

# Why Aalto? The sceptic builds for religion

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## WHY AALTO? THE SCEPTIC BUILDS FOR RELIGION

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### Why Aalto?

“We need not be so dogmatic,” Aalto used to advise the members of his atelier. The quip was meant, of course, to encourage playful design methods in the office – but it also aptly crystallises Aalto’s personal attitude toward religion, made manifest in his ecclesiastical projects.<sup>1</sup> As Göran Schildt and others have documented, Aalto was not religious even to the extent of so-called ‘habitual Lutherans’ in Finland, choosing to absent himself even from Christmas services.<sup>2</sup> Despite his personal lack of religious faith, his ecclesiastical works – particularly his churches and parish centres from the 1950s and 1960s both in Finland and abroad – remain some of his most inspiring projects. How and why did an unbelieving architect come to design some of the most significant sacred buildings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century?

In Finland, the Lutheran Church was a critical patron of modern architecture throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The 1920s and 1930s saw the construction of little parish churches erected in order to strengthen national and local identities in the newly independent state. Post-war years shifted the focus from churches to parish centres in an effort to ensure religion’s presence in the day-to-day life of newly urbanised cities and neighbourhoods. Alvar Aalto was one of many modernists employed by the Lutheran Church to realise its ambitions both before and after the wars. Indeed, his ecclesiastical projects parallel and express key developments in Church policy and liturgy, and relate directly to many contemporaries’ sacred architectures.

Still, Aalto’s ecclesiastical projects stand out as particularly relevant exemplars due to their consistent in-between quality: they refer to religious tradition less than historicist designs but more than purely abstracted works, neither confirming nor rejecting religious dogma. Such an in-between quality is linked to his position as a philosophical sceptic – like Aalto himself, his religious architecture doubts rather than declares. Reading Aalto’s churches through the lens of philosophical scepticism reveals critical aspects of Aalto’s own religious architecture, and also helps understand the lasting appeal of other modernists’ projects that crystallise similarly questioning attitudes to religion. Most critically, it helps lay out directions for contemporary sacred architecture. In a world where, on the one hand, secularisation is taking hold stronger, but on the other, religion is once again reasserting itself in the global arena, a creative yet sceptical position is more relevant than ever before.

### Aalto’s Religious Oeuvre

Aalto’s ecclesiastical oeuvre can be considered in two relatively separate phases: the early projects of the 1920s and 1930s, most of which remained unrealised, and the major post-war projects of the 1950s and 1960s.

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<sup>1</sup> Harry Charrington has written extensively of play and intuitive design in the Aalto atelier. See, for example, ‘Coordinating Method and Art: Alvar Aalto at Play’, *Architectural History*, 54 (2011), 309–345 and ‘An Agency of Endless Play: Alvar Aalto and Frederick Kiesler’, *Alvar Aalto Researchers’ Network Working Papers*, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Göran Schildt, ed., *Näin puhui Alvar Aalto* (Keuruu: Otava, 1997), p. 35.

Having graduated from the Helsinki University of Technology in 1921 and founded his own office in Jyväskylä in 1923, Aalto's early-career portfolio consisted of private residential and ecclesiastical commissions, primarily church renovations and competition entries in Central Finland and Ostrobothnia. His early religious projects made reference to the hall churches and freestanding campaniles he had observed on his honeymoon to Tuscany in 1924 with Aino Marsio-Aalto. An unrealised design for the Jyväskylä funerary chapel (1925), for example, directly quotes Brunelleschi's Ospedale degli Innocenti in Florence.<sup>3</sup>

Aalto's Taulumäki (1927) and Töölö (1927) church competition entries illustrate his stylistic shift from classicism to functionalism, a development further exemplified by submissions for churches at Vallila (1929), Tehtaanpuisto (1930) and Tempeliukio (1933). His functionalist proposals were never appreciated by the classically-trained jury members of the prize committees. The Muurame Church (1929), Aalto's first completed church project, sat in the interstice between the neoclassical and functionalist idioms. Following lack of success in all the church competitions he entered in the early 1930s, Aalto designed no ecclesiastical projects at all during the next seventeen years.

