On Earth as It is in Heaven: St. Hallvard’s Church and Abbey

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Introduction

In recent Norwegian church architecture, the sacred has been highlighted as an important quality, as can be seen in architectural church-building competitions. The church is likely to favor architecture that embodies the sacred, and architects follow up by incorporating the sacred as a theme in their competition proposals, and in the juries there is an evaluation of the qualities that can produce a sacred effect. The architecture critics are also pleased with the term ‘sacred’ in relation to the most successful churches. At the same time, there seems to be a wide range in the understanding of what the architectural sacred is, or can be, and there is surprisingly little discussion of the significance the building has in a liturgical context.1

Interest in the sacred, combined with the unclear expectations regarding qualities and meanings can be seen against the background of the development in church architecture in the previous century. Changes in liturgical and ecclesiastical practices meant that one had to think in a new way about the plan of the churches. In connection with this, there were also great changes in church design. Le Corbusier showed with his pilgrims’ church in Ronchamp, which was finished in 1955, that religious architecture was an interesting field for innovation. After this, many architects began to experiment with sacred forms, but this reformulation of church architecture was not always entirely successful. It could end in arbitrary improvisations and meaningless signs.2 Other architects were more skeptical about seeking new forms, and they thought that church projects were best taken care of by exclusively focusing on the functional response to the practice that architecture is supposed to

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provide. At the outer extreme, vulgar functionalism could lead to church-building governed by utilitarian needs, where the task of architecture is reduced to the practical planning of activities in a physically protected environment, and within a reasonable economic framework.

Many of the theologians who got involved in this discussion of church architecture understood the church building as first and foremost a place to “house a congregation gathered around an altar”: “The first purpose of building a church is a purely practical one; to provide a shelter for the liturgical assembly of a particular Christian community.” This means that the building gains sacred significance through its practical, instrumental and functional organization for the congregation and its liturgical practice, but beyond that, architecture does not play any role in the church service. “The building should be shaped by worship, and not worship by architecture.” This attitude could lead to a focus on plans and layout, while the formal or symbolic architectural expression of sanctity is given lower priority. Such attitudes can be a contributing factor to the increased interest in sacred qualities in Norwegian church-building in recent years. In general, there is reason to believe that the great revolution in church architecture has led to both a renewed interest in the architectural expression of sanctity and to confusion about which qualities can represent it.

I, myself, argue that the sacred quality in church-building is that which “is related to God.” I take my point of departure, then, in the sacred in architecture as a constructed treatment of the relationship between God and the world that is congruent with the treatment of the same relation in liturgical practice. I understand architecture, thus, as an integrated part of the liturgy; it simply is liturgy. Liturgical practice is about a divine presence, and correspondingly, the sacred in architecture is a treatment of God’s presence in the world. Like God’s transcendence, this presence should be understood dialectically. This means that it can be radicalized and modified in different ways (see pp. 455–457). In liturgical practice, the congregation around and mediation of God takes place through different means, such as words and song, music, wine and water.

Architecture is a medium with its own laws, which govern the representation of the relation between God and the world. The building is a concrete and physical material, which is usually to be constructed in a particular place. When architecture is congruent with the liturgical acts, it is so usually through

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