

# KIRCHENTAGS, FESTIVALS, CONVENTIONS – RELIGIOUS HAPPENINGS AS PLACES FOR THE FORMATION OF FAITH

## I RELIGIOUS HAPPENINGS AS FORMATIVE EVENTS

If we ask about places for the formation of faith, then we need to develop a topography of religious pedagogy. Happenings, Events, Festivals, Conventions or *Kirchentags* are celebrations, exceptional situations in the church as in the everyday.<sup>1</sup> They are *Heterotopes*<sup>2</sup> – places where the other, the unusual, the exceptional appears. Such places are stages to represent what is strange to us and keeps us alive. They are non-everyday places which have their effect as such – even and precisely in the everyday. Thereby it is important to recognize that this effect does not rest on taking the unusual over into the usual, the extraordinary into the ordinary, but only as the other can have an impact on the everyday. One might speak of a hidden, of a subterranean, sometimes even a supernatural effect.

This holds especially true for processes of formation which are associated with such happenings. For on the one hand it is right to say: The

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. J. KUNSTMANN, Fest/Feiern/Event, in *Handbuch Religion und Populäre Kultur*, ed. K. Fechtner et al. (Stuttgart 2005), 52–62.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. M. FOUCAULT, Andere Räume, in *Aisthesis. Wahrnehmung heute oder Perspektiven einer anderen Ästhetik*, ed. K. Barck et al. (Leipzig 1990), 39: »There are also – and that no doubt in every culture, every civilization – real places, effective places which are written into the structure of the society, as it were counter-placements, counter-camps, actually realized utopias, in which the real places within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested and overturned, so to say places outside all places although they can in fact be located. Because these places are quite *other* than all the places which they reflect or of which they speak I call them the *heterotopias* in contrast to the utopias.«

feast is something different from everyday. So the feast also has nothing to do with pedagogy. At a feast there is nothing to learn but everything to celebrate. Feasts are celebrated. They are »interruptions of life«. <sup>3</sup> If the feast is made didactic it is robbed of its essential character.

Yet the converse is true too: at feasts formation happens. In the aftermath of the feast, in a feast's echo, resonance and reflection, formative processes living from the resources of the feast are set in motion.

This does not only happen afterwards but can occur during the feast itself if it is understood as a performance. For performance is a process in which and insofar as action occurs with reflective moments. So a performance with its action can work as a formative process. This is a matter of the fundamental difference between doing and performing: »The difference between doing and performing, according to this way of thinking, would seem to lie not in the frame of theatre versus real life but in an attitude – we may do actions unthinkingly, but when we think about them, this introduces a consciousness that gives them the quality of performance.« <sup>4</sup> So from the formational perspective religious happenings are not meant »to do religion, but to perform religion«. The recognition of religion as performance – and with that the realization of the formational task of religion, especially Christianity which is essentially »thinking religion« <sup>5</sup> – can itself arise from the process, but it can also be furthered by accompanying measures or through the structure of a happening. In this respect *Kirchentags* offer many possibilities which also correspond to the various dimensions of formation.

My analysis in what follows will be based on the German protestant *Kirchentag* because it represents the largest event of its kind in Europe and it combines in complex ways all that can be called the formative dimensions of religious happenings. <sup>6</sup> Even if smaller or monocultural happenings do not have the same breadth of formation to offer, they are still

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. D. RÖSSLER, Unterbrechungen des Lebens. Zur Theorie des Festes bei Schleiermacher, in *In der Schar derer, die da feiern. Feste als Gegenstand praktisch-theologischer Reflexion*, ed. P. Cornehl / M. Dutzmann / A. Strauch (Göttingen 1993), 33–40.

<sup>4</sup> M. CARLSON, *Performance. A Critical Introduction* (London 1996), 5.

<sup>5</sup> C. H. RATSCHOW, Das Christentum als denkende Religion, in *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie* 5, 1963, 16–33.

also to be recognized as formative events. That applies, for instance, to the five *Christival* Congresses of 1976 in Essen, 1988 in Nuremberg, 1996 in Dresden, 2002 in Kassel and 2008 in Bremen, which always drew between about 15,000 and 30,000 long-term participants. The sixth *Christival* is due to be in 2016 at a place yet to be named. The *Christliche Begegnungstage* (Christian Encounter Meetings) can also be described as formational events; they have gathered numerous protestant Christians from central Europe every three years since 1991. In 2011 they were integrated in the Dresden *Kirchentag* and will take place again in Wrocław (Poland) in 2016. Formation occurs here above all through forms of meeting. Finally the *European Methodist Festival* must also be mentioned. It was first held on the occasion of John Wesley's 300<sup>th</sup> birthday in Potsdam/Berlin, then 2007 in Bratislava and will run again from 1<sup>st</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> August 2012 in Cracau (Poland).

