**O Oriens**: Reassessing Eastward Eucharistic Celebration for Renewed Liturgy

**Stephen R. Shaver**

Is an east-facing eucharistic celebration incompatible with renewed liturgy? In this paper I suggest that this ancient tradition has great potential precisely within the baptismal ecclesiology and participatory practice that are the hallmarks of liturgical renewal. I begin by investigating the connotations eastward prayer developed in the early church and reflecting on their value today. Next I explore the baptismal implications of a common direction for prayer and the openness—to God, to the universal church, and to the world—this can create. I consider the images of the circle, the line, and the arc in connection with this openness, which has implications for the servant ministry of the church to a suffering world. Finally, I suggest architectural and ceremonial choices to help disentangle eastward prayer from clericalizing practices so its symbolic power might find a place in genuinely participatory Anglican worship.

**Introduction**

*O Oriens, splendor lucis aeternae, et sol justitiae:*
veni, et illumina sedentes in tenebris, et umbra mortis.
O East, brilliance of the eternal light, sun of righteousness: come and shine on those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death.

Vespers Antiphon for December 21

The Latin word *oriens* is difficult to translate in a way that communicates its full character. It is the present participle of the verb “to rise”; as a noun it can denote the rising sun, the dawn, or simply

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the cardinal direction of the east. Applied to Jesus in this antiphon, it takes on a rich, multivalent meaning: Christ is the rising one, literally, by virtue of his resurrection. But he is also the sun of righteousness, bringing the light of good news to those sitting in darkness (Mal. 4:2; Isa. 9; Luke 1:78–79). And he is the one who will come again, like lightning flashing from the east, or like dawn after the night watch (Matt. 24:27; Ps. 130:6).

The antiphon captures much of the significance the practice of eastward prayer has held throughout Christian history. In contemporary North American Anglican liturgical practice, however, this directional symbolism is largely absent. Today a majority of Anglicans would likely associate east-facing celebration less with a robust proclamation of the paschal mystery than with a clericalizing disenfranchisement of the congregation.

A number of authors have proposed its rediscovery. Some have written from a rather conservative Roman Catholic point of view, most prominently Pope Benedict XVI (the former Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger), who advocates a greater emphasis on transcendence in liturgy. A similar argument is made at greater length by U. M. Lang. These authors promote eastward celebration without addressing the significant problems of congregational participation which have often accompanied it, and their proposals might understandably be viewed with skepticism by those committed to the radically baptismal ecclesiology that has been the fruit of the liturgical renewal movement.

This is not the whole story, however. Other voices with notably different assumptions—Anglicans Sarah Coakley and Patrick Malloy; Lutheran scholar Gordon Lathrop; and Reformed theologian George Hunsinger among them—have recently offered hints that eastward prayer might find a place within renewed liturgy. With this paper I seek to carry the conversation forward, suggesting that the tradition of

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Reassessing Eastward Eucharistic Celebration

eastward prayer offers distinct gifts, not at the expense of a baptismal ecclesiology, but precisely as a way of expressing it.

I write as one who has been steeped in the ethos of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer literally for my entire life. I am convinced that the liturgical renewal movement is a gift of God to the church. Indeed, I believe the widespread adoption of versus populum celebration has done tremendous good by enabling the visual participation of the priestly people of God in their act of praise and thanksgiving. Yet I will suggest that, after fifty years of reaping the fruits of versus populum, Anglicans may find a rehabilitation of eastward prayer to have value. While drawing from observations of Ratzinger, Lang, and others about the cosmic and eschatological symbolism of eastward celebration and its implications for baptismal unity—and while adding some observations of my own about its applicability to the situation of a postmodern church which has become acutely aware of its own incompleteness and of the reality of human suffering—I seek to acknowledge the clericalism and dualism which have too often been its corollaries and to suggest architectural and ceremonial ways to undo these so that this ancient Christian tradition might speak powerfully today.

The Symbolic Significance of the East

It is difficult to know how early eastward prayer became common among Christians. Given the wide range of practice that characterized Christian worship from the beginning, there is little need to assume that it was universal or even particularly widespread in the first or second centuries. It is not mentioned in the New Testament, though it may have been used among certain early Jewish Christians: Elxai, a sect leader of the early second century, apparently prohibited it in favor of prayer toward Jerusalem.

What seems clear is that well before Constantine, eastward prayer had become a common, and even normative, practice among Christians in many different parts of the Mediterranean world. By the early third century Tertullian could complain that North African

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Christians were being falsely accused of sun worship because of “our being known to turn to the east in prayer.”5 Clement of Alexandria (Egypt) and the anonymous author of the Syrian church order Didascalia Apostolorum refer to eastward prayer as a norm at about the same time, as does Basil of Caesarea (Palestine) about a century later.6 Jaime Lara summarizes the historical record: “In the course of twenty centuries, the Church has experimented with a number of positions for prayer, for locus of altar and presider, and for placement of the assembly. . . . Missa versus populum was never as high a priority as missa versus orientem, which entered relatively early, although at different moments in different parts of the Christian world.”7

