

# THE IMPORTANCE OF LITURGICAL STUDIES IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

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Some would say Liturgical Studies have no importance whatever. Professor F. C. Burkitt of Cambridge wrote, "It is still believed in certain circles that Liturgiology is a proper study only for those possessed of a sacristy mind." This accusation suggests there is a closet effeminacy in those whose immature delight it is to dress up in imposing vestments, to scatter incense like leaves before the north wind, to play with anachronistic candles, and to cross themselves as if they had been attacked by a bevy of witches. Sometimes the critics of liturgiology suggest that it is a study subject to triviality and pomposity. My distinguished teacher, Professor E. C. Ratcliff, was frequently in demand as a liturgical adviser in South India as well as in the United Kingdom, but when he was asked for liturgical guidance for some pompous episcopal function in the Church of England, he replied, "liturgy, not Circus, is my subject."<sup>1</sup>

You may even be surprised to learn that Dean Inge, Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, and himself a great mystic, when asked if he studied liturgiology answered, "No; nor do I collect postage stamps." The assumption was that both were totally irrelevant studies and the obsession of the small-minded. His diary also records that after he had spent several hours conducting worship in the cathedral on the same day, he confided, "I have held different views at different times about the character and nature of the Creator of the Universe; but never at any time have I thought it at all probable that He is the kind of person who enjoys being serenaded."<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the most far-reaching criticism of liturgies has emerged in the English-speaking part of the world from those denominations in England who were historically excluded from the national Church of the land because they believed that the Book of Common Prayer was not in all points in accordance with the Biblical criterion, and although they were faithful ministers, yet were hauled into prison or forced to escape to Holland or New England where they could practice extemporary prayers under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit following Romans 8:26, "We do not even know how we ought to pray, but through our inarticulate groans the Spirit himself is pleading for us..."(N.E.B.). The Puritans, as recorded in my *The Worship of the English Puritans* (1948), elaborated no less than five important arguments against liturgies and set prayers. First, this deprived both ministers and people from the opportunity of creating their own prayers. Secondly, no liturgy could meet the different needs of varying congregations and occasions. Thirdly, to insist upon set forms as the only acceptable way of worshipping God was to equate human decisions with Divine imperatives. Fourthly, set prayers lead to hypocrisy for either familiarity breeds contempt or leads to mere lip service where we speak what we do not feel. The fifth and final charge against liturgies is that their imposition has brought persecution in its train. Certainly, it cost Presbyterian, Congregationalist, as well as Baptist ministers their livings in the seventeenth century, and Methodists theirs in the eighteenth century in England, while creating the so-called "Free Church" tradition which until recently, has equated a set liturgy with insincerity.

How in the face of such criticisms as I have mentioned - the charges of immaturity, triviality, pomposity, and insincerity as well as Biblical infidelity - can we make a case for the importance of liturgiology in Theological education? One could, of course, answer that the very listing of such charges is itself an example of studying the history of liturgy, but what is wanted is a

finer appreciation of the aims and rewards of Liturgical Studies. One could point out that some of the finest defenders of extemporaneous prayer have, in fact, created famous prayers and even books of prayers, such as George Reynolds, a Presbyterian minister who, at the Restoration was appointed Bishop of Norwich and in 1662 wrote the superb General Thanksgiving in the Book of Common Prayer with its succinct summaries, blessing Almighty God for “our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life” and giving gratitude “for the means of grace and the hope of glory” and answering the very criticism of insincerity by begging “that we show forth thy praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives.” We cannot forget either that John Hunter, an English Congregational minister published *Devotional Services for Public Worship* in 1882 which called for a tenth revised edition in 1920, and that an English Presbyterian minister, Dr. W. E. Orchard, produced his fine book, *Divine Service* in 1919.

## I.

In this presentation, however, I want to make some larger claims for the central role of the study of liturgies in our seminaries. I will begin with a very modest, even mediocre claim. If a sermon occupies no more than a third of a service of Divine worship, and liturgy takes up the rest of the time, why, in theological seminaries is so much more time given to homiletics (not to mention Biblical interpretation and systematic theology, all subservient to sermon production) than to liturgies? And in this calculation I am omitting such special services as the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist, and occasional services such as Confirmation, Weddings, and Funerals. This, of itself, argues that far more time should be spent in Protestant seminaries on Liturgies than is at present the case.

