Performance
Religion and Spirituality

The Emergence of Pop-Masses: How Pop-Cultural Aesthetics Shape Contemporary Norwegian Worship

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ABSTRACT Since 2017, the Church of Norway has introduced new theatrical strategies and embraced spectacular aesthetics in its masses. Introduced initially through "carnival services," these practices have since expanded into what I have termed "pop-masses", which incorporate elements from popular culture to create events blending sacred and secular themes. Through case studies of *Harry Potter*-masses and *Les Misérables*-mass, this article explores how these liturgical innovations challenge traditional minimalist aesthetics in Norwegian Lutheranism and foster new modes of theological engagement.

Beginning with carnival services, I will examine how these new pop-masses have become significant events in Lutheran congregations in Norway's largest cities: Oslo and Bergen. Through this analysis, I aim to shed light on the development of a new dramaturgical approach within the Norwegian Church that integrates popular aesthetics into religious rituals.

KEYWORDS pop-masses; contemporary worship; Church of Norway; carnival services; pop culture

Until the formal secularization of Norway in 2012, the Church of Norway (Den Norske Kirke), a Lutheran denomination, functioned as the official state church. Even though Norwegian culture is still embedded in affiliation with the Church of Norway, the formal secularization has led to a continued decline in Church membership. This development has increased the pressure on the Church to present itself as "modern" and relevant to contemporary society, an ambition that now plays a central role in shaping its religious services.

Traditionally, worship services within the Church of Norway have been a relatively fixed liturgical order centered on Word and Sacrament: scripture readings, preaching, prayers, hymns, and the celebration of baptism and Holy Communion. These services have had a minimalistic aesthetic, emphasizing theological clarity and a formal, structured ritual sequence.

With declining membership, the Church has implemented themed worship services such as "carnival services" to make worship more joyful and inclusive, particularly for children and families (Den Norske Kirke 2024a). During carnival services, both ministries and congregants dress up as superheroes, clowns, princesses, or in other family-friendly costumes, creating a playful atmosphere.

Over the last decade, the Church of Norway has continued to move beyond its inherited liturgical form, implementing popular culture in its services. The result is what I have termed "pop-masses": hybrid liturgies that intentionally blur the boundaries between entertainment and sacred rites (Schipper 2024). Rather than treating popular culture as something external to worship, these services merge the two modes into a shared ritual frame.

In 2017, the first clearly identifiable pop-mass was reported in Oslo, when the priest Sunniva Gylver extended an invitation to the Potter-påske (Potter-easter) event at Fagerborg Church (Gudvangen 2017; Kvalsund 2017). The event lasted three days and featured activities such as potion-making workshops, wand crafting, Quidditch matches, spell classes, and wizard chess (Gudvangen 2017). The event concluded with a "*Harry Potter*-mass," a church service in which themes from the Harry Potter universe were integral to the liturgy. Since then, the *Potter*-easter has become a regular part of the Easter celebrations at Fagerborg (Den Norske Kirke 2024b; Gylver 2025).

In March 2023, St. Jakob Church in Bergen hosted a worship service fusing liturgy with Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables* (1862) and its adaptations to stage musical (1980) and film (2012). Beginning in January, the church promoted the event as a "different kind of service," featuring the "popular book, musical, and film adaptation" (St. Jakob 2023). During the service, traditional hymns were replaced with songs from the *Les Misérables* musical, and the church interior was decorated to resemble the stage production's and film's scenography: the altar was barricaded, and French flags were suspended from the ceiling.

These pop-masses signal a new dramaturgical experimentation within the Church of Norway, where the relationship between *theological aesthetics* and *aesthetic theology,* as defined by Dorte Jørgensen, is explored. In this context, the pop-masses exemplify how these two aesthetic orientations become intertwined in practice. While *theological aesthetics* concerns how religious aesthetic practices and worship seek to explore and express the divine, *aesthetic theology*, by contrast, investigates how the nature of art itself possesses creative and transformative potential, enabling experiences of the metaphysical or the transcendent, often beyond sensory perception (Jørgensen 2014).

In this article, I trace the emergence of pop-masses, arguing that the Norwegian "carnival service" was the starting point for theological reflection on the interplay between theological aesthetics and aesthetic theology. To underscore this interplay, I use the terms *resonance* and *wonder*, as defined by Stephen Greenblatt. He defines *resonance,* in relation to historical artifacts, as the capacity of an object to extend beyond its formal boundaries, evoking the complex cultural, historical, and social forces from which it emerged (1990, 19-20). Building on this, the experience of wonder is characterized by an intense, almost enchanted, focus on the object itself. Wonder, in this sense, is associated with the aesthetic impact of an artifact, or a mass, and its ability to provoke admiration, surprise, and a sense of the marvelous (Greenblatt 1990, 19). In the context of religious services, resonance is a capacity to signify theological meaning, and biblical myth as a form of historical presence. Wonder, in this context, will be understood as the suggestive effect of theological aesthetic. Thus, providing an intense feeling of connection to the liturgy, which I argue is crucial for the potential of aesthetic theology.

By applying these terms, I will seek insight into how the new theological aesthetics convey theological understanding. Furthermore, I seek to understand how new theological aesthetics incorporate pop culture to resonate with a broader audience, not only to gain popularity but also to evoke a deeper understanding of the complex theology. This exploration also resonates with broader currents in contemporary Norwegian Lutheran theology, where a phenomenological approach is centered (Veiteberg 2006), which is the premise of the exploitation that led to the development of pop-masses.

