

Liturgy and Public Theology

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Liturgy is an act of public theology, when considered from the point of view that Christian ritual performance is publicly enacted for the sake of a wider public, and joins the assembly to Jesus Christ, who is himself God's logos tou theou and God's liturgy. Liturgy does this work through its scripted repetition, formality, spatial and temporal patterning, focus on the body, and deployment of the familiar and unfamiliar. Through these modes, a worldview is enacted and valorizes a certain set of virtues and an orientation to living that correspond to that worldview. Among those virtues are gratitude, a desire for reconciliation, the recognition of our dependency of God and responsibility toward others, and a compassionate commitment to the dignity of humanity and the created order. These ritually enacted virtues, practiced in the hope for the full and coming reign of God, will orient the liturgical assembly to particular social, moral, political concerns as worthy of Christian engagement; but liturgical formation will not, in most cases, prescribe detailed courses of action to take when facing specific instances of those concerns.

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It seems immediately clear that Christian liturgy is both a *public* and *theological* act. One wonders, then, if liturgy has some relationship to the exercise by Christians of one or more of the various forms of critical discourse described as “public theology”—that form of theology in which Christians engage church and world on matters of common interest and the public good. The precise relationship

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between the two follows from some careful reflection on just *how* liturgy itself is public and theological, and through what ritual mechanisms this occurs. With the public and theological nature of liturgy delineated, it is possible to see how liturgy is related to public theology in the narrower sense. What one sees about this relationship, it seems to me, can be summarized as follows:

- liturgy is itself the public theology of the liturgical assembly but in the *very particular mode* of ritual performance;
- liturgy as ritual performance is an act of world making that *funds* public theology by cultivating certain virtues, habits, and values in the liturgical assembly;
- these liturgically enacted virtues, habits, and values *shape* the public theologian's capacity to identify the social, moral, political, and economic concerns to which she should speak, and conditions her testimony and judgment on these matters, ruling certain actions and policies in and others out;
- but liturgy does not, in most cases, *prescribe* the specific courses of action or behaviors that should be taken with respect to every matter pertaining to the common good to which the public theologian, as a member of a larger, pluralistic public, will wish to speak.

In sum, the work and the judgment of the Christian public theologian cannot be “read off the rite.” However, the rite does enact a dynamic, comprehensive worldview that frames and forms the work of the public theologian. This worldview supplies moral norms for the public theologian's work, but leaves the public theologian to determine specific courses of action in a complex world among a range of goods. This is consistent with (though a limited application of) the observation by Aidan Kavanagh, interpreting Schmemmann: the liturgy is the “ontological condition of theology.”¹

Liturgy as Public

The fact that liturgy is *public* in scope and character lives in the very term. It is Greco-Roman in origin, referring to a gift or work

¹ Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), xii.

given toward the good of a city, community, or *polis*. Thus, for example, a Roman citizen who gave from his or her wealth for the building of an aqueduct so that water could be moved across the precincts of the city, or who built a plaza so that civic discourse could flourish there, was performing a *leitourgia*, a work for the people. The Greek-speaking Jews picked up the term as metaphor for the work of the High Priest for the atonement of the people, a usage reflected in the New Testament, where the end of Zacharias's ministry is recalled (Luke 1:23); and for the notion of ministry or service to whole people of God, as with Paul's call for the collection for the sake of the church at Jerusalem (2 Cor. 9:12). Most notably, and in the closest parallel to the use in the Septuagint, Jesus himself not only does a liturgy for the people but *is, in fact, the liturgy*, in his person and in his performance, both as the superior High Priest and through the shedding of his own blood (Heb. 8:6; 9:21). The connection to the old Roman usage of the term should be transparent: as a Roman citizen gave from his or her abundance for the upbuilding of the city, so God gave from the divine abundance the incarnation of the Logos, Jesus Christ, that the world might be saved, redeemed, set free, made newly alive, set on the path to transformation, brought to its own true identity.²