After the nearly two-decade intermission from religious architecture, Aalto's return to church design was marked by two winning entries in 1950, a proposal for a church in Lahti and a complex of three funerary chapels in Malmi called 'Trinitas.' Both remained unrealised, although Aalto was later awarded the commission for another church in Lahti on a different site. In 1951, Aalto won the competition for a new church in Seinäjoki, which was later complemented by an entire civic centre, including a town hall and library. The Church of the Plains, as the project was called, was followed by the Church of the Three Crosses at Vuoksenniska, as well as churches in Wolfsburg, Detmerode and Riola, and a parish centre in Alajärvi. Although congregations and the general public have not always been impressed by Aalto's religious projects – for example, the Church of the Three Crosses is still known as 'piruntorjuntabunkkeri,' Finnish for 'anti-devil bunker'<sup>4</sup> – they remain some of the architecturally and theologically most powerful churches in Finland.

### **Religion and modern architecture in Finland**

Due to the presumed irreconcilability between religion and modern architecture, modern religious buildings are typically considered exceptions or antitheses to what is understood as 'orthodox Modernism.' Religious architecture has remained an outlier in the historiography of architectural modernism because of its perceived incompatibility or defiance to precepts of modernity: positivism, empiricism, rationality, mechanisation, and, above all, secularisation. In the Nordics, however, religion has been consistently linked to architectural modernism: the Lutheran Church maintained national church status throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was therefore inextricably linked to national politics and culture. Finland, having declared independence in 1917, consciously celebrated modern architecture as a representation of its newly-established national identity and progressiveness. As patron of modern architecture, the Church could present itself as timely and relevant in the face of increasing secularisation, and simultaneously satisfy its duty as national church to showcase the country's modernisation.

It is hardly surprising, then, that modernist architects should collaborate intensively with the Church particularly in the post-war decades; Aalto was no exception. In line with liturgical reform, the Church broke from previous centuries' stylistic preferences, and advocated a freer creative expression from the 1950s onward. If the desire to encourage broader participation by downplaying traditional liturgy and aesthetics was, for the Church, a way of increasing religion's relevance, for architects, it

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<sup>3</sup> Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen, *Alvar Aalto: Architecture, Modernity, and Geopolitics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 40–42.

<sup>4</sup> An editorial in the newspaper *Kotimaa*, 35 (1964), summed up the general public's dislike of the new churches of the 1950s and 1960s: "We deserve better than concrete boxes."

offered the opportunity to design spatially and visually ambitious projects without excessive design constraints. The Church, even if conservative in its social outlook, was acknowledged and thanked for its role as patron of the arts, and thus, paradoxically, supported even by atheist and agnostic modernists. Aalto's insistence on the creation of total works of art could flourish under the Church's patronage – his ecclesiastical textile, furniture and stained glass designs can be seen as developments both of his own signature style and of the Church's new expression. In fact, Aalto was so insistent that he remain in control of all aspects of his church designs that he was publicly criticised for intentionally excluding artists from his working process.<sup>5</sup>

For many modernists disillusioned by the broken promises of techno-scientific rationalism in the post-war context, the Church's emphasis on the non-quantifiable, the mystic and the humane struck a chord. Ecclesiastical architecture became an outlet for beauty, affect and poeticism, which could not be justified in purely programmatic or functional terms. Aalto found, in the religious context, a suitable framework for the development of his well-known and much-discussed antipathy toward mechanisation. Describing his project for a funerary chapel in Lyngby-Taarbæk, Denmark, for example, Aalto emphasised his steadfast objection to a mechanical catafalque, deriding the invention as entertainment that belonged to Hollywood. A decade earlier, Gunnar Asplund had expressed his disapproval of the machine in the funerary context. Religious architecture's value as a conscious denunciation of uncritical promotion of the machine is still recognised today: Anssi Lassila, for example, has recently described the power of traditional craftsmanship in creating a sense of the sacred.<sup>6</sup>