Methodology

Over the past ten years, I have conducted observations of a range of church services in Oslo and Bergen. My theoretical approach to the services, and to religion over all, is based on what scholar of religion Benjamin Schewel describes as a *transsecular narrative*, which aims to move beyond the dichotomy of religion and modernity by demonstrating that modernity does not cause religions' marginalization and decline, but rather their transformation (Schewel 2020, 4). With this theoretical starting point, my methodology is based on a "hermeneutic of suspicion," as described by scholar of religion Craig Martin:

> [Hermeneutics of suspicion] invites us to approach the subject matter with skepticism. Rather than take insiders' views on religion at face value, we will ask critical questions about how insiders can use elements of religious culture to accomplish a number of social goals, such as ensuring social cohesion or authorizing moral norms. (Martin 2017, xix)

In this research, I have participated in St. Jakob between August 2022 and July 2024. Here, the goal has been to map church activities, especially what I have termed "pop-masses." Among the most notable pop-masses in this period are: *Les Misérables* (March 5, 2023), *Harry Potter* (May 05, 2023), *The Greatest Showman* (October 27, 2024), *The Lion King* (June 11, 2022), and *The Prince of Egypt* (April 14, 2024). I have observed the above-mentioned *Harry Potter*-mass in Fagerborg twice, on March 03, 2023, and March 25, 2024. Here, I have not engaged in further participation except for the masses and a conversation with the priest Sunniva Gylver about her theological approaches, March 25, 2024.

Each service, in both St. Jakob and Fagerborg, has been approached through the lens of

performance analysis, whereby the service is understood as an ephemeral and aesthetic sequence of actions that can only be experienced in the present moment. When comparing pop-masses to carnival services, a liturgical form that emerged approximately ten years earlier (Engh 2004), several similarities become evident. However, there are also notable differences, particularly in how pop-masses employ a new theological aesthetic to emphasize aesthetic theology. In this regard, the pop-masses appear to have a more comprehensive and intentional focus than the earlier carnival services. To better understand this development, I contextualize these services by examining a change in Norwegian theological publications, as well as commentary and reviews published in Norwegian newspapers.

Theological Aesthetics - Church of Norway

The Church of Norway is traditionally characterized by minimalist aesthetics and conservative liturgical practices, emphasizing contextualized biblical readings, communion, and psalmody. Within this framework, theological aesthetics is conceived as a restrained exaltation of beauty in theological terms, addressing questions of divine essence through perception, art, and liturgical engagement (Jørgensen 2014, 586).

The traditional liturgy's minimalist aesthetic is premised on the notion that individuals may attain a deeper understanding of the divine without any distractions. This mirrors the Lutheran idea of "Sola Scriptura", the notion that only the Bible should be the center of the church, as Martin Luther first introduced in his 62nd thesis: "The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God." (Luther 1989). This idea led to a stripping of the liturgy and church interior, based on a theology that God is present in an individual contemplation of divinity through participation in Bible readings, prayers, and psalm singing (Thomassen and Rasmussen 2000). The relationship between theological aesthetic and aesthetic theology is, within the traditional liturgy of the Norwegian Church, therefore based on the oral and written representation of the Biblical text.

Here, it may be useful to further distinguish between the two terms, theological aesthetics and aesthetic theology. While theological aesthetics examines how religious art, worship, and aesthetic practices explore and express the divine, aesthetic theology refers to a philosophical inquiry into how aesthetic experience itself may evoke a sense of transcendence (Jørgensen 2014, 651; 2021, 137). Therefore, it might be misleading to describe aesthetic theology as "theology", as it does not need to involve a superhuman force, i.e., a god. For Christians, however, the decentralizing out-of-body experience described by aesthetic theology is inextricably linked to the encounter with a transcendent or sacred presence.

Theological aesthetics, then, explores how human beings encounter the divine through sensory engagement, material culture, and aesthetic interpretation. It involves both the hermeneutics of perception and the recognition of art's surplus meaning. Jørgensen emphasizes that, in a Christian context, communication with God is itself an aesthetic act: God speaks through the Word, and humans respond through prayer, hymnody, and ritual (Jørgensen 2014, 581). These practices are simultaneously aesthetic and phenomenological, binding aesthetics and teleology in a complex duality.

In this analysis, theological aesthetics is understood as the measures taken by the church

to communicate with the divine through different aesthetic approaches, such as visual aesthetics, metaphors, iconography, dramaturgies, voice, gestures, texts, and song. Aesthetic theology, on the other hand, is how these aesthetic approaches provide an experience of the divine to the congregation. Therefore, although distinct, theological aesthetics and aesthetic theology frequently operate in tandem, particularly within the context of worship. The liturgical service may be understood as an instance of theological aesthetics that seeks to employ aesthetic theology, structuring its dramaturgical expression to evoke sacred experience.

While theological aesthetics is well articulated in official church documents that prescribe the visual and experiential dimensions of worship (Kirkerådet 2020; Veiteberg 2006), aesthetic theology is not explicitly mentioned in these documents. Nonetheless, there has been a shift in the theological discourse within the church, regarding how to give the congregation a sensation of divine presence. Since the turn of the 21st century, there has been a renewed way of seeking an understanding of the gap between the theological aesthetic, church attendants, and the (lack of) experiences of the Divine (Veiteberg 2006).

This development may be attributed, in part, to declining church membership. As stated above, the Church of Norway functioned as the state church until the formal secularization of Norway in 2012. Still, it remains the largest religious community in the country, with approximately 65% of the population registered as members (Østhus 2023, 2025). However, only 47% of all Norwegians identify as religious (Dalen 2023). The difference between the Church of Norway's registered members and Norway's overall religious population shows that many registered members do not consider themselves Christian. Even among self-identified Christians, regular participation in church activities is uncommon (Johnsen 2020).

This decline in attendance has prompted the Church to explore new modes of staging worship. Therefore, there has been a growing interest in theatricality and performance within the Church of Norway, with church leaders increasingly viewing worship as an aesthetic practice. The theological shift is largely influenced by former bishop and theatre scholar, Kari Veiteberg, who has drawn attention to the parallels between theatrical performance and liturgical celebration (Veiteberg 2008, 2006).