More important for the current discussion is that eastward celebration developed a complex and potent set of cosmic, christological, and eschatological meanings within the first three centuries.8 As the direction of the rising sun, the east is a symbol shared with many other traditions but assigned new meaning by Christians as a figure of Christ the sun of righteousness, of the light of the gospel illuminating the world, or, most centrally, of the resurrection. It gains added resonance from its association with the first day of the week, on which God created light.9 This day has also become the Lord’s Day, the eighth day on which a new creation breaks into the old natural order, and the particular day of the eucharist. Then, because the east is the traditional direction of Paradise and of Christ’s ascension from the Mount of Ol-


8 See Geoffrey Wainwright, Eucharist and Eschatology (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 78–79 for a more thorough exploration of these symbolic associations. The preceding discussion of the eschatological connotations of the Lord’s Day (76–77) is pertinent as well.

9 The sun, of course, is not created until the fourth day in the Genesis account; but light is created on the first. Symbolism does not always preoccupy itself with perfect literalism.
ives (east of Jerusalem), and because of its mention in the apocalyptic passage at Matthew 24:27, it also has a strong association with the *parousia*. As John of Damascus writes:

> When He was received again into Heaven He was borne towards the East, and thus His apostles worship Him, and thus He will come again in the way in which they beheld Him going towards Heaven; as the Lord Himself said, *As the lightning cometh out of the East and shineth even unto the West, so also shall the coming of the Son of Man be.*

These resonances may be well worth recovering for the contemporary situation—which, as is often noted, shares a great deal with that of the early church. The church has recently rediscovered the eschatological import of the gospel to an extent perhaps not seen since the time of Constantine, partly because of the substantial scriptural and theological work that has been done on the concept of the reign of God, and partly because the cataclysmic events of the past century—in many of which, preeminently the Holocaust, Christians have been disastrously complicit—have exposed the vacuity of the myth of triumphalism that can accompany a too-realized eschatology. More positively, the liturgical renewal movement has brought a renewed appreciation of the importance of embodiment, spatiality, and symbol in Christian worship, as well as the powerful significance of the Lord’s Day in the fractal-like structure of liturgical time in which the eighth day bears the same relation to the rest of the week that the *pasch* bears to the rest of the year. In the current context, then, the symbolic resonances associated with the east hold remarkable potential to enrich contemporary practice.

Before this is admitted, however, the question Lara poses must be taken seriously:

> What does “east” mean as a place of light and goodness (or “west” mean as a place of darkness and evil) for a scientific world which no longer believes in a flat, four-cornered planet floating on the primeval waters whence the sun is daily reborn? In a world of

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artificial and continuous light, is the spatial symbol of Christ’s return “from the east” potent enough to warrant building oriented churches again?\textsuperscript{12}

One response to Lara’s question might be that such a world makes a reappropriation of spatial symbols more important than ever. Most Western Christians today have internalized an astronomically-informed worldview to the point that a literal belief that God is located upwards, or to the east, presents little danger. But a quasi-gnostic spirituality of individualism is a serious temptation. Lathrop has warned of the power of the modern prosperity myth to infiltrate liturgy that is ungrounded in a useful cosmology:

The single “order”—cosmos—that may remain to such an assembly will be the order of the small, intimate circle of “you and me” and the order of the poetry or liturgy itself. Such an individualist assembly may then be further subject to the uncriticized presence of the regnant, consumerist worldview. . . . So, in the “intercessions,” we may plead only for our own happiness, and after the liturgy head for the mall.\textsuperscript{13}

Lathrop sees a renewed practice of eastward prayer as “not a bad idea when it is practicable” but notes that “there are probably more urgent orientations . . . toward God, toward the assembly, toward the poor, and toward the earth itself.”\textsuperscript{14} My approach here is broadly sympathetic to Lathrop’s in that I propose eastward prayer not as a universal norm but as one way of instantiating these “more urgent orientations.” The sheer givenness of a geographical direction which does not adjust itself to our preferences may be a useful counter to a culture of customization. Having digested the insights of a scientific worldview, perhaps Christians might develop a sort of spatial second naiveté and find power once more in the ancient symbol of the dawn.\textsuperscript{15}

A related objection might be that praying toward the rising sun creates a danger of setting Christian revelation up as a mere instantiation

\textsuperscript{12} Lara, “Versus Populum Revisited,” 220–221.
\textsuperscript{13} Lathrop, Holy Ground, 14.
\textsuperscript{14} Lathrop, Holy Ground, 171–172.
of preexisting cosmic archetypes. Yet as even one as dedicated to the primacy of revelation as Karl Barth could write, “Theology and the church, and before them the Bible itself, speak no other language than the language of this world.”16 The Christian *pasch* is in many ways analogous to eastward prayer: as Lathrop writes, the Christian observance retains the archetypal experience of the vernal equinox with all its associations, but in juxtaposing it to the scriptural story creates a new and distinctive celebration that relativizes the original meanings.17 Elsewhere Lathrop discusses the “wrongness” of all liturgical language and the “catholic iconoclasm” that is thus inherent in all Christian liturgy.18 This wrongness must be acknowledged: the east may be a good symbol for Christ in many ways, yet it is hardly the only symbol available; nor is its symbolism exhaustive. But as Lathrop might say, broken symbols are the only symbols we have.