As a consequence of liturgical reform, Protestant churches recommended that worship be conducted *versus populum*, that is, facing the congregation. The reform led to the detachment of the altar from the apse, a spatial manifestation of the ambition to dismantle hierarchy between officiating clergy and congregation, as we see in all of Aalto's churches. The first purpose-designed *versus populum* church was a diploma thesis project for a church in Jyväskylä, published by Olavi Noronen in 1967, who later went on to design several postmodernist churches and parish centres in the same city. The first *versus populum* service took place in Föglö, Åland, the following year, in a mediaeval stone church modified by Erik Kråkström and Carl-Johan Slotte to conform to the new liturgical guidelines.<sup>7</sup> Following the precedent of other modernists across the Nordics, Aalto composed the east ends of his churches as triads of altar, pulpit and organ, highlighting Lutheran theology's focus on sermons and hymns. Indeed, the focus on music was so strong that modernists typically treated the design of churches as briefs for concert halls; Juha Leiviskä's description of his churches as Baroque fugues crystallises how the enjoyment of music became the most prioritised design driver, superseding prayer or even the celebration of mass, and thus typifying increasingly abstracted and individualised approaches to faith.<sup>8</sup>

The Church's ambition to dismantle its hierarchical structures and consciously bring itself closer to its people was ultimately expressed not only in revised liturgy but also the emphasis set on the parish centre rather than the church as the key building type. Based on the Norwegian 'working church' model, parish centres strove to ensure the presence of religion in the day-to-day life of newly-urbanised neighbourhoods.<sup>9</sup> They were also a vehicle for the Church to ensure continuity of building activity, since the erection of parish centres – devoted to work, socialising and hobbies – provoked

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<sup>5</sup> Mauri Favén, 'Taiteellisuus vaatii asiantuntijaa', *Kotimaa*, 21 (1976).

<sup>6</sup> Minna Joenniemi, 'Periferiasta kajahtaa – OOPÉEAA luo rajaseutujen arkkitehtuuria', *YLE Kulttuuri*, 12.12.2014. <<http://yle.fi/aihe/artikkeli/2014/12/12/periferiasta-kajahtaa-oopeaa-luo-rajaseutujen-arkkitehtuuria>>

<sup>7</sup> Sari Dhima, *Tila tilassa. Liturgian ja tilan dialogi alttarin äärellä* (Helsinki: Yliopistopaino, 2008), p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> Rita Landström, 'Juha Leiviskä, valon ja musiikin arkkitehti', *YLE Elävä arkisto*, 8.7.2008.

<<http://yle.fi/aihe/artikkeli/2008/07/08/juha-leiviska-valon-ja-musiikin-arkkitehti>>

<sup>9</sup> Marja Terttu Knapas, *Suomalaista kirkkoarkkitehtuuria 1917–1970* (Helsinki: Museovirasto, 2006), pp. 10–11.

less opposition than the construction of new churches during the post-war housing crisis.<sup>10</sup> Aalto's late-career churches are, without exception, connected to parish centres as recommended by the Lutheran Church. Schildt argues that rather than religious dogma, a guiding principle in Aalto's life would have been his conception of harmony, rooted in the Ancient Greek conception of the *kosmos* as well as a Goethean conception of natural order.<sup>11</sup> The very purpose of the parish centre can be considered in relation to harmony: the building type promotes the ideal of a life where people live in peace with one another, enjoying work and leisure, ritual and casual socialising, and collective functions and solitude in balance.

Aalto's thinking on the importance of congregating together can also be linked to broader modernist justifications of religion as an instrument of community-building. In the post-war decades, ontological, epistemological and existential debates on religion were peripheral compared to the discourse on community: religion was discussed more as an instrument of social cohesion than a search for theological truths. The focus on community was also linked to an emphasis on Jesus' anti-establishment stance; particularly in the run-up to the student protests of 1968, modernist artists' highlighting of 'Christ the anarchist' became a way of consciously drawing on the philosophical and political content of Christianity rather than renouncing it altogether.<sup>12</sup> Anarchist apologias for religion drew from the Sermon on the Mount, arguing for the relevance of religion as an antidote to hierarchical power structures, inequality and consumerism. In Finland, the movement consciously referred to the socialist anarchist Jean Boldt, who had famously invaded Helsinki Cathedral in 1917 to demonstrate that ostentatious churches were only hindrances to purely selfless charity, which ought to take place in the streets instead.<sup>13</sup> It is undeniable that the Church's promotion of community-centred life would have appealed to Aalto, particularly in light of his spirited defence of the 'little man' – furthermore, even if not directly linked to religious ideology, his appreciation of the Russian anarchist Petr Kropotkin can be considered in similar terms.<sup>14</sup>