Veiteberg critiques the aesthetic dimensions of traditional Norwegian worship, arguing that many services fail to evoke a sense of divine presence. Meaning that the theological aesthetics does not always succeed in facilitating aesthetic theology. From this perspective, she introduces the concept of the "unsuccessful church service" (Veiteberg 2008, 2006), suggesting that success in worship may be evaluated not solely in terms of salvation, but also in terms of aesthetic and emotional resonance (Veiteberg 2008, 108). She thereby encourages clergy to adopt new dramaturgical approaches to their liturgy.

In response to this call for liturgical renewal, a new wave of both practical and theoretical theology has emerged within the Church of Norway. Among the most notable contributions is the project *Gudstjenester folk vil ha* (*Worship Services People Want*). Led by Elisabeth Tveito Johnsen, the project investigates the types of spaces that are created in worship services with increased attendance. The project explores how spatial and aesthetic dimensions shape the experience of church interiors during worship, the forms of authority and authenticity that are performed in these settings, and the theological and doctrinal frameworks within which congregational worship is situated.

This is not to suggest that there exists a unified agreement among church leaders or congregations within the Church of Norway regarding dramaturgical experimentation in worship. On the contrary, tradition is widely regarded as a foundational value in Norway, a stance that is clearly reflected in the theological aesthetics of church architecture, liturgical ornamentation, liturgy, and ritual practice. In 2020, the Church of Norway published a revised liturgical handbook, *Gudstjenestebok for Den Norske Kirke* (*the Church Book of the Church of Norway*), which outlines a unified framework for worship services nationwide. The handbook describes the service as an episodic sequence of fixed scripture readings and ritual acts, designed to facilitate an encounter with the divine through structured participation (Kirkerådet 2020).

Carnival Services

The tension between traditional minimalist liturgy and emerging dramaturgical perspectives has led to more creative worship formats, particularly during religious holidays. Among the earliest of these innovations in the Church of Norway were the Carnival services, held on the last Sunday before Ash Wednesday. Carnival, rooted in Catholic tradition, has not historically been observed in the Church of Norway. The Norwegian "carnivals" have primarily been a festival at secular schools and kindergartens, in which children dress up and celebrate with candy or a piñata. Therefore, most Norwegians associate carnival with secular children's parties and are unaware of its ecclesiastical origins.

Despite this, the Church of Norway has embraced carnival as a liturgical event. While the precise origins of the carnival service are unclear, the first documented newspaper report dates to 2004 (Engh 2004, 3). By looking at the archives at the National Library, it is clear that there is an increase in reports on carnival services across national newspapers between 2008 and 2009, which marks the national popularity (Nasjonalbiblioteket 2025). By 2010, 18 of the 108 services announced in the media on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday featured a Carnival theme (Øgar 2010). With similarities to the carnival-themed parties, the Carnival service was introduced to make worship more inviting for families (Den Norske Kirke 2024a).

During Carnival services, both ministries and congregants wear family-friendly costumes. The use of costumes disrupts traditional liturgical norms, particularly the wearing of clerical vestments. Therefore, despite the costumes creating a playful atmosphere, the dress-up has been criticized in Norwegian media and online forums (Øgar 2010). Nevertheless, Bishop Halvor Nordhaug has expressed support for such innovations, stating: "There is great freedom. As bishop, I believe the biggest problem in the Church of Norway is not innovation and creativity" (Øgar 2010, my translation).

Carnival services retain the traditional liturgical structure, including preaching, scripture readings, and psalmody. The costumes serve primarily to enhance the appeal of the service for children, striking a balance between festivity and tradition. Carnival service, then, lacks a sense of theological resonance. The carnival service is merely about the visual or material uniqueness, not about its capacity to signify a broader aesthetic theology, and can therefore be understood as transitional, primarily focusing on making the services more inviting. The main objective of carnival services appears to be the introduction of a new theological aesthetic aimed at attracting new members. Nevertheless, none of the church's websites emphasizes that these services are

intended to facilitate an experience of the divine. As such, there is no explicit focus on how this carnival-inspired theological aesthetic might give rise to an aesthetic theology.

Today, the Carnival service is a widespread annual event in Norway, described on the Church of Norway's official website as a popular family celebration (Den Norske Kirke 2024a). I argue that this success has inspired further experimentation with liturgical staging, leading to the emergence of what I have termed "pop-masses." These masses incorporate spectacular and pop-cultural aesthetics, representing a new and controversial dramaturgical approach.

Pop-Masses

With the term 'pop-masses', I refer to services that depart from established liturgy in favor of pop-cultural aesthetic and dramaturgical techniques. Here, pop culture refers to various cultural expressions designed to reach the general public, primarily intended to entertain a broad audience (Bøe and Kalvig 2020).

By deliberately employing pop-cultural motifs and spectacular staging, pop-masses alter their liturgical aesthetic and create immersive experiences. Through this fusion of popular culture and religious ritual, pop-masses generate a theatrical sacred space where the boundaries between entertainment and worship are actively negotiated. This results not only in a mass with pop-cultural motifs, but in a new sacred, theatrical event. By this, I mean that the traditional worship service moves beyond its traditional framework and into a new form of *eventness*. The term eventness describes distinctly what makes theatre a special artistic communication (Sauter 2008). Theatre Scholar Wilmar Sauter describes eventness as "the interaction between performer(s) and spectator(s), during a given time, in a given space and certain circumstances" (Sauter 2008, 12).