**The Common Direction for Prayer**

Besides its multi-stranded symbolic potential, another gift of eastward celebration is that it may incarnate a baptismal ecclesiology more effectively than the situation in which the presider faces the people across the altar. In the current liturgical climate, this assertion may seem strange. Most North American Anglicans would likely describe an eastward celebration less as the church’s communal act than as the priest’s turning his or her back to the people. The classical literature speaks not of the presider turning from the people but of the entire assembly turning toward Christ. Yet the fact remains that the felt experience of many is much more like the former than the latter.

The issue here, I suggest, lies with the Gothic arrangement that has become the standard venue for eastward celebration: a priest (and perhaps altar party) stationed against the east wall, separated from the rest of the congregation by a deep chancel and several stairs. It is the distance between presider and people—not the direction of prayer per se—that creates the experience of disenfranchisement. As

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17 On the *pasch*, see Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1998), 68–79. Coakley’s exploration of the relativization of “natural” gender binaries, discussed below, is also relevant.

Tobias S. Haller points out, “No one ever suggested that the people in the front pews had turned their backs on the people behind them.” 19 True enough: those in the front rows are, in fact, part of the congregation! This is not obviously the case, though, for a presider standing several yards off from the rest of the assembly, and often significantly elevated above it as well.

More than forty years ago, the French scholar Louis Bouyer wrote as both an advocate of liturgical renewal and a staunch supporter of eastward celebration. Bouyer clearly identifies the spatial separation of altar (and clergy) from people as a major concern:

> From the very point of view of restoring a true common celebration, it must be said frankly that the priest standing on the same side as the people for the eucharistic prayer as the visible leader of their whole body remains the better practice. What is only needed, then, is that there might be as little breach as possible between the priest, the ministers and the whole congregation. It means that the altar should never be lost in some inaccessible sanctuary but always be at a short distance from the first ranks of the people. 20

The reality, of course, is that many congregations have inherited buildings designed with the Gothic layout and have been forced to accommodate them to the demands of a renewed liturgy. In such a situation, bringing the altar forward to allow celebration *versus populum* at least allows the congregation to see the eucharistic action more clearly. However, this arrangement has its weaknesses. When presider and people face one another across the altar, the physical barrier tends to single out the presider for special status. As Malloy writes, “The presider standing behind the altar can become like an actor on the stage, and the assembly can become simply an audience.” 21 In a media-dominated culture, theatrical performance can be a tempting model for liturgy. But as Bouyer points out, true active participation goes beyond simple visual contact:

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19 Tobias S. Haller, BSG, “People, Look East”; available from http://home.earthlink.net/~tshbsg/peoplelookeast.htm; see esp. section heading “Turning one’s back for leadership,” paragraph 1.


21 Malloy, *Celebrating the Eucharist*, 40.
The concentration on seeing what the officiants do, far from having ever accompanied a real participation of all in the liturgy, has appeared as a compensation for the lack of this participation, and is psychologically more or less exclusive of it. . . . It is perfectly understandable: either you look at somebody doing something for you, instead of you, or you do it with him. You can’t do both at the same time.22

A potential risk of celebration versus populum is that it can lend itself to a theology in which the priest, rather than the entire assembly, is seen as the primary representation of Jesus. It is ironic, as John F. Baldovin has noted, that many conservative Roman Catholic liturgists who are committed to a strong in persona Christi theology of priesthood have argued for a return to the eastward position, when the versus populum position may actually tend to emphasize that theology more strongly by focusing the attention of the congregation on the priest’s actions, gestures, and facial expressions.23 Malloy notes that Anglicans are not immune to the temptation to interpret the institution narrative in this way:

It is not in fact an opportunity for the priest to impersonate Jesus, although priests often treat it that way. They lift the bread and gaze at the assembly, saying, “Take, eat,” as if the Eucharist were a tableau of the Last Supper and the priest were playing the role of Jesus.

All of the Eucharistic Prayer is precisely a prayer, and so it is addressed to God. The memorial of the Last Supper embedded in the Eucharistic Prayer is also addressed to God, not to the assembly.24

22 Bouyer, Liturgy and Architecture, 58–59.
From the standpoint of a baptismal ecclesiology, it is not the presider alone but the entire assembly—the body of Christ—that is the primary representation of Christ’s sacrificial self-offering and intercession for the world. Thus it is not the presider alone but the entire assembly who is most properly said to celebrate the eucharist. There are indeed many moments in the liturgy that feature a dialogue between members of the assembly—greetings, readings, the sermon, the *Sursum corda*—but during the anaphora itself the dialogue is between the church and God. By orienting the entire church body—presider and people—in the same direction, the eastward position honors this communal nature of the celebration.

