FOUNDATIONS IN RITUAL STUDIES

A reader for students of Christian worship

Edited by

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Preface

Traditionally, the study of liturgy was understood as being the study of liturgical history: in order to understand what we do today, we need to know the origin and development of each particular liturgical practice and unit. It was only in the second half of the twentieth century that the horizons of the discipline began to be extended to include other dimensions, and in particular those of liturgical theology and ritual studies. The latter utilizes methods that had long been developed by the human sciences – especially cultural anthropology, psychology, sociology, linguistics and performative language theory, communications studies, semiotics, and phenomenology – but had previously been ignored by the theorists and practitioners of Christian liturgy.

The starting point for ritual studies is, as far as possible, the empirical observation and recording of the totality of an act of worship, since what is printed in liturgical texts and what is happening in the actual event are quite different things. In this process it is especially attentive to that often overlooked dimension of the phenomenon of worship – the people who are involved in the activity. Their attitudes, outlooks, lifestyles and behaviour, their understanding of what liturgy is for, their motives for participating in it, and the accounts they give of its place in their lives, all these are open to empirical research and constitute relevant data. In particular, this approach facilitates the possibility of a comparison between the theological claims which are made for liturgy and the actual experience and perception of its participants. Once the data has been collected, it must then be analysed. Among the many questions which may be addressed to the material are: How do signs and symbols operate within the liturgical event? What are they intended to communicate and how effective are they in this aim? How does a believer enter into a rite and become engaged by it? In what respects does a gathering of people for worship constitute a community and how does it function as such? How does the liturgical realm relate to and interact with the ‘real world’ within which the worshippers necessarily exist, and how does it affect their social and cultural identity in that world?

Although still in its infancy as far as liturgical scholars and teachers are concerned, ritual studies obviously has huge potential for helping worship leaders to understand better the activity in which they are engaged and the effect that their innovations can have on congregations.
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It thus deserves a significant place in any curriculum of liturgical study. So far, however, it has been slow to receive that. In part, this is because those who teach have received little, if any, grounding in this aspect of the discipline, and even where they do feel prepared to tackle it in the courses that they give, they lack convenient access to written resources to support their work. This is where the genesis of this particular volume occurred. Collaboration between a liturgical historian, who is not an expert in the field of ritual studies but who recognizes its vital importance in the training of competent liturgical practitioners, and a teacher who focuses much of his work in this particular area has given rise to a series of carefully chosen extracts from previously published material, which it is hoped will assist both the individual student who wants to know more and also those responsible for giving instruction in liturgy to become better acquainted with some of its key scholars and theories.

Paul Bradshaw

John Melloh
1. Introduction

We must begin to look at the liturgy as it is experienced by the man or woman in the pew and try to understand the effect that it has upon them during the performance of the rite itself and throughout their lives, also the way in which this effect is being achieved (Martin Stringer, ‘Liturgy and Anthropology: The History of a Relationship’, Worship 63 [1989], 517).

How pastoral and academic liturgists have appropriated social science methods is the topic examined by John Witvliet, Director of the Institute of Christian Worship at Calvin College in Holland, Michigan, USA, in his essay, ‘For Our Own Purposes: The Appropriation of the Social Sciences in Liturgical Studies’, Liturgy Digest 2/2 (Spring/Summer 1995), 6–35. By probing frequently discussed conceptual problems in social-scientific theories, he leads the reader through significant issues which must be engaged. Beginning from a quotation from Geoffrey Wainwright’s address to the North American Academy of Liturgy, Witvliet offers an extended commentary on how ‘we [liturgists] must retain our freedom to use borrowed tools in our own ways and for our own purposes.’ Liturgists of whatever stripe, the author argues, have a task that is both descriptive and prescriptive. The human sciences can be especially useful in the descriptive task. Yet these methodological approaches need to be approached with caution. In the end Witvliet wisely notes that liturgists need awareness of both their own goals and the implications of their own faith commitments when exploring the weighty issues of contemporary epistemology, metaphysics, and the social sciences.

2. For further reading


Timothy Radcliffe, ‘Relativizing the Relativizers: A Theologian’s Assessment of the Role of Sociological Explanations of Religious Phenomena and Theology’.

