

A New Face at the Section of Church History

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“Der er ingen bjerge i Danmark.” During the first classroom meeting of my masters’ course at the Faculty of Theology last September, two days after I had arrived in Copenhagen, the obvious reality dawned on me: there are no mountains in Denmark! I was introducing the programme of the course on Augustine and Augustinianisms in the Middle Ages. And while I was musing about the shifts in the Church Father’s teachings on grace and free will, I pointed out that in the weeks to follow we would be discussing where, when, and to which extent there was a “watershed” in Augustine’s thought. When one student was visibly puzzled by this figure of speech, I realized that this was not a language problem. Rather, his irritation made good sense, because there really are no mountains in Denmark. There is, however, the sea where all water flows together.

Since then, this difference between where I am coming from and where I am sitting right now has become a part of my habitual knowledge. Every week,

that knowledge is being actualized when I travel from Munich to Copenhagen and from Amager back to Bavaria, leaving the sea or, while on my way north, the mountains behind me. It was in Munich where I had my last academic employment as a postdoctoral lecturer in Church History until August 2018. From 2008 until 2016, I was a doctoral student and, subsequently, a postdoctoral lecturer in Church History at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Basel. And again before that I studied theology and philosophy at the Humboldt Universität of Berlin, at different Protestant and Catholic universities in Rome, and at the University of Münster. Thus, I feel that, academically speaking, the sea off the shores of Copenhagen – where all water flows together – is a fitting allegory for my past movements and current arrival.

Obviously, one important aspect of that arrival is to learn Danish properly, something that I am sure will be much easier once I will have moved from Munich to Copenhagen permanently. For the time being, however, I am still a complete beginner in Danish and thus am counting on your patience while you read about my work below.

Theology and science in the late Middle Ages

Church History offers an extraordinarily broad (and sometimes overwhelming) spectrum of possible research interests to pursue. And while it is of course all but impossible to explain exactly why any Church historian picks a given topic, it is safe to say that my choice, as a PhD student, of medieval theology has allowed me to continue to engage in interdisciplinary and ecumenical exchange. Therefore, maybe, there was a biographical factor involved. But more than being driven by my own biography, I felt and still feel attracted to the late medieval history of theology because it stirs my curiosity. I do not exaggerate by saying that until now we barely know the lesser part of the theology produced between 1200 and 1500, and anybody who has ever spent some days in a manuscript reading room over unedited theological texts from the late Middle Ages, will probably confirm this claim.

Put differently, there still is a lot of basic research to do, before we can better assess and appreciate the rich plurality of late medieval theology. Peter Auriol (c. 1280-1322), the author who stood at the center of my dissertation project, in some aspects, is a good example for that plurality. While traditionally Auriol was seen squeezed, as it were, between such towering figures as Duns Scotus (d. 1308) and William of Ockham (d. 1348), more recent research has portrayed him as an original and remarkably independent figure. My book *Theologie und Wissenschaft bei Petrus Aureoli* (Leiden 2015) confirms and emphasizes this perspective on Auriol. By putting his accounts of

academic theology and science in institutional and intellectual context, I argue that he advanced not only a new but also a fundamentally alternative explanation of theology's place at the medieval university.

Auriol argued for instance that theologians can never prove the truths of faith on the basis of *necessary* reasons and thus in a strictly scientific way; rather, they explain these truths with the help of only *probable* arguments. Whereas scientists often use *clear and distinct* concepts, theologians rather employ *fuzzy and approximative* ones (such as 'God', to name the most complicated case). And while science mostly strives for *the* best argument, theology may include a multitude of explanations. From points like these, Auriol reaches highly fascinating conclusions about theology and science but also about theology and religious faith.

At first sight, Auriol seems to be weakening the scientific rigour of theology. However, he discovered similar forms of rationality in other disciplines as well. The result, therefore, is a refined and dynamic concept of science, which includes a certain fuzziness and thus may seem almost modern (if not outright postmodern). At some point in my academic career, I would like to contribute to current debates on this point in detail, but for the time being it may be even more important to make a historical point. What we see in the late medieval debates on theology and science is a great plurality of approaches and results. Furthermore and perhaps surprisingly, many of these late medieval accounts of theology are far from being simply dominated by philosophy or, in a medieval sense, by science.

Late antique cities in motion

By studying street processions in late antique cities, that is, in cities throughout the Mediterranean from the fourth to the sixth centuries, for my second book, I am of course strategically pursuing a somewhat broad profile as a researcher. However, the decision to switch periods, so to speak, and to concentrate on history of religion and culture rather than continuing to study intellectual history also reflects the great potentialities of Church History as a discipline mentioned above. Not least the collaboration with my students on topics from all periods of the history of Christianity never failed and never fails to stimulate my curiosity for everything that my discipline has to offer.

More to the point, this new project also developed out of a dissatisfaction with some existent accounts of late antique cities. Traditional research described late antique urban spaces, which were the infrastructural but also the cultural and social contexts of Early Christianity, on the basis of evidence that to some extent may be characterised as static. In this traditional perspective, it is streets, squares, monuments, buildings etc. that constitute urban spaces, in which then the private, civic, and religious life of late ancient cities is supposed to have taken place. Complementary to this approach, but also correcting it, recent research has begun to stress that any urban space, including that of late antique cities, is constituted, changed, and negotiated by different kinds of movement and mobility. Traffic and commercial movement, for instance, had an impact on late antique cities to no lesser extent than it has on our contemporary urban spaces.

In contrast to our times, however, in late antiquity the movement of people through the streets in procession played an important role in the constitution and negotiation of urban space, both in physical reality and in imagination. So it transpires, to some extent, from architecture, imagery, and urbanistic dispositions such as porticoed streets or cemetery basilicas specifically designed for moving around the venerated graves. Yet, the material sources reflect only a small part of the late antique culture of street processions, while a much greater part is witnessed by literary sources. From these it becomes clear that in late antique culture, street processions were so much part of daily urban normality that they are often recorded only in scattered remarks. Nevertheless, taken all together, the evidence both in material and in literary sources provides us with a rich and fascinating account of how street processions formed and negotiated urban spaces in late antiquity, and how they played a role in the transformation of ‘ancient’ into Christian spaces.

Future perspectives

In order not to overload this present introduction, I would like to postpone any further discussion of late antique street processions to future issues of *TEOL-information*. That there will be many occasions for this, seems to me beyond any doubt. For I cannot think of a better place to pursue both my research focuses than the section of Church History at the Faculty of Theology. This is so, first because the research done at the section represents the whole breadth of Church History, and thus my projects both on

late medieval theology and on late antique street processions have found a new home, so to speak, that accommodates them very well. But I also believe that the collegial and inspirational atmosphere at the section and at the faculty more generally will allow me to continue working on both these projects. Hence, I am convinced that all water coming from the different areas of my work will indeed flow together here in Copenhagen.

Movement, however, also changes things. That holds true not only for street processions but also for my moving from Munich to Copenhagen. Therefore, I am

looking very much forward to new projects and new research topics that will widen my horizon, challenge my thinking, and change my perspectives. The *Centre for Privacy Studies* at the Faculty of Theology, of which I feel honoured to be an affiliated member, is a very important part of this. Already now, after less than one semester, I am realizing that the discussion with my colleagues at PRIVACY, at the section of Church History, and at the faculty of Theology are beginning to change my thinking and my work. I am sure that they will, not before long, lead me into new directions.