Eastward prayer is often associated with traditional imagery of the eucharist as the consummation of the love between Christ and the church—the bridegroom and the bride. This conventional schema might seem to reinforce a hierarchical model antithetical to a baptismal ecclesiology. However, in her essay “The Woman at the Altar: Cosmological Disturbance or Gender Subversion?” Sarah Coakley reclaims this nuptial imagery for a feminist perspective, resituating it within a fluid understanding of gender identity and positioning the priest as a liminal figure who destabilizes fixed binaries. Coakley’s account of her personal experience with eastward celebration is worth quoting at length:

> I was startled to discover, in celebrating east-facing at Littlemore, that far from finding myself offended by this position as a feminist, I actually found the east position curiously releasing. I think I can now give a theological account of this, as follows. When the priest has her back to the people, it is symbolically clear that she is adopting the position of “offering” on behalf of the laity: she is facing Godwards, representing the *laos*. In the terms of the old “natural signs” (which, as Mary Douglas argues, cannot be represively obliterated, but must rather—in my view—be resummoned and strategically destabilized), the priest is “feminine” in this posture—supremely Marian, as [Hans Urs von] Balthasar would see it. But when she turns around, whether to greet (at the *sursum corda*), or to offer the consecrated elements, or to bless, she has

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26 As, for example, in Christoph Schönborn, *Loving the Church: Spiritual Exercises Preached in the Presence of Pope John Paul II* (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius Press, 1998), 203–206.
moved to the other side of the divide, representing Christ, offering God to the people—again, in the terms of the nuptial metaphor, both summoning and destabilizing the “masculine” posture of the bridegroom’s self-gift. Without these bodily reversals and movements in the liturgy, I suggest, something deeply significant to the enactment of this destabilization is lost. When I am stuck, fixed behind the altar west-facing throughout, I also contribute unwittingly to a gender fixing that blocks the play of liminality those older movements conveyed.27

For Coakley, the nuptial symbolism of the eucharist challenges stereotypes rather than reinforcing them and thus gains newfound power. The idea that eastward prayer may offer possibilities for the destabilization of rigid binaries has even more intriguing implications when more flexible architectural arrangements than the traditional Gothic plan are considered, as I will explore further below.

*The Openness of the Community: Circle, Line, Arc*

In liturgical spaces that allow it, the dialogical feel of celebration versus populum can be significantly remedied by adopting a more or less circular arrangement. Perhaps the altar stands at the center as the visual focus of the community’s prayer; perhaps it is positioned along one edge, with the presider standing behind it as part of a wider circle of the baptized. In either case, the image of a circle has much to recommend it. It honors the communitarian nature of the eucharist instead of establishing a definite separation between presider and people; it emphasizes that it is a common meal; it upholds an incarnational theology, suggesting that God is in here with the gathered assembly. Yet a circle is also an intrinsically closed arrangement. It may suggest that this particular community is complete within itself, without reference to other ecclesial gatherings or to the rest of the world; it may lose sight of the fact that the eucharist is not only a meal but also an act of thanksgiving and intercession; it may forget that God is also out there beyond the walls, both in transcendent rule over the creation and in the suffering and need of a world still groaning to be reborn. Ratzinger writes that the versus populum position carries with it a potential risk of turning the gathering into “a self-enclosed

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27 Coakley, “The Woman at the Altar,” 89.
circle [which] no longer opens out on what lies ahead and above, but is closed in on itself.”

In the traditional version of the eastward arrangement, the image of the church is not a circle but a line—or, as Josef A. Jungmann puts it, a procession, with the presider at its head leading the people toward their Lord. This image has its own serious difficulties, which will be explored below; it cannot be embraced uncritically. Yet it also has certain strengths which may usefully counterbalance the circular model for a church rediscovering its identity as a pilgrim people. As Lang and Ratzinger point out, if the circular model emphasizes God’s immanence, the linear model emphasizes God’s transcendence. In a culture that increasingly assumes the relativity of all truth claims, the outward orientation of the gathered community beyond itself may serve as a countercultural witness to the ultimate otherness of God.

Lang suggests:

The *celebratio versus populum* tends to diminish the transcendent dimension of the Eucharist to such an extent that it generates the notion of a closed society. . . . The congregation can become complacent and entertain a misconceived autonomy, thus disconnecting itself from the other assemblies of the faithful and from the invisible assemblies of the saints in heaven, so that the community would just be in dialogue with itself.

While even the smallest local eucharistic assembly is an icon of God’s reign, it always exists in relation to the overall church of which it is a part. The openness of eastward prayer can be a helpful expression of this connectedness, keeping the community in dialogue both with God and with the rest of the church.

While Lang places great emphasis on the orientation toward a transcendent God and toward the church universal, he makes a serious omission by failing to address an equally crucial aspect of eucharistic practice: the connection between the church and the rest of the world. Yet the linear model Lang favors does offer powerful symbolic possibilities for both evangelism and servant ministry. In

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31 Lang, *Turning Towards the Lord*, 103.
the circular arrangement, God might be pictured at the center of the gathering, with the world outside the periphery. The closed quality of such a circle tends to suggest a clearly delineated in- and out-group. By contrast, in the linear arrangement God is traditionally pictured to the east, at the focus of the community’s prayer, with the world located behind the community to the west. This arrangement offers somewhat more fluid boundaries: as Haller writes, “It is very hard to break into a circle, but it is wonderfully easy to slip in at the end of a procession.”32 In this way the traditional linear arrangement offers a model of the church as an evangelistic assembly which intentionally welcomes others into its ranks through the baptismal font at the west entrance and ushers them forward to the eucharistic table.

