

## **Gilija Žukauskienė, “The Transformative Power of Movement: A Conversation between Marcel Mauss and Maurice Merleau-Ponty and its Influence on Contemporary Theology”**

The dissertation presented by Gilija Žukauskienė consists of 369 pages, divided into a very brief introduction, four very long chapters, and a brief conclusion, with a full bibliography. The four chapters look respectively at Marcel Mauss, then three scholars influenced by him, with the third chapter dealing with Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the fourth looking at the sacramental theologian, Louis-Marie Chauvet, the cultural scholar Michel de Certeau, and concluding with some attempt to apply all these thinkers to questions of church practice.

As most of this report will be rather critical, it is important to start with an acknowledgement of the depth of engagement with each of the thinkers that is evidenced in the text. The scope of reading is immense, and the ability to synthesise and present the work of often very complex thinkers is admirable and of a very high quality. It is evident that the supervisor has worked very hard at trying to get the author to highlight the links between the different parts, which is very much to the credit of the supervisor and partly to the credit of the candidate who has tried to put some of these links in at times.

Moreover, one of the many aims of the dissertation, which is to emphasise the importance of movement in church life, is something that is much needed, and there is much to agree with in what the author has placed as Chapter 4.3, but which is really a separate concluding chapter. For these reasons at least, I can already say that I think the dissertation can be admitted for defence.

Having said that, there are many problems with the dissertation, and it is important that the commission for the defence is aware of them, in order to ascertain the candidate's responses. The first and obvious problem is that the dissertation is at least twice as long as it needs to be, which leads to unclarity, lack of focus and ultimately exhaustion. What we essentially have are three or four Magister-level dissertations: on Marcel Mauss, on his followers, on Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and a quarter of a dissertation on Chauvet and a bit more of a dissertation on de Certeau, followed by an attempt to link all this to ecclesiology. The first three dissertations especially are of a very high standard for a Magister work. They present an excellent analysis of the works of the five scholars involved (alongside Mauss and Merleau-Ponty, these are Marcel Jousse, André Leroi-Gourhan, and Pierre Bourdieu). Each chapter not only contains brief biographical sketches, but also a long look at influences on the scholars (especially on Mauss and Merleau-Ponty), as well as presenting key aspects of their work which the author regards as relevant to the theme of movement.

Apart from the fact that this is meant to be a doctorate, the difficulty is that most of the material is only tangentially relevant to the overall argument, or at least it is not explained why it is relevant. The treatments of the scholars would be appropriate for a doctorate in sociology or philosophy looking at these particular thinkers, but the length of the treatments means that the reader is left lost in a morass of detail, with very little sense of a developing argument. The title suggests a conversation between Mauss and Merleau-Ponty, and part of Chapter 3 allows for something like this to take place, but it is hardly central. So the question that faces the reader as they struggle through the mountain of text and footnotes and details is “why?”. What is this telling us about the transformative power of movement, what is the relevance of where they took their ideas from, what role do Jousse, Leroi-Gourhan and Bourdieu play in a conversation between two other thinkers?



This problem is already present in the introduction, where the author posits at least three main goals of the dissertation (to introduce Mauss and Merleau-Ponty, to look at their use in theology, and to set out an approach to movement based on their work), with four major authors (Mauss, Merleau-Ponty, Chauvet and de Certeau), which by the end of the work has expanded to seven authors, and nine different methods (listed on pp. 5 and 6). Being charitable, one might assume that the author wants to adopt a broad approach in the argument of the work, but in practice it leaves the work as chaotic and unfocused as this listing suggests.

I mentioned that the chapters are perhaps best seen as individual Magister-level theses, albeit of the highest quality. In saying this, I mean to imply that they are very strong on the descriptive and to some extent synthetic elements of research, but there is really almost no critical engagement with the ideas. We know by the end of the dissertation what Mauss or Merleau-Ponty or the other five thought, but one obvious question that remains is "do we agree with them?" What are the problems that remain with their work, the elements that are not emphasised or ignored, the questions they gloss over, and so on? In a sense, the work could be seen as indulging in a kind of proof-texting, using ideas from the thinkers to construct a view, rather than in engaging critically with them.

