

## ANGLICAN-LUTHERAN SOCIETY

Conference in Trondheim, Norway, 25<sup>th</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> July 2022

### SESSION FOUR : St Olav from an Historic-Cultural Perspective

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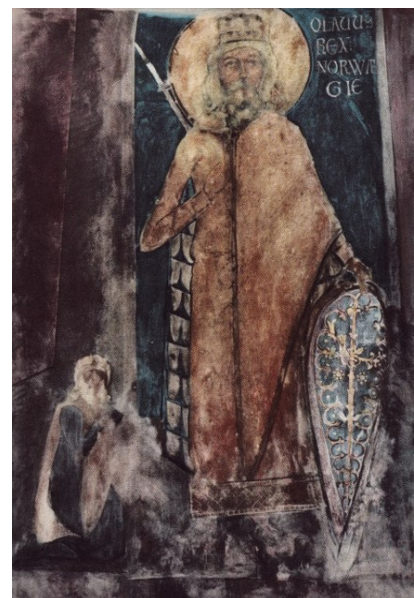


I was asked to lecture on St Olav from a cultural perspective, and I was very encouraged yesterday when Fredrik told me that the cultural aspect is the most interesting since there isn't much theological heritage associated with Olav and I have to say I agree. I am a medievalist and an art historian and absolutely not a theologian! Please ask questions along the way and at the end.

I was also asked to put a break into the middle of the lecture, and though I have a lot of material I shall make it as brief as I can. So let's start!

A fact that you all probably know is that King Olav Haraldson II was martyred at the Battle of Stiklestad on 29<sup>th</sup> July 1030. Stiklestad is a couple of hours north of Trondheim (twenty-first century travel time, not eleventh century!). He was very soon proclaimed a saint – this was before canonisation – he was a local saint. The Battle was perceived as a battle between Christian and pagan armies, but this was not so. Historians are now agreed that Norway had enjoyed extensive contact between Scandinavia, The British Isles, Continental Europe and Byzantium from the eighth century. Iceland had just proclaimed itself a Christian country at the *Big Thing* (the gathering of the chieftains) in the year 1000. This could have been the way that Norway was Christianised, but instead it became a brutal and bloody affair. I think it's fair to say that of all the Christianising kings we have in the early middle ages (St Edmund in England, St Stephen in Hungary for example) Olav was certainly one of the most brutal and bloodthirsty ones! People normally associate the word 'saint' with someone who is very nice, but it's Olav's martyrdom that made him a saint in the eleventh century.

Now, I'm an art historian and so my exploration of St Olav will be through images. Quite excitingly, the earliest image we have of St Olav is not a Norwegian image, nor Scandinavian, nor even Northern European. It's in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. You can see him in this rather dark, shadowy image – I haven't seen it myself because I've never been to Bethlehem – which is an Eastern style of painting. Look at it and you can see that he's standing and he has an axe on his shoulder – whether it was there in the beginning or was added later, or if it replaced a sceptre, is very much up for discussion, but much more interestingly there is a little person kneeling in prayer to the left of the saint and presumably this is a woman who was both the daughter of a king and the mother of a king and her name was Kristin Sigurdsdottir. The theory is that she was the donor of this picture, and it's interesting to have the image of a woman associated with the picture in this way.



*Olav in a painting c1170 in the Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem*

It is a very long time before we get an image of Olav associated with Norway that we can date. There is an American scholar, Cynthia Hahn, who has listed all the things that need to be associated with a saint in medieval times, a kind of saint's portfolio. There needs to be the story of their lives, images, liturgy and so on. They don't always have everything, but here you can see a sort of compilation of what happens to the cult of St Olav.

- His body was enshrined in 1031, just a year after his death
- The cult is mentioned in European sources in the 11th century
- Nidaros Cathedral was built from about 1070
- The most important event is the establishment of Nidaros archdiocese in 1153. If Bergen or Oslo had been chosen instead of Trondheim it's likely Norway might have had another patron saint
- Olav's life and miracles, the *Passio Olavi*, is recorded 1150-1160, and there is a new English edition that is very good
- In the Law of Succession in Norway, 1163, to end battles over the monarchy, Olav is named as «*Rex perpetuus Norvegiae*»
- St Olav's axe included in the claws of the lion in the royal Norwegian coat of arms c1280

