

# Alle drey Ding vollkommen sind! On the Meaning of Naming the Church after Holy Trinity According to Josua Wegelin, Preacher in Pressburg, Anno 1640

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## Abstract

Based on two erudite occasional prints from 1640, commemorating the consecration of the new Lutheran church in Bratislava, the article concerns the meaning of a church name in the mid-17th century Lutheran religious culture. The issue is set and discussed in the broader context of Lutheran theology regarding places of cult: what is a Lutheran place of cult, what is its sacredness, what is the relationship between church architecture and the worship space it determines. From the perspective of cultural studies, the article provides an insight into the process of imposing the architecture with symbolic meaning.

## Keywords

symbolic meaning of architecture, church name, church consecration, Lutheran sacred space

## 1 Introduction

On the 21st December 1638, the new and at the time, the only Lutheran church in Bratislava was dedicated to the Holy Trinity. Pastor Josua Wegelin, who conducted the consecration service, made an effort to commemorate this very important event in the life of a persecuted religious community with a two-volume occasional publication. The first volume contains a detailed description of the three-day celebration (Wegelin, 1640a), while the second contains the text of a dedication sermon (Wegelin, 1640b). The title page of the first one is illustrated with a schematic depiction of the Bratislava church upon which the sign of the Holy Trinity is shown (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Church of Holy Trinity in Bratislava

The iconography of the picture is obvious: it is the church that is named after the Trinity, but what did it actually mean “to name the church after the Trinity”? Wegelin devoted his dedication sermon to the explanation of this issue. He understood the church name as a powerful symbol, full of important connotations, the meaning of which the faithful had to be taught. Following his arguments, the aim of the article is to reconstruct the meaning of the church name in 17th-century Lutheran culture.

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## 2 Church name as a symbol

In his dedication sermon, Wegelin carefully discusses the differences between Roman Catholic and Lutheran understandings of a church name. Especially important is his remark that both Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches are sometimes named after “dead saints” (Wegelin, 1640b, pp. 20-23). But whereas Roman Catholics use their churches as places for the cult of patron saints, Lutherans – who reject the cult of saints and follow the example of early Christians – have no doubt that their temples are dedicated exclusively to the cult of the only God, despite church names, which are just forms of commemoration of notable Christians:

“[...] That is why we, Evangelicals, are not against names and commemoration of saints in our churches. We not only celebrate annually and with due respect memorias and feast days of the apostles, but also mention other saints and martyrs of Christ in our sermons. Many of our old churches are named after them; we only reject their cultum religiosum, that is worshipping them and praying to them during the service, which, as one might think, they deserve as patrons of the place but which is due to God alone. We hope that even our opponents will admit that in this way we dedicate our temples only to God.” (Wegelin, 1640b, p.23)<sup>1</sup>

Note that Wegelin clearly distinguishes between the name of a church and the place of cult. Although the latter must be dedicated exclusively to the cult of God, its name need not necessarily allude to this fact. Wegelin considers the name as its verbal, conventional symbol, deprived of any sanctity. A Lutheran church can be named after any of the saints as long as the faithful are conscious of whose cult it is actually dedicated.

## 3 Signified: Lutheran place of cult

If the church name is a symbol of the place of cult what actually does it signify, that is, what is the place of cult? For Wegelin it consists of two spheres: material, which is the church building and its furnishing, and spatial, which is abstract and spiritual. To understand the difference between them one must notice a striking but surface contradiction in Wegelin’s use of the word “sacred” (heilige) in reference to the place of cult. Sometimes he describes the place of cult as “sacred” (Wegelin, 1640a, p. 2, 8, 11, 16, 19, 24, 26, 32; Wegelin, 1640b, p. 1, 12, 13) while at other times, he denies it being sacred in any way, by stating that

<sup>1</sup> „[...] Dahero auch uns Evangelischen die Nahmen und Gedächtnus der Heiligen und Martyrer bey den Kirchen nicht entgegen. Sintemal wir auch Jährlichen die Memorias und Gedächtnus der H. Apostel gebühlich darinn begehen / auch anderer Heiligen und Martyrer Christi rühmlich in den Predigen gedencken. Dero Nahmen bey vielen alten Kirchen behalten / und allein cultum religiosum, die jenige Ehre deß Gottesdienst / als deß Gebetts und der Anruffung / daß man sie als Patronen deß Orts durch das Gebett ehren und anruffen solte / welches GOtt allein gebühret / aufheben und abstellen / hoffend gänzlich es werde auch der Gegentheil selbsten uns nicht unrecht geben / daß wir auff eine solche Weise die Tempel und Kirchen GOtt allein zu schreiben.”

it is an idolatry to believe that any material substance could hold any sacredness (Wegelin, 1640b, p. 24, 28–31). A careful analysis allows us to state that Wegelin never describes as sacred the material structure of a place of cult, that is the church building and its furnishing, but he always describes as such the abstract worship space determined by the architectural construction. He, therefore, claims that the place of cult cannot be uncritically identified with the church building. In semiotic terms, for Wegelin, the church architecture is the material, visual symbol of a sacred worship space, just as the name is its verbal symbol. Together they constitute its symbolic sphere.