To be fair to the author, the way in which the ideas of the figures are used could be construed as constructing its own critical argument, but I would have liked to have seen a more robust discussion of the views that they present, to see to what extent they really hold water, and what would need to be added to them. Just to give one example, in the discussion of Mauss's views on dance, (pp. 67 ff.), his assertion that dance is always for something could lead to a very utilitarian approach to art, something present also in his dismissal (without apparent contextualising) of the "Art for Art's Sake" movement. If this utilitarian approach is introduced into ecclesial life (as it often is), it is not obviously unproblematic.

Another problem is the lack of clarity about what is meant by "movement", somewhat surprising in a dissertation that seeks to speak about movement's transformative power. There is no clear definition in this extremely lengthy dissertation of what is meant by "movement". At times it seems to be something akin to a kind of Heraclitean *panta rhei*, which is fine, but not terribly informative. If everything is movement, and we are always in movement, what transformative power can it have as a particular quality? At other times, it is apparently synonymous with action or act or activity (and again which of those is not clear) (see for example p. 302). If movement and act / action / activity are the same, this would need to be argued and not assumed. For example, writing a book is an activity / act / action, but except in a very limited sense of fingers on keyboard, what form of movement does it involve? Towards the end of the dissertation (p. 323), when it comes to movement in terms of ecclesial practice, there is a clear association of movement with physical action, but that is the only place where this is made emphasised.

This absence of clarity on the nature of movement is all the more surprising given its centrality to the theme. Again a lack of critical engagement with the seven authors may be seen here – are they all talking about the same thing when it comes to movement? It seems to me from the presentation that they are not, but if they are this needs to be shown. What is it that can be transformative – is it to do with physical movement (dance, for example), or is it to do with some kind of psychological movement, metaphorically understood, or is it to do with social movement, or even "movements", like the labour movement or anti-war movement? As I said



above, towards the end of the dissertation, it seems that it is some physical movement that is intended, but that is an unexplained step in the dissertation from a far more general and imprecise meaning of movement to a very particular (and in a sense more understandable) form.

A further point that needs to be raised about the dissertation is to what extent it is linked to theology. Only roughly fifty pages (299–348) are devoted to the question of the link between movement and ecclesial practice, which is about one-seventh of the whole dissertation. On the grounds that it is highly questionable if Michel de Certeau is primarily a theologian, there is arguably only one theologian dealt with in any detail (Louis-Marie Chauvet), and the treatment of Chauvet is one of the shortest of all seven authors. It thus feels like this is a long dissertation on Marcel Mauss and Maurice Merleau-Ponty which rather hastily at the end throws in a bit of what might loosely be called theology, but is really a prescriptive list of what “the church” needs to do.

I had no great problems with any of what the author suggests, but the question arises as to why “movement” is a helpful category for discussing these transformations? If one were simply to ask how the church might be more deeply alive in different (perhaps especially European) contexts, one could arguably provide the same answers without using the word “movement”, so what concretely does “movement” bring to the table?

To sum up some of these points in questions for the defence:

What is the aim, in terms of the final argument of the dissertation, of the long chapters on Mauss and Merleau-Ponty?

Very simply, what is the aim of the dissertation and the question that the author wants to answer in it?

What is movement?

What does “movement” bring extra to a discussion of the need for transformative practices in and by church communities?

What is the contribution of this dissertation to theology?

At a formal level, the dissertation is acceptable. I suspect the language corrector deserves several medals for struggling through it and mostly they have done an excellent job, though the verb “remind” cannot be used intransitively in English. The footnotes are good, and the bibliography is full and contains works in a number of different languages. The pdf version of the dissertation is not well-presented, with new chapters starting half-way down a page, and footnote numbers running throughout the dissertation rather than starting at 1 for each chapter. The chapters are far too long, and as mentioned 4.3 should be a concluding chapter.

Despite my misgivings and criticisms of the dissertation as a doctoral dissertation in theology, I am happy to recommend it for defence, especially because of the quality of the analytical work on the main authors and for interesting suggestions for changes in the final part of chapter 4.



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v Mariánských Lázních, 26. 2. 2024