People often ask me why I study medieval art. They say it's not very pretty. But I love these images of Olav. This one is quite comic, it's one of the oldest cult sculptures of Olav we have. It comes from Eastern Norway. What you can see is a king enthroned, he wears a long gown which is fastened with a belt, he has a cloak and a crown and in his left hand he holds a book and his right hand held something which is lost (a common problem with cult statues which were touched by pilgrims and bits fell off). This one is beautiful. It is in Skedsmo Church in Eastern Norway and dates from c1200. Look at the pleats on his arms. They're so well carved. But the carvers didn't want to make things that jutted out too much because it is very demanding and they get broken. He might have held a sceptre because some of you might be familiar with the Seal of Nidaros Archdiocese where you can see clearly Olav holding a sceptre, finished with a lily on top. When I wrote my Master's thesis more than 25 years ago I argued that it was probably a sceptre that was his attribute before the axe became established in the late thirteenth century. As I wrote my thesis I thought to myself, 'I have chosen Olav, so I will never be out of work in Norway! And I shall probably become fed up with him!' And so it has proved!



Olav is a really powerful personality in his after-life, and this one, dating from c1230-50

is a very nice statue which is kept in the museum in Copenhagen (Denmark). The Danish kings became very interested in Olav and this was sent to the Royal Collection in Copenhagen along with other objects such as the helmet and the spurs. However, if you know the history of spurs you will





know that they were not around in the eleventh century! So these are late medieval and have no connection to Olav! The original reliquary is in the National Danish Museum, and a very nice copy can be found in the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Oslo with an original bone in it. It's an arm bone that may have had no connection with St Olav, but it's a very old bone! So this is a very typical high medieval image of St Olav and they became very popular and are found all over Scandinavia in parish churches. There are many more medieval sculptures preserved in Norway than there are in England, especially in Sweden and Finland, and Olav is in every second one!



I want to discuss the axe, because it's often presented as the axe with which he was martyred. This, of course, makes perfect theological sense and is the norm for depiction of martyrs with the means of their martyrdom. But how did the idea that he was martyred with an axe evolve? This is a nineteenth century depiction of the Battle of Lyrskoghede, 1043, in the southern part of Denmark today, in which Olav's son Magnus the Good led the Danish-Norwegian Army against the Wends. (Incidentally, Magnus was a rather tiny baby when he was born but when Olav asked what his son was like they told him he was a fine youngster, huge! Hence his name, Magnus!) The axe you see ringed in red is supposed to be the King's own axe which was used by his son and broken in the battle and was later gifted to the cathedral and this is something that pops up in early thirteenth century sources. So presumably there was some kind of axe in the cathedral here attributed to Olav, and I believe there was some sort of connection, a kind of contamination, so that the axe of St Olav turned into the means of his martyrdom.

Now I want to show you some examples of these fabulous sculptures. They all conform to the high medieval ideal of kingship and what's interesting for me is that this kind of saint loses popularity at this point. There are more exciting saints coming to the fore, and this is something that I find quite puzzling with the cult of St Olav, that it has a very stable following, and there seems to be some kind of conservatism in Norway, especially here in Trondheim, so that new cults never really take off. So Olav remains popular whilst other new saints like Francis with his focus on the poor, for example, which become popular especially after the Black Death, do not catch on in Trondheim. It is said that

Scotland displays the same kind of conservatism at this period. We know that Archbishops who went to Rome to collect their pallium would suggest new saints and the Pope or his retinue would say, 'Show us some miracles.' They would have lists of miracles but they were told, 'I'm sorry, but that's not good enough!' So there must be something in Norway at the time that was not quite in step with continental Europe.



But the cult of saint-king was very much alive elsewhere. Here you see the bust of Charlemagne dating from around 1300AD and stylistically it fits with Olav's images and Grog (c1300) to the right.

We have quite a few depictions of Olav's miracles dating from the Middle Ages, but his life is very brutal, in many ways reflecting the life of a Viking king. The miracles associated with him are mostly from after his death and they show the compassionate Olav which is the saint around whom the cathedral is built and who pilgrims come to. It's not the brutal warrior king, it's the Olav who heals.



In the very centre panel of this walrus ivory diptych, which was probably made in Trondheim c1300, you see a boy with a boil on his neck and his mother pointing him to St Olav who heals the boil.