To speak of our worship as liturgy, then, is first and foremost to speak of Jesus Christ, and of the church gathered in his name for rituals through which they participate in this gift that God has given.³ *It is public at its core*, both in the sense that Jesus, as liturgy, is *given for the whole world*, and in the sense that the church, through liturgy, enters, *as a corporate body, a gathered community*, into its own participation in the liturgy that is Jesus Christ. The entire world is the public for which Jesus is given, and the whole church is the public that joins itself to the work of Christ in hearing, washing, and eating in the name of God, the church being itself the body of Christ. This is what it means to say that the liturgy celebrates the paschal mystery. This term, *paschal mystery*, is never simply a description of what happens in Christ's life, death, and resurrection, but implicates the church, the

² While "forensic substitutionary atonement" dominates the soteriological imagination of many postmedieval Protestants, the history of Christian soteriological metaphors, Eastern and Western, is a varied one. Public theologians find themselves working with various metaphors depending on context.

³ Robert F. Taft, "What Does Liturgy Do? Toward a Soteriology of Liturgical Celebration: Some Theses," in *Primary Sources of Liturgical Theology*, ed. Dwight W. Vogel (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 140–41.

liturgical assembly who enters into that mystery, as both the gift of its life and the command of its discipleship.⁴

If Christ is God's liturgy in the sense we have described so far, then it follows that the church's liturgy is not only public in the sense that it joins the church to an action intended by God for the redemption of the world; and public in the sense that it is the intentional ritual action of a public body; but it is public in that it enacts a vision of the world as God intends it to be, an eschatological promise of the world that God brings to pass in its transformation in Christ. Put sharply, the liturgy is not only a public act, but the enactment of a *public* in the broadest possible sense. This public is woven not only of all peoples of the world but of the whole creation. We are involved, in liturgy, in practicing the reign of God as it is brought into being through the Spirit by God in Christ.

Liturgy as Theology

Let us consider this from another angle of view. As the primary referent of *leitourgia*, Jesus Christ himself is the *logos tou theou* (John 1:1–14). In the same way that liturgy is, in the primary sense, Jesus Christ himself, “theology” refers in the primary sense to what is enacted in him. The living Word, incarnate, “spoken” in Jesus, is the foundation of theology in the secondary, discursive sense of the term, and its final goal. To be a theologian is to enter into that performance of human life that is flourishing life, life as God intends it. No one can speak in *words about God* unless she has entered into the life of *God the Word*—or become aware and engaged with that life by virtue of which she lives—which is first and foremost neither an idea nor a set of doctrines but the shape of a life. Liturgy, as noted above, 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. This entrance into the paschal mystery for the theologian in community, and the community as theologian, is inclusive of prayer, and prayer is at its heart, as this is the irreducible form of the reconciled life. What is prayer if not the living interchange with God in Christ through the Spirit? Liturgy is the consummate place at which the whole public of God (the church) turns mind and

⁴ Mary Collins, “Critical Questions for Liturgical Theology,” in Vogel, *Primary Sources of Liturgical Theology*, 157.

body toward God and enters into the paschal mystery; it practices the life and word of the *logos tou theou* as its own life, source, and goal, through word, structured silence, and bodily practice. It is in this sense of turning the whole person toward God that Evagrius means that the theologian is one who “prays truly.”⁵

Liturgy, then, obviously has theology *in it*, in its hymns, its prayers, its intercessions prayed, and its Scripture read; and we can *reflect upon* it theologically, as we are doing here; but more radically, and logically prior to those senses of theology, the liturgy is primary theology.⁶ That primary theology is a public theology: the gathering of the liturgical assembly around and in the living Word of God, immersing itself through ritual practice in the new world, the new public that God is bringing to pass. In the idiom of ritual performance, human beings engage in embodied cognition, enacting and sketching with bodies a worldview. This happens through their consent to a particular way of patterning of time, of using space, and of sequencing rite.