## 2 ENTHUSIASM AND FAITH FORMATION

»Over 100,000 people participated and there were times where it seemed the whole city had become a stage for the church's activities and stunts and spectacles. It seemed like a foreshadowing of what is to come and also an echo of festivals in Biblical times where faith, feasting and foreshadowing the Kingdom played significant roles.«

That was the feedback from the Australian blogger Andrew Jones, travelling through the world with a 4x4 truck, on the 33<sup>rd</sup> German protestant *Kirchentag* in Dresden from 1<sup>st</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> June 2011.

The enthusiasm that shows through here is in many respects a formative event. So the question can no longer be whether religious happenings are a place for formation of faith, but only how far they are an event of faith formation.

In Jones' words about the *Kirchentag* we hear echoes of three dimensions of formation particularly anchored in pop culture:

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. P. BUBMANN, *Der Kirchentag als Bildungsangebot*, in *Neues Gemeindepädagogisches Kompendium*, ed. G. Adam / R. Lachmann (Göttingen 2008), 413–424.

1. Happenings are mass events. As such they are specific forms of community- building which as regular institutions first became possible with the railway in the nineteenth century and since then have spread world-wide. The *Kirchentag* movement<sup>7</sup> in Germany and the *Katholikentags*<sup>8</sup> («Catholic Assemblies») were initiated in the middle of the nineteenth century, both in the same month in 1848. They developed into open demonstrations which were indeed designed to cultivate religion but their implicit (and later also explicit) political effects were also always noticeable.
2. As mass gatherings happenings are public events. This public character always has political effects, which is why particularly such occasions as involved an explicit claim to formation were always eyed with suspicion from the side of the state in the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. This also applies in a weaker form to the German *Katholikentags* in the nineteenth century under largely protestant ruling governments.
3. As public mass occurrences, religious happenings, events, *Kirchentags* etc are also phenomena of the pop culture, whose beginnings can also be located in the middle of the nineteenth century,<sup>9</sup> but which was given considerable further impetus with the new media and pop music in the twentieth century.
4. *Kirchentags* combine religious roots from the past with prophetic visions of life, in that they claim to speak to the times: faith, feasting and foreshadowing. With this they span a dramatic arch embracing the respective present in a curve from biblical times through contemporary questions to future challenges. One could call *Kirchentags* a contemporary way of shaping and experiencing immediate expectation, *parousia*.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. W. KREFT, *Die Kirchentage von 1848-1872* (Frankfurt/Main 1994); also D. BORMUTH, *Die Deutschen Evangelischen Kirchentage in der Weimarer Republik* (Stuttgart 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. H. HÜRTE, *Spiegel der Kirche - Spiegel der Gesellschaft? Katholikentage im Wandel der Welt* (Paderborn 1998); also U. VON HEHL / F. KRONENBERG (ed.), *Zeitzeichen. 150 Jahre Deutsche Katholikentage 1848-1998* (Paderborn 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. H.-O. HÜGEL (ed.), *Handbuch Populäre Kultur* (Stuttgart/Weimar 2003).

### 3 THE KIRCHENTAG AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The *Kirchentag* as a place of formation of faith has altered in the course of its history in way which show parallels to the most important contemporary pedagogical streams. A brief sketch of its history since the Second World War can therefore be helpful.<sup>10</sup>

The present-day *Kirchentag* was proclaimed as a »permanent institution« on 31 July 1949 in Hanover by the later West German president Gustav Heinemann (1899–1976). Its founder and first president was the Pomeranian landowner and lawyer Reinold von Thadden-Trieglaff (1891–1976) who was also very active in the ecumenical movement. He gave the *Kirchentag* its permanent office in Fulda and associated it with the following aims:

1. The *Kirchentag* will strengthen and equip laypeople on the frontier between church and world and so as bearers of mission.
2. The *Kirchentag* represents a place of meeting for all of German Protestantism and will offer experience of the world-wide oikumene.
3. The *Kirchentag* will continue the inheritance of the »Confessing Church« in the post-war democratic and pluralist society.
4. The *Kirchentag* understands itself, finally, as an instrument of church reform.