Since the mid-1990s, with the explosion of pop-cultural content across a variety of media, far more people encounter religion through pop culture than through places of worship or sacred texts (Bøe and Kalvig 2020, 204; Endsjø and Lied 2011, 20). To counteract this development, there has been a shift in Scandinavian religious practice, where houses of worship have adopted pop cultural aesthetics and references. In Denmark, popular culture, such as music trends from social media, has been incorporated into services targeting teens. Which has led to a debate about the «tivolization of the Church of Denmark»:

> […] Back to the Gangnam Style séance, the popular culture discussion, and not least the issue of definitions. As mentioned, the confirmation ceremony was accused of being 'superficial pop culture' and the latest step in the 'tivolization of the National Church', while Associate Professor Hans Ravn Iversen, by contrast, argued that popular culture is an essential part of the National Church's future in its break with the state church's 'high-culture monopoly'. (Rasmussen 2015, 16)

Both the Church of Norway and the Church of Sweden, which was the official national church of Sweden until the official secularization in 2000, have made several attempts to incorporate pop-cultural motifs into religious services and other church activities, the most distinct being the pop-masses. The pop-masses have a dual focus, where the entertaining and expressive elements merge with the divine to produce a new form of religious expression. This fusion lends the services a spectacular character, marked by grand and impressive features. Scenography, lighting, sound, and metaphorical language are particularly employed to create a

dynamic and suggestive dramaturgy. The most widespread pop-mass is the Harry Potter-themed services, which have been staged multiple times in Vilhelmina församling (SE), Vetlanda kyrka (SE), Stavanger Kirke (NO), St. Jakob (NO), and Fagerborg Kirke (NO).

In contrast to the carnival services, where the goal is to promote a joyful and fun service, the pop-masses explicitly work with a new aesthetic to employ aesthetic theology. Across theological publications, interviews, and on social platforms, there is a focus on how these masses provide an understanding and experience of the Divine (Schipper 2024). In the following, I will look at how Fagerborg Church and The Church of St. Jakob have implemented pop-masses in their practice.

Potter-Masses at Fagerborg

The earliest documented pop-mass within the Church of Norway was held in Oslo in 2017, when priest Sunniva Gylver introduced *Potter-påske* (*potter-easter*), an event in which families, teenagers, and young adults were invited to watch the *Harry Potter* films inside the church (Gudvangen 2017; Kvalsund 2017). At the end of this marathon, the congregation held an Easter mass with themes and decorations from the *Harry Potter* franchise. Since its inception, *Potter*-easter has become a recurring tradition at Fagerborg.

The central narrative of *Harry Potter* follows the struggle between the young wizard Harry Potter and the dark lord Voldemort. Originally a seven-volume book series authored by J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter* evolved into a global pop-cultural supersystem, generating a wide array of derivative media, including websites, films, video games, forums, and merchandise across multiple platforms.

The popularity of the books has made them a target for religious criticism in the West. Several Christian conservatives in the United States have attacked the novels for "promoting witchcraft and satanism" (Šari 2001, 79). This has led to a ban on the books in parts of the United States (Gemmill and Nexon 2006; Šari 2001). In 1999, The *New York Times* reported that:

> In their formal complaints asking school districts to remove the materials, parents argue that because witchcraft is a religion, books about it do not belong in public schools, and they say that Harry's flirtations with death and disaster are troubling story lines in light of recent school shootings. (Šari 2001, 79)

In Norway, the book franchise has not received similar criticism. Still, when adopted into the church, the franchise has aroused controversy. In 2005, priest Per Christian Solberg incorporated *Harry Potter*-inspired elements into a worship service, marking the first known instance of such an aesthetic within the Church of Norway. This initiative sparked considerable debate within Norwegian ecclesiastical circles. Several clergy and theologians expressed concern over the theological legitimacy of referencing the *Harry Potter* franchise in a sacred context, denouncing the initiative as occultism or even satanic worship (Lepperød 2005; Heradstveit 2025; Ystrøm 2005). These reactions underscore the tension between traditional theological frameworks and emerging liturgical practices that seek to engage contemporary cultural forms.

Despite this backdrop, Gylver introduced the concept of the Harry Potter-service phenomenon, which has gained nationwide popularity. Following the first *Harry Potter* mass in

Fagerborg, similar masses have been held in Oslo, Bergen, and Stavanger (Tegle 2025; Berg 2024; Gylver 2025). The concept has gained so much attention that the Church of Norway received a complaint from Warner Bros in 2026. Here, Warner Bros forbids continuing Harry Potter-service, claiming that the Church has been stealing aesthetic features patented by the corporation. Until this prohibition, Potter-easter was an annual part of Fagerborg's Easter celebration.

In 2024, the *Harry Potter*-themed mass at Fagerborg unfolded over the course of three days, offering an immersive program designed to engage participants of all ages. Throughout the weekend, the church hosted a variety of themed activities, including potion-making workshops where participants learned to mix "elixirs" inspired by the *Harry Potter* universe. Wand crafting sessions allowed children and young adults to create their own wands, often accompanied by discussions on the symbolism of transformation and agency. The culmination of the event was a specially staged worship service, in which elements from the *Harry Potter* series were woven into liturgy. Scriptural readings were paired with excerpts from the novels, prayers invoked motifs of the franchise, and the sermon explored the similarities of the gospel and the *Harry Potte*r narrative.

During the whole event, the church was decorated with elements that evoked the franchise. Banners and posters representing the four Hogwarts houses were hung on the walls, while toys and figurines recreated miniature scenes from the wizarding world, contributing to a richly immersive environment. This decoration also highlights architectural parallels between the worship space and the fictional Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, such as brick walls and spacious interiors; however, the decorations did not transform the church into a replica of the school. Rather, the worship space was adorned with symbolic references to the *Harry Potter* films, without fully converting the interior into a setting from the wizarding universe.

