

Ora pro Nobis: Development of Western Meditative Traditions through Form

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Abstract. The title *Ora pro Nobis* is Latin, reading: “pray for us”. These words are part of the final sentence within the prayer Hail Mary that is constitutive in the Roman Catholic, meditative rosary prayers. This project was initiated by a newspaper headline concerning the Israeli attack on Gaza in December 2008, in which some Palestinians asked the outside world to pray for them. The research question raised is: how can secularized Christians respond to such a request? The suggested answer to this question is put forward by a new artefact, accompanied by this written text. The artefact produced is a prayer rope made of the very newspaper pages on which the war reports were printed. The text accounts for the context, concept development and production of the artefact. The project represents one example of how the visual and the verbal can be unified in artistic or design research.

1 Introduction

The title *Ora pro Nobis* is Latin, reading: “pray for us”. These words are part of the final sentence within the prayer Hail Mary that is constitutive in the Roman Catholic, meditative rosary prayers.¹ The term *rosary* denotes two things: a) a set of verbal prayers and meditations, and b) a physical object designed to accompany this particular prayer practice. In this project, the title refers to the rosary tradition both as an object and verbally.

The project was initiated by a newspaper headline concerning the Israeli attack on Gaza in December 2008, in which some Palestinians were reported to beg the outer world for prayers, saying: “Now, you must only pray for us”.² The research question raised is: how can secularized Christians respond to a request for prayers from a Moslem community? Generally speaking: How can we pray for those who suffer in the world?

This project takes its point of departure in the fields of art and design. Besides aiming at contributing to answer the research question, it represents one example of how the visual and the verbal can be unified in artistic or design research. Artists and designers think through their making, transforming what they know, feel and anticipate into materiality. The art or design work embodies this thinking. Although

¹ *Ave Maria mater Dei, ora pro nobis, nunc et in hora mortis nostrae.*

² ““Nå må dere bare be for oss. Israelerne ødelegger alt som kommer i deres vei” er meldingen fra palestinerne i Gaza, sier Merete Taksdal, Norwac” (*Klassekampen* 16. January 2009: 12).

interpreted by an individual, it represents a vision that through its materiality becomes publicly available. Therefore, the suggested answer to the research question, in this context, is set forward by a new artefact.

One may ask what the difference is between research and professional art or design practice. In this author's opinion, it rests in the willingness and ability of the artist or designer to articulate her reflections related to her art or design process. If such an articulation is done adequately according to the topic treated, new knowledge will arise, both on the personal level and in the wider context of the fields [Jarvis 1999]. This paper is a retrospective reflection systematically thinking through and extending the reflections in practice connected to an art or design process. It is this writing – accounting for the context, conceptualization, making and outcome – that turns the project into one of artistic or design research.

Methodologically, such a strategy was the recommended role model of art and design research in its initial phase in the late 1980s and 1990s. The author holds that this method, which during the early phase of artistic or design research was left to please the demand for scientific research methodologies, still is relevant and efficient. Being developed from within the art and design fields, it basically does not harm practice or the making processes. Rather, it sheds light on the art and design activities that often are considered tacit. Such a method helps the artist or designer become more explicitly aware of their art or design practice. Thereby, they may build their personal theory and add to the shared knowledge within the fields [Jarvis 1999; Refsum 2007 and 2008].

Religious understanding and practices constantly change through time, adapting to current cultural needs. Since there is a close relationship between a religion and its material culture, artists and designers may play a role in these alterations. Theology provides the narratives and concepts that artists and designers reflect in images and artefacts. The images in turn influence theological thinking. Thus, by providing new religious materiality, artists and designers may take part in the development of a culture's religious thinking [Bergmann 2003: 65]. The Palestinian request for prayers invites a discussion about what prayer is, and furthermore, what we want it to be in our time and culture. In this project, their appeal for prayer is taken as an opportunity to explore the concept of prayer in between cultures: what prayers may be inter-religiously, phenomenologically and functionally.

