

Difficulties in Doing Liturgical Theology

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Abstract: This study critically examines some traditional methods in liturgical theology. The author argues that liturgy is as much a human artefact as a divine creation, and therefore that liturgical theology needs to take the fruits of historical research and the insights offered by the social sciences much more seriously than it has generally done. He also rejects the notion that there is a single theological meaning within every liturgical act which can be read out of it as a doctrinal norm. On the contrary, liturgies are essentially multivalent, and doctrine shapes both the liturgies themselves and people's interpretations of them at least as much as liturgical practice shapes belief.

THE TERM "LITURGICAL THEOLOGY" is a very slippery customer indeed, because it can mean different things to different people, and even be used in somewhat differing senses by the same person. It can, for instance, be a new way talking about what would formerly have been called sacramental theology, as in the recent work of Louis-Marie Chauvet;¹ it can be used to denote the theological investigation of the activity of worship itself; it can refer to the use of liturgy as a source for the formulation of Christian doctrine; or it can be understood in reverse, as the critical assessment of the practice of worship in the light of doctrinal norms.²

Thus, lack of any agreed and clear definition of what the activity itself is supposed to be presents us with one significant problem in engaging in liturgical theology. But it is not the only one. Although space does not permit me to undertake a fully comprehensive critique, I propose to lay out several other difficulties that I perceive in the ways in which many of my contemporaries set about the task, and to suggest that the future of liturgical theology might lie in a somewhat different approach to the subject.

1. Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbole et sacrement* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1987); English translation, *Symbol and Sacrament* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995).

2. For a summary of different understandings of the term, see Kevin W. Irwin, "Liturgical Theology", in Peter E. Fink, (ed.), *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship* (Liturgical Press, 1990) 721-33.

THE DEFINITE ARTICLE?

In scholarly writings about liturgy and liturgical theology, one often encounters the use of the definite article: "The liturgy". Such an expression is obviously natural when referring to the specific worship practices of a particular denomination: the liturgy of the Church of England, for example, or the liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church. And it was also understandably used in earlier centuries by those who believed that liturgy was substantially unchanging, that what Christians of their own times were doing was fundamentally identical with what Christians had always done, right back to the apostolic age. But since the rise of critical historical scholarship, we have been made aware of the enormous changes that have taken place in the ways that Christians have organised their worship from one century to another, as well as from one ecclesiastical tradition to another. To state the obvious, the liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church of today is quite different from that of the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, and that of the medieval Catholic Church was again quite different from what went on at Rome in the third or fourth centuries, and all these liturgies are again quite different from what the Church in Byzantium was doing in those same periods or from what western Protestant traditions were doing in the sixteenth century.

When liturgical theologians today therefore speak of "the liturgy" in an absolute sense, they are usually not referring to the precise texts and rubrics of particular liturgies but rather to an underlying continuity of liturgical practice which they claim to discern behind all the variations and mutations in outward appearance that Christian worship has displayed. Some time ago the American Benedictine liturgical scholar Aidan Kavanagh issued a warning about the "easy generalization" that such an approach can engender, but sadly his words have not been headed by many:

We are led into habits of thought about *the* liturgy of *the* church, as though such a thing is obvious and presumptive. What has existed, however, are *liturgies* of the *churches* – and it is in the comparison of these with each other that one is led down through their different surface structures into their common deep structures where the basis for generalization, and *then* systematization, can be detected. To presume that there is such a thing as *the* liturgy of *the* church at the outset of a research process puts cart before horse, and the western researcher may well end up by searching for Confirmation in Saint John Chrysostom or by concluding that women have never influenced Christian worship until our own day – despite the foundational influence exercised by Juliana of Liège, Mechtilde, Gertrude, and Margaret Mary Alcoque on the

liturgical observances of Corpus Christi and Sacred Heart in the Medieval or Counter-Reformation Roman liturgy, to name but four examples. That there is indeed *a* liturgy of *the* church is something no one would deny. It is, however, not a presumption in research. It is the conclusion, well nuanced, which sound research may among other things demonstrate.³