### Aalto's Sceptical Religious Architecture

We have seen how Aalto's relationship to ecclesiastical architecture was, in many ways, a development of broader modernist views on religion. His exploitation of the religious context as fruitful ground to further personal artistic expression, in opposition to a purely mechanistic worldview, and reinforcing ideas of community construction, especially in the face of increasing inequality and commercialism, was an attitude shared by many modernists. What distinguishes Aalto's religious projects from those of many contemporaries, however, is their ambiguous relation to religious tradition and imagery. Just as Aalto remained careful not to associate with any particular political viewpoint, he was careful not to commit to any particular religious doctrine; one might draw a parallel between his anti-doctrinaire stances both in politics and in religion. The attitude can be read in his religious architecture, which celebrates artistic expression and the community as straightforwardly as many other modernists, but is more ambivalent in relation to theological dogma, narratives and tradition.

The religious ambiguity of Aalto's ecclesiastical architecture is best illustrated by its aesthetic and spatial expression, which was never as straightforwardly traditionalist nor as abstracted as that of

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<sup>10</sup> Horst Schwebel, 'An Aversion to Grand Gestures: Theological and Liturgical Perspectives on Protestant Church Architecture', in *European Church Architecture 1950–2000*, ed. by Wolfgang Jean Stock (Munich, London: Prestel, 2002), pp. 212–223, p. 219.

<sup>11</sup> Göran Schildt, *Alvar Aalto: The Complete Catalogue of Architecture, Design and Art* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), p. 39; Schildt 1997, p. 28.

<sup>12</sup> For example, the poet Pentti Saarikoski's frequent references to Christ's anarchism influenced many other modernists across the arts. Arto Köykkä, *Sakeinta sumua käskettiin sanoa Jumalaksi: Uskonnollinen kieli Pentti Saarikosken tuotannossa* (Helsinki: Unigrafia, 2017), pp. 137–144.

<sup>13</sup> Samu Nyström, *Poikkeusajan kaupunkielämäkerta: Helsinki ja helsinkiläiset maailmansodassa 1914–1918* (Helsinki: Unigrafia, 2013), pp. 136–137.

<sup>14</sup> Pelkonen 2009, p. 121; Schildt 1994, p. 81.

some of his contemporaries. On the one hand, Aalto dismisses traditional pictorial symbolism almost entirely – none of his later-career churches, for example, have traditional altarpieces or frescoes. Despite their general aversion to symbolism and ornament, many modernists faithfully referred to traditional Biblical scenes and iconography in the ecclesiastical context, even if they reinterpreted them in modernist visual languages, as if the religious building type justified a recourse to otherwise undesirable links to tradition. But on the other hand, Aalto's church designs never became so abstract as to relinquish their ties to religious tradition altogether; they remain legibly, if subtly, ecclesiastical spaces. Aalto's Christian symbolism is always reduced to its most elementary core – the cross. Many modernists rejected any obvious references to religion altogether, instead focusing on abstract compositions of light, space and material, which can be read as efforts to achieve a more general ambiance of the sacred rather than create spaces specific to Christian tradition. Aalto's consistent employment of the cross, as well as the carefully-selected Biblical verses of his altar textiles, or natural imagery of his stained glass windows, stands somewhere in between, illustrating the subtlety with which his religious architecture negotiates the territory between tradition and modernity.