From the perspective of the fields of art and design the *Ora pro Nobis* project intends to contribute in the contemporary discourse on theological practice.³ It takes its point of departure within Christian meditative traditions based on prayer ropes and loops of beads, combining it with other current meditation practices. The project is controversial in traditional research contexts. In the context of artistic and design research, it represents one example of how the visual and the verbal can be unified. The project demonstrates how a new artefact can change the way a problem is

³ This *Ora pro Nobis* project is part of a wider, ongoing artistic or design research project titled *Prayer Ropes* that aims at contributing to revitalize and develop Western meditative prayer practices. It is linked to the international, collaborative research project on ecology and Christian doctrine, *Christian Faith and the Earth*, group 11. Liturgy and Life. (<http://fore.research.yale.edu/religion/christianity/ChristianFaithandEarth/CFE%20Homepage.htm>).

understood. An artefact may open a new vision and it represents new empirical material from which further thinking can be developed.

The paper accounts for the subject matter of the project, the context, conceptualization, making and outcome of the artefact, namely a prayer rope. Firstly, the concepts of prayer and prayer beads are defined; secondly, the art or design context of the artefact produced is treated; thirdly, the concept development and production process is accounted for; and fourthly, future use and further development of the work is suggested.

2 Prayer and Beads

2.1 Defining Prayer

Prayer can take various forms; it can be verbal or wordless, outspoken or silent. Silent prayer is often called contemplation or meditation. In religious contexts that uphold the notion of a personal God,⁴ prayers can be defined as talking to God.⁵ However, to think that prayers will influence God or future events is superstitious magic. The only thing that can be said for certain about the effects of prayer in general, meditation included, is that it affects those who pray [Brümmer 2008: 12-13].

Meditation is inherent in all religious practices, but it can also be learnt and practiced in secular contexts. In such contexts, meditation is defined as a mental practice and a non-religious activity. The same activity, however, will in a religious context be regarded a religious activity. In this paper, meditation within religious contexts is synonymously denoted meditative prayer. A general term that may characterize meditation as an activity and a phenomenon both in religious and non-religious contexts is “silencing the mind”. Undoubtedly, meditative practices clean your mind and are beneficial for health, well-being and educational purposes [Fischer 2006]. It is a method of establishing order and meaning in one’s mental and personal life.

The Palestinian request for prayers was directed from a Muslim culture towards Christian cultures. Since meditation is one form of prayer practiced within both Islam and Christianity, and also takes place in secular contexts, meditation may represent a meeting point between different cultural spheres, religious as well as non-religious. Therefore, this project takes its point of departure in meditation, and furthermore in meditative prayer within the Western Christian tradition to which the author culturally belongs.

⁴ In Buddhism that holds a different idea of ultimate reality this definition is not adequate.

⁵ *The Catholic Encyclopedia*: Prayer (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12345b.htm>).

2.2 Meditative Prayer Practices

Meditation and meditative prayer are practiced in various forms. Basic constituents in meditation are: 1) mental focus 2) postures, and eventually 3) prayer objects or elements. The mental focus can be: a) verbal contents of saying a word, a sentence or whole sets of prayers; b) auditive uttering of a sound; or simply c) to follow one's breathing rhythm. The posture can vary from: a) sitting, with your legs crossed in variations of lotus positions, to sit upright on a pillow, stool or bench with your back straight; b) to stand grounded on your feet in various positions related to knees and arms; c) or to move, either in set positions or freely as you wish, even lying down. The postures shall help the body breathe more deeply. Prayer objects may be: a) visual images to look at; b) tactile objects to sense and hold on to, one example being meditation cords with knots or beads on which the prayers can be counted;⁶ and c) perceivable elements like fire, smells etc. The possibilities and combinations of these elements are countless.

Meditation is often understood as inherited from Asian religious practices, probably because such practices since the 1960s have become widely adopted in the West. In Christian contexts, the most common practices are Zen-Buddhist meditative traditions, *za-zen*, based on breathing and sitting postures [Kennedy 2000]. But also Hindu inspired meditation based on saying a mantra together with an awareness of the breathing and sitting posture is adopted [Main 2002; Freeman 2007].⁷ In secular contexts, both forms are practiced as well as meditation connected to martial art practices like *taiji*, incorporating static (*ji gong*) and moving meditation.