Public, Theological . . . and Ritually Performed

To consider liturgy as public and as theological, then, is to consider the same reality, holographically as it were, from two different angles. That one reality is life in God—specifically, a life lived by Jesus, loving, celebrating, suffering, dying, and risen—and the church by grace entering ritually into that life, in which the destiny of the world, the coming reign of God, is performed. It does not happen only there, but as the one place and time where the whole body gathers to celebrate and pray, it happens *especially* there. In this way liturgy is, in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*’s memorable phrase, the source and summit of the Christian life.⁷

Ritualizing is a fundamental and universal mode of human world-making. It is not unique to the Christian life, though the public vision it enacts in Christian liturgy with which we are concerned is specific

⁵ Evagrius of Pontus, “On Prayer,” in *The Philokalia*, vol. 1, trans. G. E. H. Palmer et al. (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 62. Evagrius’s Neoplatonic and individualist framework is not itself necessarily to the point.

⁶ More on the distinction between primary and secondary forms of theology can be found in Western writers influenced to varying degrees by Alexander Schmemmann; for example, Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Pueblo, 1984); and Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998).

⁷ Taft, “What Does Liturgy Do?,” 141.

to that life and faith. Ritual performs a world, a public theology in the primary sense; the source of its power is in its *repetition, formality, spatial and temporal patterning, focus on the whole body, and as a function of its simultaneous familiarity and unfamiliarity*. In ritual the assembly experiences the meeting point of the world both as it is and as it ought to be.

Ritual's power is in its repetition: it communicates what is most important by actions occurring over and over, and registers these things of high importance in the body memory of the participants. (Even the original, novel, flexible, or ad hoc moments in liturgy are scripted to occur in a particular place, time, or manner by the rite, or finally figured by them.)

Ritual's power is in its formality: the church from one assembly to the next experiences its rites as something to which they *consent* but do not entirely control, decide on, or constantly rearrange. While members of the assembly bring themselves to the action, they submit themselves to the rhythms of the rite and find their horizons reshaped by it. As Roy Rappaport put it, ritual is "more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances *not entirely encoded by the performers*" that "logically entails" the social contract, morality, understanding of creation, the numinous in its relationship to ordinary life, and more.⁸ This is a *public* vision, performed, in the most expansive sense.

Ritual's power is in its sanctification of space, and occurrence in space sanctified. The assembly meets in a space set aside specifically for their rites, which conveys to them a festal quality and contributes to their aforementioned formality, so that even occasional liturgies that happen outside spaces consecrated to that purpose occur against the horizon of sacred space as normative. *All* space is sacred, and this grounds the public concern of the church; but we know this, counter-intuitively, precisely from our experience of meeting again and again in space set apart to testify to that fact.

Ritual's power is in its ordering of time. The quotidian sequence of time passing in our ordinary days is reshaped and reframed, in the Christian case, around the signal dimensions of the life and character of Christ. Fixed times, or fixed occasions in life passage, are set for its observance and signal key features of the life and character of its Lord

⁸ Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1999), 27.

that, in turn, valorize certain ways of being and behaving on the part of the liturgical assembly.

Ritual's power arises in its combination of the familiar and the unfamiliar: the people perform the rite with people they know, within a world they recognize in which the ritual action occurs, but sketch in gestural and bodily shorthand a world that is *unlike* the one they occupy but for which they long: a world as it is promised and foreshadowed to be . . . a world as it *should* be. This is the *subjunctive* mode in which ritual occurs, as Michael Puett puts it, in his critique of a line of interpretation from Durkheim to Geertz: its power is not simply in cementing an existing social order, but in reordering the conventions of the present order according to the conventions of the world to come.⁹ Not incidentally, ritual, just like public theology (in the sense of discursive accounts of the world's particular problems, policies, or identification of social goods), functions where the edges of "is" and "ought" meet: "working between the as is and the otherwise," as Shelly Rambo defines the character of public theology that has its "eyes wide open to suffering."¹⁰

The Lifeworld Enacted in Liturgy

All these dimensions of liturgy—scripted repetition, formality, the ordering of time, the use of space, the illumination of *is* in the light of *ought*—sketch in the form of body practice the clue not only to all of the worshipping community's life, but all of life, *omnia cum deo*. The shape of that lifeworld emerges especially in the *ordo* of the rites—that is, their deep grammar, essential elements, and largely nonnegotiable dynamic structure. Gathering around book and font and altar, in words and silence and song, praising, praying, hearing, washing, expressing hope, interceding, naming failures and accepting their absolution, touching, eating, gesturing, being sent, occur in a particular order and relationship to one another. All the dimensions of liturgy in their dynamic totality and interrelationship establish the

⁹ Adam B. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (New York: Oxford University, 2008), 17–42.