Both the worship space and its symbolic sphere is established during the consecration service, which in liturgical terms does not differ from regular Lutheran service. There were no specific rites of consecration in Lutheran liturgy because otherwise, it would resemble the strongly criticised Roman-Catholic liturgy of church consecration (Wegelin, 1640b, pp. 24-25). The Lutheran belief that a regular service, based on the Word of God and prayer, is enough to consecrate the temple is founded on the 1st Epistle to Timothy 4:5: “because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.” (Wegelin, 1640b, p. 1) Since for Wegelin, the whole service is understood as the sacred rite of establishing the place of cult, the very act of church dedication to the Holy Trinity is just the moment of public establishing of the symbolic representation of the place. The act of name-giving was not a separate rite - he named the church after Holy Trinity during the consecration sermon - but a symbolic act. (Wegelin, 1640b, p. 9-13)

However, what did the “sacredness” of worship space mean for Wegelin? What are its features? What is the relation between the worship space and the church building? To answer these questions, one should notice the change in the Lutheran view on the nature of places of cult. This occurred in the course of the 16th and 17th centuries, from the complete negation of the possibility of any long-lasting sacredness in connection with the place to a position quite similar to the Roman Catholic one, in a sense that both Roman Catholics and Lutherans considered their places of cult as permanently sacred. Nevertheless, difference was the status and theological basis of both types of sacredness (For the current state of research on Lutheran sacred space see: Leeb, 2015; Umbach, 2015; Wisłocki, 2015).

The first Lutheran consecration sermon was delivered by Martin Luther at the consecration of the palace chapel in Torgau, in 1544. Although Luther spoke about its consecration (“Einweihung”), he meant by this its festive inauguration for worship purposes rather than any consecration in a theological sense. He thought that God is the only holiness, which occurs temporarily in a place of cult, but only because of His presence among the believers, gathered there for service. In this sense, the consecration was made during each service, “by the Word of God and the prayer”, according to 1 Tm 4:5 (Luther, 1544, p. 599). Luther argued that the service was effective not because it took place at

the certain place, but because of the very fact of a gathering of the faithful, because of its public character. According to evangelium of St. Matthew 18,20: "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them". Luther discerned the advantages of using the churches only because of their functionality and disciplinary potential (Umbach, 2015, pp. 31-32).

In the background of Luther's views, the publication of Wegelin starts with an extraordinary quotation from the work of Roman Catholic priest, Laurentius Beyerlinck, entitled "Magnum Theatrum Vitae Humanae":

"Dedication and consecration of temples is nothing else than a kind of festive [...] thanksgiving to God for the joyful finish of house construction, and a request for His blessing for the house, expressed with certain sacred rites. [...] By means of them the house, which is about to become a temple of God and his cult, is singled out as sacred from among the other houses."<sup>2</sup> (Wegelin, 1640a, p. 1)

However, it is not the building which becomes sacred since Wegelin categorically rejects the Roman-Catholic belief in the sacredness of matter of place of cult (On the Roman-Catholic understanding of the sacredness of place of cult see: Enders, 2007; Stammberger, Warnke, Sticher, ed. 2007; Umbach, 2005). In his opinion, sacredness cannot be a feature of any matter because it would open the way to idolatry: "To build houses in honour of God and for the benefit of the church community is not causa superstitionis, the cause of idolatry, as if would be the case if one would consider one place as essentially and by itself more sacred than the other." He explains that to consider one place as an und für sich selbst more sacred than another stands against Ps 21,1: "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." (Wegelin, 1640b, p. 28) In his opinion, only after the rejection of the belief that a Christian temple holds anything sacred in its matter, it can be correctly used as a house of prayer - as it is nothing more than that. Still, he names some places as permanently sacred. Yet, in his opinion the sacredness of places is spatial, abstract, separated from their material sphere. It lasts only on the force of agreement concluded in a certain place between the faithful and God during the consecration service, not because of the essential sacredness of their matter. According to Wegelin, the basis for the sacredness of places is the belief that certain places are chosen by God himself to be permanent places of His worship. Thus, the faithful lead by Holy Spirit (Wegelin, 1648b, p. 1), who distinguish a certain space exclusively for His cult, prove that they understand and fulfil His will. Wegelin bases his statement on two biblical verses: (Ex 20,24)

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<sup>2</sup> „Templorum dedicatio & consecratio nihil est aliud, quam solennis quaedam [...] Deo gratiarum actio, quod domus illa ad optatum finem perducta sit: cui fausta apprecatio certis sacrisque ceremoniis adiungitur [...]. Earumque finis est, ad significandum templum quod dedicatur & consecratur Deo ejusque cultui, ac sacris actionibus deputatum neque esse domum profanum, sed sacram.”