Christianity has its own prayer traditions that are meditative.⁸ Continuous verbal prayers based on the Lord's Prayer or the Jesus Prayer⁹ can be said anywhere in whatever posture, and with or without prayer objects at hand.¹⁰ The Roman Catholic rosary series is a meditative prayer, based on verbal prayers, Hail Mary in particular, textual meditations and loops of beads: rosaries. It can be said silently in private or spoken as a dialogue in private or in church. Within the Protestant Churches the practice of praying with beads was lost during the reformation process.¹¹ The rosary

⁶ There also may be outer sounds that regulate the meditation, often made by cymbals and bells.

⁷ Introduced by the Benedictine monk John Main (1926-1982), his teachings are furthered by Laurence Freeman O.S.B. in The World Community for Christian Meditation, see online: <<http://www.wccm.org/item.asp?recordid=johnmain&pagestyle=default>>.

⁸ When neurologists measures the wavelength within the brains of meditating monks East and West, the wave patterns registered are similar. During meditation the brain activity deviates from being awake and in sleep. This mental state registered may explain the experience of phenomena labeled spirituality [Johnston 1978; Beauregard and O'Leary 2007].

⁹ A very simple prayer, with or without the words in brackets: Lord (Jesus) have mercy on me (a sinner), or simply in Greek: *Kyrie eleison!*

¹⁰ *En rysk pilgrims berättelser* 1980.

¹¹ The Roman Catholic Church in the 15th century began granting indulgences to those who recited the rosary. The reformists of the 16th century strongly rejected this practice. Although it was reformed within the Roman Catholic Church in the Council of Trent in the mid 16th century [Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils 1990, vol. II: 796], the reformists came to regard the veneration of Holy Mary, and the mumbling recitation of the rosary in particular, as despicable practices [Oelke 2003].

prayers directed to Holy Mary became for Martin Luther and his fellow Protestants the very symbol of all that was loathsome and corrupt in the Church of Rome [Camara 2002: 11].¹² Today, however, there seems to be a need for this kind of meditative, religious practice within Lutheran communities. The Swedish Lutheran priest Martin Lönnebo has recently developed a loop of prayer beads called *The Christ Wreath* [Lönnebo 2000].¹³

This project was initiated by a Muslim request for prayers directed towards Christian communities. There was no request of any particular prayer. However, the project was developed with wish to focus on a prayer method that might be compatible in both cultures. Since meditation or prayer with beads is an inter-religiously shared practice within Islamic and Christian cultures, it seemed logical to continue the work by focusing on prayer ropes. The challenging question, however, was what to say or rather pray on the beads.

2.3 Prayer Ropes

The use of prayer ropes when praying – popularly often called ‘beads’ – is global; all the higher world religions have them.¹⁴ They are made of strings of knops, knots and beads of any kind that can be touched by the fingers, one by one, to keep count of the prayers said. Christianity was the last world religion to cultivate prayer cords, dating back to the 12th century [Baumann 2003: 321; Winston 1993; Winston-Allen 1998].¹⁵

The Christian tradition of praying with beads seems to have arisen in monasteries. Monastic life is structured by the liturgy of the hours or Divine Office¹⁶ that includes readings, prayers and the recitation of the psalms of King David, all 150 in the stricter rules, every day and night. However, in many monasteries it was instructed that lay brothers, who knew no Latin, instead of following the Divine Office could say Lord’s Prayer a certain number of times each day. Lord’s Prayer is considered the model prayer in any Christian denomination.¹⁷ Optimally, the number should be one for each psalm every day, 150 in all. But according to their other practical obligations, a fraction of two thirds, or just one third, was acceptable: Thereby, the daily number of the pater noster to recite became 100 or 50.

¹² While the Protestants rejected and lost contact with the Christian bead-based meditative tradition, the remaining Catholics embraced their rosaries even more feverishly, regarding them as a weapon against heresy and a defense of their true faith.

¹³ In my opinion, this system of 18 different beads, focusing on Biblical texts, is too demanding intellectually to categorize as meditation in a traditional sense.