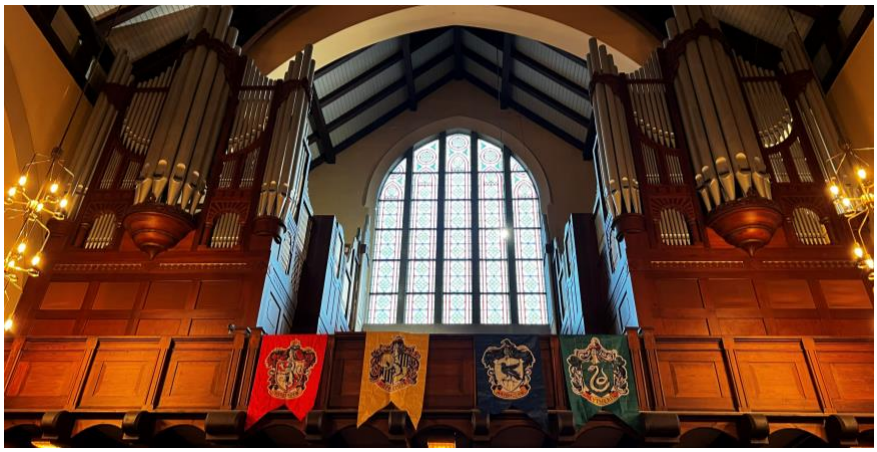

Figure 1. Banners representing the four houses from the *Harry Potter* franchise hang from the organ. Photo courtesy of Sander J. Schipper

The dramaturgical and aesthetic structure of the service was designed to facilitate "magical experiences." In addition to scenography, music and metaphors drawn from the *Harry Potter* universe were integrated into the liturgy. While music from the films played, congregants participated in rituals that blended religious acts with fictional symbolism.

During communion, participants were invited to move freely throughout the worship

space and engage in a series of prayer activities that intertwined pop-cultural motifs with theological reflection. Traditionally, communion in the Church of Norway is administered by inviting congregants to walk down the aisle in a line, receive a piece of bread, and dip it in wine, accompanied by the quiet singing of a psalm. In the *Potter*-mass, Gylver asked the participants to do a *prayer walk*. Here, the participants prayed while performing a variety of activities at different stations, which blended rituals such as lighting candles, scripture reading, and communion with themes from *Harry Potter*.

One notable station featured a mirror adorned with Bible verses, introduced as the *Mirror of Erised* from *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997). In the book, the mirror bears the inscription: "Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi" (Rowling 2002, 207), in reverse: "I show not your face but your heart's desire." The inscription signifies that the mirror reveals a person's deepest, most desperate longing rather than their reflection. In the service, this metaphor was reinterpreted theologically; the mirror was described as "magical," yet framed with scripture to encourage participants to see themselves through God's eyes, as "important and beautiful children of God" (Gylver March 25, 2024). The intention behind these practices was to encourage participants to perceive themselves as inherently valuable, in accordance with Lutheran theological anthropology.

In addition to these reflective tasks, the prayer walk included the sacrament of communion and the baptism of two individuals. The multiplicity of ritual components contributed to a heightened dramaturgical flexibility and simultaneity. Participants were given autonomy to choose which elements to engage with. Changing not only the theological aesthetic, but also the dramaturgical approach of the liturgy.

In interviews, Gylver explained that her new form of mass aimed to help young attendees develop a deeper understanding of the Christian easter story while also evoking a sense of wonder and enchantment (Den Norske Kirke 2024b). As mentioned above, Stephen Greenblatt associated wonder with intense looking, where the object becomes the sole focus of attention (Greenblatt 1990, 19). In the *Potter*-mass, the sense of wonder was provoked by the change in the theological aesthetic. Throughout the event, parallels were drawn between the *Harry Potter* narrative and biblical themes. For example, it was suggested that just as wizards perform magic, God creates and shapes the world through magic or superhuman powers.

However, a clear theological distinction was maintained: the magic of *Harry Potter* was consistently framed as fictional, while a divine creative power was presented as real and sacred, permeating all aspects of existence. This new theological aesthetics allowed the participant to admire the liturgy and church architecture in new ways, providing an opportunity for wonder. The resonance of the carnival service, then, is not just about the visual or material uniqueness, but about its capacity to signify. Acting as a conduit for theological negotiation, the resonance encourages participants to contextualize the service and extend beyond its immediate presence.

This new theological aesthetic is not only the starting point for wonder, where the renewed approach to aesthetics evokes a sense of openness and curiosity; it also serves, through this very sense of wonder, as the foundation for an aesthetic theology. By transforming the theological aesthetic, participants engage with the mass in new ways, creating space for a deeper exploration of the aesthetic dimension. The new theological aesthetic, or rather the encounter with it, possesses its own inherent creative power. This resonates with Jørgensen's understanding

that the aesthetic of beauty does not merely represent itself but opens the possibility for a greater experience of aesthetic theology (Jørgensen 2014, 477). Jørgensen further elaborates on this by emphasizing how the experience of aesthetic theology is both reflexive and transformative:

> Without the sensitivity that is central to aesthetics, which orients itself toward aesthetic appearance rather than logical truth, thought would not be able to rise from the level of formal logic to a metaphysics that has not left the experienced world behind. (Jørgensen 2014, 477, my translation)

Like the *carnival services*, where congregants were encouraged to wear costumes, the *Potter*-mass invited attendees to dress in outfits inspired by the *Harry Potter* franchise. Young participants were encouraged to explore wizard personas, moving fluidly between their roles as fictional characters and worshippers. This resonates with Sauter's term of theatrical playing. Here, the physical practice of playing, the tacit knowing and oral traditions (Sauter 2008, 35), is implied in the fictional imagination (Sauter 2008, 55). Thus, the separation of actor and character is playing, making the fiction by the presence of an observer (Sauter 2008, 54).