My quarrel with those who use the definite article, however, goes much further than Kavanagh's, in two directions. First, in most cases the fault does not seem to be simply a matter of insufficient academic rigour, of making a presumption without first engaging in the necessary historical research. Rather, historical research is treated as largely irrelevant to the question, because the conviction that there is a fundamental continuity in the liturgical tradition rests in the end not upon demonstrable historical proof but upon faith. Its proponents hold a "high" doctrine of liturgy, that it is "the *sacred* liturgy", given to the Church by Christ, and inspired, guided, and shaped by the Holy Spirit throughout the ages; and hence its continuity is assured by the continuity of the divine initiative. Thus, for example, the 1947 encyclical letter of Pope Pius XII, *Mediator Dei*, could say: "The sacred liturgy is consequently the public worship which our Redeemer as Head of the Church renders to the Father...";⁴ and the late Jesuit liturgical theologian Edward Kilmartin could conclude: "We know by faith that the liturgy of the Church is ultimately the work of the Triune God."⁵

It is true that this perspective does not always lead to a kind of "liturgical fundamentalism", comparable to biblical fundamentalism. It does not exclude the possibility of a critical attitude towards actual liturgical practice. But it does place considerable restraints upon it. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council was willing to admit that "the Liturgy consists of a part that is unchangeable because it is divinely instituted and of parts that can be changed",⁶ but the changes that liturgical reformers of most Christian denominations have been prepared to undertake have mostly been limited to the restoration of what was perceived to be the earlier – and therefore presumably truer – form and meaning of some practice rather than the fundamental questioning of core features.

3. Aidan Kavanagh, "Liturgy and Ecclesial Consciousness: a Dialectic of Change", *Studia Liturgica* 15 (1982/83) 3.

4. *Mediator Dei* 20; Latin text in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 39 (1947) 528.

5. Edward Kilmartin, *Christian Liturgy I: Theology* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1988) 180.

6. *Sacrosanctum Concilium Oecumenicum Vaticanum Secundum, Constitutio de Sacra Liturgia* 21; Latin text in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 56 (1964) 97-138; English text in Mary Ann Simcoe (ed.), *The Liturgy Documents: A Parish Resource* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, revised edition 1985) 1-36.

Similarly, liturgical theologians belonging to this same school have seen their task as discovering the sound meaning that lies hidden within an obscure practice rather than challenging its very roots. They have taken as their starting-point the presumption that, whatever superficial appearances may suggest to the contrary, there must be an orthodox doctrinal message behind every ritual, if only we could find out what it is. They have, for example, usually been no more prepared to question seriously whether the rite of confirmation has any real theological justification for its existence than Augustine of Hippo was to ask whether the practice of infant baptism might have begun for reasons of more doubtful worth rather than as an expression of sound doctrine.⁷ Since Christians have practised both infant baptism and confirmation for such a long time, the presumption goes, there obviously must be good reasons for both customs, even if historians have sometimes described them as “rites in search of a theology”.⁸ Such attitudes apply a very strong brake to rigorous theological investigation, and for those of us who do not subscribe to such a “high” doctrine of liturgical inspiration, and who regard Christian patterns of worship as being as much the product of fallible human minds as of divine initiative, they present a very real difficulty in doing liturgical theology, or at least in doing it in that way.

The second direction in which I would want to extend Kavanagh’s critique is that not only is the fundamental continuity of liturgical practice assumed without historical research but that historical research itself does not give us grounds for concluding that there is any fundamental continuity, except in the very broadest of terms. The “deep structures” running through liturgy are very few indeed if we apply the test of universal observance to them. There are very few things that Christians have consistently done in worship at all times and in all places. Of course, the task is made somewhat easier if one restricts one’s vision to just a single ecclesiastical tradition and ignores

7. “What the value of baptizing infants might be is an extremely obscure question. But one must believe there is some value in it”: Augustine, *De quantitate animae* 36.80, quoted from Mark Searle, “Infant baptism reconsidered”, in Mark Searle (ed.), *Alternative Futures for Worship*, vol. 2., *Baptism and Confirmation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1987) 15.