¹⁴ *The Catholic Encyclopedia*: Use of Beads at Prayer (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02361c.htm>)

¹⁵ *The Catholic Encyclopedia*: Rosary (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13184b.htm>)

¹⁶ See: <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11219a.htm>>.

¹⁷ When the disciples, according to Scripture, asked Jesus how to pray, he taught them this prayer named after its first two words. This prayer is found in two versions in the Gospels: Matthew, 6.9b-13, and Luke 11.2b-14. See: *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 2003 vol. 8: 784; available online: <<http://www.preces-latinae.org/thesaurus/Basics/OraDom.html>>; for an informative overview see also Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord's_Prayer>.

To keep count of the numbers of prayers prescribed, the monks made an apparatus of pebbles or beads strung upon a rope. This object commonly was known as a "pater-noster", from *Pater Noster* that is Latin for Our Father, the initial two words in Lord's Prayer. This pater-noster cord is considered the original Christian prayer cord. It is the forerunner of the subsequent rosary that represents a more elaborate system of both prayers and beads. Most often, the pater-nosters counted 50 beads that could be prayed as many times as wanted. Interestingly, the rosary is composed of 50 prayer beads that are interrupted by the so called stations at each decade. The name pater-noster was retained even when such a string of beads was used to count, not Our Fathers, but Hail Marys.¹⁸ Although waning in popularity after the development of the rosary in late Medieval time, the pater-noster cords were not replaced altogether, but existed parallel to the rosaries.

Today, pater noster ropes consist of different numbers, most often 50 or 100 beads or knots put on a string, with or without markers for the decades. They resemble the prayer ropes in the Orthodox Churches that most often have number 33 or 99 beads. These prayer ropes have markings between every 11th or 33rd bead, and is made for recitation of the Jesus prayer, and not Lord's Prayer.¹⁹ This arrangement formally is close to the Muslim prayer ropes of 33 or 99 + 1 bead, representing the names of Allah/God.²⁰

The pater nosters and rosaries as physical items represent the Western examples of the universally found prayer beads. Countless varieties of them exist [500 Jahre Rosenkranz. 1475 Köln 1975 1976; Frei and Bühler 2003].²¹ Pater noster ropes are still made in the preferred number and form of the client.²² This meditation object is not offensive to any Christian denomination and it has the same shape as a Muslim prayer rope. Therefore, it was chosen as the compositional foundation in the *Ora pro Nobis* project.

2.4 Meditative Prayer as a Survival Strategy

When we are asked to pray for someone we know, we can sit down and concentrate on them in verbal or meditative prayer, which may well be just to sit in silence. The mature religious attitude to prayer is that one prays in order to dispose oneself to receive spiritual strength to cope with the way things go. Such an attitude is expressed in the prayer "Thy will be done" within Lord's Prayer [Brümmer: 12-13]. Prayer understood in this way may represent a survival strategy. The choice of formally building upon the tradition of pater noster ropes underscores indirectly such an attitude to prayer.

¹⁸ *The Catholic Encyclopedia*: Lord's Prayer (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09356a.htm>)

¹⁹ The prayer rope, *chotki*, in the orthodox traditions fall outside the scope of this paper. See: <http://www.icbs.com/prayer/Sermons/orthodox-rosary.htm>.

²⁰ See: <http://www.faizani.com/articles/names.html>.

²¹ See also: http://images.google.no/images?q=rosary&oe=utf-8&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&client=firefox-a&um=1&ie=UTF8&ei=VDJWSqW1OoK6mgOEzOndCQ&sa=X&oi=image_result_group&ct=title&resnum=12.

²² See: <http://www.chotkis.com/catalog/index.php?cPath=26>.