Figure 2. Procession at the start of the church service. The liturgist and acolytes are all wearing costumes from the *Harry Potter* franchise. Photo courtesy of Sander J. Schipper

The participants did not merely perform roles but inhabited them, treating the magical narrative as a plausible reality while remaining aware of its constructed nature. During the *Potter*-mass Participants were invited to live, sleep, eat, play, and worship within an expanded liturgical setting. Through this theatrical play, participants entered a fictional world where the magic of the narrative was treated as a plausible reality. The fiction was sustained through embodied engagement and communal recognition, similar to the performative interplay of *theatrical play* that Sauter describes (Sauter 2008, 54-55).

This approach resulted in a liturgical form that referenced both the Bible and the fictional universe of J.K. Rowling. Traditional contextualization of scripture was supplemented by comparative narrative strategies, drawing analogies between Harry Potter and Jesus. These elements appealed to participants' curiosity, imagination, and capacity for inner image-making. Thus, *Potter*-mass represents a dual focus: the entertaining and expressive are intertwined with the divine to produce a new form of religious expression. This fusion lends the service a spectacular

character, incorporating scenography, lighting, sound, and metaphorical language to create a dynamic and emotionally resonant dramaturgy.

While attendees engaged with the magical narrative as if they were wizards, the liturgy emphasized that God is the true and holy creator. Through this imaginative engagement, participants were invited to explore theological themes and attributes of the Christian God. These ideas were also addressed in dialogues between Gylver and the participants, where she emphasized the parallels between children's literature and biblical narratives, particularly the shared motifs of good versus evil, creation versus destruction, and moral transformation. The *Potter*-mass thus functioned as a hybrid liturgical form, combining entertainment and theological reflection to foster spiritual engagement through aesthetic and narrative immersion, thus engaging an aesthetic theology.

Although participants dress as wizards and imaginatively inhabit the narrative world, this engagement is framed as theatrical play in Sauter's sense an "as-if" mode that acknowledges the fiction while allowing immersive participation. The liturgy anchors these imaginative elements within core Christian rituals, such as communion, prayer, scripture reading, baptism, clarifying that sacred meaning resides in the sacramental structure, while pop-cultural imagery serves only as an aesthetic and pedagogical lens. Furthermore, the books' underlying Christian narrative framework, especially Harry as a Christ-figure who dies to save others and is resurrected, provides a theological bridge that helps attendees interpret the fiction in relation to Christian motifs without collapsing it into doctrine. Through scenography, music, and narrative parallels that evoke wonder, the service directs emotional and aesthetic engagement toward theological reflection rather than enchantment, thereby clearly maintaining the boundary between fictional magic and the sacred while using the resonance between the narratives to deepen religious experience.

The encounter with a new theological aesthetic, then, is inherently creative, opening onto more than itself. Jørgensen stresses that this experience of aesthetic theology is reflexive and transformative: "Without the central sensitivity of aesthetics, which orients itself toward the aesthetic before logical truth, thought could not rise from the level of formal logic to a metaphysics that has not left the experienced world behind" (Jørgensen 2014, 477, my translation). This is like God's creative power, which in Christian ontology grounds the universe; similarly, the *Potter*-mass emphasized parallels between the experience of magic within the service and God. The exploration of theological aesthetics is, therefore, an exploration of the divine, which prompts an aesthetic theology.

***Les Misérables*-mass at St. Jakob**

In March 2023, St. Jakob Church, a small congregation in Bergen, hosted a themed worship service centered on the pop-cultural phenomenon *Les Misérables*. Promoted as a different kind of service "featuring contemporary music and language" (St. Jakob 2023), the event sought to merge theological aesthetics with the thematic and visual elements of Victor Hugo's book and its adaptation to stage musical and film. The goal for the implementation of pop-culture is to provide a current theological aesthetic that also employs aesthetic theology (Berg 2024).

Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862) is a seminal work of French literature that explores

themes of justice, redemption, and moral transformation within the context of post-revolutionary France. The narrative follows the journey of Jean Valjean, a former convict seeking spiritual renewal, and juxtaposes individual suffering with collective struggle. The novel is deeply political, reflecting Victor Hugo's commitment to social justice, equality, and reform through its exploration of poverty, oppression, and revolution.

The novel was adapted for the stage as early as 1872 (Variyar 2017, 59), but the rock opera, which is popular today, was first staged in France in 1980, scored by Claude-Michel Schonberg, with libretto by Alain Boubil (Variyar 2017, 59). This theatrical adaptation is the basis for the West End (1985) production, which premiered in London on 8 October 1985 (Variyar 2017, 61). The production is still running today, making it the longest-running musical at the West End, with over 15000 stagings as of 2025 (Society of London Theatre 2025). Also on Broadway the musical has gained popularity, with over 6000 stagings according to the Internet Broadway Database (2025).

The rock operatic staging of the novel is "considered unique for its combination of high and 'low' (popular) art" (Variyar 2017, 60), which gained more popularity with the release of the film version in 2012. The adaptation into a globally acclaimed stage musical (1980) and film (2012) has amplified the emotional and symbolic resonance, making it a rich source for theological reflection. With its theological perspectives, there were no protests when St. Jakob announced the pairing of liturgy and the narrative of *Les Misérables*.

Founded in 2012, St. Jakob was established with a mandate to create an inclusive worship space. The goal was to develop a theological aesthetic that would make worship engaging, foster community, and facilitate an experience of the divine (Berg 2024, 10). This initiative was also a response to declining church attendance, seeking both to awaken a new theological aesthetic still capable of employing aesthetic theology and to increase attendance. In his practical-theological work *Levende steiner* (*Living Stones*), the priest of St. Jakob Øyvind Rudolf Berg emphasizes the theological potential of pop-cultural motifs:

> There is little that constitutes a more credible *kyrie* than Fantine's song from *Les Misérables* [the musical]: 'I had a dream my life would be, so different from this hell I'm living.' […] Renunciation becomes far more concrete when Sauron's eye (in the form of a red spotlight), which previously swept across the congregation in search of weakness and sin, is extinguished as the congregation declares: 'I renounce the devil and all his works and all his being.' (Berg 2024, 78-79, my translation)

St. Jakob Church has actively experimented with new ways to actualize church activities (Berg 2024, 12). Over the last decade, St. Jakob has hosted numerous pop-themed services, inspired by *Les Misérables*, *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Greatest Showman*, *The Lion King*, *The Prince of Egypt,* and the music of *Coldplay*.

