invite us to a dialogue about the holy presence*, says Father Mennekes. *We emptied the room of everything except the altar, the cross and the Madonna.*

The Church of Sweden is often accused of being inexplicit and vague about faith. But I would rather say that it is practicing a dialogue approach in meeting with modern life. A century of dialogue tradition has influenced many church leaders and congregations, even if it is in a modest way.

Interior changes of the architecture of the Lutheran churches are interpreted as an expression of a more open and mutual approach. Candleholders were early examples of an invitation to individual devotion in chapels and churches. Entering a church and lighting a candle is today a widespread way of practicing – perhaps not prayer – but compassion.

Many churches provide an opportunity between services for silent meditation in the church halls. Empty rooms are filled with carpets and pallets under the sacred vaults inviting modern spiritual seekers into silence. Meditation is a bodily practice of spirituality that is important for many people today. When you are mentally stressed, meditation is a way of composing oneself and connecting your body, soul and spirit. Practiced in a church, it can be a possibility of experiencing the deep secret: being part of the body of Christ.

Sacred dance is also about meditation, self-expression and connection. It is a big movement in the Church of Sweden, often practised in empty churches. Sacred dancing and modern pilgrimages are examples of bodily activities aimed at spiritual growth.

The Dome of Lund has a well-developed cultural dialogue programme. They invite artists like the weaver Kerstin Jakobsson to make site-specific art in the church hall. Some years ago, she made a famous installation called *Signs in Dialogue* where she placed herself and her empty textile fabric in the choir of the dome for a few weeks, and she invited visitors to take part in her composition. The visitors were asked to draw personal life symbols, which she embroidered on the fabric.

She also took her installation to churches in the Philippines, South Africa and Brazil. Afterwards she summarized *Signs in dialogue* saying: *There are many different life stories contained in the signs, but what they have in common is the wish to confirm the spiritual presence in everyday life and promote the community of the world.*

**The Katarina Community**

The Katarina Parish in Stockholm has gone the whole way by addressing their main service directly to secularized people seeking God in new ways. The Sunday service in Katarina is today the best attended one of the whole Church of Sweden.

The vicar Olle Carlsson, who calls himself a sober alcoholic, wants to make the church a meeting place for spiritual seekers. He knows that many secularized people have spiritual experiences, but very few feel connected to the church or to Christianity. They want a meeting place and a language ​​for their spirituality. If other churches opened their doors as Katarina has done, more people would have access to vital spiritual sanctuaries, according to him.

People from all walks of life come to the church of Katarina, for example journalist, foreign correspondents, editors, authors, business people, poor people, mentally ill people… They all sit side by side in a crowded church year after year. There are of course critics saying that this congregation is not Christian. And perhaps it isn’t in the traditional sense – people are seekers of wellbeing, spiritual deepening, health and above all the spirit of community.

When the vicar Olle Carlsson first started ten years ago, the church was almost empty. There were about twenty people taking part in the services when he posed the question: *Do we have a problem?* The answer was obvious: *Yes, we have a problem!* Then he posed the next question: *Can the solution to our problem be beyond ourselves?* And the third question: *Are we prepared to receive help?*

His questions were about pastoral care in times of spiritual longing and empty churches: *What is the oblate for the hungry of today? Is it the doctrine of the church, or is it trust through a living community?*

At the heart of the Katarina community is the worship service at 11 am every Sunday. It is meditative with very little liturgy, but with great participation from everyone. People are invited to take part in many ways, like distributing the sacramental bread and wine, giving personal testimonies about their life and faith, singing and playing accompanied by traditional church choirs, praying and meditating in connection with the communion and so on.

I have spent some years documenting this congregation and the development of the pastoral care in this context. I was impressed by the close connection between the worship community and the compassion work. The pastoral care has developed from a more clerical paradigm into a community model where many people are involved.

The parish house has been rebuilt into a sort of community centre with a restaurant and a café, staffed by former drug addicts or people under rehabilitation from long diseases. Volunteers are trained and offer studies in the 12-step program, not only for anonymous alcoholics but also for, as the vicar says, *normally disordered* people. The program is called *Livsstegen* (Steps of Life) and is organized as self-help groups practicing listening and sharing focused on existential items, such as powerlessness, trust, imperfection and attendance. It is an interconnecting and mutually reinforcing model of pastoral care that has been developed in Katarina. They also offer a more clinical pastoral care by voluntary psychotherapists and traditional care by the pastors.

This open and dialogue-oriented church model is still a big challenge for the Church of Sweden. The development of Katarina church during the last ten years is a story of great tensions. It is probably not possible to carry through such a big change without various conflicts.

**Intercultural Tensions**

The most demanding challenge for the Church as well as the society of Sweden remains. I am thinking about the intercultural tensions in the wake of the refugee-crisis. Two years ago, Sweden received more than 160,000 refugees during the autumn. One of the very first activists in Stockholm was Katarina church and the big Sunni Muslim Mosque of Stockholm. The church and the mosque immediately coordinated their efforts, and from September to December a total of 4,000 transit refugees were given temporary shelter.

The refugees were on their way to Finland, having heard that that was a good and safe place for refugees. These people were mainly Shia Muslims, and they had their night shelter in these sanctuaries. The refugee work was organized by a thousand secular volunteers in the church as well as in the mosque, and it all went well and without conflicts.

This interreligious work got international attention (Washington Post and TV-channels etc), and several ministers of the Swedish government visited the mosque and the church in the middle of the night to see this happen. The vicar and the imam got several prices for their joint effort during the refugee crisis.

When the government of Sweden introduced a more restrictive refugee policy, the vicar and the imam decided to start a counselling agency for refugees called *Good Neighbours.* For the Islamic community, often being both isolated and persecuted, this Christian-Muslim cooperation is one of the most important activities today.

Albeit a visionary initiative, it is far from established in the Christian context. What’s lacking is perhaps the dialogue skills, for example a preparedness to go outside oneself and be truly curious and interested in others. It is no exaggeration to say that we are facing the risk of xenophobia in our country.

That is why *dialogue as a theological practice* is a more urgent task than ever before. We are challenged to develop our relational selves based on a connectivity that values differences and refrains from excluding, suppressing or annihilating others. Being human today is a struggle for love through spiritual growth.

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