According to the Holocaust survivor, the late Austrian psychiatrist Victor Frankl (1905-1997), it is essential for the ability to uphold one's life and keeping the willingness to live, to establish meaning in one's personal life. Frankl writes: "This experiential evidence conformed the survival value of the 'the will to meaning' and of self-transcendence – the reaching out beyond ourselves for something other than ourselves" [Frankl 2000: 97]. The basic idea that helped Frankl – a secularized Jew – to survive was that: "There exists something I have called the 'suprameaning', *but not in the sense of something supernatural*. In this we can only believe [...] essentially we all do believe it" [Frankl 2000: 56].²³

Prayer beads are objects that represent a set order, which may help its user hold on to meaning in chaotic times.²⁴ One recent example of this is the former Colombian presidential candidate, Ingrid Betancourt, who was held captured for six years. She made a rosary from the materials at hand: buttons, nails and cord that helped her keep her sanity and hope during the time of captivity.²⁵

2.5 Western Prayer Beads Today

During the last decades, beaded necklaces that formally resemble prayer beads have become increasingly popular in secular contexts. Also traditional prayer beads and rosaries are often seen worn around the neck by rock stars and models, a practice similar to the use of crosses and crucifixes. The functionally religious objects are here taken out of their traditional context and used as accessories. They induce associations of tradition, memory, symbolic power and even magic. The effect is powerful since it seems to have inspired part of the contemporary jewelry production. In religious contexts, the rosary seldom will be worn around the neck. Professionals (monks and nuns) keep their private rosary in the belt, lay people may most often hide it in pockets and bags, while exposing it at home, commonly hanging on the wall for display.

Praying with beads in Christian religious contexts also has had a recent revival. The late Pope John Paul II announced 2003 The Year of the Rosary. He strongly advocated prayer, the rosary prayer in particular, as a means to create inter-religious understanding and peace among people [John Paul II 2002]. Many contemporary Roman Catholics dislike rosaries, however, associating the rosary prayers with the penalty given after confession. Saying the rosary may even be regarded as an old-fashioned enterprise connected to Mediterranean cultures where ignorant, black clothed women gather in the evenings for a shared mumble in their churches. Undoubtedly, it is the traditionalist and conservative groups within the Roman

²³ Frankl's conviction constitutes the foundation for his logotherapy. He could see beyond the misery in any situation, to the potential for discovering a meaning behind it. Thus he could turn an apparently meaningless suffering into a genuine human achievement: "I am convinced that, in the final analysis, there is no situation that does not contain within it the seed of a meaning" [Frankl 1995: 53].

²⁴ In an article about Guantánamo, the illustration shows a hand behind a double iron fence, holding a Muslim prayer cord (*Aftenposten* 25.01.09: 2).

²⁵ See: <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7266587.stm>>

<<http://medjugorje.wordpress.com/2008/07/05/ingrid%E2%80%99s-beautiful-rosary/>>.

Catholic Church that favour the rosary. Those who do not share their religious political views may distance themselves from the use of prayer beads instead of seeing the value of this meditative tradition.

However, while liberal Catholics are somewhat discouraged towards their rosary tradition, members of Protestant Churches and even some post- and non-Christians in the West have recognized the potential of prayer beads in their spiritual journeys.²⁶ New books and homepages on beading and the benefits of prayer ropes are regularly published [Winston 2008]. A supply of traditional varieties of pater noster and rosaries of all kinds of materials and qualities with ditto prices are easily available on the Internet, which in itself indicates a demand.²⁷

3 Art or Design Context

3.1 Contemporary Development of Prayer Beads

The traditional prayer beads fill their practical function, therefore, little if any effort has been done to redesign these objects. On the conceptual level, however, reflections on the rosary have taken place. The American painter James Brown (1951-) has worked on the theme of the rosary in flat objects of mixed media in the late 1980s [Mennekes 1989: 102].²⁸ His work is reflective on the mysteries of the rosary, rather than focused on the beads as tactile objects. It resembles the work of the American Modernist painter Barnett Newman's (1905-1970), especially his black and white series *Stations of the Cross* (1958-1966).²⁹

In the collections of the Victorian & Albert Museum in London, prayer beads occupy a separate category of their jewelry collection. Even today, some jewelers produce prayer beads in the form of rosaries, more or less experimentally [Turner, 1996]. The Netherlandish jewelry artist Peter Hoogeboom (1961-) produces rough jewelry that may well be understood as experimental prayer beads – at least formally his works can be interpreted to extend this tradition.³⁰ The Swiss artist Adriana Stadler was in 2003 commissioned to make an outdoor installation in Sacseln in Switzerland, based on the rosary as a theme.³¹ Her work is based on pattern and rhythms, relating to circle and center, rather than the traditional rosary form [Odermatt 2003: 366]. The Netherlandish artist Maria Roosen (1957-) is a contemporary, experimental maker of rosaries. She has produced several installations with huge rosaries made of glass, like her 10m long *Roosenkrans*, in glass and metal

²⁶ See: <http://www.angelfire.com/my/zelime/beads_karen.html>.