The standalone cross acknowledges the Christian context, but does not proclaim it. This approach can be linked in philosophical terms to scepticism, a position that neither accepts nor denies. Göran Schildt laid the foundation for the consideration of Aalto's philosophical and theological stance as that of the sceptic. Schildt, in a point reinforced by numerous other scholars, characterised Aalto's personal relationship to religious dogma as “an almost Voltairean antipathy”<sup>15</sup> – both Aalto's childhood home and his alma mater, the Jyväskylä Lyceum, emphasised the tradition of French scientific rationalism – but also elaborated on Aalto's appreciation of the “gift of doubt.”<sup>16</sup> In a speech celebrating the Lyceum's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Aalto himself defined scepticism as follows:

“The often disdained sceptical world view is in reality a necessary condition for anyone who would like to make a cultural contribution. This is of course dependent on scepticism's transformation into a positive phenomenon, an unwillingness to ‘move with the stream.’ On a higher level scepticism is transformed into its apparent opposite, to love with a critical sensibility. It is a love that lasts, as it rests on a critically tested foundation. It can result in such a love for the little man that it functions as a kind of guardian when our era's mechanised lifestyle threatens to strangle the individual and the organically harmonious life.”<sup>17</sup>

Schildt regards it “something of a paradox” that Aalto, a fervent non-believer, would design so many powerful religious projects.<sup>18</sup> Given how often Aalto's personal qualities and interests – his internationalism, admiration for Italy, and humanist outlook, to name but a few – are read directly into his architecture, it is unsurprising that his distance from religion would, at first glance, seem problematic or inexplicable in relation to the depth of his religious works. However, like Aalto, many other agnostic and atheist architects went on to design deeply touching and theologically powerful spaces in their time – surely one cannot label all modern religious architecture inherently paradoxical. Instead, perhaps it is more accurate to postulate that Aalto's sacred architecture, like that of many contemporaries, is so compelling not despite but because of a lack of faith. Rather than exhibiting a paradox, perhaps the incongruence between an architect's personal irreligiousness and success in ecclesiastical architecture is a manifestation of a typically modernist characteristic. After all, it is the self-reflexivity and self-questioning nature of modernity that “make it possible for one to entertain simultaneously conflicting conceptions of the world” – perhaps not knowing for certain is more modern than claiming to know.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Schildt 1994, p. 39.

<sup>16</sup> Schildt 1997, p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> Alvar Aalto, ‘Mitä on kulttuuri?’ (1958), in *Näin puhui Alvar Aalto*, ed. by Göran Schildt (Keuruu: Otava, 1997), pp. 15–17.

<sup>18</sup> Schildt 1994, p. 39.

<sup>19</sup> Gustavo Benavides, ‘Modernity’, in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. by Mark Taylor (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), p. 190. See also Renata Hejduk and Jim Williamson, *The Religious Imagination in Modern and Contemporary Architecture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 1–9.

Nordic modernists succeeded in forming productive relations with religion both before and after the wars; in countries where religion has long been understood more in terms of cultural tradition than belief, religion and modernity have never appeared as mutually exclusive as elsewhere. A reading of Aalto's sacred oeuvre through the lens of philosophical scepticism helps explain the lasting appeal not only of his own but of many other modernist church masterpieces in Finland. Kaija and Heikki Sirén's Otaniemi Chapel expresses a pantheist conviction of nature itself, rather than an anthropomorphised image of God, being sacred – but, like Aalto's churches, still remains rooted in Christian tradition through the singular cross that stands outside its fully-glazed altar wall. Raili and Reima Pietilä's Kaleva Church reads as a Christian fish in plan, and its altar sculpture depicts the "bruised reed" described by the prophet Isaiah, but the anonymity of the massing and interior reinforce an overall non-specificity. Similar subtleties can be read in works by Viljo Revell, Pekka Pitkänen, and Timo and Tuomo Suomalainen, to name but a few – a study of many Finnish modernists' sacred architectures in relation to scepticism appears promising.

