Public Liturgy and Public Secularity: A Response to James W. Farwell

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In the post-Constantinian age of Christianity, the need for a public theology that can illuminate and address the spiritual needs of the secular world is greater than ever. In examining the concept of liturgy as theology, this approach indicates that the liturgy does a great deal to address much of what ails the current secular age. As James Farwell notes, liturgy "is the enactment of participation in the life of God the Word through the Spirit's continuous working in the Christian public, both within its assembly and in the world." It would seem then that liturgy is, in a sense, the church breaking through the divide of Charles Taylor's closed world structure of the secular age.

Taylor argues that belief in God is now nonaxiomatic. There are one of two worldviews that have arisen in the postmodern age. One either holds a closed encapsulated worldview in which meaning is ascribed by the interpretation of the buffered self, or one holds a perception that the immanent world is enclosed but porous and permeable by the transcendent. In this second view, liturgy enlarges fissures in the porous immanent world to open us to the transcendent and for the transcendent to become present in tangible ways. Liturgy, to use Taylor's terms, is a means to reenchantment and reembedding.[1] For a Christian, liturgy reembeds an individual in community. Liturgy envisions a community brought into deeper relationship with the cosmos. Liturgy enacts the deep word of God's work in reconciling the cosmos to God's self.

For Alexander Schmemann, liturgy is the "ontological condition of theology." In interpreting him, Aidan Kavanagh goes further. Liturgy, writes Kavanagh, is "nothing other than the Church's faith in motion both at the highest and on the most practical level . . . liturgy

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[1] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007), 152.

does not merely reflect but actualizes concretely and in a sustained manner the basic repertoire of faith which is irreducible."[2] Given this fundamental role for liturgy, as an expression of the church's theology, it is reasonable to conclude that the liturgy does serve, as Farwell notes, as "an act of worldmaking that funds public theology by cultivating certain virtues, habits, and values in the liturgical assembly." It is the ongoing, committed, and communal aspect of liturgical action that Timothy Sedgwick notes is the basis for a faith community's discernment of the moral and ethical interpretation of the needs of their cultural context and particularity.[3]

It seems entirely appropriate, then, that the liturgical action be a significant source for public theology. Does this mean then that liturgy is to purely serve as a sort of centralized warehouse of postmodern Gnosticism from which the public theologian and the select ranks of the initiated few draw out nuggets of theological treasure with which to dazzle the wider society, or is it to truly be a public enactment into which the uninitiated public is drawn into participation? How public should the public theology of the liturgy be?

If part of the nature of liturgy is that of being a public act, then it seems to follow that liturgy needs to be accessible to the public. Having served an internship in an emerging church environment in the Church of England, a common complaint I heard about the liturgy as a form of worship is that it feels contrived and artificial because the words expressed are not phrased in a manner consistent with the language of the people in attendance. Those new to the experience of liturgical action felt that the language is confusing or unclear. While the power of ritual may not be in dispute, if Christian liturgy is for the benefit of the public—to what extent should the wording of liturgy, the movement, the sacred space, the music, and all other elements touching upon the senses be contextualizing or enculturating? To what extent should liturgy reflect the cultural context in which it is occurring?[4] The reformers at the Second Vatican council emphasized

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[2] Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), xii.

[3] Timothy F. Sedgwick, *What Does It Mean to Be Wholly Whole*, Little Books of Guidance series (New York: Church Publishing Inc.), Kindle location 600–601.

[4] It is interesting to note, though, that human nature tends toward ritual. My observation was that these nonliturgical faith communities in the north of England eventually fell into patterns of ritualized behavior in their worship that for all intents resulted in an alternative liturgy, albeit one of their own creation.

the necessity that all believers in attendance needed to "take part fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite, and enriched by its effects."[5] It is questionable if this can be accomplished if a substantial component of the congregation in attendance is bewildered and confused by the enactment and cannot recognize any relevance in the actions that pertains to their personal experience and existence.

In this same document, and as is also expressed by Farwell, the intent of this public act is to illustrate a "foretaste of that heavenly liturgy that is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem."[6] Contextualization, it seems, is held in tension with the need for a sense of "otherness" as "heavenly foretaste." Authors of liturgy seek to enact a "timelessness" that connects the faithful of today with the faithful of past generations. As Farwell notes, ritual works by means of contrast between the familiar and the unfamiliar. In this space between the representing of the past and the representation of the present, liturgy does its universal and particular work.

The work of liturgy is particular, universal, and public. Farwell argues that this public work of God the Father is an act of abundance, similar to a generous donation of a wealthy individual to the common good of a community. In the case of the pascal mystery, it is God's act of giving the Logos for all of creation. Because this abundance is God's and not the church's, it would seem both cruel and highly inappropriate for the church to curtail that divine abundance to any member of creation. If the liturgy has done its job—through proclamation and anamnesis—one could argue that those present are catechized. In what sense is there a danger of Pelagianism when the church puts formational prerequisites in the way of the work of the liturgy? To what extent do the demands for baptism preparatory classes on the way to baptism and Eucharist stand in the way of the work of the liturgy? This work, it is argued, forms inclusive community and not a community that turns inward on itself but turns outward to the world. In contrast to this view, Thomas Breidenthal argues that inclusion or exclusion is not the appropriate lens through which to view the relationship between the public and the sacraments. For him baptism

[5] The Second Vatican Council, The Constitution on Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), December 4, 1963, *The Documents of Vatican II*, Vatican translation (Strathfield, Australia: St. Paul's Publication, 2009), chapter 1, section 11.

[6] *Sacrosantum Concilium*, ch. 1, section 8.

is an initiation into service. It is a "birthing" out into the world and a leaving behind of the comfortable and the familiar. It seems, therefore, imprudent to offer communion to the unbaptized as it would entrap them in an unwanted obligation.[7] Given these liturgical tensions in the relationship between the very definition of "public" and "theology," what is to be done?

It may be that it is possible to engage in full participation without necessarily opening all levels of all participation in the liturgy to everyone all of the time. This is why we have ordered ministry. For example, it is neither practical nor appropriate for all to serve as presider. It then becomes a question of what degree and what manner of participation is necessary to come close to the ideal of an assembly engaged in full participation. The danger with this stream of thought is that it can result in a partial call to public witness. If the liturgy is to provide a foretaste of the kingdom and, at the same time, access to the table is limited to the initiated, then the call to life-giving action is limited to the initiated. This could have the deleterious impact of creating a public theology that results in a thoroughly passive public.

In the final analysis, it may be that the most significant public aspect of the liturgy as public theology is that it serves as a countercultural testimony against the closed worldview of secularism. Despite the paucity of post-Enlightenment sensibilities, liturgy remains a witness to a richer cosmos. Yet the ritual aspect of liturgy is a double edged sword. For those who are engaged in liturgical practice on an ongoing basis, the power of ritual to transform is unmistakable. For some, the ritual aspects may entice and invite to further exploration. At the same time, ritual in the absence of genuine hospitality can come across as arcane and exclusionary. Such ritual can serve as a barrier to those in search of spiritual illumination. In sum, the church remains unclear on how, or even if, liturgical theology should become a robustly public theology.

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[7] Thomas E. Breidenthal, "The Festal Gathering: Reflections on Open Communion," *Sewanee Theological Review* 5, no. 2 (Easter 2011): 146–47.