"Make an altar of earth for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, your sheep and goats and your cattle. Wherever I cause my name to be honoured, I will come to you and bless you" and (1 Kings 8,29) "May your eyes be open toward this temple night and day, this place of which you said, 'My Name shall be there,' so that you will hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place". This view gives a theological justification of the practical fact, that – as Wegelin concludes – a place of cult can be established in any place in the world, which is inaugurated for worship purposes by the faithful (Wegelin, 1648b, p. 18). Differently from Luther, for Wegelin its effectiveness is permanent.

The differentiation between the place of cult and the church building is a consequence of the previously described understanding of the nature of the sacredness of place. Just because during the first service the place of cult is established in a certain building, it does not mean, that it could not be established in any other location, not determined by architectural structure. Among different types of temples, Wegelin also counts the open-air temples (templum Hypaethron sive Subdiale, das ist / Lufft und Himmels Kirchen). He informs that Lutherans of Bratislava also used this type of temple during three years of construction of the new church when they moved with their cult to a backyard of one of Bratislava's houses. He describes this place as a temple in the full sense (Wegelin, 1648b, p. 18). The consecrated, or sacred building does not mean a building which construction became somehow sacred, but the one inside of which a sacred worship space was established. "Sacred" means distinguished for worship purposes, and accepted as such by God during the first service, not the place in which God is permanently present.

#### 4 The name of Holy Trinity and its connotations

Having described the features of a church name as a conventional symbol of the place of cult, the remaining question is why Wegelin considers the name of the Holy Trinity the most appropriate. Since, theoretically, any name can be given, he simply chooses the one which carries the most desirable connotations. His explanation, as well as the whole sermon, is based on Num 6,22-27:

"The Lord said to Moses, / "Tell Aaron and his sons, 'This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them: / "The Lord bless you and keep you / the Lord make his face shine on you / and be gracious to you; / the Lord turn his face toward you / and give you peace." / "So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them." (Wegelin, 1648b, p. 6)

Wegelin - after Athanasius of Alexandria and Rupert of Deutz – recognises the typological announcement of the Holy Trinity in the quoted Old Testament verses. He quotes Rupert of Deutz:

"The Lord bless you refers to God Father. The Lord make his face shine on you refers to the Son. The Lord turn his face towards you refers to the Holy Spirit. (...) What can be more

beautiful than this? And what sweeter? In the Old Testament, a light of the new Grace can be seen. The Holy Name of Trinity, which helped the Jews, which destroyed Arius, which oppressed Sabellius, this name we recognise both united and clearly distinguished in the Book of Numbers (which is the fourth Book of Moses).” (Wegelin, 1648b, pp. 12-13)

Wegelin argues that the name of Holy Trinity best conveys the threefold nature of God and as such it is the most proper name of the One in whose service the faithful gather. He explains that to name the church after Holy Trinity is to make it – literally – “the outer symbol of our confession” (“*Symbolum externum nostrae confessionis*”): “to manifest clearly, whom we want to serve in this house, that is one God in three Divine Persons, to whom now and forever it should be dedicated. And that you all agree with this, beloved in God, you have proven with your presence here today, and you will prove the same way in the future” (Wegelin, 1648b, pp. 13-15)<sup>3</sup>. Note that according to Wegelin, the name does not represent the building. It is both the name and the building, as a symbolic entity, which stands for the sacred gathering place of the community. Therefore, all the connotations of this symbolic sphere, as taught by Wegelin, should direct thoughts of the faithful to what the worship space is for, that is the service: to its proper understanding, and the proper way of participation in it. Therefore, the sound of the name and the sight of the dedicated temple should stimulate the faithful to regular participation in services: “since we ourselves dedicated this house to God, we cannot allow it to stay empty. Instead, may it resound with prayer, let the Word of God be preached in it, may the sacraments be administered here” (Wegelin, 1648b, pp. 15-17)<sup>4</sup>. Next, Wegelin teaches, this jointly established symbol, that is the church named after the Holy Trinity, is a reliable signpost (“*Manus directionis*”) informing that in this house the pure evangelium is preached (Wegelin, 1648b, p. 17). Thirdly, the house named after the Holy Trinity determines the border (“*Limes distinctionis*”), which distinguish the place of true Christian worship from temples of false religions (Wegelin, 1648b, p. 18). Moreover, finally, it should encourage the faithful to ardent participation in services: “so that the hearts of those gathered here would lift to God”. Wegelin refers here to a specific character of religious experiences experienced during services, a kind of elation, best expressed in a liturgical