To the left you see a cornfield and the king rides over the corn and it is flattened. He then makes the corn rise up again and the harvest is saved. At the bottom left is a really brutal story of Richard the Priest who was accused of seducing a young girl and her brothers seize the priest, chop off his legs, poked out his eyes and cut out his tongue. Being unable to speak he had to pray silently (at that time prayer was vocalised) and St Olav came to him and restored his eyes so he could see the saint, restored his arms and legs and then pulled the stump of his tongue out so that he could speak again. But there remained a mark on his tongue to commemorate this remarkable event.

To the bottom right you see the martyrdom of Olav showing the three weapons with which he was killed. This is just the right half of the diptych. The left half shows the miracles of the Virgin Mary and you can see the diptych in Copenhagen.





If you have been in the museum across the yard here you will have seen this. It is an altar frontal that was probably made here in Trondheim around 1300, and it is incredibly well preserved. It was taken to Copenhagen three or four hundred years ago so it hasn't been in a church for all that time. You can see the saint standing in the middle. Unusually there are the symbols of the four Evangelists separating the four compartments. There has been a lot of discussion about Olav as someone who imitated Christ, which I think has been helpful in the twentieth century in bringing Olav back into the heart of Norwegian culture. The four quarters are a bit like a

cartoon, and the colours are bright. A Dutch scholar calls it 'The Nightwatch of the North', comparing it with Rembrandt's famous painting.

The first episode of this little cartoon is bottom left. Olav is riding towards the Battle of Stiklestad which is a very important scene for the Church of the late thirteenth century. St Olav meets a farmer, stops his horse and says to the farmer, 'I want to give you this bag of silver.' A quarter of the silver is to pay for the souls of Olav's enemies, not his men because they will go to heaven anyway! The other three quarters are for the Church, the priests and the monastery. This demonstrates Olav's example as someone who donates wealth to the Church.



The second image shows Olav's dream before the Battle. There was a ladder up to heaven and just as he came to the top of the ladder he was woken up. That isn't what you see here! It would make no sense to paint that so conveniently Christ is put in a kind of halo in the sky – you can see the wavy coloured lines – and he's talking to Olav. The saga tells us that Olav was very annoyed when he was woken up on the day of the Battle. He told his men about the dream, but his men don't consider it a good omen. Olav seems so

enthusiastic about going up the ladder to God. It points to his martyrdom. Can you see the man to the right blowing his horn to awaken the king?

We then move on to the Battle and notice the similarity with the last picture. In that he was sleeping, but here he is dead. Very importantly, his sword is beside him along with his shield, so he



is unarmed and so is a martyr. The lance pierces his chest, the axe cuts into his knee and a sword cuts his neck. Red blood is splashing all over the place and if you go to the museum you can see how cleverly it's painted and the red blotches do look like blood, which is fascinating in something that is more than 700 years old. I want to draw your attention to one wonderful detail here. One of these men (top right) is not wearing a coat of arms, he's wearing a grey, shaggy coat. This grey, shaggy coat is a reindeer coat. This is a chieftain from the

north of Norway and he's made a sort of pact with the Sami people, the people of the north, and so he has this magical reindeer coat. The arrows and swords of his enemies can't harm him, they can't cut through the coat. But you can actually see that there is red at his wrist where he's not protected. But he is healed by touching St Olav's body and one version of this legend sends him to Jerusalem after St Olav is buried, and he's never heard of again! But it is really interesting to see how indigenous people are woven into the story.

There is a very different scene at the end where we see either Olav's enshrinement or his burial, and I have had lots of discussion with colleagues about this because I think it's the burial and not the enshrinement. But in this context it really doesn't matter! What is interesting is that this quite small altar frontal has no miracles in it. There is nothing, except perhaps Christ talking to Olav before the battle (and that is in a dream anyway), that couldn't be in a Protestant church or even in secular history. I believe that the reason for that is that it was not commissioned for the cathedral, but for a minor church in Trondheim while the cathedral wanted to monopolise the miracles. The Church of St Olav was run by a chapter from the cathedral so they had self-interest in maintaining their church as the place where Olav was buried before he was enshrined, and keeping the miracles for the cathedral!