8. On the origins of infant baptism, see the essays by David F. Wright, “How controversial was the development of infant baptism in the early Church?”, in James E. Bradley and Richard A. Muller (eds.), *Church, Word, and Spirit: Historical and Theological Essays in Honor of Geoffrey W. Bromiley* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 47-63; “The Origins of Infant Baptism – Child Believers’ Baptism?”, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 40 (1987) 1-23; and “At What Ages were People Baptized in the Early Centuries?”, *Studia Patristica* 30 (1997) 389-94. On the origins of confirmation, see Aidan Kavanagh, *Confirmation: Origins and Reform* (New York: Pueblo, 1988); and Paul Turner, “The Origins of Confirmation: An Analysis of Aidan Kavanagh’s Hypothesis”, *Worship* 65 (1991) 320-36, reprinted in Maxwell E. Johnson (ed.), *Living Water, Sealing Spirit: Readings on Christian Initiation* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995) 238-58.

all the rest, but even there the genuine historical continuities are generally fewer than the often sweeping generalisations of liturgical theologians seem to suggest. In particular, just as in the case of the doctrine of apostolic succession, the evidence for continuity is most lacking where it is most needed. Recent research has demonstrated that the first three centuries of Christian history do not reveal the existence of a common liturgical pattern shared by all parts of the Church and derived from the apostles, which only subsequently became more varied from place to place as additions and deviations crept in. On the contrary, the further back we go, the more diverse Christian worship practice appears to become, and the later trend is towards uniformity rather than away from it.⁹

But the problem is increased manifold if we are serious about attempting a genuine *ecumenical* liturgical theology, because of the radical discontinuities in practice introduced at the time of the Reformation and afterwards in churches of the Protestant traditions. Efforts to find “deep structures” that perdure throughout all forms of Christian worship rapidly founder on these rocks. This results in a tendency among liturgical theologians either to ignore these inconvenient obstacles to the vision that is being set forth or to denigrate Reformation developments as being the death of the authentic Christian liturgy – seen essentially as the work of fallible humans in contrast to the divine character attributed to the shaping of Catholic worship – and so sending present-day liturgical enthusiasts within those traditions scurrying to undo the work of their forebears and “restore” in its place the “true” pattern of what is romantically imagined to have been fourth-century worship.¹⁰

Thus, if they are to stand a chance of achieving widespread acceptance, any new approaches to liturgical theology must not only give due place to the human as well as the divine contribution to the shaping of *all* Christian worship but also be prepared to grant a positive evaluation to patterns of liturgy that differ from the imagined archetype of the early Church. In this respect, it is interesting to note that the American Lutheran scholar Gordon Lathrop has adopted in his recent work a rather different and more minimalist stance than other liturgical theologians with regard to the “deep structures” that liturgy is supposed to possess. His thesis is that the *Ordo* of Christian worship is essentially one of the juxtaposition of polar opposites that reflect the pattern of God’s

9. See for example the evidence summarised in Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship* (London: SPCK/New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

10. See the remarks of Paul V. Marshall, “Reconsidering ‘Liturgical Theology’: Is there a *Lex Orandi* for all Christians?”, *Studia Liturgica* 25 (1995) 129-51, esp. 130-32; and for the effects on twentieth-century Protestant worship, see James F. White, *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989).

dealings with humanity, such as word/table, Sunday/week, praise/beseeching, teaching/bath, year/Pascha, old/new.¹¹ While his categorisation may be a little too neat and tidy, a little over-systematised to fit the full facts of history, yet it offers a promising avenue for future exploration.

LEX ORANDI?