Karla Britton, drawing from Gianni Vattimo, contends that the "provisionality" of key works of modern sacred architecture "may be truthful precisely because it is neither definitive nor ultimate."<sup>20</sup> In a world defined by plurality and complexity, instrumental reason no longer carries the capacity to formulate absolute truths. The value of sceptical religious architecture lies not in being disengaged from religious discourse but in acknowledging the absence of posited ultimate truths; its provisionality defines its relevance. At its most fruitful, a sceptical position can foster not only an anxious uncertainty but joy; we are reminded how, echoing Goethe, Aalto himself spoke of his scepticism as a "positive seed of doubt."<sup>21</sup> The phrase calls into mind Erasmus of Rotterdam's wisdom: "For so great is the obscurity and variety of humane affairs, that nothing can be clearly known [--]; or if it could, it would but obstruct the pleasure of life."<sup>22</sup>

### The Philosophical Nature of Aalto's Scepticism

All philosophical positions are problematic, and that of the sceptic is no exception. For a start, there are several types of sceptics. Descartes, for example, regularly castigated as a positivist, was famously sceptical about claims that could not be proved to be true, starting from the most basic foundations of what it is possible to know. He was suspicious, above all, of the evidence provided by the senses. As Bernard Williams put it, we need only the universal possibility of error, not the possibility of universal error, to destroy all conviction.<sup>23</sup> But Descartes fought back from that position, so that eventually, for him, the belief in oneself (one's own existence), and thereafter in God, can rescue us, and thence rational behaviour can proceed.

Aalto's scepticism does not appear to be of this kind. In one reading, it is more extreme than Cartesian scepticism. Descartes persuaded himself that a benign deity guides our thoughts (though he acknowledged it could be an evil demon). But truly we have no grounds whatsoever for belief in things in this world, or the next. We have no alternative but to accept the world as it presents itself to us, and our senses are the only means that we have of apprehending it.<sup>24</sup> That does not mean that rationality has no place: the purpose of reason, which of course, as peculiarly well-endowed sentient beings, we are bound to apply, is to correct our misplaced perceptions, although it can never prove things infallibly. If sense-impressions come first, that gives primacy to imaginative intuitions. In their

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<sup>20</sup> Karla Britton, 'Architecture and Theology: The Sacred in the Modern', Conference paper, *Modern Architecture and the Sacred*, Pembroke College, Cambridge, 20–21 April 2017. See also Gianni Vattimo, 'Myth and the Fate of Secularization', trans. by Jon Snyder, *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 9 (1985), 29–35.

<sup>21</sup> Aalto 1958, p. 16.

<sup>22</sup> Erasmus of Rotterdam, *The Praise of Folly* (1509), trans. by John Wilson, ed. by P. Allen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931), pp. 91–92.

<sup>23</sup> Bernard Williams, *Descartes* (London: Penguin Books, 1978).

<sup>24</sup> Naturally this is a simplification. For a historical account see *The Sceptical Tradition*, ed. by Myles Burnyeat (Berkeley: University of California Press: 1983), and for a concise review of contemporary scepticism, referring to a number of recent arguments and counter-arguments, see <http://www.iep.utm.edu/skepcont/>.

imaginings, architects can therefore assemble new forms from sets of previously experienced complexes (buildings and places): we can envisage the extraordinary. We could not do this by the strict application of logic, however, since that is an analytical tool that comes after sensory impressions. Hence Aalto's quarrel with a modernism that purports to proceed seamlessly from the logical analysis of building problems towards design – a position that has proved fruitful for some of his admirers, such as Álvaro Siza, as we shall see. The claims of an architect such as Hannes Meyer are clearly absurd: he produced interesting and innovative buildings, despite rather than in support of his efforts to ridicule the notion of individual imaginative talent.

Nor does Aalto seem to subscribe to Kant's heroic attempted resolution of the subjective/objective problem; Kant suggested that the world as we apprehend it is in some way fashioned by the way we think of it, with the result that, as Paul Guyer puts it:

“Kant's transcendental idealism asserts that things other than our own representations – indeed even our own selves as contrasted to our representations of ourselves – really do lack spatial and temporal properties.”<sup>25</sup>