## II.

Let me move to higher ground to provide further arguments for the role of Liturgies. My second argument is, therefore, the maturity which the discipline of liturgiology has now attained. To make the point I need only refer to the masterworks now available in this field produced by Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, and Protestant scholars. The Catholic Josef Jungmann’s *chef-d’oeuvre* appeared in English translation from 1951-55 in two substantial volumes as *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, and a fellow Jesuit Vaggagini produced the influential *Theological Dimensions of the Liturgy* in 1959. Alexander Schmemmann, the Eastern Orthodox scholar, published his *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* in 1966, while the superb Lutheran bishop Yngve Briliottz made an ecumenical contribution to liturgiology by his masterful study of Holy Communion as early as 1930 in the book, *Eucharist Faith and Practice - Catholic and Evangelical*. It was a study of the various ways the Eucharist had been interpreted through the Christian centuries, and this I shall refer to later in greater detail. Major Anglican contributions to our study have been made by Dom Gregory Dix in *The Shape of the Liturgy* (1948) which argued that the four basic actions were more important than the varying interpretations given to them historically, and A. G. Herbert’s *Liturgy and Society; The Function of the Church in the Modern World* (1935). This argued that the Church in her liturgy was living out her theology and at the same time renewing her spirituality. It included the claim that the Church was expressing the will of God in a redeemed society which had already transcended in principle and partly in reality the divisions of race, nationality, class, sexuality, and politics that tear the outside world asunder, and was commissioned to demonstrate this integrating life in the world. This was no merely antiquarian or aesthetic approach. Other Anglican writings of note were Evelyn Underbill’s *Worship* and J. Gordon Davies’s studies of liturgy and architecture, ancient and contemporary.

The two leading Continental Reformed students of liturgiology in our day have been J. J. Von Allmen with his magisterial study, *Worship its Theology and Practice* (1965), and Max Thurian's *The Eucharist Memorial* (2 volumes), of 1960 and 1961.

Two Methodists of our day have made remarkable liturgical studies. The most renowned is, of course, Geoffrey Wainright, who has lived and taught in three Continents, Europe, Africa and now in North America. His *The Eucharist and Eschatology* (1971) a historical and contemporary ecumenical study showed how important the vision we get of the future Kingdom of God is in worship for this is what directs the steps of the Church. But he has surpassed himself in the epoch-making *Doxology. The Praise of God in Doctrine, Worship and Life. A Systematic Theology*. (1980). It showed that an excellent systematic theology can be grounded on worship alone which fulfills all the basic needs of individuals in community. Here at least liturgiology has come of age. The other Methodist who has placed us all in his debt is the American James F. White by the range and relevance of his writings on worship, and, indeed, the same could be said of another Methodist, William H. Willimon. It would be inappropriate to provide a fuller bibliography of liturgiology here, but I maintain that I have cited enough authors and major works to show that our discipline need not be ashamed of itself, nor of its profound relevance for theological training and renewal through the maturity of the works which have been referred to. Liturgiology has fully come of age and is in its maturity.

### III.

My third major contention is that it is in Christian Worship that normally Christians capture the vision of the Christian faith. Geoffrey Wainwright makes the claim in his *Doxology* in the statement, "It is in and through the worshipping community that most believers catch the Christian vision."<sup>3</sup> Now, if we accept the postulate that worship affords the primary experience of corporate Christianity - of what it means to be part of the communion that proudly calls itself the Body of Christ - then we must recognize that there are some important corollaries of this perception and acknowledgement. The first is that this experience more than the brain, the top of the mind, is involved. Indeed, it can be argued, as Thomas Torrance has in fact done, that worship actually stretches the mind itself to the utmost. "Worship," he has written, "is the exercise of the mind and in the contemplation of God in which wonder and awe play an important part in stretching and enlarging our vision, or in opening up our conceptual forms to take in that which by its nature far outshines them."<sup>4</sup> But worship involves far more than the top of the mind. It involves the adoring heart as well. It even opens up all the senses, those aesthetic port-holes for color, sound, touch, taste and scent. Let me insist that "vision" is a very appropriate term for the enlargement of cognition and feeling that worship involves, for it is at once an awareness of God, ourselves, the world, and our neighbors in a remarkable and unifying way that affects us totally: mind, heart, will, conscience all at once.

The point may be made more clearly by quoting Archbishop William Temple's definition of worship, even though this is incomplete:

What worship means is the submission of the whole being to the Object of worship. It is the opening of the heart to receive the love of God; it is the subjection of conscience to be directed by Him; it is the declaration of need to be filled by Him; it is the subjection of desire to be controlled by Him; and as a result of all these together, it is the surrender of the will to be used by Him.<sup>5</sup>

If we are right in claiming that the experience of worship properly understood uses all our faculties, then the study of worship expands to be a mighty discipline. It will demand specialists in the history of art and architecture, music, psychology; since the study of our neighbors is involved, sociology, too, in addition to theology and the history of human thought. Hence liturgiology, including all the elements of knowledge just mentioned, will require a detailed study historically, ecumenically, and contemporaneously, of all the elements of Divine worship: types of spirituality from Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain to Go, Tell It on the Mountain*; the dramatic impact of the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion, how they have been interpreted and enacted at different times; the various attitudes of prayer and how adequately they are presented in contemporary worship - I refer to adoration and thanksgiving, confession, absolution, petition, intercession, and dedication or consecration; the Christological and sanctoral cycles in the Christian Year and how they should be incorporated in Protestant worship; the changing art, architecture and music used, disused, or abused through twenty centuries; liturgical preaching in relation to the Lectionary; and Church services as rites of passage. Can anyone reasonably argue that such correlations of Christianity, Liturgy and Culture are narrow, self-serving, anachronistic, trivial or pompous subjects for courses in theological education? I very much doubt it.