The expectation that there will be some relationship between what people do in worship and what they believe in their hearts obviously has some justification. Liturgical practices are not usually irrational, and so to engage in this act of worship rather than that, to include this ritual gesture and exclude that, to say these particular words rather than those, does carry with it certain doctrinal implications, does suggest that one holds a particular belief. Thus, it does not seem unreasonable to claim that if we want to know what it is that Christians truly believe, then we should look to what they say and do in their worship. On the other hand, arguing from liturgy to doctrine in this way is not without its difficulties.

First of all, there is a much too ready tendency to move from *description* to *prescription*. Stating what Christians actually believe by examining what they say and do in their worship is not the same thing as using that evidence to say what Christians ought to believe, or in the words of the commonly used Latin tag, *lex orandi, lex credendi*, "law of prayer, law of belief". We certainly should take liturgy seriously as a potential source for Christian doctrine, especially where the practices concerned have existed for a very long time and/or are celebrated by a number of different Christian groups. But not any and every liturgical practice that may once have existed can claim the right to determine the Church's law of belief. Even Prosper of Aquitaine (c. 390–463), from whom the Latin tag is derived, did not argue that all liturgy offered proof for Christian doctrine. Indeed, what he actually wrote was not *lex orandi, lex credendi* at all but rather *legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*, and even this phrase needs to be seen within the context of his whole argument.

In his controversy with semi-Pelagianists over the necessity of divine grace for human salvation, Prosper first cited the judgements of Pope Innocent I, his successor Pope Zosimus, and the Council of

11. Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) esp. 33-83. His ideas also strongly influenced the report of a World Council of Churches Consultation on worship held at Ditchingham, Norfolk, England, in 1994: "Towards Koinonia in Worship: Report of the Consultation on the role of worship within the search for unity", in Thomas F. Best and Dagmar Heller (eds.), *So We Believe, So We Pray*, Faith and Order Paper 171 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1995) 4-26; also published in *Studia Liturgica* 25 (1995) 3-31.

Carthage of 418, and then went on to say: "In addition to these inviolable decisions of the blessed Apostolic See...let us consider equally the rites of the priestly supplications which, transmitted by the apostles, are celebrated in the same manner in the entire world and in the whole catholic Church, *in such a way that the order of supplication determines the rule of faith.*" This sentence serves to introduce a lengthy citation from the general intercessions of the Roman church which asks God to bring about the work of salvation in various classes of human beings – infidels, idolaters, the Jews, heretics, schismatics, and catechumens. Seen in this context, several things seem clear: (a) for Prosper, the primary source of doctrinal authority is the "inviolable decisions of the blessed Apostolic See" and not the liturgical practice, the latter only being cited as additional support for his argument; (b) what gives the liturgical practice any authority is his conviction that it both stems from the apostles themselves and is celebrated in exactly the same form throughout the universal Church; (c) his statement that "the order of supplication determines the rule of faith" is intended by him to apply to the particular liturgical text under consideration and not necessarily to all liturgical formulations.¹²

A second major difficulty is that the evidence presented by liturgical practice has often been misused by theologians, and the process has become no more than the equivalent of the practice of biblical proof-texting. One determines *a priori* what doctrinal position one espouses, and then quarries ancient liturgical texts in order to find material that could be interpreted in support of that position, sometimes without regard for the history of the text in question or its broader context in the rite.

Thirdly, even where proper care is taken in the treatment of historical evidence, the activity is generally highly selective: certain features of liturgical practice are highlighted as authentic, while others are disregarded as aberrations from the norm. Thus, while the process is presented as moving from liturgy to doctrine, in reality the journey has first been made in the opposite direction, from doctrine to liturgy, in order to decide which pieces of evidence to include in the argument.