¹⁰ Stephanie N. Arel and Shelly Rambo, eds., *Introduction to Post-traumatic Public Theology* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2016), 3.

proper human life. The ritual teaches us how to attend, and what we should attend to, in our lives.¹¹

To say that the liturgy sketches a lifeworld and its attendant virtues and order of values is not to say the sketch is simple. It works out in ritual paraphrase the depth of a life, its texture and complexity, and if this life could be univocally described, we would not need to ritualize it. That world is known, but known eschatologically even as we enact it presently. This eschatological life is both the condition and content of the liturgy and also its horizon. So the lifeworld the liturgy enacts is both manifest and mysterious, hidden and emerging by the hand of the God who has not finished in flesh and matter what was finished in the body of the One who was crucified, yet whose risen body was both continuous and discontinuous with his earthly body. Thus, the liturgical action is full of the play of images and metaphors, like Scripture itself—sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory, often dialectical, and ultimately nonbinary and paradoxical, to “speak” of that which exceeds a binary grasp. (This quality of liturgy is of a piece with the Christian tradition as a whole. It is too often overlooked that this tradition is itself an ongoing conversation, a debate, an argument over what is central to the gospel and what is peripheral, as the work that God is doing both establishes the impulse to traditioning and continuously breaks and remakes the tradition.)¹²

But this much is clear regarding the virtues appropriate to the reign of God emerging half-glimpsed in the liturgical action: they include *gratitude*, the cardinal virtue of Christian life, the very “name” given to the eucharistic rite as such, which recognizes that all is given by God, beyond what could be asked for or deserved; an attendant *reverence for the whole of creation and all people* sharing in the dignity of the divine source of being; *trust* that God is gracious, that there is enough for all, and that the bounty of the world should be shared; a *readiness to listen and receive* divine guidance, and the corresponding awareness that to live only by our own lights will and does lead

¹¹ Michael L. Raposa, “Ritual Inquiry: The Pragmatic Logic of Religious Practice,” in *Thinking Through Rituals: Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Kevin Schilbrack (New York: Routledge, 2004), 115–16.

¹² Gordon Lathrop, *Saving Images: The Presence of the Bible in Christian Liturgy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 180. For the pre-Nicene roots of this phenomenon, see Rowan Williams, “Does It Make Sense to Speak of Pre-Nicene Orthodoxy?” in *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honor of Henry Chadwick* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1989), 1–23.

to catastrophe; the *capacity to lament, compassion* for those who are broken, by their own actions or by what has befallen them within the tragic structure of a beautiful but finite world, as well as the commitment to tend to their wounds; a commitment to the *just distribution* of resources and care for the poor, the little, the lost, and to feed the hungry both spiritually and physically; sustained *consciousness of our failures* but avoidance of scrupulosity that aggrandizes human power by magnifying our failures beyond proportion; the *readiness to make peace* with our neighbor, and the corresponding awareness that all are neighbors, and that we are called, like the Samaritan in Luke's Gospel, to be neighbor to others. Gratitude respectful of all human and created dignity, humility and reverence, a commitment to justice and peacemaking—and many more could be named: these virtues and values are practiced in the various ritual actions and exchanges of the liturgy and establish the kind of community, correspond to the kind or world, that God is bringing to pass in Jesus Christ. This glimpse of the reign of God in and through these virtues practiced in the actions of the rite constitute the lens through which the public theologian identifies what might be named, spoken, identified, lifted up, resisted, challenged, healed, or judged in the economic, social, political, moral spheres with which the Christian church lives out its life and discipleship.

From Liturgically Enacted Virtues to Policies and Actions?