²⁷ See: <<http://www.discountcatholicproducts.com/catholic-store/Rosaries/Rosaries.aspx?gclid=CJO3yLKdyZsCFcQTzAodYhz9Kg>>.

²⁸ See: <<http://www.artnet.com/artist/3168/james-brown.html>>.

²⁹ See: <<http://www.pierretristam.com/Bobst/07/cn040607.htm>>.

³⁰ See: <http://www.klimt02.net/jewellers/index.php?item_id=9228>.

³¹ She is raised in a Roman Catholic tradition, but does not regard herself confessionally religious.

from 1997 [Frei and Bühler 2003: 12].³² Formally, her work has resemblance to the French artist Jean Michel Othoniel (1964-).³³ He also works with glass beads, necklaces and ropes in various forms within a large scale of several meters, and some of his works definitely are rosaries [Doove 2001].³⁴ When the rosary is made in such huge dimensions, they no longer resemble the functional prayer tool kept in the belt or the pocket. In these cases, the conceptual side of the work becomes dominant, raising questions about what it is, how we perceive it, and possibly might use it. This is the line of thought to which the *Ora pro Nobis* project adheres.

3.2 Ecclesial Art and Catechetical Design

The *Ora pro Nobis* project is an autonomous piece of work, as far as it is not being commissioned. However, it clearly addresses ecclesial³⁵ milieus that have a close relationship to prayer. Ecclesial art has to relate to the demands of the commissioner or its future users [Flannery 1981].³⁶ Therefore, it may be seen as having a closer connection to design than to art, especially in relation to the contemporary art scene. As far as this project addresses congregations, aiming at being used liturgically during the prayers for the world within a mass, it may be regarded one of liturgical art. Dependent on the interpretation and accent given to the work, it may even be considered catechetical³⁷ design. If the work is seen as inducing reflections on the question of prayer as such, the sufferings of the other, or inter-religious relations, it definitely has a teaching component. This catechetical aspect is strengthened by the project being extended into one of artistic or design research through the articulation and clarification of the multi-layered reflections inherent in the artefact produced.

4 Art or Design Interpretation

4.1 Concept Development

Daily, I leaf through several newspapers, exposing myself to different accounts of the foreign affairs. The reported misery of the world, to which I can do near to nothing, is often difficult to face. In the fall 2008, I decided as a maker of objects –

³² See: http://images.google.no/images?hl=no&client=firefox-a&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&hs=UZI&q=Maria+Roosen&um=1&ie=UTF-8&ei=hmBXSo-jH6DKmgON9PXdcQ&sa=X&oi=image_result_group&ct=title&resnum=4 and <http://www.mariaroosen.com/>.

³³ See images: http://images.google.no/images?hl=no&source=hp&q=jean+michel+othoniel&um=1&ie=UTF-8&ei=Ls69SoTkOtHuQaskt3IAQ&sa=X&oi=image_result_group&ct=title&resnum=4.

³⁴ See front page of the catalogue [Doove 2001].

³⁵ *Ecclesia*, Greek, the church, building and congregation.

³⁶ See for instance the work of the German artist Heinz Mack (1931-) [Mack, 1996].

³⁷ Catechet, a teacher within Christianity, from Greek *kathekein*, teaching.

artist/designer/crafts person – to collect the very pages, bringing the bad news in my daily newspapers. The intention was to use them as material for making of a meditation object in the form of a prayer rope. As a convenient date to begin collecting the newspaper pages, I chose the first day of the Church’s liturgical year, 1. Sunday of Advent 2008.

Before long, the news was flooded by the horrors from the Near Middle East. The request for prayers by the terrified Palestinians was something that confirmed the actuality of the project and directed its realization. From being a work related to any misery in the world, I came to see the prayer rope as a distinct response to the Palestinian sufferings.