12. The definitive study is by Paul De Clerck, "'Lex orandi, lex credendi'. Sens originel et avatars historiques d'un adage équivoque", *Questions Liturgiques* 59 (1978) 193-212; English translation: "'Lex orandi, lex credendi': The Original Sense and Historical Avatars of an Equivocal Adage", *Studia Liturgica* 24 (1994) 178-200. See also Marshall, "Reconsidering 'Liturgical Theology'", 139-42; and for a discussion of the use of *lex orandi, lex credendi* by three modern theologians – Alexander Schmemmann, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Aidan Kavanagh – see Maxwell Johnson, "Liturgy and Theology", in Paul Bradshaw and Bryan Spinks (eds.), *Liturgy in Dialogue* (London: SPCK, 1993) 202-25.

The study of the history of liturgy, for example, would not of itself alone have led to the conclusion adopted by the Constitution on the Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council, that the "full, intelligent, active participation" of all the faithful is an essential principle "which the nature of the liturgy itself requires".¹³ That practice has simply not been true for the majority of the history of Christian worship. At best it was a feature only of the first few hundred years, and was already in decline in the fourth century. The Constitution on the Liturgy is therefore giving a theological priority to this early historical period, but it does not grant equal status to every practice encountered in this particular age. It does not, for instance, regard the election of their bishop by the people as an equally essential principle "which the nature of the liturgy itself requires", even though it is consistently evidenced in ancient ordination practices.¹⁴ Similarly, the Constitution's decision to regard "the paschal mystery" as the primary principle around which to organise its theology of the sacraments¹⁵ has meant that practices and theologies which did not fit comfortably with this overriding notion have been down-played or often excluded altogether. It has led, among other things, to the decline of images other than that of Romans 6 from baptismal rites and theologies, even though they are equally strongly evidenced in the patristic period, and to the abolition of "Ember Days" from the liturgical calendar.

This method is not a peculiarity of the Roman Catholic Church. The same selectivity with regard to historical evidence can also be found in the official formulations of other Christian denominations and in the writings of liturgical theologians from other ecclesiastical traditions. While it is alleged that liturgy is being used as a source for Christian doctrine, something else is really going on.

On the other hand, the foregoing should not be read as an argument for allowing liturgical practice a free hand in shaping the content of Christian doctrine. Such a thing would in any case be an impossibility: liturgy speaks with too many different and discordant voices for a systematic theology to be distilled from it alone. Thus, if we are to continue to use the tag *lex orandi, lex credendi* – and it is frequently so carelessly employed as if it settled all arguments that perhaps it would be better to declare a moratorium on its appearance in theological discourse for a while – we must remember that it is

13. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 14.

14. For the historical evidence, see Roger Gryson, "Les élections ecclésiastiques au IIIe siècle", *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 68 (1973) 353-404; idem, "Les élections épiscopales en Orient au IVe siècle", *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 74 (1979) 301-45; James F. Puglisi, *The Process of Admission to Ordained Ministry*, vol. I (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1996) 29, n. 52; and the works cited therein.

15. See for example *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 61.

always a two-way street: doctrine plays just as much of a part in affecting how we “read” liturgical practice as liturgy does in supplying a source from which we may formulate Christian doctrine. Moreover, the matter becomes even more complex when we ask which particular “meaning” of the liturgy it is with which we are concerned. To this question we now turn our attention.

WHOSE MEANING?

The Jewish liturgiologist Lawrence Hoffman has done a great service to liturgical studies by challenging the idea that a religious ritual has a single meaning that can be readily identified. He has argued that, on the contrary, rituals have several meanings that are present at the same time.¹⁶ First, there are *private* meanings. These he defines as “whatever idiosyncratic interpretations people find in things”, which religious officials usually ignore and fail to investigate. Second, there are *official* meanings, “the things experts say that a rite means”. Hoffman cites as an example the interpretation of the Sabbath light as “the symbol of the divine” in the *Union Prayer Book*, “invented (for all we know, accidentally or unwittingly) by some unknown prayerbook editor in 1940”. Such an interpretation “may be wrong, but it is agreed upon and safe”. Thirdly, there are *public* meanings,

agreed-upon meanings shared by a number of ritual participants, even though they are not officially preached by the experts. In the Jewish world, family solidarity at a Passover *seder* is such a value.... For the average American Jew, Passover may or may not be Exodus time; but it is family time, the most pervasive public meaning of the *seder* rite, whether the officials say so or not.