It can also model the eucharist as catalyst for the church’s loving diakonia to the world. As members enter the building, they move toward the east, where they make their prayers to God and are fed at Christ’s table. In the prayers, the church takes up its vocation as the incarnation of Christ, the great high priest, in the world; the linear east-west directionality implies that the church is literally bringing the world before God.33 The faithful are then sent back out to the west, fed and strengthened, to continue their ministry of service in the world. As Haller writes, “How much more powerful is the dismissal as a sending forth in a particular direction, than as the mere dispersal of a circle.”34

Yet if this linear arrangement has advantages, it must be admitted that it holds serious problems as well. In placing the presider alone at the head of the procession, it carries with it—no less than the dialogical arrangement, though for a different reason—a built-in risk of clericalism.35 Worse, in its thoroughgoing emphasis on the transcendency of God it may imply a deism that neglects the fact of God’s self-revelation in the material order. The mythic positioning of the

32 Haller, “People, Look East,” section heading “Turning one’s back for leadership,” paragraph 2.
33 James W. Farwell explores this “soteriological fusion of identities” between Christ as high priest and the community of the church, with reference especially to the Solemn Collects of Good Friday, in This Is the Night: Suffering, Salvation, and the Liturgies of Holy Week (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 57–61.
34 Haller, “People, Look East,” section heading “Turning one’s back for leadership,” paragraph 7.
35 See, for example, Didascalia Apostolorum, 119–120, which prescribes a strict hierarchy in which bishops and presbyters stand farthest east, followed by lay men, followed by women.
world to the west may be imagined, as above, in ways which evoke loving concern for the world as God's good creation—but it may also be imagined in ways which denigrate the world vis-à-vis Paradise (as in the spitting to the west in some early baptismal rites). If the danger of the circular arrangement, with its emphasis on God's immanence, is pantheism, then the danger of the linear arrangement is deism or even dualism.

Geoffrey Wainwright has argued that God's transcendence is nonetheless more fundamental than God's immanence and therefore that liturgical practice should preferentially express the former. From this perspective the linear position may still have value despite its disadvantages: if a community must choose between highlighting God's transcendence and highlighting God's immanence, there is a case to be made for sticking with transcendence—particularly in an age which tends to resist it.

Yet in the final analysis such a choice is maddeningly unsatisfactory. Indeed, the entire discussion rests on a paradigm which is itself dualistic, assuming that Christian theology and liturgical practice must be a matter of navigating between paired opposites—immanence and transcendence, circle and line—swinging the pendulum one way or the other as the needs of a given situation demand. A framework that sets up transcendence and immanence as opposites, rather than simultaneous truths about the God in whom there is no contradiction, is destined to create false dichotomies. A faithful Christian liturgical practice must do its best to draw together the partial truths expressed by both the circular and linear models.

To address this admittedly tall order, a third image may be helpful. As noted above, the past century or so has seen a rediscovery by theologians across the denominational spectrum of the unfinished nature of God's project of salvation—the fact that the Johannine eschatology of “already” is complemented by the Pauline and synoptic “not yet.” In *Eucharist and Eschatology*, Wainwright draws from several scriptural and traditional ways of understanding the eucharist—foretaste of the messianic banquet, anticipation of Christ's coming again, firstfruits of God's reign, and so on—to argue that it is the

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36 Lara, “Versus Populum Revisited,” 221 n. 45. This particular practice could perhaps be thought of as reflecting the reality that the world is still under bondage to Satan rather than evil in and of itself, but it certainly lends itself readily to a dualistic, world-denying attitude.

eucharistic action of the church that bridges the eschatological gap. 38 One intriguing image Wainwright uses is that of an arc. While not a complete circle, he explains, the arc “already suggests the full circle to the beholder with eyes to see and commits the draughtsman to completing the full figure of $360^\circ$ that already exists in his mind.” 39 For Wainwright, the first stage in drawing the arc represents the table fellowship that characterized Jesus’ earthly ministry. The full circle is the celebratory banquet still to be realized in the reign of God. Thus the current eucharistic practice of the church represents an intermediate stage in which “a broader sweep of the arc has now been drawn, but still the $360^\circ$ is not complete; the perfect form will be achieved only when we feast forever face to face with the Lord.” 40

While Wainwright is not necessarily addressing concrete spatial arrangements, the image of the arc is a compelling one. Its roundedness suggests the koinonia of a community gathered around the Lord’s table in a way that recalls the circular model. And yet its inherent incompleteness avoids representing the assembly as a closed circle and instead gives it the same directionality and openness that are the great strengths of the linear model. This allows it to draw from the powerful symbolism of the east, not as a procession in which the presider leads the people toward God, but as an assembly that stands as one body and simultaneously looks out beyond itself. Such an arrangement offers a strong sense of God’s immanent presence in the community’s midst while at the same time honoring God’s transcendence beyond it.