From 1949 to 1961 the *Kirchentag* is coloured by the question of German division and presents itself to the world to which it is attempting to give hope and answer as more or less united. Its Berlin motto »We are still brothers« (1951) expresses that time's feeling of belonging together, whose high point was the closing assembly in Leipzig in 1954 with 650,000 participating. After the building of the Wall in 1961 it loses its pan-German bracketing function. With the Dortmund motto »Living with conflict« (1963) the pluralist society of West Germany with its difficulties

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<sup>10</sup> On the history of the *Kirchentag* since 1945 cf. R. RUNGE / C. KRAUSE (ed.), *Zeitansage. 40 Jahre Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag* (Stuttgart 1989); H. SCHROETER, *Kirchentag als vorläufige Kirche. Der Kirchentag als eine besondere Gestalt des Christseins zwischen Kirche und Welt* (Stuttgart 1993); R. RUNGE / M. KÄBMANN (ed.), *Kirche in Bewegung. 50 Jahre Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag* (Gütersloh 1999); R. RUNGE / E. UEBERSCHÄR (ed.), *Fest des Glaubens – Forum der Welt. 60 Jahre Deutscher Evangelischer Kirchentag* (Gütersloh 2009).

stands conspicuously in the centre of interest, Church reform comes on the agenda. The organizational style of the *Kirchentag* changes: fewer lectures – more debate. Thus it becomes a form of Protestantism that no longer stands over against the world but instead has a share in its problems. Since Dusseldorf in 1973, numerically its low point with only 7,500 long-term participants, the *Kirchentag* has massively changed, especially through its newly instituted options of participation with the »Market of Possibilities« and other communicative events in which so-called co-workers can present and communicate their life and faith. Following Hamburg in 1981 the *Kirchentag* becomes an important multiplying factor for the peace movement in West Germany as well as for the ecumenical conciliar process.

In East Germany<sup>11</sup> after 1961 regional *Kirchentags* with a stronger conference character develop on various levels. A high point here were the seven *Kirchentags* for the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther in 1983. In making a free space available for debate the *Kirchentags* in East Germany were significant building-blocks on the way to the fall of the Wall in 1989.

The pan-German function of the *Kirchentag* plays a role again after reunification, even if it is not as spectacularly noticeable as in the 1950s. From the 1990s the *Kirchentags* are marked by conspicuous plurality which is many ways open to the charge of arbitrariness. This charge, however, can only be made from a position which tries to preserve an overview and correspondingly cannot let itself be swept up in the immediate flow of events. The cultural dimension becomes ever more apparent from the 1990s. The *Kirchentag* works with the means of contemporary pop culture. It becomes an event. It presents the form of a potential church, a church whose forms of belonging have a different aggregate state from those of the parish. This applies both to the spatial and the temporal format of the *Kirchentag*.

With the ecumenical *Kirchentags* of 2003 in Berlin and 2010 in Munich, organized by the presidium of the German Protestant *Kirchentag* together with the Central Committee of German Catholics which is re-

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. O. SCHRÖDER / H.-D. PETER (ed.), *Vertrauen wagen. Evangelischer Kirchentag in der DDR* (Berlin 1993).

sponsible for the *Katholikentag*, there opened a new dimension of its history and shape in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This will continue and the scale of its long-term tasks and influence on formation cannot be highly enough estimated.

#### 4 STRUCTURES OF THE KIRCHENTAG AS A PLACE OF FORMATION

As a registered association the *Kirchentag* is independent of the church. Since 1959 it has been taking place in the German Federal Republic every two years for five days in a series of exhibition cities. Its three pillars, biblical and theological work, social and political responsibility and liturgical and pastoral experience, are reflected in the broad structure of the days of events. While the Bible studies still today open the day without any competing items, the social problems are discussed in lectures and debates until the early evening. The evenings are kept for cultural and liturgical events.

From the very beginning the *Kirchentag* was described as a »lay movement« distinguished from the clerical and parochial shape of the church and based on freedom. Its invitation goes to »the unknown«, as its founders emphasized time and again. What »lay« means cannot be completely defined in Protestantism, differently from Catholicism. It is a matter here of a concept which by its very imprecision permits many people there to feel themselves addressed, regarded and accepted. The concept of »lay« is a counter-concept marking the difference from »them up there« and precisely by this populism creates space for a formation which does not prescribe but liberates. In the 1950s laypeople in the ecumenical movement were chiefly seen as being on the frontier between church and world and so as at the place where »worship of God in the world of everyday«<sup>12</sup> – and with it the very being of the church – was decisively formed. To equip these laypeople is the primary programmatic task of the *Kirchentag*.

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<sup>12</sup> E. KÄSEMANN, *Worship in Everyday Life: A note on Romans 12*, in Idem, *New Testament Questions of Today* (Philadelphia 1969), 183–195.

From the beginning its character as a mass gathering was both planned and controversial. Yet it is only as a mass happening that it becomes a media event and so constitutes a significant public manifestation of the church in Protestantism. *Kirchentag* in this form exists only in the folk church typical of Germany because it brings its unused potential of volunteers to bear.

In the 1960s the *Kirchentag* is also called a »forum of Protestantism« and an »evangelical word for the times«, which expresses its protestant freedom and advances the principle of controversial debate as a means of resolving problems. After the middle of the 1970s the *Kirchentag* with its structures of participation again becomes popular enough to attract some 100,000 long-term visitors every two years beginning from 1981, half of whom are first time visitors. At the same time the number of active co-workers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century amounts to about half of all *Kirchentag* visitors. With that the *Kirchentag* has advanced to be one of the most important forms of experiential and experienced church – mostly with thoroughly positive results and associations. Those who know their home church as a minority find themselves at the *Kirchentag* in a majority.