John D. Witvliet


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For our own purposes: The appropriation of the social sciences in liturgical studies

Christian liturgy, if nothing else, is a robustly human activity. Whether gathering in a small roadside chapel in rural Alabama, in a stately Gothic cathedral, in a mud hut in the African bush, or in a lush South American rain forest, worshippers bring with them their particular ways of construing the world, their distinctive patterns of interaction, and their idiosyncratic styles of expressing their deepest yearnings, hopes, and fears. It is no surprise, then, that the human sciences – psychology, sociology, and anthropology among them – have so much to teach us about the inner dynamics and the outer patterns of liturgical action. It is also no surprise that in the past generation, students of Christian liturgy have embraced these disciplines and begun a variety of conversations with social scientists that share a great deal of promise for generating insight into the dynamics of Christian communities at worship (see Martin D. Stringer, ‘Liturgy and Anthropology: The History of a Relationship’, *Worship* 63/6 [November 1989], 503–21). Nevertheless, liturgists, typically, are not trained in the social sciences, serving rather as historians, theologians, artists, and pastors, and devoting special attention to the spiritual and theological dimensions of the liturgical assembly. When using methodologies imported from the social sciences, however, liturgists often set aside theological questions and claims to focus on the human aspects of liturgical experience. Perhaps the greatest challenge for liturgists today is the integration of social-scientific and theological perspectives on liturgical action. This task is particularly daunting, especially in light of the guiding assumptions which drive the most prevalent social scientific theories and methods. As Wolfhart Pannenberg has observed, ‘A disregard of the theological questions concerning the human person is, then, implicitly, even if more or less unreflectively, at work in most contributions to modern anthropology’ (Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell [Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1985], 18). This disregard is evident in recent social-scientific studies of liturgy that attempt to understand human ritual actions through relentless anthropological field work,
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analysis according to the strictures of semiotic analysis, or explanation along biogenetic lines, while eschewing the theological dimensions of the same rites. The task of integrating theological and humanistic perspectives has only rarely, if ever, been achieved.

With this in mind, a variety of voices have called theologians and pastoral liturgists to approach the social sciences with caution. In an article that generally commended the interdisciplinary dialogue between ritual studies and liturgical theology, Theodore W. Jennings nevertheless cautioned that ‘liturgical theology will do well to avoid the uncritical importation of notions, categories and theoretical formulations generated by attention to ritual and cultic phenomena generally’ (Theodore W. Jennings, ‘Ritual Studies and Liturgical Theology: An Invitation to Dialogue’, *Journal of Ritual Studies* 1 [1987], 51). From outside the liturgical academy, Catherine Bell has wondered about the ‘faith liturgical studies has in social science’. She asks, ‘Why is it [liturgical studies] so willing to take social scientific expertise at its word and believe that social science really has a clue as to which cultural forms express what?’ (Catherine Bell, ‘The Authority of the Ritual Experts’, *Studia Liturgica* 23 [1993], 114). Speaking to the North American Academy of Liturgy, Geoffrey Wainwright similarly advised that ‘It may well be that we have to borrow tools from the religionists although I hope we realize that ‘value-free’ in sociological language often means ‘reductionist’ from a theological viewpoint; and we must retain our freedom to use borrowed tools *in our own ways and for our own purposes*’ (‘A Language in Which We Speak to God’, *Worship* 57 [1983], 313; emphasis added). Taking its cue from these cautionary words, this report attempts to discern exactly what ‘in our own ways and for our own purposes’ might mean. To accomplish this, it will summarily probe a number of frequently discussed conceptual problems in social-scientific theory, particularly concerning the study of religious phenomena, reviewing recent contributions that are especially relevant to the issue of how liturgists might appropriate the social sciences. This report is a brief catalogue of significant issues that are addressed in current discussions. A rather dizzying variety of arguments and sources are presented, not with the intention of solving the problems presented, nor even of arguing for one monolithic strategy, but rather with the goal of challenging liturgists to appreciate the far-reaching consequences of their methodological choices. Importantly, this essay does not intend to discount the value of the social sciences for liturgists, but rather calls for rigorous self-consciousness about why and how they are used (such suspicions are outlined in Mark Kline Taylor, ‘What Has Anthropology to Do With Theology’, *Theology Today* 41 [1985], 379–82).