So far I have argued that there are three reasons urging the importance of liturgies in theological education: the time spent on worship in any service is three times as long as that spent on the sermon; the profound maturity that the discipline of Liturgies has now reached as a theological discipline; and that it is in Christian worship the majority of folk learn the vision of the Christian life.

#### IV.

The fourth consideration is an ecumenical one. It is a striking fact that since Vatican II almost all of the Churches in the world have reached an astonishing degree of unity in their understanding of worship, and even in their celebration of the sacraments, and their evaluation of preaching. There are, of course, residual differences, and there is not time to argue the details. But the evidence has been very plainly set forward in a document of the World Council of Churches which crosses denominations, ethnic groupings, and even high and low types of churchmanship. Its editors are Max Thurian and Geoffrey Wainwright and their revealing volume is titled, *Baptism and Eucharist. Ecumenical Convergence in Celebration* (1983).

A very powerful fifth argument for the importance of liturgiology is that it is essential if the Christian Church is to remain apostolically orthodox in its mission and also reformed. How otherwise can we be delivered in Protestantism from a debilitated eucharistic theology like Zwinglian Memorialism as contrasted with the real spiritual presence of Christ which Calvin taught, and which Howard Hageman has so forcefully presented in his chapter called "The Tale of Two Cities" in his admirable *Pulpit and Table*. To forget our history is to be haunted by heresy. It was a profound revelation to most scholars, I believe, when the Lutheran liturgiologist Brilioth showed that at different times in the history of Christianity the Eucharist had been seen from the standpoint of five different angles: Thanksgiving, Communion and Fellowship, Commemoration, Sacrifice, and Mystery. In our day we would, like the earliest Church, want to add the dimension of Eschatology stressing the joyful Banquet which points to the age to come, and which has been so excellently described in Wainwright's *Eucharist and Eschatology* (American edition, 1981). He has brilliantly analyzed three images: the Messianic Banquet, the Second Advent of our Lord, and the first fruits of the Kingdom of God, all experienced at the Eucharist. Perhaps the newest emphasis of all, though it was anticipated in part in the American Social Gospel and is now rehearsed in Liberation Theology, is the sense that the Eucharist is the perfect image of sharing, where rich and

poor receive equal shares of the consecrated bread and wine in the brotherhood and sisterhood of Christ's Kingdom. It is therefore a proleptic vision of Christocracy as true economic as well as political democracy.

My contention is that these differing emphases have never been all incorporated in one satisfactory and unified Eucharistic Celebration, but that they should be. Without any one of them this coruscating diamond of Christ's gift will be lacking a facet of the sublime truth. And missing that facet of truth and grace, we are all deficient: our faith maimed, our vision skewed and squinty.

## VI.

Finally, let me indicate that another argument for a greater recognition of the importance of Liturgies in the theological curriculum. It is the ethical consequences of Liturgy. It is, Says D. H. Tripp, at sessions of worship where Christians are expected to be most sincere, in the vows of initiation or confirmation, in marriage and ordination, and in the approach to Holy Communion. He also adds, "Worship sanctifies the Church and its members by instruction in the faith. It is committed to being orthodox both by its nature as a response to the Gospel and, also by the moral need to be true to God, for the sake of honoring Him."<sup>6</sup> It is supremely in worship that our pride is lowered, and we discover that humility which is the precondition to the obedience of faith. Dr. Kenneth Kirk in *The Vision of God* made the ethical impact of worship vividly clear in eliminating the arrogance in the service of patronage:

Yet apart from the atmosphere of worship, every act of service avails only to inflate the agent's sense of patronage. He is the doctor, humanity is his patient: he is the Samaritan, his neighbor the crippled wayfarer: he is the instructor, others are merely his pupils. Gratitude (if they show gratitude) only confirms his conviction of his own importance; resentment (if they resent his services) only ministers to the glow of self-esteem with which he comforts himself in secret.<sup>7</sup>

The glory of worship, by contrast, is to elicit the grace of humility, for at its center is a Cross, the Divine token of disinterested service on the part of One who humbled himself becoming obedient to death, yes, the death of the Cross.

Every true service of worship reminds us that the essential function of the Church is to glorify God in adoration and sacrificial service. And this demands that all theological seminaries express the central importance of worship in their curricula.

## FOOTNOTES

1. *E. C. Ratcliff Liturgical Studies*, eds. A. H. Couratin and D. H. Tripp, (London: S.P.C.K., 1976), p. 13. Burkitt citation, *ibid.*, p. 12.
2. Adam Fox, *Dean Inge*, (London, 1960), p. 115, cited from his diary entry for May 28, 1911, which was Inge's first Sunday at St. Paul's.
3. p. 436.
4. *God and Rationality*, p. 204f.
5. *The Church and Its Teaching To-day*, (1936), p. 15.
6. *The Study of Liturgy*, eds. C. Jones, G. Wainwright, and E. Yarnold, (1978), "Worship and the Pastoral Office" by D. H. Tripp, p. 525.
7. Abridged edition, p. 184.

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