It also makes a symbolic statement about both ecclesiology and evangelism. The unfinished portion of the circle is suggestive of the absence of others, implying that the local circle of believers is not totally self-referential, but depends on those separated from it by space and time. This includes the communion of saints past and present, as well as those yet to be brought into the Christian fellowship: the church will not be finally complete until all its members are gathered in.

Moreover, the image of the arc has intriguing implications for the church’s servant ministry to a suffering world. Like the linear model, it enforces a certain directionality. Yet in its roundedness, it lessens the temptation to locate “Paradise” firmly ahead and to the east and

38 Wainwright, Eucharist and Eschatology, 18, 60, 95; see also 151–154.
39 Wainwright, Eucharist and Eschatology, 30.
40 Wainwright, Eucharist and Eschatology, 41.
“the world” firmly behind and to the west. Instead, with its single outward focal point, the arc opens up the possibility of a less rigid, more multivalent symbolic language in which the assembly is invited to see itself facing toward God and toward the rest of creation at the same time. Indeed, the image of the arc—which holds characteristics of both circle and line—may serve to destabilize binaries of immanence and transcendence in much the same way that, for Coakley, the figure of the presiding priest destabilizes binaries of male and female.

The rich and ancient Paradise imagery of the east as God’s domain is still available in this schema, but it can be supplemented by an awareness of the world as the arena of God’s saving activity. As the church gazes out beyond the altar to make its thanksgiving and intercession for all creation, it is also engaged in an act of attentiveness to that same creation. Alexander Schmemann has written of this attentiveness in connection with the anaphora: “It is the very joy of the Kingdom that makes us remember the world and pray for it. . . . The Eucharist is the sacrament of unity and the moment of truth: here we see the world in Christ, as it really is, and not from our particular and therefore limited and partial points of view.”

This attentiveness to the world “as it really is” has particular resonance in an age when postmodernist philosophy has brought a greater awareness of the human tendency to create metanarratives which inevitably gloss over the concrete and messy particularities of reality. In This Is the Night: Suffering, Salvation, and the Liturgies of Holy Week, James Farwell draws on this postmodern critique of metanarrative to address modern culture’s propensity to ignore, erase, or explain away the reality of suffering. Farwell observes that the massive scale of suffering over the course of the past century has made it newly apparent that Christian theology—and, crucially, the liturgical practice which forms and enacts Christian theology—must pay careful attention to the suffering inherent in the human situation. If our eucharistic practice tends to reinforce the belief that we are celebrating a reality already complete within itself, we risk complicity in a damaging metanarrative which implies a false triumphalism and invites us to forget the ongoing suffering of the world. In this context, the open-

41 Alexander Schmemann, For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy, second revised and expanded edition (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1973), 44.
ness intrinsic to the eastward position—particularly as expressed in the image of the arc, with its built-in sense of incompleteness—may be a valuable expression of solidarity with a redeemed but unfinished creation still groaning for redemption.

**Practical Suggestions for Renewing Eastward Celebration**

Eastward prayer draws upon a vibrant and ancient symbolic tradition whose cosmic and eschatological associations offer much potential material for reappropriation. It unites the community in a common direction, helping to avoid an overemphasis on the presider at the expense of the rest of the assembly. It can help the assembly to remain open to God, the church universal, and the world. And all this is particularly promising if the arc, rather than the line, is seen as the fundamental shape of the community so as to honor both the intimate fellowship of the baptized gathered around the Lord’s table and the openness and incompleteness of a pilgrim church. Yet none of this can be realized in practice without considering a host of architectural and ceremonial factors. Liturgy does not exist in a theoretical vacuum but in the embodied actions of communities. What follows, therefore, is an exploration of some choices a twenty-first-century assembly might make to situate eastward prayer within a truly participatory practice.

I have already cited Louis Bouyer’s suggestion that an architectural layout with the altar as close as possible to the people is essential. In fact, writing in 1967, Bouyer explicitly recommends an arc-like arrangement: “What is needed especially is, for the offering and the communion, that [the people] may come as near to [the altar] as possible. This will be best achieved by a disposition of the congregation which will make it at the time of the eucharistic prayer gather in a more or less semi-circular way behind the celebrant.”

There are historical examples of eastward layouts featuring altars near the people. Bouyer describes certain early churches in Syria in which the presider and other clergy sat on a platform in the middle of the nave, with the people gathered on all sides for the liturgy of the word.