In common with many of his generation, who rejected such an over-intellectualized systematic construct<sup>26</sup>, Aalto's acceptance of the world as we find it is rather more “commonsense” than that: there may be a mystery as to why there is a world at all, but all we can do is operate within it, in all its complex physicality. Metaphysical speculation is therefore futile: the important questions to determine are what it is right to do in the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Sceptics need not be atheists, but they are at least agnostic. David Hume, for instance, ridicules the idea that we should “have recourse to the veracity of the Supreme Being in order to prove the veracity of our senses”,<sup>27</sup> while holding in abeyance his position on the existence of a divinity – this was something that could not be determined. Ludwig Wittgenstein spent his whole life deliberating on what we could say, and eventually came to believe that though we could say nothing about the most important things in life, we might be able to show them. He illustrated the implications of his beliefs not only by his altruistic forfeiting of a substantial private fortune but also, we might postulate, in the design of a house for his sister; he did not attempt to theorize about either of these manifestations of his character.<sup>28</sup> Alvar Aalto's famous retort, when asked about theoretical questions – that he built, which was sufficient – can therefore be understood as something more than just a refusal to theorise: he suggests, quite properly for a sceptic, that there is nothing that can be said. But this does not mean that he did not think seriously about theory, or philosophy.

In Finland, an influential philosopher whose thinking closely resembles Aalto's was Georg Henrik von Wright (1916–2003), a pupil of Wittgenstein's and later one of his literary executors. In August 1988, he contributed to the 4<sup>th</sup> Alvar Aalto symposium in Jyväskylä on the theme of “Architecture and Cultural Values.” This was the occasion on which Álvaro Siza was awarded the Alvar Aalto medal. Siza, whose intuitive design method is well-known, said he inherited his design theory from Aalto: intuition necessarily comes before the answering of the conditions of the brief. But that does not mean that Aalto did not have a theoretical position:

“... it would be impossible to make good buildings without a strong theoretical base; and I would say that Alvar Aalto must have had a very good theoretical base. Maybe when he

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<sup>25</sup> Paul Guyer, *Kant*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), p. 79.

<sup>26</sup> A common critique of Kant's position is that it leads to an instrumentalisation of nature: ultimately the world is there for man's use.

<sup>27</sup> David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), ed. by L. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 153.

<sup>28</sup> The house has been widely published and analysed. A fuller discussion of Wittgenstein's house(s) and their relation to his philosophy can be found in Nicholas Ray, ‘Embodiment and Private Languages: The Proper Task of an Articulate Architecture’, forthcoming in *ISPA Philosophy of Architecture Journal*.



spoke about misusing paper, he was reacting to some preconceptions about architecture and exaggerated. As far as I understand Aalto's personality, he may also have been joking."<sup>29</sup>

Von Wright's own contribution, entitled 'The Myth of Progress', reviewed the legacy of Enlightenment philosophy (the period of "the separation of facts from values, of Is from Ought" for which, he says, David Hume was chiefly responsible), and its culmination in the remarkable decade of the 1920s, when modernism flourished in all the arts.<sup>30</sup> But, from the ancient Greeks onwards, a positive, optimistic, view of human potential was always accompanied by its pessimistic counterpart: the eighth and ninth books of Plato's *Republic* subscribe to the latter. It was the achievements of science during the nineteenth century which permitted the triumph of the optimistic strand of modernism, exemplified by Hegel's belief in human progress; the pessimistic strand meanwhile was represented by Nietzsche and Spengler. Von Wright concludes with a plea for "de-mythologized rationalism," which debunks scientific and technocratic positivism but maintains a cautious optimism. The most important of the ideals of the (essentially secular) French Revolution is that of *fraternité*, to "transcend all boundaries of nation, race or religion so as to become a consciousness of global responsibility." This surely chimes with Aalto's "love for the little man" – although von Wright never mentions Aalto directly – whilst at the same time being "nothing but a fulfilment of the Christian command that we should love our neighbour as we love ourselves." And von Wright, who refuses to reveal whether he is himself optimistic or pessimistic about the future, or whether or not he shares in a Christian faith, concludes: "The only answer we can give to the question whether there is hope for the future of man runs: Let us work for its fulfilment!"