Now we move on to a second phase in the cult of St Olav, the Late Medieval one, and as I said before, the cult is quite conservative, but there is an interesting development in the fifteenth century. The Black Death devastates Norway. It's a sparsely populated country even today, but it was much more so after the Black Death. The sources of information from 1350 are hard to access, but we believe that it was the cities that were most hard hit. The religious elite is almost wiped out, and only one bishop survives. This is hard for this country which is the northernmost in Christendom. There are no universities in Scandinavia so all the clerics are educated abroad, but uneducated people had to be brought in to fill all the vacancies. There isn't the surge of church building that you get in lots of other countries including Sweden and Denmark. Norwegian political independence crumbles, so you get Swedish kings and Danish kings, the Norwegian elite marries Swedes and Danes and no longer live in Norway, and that means that they are no longer patrons. The Church is very wealthy but not very well educated as I see it. It is quite worldly and theologically 'laid-back', but its wealth comes from the export of fish. Then comes the Hansa, which is very



important and a lot of ecclesiastical art is made abroad and where there is local production in Norway the quality is not as good as it used to be. In the thirteenth century you can see on the West Front of the cathedral modern reproductions of statues the originals of which are in the museum. When you look at them they could be English or French because the quality is really fine, and they are all made in one period. But all this changes after the Black Death. So Norway becomes provincial until the nineteenth century.



But St Olav's cult blossoms abroad, and there is a St Olav's Church in London and others are scattered around Europe, but in the Late Middle Ages it's around the Baltic that everything happens. A new set of legends appears in which St Olav is a popular hero. He travels and helps people and here, in a mural in Lid Kyrka in Sweden, you see him in a green tunic and there is a troll stealing a baby and someone being seasick over

the side of the boat, and the stories are often ballad-like, often grotesque and are found all around the Baltic Basin. This is the very kind of mural you would expect to find in Norwegian churches, but you don't. There simply isn't the economy, the wealth, to do this kind of thing. What we do find are quite a lot of winged altarpieces, some quite small and I think this reflects a relative poverty, so instead of buying a huge one of the kind you find in Danish churches at the same time, they buy several small ones, maybe in installments. In this one, made in a German workshop for a Norwegian church around 1500, you see St Sunniva to the left and St Olav to the right. St Sunniva is Patron Saint of Bergen, a mysterious Irish princess and one of the earliest cults we have, but very little is known about her. St Olav is shown in a modern German form with a tunic and tight hose and he's stepping on a dragon with a human face. Nobody knows why this element in the iconography pops up at this point but presumably these German workshops are making altarpieces for churches all around the Hansa world and a king with an axe is quite dull and can be confused with other kings with or without weapons, but this quite colourful beast with the human head appears and catches on, first in Germany. We don't have any literary sources for it, and art historians work from literary sources, and I rather suspect that the source is simply not literary, but someone had the great idea of putting a human head on a beast. I remember, as a child, seeing these creatures with a human face and finding them terrifying! There is a theory that the creature is Olav himself and that he's treading down his own ego. But that



sounds to me a bit Post-Freudian! There's a possibility that the creature is Olav's half-brother who competes with Olav and cheats and is turned into a sea-monster. I tried to write an article about it once, but in the end I had to throw in the towel – I couldn't make head nor tail of it!



The imported images of Olav usually show him in fashionable short tunic and tight hose, and sometimes in armour, but the locally produced ones still tend to depict him in his traditional long belted tunic and cloak with an axe, like this one in Kirkjubø Cathedral, the Faroe Islands.

This is also how the pilgrim badges of the saint depict him, like this one to the right, and this is the most popular image of St Olav. The ordinary people would all say, 'Yes, this is my saint!' I believe that after the plague Olav became a symbol of 'the good old days'. He was a good king, he



was a Christian king and this became important in the conservative attitudes that prevailed during the following centuries.

This statue of Olav is quite sweet. It is found in Borgsjö church, Medelpad in northern Sweden, and dates from c1500. It shows him in traditional garb and pose combined with a late medieval crown, hair and beard styles. It's a bit like folk art, and statues are subject to change over time. There is a church in part of Norway that used to be in Sweden where Olav's crown was removed at some stage and replaced by a three-cornered hat which was part of the Swedish uniform in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.