At precisely this point of liturgy's power as ritualized public theology are its limits with respect to public theology in the narrower sense. The liturgy enacts a lifeworld, a public theology in the thickest and richest sense; that lifeworld implies the correspondent virtues and objects of our attention, including those illustrative examples above; and the Christian public theologian thus shaped by liturgy is, as it were, directed to name and speak of certain concerns in the public life of the wider world, and toward developing critique and prescription in ways that reflect the liturgical lifeworld's values. However, it is not necessarily the case that this will lead the liturgically formed and informed public theologian, or the church, toward specific judgments or recommendations universally applied.

Consider an example: there is a famine in a particular country. This is a concern to which a public theologian might speak. It is clear that compassion, the respect for the dignity of human nature, the

concern for just distribution of resources, the commitment to care for the least of these, and a range of other principal virtues that mark the Christian vision of God's reign rehearsed and inculcated in liturgy would surely generate a Christian call for a response. But moving on from that call, from what specific causes does this famine arise and to what actions and policies would this lead? The direct drop of food relief that we might ask our church or legislative representatives to set in motion? The transfer of the knowledge of agricultural technologies that mitigate climatic shifts? Pressure on local or national government to alter policies that may be conditioning factors of this calamity? What technical challenges and possibilities are involved in relief, and what kind of response will have the most significant impact? What diplomatic relations or political alliances are involved and what is their relationship to the famine? How must they be navigated and what political or moral cascade effects would arise from their engagement? What, particularly, in the face of all these challenges and complexities, would be the voice of the Christian public theologian addressing the matter?

It is difficult to imagine, from the standpoint of our values enacted in word and sacrament, that we would ever recommend, "Do not feed the hungry!" But—to broaden the example of hunger beyond a single crisis—to calibrate responses to the homeless man on the street, the impoverished woman and her children living in a food desert, the temporarily unemployed as the cascade effect of government policy shifts, and the starving population of a sovereign nation not our own, the public theologian will need to translate liturgical values to an account of these public concerns and to concrete recommendations and calls to the church. To do so, he or she must partner with moral theologians and with others whose skills are in the economic, political, and technical sectors. The liturgy forms a people with values such that they must address these concerns as a matter of ongoing discipleship. But how they are to be addressed is rarely indicated by liturgical practice as such.

Consider another example with which the public theologian might engage. Every week, we ritually make peace with one another. We eat from a common table in which the One is given for many so that the many become one. We hear the Scripture call for respect for the neighbor. Can the church that speaks in one of its altar prayers of a kingdom in which "every tribe and language and people and nation" are gathered around the throne of God, *ever* support violent action

for any purpose? If so, for what purpose? Is a war ever just? Can it ever secure the dignity of the innocent? Augustine of Hippo, the Mennonites, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer (just to name a few) have come to conclusions either slightly or radically different from one another on this question.

How about whether the state should enter an economic pact with another nation concerning some category of goods? What positions on these matters most closely enact the respect for distributive justice enacted in the rhythms of our liturgical life? What particular position ought the church call for and support regarding incarceration in its interconnection to race and class? A commitment to restorative and not merely retributive justice would seem the implication of a liturgical practice that performs in any number of ways an aspiration to reconciliation. But what are the specific policy commitments by which this commitment would be enfolded in a complex world in which the competing goods of the protection of citizens and human rehabilitation both seem to arise from the gospel enacted in liturgy?

We could go on. Perhaps these examples suffice to demonstrate that it will sometimes be clear, but sometimes not at all, how Christians should anticipate the coming reign of God, envisioned and anticipated in liturgy, in specific actions and policies. The public theologian will speak in a way that anticipates the final repair and re-creation of the world sketched in the public theology that is liturgy; but for now, we see in a glass darkly. Too, we do well to remember that the center of the eucharistic action is the remembrance of one who was crucified: God redeems the world not through a policy but through a person, the Risen One who was crucified, whose life, passion, and death constitutes for us a continuing interruption of our practices, our policies . . . our certainties . . . and their continuous remaking, until that day when God is all in all and the creation is made new. Until then we gather around book and font and table, never far from the door that opens to the world, for a ritual performance that is its own end. We gather again and again, ritually reinforcing the virtues that we will—at time boldly and at times haltingly—bring to the challenges we face in seeking and speaking Christianly to the public good.