3 „damit zu bekennen / wem wir in diesem Hause dienen wollen / nemblich dem waren dreyeinigen Gott [...] deme solle wie vor diesem / also auch noch und allezeit unser Gottesdienst gewidmet seyn. Das ist ja / ihr Allerliebste in GOtt / ewer aller Meynung / darumb seydt ihr anheut in diesem Hause zusammen kommen / und darumb werdet ihr auch ins künfftige zusammen kommen [...]“

4 „weil wir diß Hauß unserm eigenen Bekandtnus nach gewidmet zum Dienst der H. unnd hochgelobten Dreyfaltigkeit / so will sich ja gebühren / daß wir dasselbe nicht öde oder leer stehen lassen. Sonderlich wann das gemeine Gebett darinnen verrichtet / das Wort deß Herren gepredigt / und seine Sacramenta gehandelt werden.“

formula quoted by him: *Sursum corda!* – and response – *Habemus ad Dominum!* (Wegelin, 1648b, p. 18)

By reference to Num 6,22-27 Wegelin also underlines the strong connection between the name of God and the receiving of God’s blessing. However, he by no means states that the faithful gathered in the church dedicated to Holy Trinity somehow “automatically” receive the blessing, which would be a pure magic. For him, the name of the church can only remind the faithful of the fact that God blesses those who are gathered in His name, that is those who consciously participate in His service. As a pattern, Wegelin evokes the image of the gathering of the disciples after the Ascension of Jesus, to whom Christ came and blessed them with words “*pax vobis*” (Wegelin, 1648b, pp. 8-9). Preacher explains that the name of the church refers to God’s presence among the faithful gathered in the service, which is the source of blessing: “for we ought to know, that (...) God himself is present among us in His grace, according to promise made in Ex 20:24: wherever I cause my name to be honoured, I will come to you and bless you, and Mt. 18:20, where Christ, our Saviour, said: for where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.” (Wegelin, 1648b, p. 17)<sup>5</sup>

Wegelin also points out contemporary connotations of the name of the church. His statement *Alle drey Ding vollkommen sind!* concerns not only Holy Trinity, but also that he considers the church in Bratislava as the third of the great Danubian Lutheran churches of this name – after the churches in Ulm (consecrated in 1621) and in Regensburg (consecrated in 1631). It is not clear why he invokes both older churches, as he does not mention any other similarities between all three temples than their location on the Danube river and that they were consecrated with the Word of God and prayer (Wegelin, 1648b, p. 7-8).

## 5 Conclusion. Cultural sense of architecture

To conclude, in the 16th and 17th centuries the Lutheran view on the sacredness and the symbolic sphere of their places of cult did not evolve into commonly accepted doctrine. Thus, the case study presented here, although based on – in the author’s opinion – two of the most elaborate texts on the subject written in the period, is the reconstruction of the views of one man. Nonetheless, it allows the drawing of some general conclusions on the process of making cultural sense of architecture. If we accept the popular definition of culture as a web of symbolic meanings, the church building and its furnishing, with its rich symbolism, must be considered a very significant part of culture in total, and the religious culture in particular. From the perspective of cultural studies, the architecture is, by

5 „Dann da müssen wir wissen / daß nicht nur der Nahm / sondern der Herr selbst sonderbarlich und in gnaden bey uns ist. Laut seiner Verheissung im 2. Buch Mosis im 20. Cap. Wo ich meines Nahmens Gedächtnus stiften werde / da will ich zu dir kommen / und dich segnen. Und Matth. 18. da Christus unser Heyland selber gesagt: Wo zwey oder drey in meinem Nahmen versamblet sind / da will ich mitten unter ihnen seyn.“

itself, deprived of any meaning, as any symbolic senses which may be represented by means of it are conventional. Thus, to signify something, architecture must be first invested with desired meaning, which next function as a part of common knowledge, shared within a certain social group. To decode the meaning, group members need proper keys of interpretation, which they are taught in a process of acculturation. In respect to church architecture and furnishing, the faithful learn its symbolic senses during services, that is, at the time, when they simply serve liturgical purposes. In the pre-modern era, consecration services, during which special attention was paid to the symbolic meaning of temple, were of special importance in the process of construction and transfer of this knowledge. They not only served the purpose of establishing of new places of cult in religious terms but also played a crucial role in the construction of their sphere of symbolic senses. Wegelin explained in his sermon the whole variety of connotations that should occur in the minds of the faithful at the sound of the church name and the sight of the named church building. He invested these symbols with many senses, using them as powerful mnemonic tools. Moreover, he codified this knowledge and published in the occasional prints to make it a part of collective memory and identity.

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