We move on to the Reformation and the Early Modern Era. Some of you know a lot about the Reformation in Norway and Scandinavia, so be patient as I paint a brief picture. The secular elite was relatively small and weak, and this is a key to understanding the Reformation in Norway. There were few people who could afford books, few who could read properly and few people cared about Protestantism which had little appeal. The few traces of Protestant, Lutheran, ideas before 1537 come from Germany to Bergen, the largest and most German city in Norway. The Reformation was effectively a coup d'état, and led to Norway being incorporated into the Danish realm, with the Danish king as head of the Church. Norway lost its independence through the Reformation. So for a lot of people religion and politics become bound together in a quite negative way. Reformation was regarded as much more positive and liberating in Sweden and Denmark than in Norway.

Something else to remember is that the cathedral in Trondheim had already burnt down. The Archbishop had had to flee the country, so there were not many people around, and no-one to rally around. The city had been badly damaged by the fire. So there is a vacuum. The body of St Olav is moved, there are attempts at reviving his cult but they don't succeed. Religious images were not forbidden and there were few iconoclastic incidents recorded, and they were mainly in Bergen Diocese, which is why so many religious images have survived. So long as people didn't make



offerings to the saints or pray to the images they could be kept in the churches. However, the feast



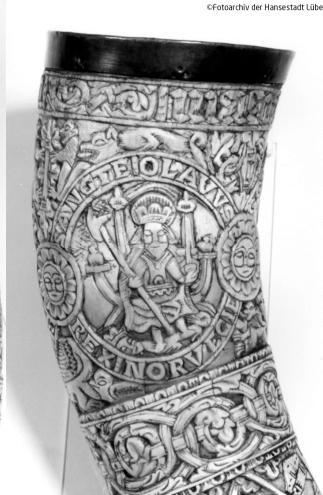
day of St Olav became a private family feast, a local feast with bonfires and lots of good food and drink, and this continued in some regions of the country right up to the twentieth century. Also we had these calendar sticks that were used right up to the seventeenth century on which the Feast of St Olav was marked with an axe. There is one axe for his martyrdom and another for the day of his translation into the cathedral. So he was never forgotten.

I stumbled upon some visual sources that are quite interesting. They are Icelandic drinking horns that can be found in collections all around Europe and they are really wonderful artifacts. This one is dated around 1600, not long after the Reformation in which Iceland was also part of the Danish -

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Swedish realm. You can see how nicely it is carved. Around the widest part there are images and there is text in the spiral part. We can see three emperors; they are Constantine, King Olav and Charlemagne. They are three idealised rulers who bring Christianity to their people. Olav is a legitimate ideal even

though he might not be regarded as a saint, so this is a good way of bringing him into a Protestant context. There is an inscription: 'King Olav instructed the people in the Christian Faith. Let's all use his horn with dignity and proficiency.' (That's my wobbly translation!) You can almost hear them toasting Olav and drinking to him, and this is his horn.

There is another drinking horn, not quite as well done. It dates from 1650 and its shows King David, another ideal king, alongside Olav. The inscription here says, 'Wise man, drink from the horn skillfully and often!' We have good sources from the seventeenth century describing weddings and village feasts in Norway where the toast of St Olav is drunk. Toasts are also offered to the Blessed Virgin Mary and to the Trinity, and there are discussions as to whether or not it is appropriate to toast them. Sometimes Norwegian toasts are very solemn, but on other occasions people do not behave very well! I think the discussions reflect this!

From the 17th century, the royal monogram or emblem was often incorporated into the choir screen, symbolising the King's role as the head of the Danish-Norwegian church. Many of these are Renaissance and Rococco images, and there are medieval images of St Olav to remind people of the



christianisation of the country. Sometimes these figures were accompanied by statues of the prophet Aaron and King David. In this one the carvers were very good at foliage but made rather clumsy angels! The King's monogram is in the middle, but then to the side of the screen there is a statue of St Olav. This makes both theological and historical sense. Olav is a medieval saint, but the King today is still the head of the Church of Norway, and the law of St Olav is something that farmers refer to as 'the good old days'. If they feel they have been dealt with unfairly by a magistrate they say, 'I want to be judged by the law of St Olav.' By that they mean the old law before the Danes came.

Legends of the saint were connected to holy wells, rocks and remarkable features in the landscape, and drinking in Olav's name continued until well into the seventeenth century. Olav was acknowledged as the most important king in Norwegian history, and images of him survived in many churches and the name Olav (Ole, Ola) has continued to be one of the most popular names until the late twentieth century.