The process began by producing the “beads” without a clear idea of what this should become and how. However, the only competence in spiritual matters that I can rely on, are my own experiences gained within the Western Christian culture, Lutheran and Roman Catholic. Working in a country that for 450 years has been nearly homogenous Evangelical Lutheran, to produce a rosary would have little chance of being received. Likewise, prayers directed to Holy Mary might not be appropriate from a Muslim point of view, so I decided to make a more neutral rope of 100 beads. In a Christian context, such a rope could be considered a pater noster rope, and the Lord’s prayer is universally foundational for all Christians. In a Muslim context, such an object could be perceived as what it is: a prayer rope.³⁸ A premise for the work has been to try to reduce conflicts, and instead contribute to improve ecumenical,³⁹ as well as the inter-religious dialogues.

The Palestinian request for prayers was directed to the Western world in general. A probable interpretation of this appeal is that as many as possible should pray. If so, a pater noster cord would hardly be the best way of inducing prayers, either in a Christian context that is not used to prayer ropes or in a secular society. The idea matured. If prayer is defined as the mere act of concentrating attention onto something, everyone, religious or secular, might be included. Following this line of thought, I decided to let each of the 100 beads represent a prayer expressed simply as: *ora pro nobis*, pray for us! This sentence has a double meaning, pray for us points in this case to those we pray for, but it also includes those who utter the sentence. Therein, lies a double cry for help: for them, for us, and even the Israelis. *Ora pro Nobis* embodies and expresses the helplessness from all sides, resting in the awareness of the misery. My thinking is that keeping the awareness about something is a vital part of finding a solution. Also today, this will be an important act as long as the conflict is far from solved.

³⁸ Feminist theologians strongly ask for gender-neutral terms to which I sympathize [Johnson 2002]. Lord’s prayer, however, is ancient, originally written in Aramaic. I chose to understand its contents in the light of the original in which father actually refers to parent, rather than a male [Douglas-Klotz 1990]. To me, this prayer in its old Western translation carries tradition and memory. When translated into contemporary prose it loses some of this quality. Therefore, in meditative contexts, I prefer the Latin version to underscore the aspect of universality and time eternal. In other contexts, I welcome new translations!

³⁹ Ecumenical, inter-Christian, from Greek *oikoumenikos*, worldwide, universal.

4.2 The Making

My morning newspaper is the national *Aftenposten* that at the time of the working period had two double pages of foreign affairs every day. The choice was simple; I used them both. This material made a sphere volume of ca. 5 cm in diameter, when formed into a ball or “bead”.

The process was simple enough. I made one bead each day, but sometimes I had to just collect the material and make several at the time. To make the bead, I firstly selected the actual pages. Then, they were carefully watered. Next, they were formed in the hand, and finally this form was tied hard with cotton thread, figure 1 a-d.



Fig. 1 a-b. a) Finding the pages of the foreign affairs; b) watering the actual pages



Fig. 1 c-d. c) Forming the wet pages by hand; d) stringing the formed material

The beads were carefully stored in right order according to their dates, and would dry at least for two weeks before being unstrung, figure 2 a and b.



Fig. 2 a-b. Stringed beads stored; b) storage of stringed and unstringed beads

I did not start making the actual rope before all the 100 beads were produced, dried and unstringed. How to organise the beads into a rope was more difficult than anticipated. I would not drill holes in them and string them onto a cord, but intended to bind them together somehow by a rope. Several ropes were considered and tried: hemp, cotton, polyester and paper. The choice fell on a twisted three-folded paper string, due to construction possibilities, form, size, strength, texture and colour, figure 3.



Fig. 3. Paper thread, galvanized metal thread, pliers, and storage

Each bead was mounted into the thread and the ends were secured by galvanized iron thread, figure 4 a and b.



Fig. 4. Mounting the bead into the thread; b) securing the packing with iron galvanized thread

The finished rope became ca. 10 m long.