This conclusion accords with the argument of von Wright's most well-known book, *Humanism as an Approach to Life*<sup>31</sup>, which in turn reflects the philosophical debates in Finland in the early years of the twentieth century, and the classical humanist education that Alvar Aalto had received in the Jyväskylä Lyceum. As well as the classics, he would have read 'sceptical' authors such as Goethe, and Voltaire. As we have seen, Aalto himself never attended church – according to Göran Schildt, not even on Christmas Eve.<sup>32</sup> But how does an architect with such a philosophy address the problem of designing for a faith – particularly the Lutheran faith? Surely by concentrating on the human experience of people who gather together for a benign social purpose. The external spaces (precincts or courtyards) and the supplementary uses (meeting rooms or subsidiary lobbies and gathering spaces) are as important as the worship space. More attention might be devoted to the worship space, in terms of the handling of daylight, or artificial light, or furnishing. But the consummate skill and taste involved is no different in kind from that which is exercised on the ostensibly secular areas. For Aalto there is no distinction, or rather (to adapt a notion that Wittgenstein dwelt upon) it is a distinction that people may bring themselves to the space they use: believers will "see it as" sacred, just as they "see" the sunken library spaces he designed as places in which it is good to read.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Álvaro Siza, 'Views', in *Architecture and Cultural Values*, Proceedings of the 4<sup>th</sup> International Alvar Aalto Symposium, 1988, ed. by Maija Kärkkäinen (Jyväskylä: Alvar Aalto Museum, 1991), p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> Georg Henrik von Wright, 'The Myth of Progress', in *Architecture and Cultural Values*, Proceedings of the 4<sup>th</sup> International Alvar Aalto Symposium, 1988, ed. by Maija Kärkkäinen (Jyväskylä: Alvar Aalto Museum, 1991), pp. 66–89.

<sup>31</sup> Georg Henrik von Wright, *Humanismen som livshållning och anda essayer* (Helsinki: Söderström, 1978), later translated into Finnish as *Humanismi elämänsenteena* (1981).

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Göran Schildt by Nicholas Ray, circa 2003, during which the nature of Aalto's humanism was discussed. Schildt followed up the discussion with a postcard: "The name of the inventor of Gift of Doubt: ERASMUS from Rotterdamus [sic]. Remembered this 5 minutes after your departure. Best wishes, Göran Schildt."

<sup>33</sup> Wittgenstein's use of this expression is discussed in Nicholas Ray, 'Embodiment and Private Languages: The Proper Task of an Articulate Architecture', forthcoming in *ISPA Philosophy of Architecture Journal*.

## Relevance Today

Contemporary scholarship is beginning to question the hegemony of totalising secularisation as a project of modernity. While it is evident that the West, in particular, has become steadily more and more secularised in the past centuries, the role of religion in today's world is far from insignificant. Across the world, religion is reasserting itself in the global political arena in increasingly extremist terms. Even in countries like Finland, which in practice is among the most secularised in the world, the Lutheran Church still maintains national church status and more than three quarters of the population can be counted as members: religion undeniably still plays a role in societies where personal faith has become problematic for the individual. The Lutheran Church remains an active voice in Finnish socio-political discourse and a critical patron of contemporary architecture, as evidenced by the large number of churches and chapels erected within the past few years.

Tellingly, in the address to his alma mater, Aalto quoted the bishop Martti Simojoki: "Christianity should not isolate itself and remain only amongst its own, for it belongs to everyone: both those, who believe, and those, for whom nothing is holy."<sup>34</sup> Mirroring Aalto's own scepticism, Aalto's religious projects make no claims on the veracity of theological constructs per se, but focus on social cohesion, communal ritual and artistic patronage as positives promoted by religion as a cultural phenomenon. Theological discourse may no longer be a mainstream topic of debate in contemporary society, but church architecture offers a potent and productive context within which to highlight humaneness in the face of increasing inequality, economic troubles and societal anguish. It is not insignificant that today's church spaces function as concert halls and refugee accommodation alike – a quality that would have surely been celebrated by Aalto himself. The relevance of Aalto's legacy in the design of contemporary sacred space can thus be summarised in his quip: "We need not be so dogmatic." As a sceptic, Aalto accepted that our knowledge concerning theological truths is inevitably uncertain and incomplete. We will never know for sure, but we need not be so concerned about our uncertainty: as Aalto's sacred portfolio suggests, the religious framework allows for the creation and defence of beautiful, egalitarian, communal spaces irrespective of theological truths – surely a meaningful act in itself.

(4844 words)

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<sup>34</sup> Aalto 1958, p. 17.

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