I now move swiftly to modern times. In 1814 Denmark and Norway had sided with Napoleon which was a bad move! So after the Battle of Waterloo Norway was transferred from Denmark to Sweden as a prize of war. Sweden lost Finland to the Russians. Nobody was very happy at this state of affairs. But in the constitution that we Norwegians wrote in a brief period of independence they had decided that Norwegian kings would always be crowned in the cathedral in Trondheim. This brought to everyone's attention the fact that the medieval church was badly in need of repair. It was only



half a church – the nave was in ruins. Renovation began in 1869. King Oskar I established the Order of St Olav. The idea of a medieval saint being brought into the nineteenth century seemed quite natural. It's interesting because this was a time when Norwegians were very sceptical about anything Roman Catholic. In 1843 Catholicism is allowed again and in 1893 an altar is set up in the church of San Carlo al Corso in Rome depicting St Olav. But in Norway it is not the religious Olav

that is revived, but the political one, and here is a translation of what poet, Nobel Laureate and national icon, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, said in a speech at the celebration of the 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Trondheim City on July 29th, 1897 :

'We must realize what [Olav] meant to every single Norwegian: a shining childhood memory, a lap full of presents, an eye to watch over them on their travels, a safe refuge, someone to pray for them, the gate to Heaven. In his martyrdom they became one people, and it brought an end to foreign rule. He was the protector of the country, its banner, its law, its highest peak. [...] At last, we again want what Olav wanted – to make this country our own. Yet again to liberate our country from foreign rule.'

He was a free-thinker and atheist, so there is no Catholic element in what he said, just the cultural! Now fast forward to 1930. Norway is independent and the 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Siklestad is celebrated. The restoration of the cathedral was nearing its completion, the Rose Window was brand new and everyone travelled to Trondheim to see it. There were souvenirs. This





spoon is from my own drawer at home. Everything had St Olav on it! Lutheran families, Socialist families – everyone – would have these knickknacks with Olav on them. It was high fashion. A huge number of people gathered at Stiklestad for what was a religious feast. The clergy and the King were there. The Norwegian Church was dipping its toe into the ecumenical basin, and there were guests from all over Europe.

But the Second World War and occupation followed. St Olav was 'kidnapped' by the National Socialists in Norway and Vidkun Quisling compared himself to St Olav and his national-socialist party NS (Nasjonal Samling) held rallies at historical sites such as Stiklestad. In 1944, a new monument was erected at Stiklestad with the emblem of NS, the wheel cross, on the spot where Olav was said to have been martyred. The following summer the monument was destroyed and buried under the original monument.



The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Trondheim was created in 1853 and in 1953 there was no question of using the cathedral for a Roman Catholic Mass. That first happened in the 1980s. So the Technical College here, which evolved into the university where I teach, lent their big entrance hall to the Roman Catholic Church and the Mass was celebrated there. Today there are Roman Catholic services in the cathedral but I don't think they would ever allow a religious service in the university!



St Olav's Day now takes a very popular turn and I think the event at Stiklestad where he was martyred and which I think some of you will visit on Saturday was premiered in the 1950s. Watch carefully for its message. In the 1950s the country was divided. Some had sided with the Nazi occupiers while others had resisted them. It's a religious play but it's about mothers and fathers and children and grandparents facing the question, 'What do we do when we have to make a choice between what we believe to be right and what might be wrong?'

Alongside it you have the revival of the pilgrimage ways which started in 1993 as part of a pan-European phenomenon. The European Union has been very active in this. I find that these ways of celebrating Olav are constantly being coloured by the times. The festival taking place outside started as a Church Music Festival. Then in the 1990s it turned into a medieval fair with jousting and things like that, all very colourful but the music had gone! Today it's becoming more like a seminar with a lot of talks and discussions about ethics and not necessarily about religion and cultural issues are brought to the fore. Outdoors there is Prog-Rock, while inside the cathedral there is a 'narrower' programme of worship and concerts and religious music. In 2002 they decided to name the hospital St Olav's Hospital and people wondered, 'Is it a Roman Catholic Hospital?' No, it's still the general hospital for the people of Trondheim!

My talk has covered 1000 years from the Battle of Stiklestad up to today. Your task is to take Olav into the future!