To these three meanings, Hoffman adds a fourth, *normative* meaning, “a structure of signification that ritual affixes upon the non-ritualized world that participants re-enter when the rite has been concluded”. Officials like to think that it is the *official* meaning of the rite that transforms the way that people see things outside the rite, but “as often as not, it is any of the other meanings that carry the day, the public understandings that everyone except the experts recognise as the rite’s message, or the private meanings that individuals hold, perhaps only inchoately but certainly nonetheless”.

Hoffman’s classification could be refined still further. His “official” meanings, for example, could be subdivided into (a) the intentions that the original compilers of a rite might have had, and

16. Hoffman sets out this argument most fully in his essay, “How Ritual Means: Ritual Circumcision in Rabbinic Culture and Today”, *Studia Liturgica* 23 (1993) 78-97, esp. 79-82.

(b) the meaning subsequently attached to the rite by later generations of ecclesiastical authorities. The eucharistic rite of the *Book of Common Prayer* of the Church of England provides a good example of the distance that can separate these two groups. While it is clear both from the shape that the rite itself took in 1552 and from the known views of those responsible for its composition that it was intended to give liturgical expression to a very "low" doctrine of the sacrament, a considerable number of leading Anglican divines in the seventeenth century were able to convince themselves that a much "higher" doctrine could be read out of the rite, and it has continued to be interpreted in that way by many leading churchmen ever since by highlighting the few tiny rubrical changes made to the text at its revision in 1662 and ignoring its historical roots, general shape, and "low" sacramental language.¹⁷ This example should stand as a stern warning to us not to assume that those who authorise a rite must necessarily share the doctrine held by its original promulgators or even that articulated in the text itself. Ecclesiastics can be capable of considerable mental gymnastics in order to read into a rite the theology that they wish to find there rather than the one that might appear to an outside observer to be there.

Be that as it may, Hoffman's comments about "normative" meanings cited above indicate that liturgical experts tend to think that the current official meaning is the only one that really matters, and consequently construct their liturgical theology from that rather than from any of the other meanings which he has identified, even though it is the latter that may very well be the real forces that motivate people to engage in the ritual. Yet, the existence of this multiplicity of meanings acquires a special significance when attempts are made to describe liturgy as constituting "primary theology".

THEOLOGIA PRIMA?

A number of liturgical theologians have sought to draw a sharp distinction between what they call "theologia prima" and "theologia secunda". Alexander Schmemmann seems to have been the first to propose to Western theologians that the liturgy itself be examined as "the ontological condition of theology",¹⁸ but it was Aidan Kavanagh

17. For the origins of the eucharistic rite of the Church of England and its subsequent revisions and (re-)interpretation, see Colin Buchanan, *What did Cranmer think he was doing?*, Grove Liturgical Study No. 7 (Nottingham: Grove Books, 1976); Richard F. Buxton, *Eucharist and Institution Narrative*, Alcuin Club Collections No. 58 (Great Wakering, Essex: Mayhew-McCrimmon, 1976); C. W. Dugmore, *Eucharistic Doctrine in England from Hooker to Waterland* (London: SPCK, 1942).

18. Alexander Schmemmann, "Theology and Liturgical Tradition", in Massey Shepherd (ed.), *Worship in Scripture and Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963) 175;

who developed his idea more fully, contrasting “primary” and “secondary” theologies, and in this he has been followed by a large number of other liturgical theologians.