During the *Les Misérables* service, the acolytes and the choir wore black clothing with red, white and blue accents, including flags. The lead liturgist deviated from traditional clerical attire by omitting the *stola*, a sacred vestment typically worn during worship, see fig 3. Not only were the clergy wearing costumes. The interior of the church was also decorated to resemble a scene from the film.

Figure 3. The lead liturgist preaching. Instead of wearing a stole, she is wearing a red, white and blue pin, similar to the one used by the rebellion in the 2012 film adaptation of Les Misérables. Behind her, projections of Javert, the main antagonist in *Les Misérables*, portrayed by Russell Crowe, are visible. Photo: courtesy of Maria Skretting.

However, unlike the *Potter*-Mass, where the decorations focused more on thematic representation than on recreating specific locations from the *Harry Potter* universe, the *Les Misérables*-Mass depicted a scenographic depiction of the revolution, as shown in the film and stage musical. A barricade of chairs was set up in front of the altar, while banners were suspended from the walls and ceilings. There were also images and video projections across several white walls, altering the spatial and aesthetic quality of the worship environment. Originally designed to direct attention toward the altar, the church space was transformed through scenographic lighting and visual effects, allowing the gaze to move more freely. This reconfiguration invited even seasoned churchgoers to re-experience the space with a sense of wonder.

Most hymns were replaced with songs from the musical, and the service concluded with a tableau. Here, the choir stood in front of the chair-barricade, waving a red flag of resistance, while singing *Do You Hear the People Sing*. This resembles a scene from the musical where revolutionaries sing the same song on a barricade. In the musical and film, this song functions as a revolutionary anthem, channeling the students' youthful passion and collective determination. It is sung with urgency, as a direct call to arms, uniting the characters in their belief that sacrifice is necessary for freedom. The song is both a rallying cry and a tool for solidarity, transforming individual fears into shared resolve. Using it in worship gave the liturgical end a new urgency, which differs from the quiet procession that usually ends a Sunday mass.

Figure 3. The choir in front of the barricade of chairs, singing *Do You Hear the People Sing*. Photo courtesy of Maria Skretting

Alongside the ending tableau, the dramaturgical flexibility of the *Les Misérables* service was particularly evident during the celebration of communion. Like the communion at the *Potter*-mass, the *Les Misérables*-mass had a prayer walk during the communion. Instead of the standard ritual, participants were invited to engage in a prayer walk through the church's annex, which had been transformed into a revolutionary scene inspired by *Les Misérables*. The walk began with instructions to proceed in silence to "feel Jesus in the prayer landscape." (Ingebritsen, May 3, 2023) Upon entering the annex, participants were encouraged to perform a series of ritual actions, each drawing on motifs from the musical as a starting point for prayer.

One of the most significant stations invited participants to lay down their burdens before God, mirroring the emotional release experienced by Jean Valjean when he prays to become a better man at the beginning of the musical. By picking up stones and carrying them through the church building, before laying them down in front of a cross, the participants symbolically laid their struggles in the hands of God. This moment was meant to evoke a sense of spiritual catharsis, aligning personal reflection with the narrative arc of the musical and offering a reimagined theological aesthetic through embodied ritual practice.

Here, the stones themselves become objects of wonder by materializing the struggle of the participants. Greenblatt traces the genealogy of wonder, noting that in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, collections of wonders (such as cabinets of curiosities) were as much about possession as about display. The sense of wonder was not initially regarded as primarily visual; rather, reports and stories about marvels circulated as virtual equivalents of the objects themselves (Greenblatt 1990, 29). Over time, however, the locus of wonder shifted from the spectacle of ownership to the aesthetic contemplation of the object, particularly in the context of the modern art museum (Greenblatt 1990, 30-31).

In the case of the stones, the sense of wonder is bound to a combination of the two. The stones become *wonderful* because they, which are usually everyday objects, are given a special narrative. They are imbued with meaning through ritual and narrative association. Their transformation from mundane objects into carriers of personal and spiritual significance reflects a dual genealogy of wonder: one rooted in the emotional and symbolic possession of the object, and the other in its aesthetic and contemplative function within a sacred space. In this way, the

stones not only represent individual burdens but also become part of a collective liturgical experience, where materiality and metaphor converge to evoke a sense of the divine through embodied participation.

While wonder isolates the object in a moment of aesthetic intensity, resonance embeds it within a broader discursive and historical framework. In the context of worship, however, this framework is not merely historical or cultural but theological. The stones, as ritual objects, exemplify this convergence: they are not only imbued with symbolic meaning through narrative and embodied practice but also situated within a theological discourse that reconfigures their material presence. Thus, resonance in this setting does not displace wonder but deepens it, allowing the object to function simultaneously as a site of emotional immediacy and theological reflection. The two modes, resonance and wonder, are not oppositional but mutually reinforcing, enabling a liturgical dramaturgy in which materiality, narrative, and sacred meaning coalesce.

Here, the liturgists emphasized that the goal was to encounter God through the popular drama, not to sanctify the musical itself. Importantly, the service did not rely on overarching fictional plots or fables. Instead, it generates tension through dynamic scene changes and visual variety. This use of pop-cultural references creates a dramaturgy of suspense, as participants observe how clergy blend secular motifs with sacred narratives.