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43 Bouyer, *Liturgy and Architecture*, 112. Writing about the relation of the semi-circle to the circle, Bouyer anticipates many of the points made above: “The Christian family must always be open, open to the invisible Church of all the other Christians in this world or the next, open to the world and beyond the world to the eternal kingdom.”

offertory the entire assembly moved together to the altar in the eastern apse and assembled behind the presider for the anaphora. This Syrian arrangement, as described by Bouyer, is the basis for Saint Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco.\footnote{See Richard Fabian, “Worship at St. Gregory’s,” 24 n. 14, 25 n. 25; available at http://www.saintgregorys.org/Resources_pdfx/Worship_at_St__Gregorys.pdf.} Another arrangement from Christian North Africa featured a bench in the apse for the presider and other clergy—similar to the Roman basilica—but placed the altar in the midst of the nave. At the offertory the presider would come down and stand at the altar, facing east, with the congregation gathered around on three or perhaps even four sides.\footnote{Lara, “Versus Populum Revisited,” 212–213, 218; Lang, Turning Towards the Lord, 76–80.}

A wide variety of other layouts, some more ambitious than others, might be possible, although not all congregations will find their buildings conducive to such adaptations. Unfortunately, most new Episcopal and Anglican church buildings, even since the peak of liturgical renewal, have maintained theater-like arrangements featuring clear separations between nave and chancel—a practice which would seem to mark a failure of the Anglican liturgical and architectural imagination to incarnate a truly baptismal ecclesiology. As R. Kevin Seasoltz writes, “Liturgical scholars and consultants are in general agreement that most Episcopal congregations in the United States have not taken seriously the demands that a reformed and renewed liturgy places on the space for gathering and celebrating the paschal mystery.”\footnote{R. Kevin Seasoltz, A Sense of the Sacred: Theological Foundations of Christian Architecture and Art (New York: Continuum, 2006), 285–288.} However, while a flexible liturgical space is clearly an asset, creative thinking may still yield possibilities. For example, a simple semicircular seating arrangement might be an option in a smaller cruciform church with an altar at the crossing. Other communities might choose to experiment with evening or weekday liturgies in alternative spaces.

In any case, a freestanding altar is highly desirable. The practice of building the altar directly against the eastern wall has little precedent before the Middle Ages; Eastern Orthodox altar tables (which are used for eastward celebration) remain freestanding to this day. Beyond historical arguments, however, the placement of the altar directly against the east wall is problematic because it tends to militate against the very eschatological and missiological openness that is one of the key strengths of eastward celebration. It is more difficult to
have a sense of dynamic, outward prayer when one is praying directly into a wall.

A visual focus that evokes what Lara calls the “directionality of eucharistic prayer” might instead be helpful. Lara writes that in classical times this directionality “moved not only in an eastward fashion, but also ‘through’ the glorious cross depicted on the east wall in paint or mosaic”; later Gothic architecture gave it a more vertical expression as well. The tradition of placing an image of the cross or of Christ Pantocrator in the apse honors this eastward and vertical directionality: in this way the focus of the assembly’s prayer does not stop at the altar but rather continues out beyond it. Another compelling variant might be a large window as a way to highlight the openness to both God and the world that eastward prayer, at its best, implies.

As important as the layout of a space is the way the community inhabits it through its bodily actions. One ceremonial element commonly associated with eastward celebration today is kneeling during the anaphora. Yet the association is more historically circumstantial than theologically substantial. In fact the early Christians who developed the rich symbolism associated with the east also placed great emphasis on standing for the public prayer of the eucharist. To have the congregation kneel while the presider stands tends to suggest that it is the priest who celebrates the eucharist while the rest of the assembly looks on. Indeed, having the entire assembly adopt the orans position would be worth considering: while many parishes would find this difficult to introduce, its potential for making the anaphora truly the prayer of the whole should not be ruled out. There are other creative ceremonial ways to highlight the corporate nature of the eucharist, such as through participatory musical settings. For example, in some settings at St. Gregory of Nyssa, the congregation takes up a drone, humming along at the tonic, the fifth, and perhaps other improvised intervals as the presider sings the anaphora. The effect is a powerful sense of the unity of the assembly and its shared ownership of the prayer being articulated by the presider, who clearly retains his or her distinctive leadership role but does so as a member of the congregation and not over against it.

48 Lara, “Versus Populum Revisited,” 216, alluding to the work of E. Peterson.
49 See Canon 20 of the Council of Nicea.
50 Malloy gives consideration to this possibility in Celebrating the Eucharist, 102.
Another important ceremonial element is the practice of manual acts. One argument for celebration versus populum has been that it allows the congregation to see the presider’s gestures. However, these gestures are generally late additions which emerged during the early Middle Ages in conjunction with an increasing emphasis on consecration rather than thanksgiving. John F. Baldovin and Donald Gray have each suggested a far less extensive approach to manual acts than currently required by Roman Catholic or even Episcopal rubrics: the presider maintains the orans position throughout the prayer without making any ceremonial gestures at the institution narrative. The gestures of extending the hands at the epiclesis and lifting the elements at the final doxology may optionally be retained as illustrative of the rhetorical import of the prayer. For both Baldovin and Gray the underlying philosophy is a minimalist one which particularly avoids any overemphasis on the institution narrative: Gray goes so far as to contend that “if, at the dominical words, the elements are handled, then hocus-pocus is not dead.”