Finally, the description of the *Kirchentag* as protestant pilgrimage expresses its experiential quality for the participants. In this sense it can also be described as a journey of formation. The strength of the *Kirchentag* consists in the fact that through experience it creates facts which theological teaching can at most re-view in retrospective reflection.

In Schleiermacher's sense the *Kirchentag* is more presentational than effective action, even if many expect effective action from it. Without this expectation the *Kirchentag* would also no longer be alive. What the *Kirchentag* is cannot be precisely described in spite of the many attempts that have been made. Yet this imprecision gives many visitors the chance to take part, to mix in and present themselves. No-one knows what the *Kirchentag* is, but they all join in. It would shake the *Kirchentag's* protestant self-understanding if this liberty of presentational participation were to be curtailed. The development of its structures towards ever more forms of co-determination and participation is thus consistent, even if it makes the *Kirchentag* event more confusing for outsiders and more prolonged for insiders. This applies as much to choosing the *Kirchentag* poster as to the autonomy of forum leaderships. There is no way round



this plurality. It is typically protestant and in the *Kirchentag* it finds public impact and ever new – disappointing or exciting – forms.

## 5 FORMATIVE DIMENSIONS OF THE KIRCHENTAG

Thus the *Kirchentag* as a »language school of faith«<sup>13</sup> excellently combines the following dimensions of formation:

1. Self-formation. The incredible number of around 3,000 events during a *Kirchentag* demands from participants a high degree of ability to choose and decide, combined with a great tolerance of pain, which is compensated for by the experience of a mass atmosphere which thus far has always clearly distanced itself from totalitarian mass phenomena.
2. Formation of trust. The *Kirchentag* experience first of all effects fiducia (trust) upon which cognitio (knowledge of faith) can grow. The participants are taken seriously as the subjects of their own formation, which takes shape particularly for the numerous participants in the market of possibilities, the many cultural groups (music – theatre – cabaret) and those involved in various *Kirchentag* options (service workshop – church music – many thousands playing wind instruments etc.).
3. Community formation. *Kirchentags* enable people who are often in a minority situation at home to have a majority experience. They do this in a large city which is often deeply marked by secularization – a mark which is transformed for the duration of a *Kirchentag*. It is understandable that this does not please everybody, for *Kirchentags* make the boundary between private and public fluid. (See on this for instance the commentaries in the German newspaper taz on the Dresden *Kirchentag* by Wiglaf Droste, who is reckoned to be a biting cabarettist. These were supposed to be clever but their propagation of prejudices in a style overstepping the limits of good taste demonstrated a high

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<sup>13</sup> ERNST LANGE minted this concept, which MARGOT KÄBMANN applies to the *Kirchentag*: Kirche in der Zukunft – Impulse aus der Kirchentagsarbeit, in *Deutsches Pfarrerberblatt* 98, 1998, 657.

degree of incompetence nourished by fear of religious encroachments.) Community formation thus always has an exclusive aspect.

4. Aesthetic formation. The mostly younger participants appreciate the *Kirchentag* above all as a cultural event. Since the *Kirchentag* culture is, however, combined with an offer of formation, learning happens here differently from the visitors' everyday school or work.
5. Political formation. With its platform occasions, forums, lecture series, keynote addresses, theme halls etc. the *Kirchentag* puts many people active in politics live on stage. Here not only the prominent (federal president, federal chancellor, federal and state ministers etc.) are important, but also those who are brought in to enable a critical dialogue.
6. Theological formation. With its Bible studies and many innovative theological concentrations (feminist base faculty - Bible centre - working group of Jews and Christians - Christian-Muslim dialogue - halls of theology etc.) the *Kirchentag* makes a contribution which should not be underestimated to theological and also religious-political formation for non-theologians.

The *Kirchentag* is a form of church that works with the most important medium of pop culture: *Kirchentag* is good *Unterhaltung*<sup>14</sup> in the threefold sense of the German word. The *Kirchentag* nourishes by supplying maintenance (*Unterhalt*). The *Kirchentag* lets people come to talk with each other face to face and so supports conversation (*Unterhaltung*) among equals. Finally the *Kirchentag* is simply enjoyable and so enthruses people by entertainment (also: *Unterhaltung*). All three of these dimensions are necessary for *Kirchentags* to remain religiously sensitive<sup>15</sup> places for the formation of faith in the future.

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. H. SCHROETER-WITTKE, Art. *Unterhaltung*, in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 34, 2002, 397-403.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. G. GUTTENBERGER / H. SCHROETER-WITTKE (ed.), *Religionssensible Schulkultur* (Jena 2011).