Primary theology is a critical and reflective act associated directly with constitutive religious experience. It is Abraham’s parental torture and doubt over Isaac, Moses’ questioning astonishment and final submission to One who spoke to him in a bush which burned without being consumed. It was what generations of Jews and Christians have done and said of the encounter with God’s living presence in their worship over thousands of years. Their liturgy is, in this view, the premier theological act of a community of faith, and it is in the act of worship that the community’s primary theology is to be found. The worshipping assembly, precisely because it worships the Living God, is a theological corporation. The worship this assembly engages in creates the ontological condition of theology, of the proper understanding of *kerygma*, of the Word of God, because it is in the Church, of which *leitourgia* is the primary expression and the life, that the sources of secondary theology function precisely as sources. Secondary theology embraces all other forms of analytical endeavour related to this primal encounter with the Living God in the constitutive religious experience of worship.¹⁹

Attractive though such a distinction between primary and secondary theology sounds, its vision of the former is a highly romantic one. It is doubtful whether many worshippers can ever have engaged in an act of *pure* primary theology. When Christians gather on a Sunday morning to worship God, they do not come with their minds a *tabula rasa*. On the contrary, they come together with their religious attitudes and expectations already formed by secondary theology, as a result of the catechesis that their particular ecclesiastical tradition has given to them over the years; and they usually participate in a liturgical rite that itself has been shaped and honed by secondary theological reflection in order to give expression to

reprinted in Thomas Fisch (ed.), *Liturgy and Tradition: Theological Reflections of Alexander Schmemmann* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press 1990) 11-20. For a study of his liturgical theology, see W. Jardine Grisbrooke, “An Orthodox Approach to Liturgical Theology: The Work of Alexander Schmemmann”, *Studia Liturgica* 23 (1993) 140-57.

19. Kavanagh, “Liturgy and Ecclesial Consciousness”, 14. See also his book, *On Liturgical Theology* (New York: Pueblo, 1984) 74-80. Among the many scholars who have followed his path, see Lathrop, *Holy Things*; Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991) 357-61; David W. Fagerberg, *What is Liturgical Theology?* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1992) esp. 9-22; Kevin W. Irwin, *Context and Text: Method in Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1994) 44-46; and Don E. Saliers, *Worship as Theology* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1994).

particular doctrinal convictions. Among myriad instances of the latter that could be cited, the classic is the case of the orthodox and Arian parties in the fourth century, where the traditional doxological formulae – expressions of “primary” theology, if you like – seemed to favour the Arian position, and so the orthodox found it necessary to correct the tradition so that believers would henceforth express a more accurate vision of the Trinity in their worship. Thus, not only does doctrine affect the way we “read” liturgy, as we saw earlier, but doctrine also shapes liturgy – in all traditions, Catholic as well as Protestant – as much as liturgy shapes doctrine. Once again, *lex orandi, lex credendi* is always a two-way street.²⁰

What ordinary worshippers experience, therefore, will be strongly conditioned by both these factors – the beliefs/doctrines they bring to the liturgical act, and the beliefs/doctrines already implicit in the form of the act itself. This is not to say that the Living God cannot speak to believers through their participation in the Church’s worship, but only that such an encounter is necessarily mediated through the lenses of a vision of God already formulated by others and by the worshippers themselves. Nor does the absence of a highly structured rite necessarily mean that worshippers are released from the constraints of secondary theology upon their experience. Many from charismatic congregations will echo the statement made by one of their number: “We can do whatever we like in worship so long as it is orthodox.” There are invisible as well as visible forces that shape and control worship experience.