Such an approach coincides readily with the ceremonial needs of a participatory eastward celebration. The orans position is clearly visible no matter where one stands in relation to the presider. The epicletic extension of the hands is perhaps slightly less clear but still hardly mystifying. The final lifting up of the gifts is also easy to see—at least if the presider lifts them high enough (as befits this climactic moment of the great prayer of the church). And all this is still more visible the closer the community stands to the altar, particularly if it surrounds it on three sides. The effect is to keep any presidential

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52 As John Macquarrie, who otherwise prefers the eastward arrangement, writes in “Subjectivity and Objectivity,” 159.
55 See Malloy, Celebrating the Eucharist, 180: “This is the proper place for the energy and drama that is often diverted to the Doxology at the Offertory.”
manual acts simple and clearly illustrative of the prayer itself rather
than letting them become apparently consecratory rituals.

One further practice which may help honor the immanent dimen-
sion of the eucharist along with the transcendent is to have the com-
munity fill in around the altar, surrounding it on four sides, for the
distribution of communion. The more transcendent moment of
the anaphora, when the community lifts up its heart to God, is bal-
anced by a more immanent moment when it is being fed. As Coakley
notes, “these bodily reversals and movements in the liturgy” serve to
destabilize false universals and allow the liturgy to express a richer,
deeper, paradoxical truth.56

Indeed, whether an eastward, westward, or circular arrangement
is chosen, every local assembly needs to find ways to honor paradox
within its liturgical practice. In a paragraph from Holy Things that
again evokes the image of the arc, Lathrop expresses this well:

We gather around water, words, a meal. For this gathering a circle
might be the most appropriate figure: all of us around a central
focus; all of us intensely here. But . . . the juxtaposition of the
central things in our meeting opens us toward God and toward
suffering in the world. For such meanings the appropriate figure
needs to be direction away from here: all the members facing an
open distance or the east or a wall standing for what is beyond
here. The result of this tension may well be a parabolic form. In
any case, churches in which all members face in one direction will
best be broken by elements of the circle—by a table, for example,
thrust out from the wall and into the assembly’s midst, beginning
to pull members around. Churches that utilize the focused circle
will best break it open, leaving it uncompleted.57

Paradox is a permanent element of liturgy. Every celebration of the
eucharist holds together the completeness of which even the smallest
local community is indeed a foretaste and the simultaneous truth that
church and cosmos are still awaiting the ultimate consummation of all
things in the reign of God.

56 Coakley, “The Woman at the Altar,” 89.
Conclusion

The antiphon at the head of this essay is thoroughly eschatological not only in its content but also in its context. It is surely no accident that it is assigned to the shortest day of the year, when the need for illumination is felt most strongly. The fifth of seven O Antiphons, it marks the imminent culmination of Advent with its focus on both the first and second comings of Christ. Read backward, the initial letters of the antiphons form a hidden promise: ERO CRAS.\(^{58}\) Tomorrow, I will come.

This is a powerful promise for a church whose need for a savior has become newly apparent in the past century. Whatever claims to prestige the Western church could once make have greatly eroded: no longer does the myth of Christendom hold, with its seductive whisper that the reign of God is already fulfilled. Meanwhile, the twentieth century has created a new awareness of the vast scope of human suffering both inside and outside the church. The specter of the Holocaust silences every Christian claim of triumphalism. And at this writing wars in Libya, Ivory Coast, Iraq, and Afghanistan, a nuclear crisis in Japan, and the ongoing threat of climate change are daily reminders that humanity still sits in darkness and the shadow of death.

It is in this situation, as Farwell writes, that the church has rediscovered the importance of the paschal mystery: the truth that God in Jesus Christ enters into the suffering of creation and brings forth new life—not through the erasure or cancellation of that suffering, but through its redemption. By once again focusing on the centrality of baptism and eucharist, in which Christians are incorporated into this mystery, and by rediscovering the liturgies of the Triduum in which it is most fully ritually enacted, the liturgical renewal has held up the paschal mystery as a response—though not a solution—to the incompleteness of the world.\(^{59}\)

The rediscovery of eastward eucharistic celebration has the potential to serve the same purpose. In its cosmic rootedness, it offers a rich set of symbolic connotations which point to the resurrection, the eighth day, and the \textit{parousia}, and which connect us to the pre-Constantinian church in which these connotations were first developed. In the common direction of its prayer, eastward celebration

offers a potent way to enact a baptismal ecclesiology in which the entire congregation, not the presider alone, is the celebrant of the eucharist. In the essential openness of its spatial arrangement, especially as expressed by the image of the arc, it honors the incompleteness of creation, the rulership of God, the pilgrim nature of the church, and the needs of a suffering world.

All this is unlikely to be fruitful, however, if the rediscovery of eastward prayer means a return to clerically dominated liturgy. The priestly people of God are not well served by a presider who seems to be turning his or her back on the congregation to do mysterious things to which they are uninvited. Yet this need not be the only model for eastward celebration. If the architectural arrangement of the church building permits as small a spatial separation as possible between people and altar, so that the presider is seen to be a member of the assembly rather than distinct from it; if the congregation is empowered to participate as fully as possible in the eucharistic action through posture, gesture, and other means; if the transcendent and immanent dimensions of the eucharist are held together in paradox through thoughtful ceremonial choices; then it is just possible that the ancient practice of facing east toward the coming of the Lord may have new power both to enrich our liturgical life and to catalyze our mission to God’s world.