5 Dissemination and Use

Ora pro Nobis was first taken into use in an experimental workshop seminar, *Verksted på Vollen*, that took place 26-29 March 2009, at the Norwegian pilgrim place Granavollen.⁴⁰ The event was organized as a meeting between professional performative, visual and auditive artists who had invited ecclesial staff into a seminar of a collaborative, relational artistic practice. The prayer rope was introduced in one workshop session on body awareness and sensation.⁴¹ It was received with interest and immediate curiosity. The huge volume of the beads, their lightness and delicate surface structure had a tactile appeal; people instantly started to handle the beads and explore the rope, ending in a dance.

Additionally, *Ora pro Nobis* was used liturgically in the local Church of Mary⁴² during Sunday mass. The rope was laid on the floor in the middle of the nave, strengthening the axis of the church room. As an installation it symbolized a 100 prayers, but was not actually prayed upon, figure 5 a and b.

⁴⁰ Verksted på Vollen – 2009. Liturgi=handling – perspektiver på kunst, kropp og gudstjenesteliv, see: <<http://www.verkstedpavollen.no/>>.

⁴¹ The session was run by the author and dancer and choreographer Ingunn Rimestad.

⁴² Norwegian Mariakirken



Fig. 5. *Ora pro Nobis* in Mariakirken Granavollen, March 29, 2009.

Ora pro Nobis will in November this fall be used in Skøyen church in Oslo. Together with the vicar and the catechist this event is planned to involve children and youth. Firstly, there will be workshop for 10-12 year old children. The children are invited to bring with them newspaper pages with news that has disturbed them. In the workshop we will turn the newspaper pages into form, balls or beads. The act of transforming the bad news use into a new form symbolizes an ability to act against what seems hopeless. It is a concretization of a prayer. The pedagogical intention is to mediate to the children what prayer is or can be. The forms or beads produced in the workshop will be used liturgically together with the *Ora pro Nobis* rope in a children and youth's sermon. We intend to circulate the prayer rope and the newly made forms in the congregation during the prayers for the world. Since we do not yet know the outcome of the children's participation, there is openness in the project. The children's beads will be marked so that each child can recognize their personal bead and take it back home with them.

When shown in art contexts, like in The Art of Research conference or in future exhibitions, the idea is to keep the *Ora pro Nobis* rope in a big basket, or just on the floor, and hand out bead by bead in a simple performance, saying *ora pro nobis*, and just let the rope move through several hands in a group until it returns back into the basket.

6 Conclusion

The research question raised – how can secularized Christians respond to a request for prayers from a Muslim community? – has been answered by the production of an artefact. Such a solution is one that specifically belongs to research carried out within the fields of art and design. The artefact produced builds on a shared Muslim Christian tradition of prayer, namely meditation, in which repetition and breathing is just as important as the uttering of verbal prayers. This approach establishes a meeting point between the two religious cultures involved, Christianity and Islam. Furthermore, meditation physiologically and phenomenologically deals with centring the mind. Such a meditative practice is open to anyone, regardless of religious commitment.

The artefact produced is in effect a prayer rope, extending a universal tradition of using beads for prayer. This prayer rope has 100 beads. It may positively be understood as Muslim, Christian or even Buddhist, which in effect means that it is universal. The beads are made of newspaper pages bringing the bad foreign affair news. Therein lies a therapeutic intention of transforming the hopeless messages into a new form that subsequently is put into an ordered structure of a rope. This rope, then, can be handled ritually in the liturgy of a sermon, as a vehicle of collective prayer.

Ora pro Nobis is one part of a wider project, exploring meditation objects and prayer in Christian cultural contexts through the production of form. The future outcome of the research will be shown and presented in exhibitions and conferences. It is not for the author to evaluate the work, but the motivation for doing it is to contribute to revitalize Christian meditative traditions and to provide a new understanding of what and how contemporary prayer may be.

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Citation reference of this article:

Refsum, Grete. 2009. *Ora pro Nobis*; Development of Western Meditative Traditions through Form. Paper read at *The Art of Research; Processes, Results and Contributions*, University of Art and Design Helsinki (TAIK), Helsinki, November 24-25 (<http://tm.uiah.fi/tutpor/AOR2009/>).