This interplay between aesthetic experience and theological meaning resonates with Jørgensen's concept of *sensitive cognition*, which she describes as both analogous to reason and formative of metaphysical insight:

> Sensitive cognition does not merely mirror reason; it is also analogous with God's creative act. It gives form to what would otherwise remain inaccessible, allowing truth to resonate through beauty. Unlike God, however, sensitive cognition neither creates the world itself nor its own capacity for metaphysical insight. (Jørgensen 2014, 157, my translation)

By reimaging the theological aesthetic, both scholars and congregations report a great increase in members, and that the young participants experience the divine within St. Jakob (Schipper 2024; Berg 2024). The new aesthetic is showing signs of a theology that accounts for the perception of faith's object and the organs of this perception, the senses and emotions. In a theological sense, the well-known histories combined with the Christian gospel make room for the participants to know God through understandable pictures.

This can further be compared to the revelation, because in this action, the invisible God has revealed Himself in concrete forms. As Jørgensen points out, the revelation does not point beyond itself but is rather a manifestation of God in Christ: in the beauty of Christ's person, the glory of the triune God is truly present and may be experienced. Nor is revelation a projection of the believer's own senses and emotions: it is God's own glory that the believer perceives aesthetically, not something merely produced by the believer (Jørgensen 2014, 595).

Between theology and trend

Carnival services, while innovative in their use of costumes and thematic play, largely preserve the traditional dramaturgical structure of Lutheran worship. Core liturgical elements

such as hymns from the official hymn book, fixed scripture readings, and clearly defined ritual boundaries remain intact. Nevertheless, the inclusion of costumes and performative gestures introduces a subtle shift toward immersive participation, encouraging congregants to engage more deeply in the communal experience of worship. This limited role-breaking reflects an early interest in aesthetic and dramaturgical experimentation.

In contrast, pop-masses intentionally blur the boundaries between liturgy and fiction, transforming popular cultural texts into vehicles for theological reflection and transcendental experience. These services do not merely entertain; they construct a dramaturgy that is layered, suggestive, and emotionally resonant, allowing participants to encounter theological meaning through metaphor, narrative, and aesthetic immersion.

Pop-masses exemplify a dual movement: they communicate theological content through aesthetic means while simultaneously inviting congregants into transformative experiences of the divine via sensory and emotional engagement. This approach challenges the minimalist liturgical tradition of the Church of Norway, which has historically emphasized textual centrality and restraint. Instead, pop-masses foreground the performative, affective, and imaginative dimensions of faith, thereby advancing a new theological aesthetic that surpasses the innovations of carnival services.

By employing pop-cultural aesthetics, these masses cultivate a new theological aesthetic that resonates with a broader audience. This aesthetic not only extends the theological core beyond formal boundaries but also engages with the wider cultural landscape. The resonance of this new aesthetic is central to enabling participants to perceive the complex and dynamic theological meanings of the liturgy, whether metaphorically or metonymically.

However, this development does not reduce the church to mere "temples of resonance" in a similar fashion as modern museums, which Greenblatt criticizes for only showing historicity, not to provoke a deeper sensation of wonder (Greenblatt 1990, 32-33). Both masses analyzed in this study utilize the new theological aesthetic to also evoke a sense of wonder, which remains a vital and distinctive aspect of theological engagement. The spectacular staging of pop-masses echoes Greenblatt's observation that modern museums cultivate wonder through techniques such as boutique lighting and the strategic isolation of masterpieces, thereby enhancing the viewer's perception of uniqueness and charisma (Greenblatt 1990, 28). Through individualized staging and the use of pop-cultural strategies, such as contemporary music, lighting, and dramaturgical innovation, pop-masses achieve distinctive charisma and experiential depth.

It is through this evocation of wonder that pop-masses enact aesthetic theology. The fusion of ritual and pop-cultural elements opens new avenues for audience engagement and dramaturgical innovation, both structurally and thematically. The dramaturgy of the pop-mass is not embedded in the liturgical framework itself but emerges through its realization, via scenographic devices, musical integration, and thematic coherence. This dramaturgical flexibility allows for a varied intensity of experience, wherein sacredness and entertainment are not opposed but mutually reinforcing. Familiar narratives and symbolic forms facilitate a participatory mode of worship, inviting congregants to explore theological themes through embodied ritual and sensitive cognition.

Crucially, pop-masses do not sacrifice theological depth for spectacle. Instead, they employ spectacle as a mode of theological articulation, using familiar cultural forms to render

abstract doctrines experientially accessible. In doing so, they dissolve the boundaries between sacred and secular, fiction and faith, performance and ritual. This dramaturgical hybridity fosters new forms of participation and meaning-making, particularly among younger audiences and those less acquainted with traditional liturgical forms.

Ultimately, the pop-masses examined in this study reveal a church in transition, negotiating its identity between tradition and innovation, doctrine and experience, word and image. They suggest that the future of liturgical practice in the Church of Norway may lie not in rigid adherence to inherited forms, but in their creative reconfiguration through dialogue with contemporary culture. In this way, the spectacle of faith becomes not a dilution of the sacred but a renewed site for its encounter.

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Sander Jensen Schipper is a PhD Research Fellow in Theatre Studies at the University of Bergen. His doctoral project combines literary analysis and performance theory to examine dramaturgical strategies that evoke experiences of metaphysics in the plays of the Norwegian Nobel Prize–winning playwright Jon Fosse. Focusing on Fosse's minimalist aesthetics, his research investigates how dramatic form, language, and staging can move readers and spectators beyond the thresholds of ordinary perception.

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In parallel with his academic work, Schipper is active as a theatre producer with a particular emphasis on theatre festivals. He has collaborated with Norwegian venues and festivals including Forum Scene, Cornerteateret, Frontlosjefestivalen, Bergen Dramatikkfestival, and

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