Yet, even if we were to grant the premiss of this school of liturgical theology, that it is possible to distinguish primary theology from secondary reflection, the problem is not thereby resolved. Those who are the strongest advocates of the theory that it is the natural piety of worshippers that should be accorded the most significant weight in liturgical theology are the ones most likely to be unhappy if this were to be put into practice. Aidan Kavanagh’s writings have introduced his readers to the figure of “Mrs Murphy”, who represents the ordinary person in the pew and who is therefore understood to be the authentic exponent of “primary theology”. Thus Kavanagh can write:

The language of the primary theologian...more often consists in symbolic, metaphorical, sacramental words and actions which throw flashes of light upon chasms of rich ambiguity. As such, Mrs Murphy’s language illuminates the chaotic landscape through which I must pick my professional way with narrow laser-like beams of precise words and concepts – which is why

20. An extensive discussion of this dual character can be found in Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life* (London: Epworth Press, 1980) esp. 218-83.

what she does is primary and what I do is secondary; which is why, also, what she does is so much harder to do than what I do. My admiration for her and her colleagues is profound, and it deepens daily.²¹

As Paul Marshall has observed, both in Kavanagh and in those who have adopted the image from him, “some Mrs Murphy analogies are apt, some are patronising, some archaic and sexist. Generally, however, one never hears of Mrs Murphy in terms that imply that she went to college, has a responsible job, or even belongs to a book club.”²² Moreover, it is precisely the expressions of the natural piety of the putative Mrs Murphy and countless other churchgoers – devotions to the sacred heart of Jesus, for example, or sentimental nineteenth-century hymns – that are usually denigrated by the professional liturgical theologian and swept away by the liturgical reformer on the grounds that they fail to conform to the inherent spirit of the liturgy! Where is the value attached to *theologia prima* here?

Thus, the use of the concept of “primary theology” can end up, although quite unintentionally, looking like an attempt to avoid the charge of elitism by offering the illusion of having roots in the actual experience of worship. But what is described rarely corresponds with what goes on in ordinary churches, because theologians generally fail to take seriously enough the views of liturgy that are actually held by people, whether individually or collectively (the “private” and “public” meanings, in Hoffman’s terminology). Instead, experts portray what they think that people ought to experience, as a jumping-off point for some quite different theology. This is not to say that either the “private” or the “public” meanings are necessarily any more valuable as a guide to a sound liturgical theology than the “official” meaning, but only that it is not helpful to present the latter as though it were something that it is not. And although it is certainly still useful to recognise a distinction between theologies that are implicit in liturgies and the theologies of liturgy that are explicit, nonetheless both of them can be said to constitute *theologia secunda*.

CONCLUSION

In addition to the specific difficulties we have thus outlined, there is also, above all, the challenge presented by post-modernism. If many liturgical theologians seem to inhabit a world where the worship practices (to judge from their depiction of them) are far

21. Aidan Kavanagh, “Response: Primary Theology and Liturgical Act”, *Worship* 57 (1983) 323.

22. Marshall, “Reconsidering ‘Liturgical Theology’”, 147.

removed from what the majority of us experience Sunday by Sunday, nearly all of them appear still to dwell in one that is as yet untouched by the currents of post-modernist culture. Although some systematic theologians may have begun to wrestle with the problems and challenges posed by this new phenomenon, most liturgical scholars continue to work with a model of theology "from above" rather than "from below", one that still pursues universal norms, even if now usually tempered by the admission of the need for some inculturation of worship.²³

The future of liturgical theology thus seems to lie in a somewhat different approach from that to be found in much contemporary writing on the subject. It needs to abandon its tendency to rest upon bad history or no history at all, and instead to take the fruits of historical research much more seriously indeed, however inconvenient they may prove to be for prevalent theories of liturgy. It needs to utilise fully the tools provided by anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists in order to explore more deeply the essentially multivalent character of worship itself and the multiple meanings attached to the activity that co-exist within any group of people celebrating ritual together. It needs to relinquish its belief that texts can be interpreted without any reader bias and do more than merely pay lip-service to the notion of the reciprocal interplay between liturgy and doctrine. And it needs to acknowledge that liturgy is as much a human artefact as a divine creation and that belief in the one God does not demand that there be only one way of worship or one theology.

23. For works on liturgical inculturation, see S. Anita Stauffer, "Worship and Culture: A Select Bibliography", *Studia Liturgica* 27 (1997) 102-28.